

Identity Terms and Organizing For Women in Same-Sex Relations in Mainland China

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Abstract

Although little research has been done on the situation of lesbians and lesbian activism in mainland China, the booming lesbian culture and lesbian activism in today's P. R. China and its relation to globalizing sexual movements deserves research attention. This thesis takes current sexual identity terms for women loving women in Chinese, *tong-xing-lian*, *tong-zhi* and *la-la* as the object of investigation. It aims to reveal the power relations, identities, and social movements around these terms from seeing them as interpenetrating multiplicities rather than separate unities. Language, power, identities and social movements are interrelated and thus these identity terms are both formed and reflect complexity of the local field. This thesis asks how these terms are used, and why are they used in this way, to expose the complexities that are otherwise obscured. The main data source is two months fieldwork in China in the spring of 2013: participant observation and informal interviews with a national lesbian organization *Tong-yu* and three local groups in Beijing: *Tong-zhi Center*, *Nu-tong-zhi Center (La-la Salon)*, and Xi'an: *Relax Tong-xue-she*. The thesis concludes that the identity terms multiplicities formed by interpenetrating multiplicities of forces. These differences and contingencies reveals the particular concerns and problems that would be obscured by simply reading the terms as translation of sexual identities and the situation in China as reflection of the global LGBT movement. They also open up for understanding of unpredictable future that is not foretold by the global LGBT movement.

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Introduction

When people ask me, “What is the situation of lesbians in China, repression or tolerance,” my answer is always “ambiguous.” Some might say that generally there is the principle of “the three nos”: no approval, no disapproval, no promotion, a Chinese version of the “don’t ask don’t tell (Engelbrechtsen, 2009, p.4).” However it is not possible to talk about “lesbians” assuming the translation as self-evident, because the Chinese terms *tong-xing-lian*, *tong-zhi* or *la-la* do not correlate with “lesbians.”¹

All these identity terms are quite recent in mainland China. The oldest, *tong-xing-lian*, started used since the early twentieth century; *tong-zhi* came from Hong Kong in the 1990s; *la-la*, arrived from Taiwan has only been widely used since the 2000s. *Tong-xing-lian* was introduced as the translational equivalent of “homosexual” in western sexology writings. From the late twentieth century till now, *tong-xing-lian* has been generally perceived both as a clinical term for a sexual and psychic abnormality, and a derogatory term for name-calling. *Tong-zhi* was reappropriated by Hong Kong activists from “comrade” to signify *tong-xing-lian*. It traveled back to mainland China with this new signification in the 1990s. Both *tong-xing-lian* and *tong-zhi* are gender-neutral but mostly refer to men. When referring to women, a prefix is added--*nu* (female)--as in *nu-tong-xing-lian* and *nu-tong-zhi*. *La-la* is the first term to refer only to women. According to my research it is the term that most lesbians in China identify with today.

Same sex eroticism existed in premodern China but never as an identity (Hinsch, 1990; Chou, 2000; Kang, 2009). Female same sex eroticism was generally trivialized, ignored and considered consistent with polygamy (Sang, 2003). Although there was law in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries China condemning sodomy, it never distinguished homosexual and heterosexual, or mentioned female same sex eroticism (Dikotter, 1995). In the early twentieth century, the term *tong-xing-lian* was introduced through intellectuals’ translations of western sexology. Female same sex relations acquired equal conceptional ground with male under the subcategory *nu-tong-xing-*

¹ I use lesbians to refer to women loving women in China, while “lesbians” with quotation mark to stress the meaning in the specific English context.

lian but were pathologized as well (See, Sang, 2003). After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, *tong-xing-lian* as a term largely disappeared from official documents, but was occasionally punished under an ambiguously defined label "hooliganism."² The leaders after Mao changed their policies, with an opening up process that bear some similarities to the early twentieth century. In the 1990s, *tong-xing-lian* reemerged in public discourses.³ The term hooliganism was dropped from law in 1997, and *tong-xing-lian* was quietly removed from Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders in 2001.

The *tong-xing-lian* issue today is not simply about toleration or suppression as represented by the "three nos." Neither the government nor the public hold an unanimous opinion. Moreover the most direct pressure for lesbians in mainland China are from families, parents and close relatives. The reason for this is as much pathological as not conforming to mandatory heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Thus many lesbians prefer a traditional heterosexual marriage arrangement to same sex marriage, or a "cooperate marriage" with gay men (Engebretsen, 2009; Kam, 2013).

According to Foucault and Butler language and names have great importance in power relations, and identities, yet the research on lesbians in China has mostly take these identity terms for granted. To avoid a reduced and oversimplified reading of lesbians in China as globalization of sexuality and sexual identities, the purpose of this thesis is to analyze the local cultural and historical particularities, by investigation into the terms: *tong-xing-lian*, *tong-zhi*, and *la-la*.

Very few scholars have written on female same sex relations in mainland China. Rofel's (1999) analysis cosmopolitan gay identity in Beijing offers a great argument on the combination of longing for global gayness and Chinese cultural citizenship. However it is a study only on gay men. Sang (2003) traces the emergence of lesbians in China from the premodern to contemporary by analyzing elite literary writings in the public sphere. She discusses how the diverse meanings of *tong-xing-lian* in early twentieth century intellectual translational works narrowed down, and how the

² Hooliganism is a vague legal and political term in the Mao's China. It is literally means people roaming or out of place. It can include any transgression that is considered anti-socialist. These transgressions can be sexual, cultural or political.

³ Several books was published on *tong-xing-lian* in the 1990s. Li & Wang (1992), Zhang, B.(1994), Fang (1995).

perception of female same sex relations changed from insignificant to public anxiety. However her study weakens in analyzing contemporary lesbian identities and activism in China. Engebretsen (2009) and Kam (2013) looked at *la-la* and their strategies with marriage and relationships after 2004, but they do not investigate into the term itself. In short, none of these scholars pays enough attention to the subtle meanings of these Chinese identity terms, which is important because how identity terms are used both reflects and constitutes a set of power relations around them, further linked to identities and social movements. Sang's (2003) tracing of *tong-xing-lian* proves a great illustration of how to take identity terms as a way to expose power relations. However her work is mostly based on elite literatures in the public sphere, and the use of terms in activists, groups and individual women's everyday lives are neglected.

This thesis, by tracing *tong-xing-lian*, *tong-zhi* and *la-la*, aims to reveal the power relations, identities, and social movements around these terms. It does this by asking how these identity terms are used why they are used in this way. Considering the ambiguity of the situation, a thorough investigation of the terms can tell us a great deal about the power relations, identities, and activism of lesbians in China today.

Post-structuralism challenging the absolutist and determinist tendency is useful in analyzing the ambiguity of situations such as for lesbians in China. This thesis takes a Foucauldian (1979) perspective of power as the "multiplicity of force relations" to analyze the lesbian identity terms, identities, sexuality, and activism in China. This perspective also links the other analytical tools such as the Deleuzian assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), performativity (Butler, 1993, 1997), cross-cultural translation (Liu, 1995), chaotic globalization (Appadurai, 1996), and social movement theory that focus on complexity of everyday life (Scott, 1990). All of these are helpful to avoid simplified structures of analyzing lesbians in China, to expose the complexity, contingency and particularities and to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the multiplicities. Detailed discussions about the theoretical framework will be in the first chapter.

The primary data sources are participant observation of national lesbian organization *Tong-yu*

and local groups in Beijing and Xi'an *Tong-zhi Center*, *Nu-tong-zhi Center* and *Relax Tong-xue-she*; interviews with participants of the activities; written materials such as flyers, internet and internal publications from lesbian groups. I also use scholarly discussions on identity terms (Chou, 2000; Sang, 2003; Rofel, 2007), digital archives (Hong Kong LGBT archives) and media reports. I conducted 12 recorded semi-structured interviews and numerous informal conversations with activists the participants. The interviews are from half an hour to four hours, mostly around one hour. The analysis also draws on my own experiences with activist and social groups.

I will show how the meanings of identity terms--*tong-xing-lian*, *tong-zhi*, and *la-la*--are constantly changing overtime. Each is a multiplicity of interpenetrating and sometimes contradictory meanings, reflecting and constituting the power relations and identities also as multiplicities. I will argue that it is important to work with the complexity, ambiguity, particularity and unpredictability. Simply assuming these identity terms are equivalent to western sexual identities loses sight of the particularities and differences: the interpenetrating cosmological epistemology, Confucianism, the introduction of sexual identity discourses and the more deep, diverse and contingent identities and subjectivities of lesbians in China.

After addressing the theoretical framework in chapter 1, each subsequent chapter addresses one of the terms under discussion respectively: *tong-xing-lian*, *tong-zhi*, and *la-la*.

Chapter 1 Theoretical framework

This chapter reviews the theories used in this thesis in analyzing lesbian identity terms, identities, activism in mainland China today. It has four sections--language, power and identity; the global and the local; the globalization of sexuality; and social movements as “infrapolitics”--which are linked through the thread of a Foucauldian power perspective that considers power as the “multiplicity of force relations.”

1.1 Power, language and identity

I begin with the theories that help to reveal the interrelations between power, language and identity. The first part discusses Foucault’s discursive power as the “multiplicity of force relations” and its connections to Deleuzian assemblages as “interpenetrating multiplicities” as a thread that links different theoretical tools by focusing on particularities and differences. Then I turn to the language part using Butler’s performativity to illustrate how the power of discursive practices especially the performative power of the naming. In the third part I turn to another example of discursive practices related to this thesis, translation process, which is connected both to the discursive power of language and transcultural interactions.

1.1.1 Discursive power, multiplicity and assemblage

Foucault’s (1979) model of discursive power as the “multiplicity of force relations” dissolves the deterministic epistemology which obscures differences and prevents an unpredictable future. This perspective of power is also the thread that links the following discussions of languages, identities, global encounters, sexualities and social movements together.

Foucault reveals an indefinite cycle between power and discourse: “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it but also undermines and exposes it (p. 101).” For Foucault this forms a new conceptual framework of power as a “power-knowledge” system. Power does not come from authoritative centers but from the omnipresent discursive practices producing knowledge. This discursive power is the “multiplicity of force relations” in the ceaseless transformation and forming “a chain or a system” or “disjunctions and contradictions (p. 92).” It is

everywhere and constitutes everything. This formation of power rejects power as coming from numerical discrete centers but rather focus on the flow, linkage and connections.

The discursive power as the “multiplicity of force relations” echoes with the Deleuzian assemblage concept, which is presented by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as the understanding formations. The Deleuzian assemblages are “functional conglomerations of elements”; the elements are not unities but intensities, forces and flows; the assemblages are elements of larger assemblages; The converging point for assemblages with Foucauldian power is the multiplicity. The assemblages are multiplicities. According to Deleuze multiplicities are distinct from “the one and the multiple” but multiplicities in itself: the former are numerical and erasing differences to “differences from” centers of references, while the latter are multiplicities characterized by “differences in kind (Currier, 2003).” Foucault’s discursive power as the “multiplicity of force relations” is the multiplicity Deleuze stresses as it comes not from numerical centers but omnipresent discursive practices. Both Foucault and Deleuze are talking about the same perspective shift that focus on differences, contingencies and particularities with slightly different choices of concepts. This perspective is expanded by Butler’s performativity that discusses the relation between language and identity in detail and the thread that holds language, globalization, sexuality, and social movements together in this chapter.

1.1.2 Performativity in naming

Building on Foucault, Butler’s (1993) concept of performativity, “the reiterate and citational practice by which discourse produce the effects that it names (p. 2),” further provides links between discourses and identity and subjectivity. One example of this is the power of naming. Butler (1997) argues that the reason that we feel injured by language, is that we are “linguistic beings” “formed in language (p. 1-2).”

The emergence of identity terms--names--is a process of certain subjects and identities being formed by language. This process concerns not only the terms, but also the ways of using: a demeaning way of using by the public may insult the subject, while an assertive way of using it by

some activists may affirm it. “If to be addressed is to be interpellated, then the offensive call runs the risk of inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call (Butler, 1997, p.2).” This is similar to the “reverse discourse”: “homosexuality begins to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy and ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified (Foucault, 1979, p. 101).”

The possibility of decontextualizing and recontextualizing such terms through radical acts of public misappropriation constitutes the basis of an ironic hopefulness that the conventional relation between word and wound might become tenuous and even broken over time.(Butler, 1997, p. 100)

Chapter 3 discusses the resignification process of Chinese sexual identity *tong-zhi* but in a quite different and complex context.

Moreover the effects of the naming process are not in one event, but in its reiteration and citationality. As Butler (1993) suggests performativity should be understood “not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains (p.2).” Both the power of naturalization and possibility for resistance exists in the reiteration. “It is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions (p. 10).” Reiteration is never perfect or complete, it produces differences, and reveals the norm as an illusion. Hence reiterative articulations of lesbian identity terms construct identities and subjectivities crucial for social movements. This reiteration produces stability and naturalness, but also, differences and transgressions, the multiplicity of meanings and identities.

1.1.3 Translation as reinvention

Besides naming, another crosspoint of language and power is translation. As a Chinese woman from China, participated in lesbian organizing in Beijing and Gender Studies education in Europe, I found myself living in the process of translations. During my fieldwork in Beijing, I was also helping a lesbian organization, *Tong-yu*, with translating international LGBT news. In such

common practices for lesbian activists in China, there are unwritten rules for translational equivalents between identity terms: *tong xing lian* with homosexual or gay, *nu-tong-xing-lian* or *la-la* with lesbian, *tong-zhi* with LGBT, *nu-tong-zhi* and sometimes *la-la* with LBT.

These translations aim to introduce truth or correct knowledge: international LGBT movement news, knowledge of sexual identity and orientation, and more recently, gender awareness. It follows the classical Enlightenment logic that subjects will be liberated by truth. According to Foucault's power-knowledge system, "truth is not by nature free--nor error servile--but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power (Foucault, 1979, p.60)." In other words, there is no natural, objective truth waiting for revelation, but knowledge is produced by the very discourses aiming to reveal it. Thus the translation process is not a transfer of knowledge, rather in translating discourses from one language into another language, new meanings are produced by the new discourses in another language; in other words, knowledge is reinvented rather than transferred.

Cross cultural translation theories converge with Foucault in this respect. For example Liu (1995) coins the term "translingual practice" to emphasize translation as a site of cross-cultural interpretation and mediation (p. xv). Liu suggests asking questions such as "how does hypothetical equivalence get established and maintained between concrete languages? (p.16)" In other words, what power relations have established and maintained the hypothetical equivalence. Gaudio (2009) illustrates how this linguistic question of translation is also a valid method in an anthropological project. Gaudio (2009) argues that translations and categorizations are "inherent features of human language and social interaction, performed by powerful and powerless alike (p.184)." The anthropological investigation of sexual identity terms *tong-xing-lian*, *tong-zhi*, *la-la*, are being performed in the Chinese language by mainland China lesbian activists, groups and individuals as will be illustrated in chapters 2 - 4.

1.2 Globalization of sexuality

Translation across cultural barriers clearly entails interactions between the global, the local and the regional. It is not pure coincidental that lesbian activism happened in mainland China today,

when interactions among different locations are more intense than ever before. It is worth noting that the “correct knowledge” is translated from an imagined global LGBT/*tong zhi* movement which the Chinese lesbian activists assume themselves to be part of. To set up an analytical framework for lesbian identities and activism in mainland China, a detour to theories on the global and local relations is necessary. After discussing globalization as a disjunctive and chaotic process described by Appadurai (1996), I will move on to particular discussions on global and local interactions relates to sexuality by anthropological writings of sexual diversity in nonwestern countries (Altman, 1997; Rofel, 1999; Sang, 2003; Boellstorff, 2003; Jackson, 2000).

1.2.1 The problem of globalization of sexuality

Appadurai’s (1996) proposal for a new framework for understanding global and local interactions is in close agreement with a Foucauldian perspective of power. Appadurai find the traditional globalization model of smoothly global flows and homogenizing from a European American centre problematic. He argues that, “the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood with existing centre-periphery models (Appadurai, 1996, p. 32).” He proposes a cultural chaos theory with borrowed metaphors from sciences--fractal, polythetic, and chaos. In short, Appadurai is suggesting a cultural theory with indefinite complexity and unpredictable future, which is the representation of “multiplicity of force relations” in globalization. His idea that the world today is “rhizomic and even schizophrenic” also links to Deleuzian assemblages (Appadurai, 1996, p. 29).

The problem for anthropologists studying sexuality in nonwestern culture at present is how to understand the spread of the global LGBT movement and identity categories such as “lesbian” and “gay” or “LGBT.” Michael Warner claims in his Introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*:

In the middle ground ... is the problem of international--or otherwise translocal--sexual politics. ... Anglo-American queer theorists will have to be more alert to the globalizing--and localizing tendencies of our theoretical languages. (Warner, 1993, xxii)

Altman (1997) declares that, “none of the contributors to this particular book take up this challenge.(p.419)” According to Altman, not only have queer theorists remained Atlantic-centric,

also the non-Western world apparently lacks interest in queer theory, continuing to use the terms “lesbian” and “gay”(Altman, 1997, p.419).

However neither has Altman succeeded in ridding himself of the Atlantic-centrism. In his encounter with gay men, commercial gay scenes and gay activist groups in cosmopolises across Asian, Altman argues for a global modern gay identity. Altman is stranded between a conscious avoidance of Euro-American-centric arguments that the West provides trajectory for Asian gay liberation and an inclination to give in. He compares the blurring of sex/gender and the significance of family value in Asia, to the past of the West. Although he distances himself from “a linear development toward the western model”(Altman, 1997, p. 426), this gesture betrays him and weakens his claim these non-Western gay groups “will adapt ideas of universal discourse and western identity politics to create something new and unpredictable.”

Below I discuss how studies on sexuality avoids reductive globalization structure and move to a more complexed structure as Appadurai has suggested. It is divided into three subsections: discussions of “cultural citizenship” and other forms of regulation in China (Rofel, 2007; Sang, 2003), “dubbing” and proliferation of identities (Boellstroff, 2003; Jackson, 2000, 2001), and the construction of “West” and critical regional analysis (Johnson, 2009; Johnson et al. 2000). These three subsections from different perspectives troubles the globalization of sexuality and provides useful analytical tools to analyze lesbians in mainland China.

1.2.2 “Cultural citizenship” and broader regulations in China

Rofel (2007) in her analysis of cosmopolitan gay men in the 1990s in mainland China takes issue with Altman’s gay globalization model. She argues that the main problem for Altman is his concept of culture and the universal as “self-evident,” “self-referential,” “timeless, bounded, homogeneous, and unchanging (Rofel, 2007, p.91).” Rofel draws on Foucault (1979) and the performative power of discourse to reconfigure culture as “ongoing discursive practices with sedimented histories that mark relations of power (p. 93).” She also draws from Tsing’s (2004) conception of the global or universal not as above culture or locality but as the global which “has been discursively produced in

various contexts (Rofel, 2007, p.93).” These reconfigurations allow Rofel to reject perceiving global gay identity and traditional culture as mutual exclusive antagonists as Altman does, and to a complex perspective where the transcultural practice of being gay and the longing for Chinese “cultural citizenship” could articulate together, shaping each other in the domestication of gayness by Chinese cosmopolitan gay men.

Rofel (2007) proposes “cultural citizenship” to refer to the transfer of the site of belonging from political struggles of class identity in Mao’s China to the cultural realm as connected to practices of desire in post-Mao, post-socialist China. In other words, the desire to be proper Chinese and cosmopolitan gay men are in a constant state of shaping each other. Even if they seems to desire a modern western based gay identity as Altman suggests, it is not a homogenous universal gayness, but something that is being worked out by Chinese gay men in transcultural practices in China. This process is both “active modes of affinity” that empowers Chinese gay men, and “techniques of normalization” as “cultural nationalism” insisting on an apolitical and non-confrontational gay identity (p. 94).

Rofel’s emphasize on “cultural citizenship” has been criticized by Sang (2003) as “overconfident.” Sang (2003) calls for consideration of a broader and historically deeper consideration of regulations in China. Sang agrees with Rofel’s attention to the complexities and nuances in study of the local, but disagrees with her argument that, “Cultural citizenship” more than “legal subjectivity or theories of psychological personality, establishes proper and improper sex in post-socialist China (p. 95).”⁴ Sang claims that Rofel’s omission of other forms of governmentally is “uncalled for,” and that “gender and other techniques of normalization, including medical, legal, and class ones, remain necessary categories of analysis (p.11).” Sang offers remedies of Rofel’s omission by taking into account lesbian identities, creative writings and autobiographic narratives. She also ask for historical deep analysis of global encounters, for it begins at least in the early twentieth century rather than in the 1990s.

⁴ The previous published version (Rofel, 1999) strongly stated “cultural citizenship, rather than, legal subjectivity or psychological personality(p.458).” Rofel softens her tone in this revised version.

Sang (2003) identifies two transformation in mainland China: the first one was during the early twentieth century that intimacy between female was sensitized and the abnormality attributed to it as *nu-tong-xing-lian*; the second one is the “resurgence of female homoerotic literature” in the 1990s (p. 7). Sang’s analysis of the construction of *tong-xing-lian* through a reading of intellectual translations of western and Japan sexological writings in the early and mid twentieth century illustrates the nuance power relations behind identity terms. However because Sang’s focus on discourses in the public sphere, her analysis in the second transformation is weakened. Other sexual identity terms besides *tong-xing-lian* are not adequately discussed in her book, also other forms of discourses such as personal narratives and everyday practices of lesbian activists, groups and individual women in mainland China after the 1990s are not thoroughly discussed.

1.2.3 “Dubbing Culture”

The problem that Altman, Rofel and Sang deal with is how we explain the spread of lesbian and gay-like identities and the globalization of LGBT movement. Is it that a western modern gay identity model in the West, which emphasizes an identity based on sexual orientation, coming out and demanding rights, traveled to the East by intensified globalization? Is it the marginalized non-normative sexual subjects in the East using globalization as an opportunity, appropriate the western gay identity model as a tool for fighting back oppressions? Are the identities in the East mirroring the those in the West, or are they “the engaging universal” (Tsing, 2004) in local practices?

Several recent studies address these questions. “Dubbing culture” by Boellstorff (2003) is one example. It suggests a way of theorizing globalizing process without assuming either a violent global force intrude the local community or a voluntary local agency to apply the universal identities. Chapter 2 will expand this “dubbing” metaphor in explaining how “homosexual” is dubbed into *tong-xing-lian* in China.

In analyzing how Indonesians comes to *lesbi* and *gay* “subject positions” alongside the controversy of dubbing western televisions into Indonesian language, Boellstorff (2003) develops a framework to analyze globalization process, “dubbing culture.” Although the similarities between

“*lesbi* and *gay*” and “lesbian and gay” suggests the globalization of modern gay identities for Altman (1997), for Boellstorff (2003) “they are distinctively Indonesian phenomena, formed through discourses of nation and sexual desire as well as a sense of linkage to distant but familiar Others (p. 226).” In considering why the Indonesia State forbid dubbing for foreign televisions, why does translation posit a threat for the national citizen to confuse itself with others, with how *lesbi* and *gay* come to the subject position, Boellstorff concludes “*lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians ‘dub’ ostensibly ‘Western’ subjectivities (p.236).” The anxiety of state authorities shows “dubbing” is challenging to the authenticity of constructed nationalism.

Additionally, in dubbing, there is a disjuncture between the image and sound track, however to the audience, there is no priority because they come at the same time. Like Butler’s (1991) problematizing the relation between copy and original, Boellstorff (2003) argues, “It disrupts the apparent seamlessness of the predubbed ‘original,’ showing that it too is a dub, that its ‘traditions’ are the product of social contexts with their own assumptions and inequalities (p. 237).” *Lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians “overwrite the deterministic ‘voice of the West,’ yet they cannot compose any script they please; ... This process of dubbing allows *lesbi* and *gay* individuals to see themselves as part of a global gay community but also authentically Indonesian (p. 237).” In dubbing, there is no globalization puppeteer or local agency for applying the global idea, rather, the global and local agency are both discursive constructs.

1.2.4 Decentering the West and applying “critical regionality”

The pervious discussions mostly focus on the relations between sexuality in non-Western places and the West. Rather less effort has been made in problematizing the centrality of the West, and focusing on the interactions of China with other non-Western societies. The discussions in chapter 2-4 will illustrate the identity terms are as much related to regional interactions as between China and the West. A few scholars (Johnson, Jackson & Herdt 2000; Johnson, 2009) take up this issue and provide insightful perspectives on decentering the West and focusing on regional connections.

Johnson (2009) illustrates that the early twentieth century western sexology and regulation of

sexualities have been made in relation to the non-Western other. “The boundaries of Western categories of normative gender and sexuality were established and resisted not simply in relation to the deviant within, but also in relation to the transgressive gender and sexuality of the racialized other without (Johnson, 2009, p. 168).” This gives another explanation to the development of scientific discourses on sex from the eighteenth centuries which Foucault (1979) fails to include. The “pre-gay” identities in non-West countries termed by Jackson (2001) are not only “pre-gay” but also important constitutes in the making of “gay.” Translation is not simply one-way process, rather, the West is only a knot in the net of globalization complex.

Given Western narcissism that constructs itself as the global, globalization is generally considered as dissemination from the West to the rest. Most of the scholarly discussions of non-normative sexualities in China, focus on between the West and mainland China. However regional connections and connections between mainland diasporic Chinese societies are crucial in the forming of lesbian identity terms and identities in China. A “critical regionality” is offered by Johnson, Jackson and Herdt (2000). Johnson, et al. (2000) while acknowledge any region as “strategy” and “fiction,” argue that this “imagined entity” have “a living reality which bears critical investigation and articulation (p. 363).” They suggests such investigation should be on “world areas” that focus on the flows and connections that are making the region. A critical region is the process of connections and flows both within and outside, without discreet boundaries. This attempt echoes with Foucauldian power as the “multiplicity of force relations” and the Deleuzian assemblage as “a focus on movements of linkage and connection (Currier, 2003, p.325).” The “critical regionality” is a way of both thinking globalization beyond the West and the rest and a bounded region.

Decentering the West and critical regional analysis provide a way to look at Chinese lesbian identity terms not as a direct importation from an uncritical West but to focus on regional connections. It values not only connections and flows inside the region as among mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, but also open up to connections and flows out-with the region as to Europe

and North America.

Thus we can see a critical analysis of lesbian in mainland China based on a complex model of power relations and globalization process should not be exploring the widespread uncritical international lesbian and gay identities. Rather the concerns should be on: yearnings for “cultural citizenship,” and other forms of local regulations; new sexual identities as “dubbing” in which meanings are remade; not connections to the West but critical regional connections. I move on to the next section to discuss the usefulness and limitations of Scott’s(1990) “hidden transcripts” and “infrapolitics.” It is a way to connect power as multiplicities to consideration of particularities and nuances of social movements in everyday lives.

1.3 Social movements as “infrapolitics”

Before talking about the lesbian movement it is important to sketch out a brief view of social movements in mainland China to situate lesbian activism in to a specific historical and cultural context. This sketch illustrates also the inadequacy of traditional social movement model such as resource mobilization theory in explaining social movements and lesbian activism in mainland China today. A social movements model attends to the multiplicities of discursive power and particularities of everyday lives is needed. After that I discuss the concepts of “hidden transcripts” and “infrapolitics” by Scott(1990) and its usefulness and limitations in examining social movements in mainland China today.

It seems for many that mainland China today is imagined to be either heavily repressed under the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party (CCP) without any slight sign of social movements, or a increasingly dysfunctional regime finding itself threaten by possible revolt in a globalizing time. These discourses echo with what Foucault (1979) describes as the “repressive hypothesis” that provides either the promise for a “liberation” or the “affirmation: that we are always-already trapped (p.83).” Just as discourses on sex everywhere in Foucault’s survey, social movements were never far from politics in mainland China. The establishment of P. R. China is product of a series of revolutions: the early twentieth century democratic revolution and New Cultural movement; the

communist revolution aimed to overthrow imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism (*Constitution of P.R.C*, 1982). Mao's rule of China, is a continual of "permanent revolutions" or "movements." It derived from Marx (1952), that the proletariats needs to "interrupt themselves continually in their own cause, come back to the accomplished in order to begin it afresh.(p.597)" was the at central place in early P.R.China (Schram, 1971). However, CCP leaders later repudiates it as "serious mistakes" by Mao (*Resolution on certain questions*, 1981), and replace it with "economic development" and "social stability (Schoenhals, 1999)."

This emphasis on "stability" replaces "movements" with "development," replaces the Cold War opposition with "Reform and Open up" policy. On the one hand, the state has tightened its regulation on assemblies, processions and demonstrations, on the other hand, a focus on "stability" also means the government's reluctance to execute large scale societal purges. Resistances move to the apolitical or everyday life realm. Dissident discourses, complaints would be ignored as long as not-threatening to the overall rule. It is in such a complex and ambiguous situation that lesbian and gay movement emerged after the 1990s.

None of the traditional social movement theory including the idea of civil society and resource mobilization could account for such complexities happened not in the political arena but in everyday lives. It is not to say that social movement organizations and social movements in the similar form in the West do not happen in China today, but they are not the majority form of resistance. The Tiananmen event triggered a discussion of the whether a civil society model is applicable to China (Brook & Frolic 1997). However in China today, the contradictory both repression and tolerance represents a Foucauldian power model: the regulation of everyday life becomes more subtle and polymorphous, the dissident discourses multiplied taking on forms other than open expressions as assemblies, processions, and demonstrations. It is in this situation that *tong-xing-lian* (homosexual) issues and lesbian and gay activism emerged and requires a new model accounts for the everyday forms of resistance. Scott's (1990) "hidden transcripts" and "infrapolitics" model provides such a start to such a model.

Scott (1990) argues the subordinate groups under surveillance and domination will put on a performance that suites the interest of the dominant groups by being servile and insubordinate, playing the “public transcripts.” It is only off the stage, outside the power-laden situation, in informal intimate circles that the “hidden transcripts” are revealed. Scott argues that traditional social movements models have overlooked the hidden transcripts so they can’t explain why sudden burst of social movements. Because “hidden transcripts” is outside traditional social movements theory like the infrared rays that cannot be detected by bare eyes and because it provide foundation for outbreak of open struggles like infrastructures, Scott terms such politics “infrapolitics.”

Scott’s model is useful for understanding the everyday forms of resistance in China today. However its effectiveness is weakened by the insistence on the dichotomy between a “powerful” dominant groups and the “powerless” subordinate groups. This is not the case for lesbians in China, since their pressure comes as much from the intimate circle as from the States. Moreover, although he claims not to dismiss the “infrapolitics” as only a foreplay of real politics, he always expects an outburst of the “hidden transcripts” to turn “infrapolitics” into real politics. An adapted “infrapolitics” model from Scott, that replaces the emphasis on dyadic paradigm between the powerful and the powerless by the “multiplicity of force relations” or “linkage and connections”, and withdraws the expectation on outburst and liberation but focus on detail of the “hidden transcripts” and “infrapolitics” is helpful in discussion of lesbian activism in mainland China.

This chapter has illustrated the importance of investigating lesbian identity terms in China today and suggested how to do it with a focus on the particularities and connections. Foucault’s concept of power as the “multiplicity of force relations” is the thread that links through. The discursive power and performativity reveal the connection between language and power. Such connections illustrate the importance to invest into lesbian identity terms. Moreover power as the “multiplicity of force relations” and Deleuzian assemblages as “interpenetrating multiplicities” replace the traditional framework of numerical unities with fixed and distinct boundaries with one that focus on processes, connections and flows. Language, sexuality, globalization and social movements are

connected together as “interpenetrating multiplicities.” In each realm this framework also helps to understand the particularities and connections, such as the scholars discussed here have addresses. With such a framework I turn to the chapters on the identity terms.

Chapter 2 Dubbing the homosexual into *Tong-xing-lian*

As Lydia Liu(1995) points out, western concepts of modernity were reinvented through works of the Chinese intellectuals during the early twentieth century with an aim of creating a “New Chinese Culture.” One of the product of this New Culture Movement is the invention of modern vernacular Chinese filled with neologisms and loanwords as translated from European languages, and/or through the mediation of Japanese. These words after reinvention in the Chinese context, have become part of everyday vocabulary. *Tong-xing-lian* is an example of this.

This chapter discusses the translation process between the term “homosexual” in western sexology and the term Chinese *tong-xing-lian* as an assemblage of three elements--same, sex, and love--and the constant meaning-making process by the reiteration in the using of these elements. It illustrates the “dubbing”(Beollstorff, 2003) of homosexual into a complex assemblage where multiple, changing, and disjunctive meanings become possible adding to the unpredictability of local identifications and social movements. Each of the three characters in the Chinese term is an element: it does not stand as a separate unity with bounded and fixed meanings; it can be separated but the separation does not result in simply replicating an unchanged element from the assemblage, and creates new meanings by making new connections; the changing is constant in the making of these elements. This multiplicity of meanings is also exemplifies by the using of the three characters by lesbian groups, activists, and individuals.

In this chapter, the elements of the term are discussed separately in three sections each of which presents a meaning making process, subtle connotations and different usages of the character. At the end of the chapter, I bring these three elements together and argue that *tong-xing-lian* is not a copy but a dubbing of homosexual, which produces complex and unpredictable meanings and the complexity and unpredictability of the issues around this term.

2.1 *Tong* (Same):”A harmonious world”

There are two specific characteristics of *tong*: first *tong* as “same” and “harmony” is valued in both traditional Chinese canons and the current discourse of “Chinese values” by Chinese political

leaders; second the broad meaning of *tong* make it an obscured sign for *tong-xing-lian* used among insiders. The two characteristics influence how gay and lesbian groups, activists choosing a proper name for groups, magazines and activities, and how individual lesbian articulate themselves. Most of the naming process illustrates a tension between the modern and the tradition, the result is an unpredictable hybridity of Western and Chinese elements. The reiterative separate use of this element in these discourses reinforces the positive meaning of *tong*, is an attempt to lose the “bad parts” of *tong-xing-lian* that contribute to the derogatory sense and reintroduce it to the normal, same and harmonious realm.

First, *Tong* generally means “same,” it is commonly used to define the relationship between people in a positive sense of sharing something, such as coworkers, classmates and comrades, reflecting harmony and solidarity. This connotation is also in classical Chinese, such as in idioms like *tian-xia-da-tong* which means the “a world in harmony.” The value of harmony has also been appropriated by the State to support the “stability” policy, as previous leader Hu repeated the aim of the government is “to build a harmonious society.” While a few criticize “harmony” being used as an excuse to silence unharmonious voice, even these people would still agree that harmony is an important Chinese value. The reason for harmony to occupy such a significant place in Chinese society has to do with the cosmological epistemology which dominated China in the premodern time and still has great influence today (See Section 1.2). Second, *Tong* is also broad and obscure, if separated from the other elements, in signifying *tong-xing-lian*. The meaning “same” is so broad that an outsider cannot directly guess out its connotation, and an insider would instantly recognizes it even without the other two characters. I often hear my informants in mainland China enquiring about someone “is she *tong*?”

These two characteristics have an impact on *tong* being the most common used character of the three to indicate *tong-xing-lian*. It is widely used in gay and lesbian websites names, group names, and organized activity names, websites as *Yi-lu-tong-xing*, group names as *Tong-yu*, *Relax tong-xue-she*, organized activities such as *Tong-xin-yuan* reading club, *Huo-ying-tong-ren* film club in

Beijing *tong-zhi* (LGBT) Center. The lesbian magazine *Les+* also once considered *tong* in its naming⁵. I suggest the positive connotation of *tong* as being same and harmony and the obscurity of using *tong* as a hint to *tong-xing-lian* are the reasons for this popularity. All these names mentioned above as combinations have more than one character in it, but none of the combinations have *xing* (sex) or *lian* (love) in it. *Xing* (sex) in *Yi-lu-tong-xing* is replaced with a totally different character with similar sound *xing*(walk). This tells us that the relations of these three characters are uneven, and they need to be considered both in their connections to one another, and their disconnections to one another.

2.1.1 The tension and resolution in naming

A close reading of the use of *tong* in these names tells us that *tong* is used for its representative of positive Chinese-ness. The naming process of these names usually shows the double “desiring” Rofel (2007) points out, a desiring the modern cosmopolitan gayness combined with a desiring for Chinese “cultural citizenship.” This is illustrated by the tensions between using the Chinese/traditional elements and using foreign/modern⁶ elements which result in various type of unpredictable interactions between the elements.

The traditional “Chinese values” that *tong* connotes have huge influence on what kind of language is used by lesbian groups and individuals and how to use it. The discourse of “Chinese value,” influences the formation of gender and sexuality in these region, “has material consequences for the lives of man and women who live in this particular part of the world (Johnson et al. 2000).” Such discourse never has only linguistic effects. It “transmits and produces power”(Foucault, 1979); its reiteration have stabilization and materialization effects (Butler, 1993). After all, all subjects including lesbian and gays in mainland China, are “linguistic beings” formed in language (Butler, 1997).

Claiming that lesbian and gay or *tong-xing-lian* subjects are formed in language is not denying their agency. They too have their rights to discourses, their “own” discourse. Discourses by the

⁵ The naming process of *Les+* and *Tong-yu* is described in detail in an oral history project by *Tong-yu* (Tong-yu, 2011).

⁶ I use Chinese/tradition, and foreign/modern here not intended to essentialize this correlation. However in China as in most post-colonial society, the anti-imperialism resistance is only to reverse the value but keeping the same correlation.

lesbian activists, groups, and individuals inextricable bare relations to these hegemonic discourses, more like a “reverse discourse.” Their use of *tong* is either appropriating the hegemonic discourse to evoke the positive meaning of it, or rarely in some cases, when the subject is very wary of the political propaganda, avoid it in certain occasions when it is reminiscent of the propaganda. Two examples illustrate this tension: ***Tong-yu*** and ***les+***.

The motto of Lesbian organization ***Tong-yu*** is “diversity, equality and harmony (*he-xie*).” The objection to hegemonic discourse harmony also appear in the same example, that one volunteer proposes to change “harmony” to “freedom,” because the word harmony is reminiscent of the State propaganda. “Freedom” is arguably categorized to the “Western/modern values” as opposite to “Chinese/traditional values.”⁷ *Tong* as related to harmony (or *he-xie*) and a positive Chinese tradition, has certain appealing for organizations like ***Tong-yu***, and has certain tensions with the western elements also desired by these organizations.

In choosing the name of a Chinese lesbian magazine ***Les+*** two cofounders had a fight over whether to use a name of Chinese combination with *tong* in it, or use a western name *les*⁸. After the disagreement, one said to the other, you can just call it “singing the same song (*tong-yi-shou-ge*) (*Tong-yu*, 2013),” which is a popular program on national TV. It is a mocking of *tong* being reminiscent of nationalist propaganda. This case, also illustrates the preference of *tong*, and the tension between whether to use *tong* and Western elements. The resolution of this is ***Les+***, which is not as completely western as it looks. The founders explain “+” is a place for free imagination: one of the exemplar given is the Chinese pronunciation of “+ (*jia*)” is the same with family (*jia*), so it is a family, a home for us.

The tension between the western elements and the Chinese elements is often resolved by a somehow combination of the two. Even a “+” symbol would be linked to “family value” as

⁷ Most of the hegemonic ideology in China consider “Chinese values” as family, collectivity, harmony, while “Western values” as individualism, freedom, aggressiveness. However the activists would argue that freedom is an “universal” value rather than western value.

⁸ The using of *les* is similar to *la-la* both of them are popular on the internet. Since most people learn them at the same time on the internet, they are used mostly interchangeably in young Chinese netizens, however there may be a personal preference for using the English form (*les*), or the Chinese form (*la-la* 拉拉). See chapter 4.

“Chinese value.” This illustrates Rofel’s (2007) argument that Chinese cosmopolitan gay men combined their desire for global gayness with a desire for “cultural citizenship.” However the other combinations are more complex and unpredictable.

2.1.2 The Western part is not always gay, while the Chinese part is not always tradition

Although Rofel (2007) argues that the global and local are “discursively produced in various contexts (p.93),” and that cultures are “ongoing discursive practices with sedimented histories that mark relations of power (p.91).” The positioning of global gayness and “cultural citizenship,” even as she defines both as ongoing discursive products, seems to suggest the combination would be gay from the global part and something like kinship and harmony from the Chinese part. While Some of the resolutions will confirm Rofel’s model, others don’t follow this expectation. On the one hand, the elements that seem to be from the West aren’t necessary modern gay and lesbian identities, on the other, the elements that seem to be from the traditional Chinese aren’t necessary expressing specified Chinese concerns.

Two examples illustrate this: the website *Yi-lu-tong-xing* (walk on the same road) and lesbian group **Relax Tong-xue-she** (Relax sameness learning group). Thought they look unrelated at first sight, the similarity is in their part elements: both borrow western elements that express not modern lesbian and gay identities, but a local concern, and both contain a certain kind of prestige with extremely different elements.

The Western element in the *Yi-lu-tong-xing* is not in its name, but in the way the forum is organized. The name of the forum means “walk on the same road” that connotes lesbian and gay are on a same life journey “loving the same sex.” There are two subtopics in this forum called “left bank (*zuo-an*)” and “right bank (*you-an*),” with threads related to men classified under “left bank” and women under “right bank.” These two neologisms are translation of left and right bank regions in Paris. This naming represents a certain superior taste for being modern and Western. In this case the western element isn’t modern lesbian and gay identities, rather a prestige related to the West and western taste.

In **Relax *Tong-xue-she*** it seems more obvious that the word “relax” comes from the West and *tong-xue-she* comes from traditional Chinese. According to my interviews with the founders, the word “relax” is to let lesbians relax and feel relaxed. According to them under the social pressure, many lesbians are living a depressed and decadent life. They think lesbians should “just relax,” and be relaxed (*qing-song*). They should “be positive about life,” and do something “helpful for their future lives and studies.” This question they identify and try to solve with relax was not Western at all, nor is “relax” the only expression for it. It is borrowing a word from English to express a local concern. For the Chinese part *tong-xue-she* the group has explanations on its blog which are excerpts from classic Chinese Confucian canons. This presents a similar prestige of knowledge and taste to the using of “left bank,” the prestige to be knowledgeable of traditional Chinese canons and the taste of tradition.

Thus we see how the element from the West is not always modern gay and lesbian identities. It could be exhibiting a prestige of modernity or only borrowing a word to articulate local concerns; the element from Chinese expresses not only “cultural citizenship,” but a similar prestige of tradition. The combination aren’t as expectable as Rofel claims. There is no clear line of which comes from the West and which comes from Chinese; there is also no predictability on what comes from the West and what comes from the Chinese and how they combine.

2.1.3 Obscurity as a different “hidden transcript”

The positive meanings attached to *tong* by hegemonic discourses seem to explain the preferences for *tong*; however they do not explain why the other two characters aren’t used in those names. To explain this I move to the second characteristic of *tong*, obscurity, namely that when *tong* is separated from the other two characters as a secret sign to *tong-xing-lian*, obscure for an outsider but recognizable for an insider.

All these names in the beginning of this section, mean different things from “walk on the same road (*Yi-lu-tong-xing*)” to “watch film together (*Huo-ying-tong-ren*).” None have the slightest connotation of *tong-xing-lian* in a regular context, however in a certain one, the names do not need

to be explained. This obscurity to the outsider illustrates *tong* being not directly related to sex has an impact on the naming and is achieved by omitting the other two characters.

This obscurity provides a “hidden transcript,” (Scott, 1990) that the subordinate groups doing a different performing off the power laden stage outside the surveillance of the dominate. A coded insider slang seems to provide the possibility to be doing something secret in the open. However most lesbians in China will not discuss issues related to sexuality in public, not even in coded language. The surveillance is not from a dominant group, but from the discursive power of the hegemonic discourses, and the subjectivity and subconsciousness formed by it. The reiteration of hegemonic discourses to produce *tong-xing-lian* as the abnormal pervert also formed an uneasiness with the term. The “hidden transcript” is as much hidden for the self as from the outsider. *Tong* is not only a secret code of *tong-xing-lian*, but when the “bad parts” are out it becomes more bearable as an identification for oneself. The interviews with lesbian women illustrate this.

Most interviewees only mentioned the term *tong-xing-lian* when absolutely necessary. Some articulate uneasiness with the term *tong-xing-lian*.

Sheng: [When having a close female friend in the past] Peoples around you will tease ‘you two are so close, are you *tong-xing-lian*?’ ... I am scared. I dare not to reply. It feels like if I confirm, I am convicted. ... I have seen such examples. When they went into the room there is sudden silence. After they left, everyone started gossiping.

The uneasiness with *tong-xing-lian* comes from both outside and inside. There is interpellation from the outside. Sheng dare not to face it, because it would make her the object of phobic fantasy and investigation. Simultaneously there is also questioning and avoiding from the inside. Zong’s narrative illustrates it.

Zong: [When I was young] I hadn’t heard of *la-la* yet, I only heard of *tong-xing-lian*. I didn’t think I was *tong-xing-lian*. I thought it was a bad word, subconsciously I avoid it. ... I was feeling some affections to girls, but when the term *tong-xing-lian* jump into my mind, I am scared. I wouldn’t identify with it; I wouldn’t think of it; I told myself and everyone else, this was a really strong friendship.

First the claimed subconsciousness is the product of performative effect of hegemonic discourse. Lao’s narrative shows this process.

Lao: I first saw *tong-xing-lian* when I was in fifth grade in school [around 12 years old]. I remember it was *Liaoning Youth* [a popular Provincial magazine for youth education]. A reader send a question, and the columnist's answer was really mean. He said that it is a disease, and asked the reader to see a doctor. Because it was a male reader I didn't feel much empathy. Now on reflection I think it affects the subconscious reaction to my identity.

It also the psychological normalization that Sang(2003) rightly reviews that Rofel's(1999) model of "cultural citizenship" cannot cover.

Second, the insistence on "friendship" in Zong's narrative illustrates that Sang's (2003) argument that female same sex intimacy in premodern China often "fell under the broad rubric of friendship and sisterhood (p.17)," remains valid today. The differences between "friendship" and *tong-xing-lian* are *xing* (a sense of eroticism) and *lian* (the intense love). *Tong* on the other hand is valued for its positive connotations and obscurity. "A harmonious world (*tian-xia-da-tong*)" is a joke among the lesbian community that never loses its flavor: because there are more visible lesbians now, we are achieving "a harmonious world" which the world is full of sameness has a pun for the world is full of homosexuals.

This section has shown the hegemonic discourses praise *tong* as core of "Chinese values," harmony, and condemn *tong-xing-lian* as abnormal perverts. Thus Chinese lesbians are using *tong* as for its positive value and its obscurity when disconnected with the other two characters to avoid the negativity of *tong-xing-lian*. This is affirming the hegemonic discourses that formed their existence. On the other hand lesbians are also rejecting the hegemonic discourses by combining the Chinese elements and the Western elements together, which illustrates complex and unpredictable interactions more than the double desiring of "cultural citizenship" and sexual identities. The third way to deal with hegemonic discourse would be parody. It is a certain way of repeating the norm but challenges it, exposes the inconsistencies of the norm, thus disillusionize its authority (Newton, 1972; Butler, 1990). The separation of *tong* from *tong-xing-lian* and appropriation of its positive value is affirming the hegemonic discourse but, to some extent, also a sort of parodying: it articulates a desire to be included into the normal ground, and yet by showing that a character with

such importance to the hegemonic discourse can be integrated into something despised by it, illustrates the disjunctures.

Why is the contradiction that the positive *tong* can make a combination of *tong-xing-lian* that is so negative for the general public and these lesbian women? To answer this question, I now move to the second element of *tong-xing-lian*.

2.2 Xing (sex): To talk or not to talk

The character *xing* (sex) is generally avoided in both names chosen by activists and groups and in lesbian women's everyday discourse. To quote Sheng, "It is not something you talk about." However the signification of the character *xing* to mean sex is only a recent invention, by the introduction of sexology in the early twentieth century (Sang, 2003, p.103). During this time radical and biological sex/gender differences (*xing-bie*) interacted with a cosmological view of *yin/yang*. The meaning of *xing* is the result of assemblages of contradictory forces: explicit sexual expressions that should be avoid and the scientific object that needed to studied; the strict biological differences and the expression of cosmological *yin* and *yang*. In the process, *xing*(sex) is becoming "schizophrenic." This illustrates that the globalization is not a homogenous process, the combination of Western sexology and traditional view on gender and sex creates disjunctures (Appadurai, 1996) inside a single character, and a "schizophrenia" of that character.

2.2.1 Human nature and the cosmological epistemology

While there is a continuity of *tong* in both classic Chinese and modern vernacular Chinese, it is not so for *xing*. The character *xing* to mean sex is a neologism invented in the earlier twentieth century. Sang (2003) argues that before the twentieth century *xing* as a character only had a meaning of "nature," especially a philosophical term in Confucianism as "human nature."

This "nature" or "human nature" is not opposite to or exclusive of culture. Rather "human nature" as "men's moral capacities and tendencies beyond food and sex" (Sang, 2003, p.103) is constitute by "culture" as prescriptive moral codes and is achieved in the teaching and learning of Confucianism. Moreover, the patriarchal order and gender hierarchy is not understood as the radical

differences between biological sexes, rather it is inscribed in the Confucian prescriptive social order for women to fulfill their social duty as daughters, wives and mothers. Sang (2003) argues that the duty is imperative and doesn't need biological differences justify it, thus social prevails nature as the source of male power (p.22). "Femininity was fully understood as an acquired skill (Sang, 2003, p.23)."

Sang (2003) see this as male culture dominating female nature, however, this claim may not be so precise. Because the culture and nature dichotomy as representing male and female dichotomy is not perceived as such in premodern Chinese society. Rather the distinction between culture and nature did not exist. According to Dikotter (1995) the predominant Chinese epistemology before the twentieth century was the cosmological view that everything is a reflection of the universe. Culture and nature are considered as a whole unity in the cosmos. The ideal is to bring harmony to the cosmos and micro-cosmoses such as the society, family, body and self.

Furth (1999) argues that gender differences in China should not be understood in either the "social roles" or "natural attributes," but in a world "encompassing both," the *yin/yang* system. The *yin* and *yang* dichotomy is not fixed or unchangeable to describe femininity and masculinity. Furth(1988) argues "there was nothing fixed and immutable about male and female as aspects of *ying* and *yang* (p.2)." It is also not a strict dichotomy since *yin* and *yang* are shifting in complementing each other, which blurs the boundaries. In gender perspective, premodern Chinese language never had a character specifically referring to gender or sex differences. There was the coexisting using of *yin/yang* and familial roles. These gender distinctions comes not from biological body, but from prescriptive teaching and social roles as reflecting cosmic order. Furth (1999) argues in premodern (960-1644) Chinese medicine the body of either sexes are constituted by both *yin* and *yang*, the treatment for health was to bring balance and harmony into the individual body. Both the excessive *yang* in male body and *yin* in female body were "potential vulnerabilities, departures from the androgynous ideal of health (Furth, 1999, p.52)."

My interviews illustrates that cosmological view of gender still has an impact on lesbian

women's conception of gender and sexuality today.

Sheng: The Ts (masculine lesbian) in *la-la* are someone who have an excessive *yang* like men. They have an appetite for women and couldn't help but to seduce normal women into the *la-la* relations. While Ps (feminine lesbian) are mostly bisexual women, who will appreciate both the beauty of *yang-gang* (the hard *yang*) and *yin-rou* (the soft *yin*).

Yong: I found out I am *tong-xing-lian* because I always like something broad and bright.(Why do you think this is *tong-xing-lian*?) Because girls' minds are generally narrow, this broadness and brightness belong to something *yang*.

Many lesbians and activists treat these understandings as representation of conservative, backwardness and even feudalist superstitions as opposite the correct knowledge of sex/gender distinctions, attributing to Sheng's age to Yong's social background from a rural village. However the valorization of certain knowledge as correct prevent them to see the subtle interactions of multiple forces in these women's narratives. Moreover, even these young lesbians and activists are constantly using phrases with *yin* and *yang* to articulate gender expressions.

Sex in premodern China was discussed less in medicine and science since there is no nature/culture dichotomy that provides nature as the object. The discussions of sex in premodern China were in the realm of eroticism and pleasure, classified by Foucault (1979) as the "erotic arts." They are not Confucian canons, rather in the "minor literatures" (Sang, 2003) that are deemed insignificant or improper such as pornographic fictions. Descriptions of female same sex relations as either eroticism between co-wives or as friendship and sisterhood are in this insignificant space. Generally in premodern China, Confucianism served as the hegemonic discourse for officials. Sex is not part of the social etiquette (*li*) and should not be seen, heard, talked about, or acted out. The influences remains today, "Sex is not something you talk about."

2.2.2 From human nature to gender and sexuality

I have shown that a cosmological epistemology existed in premodern China and continues to have effects on gender and sexuality today. Now I will turn to how the introduction of modern "sex science (*xing-ke-xue*)" in the early twentieth century constructs the new signification to mean both "gender and sexuality" to *xing*. Both Dikotter(1995) and Sang(2003) noticed an explosion discourse

on *xing* (sex) as analogous to the proliferation Foucault(1979) investigates in the West. Since Japan translated western discourses a few decades earlier⁹ than China and the languages shared part of a same writing system¹⁰, many Chinese terms of western discourses were mediated through Japan.¹¹ *Xing* (sex) is one of these adaptations in translating western sexologies.

The background for intellectual zeal of translating western sex science is the colonial anxiety of perishing of the Chinese nation and race. The late Qing empire's impotence in resisting imperialism made intellectuals vehemently attack Confucianism and the cosmological epistemology as feudalism, trying to revival the nation with science and democracy. The dichotomy of nature and culture was introduced to replace cosmological epistemology (Dikotter, 1995). *Xing*, the character used in Japanese translation of sexology, was adopted. The biological sex differences under the neologism *xing-bie* (sex differences) is replacing Confucian moral codes as the justification for patriarchal order. The aim of this sex liberation was to eliminat feudal "bad habits"¹², with correct knowledge of sex which is the biological differences and drives to heterosexual reproductive intercourse.

This incitement to speak was brought to sudden end at the establish of P. R. China in 1949. However deployment of sexuality in Mao's China is not a complete detachment from republican discourses. According to Dikotter (1995) the totalitarian governments disseminated the dominant voice in the earlier debate, denouncing feudal bad habits of sex and enforcing marital heterosexual reproductive sexuality. The discourse of sex science was only among the new bourgeois in coastal urban cities, but was enforced on the whole region of mainland and different levels of social status by the power of the PRC government. It is the institutionalization of previous proliferation discourses of sex science. Moreover, the sex discourses of the CCP government also derives from the old cosmological view that sex should be socially controlled, and the Confucian moral code that sex is not something to talk about. It is illustrated by the erasure of the term *tong-xing-lian* from the

⁹ Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) in Japan and May Fourth (1915-1921) New Cultural movement in China.

¹⁰ Japanese writing system is a combination Chinese characters (Kanji) with two syllabaries.

¹¹ The term homosexual (*tong-xing-lian*), sex(*xing*), romantic love(*lian-ai*), sexual pervers(*bian-tai*) and comrades (*tong-zhi*) are examples.

¹² Polygamy, feetbinding, prostitution, homosexuality, etc.

public sphere but occasionally punished under the label of hooliganism. *Tong-xing-lian* was not set as opposite of heterosexual, but grouped together with prostitution, premarital, extramarital and any sex behaviors that are not reproductive, or conforming to social etiquette (*li*). On the one hand sexual discourse in Mao's China denounced them as corruption of the bourgeois Western imperialism and remnants of feudalism, on the other hand it is using the language of both sex science and Confucian morality to achieve this.

After the "Reform and Open up" policy in the 1980s and especially after 1990s, a new wave of "sexual liberation" emerged, denouncing the socialist past as repression against human nature (*ren-xing*)¹³. However this "liberation" attempts to bring back both sexual science and Confucian harmony, in the same language as the Mao's China. It denounces the masculinization of women in socialist past to bring back femininity as both mothers and wives in Confucian teaching and natural expression of biological differences. The whole process of the transformation of sex is "further hybridizes an already hybridized space (Sang, 2003, p.11)." Which makes it not simply hybridized, but rhizomic and schizophrenic (Deleuze & Guatarri 1987; Appadurai, 1996).

2.2.3 Sex is something you do not talk and yet have to talk about

Xing (sex) is an assemblage of cosmological ideas, Confucian morals, sex science, and sex liberation. The schizophrenic attitude toward sex is also illustrated by lesbians today. Sex is something you do not talk and yet have to talk about. These attitudes regardless if it's by CCP government, sexual liberationists, lesbians or the general public is deeply "schizophrenic."

Section 2.1 have shown that *xing*(sex) is avoided in the names. This omission of *xing* (sex) could be partly attributed to the general attitude about sex as something should not be discussed openly.

Sheng: I heard of *tong-xing-lian* but didn't know what it means. I know it is two people really close, but how close, I didn't know. It is like I knew people should get married and have baby, but didn't know where the baby come from? ... Sex(*xing*) is something our generation didn't know, something disgraceful. Sex (*xing*) is not something you talk about. Everyone, relatives and friends congratulate you on your marriage, and it is a mandatory

¹³ This is not the same human nature (*xing*), in Confucian canons, it is based on nature and culture divide of human desires both for material and sex.

path for everyone, but except for that ...

Sheng claims that *xing*(sex) generally, no matter in *tong-xing-lian* or in heterosexual relations as marriage, is not known, respected, or talked about. It is something hidden behind a mandatory path for everyone, marriage and reproduction and celebrated for relatives and friends.

Although Sheng specifies this is the situation of “my generation”(in the late 80s and early 90s) and it is true that restriction toward sex is lifting. Avoiding the character *xing* (sex) is still common today, it is often replaced by “that thing,” “the business” and many other euphemisms. Another interviewee Lao successfully avoid using *xing* (sex) in most of her narratives.

Lao: I knew about the business between men and men almost the same time I knew the business between men and women. I read a lot when I was young, books like *The Golden Lotus*.¹⁴

Despite knowing more about sex by reading erotic fiction, Lao always hesitated to utter the character *xing*. Her knowledge about sex as the “business between men” and “between men and women” does not contradict Sheng’s argument that sex is not to be talked about. She acquired that knowledge from secretly reading some “forbidden books,” not from normal media or others’ mouths. Even after she got that knowledge, she did not share it with others. When she was sharing with me, she avoided the character *xing* (sex) altogether.

On the contrary, sex liberation is also in lesbian activists and their homophobic attackers’ agenda today.

Kan: *La-la* culture is a sex culture (*xing-wen-hua*). In China we have generally low sexual satisfaction. Especially for women, most women have never experienced orgasm in their sexual life. People don’t believe women can be active in sex. Many people ask questions “how do *la-la* have sex?” They don’t think it is possible. Even some *la-la* don’t know much about sex.

Ironically, Kan’s stress on the importance of *xing* (sex) and female orgasm coincides with the male intellectual Dr. Sex, Zhang Jingsheng, who a century earlier deploring the ignorance of sex in China and claimed female orgasm as necessity for “healthy, gender distinct offspring,” who also attacked homosexuality contemptuously believing they were “symptomatic of the Chinese race’s lack of

¹⁴ A erotic fiction in pre-modern China, which depict both male-female and male-male sexual behaviors.

sexual desire and consequent degeneration (cited in Sang, 2003, p.114-115).” Reframings of Dr. Sex’s opinion are common in the homophobic discourses today. They don’t believe sex can happen between women, because in their opinion sex is under the natural drive of heterosexual attraction and will result in reproductive intercourse.

This section has shown the transformation of the character *xing* to and how the contradictions, disjunctives and multiple meanings related to *xing* is formed through discourses. In answering why *xing* is both something one does not talk, and yet has to talk about, it has illustrated the discourse of sexuality in China is not a westernization of sex science or a revival of the cosmological epistemology. It is schizophrenia and chaos. *Xing* (sex) is also connected to our next element love as discourse on sex is always related to romantic love.

2.3 *Lian* or *ai* (love): “Love between homosexuals is the real love”

In the early twentieth century China the naturalization of heterosexuality is combined with a valorization of romantic love over familial responsibility as the legitimization for marriage. The introduction of western sex science was not the West pathological term homosexual imposing itself on the non-homophobic local understandings of gender and sexuality as some scholars argues (Hirsch, 1990; Chou,2001). First, western sexology is not an unanimous, unambiguous voice that developed independently on its own (Johnson, 2009), second this does not explain these Chinese intellectuals’ suddenly enthusiasm about “homosexuality.” Third, the term *tong-xing-lian* was not translated without debates, three variations existed in the early twentieth century, *tong-xing-lian*, *tong-xing-ai*, *tong-xing-lian-ai* (Sang, 2003). This section discusses the differences between different forms of love: between the pathological love (*lian*) and highly valued love (*ai*); between love and marriage; between homosexual and heterosexual love. To answer the contradiction of how love (*lian* and *ai*) become both the pathologization (as in *lian*) and valorization (as in *ai*) of *tong-xing-lian*, represented best by the phrase “homosexual love (*tong-xing-lian*) is the real love (*ai*).”

2.3.1 Valorization of romantic love

Both the characters *lian* and *ai* are roughly translated as love. In classic Chinese before twentieth

century *lian* (admire) is only one element of all benevolent humanist feelings that *ai* (love) encompasses, while none of them were directly related to love between the sexes. In the early twentieth century intellectuals adopted and exalted the use of compound *lian-ai* in modern Japanese as romantic love in translating European literature. In challenging the traditional Confucian morals, romantic love between the sexes replaced familial duty as the new norm for marriage. Free romantic love between men and women became the new yardstick for proper marriages rather than social-economical matching and arrangements of parents and relatives. Sang (2003) suggests it is an analogous to “the deployment of sexuality” replacing “the deployment of alliances”(Foucault, 1979). However “the deployment of alliances” never withdraw from China, social-economical matching and family approval are still top concerns of marriages for the young generation today.

The imposing of romantic love on the traditional discourse of filial piety resulting in a dilemma for lesbians in China today. Some enter into heterosexual marriages to fulfill their filial piety, some resist marriage by exposing their sexual identity to parents, and some consider “cooperate marriage” with gay men as a compromise.

Sheng: Then my mother also said, you should get married soon ... I thought, OK. I would just marry someone, but I have one condition: if there is no love, I would not marry him.

Meng: My family are talking more about my marriage since I am in university now. I will not consider marriage. It is irresponsible for both of the families, because I don't love him. I am considering coming out to my family soon.

Yong: I have to get married. My parents suffered enough. I can't put them through ... the gossips of neighbors. I am almost 30 now, people are already talking. I can't get into a real marriage with no love. I am seeing gay men now, choosing a proper match for cooperate marriage.[She then talks about why those gay men are not proper match.]

It is interesting that all of them, regardless of what strategy they choose, talk about both family responsibility and love. Sheng chose to follow family duty on the condition of romantic love; Meng rejects marriage not because she value love over family responsibility. She though a marriage without love, a bad marriage, is irresponsible for families; Yong tries to balance these two in a fake marriage, however still concerns about the comparable social-economical status of a fake husband.

It is not they are preferring either one of the two, but the combination of romantic love and family duty results in various unpredicted results.

2.3.2 Pathologization of abnormal love

The emergence of *tong-xing-lian*, *tong-xing-ai*, *tong-xing-lian-ai* in intellectual discussions raised from the local concerns of demarcating the boundaries of romantic love (*lian-ai*) with other feelings such as friendship between the sexes, friendship/love between the people of the same sex (Sang, 2003). Although the dominant concern was to normalize heterosexual romantic love in contrast to abnormal homosexual love, the early twentieth century translations represents a variety of conceptions and valuations from a western sexology which is also diverse. Nevertheless, the translation as same sex love rather than same sex desire and intercourse, shift same sex relations from eroticism and behavior to something analogous to romantic love.

In the late 1930s because of strict nationalism intensified by the looming Japanese invasion and the conservative nationalist government, the various conceptions and valuations of *tong-xing-lian* were narrowed down to a single authoritative voice. Pan's (1944) translation of Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* became highly influential and his translation of *tong-xing-lian* erased other forms of translation, and narrowed down to a pathological term as sexual perverts (*bian-tai*). Pan and sexologists after him have succeed in using *lian*(love) to document a list of perverts (*bian-tai*) "entomologized by giving them baptismal names (Foucault, 1979, p.43)": sadomasochism, pedophilia, fetishism, etc. It is with these sexologists reiterate discursive practices, *tong-xing-lian* becomes the only recognized term now, and the character *lian* to a certain extent, is associated with a sense of perversion(*bian-tai*)¹⁵.

Ai(love) on the other hand is not tainted by perversion. It is elevated as the most valued affection between human beings. In early twentieth century true love between the sexes replaced family arranged polygamy; reproduction, used to be only filial piety was celebrated as the crystallization of love. Ironically it was Mao's PRC government that eliminated polygamy but romantic love was also

¹⁵ There is a popular pun: love is the upper part of pervers- combined with the lower part of -sion, so love is a perversion. *lian* (恋) is upper part of *bian*(变) combined with the lower part of *tai* (态), so to *lian-ai*(love) is to *bian-tai*(perversion).

restricted to transform love to the nation, the people, the Party. Premarital bonds between the opposite sexes was denounced, homosocial bonds was privileged as intimate comradeship. *Tong-xing-lian* was not mentioned anymore but grouped together with all other extramarital sexual behaviors as hooliganism.

After Mao (1980s-), the socialist past is condemned as repressing human nature, heterosexual romantic love is re-valORIZED and Confucianism that was deemed as feudal remnants in Mao's China also revivals. *Tong-xing-lian* reemerges for public concern. A psychiatrist in a local hospital (Zhang Beichuan, 1992) even attempted to revive the old term *tong-xing-ai* but without much success. According to one interviewee Ran "it is wired and awkward sounding." As the norms of sex and gender has been materialized through performativity (Butler, 1993), *tong-xing-lian* is also materialized as the more nature and correct term. Through the effort of medical officials like Zhang, *tong-xing-lian* was removed from the list of mental disorders in 2001. However this does not affect much in the public, *tong-xing-lian* is still generally believed to be a perversion (*bian-tai*) and many of my interviewees first heard of the term after 2001 feels uncomfortable with it. *Lian* (love) inscribes the sense of perversion (*bian-tai*) into *tong-xing-lian*.

2.3.3 Reverse discourse: *tong-xing-lian* as sexual identity and true love

The medicalization of *tong-xing-lian* also make possible a "reverse discourse." An introduction of human rights and global LGBT movement discourses has been going on after the 1990s. On the one hand *tong-xing-lian* as a sexual identity is spread as correct knowledge, on the other, it is justified by true love between people of the same sex.

Organizations and groups in their websites, flyers and public advocacies are aiming to spread the correct knowledge of *tong-xing-lian*, directly adopted from similar sources in organizations in the US, Hong Kong, Taiwan and ILGA (International Lesbian Gay Association). At one campus lecture in Tsinghua University co-hosted by *Tong-yu* and **Beijing tong-zhi Center** with student societies, several booklets are handing out: *tong-xing-lian ABC: basic knowledge of gender and sexual orientation* (Liao, 2013), a colored map showing homosexual legislation by ILGA.

Besides these efforts to essentialize *tong-xing-lian* as a sexual identity, lesbian activists are also incorporating the exalted true love (*ai*) as means to justify *tong-xing-lian*. The name of this campus lecture is *To love is not a privilege*. The host from the student society started the lecture with “Today we invite them to share with us their love stories. We believe a true love story is worthier than thousands of declarations of equality.” The emphasize on the value of love is also a sign of keeping *tong-xing-lian* activism outside the political realm. This is a main predicament for lesbian activists, for if they believe in true love triumphs over advocacy it is hard to justify their organizing. This predicament is often negotiated by their efforts to bring advocacy and love together. Xun responds to my question of this predicament “she is saying love stories is worthier than declarations of equality, not equality per se.” It means the ways of achieving equality and the strategies of lesbian activism in China are more subtle and diverse. The reason for activist to privilege love (*ai*) in their strategies lies in the valorization of love (*ai*) in hegemonic discourses. They are subjects formed in these discourses, their confirming or resistance comes not from outside power, but from the same discourse that formed them as a “reverse discourse” (Foucault, 1979).

Love is also used by lesbians to legitimize their same sex relations, using the same language that defines heterosexual love.

Lao: Until I felt something that is beyond friendship, a little possessive, what to be with her all day. (Is that why you define yourself as ...) No, that is what I define love (*ai*) as. Lao is not using any sexual identity terms in her narrative. Notwithstanding all the hesitations on topics about sex and sexual identities, Lao is quite decisive when she utters love (*ai*). This definition of love (*ai*) is exactly the language used in hegemonic discourse in defining heterosexual love.

There are also narratives that privilege same sex love over heterosexual love.

Sheng: I feel being with women is more comfortable, the communication is more deep, feeling is more warm and sweet, while with men it is like animals from two different worlds ... [when she started to look for a husband] it is like you have a frame in your mind ... what is his education background, what is his job, but not much love.

For Sheng although she did confirm to marriage, she nevertheless argues that love with women is

love as sweetness and deep communication. On the other hand, her claim that gender differences makes heterosexual love impossible subvert the hegemonic discourses. Moreover, her description of finding a husband bases on marriage as the familial responsibility. In which she is saying that marriage is to fulfill your familial responsibility which is less value than romantic love. This is brilliantly framed by many as “Love between homosexual (*tong-xing-lian*) is real love (*ai*) while heterosexual is only to complete the task of marriage as duty to your parents.”

In short, love (*lian* and *ai*) is both used by hegemonic discourse to pathologize of *tong-xing-lian* as perversion(*bian-tai*), and used by lesbians to legitimize and even valorize *tong-xing-lian* over heterosexuals. The reasons are in the complexed transcultural discursive practices with references to both premodern Confucianism, early twentieth century transformation, the socialist history and contemporary global LGBT discourses.

This chapter illustrates how homosexual is dubbed into three elements complementing yet contradicting each other, as a new invention rather than implanting homosexuality in a different culture. *Tong* is used in isolation for its correlation to sameness and harmony. Sometimes this is performed by unexpected assemblage of western elements with Chinese elements. *Xing* (sex) is something one should not talk according to social etiquette and yet have to talk about according to sex science. This make the Chinese attitudes toward sex schizophrenic. Love (*lian* and *ai*) is both the pathological part and valorized part of *tong-xing-lian*. It is interpenetrated with marriage, the distinction of homosexual love and heterosexual love, and the lesbians and lesbian activists’ strategies. Linking the three elements each are profoundly diverse and contradictory in meanings together, *tong-xing-lian* is not simply a sexual identity but assemblages as “interpenetrating multiplicities” in the complex field of discursive power as “multiplicities” in China today.

Chapter 3 Appropriations of *tong-zhi*

This chapter discusses the struggle between different parties in appropriating, the meanings of the term *tong-zhi* (comrade). The multiplicities of *tong-zhi* are represented by constant appropriation process by government officials, mass medias, gay and lesbians from mainland China, Hong Kong not only to differentiate themselves from the West, also to address local concerns and to demarcate the boundaries. Moreover, inside the movement, *nu-tong-zhi* (female comrades) were left out. The struggling and controversy over *tong-zhi* illustrates again that a global gay identity is not enough to analyze lesbians and lesbian activism in China. With *tong-zhi* continuously shifting its multiplicities of meanings performatively while traveling among diasporic Chinese societies in US, Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China, it represents more than a local identity or cultural citizenship. *Tong-zhi* too is an act of “dubbing” not in the narrow sense of translation across linguistic boundaries but in a broader sense that transformations creating disjunctures and differences in the multiplicities of language, sexuality, identity, social movements interwoven together.

Tong-zhi is closely associated to revolution and social movements in China, especially after the democratic revolution in the early twentieth century. Both the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) in mainland and the KMT (Chinese Nationalist Party) in Taiwan still use *tong-zhi* as the address title for members. After the P.R. China was established in 1949, the title was promoted by CCP as a replacement of all old titles for owners and employers and honorific titles (Scotton & Zhu, 1983). After the new leadership denouncing Mao’s policy and shifting to economical development and social stability, *tong-zhi* is less used with a return of old addressing titles. *Tong-zhi* as a general title remains, more in the older generation.

This chapter starts with the first appropriation of *tong-zhi* in the Hong Kong gay elites circle in San Francisco, US, as a camp humor differentiating themselves from both the communist mainland, and the Hong Kong heterosexual society. Later this term returned to Hong Kong in the 1990s: on the one hand some *tong-zhi* activists in Hong Kong use *tong-zhi* to distant themselves from the West, with resentment follows the colonial history, emphasizing their proper Chinese cultural

citizenship, and reconciliation with the CCP government; on the other hand Hong Kong mass media denigrate *tong-zhi* to be abnormal other. With the introduction of *tong-zhi* to mainland in late 1990s, gay men widely accept this term, officials ignored this new meaning, lesbian activists in the 1990s remake this term into *nu-tong-zhi* reminiscent of an enthusiastic past, and lesbians today are ambivalent about the term, rejecting for its male centric and anachronism and sometimes use it interchangeably with *la-la* and LBT. These multiplicities are the product of dubbing *tong-zhi* which creates the diverse unpredictable meanings and politics as “infrapolitics.”

3.1 Hong Kong: “I am not *tong-zhi* but I am gay and *tong-xing-lian*”

In April 2012, Hong Kong pop star Anthony Wong came out in his live concert: “The media keeps asking me. If they are so eager to know, I will say it once for all today. I am not a *tong-zhi*. But I am *gay*¹⁶, I am a *tong-xing-lian*.” This statement cost a huge sensation for media, but many Chinese in mainland were also confused, for the three terms are used in the gay men community interchangeably. Why did he say he is not *tong-zhi*, but *gay* and *tong-xing-lian*? Why do Hong Kong gay activists say they are doing *tong-zhi* movement, rather than *gay* movement, or *tong-xing-lian* movement? The matter is even more confusing when Wong started his own activist champion with the slogan “support *tong-zhi*, against discrimination.” These gestures expose the complex battle field around *tong-zhi* that we are going to disclose in this section.

3.1.1 *Tong-zhi* as the campy appropriation

The first appropriation of *tong-zhi* was in 1970s by a diasporic group of Hong Kong gay and lesbian elites in the US as a gesture mocking the mainland communist China and distancing themselves from both the US society, and Hong Kong heterosexual society. The social and cultural relations in the transcultural interaction among US, Hong Kong, mainland formed this appropriation are still relevant today.

This new signification of *tong-zhi* started in a small circle of Hong Kong gay and lesbians elites

¹⁶ I use *gay* in italic to differentiate the term from gay in English. It is a term embedded in daily conversations carried in Chinese, it also has a Chinese character representation *ji* in Cantonese, for in this dialect of Chinese, the pronunciation of *ji* is same as in the English term gay.

in the 1970s San Francisco. The 1970s in US, is a decade when gay pride movement are gaining some ground in decriminalization and anti-discrimination, along with a cooptation of camp sensibility by the mass media (Newton, 1979, p.xi-xii). The Hong Kong elite gay lesbian circle in San Francisco were not as much involving with the gay pride movement as applying the camp humor into their playful appropriation of the sacred communist term *tong-zhi*. The camp humor bring together the subversive power of parodying (Butler, 1991) and the infrapolitics of everyday life (Scott, 1990).

The camp humor is evident when Mike Lam (2003) recalls his “dare to borrow” this term from the CCP as purely “a playful act for fun,” as he called a lesbian friend *tong-zhi* for their same aspiration (*zhi*) both in films and in people of the same sex. Moreover the description of their intimate relations as “arms around each other like CCP members,” and pretending to deplore “the poor communist title was defiled” is also a mockery the CCP members’ intimate comradeship as something similar to the perverted *tong-xing-lian*. The imaginary of mainland by this small circle is constructed both by Hong Kong and US anti-Communist discourses.

The using of *tong-zhi* in this small circle serves as a code word. Lam claims this code word is not for “mysterious conversation without noticing in public” because the conversations were in Cantonese, and mostly over telephone, not in public place and “of course not places like Chinatowns filled with Chinese ears and eyes.” This is a “hidden transcript” in places “off stage” (Scott, 1990). It is only carried in Cantonese, set its places apart from the local US atmosphere. Lam’s description of the US, “So open that it is common to talk aloud about homosexuality in front of colleges and neighbors,” is contrary to fact that police raids and queer bashing still prevailed (Rubin, 1984). Not only mainland, but the US is also an imaginary for them.¹⁷ *Tong-zhi* discussions are in a circle separated from hegemonic discursive power both in Hong Kong and the US, a “non-place” (Auge, 1992) which is detached from both places.

Although the “decontextualizing and recontextualizing” of *tong-zhi* is similar to the

¹⁷ See Appadurai (1996) for the role of imaginary in post-modern world.

“resignification” of hate speech (Butler, 1997), it is different that *tong-zhi* never severs as a hate speech. Moreover the “defiling” of the communist title reflects the camp sensibility in the drag queen community in the 60s (Newton, 1972), except there is not much self-hating in Lam’s content. Thus the first appropriation of *tong-zhi* is a combination of camp parody with resignification. It is an attempt to demarcate the boundaries: mocking the communist mainland, distancing from Hong Kong heterosexual society and the US.

3.1.2 The good Chinese *tong-zhi*

In 1990s when *tong-zhi* traveled back to Hong Kong with some of these elites, and with the Hong Kong *Tong-zhi* Film Festival in 1989 by one artist in the small circle, it became popular in both media, general public, gay men and gay activists. By end of 1990s the Hong Kong society was extreme anxious of the “handing over” to CCP government in 1997. There is one shift in the activists discourse of *tong-zhi*: the sarcasm of the CCP government was dropped by as a strategy to both reconcile with the CCP government and claim for “cultural citizenship” (Rofel, 2007).

One year before the “handing over” the first Chinese *Tong-zhi* Conference was organized in Hong Kong, with 200 participants from Hong Kong, mainland and Taiwan, reported using *tong-zhi*, “gay,” “homosexual men lesbians, and bisexuals” interchangeably (Connolly, 1996). Months after the “handing over,” in 1998 the second conference was held in Hong Kong again, some inside critics sensed the normative tendency in this conference. Si-ji-lao¹⁸(1998) sharply points out that the conference put discussions on women into the agenda only as showing “political correctness” while other forms of exclusions especially the class discrimination was totally ignored and even reinforced by some middle class *tong-zhi* activists.

This normative tendency is more obvious in Hong Kong activist and sociologist Chou’s (2000) interpretation of *tong-zhi*.

The word ... has very positive historical references ... after 1949 *tong-zhi* became a friendly and politically correct term ... as it refers to the most sacred ideal of a classless society.(Chou, 2000, p.2)

¹⁸ This pseudonym “damn faggot” (*si-ji-lao*) is a clear sign of the author’s familiarity with queer politics as he is attempting to reclaim a derogatory name rather than borrowing an honorable name like *tong-zhi*.

The camp humor mocking the CCP in the earlier interpretation disappears completely, rather Chou is praising the *tong-zhi* for its “positive historical references” and as “the most scared ideal of a classless society.” This welcoming of the communist terms and ideas was largely impossible in Hong Kong before. Thus it is a gesture of trying to reconcile with the CCP government with the anxiety of the “handing over.” This is more obvious when they bring the conference to Beijing, one mainland gay activist was insinuated not to come because his sensitive relation with the government could endanger the conference.¹⁹

Under both a desire to reconcile with the CCP government and to separate from white gay as a resentment to the colonial history, Hong Kong *tong-zhi* activists argue that Chinese gay men should not follow the Western individualist and confrontational model but a Chinese harmonious non-confrontational model (See Rofel, 2007, p.100). Chou (2001) further claims that *tong-zhi* represents “gender-neutrality,” “desexualizing of the stigma of homosexuality” and is “beyond the homo-hetero binarism (p.28).” This new shift of *tong-zhi* shows that performativity is not a single act or a one directional process but a reiteration of discourse (Butler, 1993) and continuing construction process in specific historical context. In short, this new *tong-zhi* is stressed for its inclusiveness and equality as comradeship, to drop sex(*xing*) from homosexuality (*tong-xing-lian*) and to articulate their Chinese cultural citizenship.

The normative standpoint of *tong-zhi* activists refutes their own stress on the classless all inclusive ideal and falls right back into the homo-hetero binarism they claim to be rid of: the non-confrontational strategies silence the more marginalized group; the all inclusive ideal covered up various exclusions; the gender-neutrality covers gender inequality with “politically correct gesture;” the desexualization of *tong-xing-lian* excludes sexualized gay and lesbians, mostly sex workers from lower class; *tong-zhi* is becoming predominantly referring to gay men reinforce the homo-hetero binarism. *Tong-zhi* for these activists becomes the synonym for “proper Chinese” and “good citizens.”

¹⁹ This activist Wan was fired from his job in the CCDC(Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention), and later jailed for his exposure of AIDS infection details the government considered national secret. For detail see his paper, *Becoming a gay activist in China* (Wan,2001) and his interview reports in an oral history project (*Tong-yu*, 2013).

3.1.3 The morbid *tong-zhi* and the CCP *tong-zhi*

The *tong-zhi* activists' appropriation isn't the only one, while the anxiety of "handing over" is not dealt with unanimously as attempting to reconcile with the CCP government. Hong Kong mass media also appropriate *tong-zhi* in their discourse as morbid others, mocking both *tong-zhi* activists and the CCP government. While these activists advocate the cultural politics as Chinese *tong-zhi* movement, inside the gay community there is also dissatisfaction with the communist handover and identify more with gay rather than *tong-zhi* as reminiscent of the communist other.

The mass media in Hong Kong appropriates *tong-zhi* by using it to report sensational stories about murder, fistfights, sexual scandal (Wong, 2005). While the *tong-zhi* activists stress for *tong-zhi* as "proper Chinese" and "good citizens" the media ridicules them by reporting these stories of *tong-zhi* as murderers, mental patients, and sexual perverts. Sex played an important role: while *tong-zhi* activists desexualizing the stigma of *tong-xing-lian*, mainstream journalists mocking them by focusing on the sex aspects of *tong-zhi* stories. The media's new interest in this term also reflects the resistance of CCP control in Hong Kong society. For instance the newly elected president Leung was accused by media as an underground CCP member, which intensified when the online *People's Daily* in mainland addressed him as Leung *tong-zhi* (BBC, 2012). Thus it is also a mocking of the CCP as using the same title as perverts. This struggle over *tong-zhi* illustrates the fundamental difference between reclaiming queer and reappropriate *tong-zhi*. The first is reclaiming a hate speech with fully embrace the denigration and the hopefulness in "relation between word and wound might become tenuous and even broken (Butler, p.100)." Appropriating *tong-zhi*, on the other hand is to avoid hate speech by replacing it with an honorable one, however the avoidance reinforcing the bound between word and wound. Thus the denigration of *tong-zhi* by the mass media, is more hurtful for *tong-zhi* activists. Instead of their queer counterpart, Chinese *tong-zhi* politics is more close to the normative gay pride movement which it differentiate itself from.

With the complexity of both *tong-zhi* as a sarcasm to the CCP, as cultural politics of *tong-zhi* activists, and as the anxiety of the "handing over," we will be able to answer the puzzle of Wong's

declaration in the beginning of this section. “I am not *tong-zhi*, but I am *gay*, and I am a *tong-xing-lian*.” Wong was making an insinuation the *tong-zhi* president incident. He claims “I am not a *tong-zhi* if *tong-zhi* is underground part member.” Wong is rejecting *tong-zhi* in this gesture to demarcate himself from the others seeking reconciliation with CCP. In Jan 2013, in responding to the anti-discrimination legislation, Wong started an activist organization Big Love Alliance with a campaign calling people to post photos with the slogan “support *tong-zhi*, against discrimination.” This time *tong-zhi* is used by him to claim alliance with other *tong-zhi* activists against the heteronormative Hong Kong society.

This section has illustrated the different appropriation processes in Hong Kong which result into a complicity of meanings making, boundary demarcating. The next section, with Hong Kong *tong-zhi* activists bring *tong-zhi* conference to mainland in 1998, I also move my discussion to the other field of the meaning making of *tong-zhi*.

3.2 Mainland: The failure of the *nu-tong-zhi* movement in 1990s

This subsection starts with a different movement than the normative *tong-zhi* movement by Hong Kong activists, a female centered perspective on the *nu-tong-zhi* movement in mainland in the early 1990s. The lesbian activists in mainland in the 1990s related *tong-zhi* to an enthusiastic socialist past which the Hong Kong activists never experienced. However this *nu-tong-zhi* movement was dismissed and forgotten at the twenty-first century. Though *nu-tong-zhi* is still used by some activists to formalize the groups and articulate its relation to *tong-zhi* movement, most of the lesbians found no belonging in it, for the male centrism in *tong-zhi*, and the anachronism of *nu-tong-zhi*.

3.2.1 *Nu-tong-zhi* as informal and yet radical “infrapolitics”

Before 1998 when Hong Kong activists held their second *tong-zhi* conference in Beijing, there was already a small group of gay men and a handful of lesbians calling themselves *tong-zhi* in Beijing, probably because some of them had traveled outside mainland. These *tong-zhi* are the early gay and lesbian activists in mainland. However they mostly socialize in informal networks and with

entertainment activities. Since part of the whole thesis is dealing with lesbian activists and activism, I want to make a short detour to the translation of the term “activist,” to illustrate two points: first, it is impossible to distinguish activists and non-activists; second, the *nu-tong-zhi* activists in the 1990s had a radical passion related to the socialist past that differentiates them from both the normative *tong-zhi* activists in Hong Kong and in the later *la-la* movement.

When I was doing translation for lesbian organization *Tong-yu*, Xun, the leader, pointed it is better to translate “activist” as *huo-dong-jia*, the person doing activities rather than *yu-dong-jia*, the person doing movement. This reminds me of one conference, some participants deplored “there is no *tong-zhi* movement in China, only *tong-zhi* activities.” However if we accept that social movement are infrapolitics (Scott, 1990) rather than applying reductionist model that ignore informal organizing and everyday life, such distinctions do not exist. *Nu-tong-zhi* activists in the 1990s were mostly doing own informal gatherings as the “sisters”: including dancing parties, hanging out in the park, doing sports and discussions (He, 2002). This blurs boundaries of activists and non-activists.

However organizing around these *nu-tong-zhi* activists is different from the normative *tong-zhi* activism discussed. Xun suggested another alternative used by lesbians activists in the 1990s, *ji-ji-fen-zi*, the person who is active in some course. Zheng, the other leader teased Xun as an old timer and claimed she had never heard of this translation. Similar to *tong-zhi*, *ji-ji-fen-zi* is a term reminiscent of Mao’s period of China. Like *tong-zhi* still exist as the addressing title of CCP members, *ji-ji-fen-zi* is used to address someone who apply for party membership aka who is active in building socialism. This means when *tong-zhi* was reintroduced to the mainland, it stimulated the lesbian activists in the 1990s some enthusiasm in the socialist past that is not in the memory of Hong Kong activists. Although there was only a handful of lesbians organizing themselves as *nu-tong-zhi* that they did not make into the research of Rofel’s (2007) analysis of *gay* and *tong-zhi* in the 1990s. The only lesbian activist mentioned clearly has an evident existence of her being vocal and radical resistant to the gay men’s exclusion of rural sex workers (Rofel, 2007, p.105). Their

separation from the male *tong-zhi* is telling when Chou et al. organized the first *tong-zhi* conference in Beijing, they dissatisfied with the male centered *tong-zhi* conference, and started their own national *nu-tong-zhi* conference a few months later (Tong-yu, 2013). After this conference these women started a national network called “**Beijing Sisters**” and started a magazine called “**The Sky**,” in a radical claim that they do not only want “Half the Sky.”²⁰

This is quite similar to US lesbian feminist movement in the 1970s (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Some of these *nu-tong-zhi* activists had an access to feminist discourse in the 1990s, when Ford Foundation organized a feminist reading group in Beijing to prepare for UN’s Fourth World Conference on women in Beijing in 1995, and many lesbian activists also associated with them during this conference. Thus the *nu-tong-zhi* movement in the 1990s is an assemblage of *tong-zhi* discourse from Hong Kong, an enthusiastic socialist past, and international lesbian feminism as informal and yet radical “infrapolitics.”

3.2.2 The use of *tong-zhi* and *nu-tong-zhi* today

However this group only lasted till 2001, and was dissolved partly because of a police crackdown of the “National *Nu-tong-zhi* Culture and Art Festival.” It was 4 years till another group formally claimed as lesbian activist group, **Beijing La-la Salon** and *Tong-yu*. According to an oral history project *Tong-yu* started from 2009, the history of “**Beijing Sisters**” and *nu-tong-zhi* organizing was lost memory for most of the lesbian activists today (Tong-yu, 2012). There are several reasons for the dissolution and later amnesia of *nu-tong-zhi* organizing in the 1990s. First some of the key organizers left China in 1998. Second, inside the “**Beijing Sisters**” there are different voices that fear the organizing are too radical. Third, the contraction of public sphere at the turn of the century for CCP crackdown on Falun Gong²¹.

With *nu-tong-zhi* fading from the stage of *tong-zhi* movement. *Tong-zhi* movement in China is becoming more male centered. Gay men use *tong-zhi* and gay interchangeably. Although the illusion of all-inclusiveness and equality still reflects in activist translation of *tong-zhi* with LGBT.

²⁰ State propaganda use “half the sky” to liberate women while restricting them in heterosexual family.

²¹ Falun Gong is a spiritual group booming in the 1990s. In 1999, the government initiate a national crackdown on it.

Take **Beijing tong-zhi (LGBT) Center**, for example. Steve, a young American who's been the director of "the Center" for two years, told me it is in reality a "gay" rather than "LGBT Center." He deplored "We don't have T(trans) here, do we? We don't even have many women here." Ever since the Center established in 2008, it has always been puzzled by the problem of LBT representation. Intended to stress equality and gender-neutrality, most of the activities in "the Center" are not gender specified. *Tong-xing-yuan* reading club and *Huo-ying-tong-ren* film club, are two of the weekly activities in the Center. However during my stay in the Center in March 2013, the reading club has absolutely no female participants, and the film club has about 3 to 5 women in its 20 to 30 participants. The only exception is *La-la-che-che*²², which is the only program specifically and intermittently organized toward women. There has been only one *La-la-che-che* during the month I stayed, with 5 lesbian participants all of them have never been to the Center before and equally number of gay men that are just visiting the center without knowledge that it is a lesbian program that day.

Beijing nu-tong-zhi Center, formerly know as the *La-la Salon*, a regular Saturday salon started at the end of 2004. From 2004 to 2011, *La-la Salon* changed its location from one regular cafe to another. From the years of organizing, it gained trust from some regular participants and through whose donation, settled in a rented apartment in a remote residential area. Since settled down, Kan the organizer found the previous name too informal for an organization with an office, and changed it to **Beijing nu-tong-zhi Center**. The mode of organizing also becomes more formal in that it expended the Saturday salon to include reading clubs, film clubs, English corner, calligraphy lessons, just as **Beijing tong-zhi Center** but opens only to women.²³ Although the program with most participants is still Saturday Salon, and most participants refer to it still as "*La-la Salon*," or "the Salon." This transformation from *la-la* to *nu-tong-zhi* illustrates the organizer's intention to formalize and institutionalize the group from an informal loosely organized salon to a *nu-tong-zhi*

²² This name has a connotation of *la-la* and also *la-la-chie-che* as a phrase means "push and pull" a metaphoric expression for gossip or informal discussions.

²³ Generally gay men in Beijing have never been to *nu-tong-zhi* Center, and many participants in *Nu-tong-zhi* Center have never been to *Tong-zhi* Center.

organization, a part of the *tong-zhi* movement. This may not be the move for all the lesbian activists or the lesbians. Some of them are moving in the other direction, turning away from *nu-tong-zhi* and toward *la-la* (See chapter 4).

3.2.3 Lesbians' rejection of identification with *tong-zhi*

The lesbians also notice the male centrism of the term *tong-zhi*, none of my interviewees, even the organizer who changed the organization name to *nu-tong-zhi* Center refer to themselves as *nu-tong-zhi* in everyday conversation.

Kan: I would generally use *la-la*. It is easy to say, two same characters. *Nu-tong-zhi* three characters, *nu-tong-xing-lian* four, just too much trouble.

Kan argues that *nu-tong-zhi* and *la-la* are the same only the first one is more formal, thus good for a name of “*Nu-tong-zhi* Center” while “*La-la* Center” would just sound funny²⁴. This opinion is not shared by other activists. Ran, the founder of the *la-la* group²⁵, Relax *tong-xue-she*, argues that *tong-zhi* is for men. She also doesn't accept *nu-tong-zhi* for its anachronism.

Ran: I rarely use *tong-zhi*. Because I feel *tong-zhi* is *nan-tong-zhi* (male *tong-zhi*). Most of the people feel it refers to *gay*, male homosexual (*nan-tong-xing-lian*), they wouldn't include women in their understandings ... *nu-tong-zhi*? ... I can't accept this word.[Impersonate an old man in the socialist deploring “All you women (*nu-tong-zhi*)...”]

Ran rarely use *tong-zhi* because of its male centrism. Many gay activists in today's China embrace the male centrism of *tong-zhi*. One example is the LGBT conference in 2012, the first one to have equal participants from men and women. After some lesbians expressed criticism of current *tong-zhi* movements, one of the *tong-zhi* organizations posted on its official microblog, “Condolences to the Chinese *tong-zhi* movement” (*Ai-bai*, 2012), which brought fiercely online fight between some gay and lesbian activists. The anachronism of *nu-tong-zhi* that Ran expresses at the end was articulating a socialist past. The sexist ideology were not erased by addressing everyone under *tong-zhi*, but remained by addressing women as *nu-tong-zhi*. A sense of condescendence of all women was addressed by using the phrase “all you women (*nu-tong-zhi*).”

²⁴ “Center”(zhong-xin) in Chinese is quite a formal expression for a place, which make the informal and playful *La-la* in consistent with it. (See also Chapter 4)

²⁵ Although the name is Relax *tong-xue-she*, Ran emphasize in her interview that it is a *la-la* group, other part of the interview is analyzed in chapter 4.

Even in China today, some gay men would express their dissatisfaction of lesbians using the same phrase “all you lesbians (*nu-tong-zhi*) ...”²⁶

Lesbians also feel awkward with *tong-zhi* because it is still used in its older sense as the title for CCP members and a general title. While the Hong Kong media twists *tong-zhi* to mark both the abnormal *tong-xing-lian*, and the scary CCP, mass media in mainland tries to ignore this new meaning. They use *tong-xing-lian* rather than *tong-zhi* in the reports, and *tong-zhi* is still reserved for addressing CCP members or honorable people. In July 2012, a new edition of the official dictionary added 4000 entries including internet slangs and even English Abbreviations, however, left out the new meaning of *tong-zhi* (China Daily, 2012). One editor claimed “You can use the word whatever way you like, but we won’t put it into a standard dictionary because we don’t want to promote these things (Gary, 2012).” A Hong Kong sociologist claimed that the government refused it for being a political satire to the CCP (ibid.). The gay activists claimed it as the “most commonly used, non-offensive term” should be included (ibid.). Despite all the appropriations CCP is still trying to hold its ground as the proper owner of *tong-zhi* that represents the honorable past.

This complexity is best represented in Lao’s story.

Lao: When I was recruited to a new team at work, one colleague made a joke referring to us as the *tong-zhi* team (Because the team is made up by lesbians and gays). ... I would not normally use *tong-zhi* to refer to myself. It’s too weird ... Once during a serious company meeting our boss was addressing everyone as *tong-zhi*. There is a sudden silence. We were trying not to laugh, while he had absolutely no idea what was going on.

First, most of Lao’s colleagues are familiar with the new meaning of *tong-zhi* and are making friendly jokes with it. Second, Lao and her lesbian and gay colleagues generally will not use the term as identification, because it is “weird.” Third, the meeting example she gives illustrates the weirdness and the inconsistency in the meanings coexists within *tong-zhi* in mainland: the boss was using the old meaning, while most of the young employees are more familiar with the new one. This inconsistency between the meanings result in a humor that is similar to the camp drag, with inconsistent elements exist in the same body (Newton, 1972). The communist comrade and the gay

²⁶ Communication with female activist Shao who was sent to LA *tong-zhi* leadership training with some gay activists.

comrade in *tong-zhi* is like the female and male elements in drag, both inconsistent and humorous.

As the campy humor for diasporic Hong Kong elites, the good Chinese citizens for Hong Kong activists, the morbid perverts for Hong Kong media, the enthusiastic and radical comrades for the early mainland *nu-tong-zhi* activists, the synonym of gay men for young generation, the honorable party members for CCP and general title for the older generation, *tong-zhi* are multiplicities of meanings and appropriations. As *tong-xing-lian*, it is also dubbing in the multiplicities of discursive power and the regional connections and flows among diasporic Chinese in US, Hong Kong and mainland. This chapter has shown that *tong-zhi* cannot be considered as a unity of either gay or communist comrades, either female or male comrades, either mainland or Hong Kong comrades, but these assemblages as “interpenetrating multiplicities.”

Since the female comrade movement in the late 1990s faded from the picture, most lesbians today do not identify with *nu-tong-zhi*, it is important that we move to the next chapter on what these lesbians now identify with, *la-la*. After the ***La-la Salon*** was established in the 2004, and ***Tong-yu*** in 2005, there has been a wave of emerging *la-la* groups in the past 5 years, that is quite different from *nu-tong-zhi* movement in the 1990s. Given Kan’s claim of the inconsistency between the informal *la-la* and the formal “center,” how does this informal term become the new organizing pivot for the lesbian movement across China today? This is the question for the next chapter.

Chapter 4 How does the informal *la-la* becomes a new movement

La-la is the collective identity for lesbian activism after the 2000s. *La-la* first appeared as the nickname *La-zi* of the protagonist in a Taiwanese lesbian autobiographic fiction in 1997, and slightly shifted its formation when introduced to mainland through the internet. The author possible intended to use *la-zi* as a homophone of lesbian. However in the novel it is a nickname “recruit-er” given by friends because that *La-zi* is active in student society for recruiting new members. The character *la* means “to pull” or “to recruit” by “pulling people in,” and the character *zi* is a common suffix for a nickname²⁷.

The previous chapter has shown the interaction between Hong Kong and mainland. This chapter focuses on Taiwan lesbian activism incorporated as *nu-tong-zhi* movement, the disseminate of *la-la* on the internet in mainland and emerging of *la-la* groups across China. The first section reviews in Taiwan the emerging of *la-zi* as an autobiographic subjectivity and *nu-tong-zhi* movement as incorporation of US lesbian movement and queer discourses in the academia (Sang, 2003). The second section traces how the autobiographic *la-la* subjectivity spread through the internet to mainland and formed an imagined collective identity. The third section describes how lesbian activists have utilized this collective identity to start a new emerging lesbian activism in China in the past five years. The last section illustrates the limitation of the new movement and the complexity being obscured by simply assuming the equivalence between *la-la* and LBT.

I have argued that the *nu-tong-zhi* in the 1990s failed due to inside disagreement on the radical strategy and the governmental pressure to constrict the public sphere. It seems contradictory that some *la-la* activists still use *nu-tong-zhi* and cooperate with Taiwan *nu-tong-zhi* movement.

However the *la-la* movement is different both from the *nu-tong-zhi* movement in the 1990s and in Taiwan. The new emerging movement bases on a collective identity *la-la*, rather than *nu-tong-zhi*.

²⁷ See Sang, 2003, p.272. There is no sources indicating why *la-zi* would evolve to *la-la*, my suggestion is the habits of different dialects. It is common in Taiwan to add the suffix *zi* as showing affection or intimacy. Where in most parts of mainland repeating the character has a similar function.

It is more loosely organized and diverse in interpretations of *la-la*, which represents more of a “infrapolitics”(Scott, 1990) than the form of politics in traditional public sphere described by resource mobilization model (McCarthy & Zald, 1997). Although there has been a tendency to formalize the groups and construct the equivalence between *la-la* and LBT, I argue that the future of *la-la* movement lies not in turning infrapolitics to formal politics, but in the infrapolitics itself: in *la-la*’s autobiographic strength, the growing number of women who now identify themselves as *la-la* and their everyday practices that challenges heterosexuality as an institutional oppression.

4.1 Taiwan: The *nu-tong-zhi* movement and the persona *La-zi*

The *nu-tong-zhi* movement in Taiwan has a strong connection to US lesbian feminist movement. The autobiographic persona *La-zi* as the predecessor of *la-la* emerged with this movement, but its strength is not only in representational politics or rebellious but in the emotional depth and its sympathetic resonances within the lesbian community. This autobiographic subjectivity is what echoes with the mainland lesbians and what makes *la-la* a collective identity in mainland.

Although lesbian activism in Taiwan borrowed the term *tong-zhi* from Hong Kong activists, it is more directly related to lesbian feminist movement and queer academia from the US²⁸. Taiwan is a highly capitalized society with matured mass media which reinforces hegemonic discourses of western sexual science and Confucian family value. The media both expel lesbians into abnormality, and maniacally pries into the hidden abnormal lesbian world. Lesbian activists are both attracting mass media for wider publicity while risk being sensationalized, and developing low cost alternatives: lectures, self-publications, and the internet (Sang, 2003). Alongside with the lesbian feminist movement, Sang (2003) argues that individual lesbian-representations are also challenging homophobia and the reductionism of identity politic. Qui Maojin’s autobiographic fiction *The crocodile’s journal* (*e-yu shou-ji*), the one *la-zi* comes from, is an example.²⁹

Sang (2003) argues that Qiu’s autobiographic fiction “is fascinating, not so much for her

²⁸ The lesbian feminist movement and queer theory are incorporated into Taiwan as *nu-tong-zhi* movement and *ku-er* theory. For more detailed discussion of lesbian feminist movement in Taiwan, see Chao (2001) and Sang (2003).

²⁹ See Chao, 2000 for anthropological study of lesbian representations with similar results.

defiance, as for the intensity of her anguish.” “While the popularity of *la-zi* may be at least partly attributed to the fact that it sounds like *lez*³⁰, it is largely due to the extraordinary charisma of Qiu’s persona (p. 260-261).” This fiction depicts *La-zi*’s personal journey as a university student tutored by her secret desire, fear, confusion and fierce indictment against the society that has dehumanized her. *La-zi* secretly identifies with lesbians, however, “anxious to be in harmony with society” (Sang, 2003, p.267) she constantly control and punish herself for her desire. It is the same anguish that many mainland lesbians also felt. Similarly, lesbians in mainland fear the label of *tong-xing-lian* and secretly control themselves and about the feelings. The narrative of Sheng is a version of *La-zi*’s narrative in mainland.

Sheng: I felt guilty. I restrained my feelings. I am afraid the possibility of her rejecting me, or having a bad feeling of me. Because in China it is impossible. I have never seen a respectable model like this. ... I know my feelings are not wrong, ... but there is no future to this. I know if I said anything, it would affect both of us. ... There are a lot struggles, a lot pains. Like pinching hard to stub out a glowing cigarette, I told myself, NO.

Moreover, Qiu’s novel emphasize the love between women as the “perfect love” felt by these women, that even if they return to the heterosexual world this “perfect love” will always reserve an “irreplaceable” place (Sang, 2003, p. 270-271). This perfect love and the emotional depth that love have is also evident in Sheng’s story.

Sheng: I am a normal women. I anticipated a romantic love like the one between my parents. Unfortunately, my first and second love relations happened to be with women. After that I feel longing and desire for women ... Men cannot satisfy the deep psychological need I have.

Thus many *la-la* in mainland would identify strongly with *La-zi*. Later when they read many autobiographic narratives on the internet, *la-la* swept the whole China became a collective identity.

Qiu’s narrative in the fiction as *La-zi*, is a lesbian-representation that is more individualistic than collective. “*The crocodile’s journal* belongs to an in-between space, one that is distinguished from the conservative mass media, on the one hand, and from radical feminist and lesbian activist

³⁰ *Lez* is another popularly used term for lesbian community in Taiwan. Although it is presented in western forms (similar to lesbian) does not simply indicate its western origin. See Boellstorff(2003) for *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities in Indonesia.

discourses, on the other (Sang, 2003, p. 271).” As mentioned in the beginning, *la-zi*’s popularity in Taiwan lesbian communities is not as much for its homophone to a sexual identity “lesbian”, as for *La-zi*’s personality. This private, personal confessional story about love, fear, confusion, anguish is what make the term *la-zi* so powerful, in that it resonates with thousands even millions of women’s stories and emotions.

Although Qiu’s autobiographic fiction along with her suicide after the novel was used by mass media as evidence of self-hating, self-destruction tendencies that represents the morbid masculine lesbian. Similar lesbian autobiographic representatives found alternative space on the internet in late 1990s, where lesbian websites and personal blogs proliferating and disseminating across the Taiwan strait. Notwithstanding Sang (2003) argues for the radical differences between PRC and Taiwan, the proliferation of *la-la* websites, blogs and communities on the internet in mainland, and the later mushrooming of *la-la* groups shows the differences may not be that radical. Sang’s emphasizing on the public sphere as published literatures over internet communities and anthropological studies makes the connections elusive. This leads us to our next section on the thriving of *la-la* websites, blogs, online communities, and *la-la* movement in China.

4.2 Internet: *la-la* a tremendous imagined community

A tremendous imagined *la-la* community and the new collective identity *la-la* formed on the internet. As mentioned in chapter 2, the *nu-tong-zhi* movement in the 1990s faded from public sight as partly a result of official restricting the public sphere. During this time, a new semipublic arena provided space for lesbians developed, the internet. The main communication methods for the 1990s’ *nu-tong-zhi* movement were mail and telephone. Although the internet already existed in 1997, it was not generalized and had not become the main method for organization.

4.2.1 A collective identity formed by autobiographic narratives on internet

During the years that *nu-tong-zhi* movement disappeared from public view, the internet in China has spread rapidly to become the new method of communication, and the main one for *la-la* communication. The internet penetrating rates have increased from 0.04% in 1997 (during the early

nu-tong-zhi movement) to 8% in 2005 (the establishment *Tong-yu*) and to 42% in 2012 (dozens of *la-la* groups) (CHIC, 2013). The first lesbian websites started around 1998 to 1999, at a time when the netizens in China is less than 0.1% of the population. Thus the initial online lesbian communities represents an upper class community. These websites often refer to the existing Taiwan lesbian online community for knowledge such as *la-la*, *les* and T-P-H (gendered labels of masculine, feminine and androgynous lesbians)³¹.

Early lesbian websites and blogs were filled with autobiographical blogs, web fictions, creative poems podcasts, etc. In early chat rooms these women shared their feelings which they felt afraid to speak of in real life. Three major lesbian websites operating from 1999 to 2004, *Shen-qiu-xiao-wu*, *A-la-dao*, *Hua-kai-de-di-fang* all started as personal blogs to document *la-la* couples' love stories, which then attracted many followers and changed into forum and websites³². Many of my interviewees felt the sense of belonging when they read these stories.

Lao: An amorphous force drove me to read the forums and fictions. Now I think it is the sense of belonging.

The similar feelings, emotions and stories makes many lesbians corresponding to these *la-la* stories, a collective identity started to form on the internet, through these very personal narratives.

Ran: I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what kind of person *tong-xing-lian* is. I only know what kind of person I am. I searched books and magazines for everything about *tong-xing-lian* or transexual (*yi-xing-pi*). ... I became more confused. ... Then I found the internet, and saw people post their stories. Many of those are just like mine. I felt relieved. ... I still didn't know whether I was *tong-xing-lian* or transexual. Since all of them are calling themselves *la-la*, then, well, I am also *la-la*.

Unlike *tong-xing-lian* which one may come across as a teenagers from hegemonic discourses or gossips, *la-la* is a term most of the interviewees found on the internet. It is a collective identity as the "shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity (Taylor & Whittier, 1992, p. 105)."

4.2.2 Imagined community in a non-place

³¹ See the descriptions of early lesbian community in Yu-bi (2008). These knowledge travel with variations between mainland Taiwan and Hong Kong. See Lai, 2007 for lesbians in Hong Kong.

³² See Xian-feng-nian-jian's (2006) online article for analysis of lesbian websites in mainland China.

Imagination is an important factor in this formation of a collective identity on a term that is personal and private. As Anderson (1983) has shown, print media has made people who never meet in life imagine themselves to be of one nation. Appadurai (1996) building on this argues that mass media in capitalism plays an even more important role in imagined community that organize beyond the level of nation. However as previous discussion suggests that mass media is creating a phobic phantasy which reinforce the abnormality of lesbians many of them cannot find their answer in mass media. Thus the internet play an important role as an alternative space for lesbians to express self-representation and build an imagined community.

The difference between the internet and mass media is the lower threshold the anonymity for safer communication of the internet. It provides the opportunity for diverse discourses to emerge. Lesbians have more free choices on the internet for they could filter the discourses through search engine and find the information and belonging they need.

Yong: I saw tong-xing-lian from books when I was in middle school ... I went on the internet when I worked in Beijing. ... I typed tong-xing-lian, nu-tong-xing-lian into the search engine, then there were websites.

Thus the internet is an example of the claim of Auge (1992) that “supermodernity” is turning places into “non-place,” the first is never erased while the second is never completed (p.77-78). The internet has all the characteristics of a non-place: it is not historical, the data can be erased without any trace; it is not relational, the user is sitting alone in-front of a computer; it is not related to identity, surfing is mostly anonymous. Yet it offers the sense of relational belongings that these *la-la* couldn't found in places. Although they are reading others' stories alone, they are felt not alone anymore with the text. On the contrary, when they were with family, friends and relatives in real lives they felt more lonely. Although the authors of these story stay anonymous under a label *la-la*, the sense of similarity and honesty reflects a vivid person behind the texts. Many of them describe the experience of finding community on the internet as finding confidence, comfort, hope, and belonging.

4.2.3 The spreading of internet *la-la* community in the 2000s

The rapid growth of technology makes the internet more important in people's lives. Around 2005 when the first activist offline group *Tong-yu* established, the internet penetrating rate is already 8%, 200 times bigger than in 1997. It means the women in small town have the opportunity to use the internet.

Meng: When I was in high school (2004-2005) I remember my friends in class were talking about "Hey do you know that *tong-xing-lian* is not psycho anymore." They did not get that from mass media, but someone saw it on the internet. Teenagers are, what parents forbid to know or talk about, is what we talk about. ... We were in a really remote little town but just in one year, the internet cafes were everywhere.

Like Meng said, in just one year in 2005 internet cafes are everywhere even in a remote small town. The most customers of these cafes are teenagers. They are curious and excited about the issues such as *tong-xing-lian* on the internet, and spread these news in school. The lesbian websites also achieve the peek at around 2004, around 30 different independent websites (Xian-feng-nian-jian, 2006). After that the internet monopolies starts to have lesbian groups in their forum, such as Baidu now have thousands of such groups: *Les*, *La-la*; around geological locations like *Beijing-la-la*; around lesbian gender labels like *Shuai-T* (handsome T); around a particular type of relationship *TTL* (love between masculine lesbians); around a certain age range *80s la-la* (*la-la* born in 1980s); around interests *La-la movies*. Because *La-la* websites organized by individuals are less competitive than these monopolies, many of them shut down after 2005. Most of the interviewees over 25 found *la-la* from *la-la* websites before 2004, the under 25s found *la-la* from the general forums.

The internet provides a huge base for *la-la* movement and facilitates offline social groups too. Many after finding the online community, were not satisfied only on virtual communications. Through arranged meeting online, offline groups started to form. Some cafes and pubs are also founded to such demands.

Ran: After I knew from the website that there are some *la-la* pubs in Xi'an, I feel really excited, finally I can meet these people face to face. In those years I would visit *la-la* pubs ever week.

During this booming of *la-la* online and off-line social groups a new wave of *la-la* movement started in 2005.

4.2.4 *La-la* as self-identification and “hidden transcript”

Moreover, unlike *tong-xing-lian*, which is interpellated by the hegemonic homophobic discourses. *La-la* is an identity one learns by herself.

Zong: *Tong-xing-lian* gives me a negative feeling but *la-la* doesn't. Now I think of it, there is no pejorative sense in the three characters, but it is something instilled to me when I was young. People always use these three characters with negative meanings behind it. ... *Les* and *la-la* are what I learned on my own not what others instill into my mind.

Zong's narrative again exposes the performative progress of hegemonic discourses. The characters of *tong-xing-lian* were not associated naturally with negativity, rather the hegemonic discourses inscribe the negative meanings in the combination. *La-la* as a recent term and adapted from Taiwan lesbian self-representations through an alternative media was not noticed by the hegemonic discourses. According to my interviewees heterosexuals generally don't understand the term.

Zong: When someone use *la-la* in conversations, he/she would not have negative attitudes toward it. The ones who really dislike *tong-xing-lian* wouldn't know about *la-la*. If someone knows *la-la*, he/she would already have an understanding of this.

La-la is a more elusive term for general public than *tong-zhi* as “hidden transcripts.” Most of the pressure for Chinese lesbians comes from friends and relatives. In this case the “offstage” Scott (1990) describes as circles around families, friends are exactly the place where the oppression power is most felt. In this case the internet as a “non-place” (Ague 1992) is the best “offstage.” When the lesbians went out to meet each other, there is a certain tacit agreement: we are all in this together so that no one would be exposed. The online and offline *la-la* communities are “infrapolitics” that characterize the new *la-la* movement after 2000s.

As mentioned in chapter 3, many lesbian activists today prefer to call themselves someone who do activities than someone who do movement. Many activists emphasize that they devote to a public-profit or nonprofit career. This differentiates them from the radical *nu-tong-zhi* movement in

the 1990s. Of course *nu-tong-zhi* movement is still constantly mentioned by *Tong-yu* and some of the groups but this new movement is organized around the new collective identity *la-la* formed on the internet.

4.3 Mainland: From *nu-tong-zhi* to *la-la* movement

After the *nu-tong-zhi* movement in the 1990s dissolved in 2001, there may be informal offline groups, but according to the oral history project by *Tong-yu* not a single lesbian activist group exist in China³³. In this section I am going to trace the new lesbian movement after 2005 based on the collective identity *la-la* formed on the internet, the establishment of *La-la Salon* and *Tong-yu*, the national lesbian activist training camp *La-la Camp*, and the spreading of *la-la* groups across China and to illustrate that traditional social movement model like resource mobilization and civil society concept is not enough to explain the lesbian movements after 2005. This new movement is a “infrapolitics” (Scott, 1990) organize around the collective identity *la-la* which challenges the distinction between formal politics and informal politics, between activists and non-activists, between activist organizations and informal groups.

4.3.1 *La-la Salon*: activist group or matured *la-la* social group

I trace the process of activist Xun’s plan to start the first lesbian activist group *Tong-yu* after the *nu-tong-zhi* movement in the 1990s. At first sight this plan seems to suggest a social movement based on resource mobilization under the civil society structure. However a close investigation reveals this reductionist model isn’t adequate to explain the nuances.

Xun came back from her PhD study in the US in 2004, where she associated with some *nu-tong-zhi* activists from Taiwan. She was shocked when a funding opportunity for *tong-zhi* activists in mainland to join the *tong-zhi* conference in Hong Kong in 2004, no *nu-tong-zhi* activist applied for it. In one interview, she said from her experience in the US, women especially lesbians (*nu-tong-zhi*) have a huge potential in civil society movement and she return to China with an aim to catalyze such a movement (*Tong-yu*, 2013). She first cooperated with Kan in an informal group the *La-la*

³³ See the oral history project report by *Tong-yu* for detailed interviews. (Tong-yu, 2011, 2013)

Salon in 2004 to build community bases for the movement. Then she started *Tong-yu* in 2005 and called for national networking in organizing national meetings and annually activist training camp the *La-la Camp*. This camp facilitates many local *la-la* groups across China. Recently she shifted the objective of *Tong-yu* from facing the community to facing the heterosexual public on public education and legislation advocacy.

At the first sight, Xun's plan modeled mostly after lesbian activism and civil society movement in the US. From the resources mobilization perspective (McCarthy & Zald, 1997), her efforts were to establish a social movement organization to aggregate various resources including support from within the community, sympathy and support outside the collective: networking with other organizations, and appealing to the public media and authorities. The resource mobilization model has been criticized for presuming a rational individual following the capitalist supply and demand, and cost and reward model. New social movement theories propose collective identity as key concept for bridging the connections among subjectively experienced discontent, pre-existing informal group bounds and political collective action (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). From a new social movement perspective, she first organized consciousness building groups with Kan. However Kan hold a different motivation in organizing the *La-la Salon*.

While Xun had the objective to build a community base, Kan had a dissatisfaction with the noisy environment of commercial *la-la* space, and intended primarily to build a quiet place for mature (older) *la-la* to socialize. These divergent aims are also present in a local *la-la* group in Xi'an, **Relax tong-xue-she**, while one founder Ran was inspired by the *La-la Camp* activist training, the other founder Shan intended to start a commercial project. They agreed on building a nonprofit group with intentions similar to Kan.

Ran: At the *la-la camp* they taught us how to start local groups and organize activities. *Tong-yu* promised to provide us fundings. I ran to Shan right after I returned. It feels like that they had injected chicken blood to me [got me excited].

Shan: [How did Ran persuade you to do a nonprofit group?] There is one thing that we both agree. Because the pub now is a foul atmosphere ... This bring a bad image to others. People [heterosexuals] saw us like this will also say, "See how decadent they are."

Especially there is also an intersection of age in Shan's narrative. When I asked why did she changed her perception of the *la-la* pubs, from a place she felt relaxed to a bad atmosphere. She mentioned the age and class differences particularly.

Shan: I have got a job now and become more mature than before. Now I understand money is not easy to make. So I feel they are not getting anything, not healthy information, not money. It is useless. We just want to get all the *la-la* in Xi'an to do something useful, rather than smoking and drinking all day.

These two examples have shown the blurring of activist and non-activist group, since the initial aims of ***La-la Salon*** and ***Relax Tong-xue-she*** were in between civil society organizations and matured *la-la* social groups.

4.3.2 *Tong-yu*: connection between activist groups and the internet

Now I turn to how Xun started the first "activist group," ***Tong-yu***, on the base of ***La-la Salon***, its differences from the *nu-tong-zhi* movement in the 1990s and how it is connected to the collective identity *la-la*.

In the ***La-la Salon*** consciousness building, compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) as an institutional oppression wasn't brought up like groups in the US (Taylor & Whittier 1992) or in Taiwan (Sang, 2003). The reason could be that with the downfall of *nu-tong-zhi* movement in the 1990s, Xun was more cautious. According to a newspaper interview in 2005:

Reflecting on the previous lessons, Xun considers more consciousness, better idea, better strategy and broader solidarity is needed. ... She also considers that a more practical approach is necessary, ... understanding the reality and general attitudes in the society, gradually expressing their claims...³⁴

The title of this report *La-la as a minority* and the emphasize on the claim for "understanding and inclusion" suggests the strategy of ***Tong-yu*** is a politics as a new enfranchisement of the *la-la* minority. Interestingly although Xun and many other lesbian activists always refer to the movement as *nu-tong* or *nu-tong-zhi* movement, they also constantly use *la-la* together *nu-tong-zhi*. This is related to *la-la* being a self-identified collective identity is more attractive to the huge online and

³⁴ Part of the original text in the report (Zheng, 2005) is different from here, because Xun posted the published text online and points out that there are certain revise suggestions she made but not adapted by the journalist. See <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-motss-74123-1.shtml> for Xun's suggestions.

offline communities.

The new movement also works with the internet. When ***La-la Salon*** established, it set up a website to announce the weekly topics. Other web publicities such as post their activities on forums like ***Yi-lu-tong-xing (Walk on the same road)*** are also used. When ***Tong-yu*** organize a national meetings of lesbians activists in 2005³⁵, they could not find so called “lesbian activists” in mainland, so they invited mostly *la-la* websites managers to their ***Nu-tong Community Working Experience Exchange***. Since discussed above the *la-la* websites in 2005 have reached a bottleneck with competitions with the internet monopolies, some of them shift their followers to offline social circles and transformed to activist groups after this meeting.

In order to build the community Xun worked with Kan whose initial motive was to build an informal social group and used *la-la* as the group name which reflects the attractiveness of this term and the collective *la-la* identity formed on the internet. The national meeting ***Nu-tong Community Working Experience Exchange*** implies a formal movement, ironically since there is no “activist groups” in mainland China in 2005, most of the participants of this national meetings are informal *la-las*, influential autobiographical bloggers who later become *la-la* website managers and small entrepreneurs of *la-la* pubs and cafes. As a result of this meeting, previous informal groups in Shanghai and Chengdu also reform themselves as activist groups. This process showed the distinction between activist and non-activist, between activist organizations or groups and informal groups are rather blurred.

4.3.3 *La-la* Camp: remaking the informal *la-la* to LBT

Although *la-la* is preferred by most of the lesbians in China, and has a huge community base, it is considered too informal and playful for formal movement organizations. For example in explaining why she changed ***La-la Salon*** to *nu-tong-zhi* Center, Kan emphasizes the obscurity, informality and playful characteristics of *la-la*.

Kan: If I need to talk to someone who has no understanding of it, he/she maybe even more confused [with *la-la*]. ... For *la-la* could refer to many things. A person’s name could

³⁵ In 2005 the Falun Gong issues was settled and the governmental pressure on public sphere eased up a little.

be *la-la*. *La* (pull) is used in too many places, even on the entrance door, it says, “Welcome *la-la*.”

Welcome *la-la* is a popular joke among *la-la* communities. Since the character *la* is mostly understood as “to pull”, when there is a double door of a shop, the door sign “Welcome, pull the door,” in Chinese becomes a brilliant pun for insiders as “Welcome lesbians.” This playful, informal, and obscurity makes *la-la* inconsistent with formal organizations and movements. As discussed before Kan changed the name of ***La-la Salon*** to ***Nu-tong-zhi Center*** which indicates not only the intention of formalization but also a predicament for lesbian activists: how to resolve the distinctions for their transformation from informal groups to activists groups; how to both use *la-la* for its collective strength but also integrate it into the formal movement.

One of the strategy is constructing the interchangeability between *la-la*, *nu-tong-zhi* and *LBT*. After 2007 ***Tong-yu*** started to organize a national lesbian activist training Camp called ***La-la Camp***, with supports from North American Chinese *tong-zhi* organizations, Hong Kong and Taiwan *nu-tong-zhi* activists. To make the term *la-la* more formal and political, they reframe it as equal to *nu-tong-zhi* and *LBT*. Here are some reports of the ***La-la Camp*** that illustrate this.

The third annual Lala Camp took place ... “Lala” is a local identity embraced by Chinese-speaking communities, used here as an umbrella term to include lesbians, bisexual women, and women-loving transgender people (LBTs) (ILGA, 1 Dec, 2009).

The Chinese Lala Alliance (CLA) held the fourth annual “Lala Camp,” a cross-regional leadership conference for lesbian, bisexual and transgender women (or lala) in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. (CLA, 29 Aug, 2011a).

The fourth trans-regional *nu-tong-zhi* training Camp, also know as the ***La-la Camp*** ...(Chinese version CLA, 29 Aug, 2011b)

La-la Camp is organized annually since 2007 and each year in a different city or divided into sub-camps simultaneously in different cities. The aim of the camp is to train young lesbian activists in China. After each camp there will be participants come back to their local region to start new local *la-la* groups, and these groups will bid for the opportunity to hold next the ***La-la Camp***. For example ***Xi'an Relax tong-xue-she*** was formed after 2009 ***La-la Camp*** and hosted the ***La-la Camp*** in Xi'an in 2011. ***CLA*** was established after the second ***La-la Camp*** as the organization to be in

charge of organizing it each year and as a platform for networking among all the *la-la* groups.

Most of these new *la-la* groups had already got online and offline informal social groups before they registered in **CLA**. For example Ran and Shan already had their informal *la-la* social groups in *la-la* pubs in Xi'an before **Ralex Tong-xue-she**. For them the new group is just to get all the *la-la* in Xi'an, many of whom they know from their previous informal social groups, to do something "useful." The next interview excerpt from Shan also illustrates the distinction between activist groups and informal social groups are blurred.

Shan: We were thinking about, even if we can't really started up a nonprofit organization, we could do a "eat, drink, play and have fun" group that we organize as many *la-la* in Xi'an as possible. The first two years we were mostly doing entertainment activities.

Moreover, the reality with *la-la* is still more complex notwithstanding **Tong-yu** and **CLA**'s effort to make it interchangeable with *nu-tong-zhi* and LBT. The term LBT is itself problematic. It is part of the trend of using list of acronyms in activist context, which focuses on "which identity categories are to be named and foreground (Kulick, 2000, p.244)" under a "logic of enumeration," that political efficacy can only exist through naming each category (Boellstorff, 2007). It also reflects the logic of identity politics about recognition, that naming and representation confers recognition and acceptance. The problem is that it presume the preexistence and self-evidence of identity categories, only present limited differences rather than real diversity. The real multiplicities rather than numerical identities are obscured by it.

I have shown through a close reading of the *la-la* movement after 2000s that the line between activist and non-activist, informal groups and activist groups are blurred. I call it the *la-la* movement for the following reasons: although some activists use *nu-tong-zhi*, LBT and *la-la* interchangeably, the *la-la* collective identity formed by autobiographic narratives on the internet is the base for this movement; and many "activist groups" now were former informal online or offline *la-la* groups.

4.4 The limitations of formalization of *la-la* movement

This subsection illustrates the diversity understanding of *la-la* that is not equal to the using of LBT, but more diverse. I am going to use two activists of local groups Kan in Beijing ***La-la Salon*** and Ran in Xi'an ***Relax Tong-xue-she*** to show that even their understanding of *la-la* is not quite the same as LBT. Then I illustrate the formalization of *la-la* movement and how this may shift *la-la* toward a normalized movement that both obscures the complexity and individuality of *la-la* and the differences within the *la-la* community: age and class differences. This formalization of *la-la* movement also obscures the structural oppression such as compulsory heterosexuality but only represent an essentialist other for sympathy and inclusion, without touching the most evident pressure for these *la-la* are from the family to get married.

The future of lesbian movement in China should not place solely on the formalization of *la-la* groups but to return to the power of personal *la-la* narratives and the complex experiences they represents, to take on structural repressions rather than claiming representation and inclusion, to focus on age, class differences rather than present coherent voice that obscure the differences. The lesbian movement in mainland China lies in the infrapolitics itself rather than turning it to real politics.

4.4.1 *La-la* is more complex than LBT

Although the ***La-la Camp*** and ***CLA*** presents *la-la* as interchangeable with *nu-tong-zhi* and LBT, chapter 3 on *tong-zhi* already showed that most lesbians in China and even some lesbian activists are not comfortable with the term *tong-zhi* or *nu-tong-zhi* for its male centrism and anachronism. Moreover, some of the lesbian activists consider *la-la* more relational and institutional than a fixed sexual identity as L, B or T, while some of the lesbian activists consider *la-la* rigidly as lesbians.

Kan: There is this possibility that after ... one or two years, you turns back to like men again. However [you are still a *la-la*], during this specific time, when your feelings and sex directing to a specific person. ... Well, I am ...more than 95 percent [*la-la*]. I could have a little heterosexual orientation, but not very strong.

Kan's claim that *la-la* is "during a specific time," "toward a specific person" challenges the fixed

sexual identity category. This echoes with early twentieth century translation of *tong-xing-lian* especially *tong-xing-lian* among female students as relational and situational (Sang, 2003, p.125). Moreover, Kan also uses *la-la* as a continuum rather than the strict hetero/homo dichotomy in claiming that she is 95 percent *la-la*. Contrarily Ran has a very different interpretation of *la-la* that for her *la-la* is *nu-tong-xing-lian* but also challenges the interchangeability of *la-la* and LBT.

Ran: [Since you have said ***Tong-xue-she*** is a *la-la* group, and also that it is doing LBT support. Does *la-la* equals LBT to you?] No, no, no. Most of our activities are around *la-la*. Because in Xi'an, rarely do you see bisexual (*shuang-xing-lian*). Bisexual is not *la-la*, neither is Transgender (*kua-xing-bie*), except for transgender *la-la* (MTF trans who identify themselves as lesbian). Bisexual women can love boys, while *nu-tong-xing-lian* (female homosexual) cannot. The majority of ***Tong-xue-she*** are *la-la*, however we will not say we only target of *la-la*, T, B, sometimes even G also come to our platform we will help them find support.

Unlike others who avoid hegemonic discourse of *tong-xing-lian* and other categorization of perverts, determined to find out the answer, Ran looked through books, magazines. She finally got her answer on the internet with *la-la* and she internalizes the hegemonic discourse and equals *la-la* to *nu-tong-xing-lian*. Although in ***La-la Camp*** she was taught about LBT, she takes from that education the fixed separable identity categories rather than *la-la* as an umbrella term as equal to LBT. For example after waving between whether her identification should be *tong-xing-lian* or *yi-xing-pi* (transsexual) she finally made her decision during the ***La-la Camp*** after a lecture given by a transsexual trainer. "After he told us what is transsexual, I felt I am different from it."

Besides Kan and Ran, the *la-las* also have their various interpretations. Like Sheng in the first chapter considers P in *la-la* relationship as the normal woman seduced by T who is excessive in her *yang*; Kan describe some *la-la* have been with her girl friend for 8 years and still claim her girl friend is straight (*zhi-de*) for they believe someone has ever been sexually active with men is not *la-la*; Lao claims she feels embarrassed with sexual identities, but she still read *la-la* literature on the internet and feels belonging from it; Zong never really declare to her friends she is *la-la*, but they knew, she claims, it is a tacit understanding; some girls tells me there are many *la-la* couples in

their university, but they only stay with their partner, without reaching out to others, or they do not even consider that as sexual identity. All these complexities of interpretations of *la-la* are obscured by assuming the equivalence between *la-la* and LBT.

4.4.2 Formalization of *la-la* groups

There is also a formalization tendency of the *la-la* groups. Some lesbian activists are really conscious about the differences between informal groups and activist groups, describing the informal social groups as “eat, drink, play and have fun” groups. Although the process many informal groups transform to activist groups through ***La-la Camp*** reveals that the distinction between these two types of groups is blurred, it is still a process of formalization of these groups. ***Tong-yu*** transit to a formal activist organization seeking resources including sympathy and support outside the collective, the heterosexual public; ***La-la Salon*** transit itself to a formal organization ***Nu-tong-zhi Center***; Ran and Shan also tell me since their first two years organizing around entertainment activities, this year, they gradually transforming ***Relax Tong-xue-she*** to more public activities, such as campus education to heterosexual students. I am glad to see these activists have their ambition to change the public attitude toward *la-la* and really admire their hard work in this, however I also sense certain problems with such representative oriented sexual identity politics.

First let's return to the earlier discussion of Kan and Shan's initial motivation for establish the groups. Both of them claim that the *la-la* pubs as too noisy, the *la-la* in the pubs does nothing meaningful but drinking and smoking. They also claim that these young lesbians in the pubs are not mature enough. This clearly represents the age and class differences inside the *la-la* groups that are obscured by a representational politics. Moreover, the claim that being not taking responsibility for their lives but drinking and smoking will bring bad image to *tong-xing-lian* is exclusion of lower class and less-conforming *la-la* from the representation.

Also the representation to heterosexual is assuming the fixity of sexual identity, reinforcing the hetero/homo dichotomy produced by compulsory heterosexuality. It is to neglect that the most pressure of gay and lesbians felt comes not from the public but from compulsory heterosexuality as

a structural oppression. Many *la-la* prefer to chose heterosexual marriage or cooperative marriage with gay men (Engebretsen, 2009; Kam, 2013) not because they or the general public do not know the correct knowledge but because they are under the pressure from their family and the society that heterosexuality is the path that majority people would naturally take. For example the problem with some Chinese gay men marrying heterosexual women is now claimed as “marriage fraud” by some feminist and lesbian and gay organizations³⁶ as an inexcusable crime some gay men made on innocent heterosexual women. It seems that before legalizing same-sex marriage, China may has a better chance passing a ban for homosexuals (*tong-xing-lian*) to marry heterosexuals (*yi-xing-lian*). This claim rests on the soul assumption that heterosexual and homosexual are natural orientations, that homosexual (*tong-xing-lian*) is only a small group of human variations of heterosexuals. Their representation logic also rest on that the *tong-xing-lian* or *tong-zhi* or *la-la* need to make themselves visible to the majority preset as naturally heterosexual public, make the visibility as representing otherness and satisfy the curious gaze of the hegemonic public discourses. This is why some *la-la* claims that before the public know about *la-la* they could have a secret life safe from the prying of the others. The *la-la* movement made it worse as their cover as friendship or as cooperate married may be blown³⁷.

In conclusion, the emerging *la-la* movement in the last five years is a new social movement based on the collective identity *la-la* in mainland China formed on the internet. It is both related to and different from the *nu-tong-zhi* movement in the 1990s and *nu-tong-zhi* movement in Taiwan. The strength of *la-la* lies in its emotional depth in the autobiographical *la-la* narratives on the internet. Although some *la-la* activists reframe *la-la* as equivalent to LBT and tends to formalize *la-la* groups and movements. This tendency obscures the complexity of interpretations of *la-la* and the differences connected to age and class differences inside the *la-la* community. I argue *la-la* subjectivity is more diverse and complex as “hidden transcripts” on the internet that transcend the fixity and unity of sexual identities, and *la-la* groups transcend distinction between formal and

³⁶ See *Ai-bai* 2011.

³⁷ Personal communication without recorded interviews.

informal groups and between infrapolitics and real politics. The future of the *la-la* movement is not and should not be limited to western model of civil society and identity politics, but lies in the complexity of *la-la* subjectivity and the nuances of infrapolitics.

Conclusion

Rejecting the simple view of lesbian and lesbian activism in China as the result of globalization of sexual identities or a part of the international gay movements this thesis argues for a perspective that values the complexity, particularity, and contingency of lesbianism in China. The Foucauldian discursive power as the “multiplicity of force relations” and the Deleuzian assemblages as “interpenetrating multiplicities” are the frameworks that help it in finding such a perspective. Rather than seeing the identity terms, *tong-xing-lian*, *tong-zhi* and *la-la* in China as literal translations of western sexual identities such as “homosexuals,” “LGBT,” or “lesbians” this thesis has investigated the diverse formations, transformations, meanings and usages of them. The findings of this investigation have illustrated the complexity, particularity and contingency of these terms represents the interpenetrating power, sexuality, regional connections and social movements around them that are otherwise obscured.

First, the terms are unities represent singular sexual identities. This thesis has shown that each term are multiplicities of disjunctive interrelated meanings. For example three characters in *tong-xing-lian* reflects multiplicities within each element and in the interactions among them; *tong-zhi* reflects multiplicities by different parties using them with various appropriations and objectives; the multiplicities of *la-la* is its strength as formed by personal narratives which are diverse in themselves and also in the different understandings of *la-la* by each individuals.

Second, the terms contingent in their formations and transformations and represent the contingent and multiple interpenetrating discursive forces formed them. Each element and the whole term of *tong-xing-lian* are constantly shifting, premodern cosmological epistemology, Confucianism, introduced sex science discourses, socialist history and introduction of LGBT movement all interrelates to this shifting. The same is with *tong-zhi* with its relation to the socialist movement, to the tensions between mainland China and Hong Kong society and other diverse forces that shaped the various appropriations. *La-la* has also been shifting from a fictional persona to a collective identity formed by autobiographical narratives on the internet and in some *la-la*

activists' integration of the term into LBT movement.

Third, the terms represents the connections and flows more complex than globalization from numerical centers. The connections and flows between the West and China in *tong-xing-lian*, between diasporic Hong Kong societies in US, Hong Kong and mainland in *tong-zhi*, between Taiwan and mainland in *la-la* are more diverse and complex than introduction or translation. Rather it is a dubbing that new meanings, multiplicities, disjunctures are created. It is also a constant shifting process with new connections, disconnections and flows.

Finally, lesbian activism in China have to be understood as “infrapolitics” that includes the nuances of social movements in everyday lives rather than a globalization of LGBT identity politics based on the logic of fixed sexual identity and inclusion. The different usages of *tong-xing-lian* as using *tong* to articulate the cultural citizenship, the contradictory usages and attitudes towards sex (*xing*) and love (*lian* or *ai*), the differences between *tong-zhi* activists in Hong Kong, *nu-tong-zhi* activists in the 1990s and *la-la* movement and the blurring of activists/non-activists and organizations/groups, are beyond the understanding of the global LGBT activism.

These terms also related together in everyday use. For example the negative meanings associated with *tong-xing-lian* has an impact on *tong-zhi* being appropriated by Hong Kong activists to desexualizing *tong-xing-lian*. The male centrism of *tong-zhi* makes many lesbian to prefer *la-la* to *nu-tong-zhi* in identification.

To sum up, all the terms represent complexities, particularities and contingencies rather than simply the translation of homosexual, LGBT, lesbian or LBT. These findings are only possible through a non-simplistic or non-deterministic perspective to value the differences, connections and contingencies. They are helpful to understand an interrelating picture of lesbian identity, subjectivity, activism in the historical, cultural, social and regional specificities, contingencies and interconnections. Simply assuming *tong-xing-lian*, *tong-zhi*, and *la-la* as equal to “homosexuals,” “LGBT,” “lesbians” or “LBT” would be a misreading that obscure the differences and connections. For example considering *tong-xing-lian* as homosexuals would obscure the shifting meanings and

connections of “sameness,” “sex,” and “love.” Considering *tong-zhi* as LGBT or a cultural politics as claiming Chinese citizenship would obscure the different usages by different parties in Hong Kong and the mainland. Considering *la-la* as “lesbians” or LBT would obscure its emotional depth as formed by autobiographic narratives, interactions between Taiwan and mainland, connections to the internet and online communities.

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