

**Gay Specificity:
The Reworking of Heteronormative Discourse in the Hong Kong Gay Community**

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This qualitative research is a study on the specific culture of the gay community in Hong Kong. Mainstream academic research on Hong Kong gay community has mostly focused on the construction and formation of gay identity and gay culture especially under the postcolonial context of Hong Kong. By adopting narrative analysis of the life histories of gay men, the research focus has been placed upon their self-recognition of gay identity, closet practices, coming out process, and sexual and intimate relationship. In response to this mainstream agenda, this study purports to explore two relatively neglected empirical phenomena concerning Hong Kong gay community, namely the adoption of zero-one role division and the marginalization of the sissy gay men. These two contentious issues define my research focus.

The first concerns with the various role divisions such as “1”, “0”, “10”, “top”, “bottom”, and “both” in the Hong Kong gay community. Some gay men will try to label or categorize themselves in terms of certain roles, especially when they are looking for sexual, love, or intimate relationship with other gay men. Although there is still no consensus on the exact definition of these role divisions, broadly speaking the sexual and the personality dimensions seem to be the major defining criteria. For instance, the roles of “1” and “0” refer respectively to the inserter and the insertee in anal intercourse at the sexual level, and to the stereotypical masculine and feminine traits at the personality level. However, some gay men contend that it is rather unnecessary and meaningless to have such a rigid role division, which constrains their own behaviors and development of intimate relationships with others. Although there are contradictory judgments and internal conflicts on the issue, the role division scheme constitutes a common language in the Hong Kong gay community. Adopting the two concepts of role differentiation and role transition from Ralph Turner’s interactive role theory, I would like to analyze how the Hong Kong gay men play and make their own roles for interaction and examine the dynamic aspects of the different roles that are constructed in the Hong Kong gay community.

The second phenomenon I would like to address in this study is the widespread anti-effeminacy prejudice among the Hong Kong gay men. Although both historically and ideologically gay culture has been a challenge to normative heterosexuality, the gender-nonconforming gay men, or the so-called “sissy gay

men”, suffer stigmatization and discrimination not only from the heteronormative society at large, but also among the gay community itself (Taywaditep 2001:1). As such the sissy gay men experience a double marginalization in the Hong Kong gay community. In view of this paradox, this study would examine the attitudes of Hong Kong gay men towards their sissy counterpart. In particular I would try to clarify their accounts and listen to the justifications offered by them on their marginalization of sissy gay men. On the other hand, some gay men would not discriminate against the sissy but rather appreciate the diversity and solidarity within the gay community. These counter-discourses would also be addressed in my study. Employing the concept of hegemonic masculinity from Robert Connell, I would like to focus on the rationale and justification provided by the gay men on their subordination of the sissy gay men in thoughts and everyday practices.

A major theme will run through my treatment of these two conspicuous phenomena. Even though the Hong Kong gay men reject heteronormativity in favor of a counter-culture of sex, love and intimacy, they still have to negotiate with the prevailing heteronormative discourse in creating their specific gay culture. The power-laden negotiation process between the gay community and the heteronormative society is pinpointed with reference to Michel Foucault's notion of relational power. My underlying assumption is that the gay culture of Hong Kong should be approached from a perspective that recognizes the implicit negotiation between the gay men and the prevailing heteronormative social context within which they are embedded. On the basis of my sharing and interaction with the informants during interviews and participant observation, as well as my documentary analysis of the two popular Internet message boards of GayHK and GayStation, I would like to suggest that the notion of “*gay specificity*” could be set forth to conceptualize gay culture in terms of the possible reworking of heteronormative discourse by the gay men. This notion is intended to characterize the reworking practices of the gay men as a potentially subversive challenge to heterosexual hegemony through specific articulations and interpretations of symbols, languages, and consciousness. Nevertheless, the notion also implies that the specific gay culture in Hong Kong is still largely structured by the heteronormative discourse. As such the gay culture may still perpetuate the

hegemonic discourse and maintain the marginality of the gay men.

The concept of marginality is defined by Robert Park (1967) as a state of limbo between at least two cultural life-worlds (the heteronormative world and the gay world in this study), in which one is in a weak and subordinate position relative to the dominant and hegemonic position of the other. It presupposes a distinction between stronger and weaker parties, or between a host and a guest. The gay men have thus been marginalized and subordinated within the heterosexual matrix.

The marginalization of the Hong Kong gay men could be readily gauged in terms of certain concrete and institutional facts, an aspect that may be referred to as “*visible marginalization*”. Even after the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1991, gay partners or couples are still not entitled to have the right to get married, to adopt children, to receive inheritance if their partner dies, or to have subsidy for applying public housing; and they are also subjected to a double standard with regard to the legal age of consent for sexual conduct (21 for gay men and 16 for heterosexuals). Biased images of and negative labels on gay men still abound in popular culture and public discourse. The gay men are as a rule portrayed as having a broken family, as unnatural and immoral, or as promiscuous. A homophobic atmosphere still prevails in the contexts of family, school, peers, workplace, and community, such that nearly all gay men would share the same experience of discrimination and exclusion. These processes of visible marginalization indicate the salient confrontation between the straight world and the gay world and an explicit subordination of the Hong Kong gay men with both institutional constraints and negative stigma.

But besides visible marginalization, I would like to suggest that there is a process of “*invisible marginalization*”, which is presupposed in my theoretical and empirical focus in this research. Unlike the visible marginalization by the heteronormative society from without, invisible marginalization is generated from within the gay culture itself and is not concretely manifested. This form of marginalization implies an “internal colonization” of the gay community by the heteronormative discourse at an ideological and subcultural level. And it could be reflected through my analysis of gay role division and sissy marginalization in this study.

The zero-one role divisions are constructed under the master framework of the binary opposition between male and female, which prescribes how the gay men should make and take their roles in interaction and manifests the masculine and feminine displays produced by the gay men. The marginalization of the sissy gay men, on the other hand, is essentially an extension of hegemonic masculinity from the dominant heterosexist society, against which the straight gay segregate and marginalize the effeminate gay within their own world. As discursive practices, the binary opposition and the hegemonic masculinity are the products of the heteronormative society, which invisibly marginalize the Hong Kong gay community and its discourse.

A close examination of the process of invisible marginalization would reveal the three corresponding reworking techniques of the Hong Kong gay men, which I term as assimilation, reconciliation, and rejection. These techniques represent the attempts of the marginalized group of gay men to negotiate with the binarist heteronormative discourse on sexuality. *Assimilation* refers to the internalization of the heterosexual norms by the gay men, such that they would firmly adhere to the heterosexist role divisions in sexual intercourse, intimate relationship and daily interaction, and accordingly discriminate against the gender nonconforming sissy in these various spheres of life. In *reconciliation*, the gay men would make their own preferable roles like 10, 1 but 0 more, or 0 but 1 more for interaction, and would undergo role transition when they encounter different kinds of partners or in their various life stages. In this case the gay men would tolerate the effeminate behaviors of the sissy in a private party, household context or gay parade, but still require them to remain normal or straight-acting in the public area. Finally, *rejection* signifies the attempt of the gay men to launch a full-fledged challenge to the heteronormative discourse by reappropriating the power of their body and deconstructing the rigid gay role division. In this case, the gay men would try to free themselves by developing relationship with others on the basis of love and intimacy alone without regarding the heterosexist norms. They would also celebrate the pluralities within their own community by embracing the sissy gay men, such that a discrimination-free, diverse and harmonious gay community that is based exclusively on their common gay identity could be established.

In view of these different reworking strategies in relation to the powerful heteronormative discourse,

it could be suggested that there is no essential element among the gay men. In other words gay identity should not be conceived as an absolute and fixed unity of beliefs and practices, which must be espoused and realized by all of the gay men. Rather the gay men articulate their own interpretations and accordingly select their peculiar modes of adaptation to heteronormativity. Such selection process revolves around the tension between disciplinary power and the bodily power of the gay men. From my informants and the cyber gay men on the message boards, I conclude that most of their practices towards and perceptions on role division and sissy gay men are still permeated by the heteronormative discourse without any external surveillance, which indicates the operation of productive and disciplinary power in Foucault's sense.

Concerning the reworking of the power domains of normative heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity in the discursive practices of gay specificity, I have addressed the question of the possibility for the transformation of such power-laden relationship. I have suggested that the promotion of queer consciousness serves as a key to empower the gay men and to upset heteronormativity by problematizing its hegemony. I have attempted to situate the introduction of queer politics within the local context of the Hong Kong *tongzhi* movement in order to speculate whether queer consciousness could be implanted in the Hong Kong gay community. Focusing almost exclusively on visible marginalization, the gay liberationist approach has merely proposed the struggle against social discrimination and the reclaiming of the long deprived legal, political, economic, social and cultural status of gay men. The coming out of the gay men would be unproblematically taken as a significant marker of their liberation. On the other hand, the queer approach, which focuses largely on the invisible marginalization, advocates the awakening of consciousness to dismantle binary code and celebrate differences and stresses on the selection of the rejection technique.

On the basis of my analysis of the development of the Hong Kong *tongzhi* movement and its perceptions by the gay men, I have pinpointed the major difficulties for the development of queer consciousness among the Hong Kong gay men. For the Hong Kong *tongzhi* groups, their major tasks remain as the provision of social services and public education to ameliorate visible marginalization. It constitutes the dominant movement discourse concerning the *tongzhi* issues in Hong Kong. They seldom problematize

the invisible marginalization and accordingly promote activities for queer consciousness-raising. Most importantly, the space for the future development of the *tongzhi* movement is shrinking owing to the limited monetary resources, the lack of new and qualified movement leaders and committees, and the loss of social support from both the straight and the gay worlds.

For my informants, on the other hand, they are much more concerned with individualistic affairs such as relationship building and emotional support than with confrontational gay politics. As argued by Jones, the gay men in Hong Kong have failed to establish a strong and coherent civil rights movement similar to those in Western societies or even other Asian countries such as Taiwan and Thailand, where the degree of social acceptance and public support enjoyed by the homosexuals is accordingly higher (Jones 2000:34-35). The gay men prefer a mild or at least non-radical approach for the local *tongzhi* movement, for they avoid arousing discontent and confronting with the mainstream society. All these factors hinder the development of queer consciousness in particular and of Hong Kong *tongzhi* movement in general.

Although the growing social acceptance and tolerance of male homosexuality and the proliferation of public gay spaces such as bars, discos, saunas and *tongzhi* subgroups and cyber gay spaces such as Internet message boards, chatrooms, and newsgroups signify the expansion of the “gay circle” in Hong Kong, I would like to argue that it is still engulfed by the much more embracing “heteronormative circle”. The domination of heteronormativity does not represent the total elimination of male homosexuality, but rather polices the gay discourse in our society. My informants, for example, still want to develop a group-based gay community that nevertheless addresses their individualistic needs. They aim not so much at subverting the heteronormativity than at enlarging the gay space, which is in the final analysis shaped by the hegemonic discourse. This explains why the reworking techniques of assimilation and reconciliation rather than rejection become the dominant practices in the Hong Kong gay community, which accordingly remains subjected to both visible and invisible marginalization in our mainstream society. There is indeed no open challenge to the heteronormative discourse.

But I do not want to draw an over-pessimistic conclusion with regard to the challenge of

heteronormative discourse by the gay men in Hong Kong. The open quest for alternative discourses that may subvert the hegemonic one should be reinstated in our society, no matter whether they concern with gay men or any other marginalized groups. Here poststructuralism may serve as a reorienting approach in stressing the transformative nature of discourse (Fletcher 1992:33). The nature of “real interests” according to the poststructuralist perspective is never fixed or absolute but is rather always open to alternative interpretations and possible changes. Alternative ways of thinking, being and organizing are articulated, without privileging any particular course. As such the deconstructive stance of poststructuralism is powerful in rendering what has been marginalized visible and thereby challenging hegemonic discourse. Poststructuralist deconstruction thus reveals how a specific discursive practice forecloses other possibilities (Fletcher 1992:33) and also how to open up alternative social and political possibilities (Seidman 1997:133). Although queer consciousness, as the theoretical and political implication of the poststructuralist thought on the homosexuality issue, may not succeed in planting on the soils of the Hong Kong gay community as well as the larger society at this moment, it is impossible to be discarded altogether. The call for queer consciousness would set the stage for the further development of pluralistic values and social multiplicities, which should be treasured by every person in our society.

Finally, this study on the Hong Kong gay men not only advocates for the queer consciousness, but also and more importantly attempts to open the hitherto desexualized academic space of sociology (Warner 1993:xxvi). This study would be successful if it may draw attention on the sociological study of non-normative sexuality especially in Hong Kong sociological academic discourses, which is crucial in providing intriguing insights about the complex gender dimensions of our society.

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