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## Shanghai Lalas

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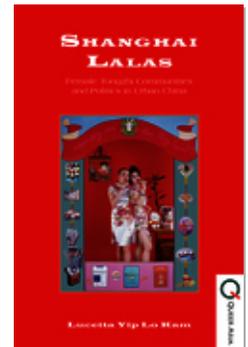
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# Chapter 1

## *Lala* Communities in the Shaping

Shanghai is a city of desires. For hundreds of years, it has been a metropolis of commerce and trade, adventure and entertainment, sex and desires. The old Shanghai in pre-1949 had been dubbed as the Paris in the East, the Hollywood in the East and a paradise for adventurers. It was in this coastal city of China that entrepreneurs, opportunists from all walks of life, movie stars, socialites, pleasure seekers, well-known prostitutes, politicians, writers, artists, and manual labourers from rural areas all conglomerated. It was romanticized as a city where one could turn dreams into reality and desires into practice. These were the more popular ways of narrating old Shanghai. Even the generations born after the establishment of the so-called “new China” took pride in the city’s glamorous past. The nostalgic sentiment was common among local Shanghai residents in my childhood in the 1970s. Old people lived on memories, while the younger generations continued the city’s legend through a sense of pride nurtured by a collective nostalgia. Migrants from all over the country were attracted to this city by its legendary past and its present economic opportunities. After 1949, Shanghai bade farewell to its capitalist glamour and retreated, as a monotonous socialist city, into relative obscurity. It was not until thirty years later that Shanghai restored itself as a city of desires and dreams. In 2005, the year I started my research, Shanghai had again transformed into a migrant city, with people flocking in from all over the country, in pursuit of their myriad desires and dreams.

### The Predecessors

There is a widely circulated anecdote about a group of women labelled the “mirror-rubbing gang” (or Rubbing-mirrors Party, *Mojing Dang* 磨鏡黨), who were known for their same-sex sexual practices and community bonding in late nineteenth-century Shanghai. Their stories can be found in many early literary and historical writings about the city. Ruan (1991) mentions this unconventional group in a chapter on homosexuality in his book *Sex in China: Studies in*

*Sexology in Chinese Culture*, one of the few early academic works in the 1990s on female homosexuality in China:

... the “*Mojing Dang*” (“Rubbing-mirrors Party”) was active in Shanghai in the late nineteenth century. It was said to be a descendant of the “Ten Sisters”, which a Buddhist nun had founded several hundred years earlier in Chaozhou, Guangdong (Canton) province. Members of the “Ten Sisters” lived together as couples. The[y] refused to marry, and some even avoided marriage by committing suicide. A few are rumoured to have killed their husbands so that they could maintain their lesbian relationships. The nineteenth-century Rubbing-mirrors Party was also led by a Cantonese woman and lasted about twenty years. It had approximately twenty members, including three who were mistresses of wealthy men, one who had never married, and more than a dozen rich widows. They attracted new members through their knowledge of sexual technique. (p. 136)

The story of the mirror-rubbing gang is one of the literary anecdotes of old Shanghai enduring in popular imagination. The term “*Mojing Dang*” entered the everyday lexicon of the general public as a euphemism for women with homosexual practices. It carries a negative and mocking undertone. As one of the early and most vivid images of women with same-sex desires and practices in modern Shanghai, it shows how sexually “deviant” women, as defined by the dominant heterosexual male-active/female-passive model, are continually demonized by mainstream discourses.

Almost a century later, I arrived in the same city where the legendary women gang had once blatantly lived out their desires. There was now a visible community of sexually identified women. The emergence of this community was not so much a continuation of the practices of its notorious predecessors as it was a development actualized by the cross-regional connectedness of LGBTQ identities, communities and the social transformation in post-reform China. One major organizer of the Shanghai *lala* community told me that one would always find women in same-sex relationships in the city or elsewhere in China—the difference was whether these individuals or groups were visible to the public, or were themselves aware of each other. Viewed together with the legend of *Mojing Dang* and other forgotten or unrecorded existence of women with same-sex desires and practices in the history of China, therefore, I would say that a set of historically and culturally relevant questions to ask were: What are the social forces that have led to the emergence of sexually and politically identified communities in contemporary China? How would new forms of sexual networking and collective identifications impact on non-normative sexual subjects in both private and public domains? What kind of changes, conflicts or transformations will be introduced into the current configuration of social relationships in China? If a new subjectivity leads to new longings and imaginations of life trajectory, what evolving forms of intimacy or lifestyle

will result from a *tongzhi* subjectivity? And what would the possible social and political implications of emerging forms of same-sex relationships be to *tongzhi* communities and society in general?

It is beyond this research's scope of investigation to go deeper into the history and the cultural heritage of women's same-sex community in Shanghai. In the following, I outline possible historical and cultural influences that may have contributed to the rapid development of *tongzhi* communities in contemporary China.

### **Cross-regional Flow of *Tongzhi* Cultures**

The emergence of *lala* communities in contemporary China and their rapid development owe much to the more established *tongzhi* cultures in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and to a lesser extent, to the lesbian and gay cultures in Western societies. This is particularly true of *lala* women in China born after the 1980s. The availability of the Internet for popular use in the late 1990s sped up tremendously all kinds of informational flow across borders, including lesbian and gay cultures. The implications of these informational flows were multifold. First of all, information on globalized lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, queer identities, communities and movements accessible through the Internet enabled social networking and information exchange, and resulted in international, regional and local mobilization efforts. Cultural learning and assimilation among *lalas* in different Chinese societies happened in regional or intercity *tongzhi* events. One example of such informational exchange is the "*Lala Camp*". It was first held in a coastal city in Guangdong, in 2007. The three-day camp, later developed into an annual event, assembled lesbian community organizers, veteran LGBTQ activists and scholars from Hong Kong, Taiwan and North America to engage in cultural and political dialogue with local community members in China. The camp represented a historic moment of trans-regional networking and exchange among lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities across the three Chinese societies concerned and also with overseas Chinese or Asian LBT organizations. It led to the birth of an encouraging number of new local *lala* groups in different cities in China.

He Xiaopei, one of the prominent lesbian activists and scholars in China, gives an extensive account of the contemporary history of female *tongzhi* in China in *Talking about Their Love: An Oral History of Women Who Love Women in Shanghai I* (她們的愛在說——愛上女人的女人·上海·口述歷史(一)) (2008). She reveals many real-life accounts of women with same-sex relationships in the pre-identity and pre-community period of China. She argues that female *tongzhi*, defined as women with same-sex desires, have always been around in China, echoing the views of a community organizer whom I talked to in

Shanghai. It is the formation of communities that has made female *tongzhi* in China more visible to society, to each other and to the world. She also relates the formation of *lala* communities in China to the cultural interflow between Taiwan, Hong Kong and China,

The word “*lazi*” spread from Hong Kong to mainland China and became “*lala*”. Right now in China, there are *lala* websites, *lala* meeting places, *lala* bars and *lala* communities that have become part of *lala* organizing and *lala* activities in general. Therefore, the emergence of the word “*lala*” has not only enabled *lalas* to identify with their own sexual identities, but more so, has given *lalas* an identity with which to build their own communities, to gather and to reach out to more *lalas* for new activities and for organizing such activities. (p. 192; original text in Chinese)<sup>1</sup>

During the pre-Internet period, before the mid-1990s, it is possible that there existed a small-scale circulation of lesbian and gay cultural texts from Taiwan and Hong Kong in cities where contacts with foreigners were available. Lesbian and gay subcultures from Taiwan and Hong Kong were also brought in by individual visitors to China during the 1990s. Individual contacts were an important and major source of information for people in pre-Internet China to learn about lesbian and gay cultures in other Chinese societies and in the West. The opening of the Internet to popular use since the mid-1990s has had a phenomenal impact on *tongzhi*. Almost all of the informants in this research have tried to search for information on homosexuality on the Internet. Many early attempts, as recounted by informants, could be traced back to the late 1990s. Most of them searched in Chinese and looked for information specific to Chinese-speaking populations. Language accessibility and cultural proximity are two major factors for the heavy borrowing from the *tongzhi* cultures of Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as from a few academic texts on homosexuality written by local Chinese scholars that were circulated on the Internet.

We can identify many aspects of influence of Hong Kong and Taiwan on local *lala* cultures in China. For example, the identities of “*tongzhi*” and “*lala*” were first adopted and developed from local terms used in Hong Kong and Taiwan respectively. The study done in Shanghai by Sun Zhongxin, James Farrer and Kyung-hee Choi (2005) on sexual identities among men who have sex with men investigated the relationship between cultural flow and gay culture in China, and how localization took place in the daily usage of borrowed identities. Models of community building, organizing and forms of lesbian socializing have also been significantly influenced by Hong Kong and Taiwan through individuals or organized exchanges between the two regions and China. For example, the most popular lesbian party in Shanghai at the time of my research (2005) was organized by a woman from Taiwan. In addition, many cultural texts such as films and video works have been imported from Taiwan

and Hong Kong, legally and illegally, and those with Asian queer themes are always in high demand and circulated eagerly in Shanghai's *lala* communities.

The availability of the Internet and the interflow of *tongzhi* cultural texts and discourses from Chinese societies such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, together with the intensifying interactions of *tongzhi* groups and individuals among the three regions, have substantially provided the cultural resources essential for *tongzhi* community building in China. This timely cultural flow and exchange would not have flourished or achieved its optimal impact without the unprecedented social changes that have taken place in China during the post-reform era.

## A Changing Society and the Rise of Communities

China's *lala* communities have become increasingly visible since the late 1990s. The rise of these communities has much to do with the political, economic and social changes in the country in the past decades. In the following section, I will briefly discuss the numerous socioeconomic factors that have led to the rise of *lala* communities.

In the past two decades, the increasing geographical mobility of the population have contributed to the emergence of visible lesbian and gay communities in metropolitan and economically more developed cities in China. Individual mobility in China, either geographical or social, has significantly heightened after the economic and social transformations in the late 1970s, and has accelerated since the 1990s. Rural reforms in the 1980s, the set-up of special economic zones in coastal cities, the relaxation of the household registration system (*hukou*), the supply of jobs in the fast-growing private sectors and the introduction of the commercial housing market in the 1990s have brought along fundamental changes to people's public and private lives. These policy changes have significantly weakened direct state control on individuals, which has long been carried out through *hukou* and the centralized job assignment system, or the *danwei* (work unit). In the pre-reform years, mobility between jobs was extremely limited. Population mobility was strictly controlled between cities, and was even stricter between rural and urban areas. The *danwei* of an individual controlled almost every aspect of her/his social and private life, from the provision of housing to the regulation of one's love and family life. Therefore, the opening up of the job market and the concomitant loosening of state control have allowed people to live their personal lives with greater autonomy. The newly acquired geographical mobility has encouraged people from less developed parts of the country to look for jobs in cities. Major cities such as Shanghai are densely populated with job seekers from all over the country. For

non-natives, the city can provide them with a kind of anonymity that would be impossible to find in small towns where social networks are closely knitted.

The opportunity to break away from close inspection by family and social networks in hometowns is crucial for people who seek to pursue alternative lifestyles. For many, Shanghai is a place to fulfil their career aspirations and also to follow their desired ways of living. Furthermore, safe meeting spaces for lesbian and gay people as well as relevant information are readily available, making the city one of the most active lesbian and gay centres in the country. For some of my non-native informants, Shanghai is the place where, for the first time in their lives, they turned their long-held desires into real-life practice. However, the newly obtained autonomy in personal mobility and private lives cannot be construed as a total breakaway from state control. Those changes are introduced largely by the state, and are sensitive to new policy changes. It is true that the introduction of market economy, to some extent, has enhanced choices available in everyday life—from daily necessities to lifestyle options. It has contributed to the rise of large cities such as Shanghai and Beijing as major centres of *tongzhi* communities. Such forms of liberalization of everyday lives in China brought about by economic development and consumption, or by neoliberalism, have already been extensively discussed (Rofel 2007, Wang 2003; Kong 2011). The economic reform has also opened up more life options, as well as introduced more acute forms of social inequality in the country. For *tongzhi* communities, increased population mobility and the provision of commercial meeting places are helpful in bringing together previously dispersed individuals. Yet, despite the relaxation in controls, it is important to understand that state intervention is always present, and that the market has developed *with*, rather than *against* state power.<sup>2</sup> While enjoying new forms of freedom created by the market, the *tongzhi* communities in China are constantly checked by the state. Community development is highly sensitive and vulnerable to political changes. Sporadic police inspections of offices of *tongzhi* organizations, forced cancellation of activities by local police (even if they are not politically sensitive) and forced shutdown of gay websites (gay websites are usually under more frequent and severe inspection by the state censorship department, possibly owing to the number of members and visitors and the amount of photos taken in the nude) indicate an omnipresent state regulation over *tongzhi* communities.

Over the past two decade, we have witnessed a paradigmatic change in political control over homosexuality in the country. Within a few years of each other, homosexuality was first excluded from legal prosecution with the abolishment of “hooliganism” in Article 160 of the old Criminal Law in 1997 (which was applied to male homosexual activities), and then from the medical category of perverts in 2001 when the Chinese Psychiatry Association formally

removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. These two “ideological shifts” have at least enabled more positive representations of homosexuality in official discourses. In particular, they introduced a new discursive space for state experts in different professions to discuss related issues with fewer ideological restrictions. Throughout the 1990s and especially during the later years, a number of publications of sexuality studies which investigated formerly condemned forms of sexual practices and relationships were released to the public. Among them, Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo’s (1992) study on male homosexuals in Beijing and Zhang Beichuan’s (1994) comprehensive discussion of homosexuality from a medical perspective are two important earlier works. These two book-length publications inaugurated the active intervention of experts from medical science and social science in the construction of contemporary discourse of homosexuality. (I will further discuss how these two sources of intervention have affected the formation of contemporary homosexual subjects in the next chapter.) After 2000, publications on alternative sexual practices, sexual health, and sexual education targeting the general public continued to flourish. The proliferation of publications on sexual topics in recent years is developed against a social backdrop of decriminalization and demedicalization of homosexuality, as well as enthusiastic participation of experts from the scientific disciplines in the production of a new sexual morality for post-reform China.

The changing economic and political atmosphere in the past decade is also accompanied by a number of significant changes in sexual morality in urban China. One prominent change is the de-orientation of sex from the social/collective to the private/individual. It is generally agreed that the new Marriage Law in 1981, which allows divorce to be filed on the basis of “a breakdown of affection” between wife and husband, has brought about a shift from collective interests to individual rights in intimate relationships (Evans, 1997; Ruan, 1991; Woo, 2006). Ruan (1991) also believes that the national birth control policy has generated an unanticipated general interest in sexual pleasure once contraception became policy, as it freed sex from the ideological trappings of being merely reproductive. One visible evidence of the changing sexual morality in urban China during the 1990s is the phenomenal growth of the sexual health industry. McMillan (2006) attributes the emerging industry to the government’s conscious efforts to create a scientific and civilized discourse on sex, and to regulate sex within a narrative of public interest. In this state-endorsed sexual health industry, sexual pleasure is associated with people’s physical well-being. Media representations also testify to a shift in attitudes. Evans (1997) examines the mounting interest in women’s sexual pleasure, and suggests that it can be dated even earlier back, to the beginning of the 1980s, when a “greater prominence of discussion about women’s sexual pleasure”

first appeared in magazines (p. 9). In other words, individual rights—in terms of sexual pleasure and satisfaction—have come to be considered as important as the duty of reproduction, and is consequently promoted as an essential part of the birth control policy.

The change in sexual morality is also expressed in a more tolerant public attitude towards people that were formerly labelled as sexual “deviants”, for example, celibate women, homosexuals, and people with multiple sex partners. With an increasing number of women now working outside the *danwei* system, which used to assign unmarried women to an economically, politically and socially inferior position, female celibacy has become more accepted, especially in metropolitan cities. For economically independent women, the stigma of remaining celibate has been significantly lessened, though not completely eliminated. The relaxation of political and social control of “abnormal” sexual subjects due to the changing economic reality and sexual morality is another factor that has made possible the emergence of lesbian and gay communities in urban China.

## The Social Sites and Activities of *Lalas*

In the following part, I will provide an overview of the *lala* communities in Shanghai and a brief discussion of the community culture during the period from 2005 to 2011.

Both online and offline *lala* communities can be found in Shanghai. The latter is composed of groups that gather at weekly lesbian parties, bars or cafés (operating on a weekly or permanent basis), *tongzhi* student associations in higher education institutions, organized community activities such as topical seminars (or salons), casual gatherings, hotline services, cultural events, and commercial practices. Some of the offline activities are organized by groups originally developed as online communities. Other commercial activities targeting the lesbian market have emerged in recent years. For example, in 2005, a privately run studio for wedding pictures and studio shots opened, exclusively serving a gay and lesbian clientele. At the time of writing, a café for lesbians is also said to open soon in Jingansi, an expensive downtown district of the city. Merchandise such as accessories, T-shirts with recognizable LGBTQ graphics and chest-binding tops are available on lesbian websites. On the cultural fronts, lesbian novels that claim to be written by lesbian writers have appeared in mainstream bookstores.<sup>3</sup> Independent video works produced by *lala*-identified directors have also multiplied. *Gender Game* (傷花, 2006) by Tracy Ni, a native Shanghai video artist, is an independently produced documentary on *Ts*<sup>4</sup> in Shanghai. The documentary has been shown at internal screenings held in the *lala* communities of Shanghai, and was also featured in the Hong Kong Lesbian

and Gay Film Festival in 2006. *Lala* activity has also grown in the academia. Since 2003, the School of Public Health of Fudan University in Shanghai, one of the top ranking universities in the country, has been offering a graduate course on “Homosexuality, Health and Social Science” (*tongxinglian jiankang shehuikexue*), with funding support from the Hong Kong-based Chi Heng Foundation. In 2005, Fudan University started a general education course on “Lesbian and Gay Studies” (*tongxinglian yanjiu*) for its undergraduate students. Both courses have received overwhelming media attention, and have chalked up a record student attendance compared with other university courses offered.

The emergence of *lala* communities in Shanghai and the rest of China in the late 1990s, apart from the aforementioned economic, political and social factors, would have been impossible without the Internet. The Internet has acted as an accelerator to the emergence of identity-based sexual communities in contemporary China. Almost all my informants have obtained knowledge about homosexuality and community happenings from the Internet. The fact that all of them are urban residents probably explains their ease of access to the Internet. Qi, a twenty-nine-year-old woman from a small town in the south of China, told a typical story of how information and Internet change lives,

Apart from big cities like Shanghai within the country, some smaller cities, especially those small towns without even traffic lights, or rural villages, basically don't have access to a lot of information. It was only when the Internet became more popular that I could . . . I had heard nothing about [homosexuality]. I was already twenty something, and it was about time for me to start dating guys. When I was a student, I had intimate experiences with other [female] classmates. But we didn't think of it as a big deal, and nobody . . . absolutely nobody could have told us what it was. I wouldn't have gone around asking. There were no books, no Internet—we didn't know what it was. Then we thought of it as a process; we thought that the time would come for us to date men and to prepare for marriage. That's it. Until I . . . I feel very lucky that I came across the Internet after I broke up with my boyfriend. I have always felt that I'm very fortunate, otherwise I would have married him for sure. If I found out about my identity only after I got married, can you imagine how hard it would all be, recalling all my memories with my classmates? That's why I feel that access to information and communication are very important.”<sup>5</sup>

This is especially the case in the late 1990s, when the Internet service opened up to popular use. Message boards of popular BBS websites became a first point of convergence for homosexual subjects in the country. The most frequently mentioned BBS website among my informants was *Tianya* Community (天涯社區). Launched in 1999, *Tianya* Community is one of the most popular social networking websites in the country. It supports a subtly named message board on its website—*Yilutongxing* (一路同行, “Walk Together”)—as a reference to

homosexual people. The message board is still active and running in 2012 at the time of writing.

By the early 2000s, there were three major lesbian websites, *Shengqiuxiaowu* (深秋小屋, "Cottage in Deep Autumn"), *Aladao* (阿拉島, "Our Island") and *Huakaidedifang* (花開的地方, or "Huakai", "Where the Flowers Bloom"), all of which were founded by *lala*-identified women based in Shanghai. *Shengqiuxiaowu* has since gradually developed into an online literary community celebrating women's literature and creative writing. *Aladao* is the most enduring first-generation lesbian website in Shanghai. Its founders being a local lesbian couple, the site demonstrates a more pronounced local Shanghainese identification. *Huakai* is a lesbian website targeted at *lalas* all over the country. Its founder, Echo, moved to Shanghai in 2003, and since then, has based her website and offline community networking in Shanghai. *Huakai* engaged message board administrators (*banzhu*) from different cities. At the time of my research, *Huakai* was the most popular lesbian website in the country. In 2005, it had over 40,000 registered members. It closed in 2007 for personal and financial reasons.

The cyberspace has dramatically changed the lives and ways of interaction for people with same-sex desires in China. Since the late 1990s, identity-based lesbian and gay communities have developed in various cities in just a few years' time. For all my informants, the memory of how they first got in touch with other lesbians in the country usually did not hark back to too long ago. A few of them had only gotten to know other *lalas* a few months before the interviews. Within a decade of the emergence of the cyberspace, we are seeing individuals being easily connected, and online and offline communities developing at rapid speeds. In 2008, there were hundreds of lesbian and gay websites operating in China. The number continues to grow rapidly today.

The moment one discovers people like us on the Internet can be as overwhelming as it can be inspiring. The thought that "I'm not the only one" has the positive effect of nurturing an awareness of a collective existence. The Internet has provided a relatively safe space for *lalas* to search for and connect with each other. It has not only encouraged the formation of online lesbian and gay communities, but has also paved the way for the establishment of communities of greater visibility in the offline world. The Internet remains the most important medium of social networking for lesbian and gay people in China. It is particularly useful for those who cannot risk exposing their sexual orientation in the offline world.

Despite all its merits, the Internet is not an all-welcoming public space. Access is not available to everyone. Internet use in China varies across gender, age, education, income, occupation and location (predominantly in cities). According to a study on Internet use in China in 2005, the year I started my research, Internet users were predominantly male (57.2%), aged 16–24 (87.8%),

not married (77.2% of this group were netizens), had university education or above (almost 90% of this group were netizens), earned a monthly income of more than RMB2,000 (67.7% of this group were netizens), and held occupations as teachers, researchers, or managers in state, private or foreign enterprises (over 80% of this group were netizens).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the majority of netizens in China at the time were young, unmarried men with university education and who earned an income above the average level. As suggested by these results, it has been difficult for the cyber *tongzhi* communities in China to reach individuals who are economically, technologically, occupationally, culturally and geographically deprived of Internet access. Regardless of gender, netizens in general were mostly from the more educated and well-off classes. This has in turn reflected in the demographic composition of offline *lala* communities, which are usually developed and maintained by social networking on the Internet. The restriction of Internet access and use has led directly to the over-dominance of women with certain economic, educational, occupational, regional (predominantly urban), and marital backgrounds in offline *lala* communities.

Nor is the cyber world risk-free to its users. The greatest threat for lesbian and gay netizens in China is the possible exposure of their actual identities to their family and colleagues. The threat of exposure has been used to manipulate lesbian and gay people, in both online and offline situations, as blackmailers are well aware of the devastating outcomes which exposure can lead to in one's family, social and work lives. Cases of gay blackmailing in cyber communities have been discussed on online forums and offline gatherings. In a typical case of Internet blackmailing, the offender asks for cash reward in exchange for not exposing the victim's sexual orientation or her/his engagement in gay communities to her/his family, school or workplace. The fear of exposure and the prevailing social prejudice against homosexuality usually deter the victim from seeking help through formal channels such as the police—which can itself turn into a possible source of harassment. The absence of recourse is exacerbated by the lack of legal recognition and protection of homosexual people in China. Bringing forth the case to the police or the legal institution may end up laying the victim open to new risks. As long as homosexuality is socially stigmatized and institutionally discriminated against, the threat of exposure will always be there.

The bar or party community has existed in Shanghai even before the advent of online networking. The earliest bar frequented by *lalas* in the city, as recounted by informants, was *Baifenzhibashi* (百分之八十, "Eighty Percent"), which operated in 1998 in one of the hotels in downtown Shanghai. A small group of *lalas*, fewer than ten in number, gathered there regularly. More often, informants who were bar-goers in the early years (that is, before 2000) told me

they usually hung out in a few gay bars in downtown areas. One of the most popular gay bars (still in business and having moved to another location in the downtown area at the time of my research) was “Eddy’s 1924” located inside the People’s Square at the heart of the city. Opened in 2001 and owned by a gay man, it is one of the first well-known gay bars in Shanghai. Its central location boosted its popularity. Informants told me they used to hang out in Eddy’s with gay friends, or just went there out of curiosity. Together with other less popular establishments in the late 1990s, gay bars were the only public spaces available for *lalas* to hang out and meet each other face to face.

Regularly held lesbian parties started to appear in the city in the early 2000s. Commercial cooperation between private bar owners and party organizers (usually *lala* identified) in the form of *baochang* (包場)—leasing out the venue for parties under contract or verbal agreement—has been the most popular form of organizing lesbian parties. The *baochang* agreement usually requires the party organizer to hold lesbian parties during the weekends, usually on Fridays and Saturdays. The bar owner and the party organizer shares the revenue from each party ticket sold and from the overall consumption of drinks and orders from the menu during the party. In the summer of 2002, “Bar 1088” became one of the first establishments to start the practice of cooperating with lesbian party organizers to hold lesbian nights every weekend. The following year, the lesbian nights were brought to a halt despite their sweeping popularity.<sup>7</sup> Such popularity turned the label, “1088”, into a synonym for *lala* community in Shanghai. The extent of the label’s influence and reach was such that a website was set up under the same name. The virtual 1088 was as popular as the offline one. In late 2004, the owner of Bar 1088 sold her business shortly after the bar stopped hosting lesbian parties. She then became a “nomadic” lesbian party organizer, co-hosting weekend lesbian nights at a quiet, downtown bar (with no dance floor and playing soft music instead) with the website *Huakai*. This came to be known as the “*Huakai* 1088” party, which began in 2005 and ran for two years.

Lesbian parties are always advertised by word of mouth in the community, or through online postings on the message boards of gay and lesbian websites. The nomadic nature of these parties makes partygoers very dependent on their connection with the organizers. In other words, since it is hard to find a permanent location, it is essential for organizers to maintain a good connection with their clientele. The most talked about reason I have heard for why organizers have to change locations is disagreement with bar owners, which can stem from different views on how to run the party, or from unsatisfactory attendance rate due to the location or other physical factors of the bar concerned. Rarely is it related to police intervention or shutdown, though those remain legitimate

concerns especially with the introduction of such activities as erotic dance, or when the scope of operation exceeds the limit tolerated by the local authorities.

Given the rarity of exclusive lesbian bars in Shanghai, and given the high financial investment and possible political risks involved in running those bars, the informal and relatively flexible partnership between well-connected lesbian party organizers and private bar owners has persisted as the most popular response to the rising demand for quality social gatherings among the younger and economically well-off *lalas* in the city. Lesbian parties also have the advantage of being a profitable business cooperation. The bar can profit from the additional and almost guaranteed *lala* clientele every weekend. The size of these weekend parties can exceed 150 people per night for a medium-sized bar. Furthermore, the commercial party organizers or community organizers can profit from commissions, and more importantly, the opportunity of having a precious space for community networking. Party organizers usually use the same party name even as they host parties in different venues. Partygoers refer to the name of the party instead of the venue that hosts the party. For example, at the time I was doing my fieldwork, the biggest lesbian party in town was the "*Hudieba*" ("The Butterfly Bar"). The party changed locations frequently, but wherever it "landed", people referred to it only as the "Butterfly Bar", rather than by the official name of the hosting venues. *Lala* parties are also promoted via text messages, websites and QQ groups. Supporters will follow well-known party organizers across the city, in a manner reminiscent of nomadic tribes trekking across large swaths of land, in search of an oasis.

The *baochang* lesbian parties have coexisted with exclusive lesbian bars and cafés. But usually due to commercial unprofitability and various personal reasons, exclusive lesbian bars are short-lived. One example is a café called *Hongba* ("The Red Bar"), which opened in 2004. It occupied a prime location just opposite "Eddy's 1924" at the People's Square. The owner of *Hongba* was said to be a *lala*. It was a small, cosy café with a cultural atmosphere. It was at one time popular among *lalas* who preferred a quieter gathering space without deafening music and a huge dancing crowd. However, *Hongba* did not survive into its second year. Some informants told me it closed down because of financial difficulties. Unlike gay bars that usually have a steady flow of customers, lesbian bars are only busy on Saturdays. Many informants agreed that *lalas* are not as economically well-off, or at least not as willing as gay men to spend money in bars. This makes it extremely difficult for an exclusive lesbian bar to survive in Shanghai, one of the most expensive cities in China. This also explains why the *baochang* practice developed as the dominant form of weekly lesbian parties. It requires only minimal cash investment for promotion and in some cases, payment to performers. *Baochang* demands more a well-established community network and connection with local bar owners. Echo, the founder

of *Huakai* website and who later became an organizer of lesbian parties, attributed the lack of exclusive lesbian bars also to the social risks faced by *lala*-identified owners. This goes back once again to the threat of being exposed. Echo said even if *lalas* were economically able to run a permanent lesbian bar, they may not want to deal with the social consequences of exposure.

Offline *lala* community activities first started to take shape in Shanghai in the early 2000s. There were lesbian hotlines, outreach volunteer workers, and regularly held salon meetings. The first lesbian hotline in the city was the *Tongxin* Hotline (同心熱線). It was set up in June 2004, and was attached to the more established *Tongxin* gay hotline. The *Tongxin* Hotline—or *Tongxin* AIDS Intervention Hotline (同心艾滋病干預熱線) in full—was a semi-official operation supported by the International Peace Maternity and Child Health Hospital (上海國際和平婦幼保健院) in Shanghai. The hotline office was located inside the hospital. In addition to hotline services, *Tongxin* also offered sexual health consultation, legal consultation and other outreach activities for the homosexual population in Shanghai. Its medical services included free HIV testing for gay men. The hotline also maintained a website and a newsletter in both print and digital versions, offering information on sexual health and other gay related topics. In 2004, the hotline posted a recruitment notice on its website and other gay and lesbian websites, calling for female volunteers for its new lesbian hotline service and community projects. Drawing on its existing resources, which included medical professionals from the hosting hospital and a pool of experienced male hotline operators, *Tongxin* provided training for the newly recruited female volunteers. The first semi-official hotline for female homosexuals in Shanghai was launched in the summer of 2004. One former *Tongxin* lesbian hotline operator told me the number of calls from women was not as many as male callers to the gay hotline. Many of them called from outside of Shanghai, which means they were not local residents. There were also parents and family members of lesbians and gay men occasionally calling in for advice and information. Some called to have a listening ear to their stories. The hotline operators were required to follow the code of practice they had learnt in training, including the policy of only giving objective advice to callers and referring cases with medical issues to the hotline's medical supervisors in the host hospital. One former operator told me it was one of the principles not to *encourage* callers to engage in homosexuality. The hotline adopted a "supportive but not encouraging" (*rentong danbu guli*) stance, especially to callers who were still at school age and economically dependent on their families. The entire *Tongxin* Hotline was shut down at the end of 2005. Many in the community believed that the closure was due to government intervention. Some speculated that the closure was also related to the crackdown of the country's first homosexual cultural festival held in Beijing that same year. Both

incidents indicated a possible tightening of government control over *tongzhi* activities. Almost a year later, in 2006, the same group of female volunteers set up another new lesbian hotline in Shanghai—the “800 Free Hotline”, funded by the Hong Kong-based Chi Heng Foundation. It offers peer counselling by *tongzhi*-identified operators to lesbians and gay men. The “800 Lala Hotline” is operated every Saturday for two hours in the afternoon. It is still in operation at the time this book is written.

In June 2005, the Shanghai *Nvai* Lesbian Group (上海女愛工作組) was founded by a group of some ten self-identified *lala* women who were, at the time, all based in Shanghai. *Nvai* is the first grassroots *lala* organization in the city without official and overseas affiliations. The group operates a *lala* hotline every Friday evening until late night. It organizes group activities, such as tours to nearby cities and celebrations of international LGBTQ events. From 2005 onwards, it has organized a number of salon gatherings for *lalas* on various topics, including lesbian relationships, coming out, and legal issues related to *tongzhi*. The gatherings are usually held in cafés or bars, with entry tickets costing around RMB20. The income is used to pay for the venue and refreshments. Guest speakers are invited occasionally to speak on specialized topics. *Nvai* also carries out cultural projects. One ongoing project is documenting the oral history of women with same-sex love in Shanghai. *Nvai* carries out oral history training workshops for volunteers. The project has released its first book, a collection of life stories of fifteen women in same-sex relationships, and circulated it internally within the local *lala* community since 2007. The oral history project was still ongoing at the time when this book was written.

In December 2005, I participated in a salon gathering organized by *Nvai*. The gathering was held on a Sunday afternoon at a bar located in an easily accessible district, and which was rented out to *Nvai* for the whole afternoon. A sign drawn up on paper—which read “salon gathering” in Chinese, and in smaller font size, “*Nvai* Lesbian Group”—was placed at the entrance of the bar. Inside the venue, a large rainbow flag was hung on the wall facing the entrance. Propped up next to the flag was a big piece of cardboard for participants to sign their names. An hour before the gathering was set to start, people began to arrive. They seated themselves on the sofas and chairs set up in the spacious room, where refreshments had been laid out, and chatted until the meeting commenced promptly at two. Two workers from *Nvai* moderated the meeting. The rest of us sat around them in a circle. The topic for the day was “When love begins”. Participants were invited to discuss how couples meet and fall in love, and about different kinds of relationships. The forty or so women in the room included newcomers and regular participants. From their self-introductions, I learnt that most were in their twenties, while the youngest was seventeen, and

the oldest over forty. Many came with their girlfriends. Some of them came from outside of Shanghai; therefore, as in many other community gatherings, *putonghua* was the lingua franca. Several couples were invited to share their experiences with love and relationships. Their sharings covered a variety of relationship types, including same-city relationship, long distance relationship, *TT* love (that is, two *Ts* as a couple), virtual relationship (*wanglian*, relationship developed on the Internet), and underage love (*zaolian*, usually referring to relationships between teenagers). Participants were eager to share. The discussion was lively, and in general, participants were agreeable to each other. When the discussion moved to the topic of virtual relationships, however, it was obvious that participants were divided in their views. One interesting observation as the discussion proceeded was the obvious division by age. Unlike the younger party crowd, the dominant group at these salon gatherings was women in their mid-twenties and over. This dominant group always called the younger generations “[those] born after the 80s”, or simply, “kids” (*xiaohai*). In a similar manner, women born in the 80s would label those born after them as “kids”. The age difference seemed even more significant than regional difference as a category of inner-group identification. At events such as salon gatherings, age is usually singled out as *the* cause of differences or disagreements over topics that may not be age-specific. The salon session was followed by a group dinner in a nearby restaurant. Some participants went on to sing karaoke after dinner, rounding up a typical evening of a salon gathering. Besides these salon gatherings by *Nv'ai*, other local *lala* groups such as *Shenqixiaowu* have also organized gatherings and seminars on different topics. They usually attract different crowds according to the networks and preferences of the organizers.

Community activities of *lalas* in Shanghai have extended beyond the city’s borders. Regional and international networking with LGBTQ groups elsewhere has intensified after 2005, since the founding of local groups. They have been active in connecting with lesbian and gay organizations in and outside the country. During the period from 2005 to 2010, these groups have led participants to attend female *tongzhi* conferences and activities in Beijing, the International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) Parades and Pride Parades in Hong Kong and Taiwan, the *Lala* Camps since 2007 (with lesbian organizers and workers coming from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States), and international LGBTQ conferences in Asia and North America. Community building and rights activism are developing at full speed. There have also been closer cooperative efforts between advocates from medical, legal and academic sectors and the *tongzhi* communities in Shanghai: legal, medical practitioners and academics have been invited to speak in *lala* salon gatherings on specialized topics and to offer support for the communities. A more in-depth discussion of experts’ involvement in the building of *tongzhi* communities can be found in the next chapter.

With the development of online and offline communities, social interaction has become much easier for *lalas* in the city. Yet for many, the possible danger of exposure remains a major concern. Most of my informants kept their same-sex desires and relationships strictly secret from their parents and other family members. Some of them could not express their sexualities in their workplaces. Most of the *lalas* I met in community gatherings were closeted in their everyday lives. In order to protect real identities, *lalas* always refer to each other by nicknames or names used on the Internet. There is an unspoken rule in the community not to ask for people's real names. It is considered very rude and intrusive if one asks for the real name of someone the first time they meet. As some social circles are initially developed from the Internet, members still keep the practice of using net names to call each other long after their first meeting. The practice is so strictly followed that some women will even call their girlfriends by net names in public occasions. One informant told me about an "annoying" woman she met at community gatherings, who liked to ask about people's hometowns. She would insist on knowing the exact geographical locations, and would be dissatisfied if only the province was given. Her insistence was interpreted by my informant as an irritating behaviour and an obvious violation of the rule of discretion that is highly valued in the community. The reason to carefully conceal information regarding one's hometown is that these private particulars can easily put the person concerned in danger of exposing her real identity. This is particularly the case for *lalas* coming from small towns where kinship and social networks are so closely knitted that one's personal identity can be easily tracked down. Native Shanghai *lalas* are often just as reluctant to tell others in the community where they work and reside. Their cautious attitude originates from an even more immediate fear of exposure. With their families and primary social networks all in Shanghai, they do not enjoy the same protection of anonymity as non-native *lalas*. Their fear is reinforced by occasional cases of blackmail of *lalas* and gay men that are circulated within the community.

### **Lala Kinship and Household**

As many *lalas* active in Shanghai communities come from other parts of the country, they have contributed to the emergence of a new form of lesbian kinship—the *lala* household. It is a common practice for a small group of close *lala* friends to form a *lala* household, sharing rental costs and providing each other with mutual support.

I stayed in a *lala* household in one of my field visits. This household was made up of four core family members; their respective partners were occasional residents. They consisted of Shanghai natives and women who came from other parts of China. At the time of my stay, they were all in their early

to mid-twenties, and had just set up the household. Not only did they live and eat together, they also took part in community activities together. They related to each other in kinship terms. Each member took up a role in the family in the same manner as in the traditional heterosexual family according to their gender/sexual identification (for example, *T* or *P*), personality or their specialization in household chores. The *T* in the family was the father, and the most capable *P* was assigned the role of mother, even though they were not a real couple. The rest of the long-term and occasional residents were daughters to them. At the beginning, they had made up the family roles for fun, but the fact that all of them and their lovers were closeted to their natal families forged stronger bonds among them as an alternative family. They supported each other emotionally and offered each other the kinds of care that were impossible to obtain from their natal families. One example of this kind of support is when family members encounter relationship crises. Family members, by being deeply invested in each other's relationship, can offer comfort and counsel, since many of them cannot share this part of themselves with parents, siblings or even close friends who do not know their sexuality. This support is sometimes also extended to other family members who are living apart. The *lala* family I stayed with had a group of close *lala* friends who functioned as secondary family members. The secondary members were referred to as "cousins" and "nieces". They were very close to the core members, and visits between them were regular and frequent.

A *lala* family performs multiple functions to its members and the *lala* community as a whole. For family members, it provides round-the-clock emotional support and a precious physical space where they can express and live out their sexuality. For members in the community, a *lala* family usually functions like a community centre where they can socialize with each other without the fear of exposure and public scrutiny. In addition to close friendship, *lala* families are bonded by love. Cohabiting *lala* couples who have an independent living space can supply intimate spaces for meeting, which can function as a nurturing ground for *lala* communities. With the increasing mobility of individuals, and as more *lalas* are economically able to live away from their natal families, the number of *lala* families can be projected to increase in metropolitan areas in China. Emerging lesbian kinship in urban China will be a fertile area for further research.

*Lala* communities in Shanghai are fast developing. Since the late 1990s, communities have emerged rapidly, appearing first on the Internet, later extending to offline spaces, and recently crossing geographical borders to connect with LGBTQ communities outside China. The numerous social transformations in post-reform China have accelerated the formation of identity-based *tongzhi*

communities in urban centres such as Shanghai. Mobility of people and information are crucial to the development of these communities. The availability of job opportunities away from one's hometown and outside of the *danwei* system have largely freed individuals from the day-to-day scrutiny of their families and the state over private lives. *Lala* communities in Shanghai consist of locals and women from other parts of China. The dominant group is women of urban origin, who are educated, economically independent, not in a heterosexual marriage, and mostly in their twenties. During 2005 to 2011, community developments included the founding of the first local grassroots lesbian group, the Shanghai *Nvni* Lesbian Group, and the inception of two lesbian hotlines, *Tongxin* Lesbian Hotline (2004–2005) and the subsequent 800 *Lala* Hotline (2006–present). Local communities heavily reference *tongzhi* cultures in nearby Chinese societies such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. Interchanges among lesbian organizations in the three societies have been increasing in recent years. The *Lala* Camp, an annually held three-day training camp for Chinese-speaking LBT organizers in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas, is a prominent site of inter-regional exchanges and coalition. It started in 2007, and has since been hosted in a number of cities in China. It has generated many cross-regional projects, and has directly birthed a significant number of local *lala* groups in different parts of China. Alongside the development of larger identity-based communities, there are smaller *lala* groups formed by friends that function as families. *Lala* families radiate from the larger community, and function as dispersed nodal points of social networking for members. The various forms of *lala* family, its role in relation to the larger community, and how it introduces new ways of kinship and ways of living among *tongzhi* furnish new areas for further research.

