

THE TROUBLE WITH *TONGZHI*: THE POLITICS OF LABELING AMONG GAY AND LESBIAN HONGKONGERS

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Abstract

A general address term in Communist China, *tongzhi* 'comrade' was appropriated by gay rights activists in Hong Kong to refer to members of sexual minorities. Examining its level of acceptance among non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers, this article argues that non-activists' ideology about sexuality accounts for their rejection of *tongzhi* and their preference for strategies that leave same-sex desire unspecified. This study demonstrates how the discursive history of a label can both enable and impede its political efficacy. It also sheds light on the internal resistance that representatives of minority groups encounter when introducing new labels for those they supposedly speak for.

Keywords: Naming; Semantic change; Social category labels; Language and sexuality; Hong Kong.

1. Introduction

Representatives of minority groups, as Goffman (1963: 24) points out, often need to convince the general public to use softer and more positive labels to refer to those they speak for. These labels are intended to replace those with negative connotations that have been imposed on minority groups from without. However, as beliefs about how minority groups should be represented continue to evolve, ideas about what constitutes a "positive label" may change and new labels may begin to emerge. This is evident in the (re-)labeling of sexual minorities in the U.S. in the last few decades. Among labels used to refer to those of non-normative sexual orientation, *queer* is perhaps the most widely discussed in academic literature. It has attracted the attention of linguists (e.g. McConnell-Ginet 2002), sociologists (e.g. Seidman 1996), and gender theorists (e.g. Butler 1993). Nevertheless, discussions of *queer* often focus on activists' and academics' views on the political purchase of the label.¹ Little is known about how other members of sexual minorities - especially those who are neither activists nor academics - evaluate the label and whether or not they use it to refer to themselves and others. Insofar as the political efficacy of a new label for a minority group is indicated in part by the level of its acceptance within the group, it is essential to examine: (1) how members of the group view the label; (2) reasons for their level of acceptance of the label; and (3) the extent to which they use it both as a label for self-identification and as a term of reference for others within the group. Of course, the labeling of sexual minorities is not a uniquely American phenomenon. Examining a different cultural

¹ One of the few exceptions is Jacobs (1998).

context, this study focuses on the Chinese label *tongzhi* – a relatively new term used in Hong Kong to refer to members of sexual minorities (i.e., lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transsexuals, and transgendered people).² It addresses the three issues mentioned above and aims to shed light on the internal resistance that representatives of minority groups may encounter when introducing new terms of reference for the ones they supposedly speak for.

The label *tongzhi* (often glossed as ‘comrade’) has a long history, and its meaning has changed over the years. Originating some 2,200 years ago, it was initially defined as ‘pertaining to people who have the same ethics and ideals.’ Its association with political discourse began to strengthen when it was used in the will of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen (leader of the 1911 Revolution) in which he called on his followers to carry on the revolution (Fang and Heng 1983). During the Communist Revolution (1921-1949), the term acquired stronger political connotations, and its use as an address term among revolutionaries became more popular. At that time, the reciprocal use of the term indexed solidarity, equality, respect, and intimacy. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Communist Party made great efforts to promote the use of *tongzhi* as a new general address term among the masses to replace those that signal differences in social status (e.g. *xiaojie* ‘miss,’ *laoye* ‘master’). The extension of the use of *tongzhi* from members of the Revolutionary Army to the general public was a strategy of the Communist Party to establish an ideology of egalitarianism (Scotton and Zhu 1983). After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), *tongzhi* became even more widely used. In the last two decades, with mainland China’s rapid social and economic changes, *tongzhi* has become disfavored due to its original political and revolutionist connotations. Address terms that were replaced by *tongzhi* have been revived and are becoming more popular. Although *tongzhi* is out of date in mainland China, it was appropriated in the late 1980s by gay rights activists in Hong Kong to refer to those of non-normative sexual orientation.

Thanks to its rich discursive history, *tongzhi* serves as an ideal symbol for the sexuality-based social movement in Hong Kong. Following the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1991, various organizations for sexual minorities were founded and the *tongzhi* movement was born. Activists involved in the movement aim to show that discrimination based on sexual orientation does exist and that a sexuality-based social movement is needed to bring same-sex desire into public discussion. As same-sex desire emerged from the underground into the public spotlight, *tongzhi* activists began to receive an increasing number of interview requests from the media and their search for an appropriate label to refer to sexual minorities became more urgent than before. Terms of reference for sexual minorities were plentiful, but not all of them were suitable for the presentation of the *tongzhi* movement to the public as a political and collective force. As Chou Wah-Shan (2000: 2), a well-known Hong Kong activist/scholar whose research focuses on gender and sexuality in Chinese societies, explains:

² *Tongzhi* is the *pinyin* (i.e.romanization) of the Chinese word in Mandarin. In Cantonese, it is pronounced as *tung4-ji3* (4 - low falling tone; 3 - mid level tone). Since all the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, Cantonese (rather than Mandarin) romanization is used. The only exceptions are original Mandarin quotes, names of people and places in Taiwan and Mainland China, Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese book titles, and the terms *tongzhi* and *gay*. *Tongzhi* is used more often than its Cantonese counterpart in academic writing in English (see, e.g., Chou 2000), and *gay* is a loanword from English. The romanization used in this article is based on the Yale system (see Matthews and Yip 1994). For easier reading, tones are not indicated.

“Homosexual” [*tung-sing-lyun je* in Cantonese] was dropped as it was a medical term denoting sickness and pathology. Even positive categories such as “gay,” “lesbian,” and “queer” are Anglo-Saxon constructs with specific histories that fail to capture the indigenous features of Chinese same-sex relationships.

On the other hand, *tongzhi* was considered an appropriate label for the representation of same-sex desire to the public, and activists began to use it as a term of reference for sexual minorities. In addition to emphasizing the cultural specificity of same-sex desire in Chinese societies, activists’ use of *tongzhi* to refer to members of sexual minorities underscores the similarities between Chinese revolutionaries and *tongzhi* activists. Through the use of *tongzhi*, activists exploit the revolutionary connotations of the term and its suggestions of solidarity, intimacy and striving for liberty. Like Chinese revolutionaries, activists use the term to present a public, collective and political front. They call on Chinese sexual minorities to respect themselves and to join the common endeavor of fighting for equality in a heterosexist society (Wong and Zhang 2000).

The use of *tongzhi* as a term of reference for sexual minorities has gained currency not only in Hong Kong, but also in Taiwan, mainland China and overseas Chinese communities. Wong (2003, chap. 3) reports that *tongzhi* activists in Hong Kong use the term, together with a host of other linguistic resources, to construct a spokesperson persona in interviews with outsiders (e.g. journalists, researchers). *Tongzhi* is also a common term of reference for sexual minorities in *G&L* - a magazine popular among gay and lesbian Chinese in Taiwan (Wong and Zhang 2000). In addition, it is frequently used on Chinese websites that cater to sexual minorities. Even in mainstream Hong Kong newspapers, *tongzhi* has for the most part replaced such derogatory labels as *sing-bin-taai* ‘perverts’ and *tyun-jau-fan-tou pik* ‘the fetish of the cut sleeve and shared peach’ (Wong 2005).³ Thus, the new meaning of *tongzhi* has spread to the wider community and heterosexual Hongkongers have to a certain extent adopted the new use of the term. Perhaps under the influence of Chou Wah-Shan, the Hong Kong activist/scholar mentioned above, *tongzhi* has also become the preferred term in Chinese academic and popular books about same-sex desire. These observations may have led some to conclude that *tongzhi* is “the most popular contemporary Chinese word for lesbians, bisexuals, and gay people” (Chou 2000: 1).

This article takes a closer look at the putative popularity of *tongzhi* and examines the extent to which the label is embraced by those it is supposed to refer to. In particular, it addresses the question of whether gay and lesbian Hongkongers who are not involved in the *tongzhi* movement use the label to refer to themselves and to others with same-sex desire. In what follows, I will first examine non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers’ ideology about same-sex desire, as well as their attitudes toward *tongzhi* and other labels that refer to members of sexual minorities. I will then discuss their use of labels to refer to those of non-normative sexual orientation in actual discourse. Through this case study, I hope to illuminate issues that may arise when new labels are introduced to refer to members of minority groups.

³ However, as Wong (2005) points out, the ways in which *tongzhi* is used in some mainstream newspapers may actually lead to the pejoration of the term.

2. Methodology

Though focusing on the labeling practices of gay and lesbian Hongkongers who are not involved in the *tongzhi* movement, this study is part of a larger project that examines both activists' and non-activists' use of labels to refer to members of sexual minorities. Using my personal contacts, as well as my contacts in several *tongzhi* organizations, I located 37 lesbians and gay men (15 *tongzhi* activists and 22 non-activists) who were willing to participate in the study. I informed the participants that I was interested in how they would talk about topics such as family, coming out and social movements. The activist/non-activist classification was based on participants' self-identification. All the self-identified activists in the study were core members (i.e. officers) of *tongzhi* organizations and were heavily involved in the *tongzhi* movement. A few self-identified non-activists participated in social activities provided by *tongzhi* organizations, but they did so intermittently and were not officers in any of these organizations.

Although they were all between the ages of 20 and 40, the 22 non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers (10 men and 12 women) have rather diverse backgrounds. Most of them are high school graduates, but one of them was unable to finish high school because of economic hardship. Others received higher education either abroad or in Hong Kong. They also have different occupations - e.g., nurse, accountant, truck driver, professional dancer, hair stylist, financial analyst, computer programmer, and university professor. Despite differences in age, gender, education and social class, the non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers in the study expressed similar opinions on matters related to same-sex desire.

Given the focus of this study on the use of labels in actual discourse, I needed speech data involving participants' use of labels to refer to those of non-normative sexual orientation. Tape-recording everyday interactions was not a feasible option: Since labels that refer to sexual minorities are not used as frequently as phonological variables, it is possible to record many hours of conversation without any use of the labels in question. Instead, following Zwicky's (1997) advice, I collected the data for the study through directed interviewing. Each interview lasted for about an hour. All the participants knew about my same-sex sexual orientation before the interview. They were free to choose the location for the interview. Many of them chose to be interviewed in cafés or restaurants. I informed them that tape-recording was optional and that they could stop the interview at any time.

The interview was divided into two parts. In the first part, I asked participants to discuss topics that would generate the use of labels to refer to those of non-normative sexual orientation (e.g. sexuality, kinship, and coming out). To prevent my use of labels from influencing theirs, I refrained from using *gay*, *lesbian*, *tongzhi*, *tung-sing-lyun je* 'homosexual' and other obvious labels. Instead, I used circumlocutions such as "those of non-normative sexual orientation," "those with same-sex desire" and "those attracted to the same sex." Data from the first part of the interview provide the basis for the analysis of non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers' use of labels in discourse. In addition, they shed light on non-activists' ideology about same-sex desire, which, as I will argue, accounts for non-activists' attitudes toward *tongzhi* and their level of acceptance of the label.

In the second part of the interview, I explicitly asked participants to talk about labels for those of non-normative sexual orientation (e.g., how labels such as *tongzhi* and *gay* are different from each other, whether they use *tongzhi* as a label for self-

identification). Data from the second part of the interview provide insights into non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers' evaluation of *tongzhi* and other labels that refer to members of sexual minorities. They complement data on non-activists' use of labels in discourse. As will be discussed below, non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers' resistance to *tongzhi* is confirmed not only by their self-reports of labeling practices in the second part of the interview, but also by the language-use data collected in the first part of the interview.

3. Ideology about same-sex desire

Unlike *tongzhi* activists, non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers do not see the need to bring same-sex desire into public discussion. They believe that even when discussed, same-sex desire should remain unspecified. For them, avoidance and indirectness are often the best strategies. This is evident in how they deal with the issue of coming out. Many non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers do not think that it is necessary to come out to their co-workers, heterosexual friends, and most importantly, their families. They claim that more often than not, their families are already aware of their sexual orientation, but same-sex desire is not an openly discussed issue. To avoid bringing it out in the open, their families sometimes maintain a façade of ignorance and they are more than willing to comply. Conversely, without telling their families directly, non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers may hint at their sexual orientation and their relationships with same-sex partners. Thus, a gay man may present his boyfriend as a "best friend" or a "roommate," and his family may take what he says at face value and not question the nature of their relationship. This is precisely how Sebastian introduced his boyfriend to his family:⁴

My mother never asks any questions about the nature of our relationship [i.e., his relationship with his boyfriend]. She knows that we are always together. One time, my brother invited me over for dinner. I declined. I said I had to make dinner for my "roommate." Since then, every time my brother invites me over for dinner, he will ask my "roommate" to come along. I think if I tell my mother and my brother directly that they have to accept our relationship, they'll think that it's too much. Actually, they have accepted us already, but because they are Chinese, they are more conservative and don't want to discuss it openly.

What Sebastian's story also illustrates is that non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers often share an implicit understanding with their families. This mutual understanding allows them to avoid talking about their sexuality explicitly. Even in those instances where same-sex desire is mentioned, it is usually brought up indirectly. This is evident in how Vincent's parents tried to find out the nature of Vincent's relationship with his "friend." Vincent used to live with his boyfriend. His parents would sometimes visit him at his place. During their visit, they would ask him why his "friend" was always there:

⁴ All names are pseudonyms.

They sort of asked me indirectly. “Why do you live together?” I told them that it is more convenient. Then they asked me, “why don’t you date girls?” I said that I didn’t feel the need to. They stopped asking after that. In fact, you can understand a lot of things without asking too many questions.... These things are difficult to hide, but I don’t think it’s necessary to tell them directly. If you’re too direct, they may not be able to handle the fact. They have certain established beliefs. It is difficult for them to change at this point.... Certain things are taboo. They don’t need to be spelled out.

As Vincent explained, the crucial point is that same-sex desire does not need to be spelled out. Many gay and lesbian Hongkongers prefer to leave it unspecified. Their silence on sexuality and their families’ reticence on the same issue tend to reinforce each other.

Many gay and lesbian Hongkongers believe that same-sex desire should be left unspoken for two reasons. First of all, they tend to view their sexuality as a personal matter. James has never felt the need to come out to his family because as far as he is concerned, his sexual orientation is his own business: “When I was eighteen, I began to feel the need to have my own space. Since I moved out, I have rarely talked to them about my personal life.... *This [his sexual orientation] is my personal business.* I don’t need to discuss it with them.” Ken echoed James’s view on same-sex desire:

If I want to tell you because you’re a good friend, I’ll tell you. But if I just meet someone for the first time, it will be strange for me to come out to him or her immediately.... If I’m friends with a straight person, the only difference is our sexual orientation. *My sexual orientation is something personal and private.*

Secondly, many non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers equate talking about same-sex desire explicitly with highlighting one aspect of their identity. For them, it is pointless because they do not see their same-sex desire as a defining characteristic of who they are. Despite their sexual orientation, many of them believe that they are not very different from straight people. Given this belief, they frown upon any identities that highlight sexual orientation and treat any communities that focus on same-sex desire with suspicion. Louise does not participate in any organizations that cater to sexual minorities. She thinks that participation in these organizations means publicly affirming her sexual orientation, which for her is unnecessary. For Bill, the only possible difference between gay people and straight people is in their consumption patterns: Since gay people do not usually have a family to take care of, they have more disposable income. Other non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers that I interviewed hold similar views. While not denying the influence of same-sex desire on their lives, they question the necessity of highlighting sexuality at the expense of other aspects of their identity. Alan admitted that his sexuality has influenced his lifestyle (particularly, his interactions with people of the same sex), but he would hesitate to say that his sexual orientation is his “first priority.” In what follows, I argue that non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers’ ideology about same-sex desire has an important bearing on their labeling practices and on their attitudes toward *tongzhi* and other labels that refer to those of same-sex desire.

4. Attitudes towards *tongzhi* and other labels

When asked in the second part of the interview if *tongzhi* is part of their everyday vocabulary, the 22 non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers expressed similar opinions. They all claimed that they had heard someone use *tongzhi* as a term of references for lesbians, gay men and other sexual minorities, but they themselves would not use it as a label for self-identification or as a term of reference for those of non-normative sexual orientation. Seven of them explained that *tongzhi* - a popular address term in Communist China - is an inappropriate label for sexual minorities in Hong Kong, because of its communist connotations and its association with mainland China. James pictures *tongzhis* as illegal immigrants from mainland China, who live in Hong Kong as second-class citizens. Kevin, who grew up in Vietnam and has lived in Hong Kong since his early twenties, refuses to identify himself as a *tongzhi*, partly because of his antagonism toward communism. For him, the label *tongzhi* evokes the image of the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution. Another informant, Karl, thinks that when used to refer to sexual minorities, *tongzhi* sounds like a joke because its communist connotations are incompatible with anything that has to do with same-sex desire. Perhaps, the dislike of *tongzhi* is most strongly expressed in a letter to the organizers of the Second Chinese *Tongzhi* Conference. Held in Hong Kong in 1998, the Conference served as a forum for the discussion of issues concerning Chinese sexual minorities. For the most part, the conference was regarded as highly successful. However, one of the organizers received a letter from an overseas Chinese named Kin Tso, who was extremely critical of the conference:

I have read with disgust regarding the so called "conclusion" of your Tongzhi conference in Hong Kong last February. It is bad enough to use the word TongZhi in your title, it is worst that the attendance agree on the "anti-American style" gay movement.... Thank god that I have left Hong Kong and not need to be called "tongzhi", a term that any decent person will not use it to call themselves. I suppose you guys think it is politically correct, it ain't, it is degrading.... *Finally, stop using that fucking word "Tongzhi", no one want to be a god damn communist.* [sic] (emphasis added) (Loo, ed. 1999: 336-337)

Thus, the general revolutionary connotations of the term recede to the background, while its association with communism and mainland China looms large for some non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers.

Nevertheless, the lack of popularity of *tongzhi* among non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers has less to do with the label per se than with many non-activists' belief that same-sex desire should not highlighted at the expense of other aspects of their identity. As previously discussed, many gay and lesbian Hongkongers equate naming same-sex desire explicitly with giving undue emphasis to sexuality. Thus, any label for sexual minorities, which gives prominence to sexuality, is immediately suspect. For Louise, labels such as *lesbian* and *tongzhi* only make it easier for others to categorize and stereotype her. As far as she is concerned, they do not serve any purpose. She is averse to any labels that refer to those of non-normative sexual orientation.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 2. keui-dei aam-aam yau go giu jou | they at that time had something called |
| 3. [tsk] tongzhi wui la, so-wai | [tsk] so-called tongzhi organization |
| 4. gam keui-dei dou m-hai wa
hou-do yan chaam-ga | they didn't have
a lot of participants |
| 5. tung-maai dou mou me yan heui chaam- | and not many people would participate |
| 6. je-hai m-wui support keui-dei lo | I mean would support them |

With regard to *me* 'whatdoyoucallit' or its reduplicated form *me-me*, its use has the effect of not only distancing the speaker from what follows, but also belittling or undermining the importance of what it qualifies. In (2), Tristan explains to me what he previously thought was the meaning of "coming out." For him, coming out originally meant getting involved in "*tongzhi* organizations" and going to "*tongzhi* venues." Notice the use of the hesitation marker *e* in line 2 and *me* in line 3. Not only do they indicate the marked status of the label *tongzhi* in Tristan's vocabulary, but they (*me* particularly) also signal Tristan's implicit negative attitude toward the label *tongzhi*.

(2) Tristan:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. la, hoi-tau ngo yi-wai come out hai | well, at first I thought coming out meant |
| 2. jau hai dai-yat-chi jip-juk li-di, e
tongzhi ge jou-jik a | the first time getting in touch with, hm
tongzhi organizations |
| 3. waak-je heui me tongzhi jeung-so a | or going to whatdoyoucallit tongzhi
venues |
| 4. je-hai ngo hoi-tau yi-wai go definition
hai gam-yeung | I mean, I thought the definition was
like this |

5. 1. Western imports

If *tongzhi* is not their preferred term for sexual minorities, how do non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers refer to those of same-sex desire when sexuality is indeed the topic of discussion? Gay and lesbian Hongkongers are certainly familiar with western imports such as *gay* and *lesbian* (and its abbreviated form *les*). In the second part of the interview, all 22 informants cited them as examples of labels for those with same-sex desire. However, only six informants used these terms regularly in the first part of the interview. Compared to the others in the study, these six informants have more contact with same-sex cultures in the West. Five of them either worked or studied in the U.S. or the U.K., where they developed social and emotional ties with gay Americans and/or Europeans. One has never lived outside of Hong Kong, but he often travels to the U.S. and has many American and European friends. Thus, all six of them have been influenced by and have significant contact with Anglo-American gay cultures.

It is not surprising that informants with more extensive contact with Anglo-American gay cultures used words borrowed from English. The term *gay*, for instance, is still to a certain extent considered an English label that came from the outside; thus, it is not part of the local same-sex culture. Chou (2000: 59) claims that when it was first imported into Hong Kong in 1970s, *gay* was 'not only a signifier of sexual orientation, but also a category of (middle) class, (white) race, (young) age, (well) educated, (English) language, and (male) gender.' Even now, the gay image in Hong Kong is about being modern, trendy, and above all, Westernized and English-speaking (p. 87).

There is some evidence for this claim in my data. When used in interviews, *gay* and *lesbian* were commonly found in Chinese-English code-switches (see (3) and (4)). This suggests its association with ‘English-speaking’ and by extension ‘Westernized.’

(3) James:

pei-yu hai Mei-Gok	for example, in the U.S.
uhm gay and lesbian ge wan-dung	uhm gay and lesbian movement
keui-dei dou hai wai-jo keui-dei ji-gei heui jou	they are only doing it for themselves
ngo jau	as for me
ngo jau mou yung yat-go gok-dou	I don’t look at it from one particular perspective
keui-dei hai	they [i.e. gay rights activists in the U.S.] are
jou-gan yat-di jing-ji ge	they’re conveying a political
ge seun-sik cheut lei	message
ngo jau mou gam tai keui	I don’t look at it [i.e. same-sex desire] in this manner

(4) Kevin:

e, dou gei-do yan gam yeung lam	well, quite a few people think like this
mou-leun hai	no matter what
je keui deui-yu keui ge identity	I mean, the way they look at their identity
deui yu gay movement li yeung ye	the way they look at the gay movement
wui gam yeung lam ji-oi	they think like this
mou-leun yam-ho gwan-yu politics ge ye	with regard to anything that has to do with politics
ho-lang dou wui take yat-go gam ge stand	they may take such a stand

Tung-sing-lyun (je) - a morphemic translation of the English word *homosexual* - is an official term that is still currently used in legal and medical discourse (Chou 2000: 79). Among gay and lesbian Hongkongers, it is even less popular than *gay* or *les(bian)*. In the first part of the interview, only two informants used *tung-sing-lyun (je)* in addition to *gay* when referring to those with same-sex desire. These informants tended to use *tung-sing-lyun (je)* when adopting what Labov (2001) calls “soapbox style,” which is characterized as “an extended expression of generalized opinions, not spoken directly to the interviewer, but enunciated as if for a more general audience” (p. 91). Rather than describing personal experiences (e.g. coming-out events), the informants acted as commentators on sexuality-based social movements, the general state of affairs for sexual minorities and other sexuality-related issues in the public arena. In (5), Ken evaluates the attitude of the general public toward gay and lesbian Hongkongers. Most notable in this excerpt is his use of the third-person plural pronoun *keui-dei* ‘they’ in lines 2, 4, 5 and 9 and *tung-sing-lyun go-di* ‘those who are homosexual’ in lines 1 and 6 to refer to those with same-sex desire in Hong Kong. The use of these two expressions (instead of the first-person plural pronoun *ngo-dei*) effectively excludes Ken and me (both gay men from Hong Kong) from the group of people labeled *tung-sing-lyun* in this stretch of discourse. Through the use of *keui-dei* and *tung-sing-lyun go-di*, Ken disassociates himself from other gay and lesbian Hongkongers and comments on the situation as if he were an “objective observer.” The use of *tung-sing-lyun* - an official term used in medical and legal discourse - evokes an air of officiality and serves as an

appropriate label for Ken's positioning of himself as an "impartial observer" detached from others with same-sex desire in Hong Kong.⁵

(5) Ken:

- | | | |
|-----|--|---|
| 1. | yi-ga tung-sing-lyun go-di m-hai wa | Nowadays for those who are homosexual , it's not that |
| 2. | di yan kei-si keui-dei | people discriminate against them |
| 3. | hou-chi gwaai-sau gam | treating them like freaks |
| 4. | yi-ga keui-dei hai | nowadays they are |
| 5. | daan-hai keui-dei chi-jung ji-gei yau | but in the end they themselves have |
| 6. | tung-sing-lyung go-di hai ji-gei yau
go hung-gaan lo | those who are homosexual , they themselves
have their own space |
| 7. | lai-yu hai tyun-tai wut-dung a | like [their own] group activities |
| 8. | waak-je cheut-heui waan a | or they can go out and have fun |
| 9. | keui-dei yau keui-dei ge dei-fong heuia | they have their own places to go to |
| 10. | gam-yeung | so on and so forth |
| 11. | je-hai am | I mean uhm |
| 12. | tung-maai straight ge yan le | also straight people |
| 13. | keui-dei dou m-wui | they don't |
| 14. | keui-dei dou gok-dak hou pou-tung ga | they think it's rather common |
| 15. | m-hai wa | it isn't |
| 16. | taai me ga la | such a big deal |
| 17. | ji-bat go hai sing-bit-cheui-heung m-tung | it's only that sexual orientation is different |
| 18. | daan-hai chi-jung dou hai yan a ma | but in the end they are human beings |

Several reasons account for the lack of popularity of terms like *gay*, *les(bian)* and *tung-sing-lyun (je)* among non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers. *First*, some gay and lesbian Hongkongers regard these Western imports as labels imposed from without. In other words, these are not their *own* labels; rather, these labels were given to them by Anglo-American gay cultures or straight people. As June explained, although *gay* is not very popular among lesbians and gay men in Hong Kong, it is often used by heterosexual Hongkongers to refer to those with same-sex desire. *Second*, some of these terms have gained negative connotations as a result of the contexts of their use. Amy stated that *gay* is derogatory, not only because some heterosexual people think that same-sex desire is abnormal, but also because of the way in which straight people use the term, as she said, "You can just look at them when they use the word. 'Oh my God! They *gaau-gay*!' They usually say that with a big frown on their face. You can tell how disapproving they are based on their facial expressions." The expression *gaau-gay* does not have an exact equivalent in English. The verb *gaau* can roughly be glossed as 'to do (something that is socially disapproved or undesirable).' It is used in expressions such as *gaau fan-oi-ching* 'to engage in extramarital affairs,' *gaau-gwai-gaau-gwaai* 'to mess around,' and *gaau jing-bin* 'to stage a coup d'état.' The expression *gaau-gay*, which can be translated as 'to engage in homosexual behavior,' carries negative meanings. *Gay* is also used in the expression *gay-lou*, which is somewhat like *faggot* in English. The word *lou* refers to a 'disgusting guy.' It is used in myriad terms with

⁵ The terms *TB* (tomboy) and *TBG* (tomboy's girl) - whose rough English equivalents are *butch* and *femme* - symbolize another system of sexual understanding espoused by some women with same-sex desire in Hong Kong (Chou 2000, chapter 6). However, unless prompted, my informants rarely used or discussed these two terms in the interview.

extremely negative meanings, e.g. *sei-lou* (lit. ‘dead, disgusting guy’) and *aam-sap-lou* (lit. ‘sleazy, disgusting guy’). With regard to *tung-sin-lyun (je)*, some of my informants echoed Chou (2000: 79) and said that it is mildly derogatory because like its English counterpart *homosexual*, it is a medical term and reminds them of the days when homosexuality was considered a medical illness. *Third*, and most important, *gay*, *les(bian)* and *tung-sing-lyun (je)* all specify sexual orientation. The use of these labels is at odds with many non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers’ belief that same-sex desire should remain unnamed even when sexuality is the topic of discussion. Instead of using sexual-identity labels borrowed from English, many non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers prefer to adopt strategies that leave same-sex desire unspecified.

5.2. *Mem-ba*

To avoid naming same-sex desire explicitly, non-activist gay Hongkongers - and to a certain extent, non-activist lesbian Hongkongers - often use the term *mem-ba* to refer to those with same-sex desire. Borrowed from the English word *member*, *mem-ba* is commonly heard in Cantonese conversation among gay Hongkongers. Most heterosexual Hongkongers are not aware of the fact that this word can refer to those with same-sex desire. While not using *mem-ba* in this particular sense, they often use the English borrowing to refer to a member of a social club, an organization etc. For gay Hongkongers, however, this term has an additional, more specific meaning - namely, ‘gay man.’ Whether *mem-ba* can be used to refer to ‘lesbians’ is debatable: While some lesbians use the term to refer to both lesbians and gay men, others would reject it outright and maintain that it is a label for gay men only. In addition, gay Hongkongers seem to be more familiar with the term than lesbian Hongkongers. In the second part of the interview, all ten male informants but only three of the twelve female informants cited *mem-ba* as a label that refers to those of non-normative sexual orientation. Linda was one of the three. Unlike many lesbian Hongkongers, she also used *mem-ba* as a label for both men and women with same-sex desire. In (6), an excerpt from the first part of the interview, Linda uses *mem-ba* when discussing her view on coming out. Since coming out is often regarded as a rite of passage for lesbians and gay men, one can infer that *mem-ba* in (6) refers to both men and women with same-sex desire. The difference in meaning attached to the label may stem from experience in different communities of practice. Linda is different from other lesbians, in that she has more gay friends than lesbian friends.

(6) Linda:

gam ngo lam second level
 maybe a a involve yat-di yat-di ge
mem-ba ge group
 je-hai sik yat-di **mem-ba** ge yan
 yan-wai lei heui jou li-yat bou ge si-hau
 lei yiu yeung yan ji-dou lei ge identity
 bat-go lei go-baan daai-ga dou hai **mem-ba** lo

so I think the second level is
 maybe uhm getting involved in certain, certain
 groups for **mem-ba**
 in other words, meeting people who are **mem-**
ba
 because when you make this step
 you let others know about your identity
 but those in the group are all **mem-ba**

Mem-ba is part of the ‘anti-language’ (Halliday 1976) that gay Hongkongers developed to talk about matters related to same-sex desire without stating them explicitly. Before the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1991, the gay sub-culture in Hong Kong was characterized by a handful of gay bars, gay clubs, and cruising places called *yu-tong* ‘fishing ponds’ (e.g. public toilets). It is a prime example of what Halliday calls “anti-society” - i.e., “a society that is set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it” (p. 570). A detailed description of this anti-society is beyond the scope of this article. What is noteworthy is the emergence of an anti-language in tandem with the underground gay sub-culture. This anti-language serves the purpose of not only expressing, but also creating and maintaining an alternative reality. As Halliday explains, “an anti-language is...nobody’s ‘mother tongue’; it exists solely in the context of *resocialization*, and the reality it creates is inherently an alternative reality, one that is constructed precisely in order to function in alternation.” (p. 575; original emphasis).

An anti-language is often not drastically different from the language of the established society. It follows the principle of “same grammar, different vocabulary.” Halliday points out that the vocabulary of an anti-language is only different in areas that are crucial to the activities of the subculture (p. 571). Some examples from gay Hongkongers’ anti-language are given in Table 1.

	Definition	Literal meaning
<i>mem-ba</i>	Gay (or lesbian)	Member
<i>Friend</i>	Boyfriend	Friend
<i>wui-so</i>	Gay bar or club	Association
<i>chau-fui</i>	To be attracted to white men	To smell dust
<i>diu-yu</i>	To go cruising	To go fishing
<i>yu-tong</i>	Cruising places	Fishing ponds
<i>Em</i>	To be the insertor in sexual intercourse	Possibly an abbreviation of the English word <i>man</i>
<i>keep yan</i>	To be in a relationship	To keep someone

Table 1: Gay Hongkongers’ anti-language

The terms in Table 1 are not necessarily known by everyone who is attracted to the same sex. Some of them may be limited to particular communities of practice. A person’s knowledge of these terms depends to a great extent on his/her involvement in different communities of practice built on same-sex desire. Some such as *mem-ba*, *diu-yu*, *chau-fui* and *yu-tong* are well-known among gay Hongkongers, but others are not as common. During my fieldwork, I only heard two people use *wui-so* to refer to ‘gay bars.’

The anti-language of which *mem-ba* is a part can be regarded as a secret code. Gay Hongkongers can use *mem-ba* as a euphemism to conceal the topic of discussion when talking about anything related to same-sex desire in the presence of heterosexual overhearers or eavesdroppers. Some informants claimed that the advantage of using *mem-ba* to refer to ‘gay men’ is that the term is not used by gay Hongkongers exclusively. As previously discussed, this English borrowing is well integrated into Hong Kong Cantonese. Heterosexual Hongkongers often use the term to refer to a member of a basketball team, a member of a swimming club etc. As Adam explained, “if you use *mem-ba*, you may refer to a member of a mah-jong club or a member of a

swimming club. It's a lot more flexible [than *gay*]." For Linda, the use of *mem-ba* has to do with the *hyun loi/hyun oi* (inside the circle/outside the circle) distinction:

We tend to distinguish between what is *hyun loi* ('inside the circle') and what is *hyun oi* ('outside the circle'). For example, when we're talking with others 'inside the circle' and we don't want to be explicit, we use *mem-ba* so that other people won't know what we are talking about.

When talking about matters related to same-sex desire, non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers' use of *mem-ba* to conceal the topic of discussion operates according to their belief that same-sex desire should remain unspecified even when discussed.

Nevertheless, the anti-language symbolized by the label *mem-ba* is not merely a code of secrecy; rather, it is also a marker of local same-sex culture in Hong Kong. As Halliday (1976: 572) argues, "while secrecy is a necessary strategic property of anti-languages, it is unlikely to be the major cause of their existence" (see also Boellstorff 2004). Wong (2003) reports that gay rights activists often use *tongzhi* in interviews with outsiders (e.g. journalists, researchers) but *mem-ba* in casual interactions amongst themselves. It is doubtful that activists, who do not mind talking about same-sex desire in the presence of straight people, use *mem-ba* to conceal the topic of discussion. Thus, *mem-ba* cannot serve solely as a euphemism. While *gay* and *tung-sing-lyun je* are labels that others (i.e. Westerners and straight people) gave to those with same-sex desire in Hong Kong, *mem-ba* is an indigenous creation that is intimately tied to local same-sex culture. *Mem-ba* conforms to the phonology of Cantonese: Tones are added to the two syllables and the second syllable *-ber* is changed to *ba*. The subtle differences between the English word *member* and the borrowing *mem-ba* (both in form and meaning) do not go unnoticed. The label is rarely (if ever) pronounced as *member* (even by Western-educated speakers) when used to refer to gay men. This is illustrated in the self-initiated repair in (7). The use of *mem-ba* as a symbol of local same-sex culture does not discount its use as a euphemism to leave same-sex desire unspecified, but it underscores the multifunctionality of the label. *Mem-ba* may serve different functions depending on who uses it and in which context it is used.

(7) Simon:

Interviewer:

yau di me-ye labels lei ji-gei yung
 waak-je lei teng-go yan yung
 lei ying-yung waak-je refer to
 hei-fun tung-sing ge yan le?

what labels do you use
 or have you heard people use
 to describe or to refer to people who like the
 same sex?

[...]

[...]

Simon:

ngo lam jeui unique go-go hai '**member**' lo
 ngo gok-dak hai
 '**mem-ba**' a, kei-sat hai (self-initiated repair)

I think the most unique one is '**member**'
 I think
 actually, it is '**mem-ba**' (self-initiated repair)

5.3. Ellipsis, circumlocutions and deictic expressions

Ellipsis is another strategy that non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers often adopt to leave same-sex desire unspecified. Ellipsis is the omission of words - in this case, labels that specify same-sex desire - that are assumed to be understood and can be supplied by the addressee. Although ellipsis is generally anaphoric and follows an explicit antecedent (e.g. "I'm Chinese and John is, too."), it could also be licensed by shared knowledge in the discourse. For instance, April said that if she wanted to find out if someone is a lesbian, she would say *keui hai-m-hai a?* 'Is she?' rather than *keui hai-m-hai lesbian a?* 'Is she a **lesbian**?'. Similarly, when asked in the interview if labels such as *tongzhi* or *gay* are commonly used, Vincent responded:

Well, people rarely use it [gay] to identify themselves. 'Is that one gay?' That doesn't happen very often.... 'That one is, too.' (*go-go dou hai ge wo.*) and 'Is he/she?' (*'hai-m-hai?'*) actually say a lot already.

Thus, according to Vincent, instead of using *gay* or *tongzhi*, many non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers would say:

<i>keui hai-m-hai</i>	[ellipsis]	<i>a?</i>
he/she is-not-is	[ellipsis]	question marker

'Is he/she [gay/*tongzhi* etc.]?'

The following narrative further illustrates non-activists' use of ellipsis to leave same-sex desire unspecified. In (8), Alan describes how he told his secondary school classmate about his sexual orientation. Even though the narrative is about how Alan told someone for the first time that he is gay, same-sex desire is not mentioned even once. Notice the use of ellipsis in lines 3, 5 and 9. Given that the speaker relies on the addressee's shared knowledge to decipher what he or she is talking about, the use of ellipsis has the potential of emphasizing the in-groupness between the speaker and the addressee.

(8) Alan:

Alan:

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. dai-yat go ying-goi hai yat-go
jung-hok tung-hok | The first one should be my
high school classmate |
| 2. da-din-wa wa bei ngo teng | who called me and told me |
| 3. wa keui ji-gei hai [ellipsis] | he told me that he is [ellipsis] |
| 4. gam git-go wa | so as a result |
| 5. kei-sat keui dou gu dou
ngo dou hai [ellipsis] ge laak | actually, he guessed that
I am [ellipsis] as well |
| 6. so-yi sin tung ngo gong | that's why he told me |
| 7. gam gan-jyu | after that |
| 8. gam tung keui gong-jo | I told him |
| 9. ngo dou hai [ellipsis] lo | I am [ellipsis], too |

10. gam so
 11. je hou gaan-dan gam I mean, it was rather simple.

In addition to the use of ellipsis, non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers circumvent the issue of specifying same-sex desire through the use of circumlocutions (e.g. *dou-hai tung ji-gei yat-yeung ge yan* ‘people like me’) and deictic expressions (e.g. *go-di yan* ‘those people’). What first caught my attention was Louise’s use of this strategy during our interview. I got in touch with Louise through a *tongzhi* activist I interviewed. However, unlike the *tongzhi* activist, she was rather wary of interviews with journalists and researchers. She was the only person who requested that her interview not be tape-recorded. In recounting her story of coming out to her mother, she did not talk about sexual orientation directly. Instead, she used the following roundabout expressions to avoid specifying same-sex desire:

(9) Louise:

yi-ga ngo hai gam.
 ‘Now I’m **like this.**’

ngo hai yat-go gam ge yan.
 ‘I am **such kind of person.**’

yi-ga ngo hai di gam ge yan, lei jip-m-jip sau a?
 ‘Now I am **such kind of person**, are you going to accept me?’

Louise was not the only non-activist who used circumlocutions or deictic expressions to get around naming same-sex desire in the interview. In (10), Bonnie discusses the main reason why she decided to participate in social activities provided by organizations for sexual minorities: Participating in these activities allows her to meet others like herself, so that she can ‘better understand what is out there.’ She uses the deictic expression *li-go san-fan* ‘this identity’ and the circumlocution *dou-hai tung ji-gei yat-yeung ge yan* ‘people who are like me’ in this case. The use of deictic expressions is like the use of ellipsis, in that the speaker relies on the addressee to figure out the referent.

(10) Bonnie:

Interviewer:
 dan-hai lei wui-m-wui jyun-dang heui di but do you take the initiative to go to
 some
 wui chaam-ga di wut-dung a? organizations to participate in their
 activities?

Bonnie:
 dou-wui yau sometimes
 je-hai ji-gei dou hai **li-go san fan** because I have **this identity**
 je-hai dou wui heui I sometimes go to
dou-hai tung ji-gei yat-yeung ge yan places where there are
 ge dei-fong **people who are like me**
 heui liu-gaai ha la... to better understand what is out there

The use of circumlocutions and deictic expressions to avoid naming same-sex desire is by no means restricted to the non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers that I interviewed. Rob (an activist in charge of the outreach activities of a *tongzhi* organization) told me that many who call the hotline of his organization use expressions like *li-di yan* ‘these people’ and *go-di yan* ‘those people’ to refer to lesbians and gay men. He said that he would often ask them politely what they mean by *li-di yan* and *go-di yan*. Whomever *li-di yan* and *go-di yan* refer to, they do not have a name and their desire is best left unspecified.

6. Narratives of coming-out experiences

Through the use of the strategies discussed above, non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers’ ideology about same-sex desire is most clearly manifest in their coming-out narratives. Antithetical to the Western notion of coming out is non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers’ belief that same-sex desire should remain unspecified even when discussed. The use of ellipsis, circumlocutions and deictic expressions in their accounts of coming-out experiences is at odds with the putative purpose of coming-out stories. In their introduction to an anthology of coming-out stories, Julia Penelope and Susan Wolfe (1995) state:

For years, the coming out story has been among the first of the stories exchanged among wimmin [sic]... *We tell our pasts to intensify the bonds between us and to tear away “the veil of silence” which separates us.* Sharing our stories is a way of coming to know ourselves.... These coming out stories are foundation of our lives as Lesbians, as real to ourselves; as such, our sharing of them defines us as participants in Lesbian culture, as members of a community. (p. 6-11; emphasis added)

At least according to the dominant gay and lesbian ideology in the U.S., coming out is supposed to be about self-liberation, the celebration of one’s same-sex desire, and as the quote above points out, the tearing away of “the veil of silence.” The proclamation of one’s same-sex desire is arguably the most important element of coming out. Yet, as shown in (8), same-sex desire is often left unsaid in many non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers’ accounts of coming-out experiences.

While some, like Julia Penelope and Susan Wolfe, believe that coming-out stories serve to intensify the bonds among lesbians and gay men, the use of ellipsis, circumlocutions and deictic expressions in the coming-out narratives of non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers creates a social distance between the narrator and others with same-sex desire. This is clearly illustrated in Pauline’s narrative about how she decided to go out to meet others with same-sex desire. In (11), Pauline uses her own experience to comment on the changes for sexual minorities that have taken place in Hong Kong in the last few years. The narrative consists of two main events: (1) how she heard something about same-sex desire on the radio; and (2) how she decided to go out to meet others with same-sex desire. Other than the narrative clauses about these two events, Pauline’s narrative is mostly made up of descriptive clauses about her feelings at the time, as well as the evaluation of the two events.

(11) Pauline:

[Lines 1 – 2: Abstract]

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. ngo lam hai gong faan hei ngo ji-gei | I think I should talk about my own experience |
| 2. ngo lam li sei-ng lin bin-fa
dou hou daai laak | I think the changes within the last four or five
years have been rather drastic |

[Lines 3 – 11: Background Information]

- | | |
|---|--|
| 3. hai ho-lang ngo ji-gei go yan
yau gwaan-hai la | perhaps, it has to do with my personality |
| 4. tung-maai jyu hai San-Gaai la | and the fact that I live in the New Territories |
| 5. yau-si jip-juk go-di fong-min
go-di ji-seun | with regard to that aspect
that kind of information |
| 6. hai-mai gam gong a? | [is that] right? |
| 7. hou si a | I don't have a lot |
| 8. gan-bu [laughter] siu dou hou-laan
ying-yung | in fact [laughter] it's hard to describe
how little |
| 9. dou bin-go gaai-dyun lo | information I got |
| 10. gam jau yat- yat-jik aat-yik lo | so I was just suppressing my feelings |
| 11. mou me geui-dou a ma | there wasn't an outlet for them |

[Lines 12 – 17: Main Event 1]

- | | |
|---|---|
| 12. gam au-yi ji-gaan | out of the blue, one time |
| 13. dou hai hai saam-yam-gei
teng dou [ellipsis] lo | on the radio
I heard [about it] |
| 14. yat teng dou [ellipsis] | once I heard [about it] ... |

Interviewer:

go-jan-si gei-si a?	when was that?
---------------------	----------------

April:

luk lin chin	six years ago
--------------	---------------

Pauline:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 15. eee... | well... |
| 16. hai lak, hai lak, luk lin chin | yes, yes, six years ago |
| 17. keui hou-gei-sing di a [laughter] | she has a better memory [laughter] |

[Lines 18 – 24: Description of Her Feelings at the Time]

- | | |
|---|--|
| 18. wa, gok-dak hou-chi jap-dou-bou gam a | oh, it was like discovering hidden treasures |
| 19. dong-si ge gam-gok | my feeling at that time |
| 20. ho-lang yan-wai aat-yik taai daai la | perhaps, there was too much pressure |
| 21. dou m-gok-dak hai yat gin hou-si lei ga | I didn't think it was a good thing |
| 22. jee, ee | so, well |
| 23. ji-dou mau yat-se ji-liu la | I got certain information |
| 24. jee, gok-dak li-go gei-wui
m-lang-gau joi sat lo | and, I felt that I shouldn't give up
this opportunity again |

[Lines 25 – 27: Main Event 2]

- | | |
|---|--|
| 25. gam-jau, jau-jo cheut heui | so, I went out |
| 26. je-hai | well |
| 27. ai-yin jau-jo-cheut heui tung
go-di yan jip-juk lo | I went out courageously to
get in touch with those people |

[Lines 28 – 32: Description of Her Feelings at the Time]

- | | |
|---|---|
| 28. yan-wai gei-sat lei gan-bun m-sik keui ga | because you didn't know them before |
| 29. gam keui-dei di yan hai dim yeung le? | so what are those people like? |
| 30. kei-sat ji-gei dou fu-cheut hoi daai lo | I actually had to sacrifice a lot |
| 31. jau hou-chi yat-jung mou-him jing-san | it's like with a sense of adventure |
| 32. gam-yeung lo | it's like that |

[Lines 33 – 36: Resolution]

- | | |
|--|--|
| 33. gam cheut-jo lei ji-hau, ee | after I came out, I mean, well |
| 34. jau dong-yin yan jau yau hou-do jung ge | of course, there are all kinds of people |
| 35. gam jau wan-faan tung ji-gei sing-gaak | I look for those whose personality is like mine |
| 36. cha-m-do go-di yan gaau wong-faan lo, ha.. | look for those people who are more or less like
me to hang out with, so.... |

The abstract of the narrative is in lines 1 and 2. Lines 3 - 11 explain the main reason why she was unable to obtain any information about same-sex desire. They also describe her emotional struggle before she heard something about same-sex attraction on the radio. Notice the use of *go-di fong-min* 'that aspect' and *go-di ji-seun* 'that kind of information' in line 5; presumably, both expressions refer to something related to same-sex desire, but it is left unspecified. The metalinguistic comment *hai-mai gam gong a?* in line 6 can literally be translated as: 'Is that how you say it?'. It is an idiomatic expression which serves the pragmatic function of seeking the interlocutor's agreement. It is possible that Pauline uses this comment to seek my agreement on the claim that it is difficult to obtain any information about same-sex desire in the New Territories. Another possibility is that she is engaged in the negotiation of the appropriate labeling of same-sex desire in the interview context.

The first main event (i.e., when Pauline heard something about same-sex desire on the radio) is in lines 12 - 17. Notice that Pauline uses ellipsis and leaves same-sex desire unnamed in lines 13 and 14. Lines 18 - 24 describe Pauline's feelings at the time when she heard about same-sex attraction on the radio. She explains that the information she heard on the radio was like hidden treasures to her. She thinks the pressure she had (presumably from hiding her same-sex attraction) at the time had an adverse effect on her (line 21: "I didn't think it was a good thing."). Yet what she heard on the radio is still left to the interviewer to figure out on his own. Pauline's insistence on leaving same-sex desire unnamed is further illustrated by her use of the vague expression *mau yat-se ji-liu* 'certain information' in line 23.

The second main event (i.e., when Pauline went out to meet others with same-sex desire) begins in line 25. Line 27 is a self-initiated repair (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977) of line 25: The use of the adverb *ai-yin* 'courageously' evaluates the protagonist's action and emphasizes her courage at the time in meeting *go-di yan* 'those

me ching-fong dai-ha gong ga? under what circumstances?

Tristan:

4. ho casual gam sik-gan faan go-jan-si lo very casually, we were having dinner
 5. gam daai-ga touch-dou li-go **man-tai** we touched on this **problem**

[Lines 6 – 7: External Evaluation]

6. yan-wai keui le because she
 7. jau yat-jik mou waai-yi go she never suspected that
 ngo hai [ellipsis] I am [ellipsis]

[Lines 8 – 26: Main Event]

8. gam-yeung le jau e so
 9. jau gong-hoi e we were talking about
 10. je-hai I mean
 11. ngo-dei leung-go dou we had a mutual friend
 gung-tung sik yat-go pang-yau ge
 12. hai laam-jai lei ge a man
 13. keui jau tung ngo gong go she told me
 14. wa waai-yi yi-yat go yan hai [ellipsis] she suspected that this person is [ellipsis]
 15. gam a so
 16. **hoi-tau dou hai educate keui gam-yeung at the beginning I was educating her**
 17. **gam-yeung je-hai jau-syun keui hai so, I mean, even if he is**
 18. **yau me man-tai a? what is the problem?**
 19. keui dou gok-dak mou man-tai gam-yeung she thought that it shouldn't be a problem either
 20. gam-yeung gong-gong ha we were just talking
 21. gam jau keui dak-yin-gaan man ngo and she suddenly asked me
 22. 'yau-mou da-syun gei-si git-fan a?' 'when are you planning to get married?'
 23. di gam ge ye and stuff like that
 24. gam ngo jau hou **jik-jip** gam so I told her **directly**
 tung keui gong wa
 25. ngo [pause] **je-hai** ngo m-wui git-fan ge I [pause] **I mean** I won't get married
 26. ngo hai [pause] **je-hai gay** ge, gam lo I am [pause] **I mean gay** and so forth

What is noteworthy about the part of the narrative that describes the main event (lines 8 - 26) is the underlying conflict between the narrating self and the narrated self (or between Tristan the narrator and Tristan the protagonist). Notice that the narrator portrays the protagonist as someone who is not apprehensive about educating his friend on same-sex desire (lines 16 - 18). Interestingly, while the narrator refers to same-sex attraction as a problem (*man-tai* in line 5) in the abstract of the narrative, the protagonist questions his friend if it can be regarded as a problem (*man-tai*) at all (line 18). Most importantly, the protagonist is described as someone who is brave enough to tell his friend *directly* (*jik-jip* in line 24) that he is gay. However, while the protagonist is unafraid to lift the veil of silence on same-sex desire, the narrator leaves same-sex attraction unnamed through the use of ellipsis in lines 7 and 14. The conflict between the one who breaks the code of silence (i.e. the protagonist) and the one who prefers to honor it (i.e. the narrator) is most clearly manifest in lines 25 and 26: The disfluencies, characterized by the use of pauses and the expression *je-hai* 'I mean,' illustrate the discomfort experienced by the narrator, when the protagonist's directness forces him to

specify same-sex desire through the use of the label *gay*.⁶ In other words, the protagonist's willingness to break the code of silence by telling his friend *directly* (line 24) about his same-sex desire contrasts sharply with the narrator's use of ellipsis to leave same-sex desire unnamed almost throughout the entire narrative. This illustrates what Bakhtin (1984) refers to as 'active double-voiced discourse.' In such discourse, two voices compete for hegemony - "the author's thought no longer oppressively dominates the other's thought, discourse loses its composure and confidence, becomes agitated, internally undecided and two-faced" (p. 198).

7. Conclusion

The preceding analysis casts doubt on Chou's (2000: 1) claim that *tongzhi* is "the most popular contemporary Chinese word for lesbians, bisexuals, and gay people." Among the non-activists in this study, *tongzhi* does not appear to be the preferred term of reference for those with same-sex desire. Non-activists' resistance to the label can be accounted for by their ideology about same-sex desire. Unlike *tongzhi* activists, non-activists do not see the need to bring same-sex desire into public discussion: They view sexuality as a personal matter and equate talking about same-sex desire explicitly with unnecessarily highlighting one aspect of their identity. Thus, few of them use labels that specify sexual orientation. Even when sexuality is the topic of discussion, they prefer to use ellipsis, circumlocutions, deictic expressions and the term *mem-ba* to avoid naming same-sex desire. Non-activists' preference for these strategies over *tongzhi* illustrates a larger problem - namely, a possible disconnect between *tongzhi* activists and those they presumably speak for. To the extent that non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers' support is vital to the success of the *tongzhi* movement and their acceptance of *tongzhi* (both as a label for self-identification and as a term of reference for other members of sexual minorities) is crucial to the political efficacy of the label, their views on labels for sexual minorities and their ideology about same-sex desire cannot be overlooked.

This study also points to another issue that often arises when representatives of minority groups introduce new terms to refer to those they supposedly speak for - i.e., who has the right to name and represent the group? Naming, as Cameron and Kulick (2003: 24) explain,

...is not just a matter of hanging linguistic labels on a pre-existing chunk of reality which was always 'there' just waiting to be named. The production of the opposed categories 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual', for instance, reconfigures the reality which the labels purport to describe, bringing into view something - what we now refer to as 'sexual orientation' or 'sexual preference' - that had not been part of previous understandings of sexual behaviour.

⁶ While Tristan used mostly ellipsis and *mem-ba* when talking about same-sex desire in the interview, he used *gay* in this coming-out narrative. It is possible that the use of the marked term *gay* is due to the fact that *mem-ba* is used solely among gay and lesbian Hongkongers; when talking to straight people (as in this case when Tristan told his friend about his same-sex attraction), lesbians and gay men who do not use *tongzhi* have to resort to labels such as *gay* and *tung-sing-lyun je* 'homosexual.'

Given the power of naming to change our perception of the social world, Bourdieu (1991: 105) concludes that 'there is no social agent who does not aspire, as far as his [sic] circumstances permit, to have the power to name and to create the world through naming.' Viewed in this light, whether those with same-sex desire in Hong Kong are labeled *gay*, *mem-ba*, *tongzhi* or *tung-sing-lyun je* is no trivial matter; rather, it is a power struggle carried out on the symbolic level, one that has important implications for whose view of sexuality is supported. In the case of *tongzhi*, not only does the label refer to members of sexual minorities, but by virtue of its association with gay rights activists, it also embodies their view on same-sex desire, a crucial component of which is the belief that to combat discrimination against lesbians and gay men, same-sex desire needs to be introduced into public consciousness. Through their rejection of *tongzhi*, non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers challenge activists' ideology about same-sex desire and dispute their claim to speak for other lesbians and gay men in Hong Kong.

Finally, this study demonstrates how the discursive history of a label can both enable and impede its political efficacy. A word accumulates meanings through its use by different speakers and in different contexts. Over time, social stereotypes, political ideologies and moral attitudes may become attached to the concept that the word denotes. Exploiting its discursive history, speakers may use the word in a new context to create novel meanings and produce novel effects. The word *queer* is a case in point. As McConnell-Ginet (2002: 153) argues, the use of *queer* as a term of abuse in homophobic discourse, as well as its suggestions of 'odd' and 'strange,' gave the queer activists' slogan "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!" its in-your-face effectiveness. Using a word that has lived a different social life - e.g., *gay* or *homosexual* ("We're here, we're gay/homosexual, get used to it!") - would be far less effective. Thus, the discursive history of *queer* enhances the political efficacy of activists' appropriation of the term. In a similar fashion, the revolutionary connotations of *tongzhi* contribute to its political effectiveness as a label for members of sexual minorities. Gay rights activists in Hong Kong draw on the discursive history of *tongzhi* and use the term to present a public, collective and political front. Yet, given its long history, the label has other meanings attached to it as well. Recall that although non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers' resistance to *tongzhi* can largely be attributed to their ideology about same-sex desire, several informants also claimed that they do not use the label because of its association with communism and mainland China. In this case, the discursive history of *tongzhi* has in fact led some non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers to reject the use of the term to refer to themselves or others with same-sex desire. This example shows that the effects of an appropriation ultimately do not depend solely on the intention of the appropriator. While representatives of minority groups may at times appropriate labels with particularly rich discursive histories to replace those with negative connotations that have been imposed from without, the meanings that these appropriated words have accumulated over the years may sometimes work against the representatives' goals and lead to unintended consequences.

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