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). 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:

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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). 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:

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.
Similarly, April questioned the necessity of using labels such as tongzhi or tung-sing-lyun je ‘homosexual’ to highlight one’s same-sex attraction:

Sometimes I wonder why I have to call myself tongzhi or tung-sing-lyun je. Heterosexuals don’t walk around telling everyone that they are heterosexual…. I actually prefer not to label myself as tongzhi or tung-sing-lyun je. I don’t really like these labels because they categorize me. They take out a certain part of my identity and magnify it…. I don’t like to highlight my sexual orientation. For me, it is sort of like highlighting a particular sex organ. It’s rather strange to me.

Amy echoed April’s opinion:

I rarely use these labels. Even tung-sing-lyun je or lesbian. I don’t like to categorize myself in this manner. Perhaps, I am what these labels refer to. But when I hear these terms, I don’t feel like they are about me. I don’t think it’s necessary to use them.

Pauline, who is April’s partner, said that to identify herself, she would rather use her own name than labels like lesbian and tongzhi. If same-sex desire is indeed the topic of discussion, many gay and lesbian Hongkongers prefer to state their sexual attraction, instead of using gay, lesbian or tongzhi. As Bonnie explained, “I actually don’t use any labels for myself. I only know that I’m attracted to women.”

5. Labels in discourse

Non-activist gay and lesbian Hongkongers’ ideology about same-sex desire manifests itself not only in their discussion of labels for sexual minorities, but also in their use of labels in actual discourse. My informants hardly ever used tongzhi in the first part of the interview. In those instances where the term was used, it was often prefaced by so-wai ‘so-called’ or me ‘whatdoyoucallit.’ These linguistic devices allowed non-activists to disassociate themselves from the label tongzhi when they used it on those rare occasions. A self-distancing device, so-wai enables the speaker to deny ownership of what it qualifies: The qualified expression does not belong to the speaker, but to someone else. In (1), Sebastian and I are discussing the sexuality-based social movement in Hong Kong. He explains that in the past, organizations that catered to those with same-sex desire were few and far between; many were unable to gain the support and participation that they needed. Together with the sound of disapproval (i.e. tsk), so-wai in line 3 indicates the marked status of tongzhi, Sebastian’s self-distancing from the label, and his attribution of the label to others. The use the third-person plural pronoun keui-dei (instead of the first-person plural pronoun ngo-dei) in lines 2, 4 and 6 further dissociates Sebastian from those in charge of tongzhi organizations, who tend to use tongzhi as their preferred label to refer to sexual minorities.

(1) Sebastian:

1. go-jan-si at that time
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 they didn’t have hou-do yan chaam-ga 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 the first time getting in touch with, hm tongzhi ge jou-jik a 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 I mean, I thought the definition was hai gam-yeung 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
uhm *gay and lesbian* ge wan-dung
keui-dei dou hai wai-jo keui-dei ji-gei heui jou
ngo jau
ngo jau mou yung yat-go gok-dou
keui-dei hai
jou-gan yat-di jing-ji ge
ge seun-sik cheut lei
ngo jau mou gam tai keui

for example, in the U.S.
uhm *gay and lesbian* movement
they are only doing it for themselves
as for me
I don’t look at it from one particular perspective
they [i.e. gay rights activists in the U.S.] are
they’re conveying a political message
I don’t look at it [i.e. same-sex desire] in this manner

(4) Kevin:

e, dou gei-do yan gam yeung lam
mou-leun hai
je keui deui-yu keui ge identity
deui yu *gay movement* li yeung ye
wui gam yeung lam ji-oi
mou-leun yam-ho gwan-yu politics ge ye
ho-lang dou wui take yat-go gam ge stand

well, quite a few people think like this
no matter what
I mean, the way they look at their identity
the way they look at the *gay movement*
they think like this
with regard to anything that has to do with politics
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 gwaaai-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 those who are homosexual, they themselves have their own space
7. lai-yeung 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 deei-fong heui 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 lathey thinks 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Literal meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>mem-ba</strong></td>
<td>Gay (or lesbian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Boyfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wui-so</td>
<td>Gay bar or club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chau-fui</td>
<td>To be attracted to white men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diu-yu</td>
<td>To go cruising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yu-tong</td>
<td>Cruising places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Em</td>
<td>To be the insertor in sexual intercourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keep yan</td>
<td>To be in a relationship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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)
Ellipses, 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:

keui hai-m-hai [ellipsis] a?
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
2. da-din-wa wa bei ngo teng
3. wa keui ji-gei hai [ellipsis]
4. gam git-go wa
5. kei-sat keui dou gu dou ngo dou hai [ellipsis] ge laak
6. so-yi sin tung ngo gong
7. gam gan-jyu
8. gam tung keui gong-jo
9. ngo dou hai [ellipsis] lo

The first one should be my high school classmate
who called me and told me
he told me that he is [ellipsis]
so as a result
actually, he guessed that I am [ellipsis] as well
that’s why he told me
after that
I told him
I am [ellipsis], too
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:

\[\text{yi-ga ngo hai gam.} \]
‘Now I’m like this.’

\[\text{ngo hai yat-go gam ge yan.} \]
‘I am such kind of person.’

\[\text{yi-ga ngo hai di gam ge yan, lei jip-m-jip sau a?} \]
‘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:
\[\text{dan-hai lei wui-m-wui jyun-dang heui di} \]
\[\text{wui chaam-ga di wut-dung a?} \]

but do you take the initiative to go to some organizations to participate in their activities?

Bonnie:
\[\text{dou-wui yau} \]
\[\text{je-hai ji-gei dou hai li-go san fan} \]
\[\text{je-hai dou wui heui} \]
\[\text{dou-hai tung ji-gei yat-yeung ge yan} \]
\[\text{ge dei-fong} \]
\[\text{heui liu-gaai ha la….} \]

sometimes
because I have this identity
I sometimes go to places where there are people who are like me
to better understand what is out there
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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:

**[L]ines 1 – 2: A b s t r a c t**

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

**[L]ines 3 – 11: Background Information**

3. hai ho-lang ngo ji-gei go yan
   perhaps, it has to do with my personality
   yau gwaan-hai la
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
   with regard to that aspect
   go-di ji-seun
   that kind of information
6. hai-mai gam gong a?
   [is that] right?
7. hou si a
   I don’t have a lot
8. gam-bu [laughter] siu dou hou-laan
   in fact [laughter] it’s hard to describe
   ying-yung
9. dou bin-go gaaai-dyun lo
   how little
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

**[L]ines 12 – 17: Main Event 1**

12. gam au-yi ji-gaan
    out of the blue, one time
teng dou [ellipsis]
13. dou hai hai saam-yam-gei
    on the radio
     lo
    I heard [about it]
teng dou [ellipsis]…
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…
16. hai lak, hai lak, luk lin chin
    well…
yes, yes, six years ago
17. keui hou-gei-sing di a [laughter]
    she has a better memory [laughter]

**[L]ines 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
23. ji-dou mau yat-se ji-liu la
    so, well
    I got certain information
24. jee, gok-dak li-go gei-wui
    and, I felt that I shouldn’t give up
    m-lang-gau joi sat lo
    this opportunity again
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[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 I went out **courageously** to
go-di yan jip-juk lo 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 because **you** didn’t know **them** before
gan because
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
people.’ Though the referent of go-di yan is not specified, the addressee can reasonably assume that it refers to other lesbians and gay men.

Lines 28 - 32 explain why the narrator (Pauline) believes that what the protagonist (Pauline as well) did at that time was a courageous act. The narrator sympathizes with the protagonist, in that the former believes that without any knowledge of what other lesbians and gay men are like, the latter had much to sacrifice when she determined to go out to meet others with same-sex desire. The narrator uses the generic you (lei in Cantonese) to position the protagonist as similar to any other reasonable person (see, e.g., O’Connor 1994): In other words, given the same situation, the interviewer would most likely be apprehensive about going out of his way to meet strangers; thus, what the protagonist did took a lot of courage. Pauline uses the third-person singular pronoun in line 28 and keui-dei di yan ‘those people’ in line 29 to refer to other lesbians and gay men. Through the pronoun use in this segment (lines 28 - 32), as well as her metacomment about the protagonist’s “courageous act,” the narrator establishes an alliance with the protagonist, while setting up a dichotomy of “us” (i.e. the narrator and the protagonist) vs. “them” (i.e. other lesbians and gay men). Combined together, Pauline’s use of circumlocutions and deictic expressions such as go-di yan ‘those people’ reinforces her reticence on issues related to same-sex desire and produces a distancing effect that is evident throughout the narrative.

The imperative of leaving same-sex desire unspecified is paramount. Unease and awkwardness may ensue when the code of silence is broken. The coming-out narrative in (12) shows how breaking the code of silence may lead to discomfort on the narrator’s part. I ask Tristan if he has told anyone about his same-sex desire. He responds by saying that he has told one of his female friends to whom he is rather close. The abstract and the orientation of the narrative are in lines 1 - 5. Notice that Tristan refers to same-sex desire as a problem (man-tai) in line 5. After providing the abstract and setting up the scene, Tristan (the narrator) moves out of the narrative frame in lines 6 - 7 and explains that his friend was not aware of his same-sex attraction before he came out to her. The main event begins in line 8.

(12) Tristan

Interviewer:
lei yau-mou tung sik-ge-yan gong-go le? have you told anyone that you’re close to?

Tristan:
yau a yes

Interviewer:
yau a? bin-go le? yes? who?

[Lines 1 – 5: Abstract and Orientation]

Tristan:
1. ngo tung go ee, I told a
2. yat-go neui-sing peng-yau gong-go, a female friend
3. gam gei-suk ge. we were rather close

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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.\textsuperscript{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, bisexuels, 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,

\begin{quote}
…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.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{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.

References


