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Pray the gay away: identity conflict between Christianity and sexuality in Hong Kong sexual minorities

Petula Sik Ying Ho and Yiqian Hu

Department of Social Work & Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, P.R. China

ABSTRACT

Recognition and respect for sexual minorities in Hong Kong is still a contested area. Public sexual identity politics in Hong Kong has been framed by traditional Chinese gender ideology and imported Christian beliefs which are profoundly negative. Focusing on the interpersonal relationships in three spheres of life, the research adopted the sociological perspective of personal life and the feminist geographers' idea of spatialization of identity management to analyze how the sexual self of sexual minorities has been marginalized and excluded in intimate social spaces of family, church communities and schools in Hong Kong with specific spatial practices and different forms of power/knowledge. By examining overlooked intimate injustice in personal life, this study illustrates that identity conflicts between Christianity and non-heterosexuality in everyday life is constructed through misrepresentation, misrecognition, harassment and exclusion in intimate relationships. Different types of knowledge are being used to reiterate pre-existing norms and institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute the sexual minorities as comparatively unworthy of respect. These micro-political processes involve both conformity and resistance to gender and sexual stereotypes. Participants managed to develop spatial coping strategies such as concealment, compartmentalization, confrontation and alternative sources of support to manage their lives with dignity and self-esteem.

Plegarias para ahuyentar lo gay: conflictos de identidad entre la cristiandad y la sexualidad en las minorías sexuales de Hong Kong

RESUMEN

El reconocimiento y el respeto por las minorías sexuales en Hong Kong es todavía un área en disputa. La política de la identidad sexual pública en Hong Kong ha estado influida por la tradicional ideología de género china y las creencias cristianas importadas que son profundamente negativas. Centrándose en las relaciones interpersonales en tres esferas de la vida, esta investigación adoptó la perspectiva sociológica de la vida personal y la idea de espacialización de la gestión de la identidad tomada de la geografía feminista para analizar cómo el yo sexual de las minorías sexuales ha sido marginado y excluido en los espacios sociales íntimos de la familia, las comunidades en relación con las iglesias y las escuelas en Hong Kong, con prácticas espaciales específicas y diferentes formas de poder/conocimiento. Al examinar la hasta ahora ignorada injusticia íntima en la vida personal, este estudio muestra que los conflictos de identidad entre la cristiandad

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y la no heterosexualidad en la vida cotidiana se construyen por medio de la tergiversación, la falta de reconocimiento, el acoso y la exclusión en las relaciones íntimas. Distintos tipos de saberes son utilizados para reiterar normas preexistentes y patrones institucionalizados de valor cultural que constituyan a las minorías sexuales como comparativamente no merecedoras de respeto. Estos procesos micropolíticos involucran tanto el conformismo como la resistencia a los estereotipos de género y sexuales. Lxs participantes fueron capaces de desarrollar estrategias espaciales de adaptación como el disimulo, la compartimentación, la confrontación y fuentes alternativas de apoyo para llevar a cabo sus vidas con dignidad y autoestima.

祈祷同性恋消失：香港性少数族群的基督教信仰和性向之间的认同冲突

摘要

在香港，对性少数族群的承认和尊重，仍然居于备受争议的地带。香港的公共性认同政治，以极度负面的传统中国性别意识形态和外来基督教信仰形塑之。本研究聚焦生命中的三大人际关係面向，采取个人生命的社会学观点，以及女权主义地理学者有关认同管理空间化的概念，分析香港性少数族群的性自我，如何透过特定的空间实践和不同的权力/知识形式，被边缘化与排除于家庭、教会团体和学校的亲密社会空间之外。本研究透过检视个人生活中被忽略的亲密不正义，描绘出基督教信仰和非异性恋者在每日生活中的认同冲突，是透过错误的再现、错认、骚扰和亲密关係的排除进行建构。不同的知识类型，被用来复述构成性少数族群相对而言不值得尊敬的既有常规和文化价值的制度化模式。这些微政治过程，同时涉及顺从和抵抗性别及性的刻板印象。参与者得以建立诸如隐藏、封闭、冲突和另类支援资源的空间应对策略，以此经营具有尊严和自尊的人生。

Introduction

This article is part of a larger project on the well-being of sexual minorities in Hong Kong identifying the various kinds of discrimination they experience. Out of 46 participants, 28 were Christians. Research in other countries has shown that homonegative discrimination toward sexual minorities is prevalent among Christian churches (Gattis, Woodford, and Han 2014). Yet, there are very few local studies on the discrimination experienced by sexual minority Christian in Hong Kong. This study addresses this gap and focuses on the social and cultural geographies of gay Christians and their experiences of injustice in those seemingly depoliticized personal everyday practices. We identify intimate injustices, including inequalities, discrimination and various forms of exclusion and violence, faced by gay Christians in the three life spheres of family, school, and the church. We explore how Hong Kong Christian sexual minorities experience and deal with intimate discriminations in personal life with a view to developing a new model of intimate justice which go beyond resource redistribution and policy issues to social status, social recognition and cultural representations.

No one is wholly defined by their sexual proclivities; everyone has a multiplicity of other social identities as members of different social groups. These various selves are negotiated within different interpersonal social spaces with specific practices and forms of power/knowledge (Brown 2005; Vanderbeck et al. 2011). There are academic researches on how members of sexual minority groups negotiate the way in which their sexual selves intersect with their other identities in different sites (Kong 2012; Tang 2011), but very little on the experiences of LGBTQ people who are Christians.

In Hong Kong, negative attitudes toward LGBT individuals are deeply entrenched in two dominant belief systems: Chinese traditional culture and the dominance of Christianity introduced by missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century which has sustained its influence through its domination of both public education and welfare systems (Law 2009). Within this hostile environment, how do LGBTQ¹

Christians resolve the conflicts between being both a member of sexual minority and a Christian in three important spheres of their personal life: family, school and church? To what extent are they able to lead integrated lives? What strategies do they adopt and at what personal cost?

Confucianism, Christianity and conformity: the suppression of sexual differences in Hong Kong

Homosexuality was decriminalized in Hong Kong in 1991. Since then, both local and international civil rights organizations have repeatedly requested the promulgation of legislation prohibiting discrimination of sexual minorities. The United Nations Human Rights Commission reiterated its concern about the absence of such legislation in 1999, 2001, 2005 and in 2013 (UNHRC 2013). Attitudes toward such legislation have changed somewhat recently. A survey in 2005 showed that only 28.7% respondents supported legislation banning discrimination against LGBTQ people in Hong Kong (HAB 2006). In 2013, the supportive respondents had increased to 65.8% (POP 2013).

In 2015, the government has issued a report on the experience of discrimination against sexual minorities conducted by the Advisory Group on Elimination Against Sexual Minorities (CMAB 2015). The Equal Opportunities Commission has also conducted an 'Study on Legislation against Discrimination on the Grounds of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity (SOGI) and Intersex Status' (EOC 2016). These studies show a greater acceptance of sexual minorities and recommended legislation, but the newly appointed chairperson of EOC has indicated that he would adopt a non-confrontational approach, contrasting with his predecessor's vocal and high-profile campaign in support of sexual minorities. Once again, the combined Confucian and Christian values have been defined by the government as the mainstream cultural consensus and used to justify their inaction in introducing legislation to define and protect the legal rights of sexual minorities (Chan 2008).

The opposition is spearheaded by various evangelical activist and Christian organizations (Wong 2013). Homosexuality is a sin in Christian tradition and the negative biblical allusions to sodomy are commonly accepted among Christians (Han 2009). Claiming to campaign for the protection of the family, Christian evangelical groups uphold the model of the modern monogamous family as the fundamental defense against homosexuality and all other forms of non-heterosexuality. They have adopted political strategies and religious ideology similar to the American Christian Right. Their slogan 'one man, one woman, one husband, one wife, one love, one life' has woven moral codes into support for discrimination against sexual minorities.

The Confucian family ideology is another source of moral elements used to justify discrimination against sexual minorities (Chow and Cheng 2010). According to Chinese tradition, sons and daughters are expected to fulfill their filial duty by marrying the opposite sex and having children. Men were not expected to be monogamous but they were expected to procreate. Given the cultural emphasis on family continuity, homosexuality is seen as an unacceptable threat to proper social order and family harmony. As a result, Hong Kong sexual minorities continue to be denied certain legal civil rights, such as marriage and adoption which are enjoyed by heterosexual couples. They are regarded as devalued 'partial' citizens. This study shows how gay Christians manage their identity conflicts and the spatial strategies they use to cope.

Theorizing identity conflicts in the everyday context

Currently, the explanatory models used to understand identity formation and impact of discriminations against LGBTQ individuals are mostly based on psychology. The stress model proposed by Meyer (2007), for example, divides stress caused by discriminations into two kinds, distal and proximal. However, these consequence-orientated psychological models tend to underestimate the complexity of stress and discrimination as well as the intersectionality of personal identities in different social spaces. This study would look at various forms of discriminations against LGBT Christians in different life spheres of personal life, which lead to their identity conflicts as sexual minority and as Christian. The concept

of 'personal life' proposed by Smart (2007) potentially includes all types of social relationships and is a reflexive state where both self-reflections and interactions with others take place. It embodies the intersectionality of different social identities in different social spaces, allowing the investigation of the interplay between sexual orientation and religion, age, gender and family in everyday experience (Nynäs and Yip 2013).

Feminist geography is also useful to look at the social institutions of family, school and church not just as social space but important 'spheres' of life or spatial locations associated with specific practices of space/power/knowledge. Physical land scarcity in Hong Kong has greatly impacted on the living spaces inhabited by Hong Kong people. Kong (2012) has analyzed how older gay men have negotiated same-sex intimacy at two specific sites – their parents' homes and public toilets. Through radical use of spaces, a new space of *Tongzhi*² can be created and practiced in both hetero-/homo-sexual worlds. In addition, Tang's (2011) work focuses on how women with lesbian desires navigate intimate spaces in Hong Kong's densely populated and socially regulated environment which makes keeping aspects of oneself secret difficult. She shows how these women locate alternative spaces in their bedrooms, living rooms, classrooms, churches, offices, cafes, and neighborhoods to express desire and develop support networks with other women. These new social spaces are conditional, contingent on the constraints of space, culture and political economy as well as the personal capacity and cultural capital of the individuals for negotiation. However, little has been done by Tang to explore the rules and norms of these conditional spaces with different physical and structural characteristics and power/knowledge relations. In this respect, feminist geographers are most useful in explicating how rules and norms are constituted in different kinds of physical and social space to shape personal subjectivities and social networks (Brown 2005; Vanderbeck et al. 2011). We recast our analysis of identity conflicts between Christianity and sexuality in three spheres of personal life with reference to the idea of the 'spatialization of the closet' (Brown 2005). Social institutions in these life spheres are not just physical spaces in which interpersonal interactions take place but social spaces in which certain norms and values are continuously being reiterated. We have considered the variety of closeted spaces as places to hide or a space where one is almost made invisible.

Purpose and methodology

The findings presented in this article derive from 28 participants during two periods of ethnographic fieldwork, 18 participants from individual interviews between June and September 2009 and 11 participants from a focus group discussion in April 2014. One gay man participated in both individual interview and the focus group discussion. The two rounds of data collection involved different participants in order to provide a more diverse and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of sexual minority people in Hong Kong. All 28 respondents were Hong Kong Chinese who self-identified as Christian or ex-Christian, and as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and pro-gay heterosexual. One participant was a heterosexual male who identified himself as a 'pro-gay straight guy' and actively organized pro-gay activities. He volunteered to join the focus group discussion, considering himself part of the sexual minorities' community. He was included as his self-identification highlights one of the theoretical assumptions in this study. Social identity is not an ascribed label based on static personal characteristics, but an achieved one, the result of interactive life experiences (Jenkins 2014).

All the respondents were recruited through collaboration with a number of different organizations to ensure the diversity across ages and social backgrounds. These included the Blessed Minority Christian Fellowship, Queer Affirming Fellowship, Queer Theology Academy, One Body in Christ, New Creation Hong Kong, Rainbow Action and the Project Touch run by the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association. Respondents were asked to refer potential participants thus about half of the participants were not involved in any LGBTQ organizations. Since the respondents were not recruited by probability sampling, the sample was not representative of the population of sexual minority Christians and the findings cannot be generalized to the population.

Respondents were contacted via e-mail or by telephone to arrange interview times and venues which respondents identified as comfortable and safe, such as in coffee shops that they preferred, or in an office at the university. The focus group discussion, upon shared agreement among the respondents and us, took place in a room at Kowloon Union Church. Prior to individual interviews and the focus group discussion, we explained our research project and obtained all respondents' written consent with their understanding of the purpose, background and duration of the research.

The 28 sexual minority participants, ranged from 16 to 50 years of age. Among the participants, 13 self-reported as gay, 8 as lesbian, 4 as bisexual, and 2 as transgender. Twenty-six of the participants were Protestants, one ex-Protestant and one Catholic. The sample was well-educated. All had completed secondary education and 21 had received tertiary education up to postgraduate level. Fourteen respondents worked full time, one part time, two unemployed, one refusing to report employment status, and ten students.

Being transgendered is different from being gay, lesbian and bisexuals, but they are often lumped together in public discourse. When the government conducts studies on the experience of discrimination, they always include transgendered people in the categories of sexual minorities or what would consider as people who are outside the norm. Therefore, we have chosen to include them in our sample.

All interviews and group discussions were conducted in Cantonese. They were recorded and transcribed word-for-word. The quotations used in this article were then translated into English. These transcripts underwent a thematic analysis, to identify emerging themes and divergent attitudes among the respondents. In this analysis process, we looked for prevalent patterns across the data-set and within each data item. Findings were then organized into codes, and the codes were collated into thematic domains. Several major themes were identified during this coding process, including homonegativity, discriminatory experiences in church, school and family, mental health outcomes and coping strategies. Subthemes that further explain the domains emerged from the data by cross-referencing the research question, interview question guideline and the responses from our respondents. These subthemes of forms of intimate discrimination included misrepresentation, misrecognition, exclusion and harassment, and coping strategies such as concealment. Some of the themes identified were classified as outliers because they were not identified by a majority of the participants or were outside of the scope of this research.

Forms of intimate discrimination in personal life

LGBTQ Christians found to their disappointment that intimate relationships in various social spheres have failed to provide the social support and understanding they need for their sexual identification. Instead, their sexual identity was devalued and denied in their churches, families and schools in various forms. These intimate discriminations against their sexual selves in the Christian community demonstrates that non-heterosexuality and Christianity are incompatible, a source of much stress in their everyday lives. The three areas are often linked explicitly by Christian beliefs especially in the case of people who are from Christian families, went to Christian schools, and attend the church regularly. In Hong Kong, the majority of schools, especially the good schools, are either Protestant or Catholic. In this study, at least 18 interviewees were from religious secondary schools, some from Catholic and some from Protestant schools. The interviewees were all long time regular church goers except at some points when they were too stressed to cope and have skipped to avoid the conflicts between their identity as gay and as Christian.

Misrepresentation and misrecognition

The interviewees often feel that they are never represented accurately. The stereotypical images of them always negative. They also felt misrecognized, which does not mean simply to be looked down upon or devalued. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence

of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem (Fraser and Honneth 2003).

In the religious context, the homonegative discourse, 'homosexuality is sin', dominates descriptions of LGBTQ individuals. LGBTQ Christians are routinely represented as sinfully abnormal people who are immoral and harmful to family and society. The church becomes a space where certain forms of power/knowledge are being produced and reproduced. This was the situation that Leo (20+, gay, student) experienced. He started going to church around 14. Before that, he regarded his gay sexual orientation as normal. However, when he began to attend the church, he gradually became aware of the conflict between his beliefs and his sexual preference:

I remember I was quite open and easy to accept what I was when I realized that I was different from others [at about 10 years old]. To me, it was like most people using their right hand but some using their left hand... When I first started going to church, I was quite devoted. ... At that time I was willing to confront myself and forgo everything for the sake of my religion so as not to do anything against my faith... I actually considered homosexuality as a sin and something immoral and forbidden. (Leo)

The discourse of homosexuality as sin would be repeatedly affirmed in various social situations within the church, such as informal conversations and Bible classes where homosexuality would be psychopathologized.

Lisa (lesbian, 20+, student) recalled her experience in a Christian-run school. In her class, gay and lesbian people were misrepresented as frequently infected with AIDS. Without supporting evidence, students were told that gays typically had unstable relationships, implying that they were promiscuous and incapable of being faithful. Similarly, our respondent Sam (20+, gay, student), reported his experience during a church gathering, when the movie *Brokeback Mountain* was shown in Hong Kong:

In the church they keep on talking about the film *Brokeback Mountain*. Furthermore, they discuss the sexual orientation legislation for three consecutive weeks. They kept talking about topics such as how homosexuals affected the family, the sins committed by homosexuals, how they would go to hell, how abnormal they were, and how and to what extent they would change society in an unethical way! I was sitting there, stunned in the church. During those three weeks I would rather have been dead than alive! (Sam)

Within religious families, homonegativity and its association with sin was mainly reproduced through silence or indirect communication, a different technique than in church and school. Neil (gay, 20+, full-time employee), a gay professional, was raised in a Christian family, where the issue of homosexuality was never discussed openly. Neil assumed that his parents would have homonegative attitudes based on their religious beliefs.

In non-religious families, the discourse of sin was replaced by the cultural and heteronormative expectation that filial piety would be expressed through procreation. This expectation weighs particularly heavily on the first-born son, and even more on the only son whose responsibility is to continue the lineage and passage of the family name. For example, as the eldest son, Johnny (gay, 20+, full-time employee) was expected to find a girlfriend and marry her. His family wanted to introduce him to a suitable woman. When Johnny refused this request, his grandfather criticized him as 'good-for-nothing'. Johnny had to realize 'How can anyone accept that the eldest son in the direct bloodline is gay? What a misfortune it is for the family!'

Exposed to a homonegative environment, some gay Christians internalize homonegativity which results in intense minority stress and negative mental health outcomes. Depression, a sense of guilt and shame, suppression of emotion, feelings of hopelessness and the meaninglessness of life were described by all participants. Three of our interviewees Sam, Deborah and Loretta had even considered suicide.

Deprivation of opportunities

Regarded as sinful in religious communities and unfilial in the family, open non-heterosexuality is not acceptable in various positions, roles, rituals and activities. Restrictions would be sometimes explicitly and directly stated. Openly gay or lesbian pastors, however capable, would be severely restricted in work opportunities since non-heterosexual identities are not recognized in ministry work of many churches.

Individuals and groups react against the experience of misrecognition by struggling to achieve three modes of recognition: love, respect, and esteem (Fraser and Honneth 2003; Ho et al. 2014; Ho 2016) which they believe they deserve. Gigi (lesbian, 40+, pastor) had concealed her lesbian identity since childhood. After training in a seminary, she had worked as a minister and been ordained. However, after coming out, her church no longer accepted her and she had to leave.

In religious rituals, homonegative restrictions were expressed through the requirement of heterosexuality. Some churches require that the potential new member affirms heterosexism before baptism. Having attended the preparation course for baptism in a church, Deborah (20+, lesbian, full-time employee) was informed that the converts in the baptism pool must vow to 'obey the holiness of marriage' that can 'only be between a man and a woman'. When Deborah anticipated the embarrassing scenario, she did not get baptized there and left that church.

Sometimes, the message that Christian homosexuals were not accepted was conveyed in a more implicit and unarticulated way. Applying to a Christian mission, Deborah submitted her testimonial of salvation mentioning her previous lesbian lifestyle. During the interview, she was challenged on her sexuality. When confronted with the question 'so are you still gay right now?' She replied 'Yes'. Deborah's application to the mission team was rejected although she was committed and considered to be a strong applicant with potential and capability.

One bisexual interviewee Janice said in the focus group, with a most matter-of-fact tone of voice, 'I know very well that I will be on my own and die alone!' When asked why, she said, 'We cannot get married. There is no protection that will give us hospital visitation rights, inheritance, adoption of anything like that even if we get married. I know that I can't have children. Who will want me?' Her hopelessness was disturbing to the group members who have tried to comfort her but in vain.

Harassment disguised as caring

Non-heterosexual Christian members of a congregation were subjected to various degrees of harassment in the name of love and care among Christian brothers and sisters. Persuasion with benevolent intentions is the mildest form. As Sam (gay, student, 20+) recalled:

They kept on 'persuading' me, and their long and tedious harangues lasted for three hours every time. They kept on discussing theology and many other issues...like sexual orientation, theology, morality, basic questions such as 'what is sin?' and so on. I was really tired and annoyed. (Sam)

Coming out to his pastor did not relieve him of internalized homonegativity. Instead, guilt was induced and reinforced by reiteration of homonegative teaching. Sam's minority stress was later exacerbated by pastoral persuasion leading to depression and distress manifested in panic attacks. Sam was scared so much as he was later referred by his family to a hypnotherapist and recovered after two months. He considered the pastoral harassment as 'prosecution by the church' which prompted his 'apostasy'.

Religious practices like prayer, spiritual counseling and, worst of all, medical conversion therapy programs were often recommended by both pastors and other Christians to convert or cure non-heterosexuals. Five of our respondents (Sam, Deborah, Leo, Neil, Steven) were referred to various curative religious practices or conversion medical therapy similar to those discussed by Maccio (2010). A spiritual solution was suggested to Deborah, to 'Pray the Gay Away'. She had been tortured daily by this activity for almost three years but without success. Her pain and struggles reflected the difficulty of sexual minorities in maintaining both sexual and religious identities simultaneously.

And they used a lot of methods to help me pray... I had come out to only a few of them...they are all girls and they prayed for me. They have good motives for me and they all prayed for me ... I did pray the gay away ... but that did not last long. (Deborah)

Conversion therapy³ is usually much more aggressive than prayer and often contains elements of aversion therapy and behavior therapy (Johnston and Jenkins 2006), sometimes combined with drugs, which influenced their normal life. Neil (20+, gay, full-time employee) recalled his therapy experience as a university student. Due to the negative effects of the prescribed drugs, Neil found that, for almost

a year, there were many things on which he became unable to concentrate on, especially his university exams. He also had to accept his father's Chinese medical treatment with acupuncture and moxibustion⁴ to cure his non-heterosexuality. These interventions had no effect in changing sexual orientation. Rather they exacerbated their negative emotional and mental health outcomes:

When I dreamt, my suppression would be revealed. In my dreams, I often dreamt of male nudity and the like. I had to struggle even in my dreams. There was another 'I' that told myself not to look! As the two parts of me struggle too much, so in the end I woke from the dream, and when I woke up I found myself crying.

In school, gay and lesbian Christian students can be subject to implicit verbal harassment, such as inconspicuous vilification by religious teachers. Different from explicit vilification as a public activity which incites hatred, serious contempt for, or severe ridicule of a person, inconspicuous vilification uses more tacit and subtle pressure. When Deborah was a high school student, she genuinely believed that 'Christians are very non-judgmental'. She came out to a Christian teacher when preparing for presentation on a topic related to homosexuality. To Deborah's surprise, the following week, her teacher showed a documentary describing negative images about homosexuality. Although Deborah's teacher did not openly identify her, Deborah was scared and felt betrayed.

Christian sexual minorities can be publically and verbally harassed by fellow students and peers in both non-Christian and Christian schools based on the incompatibility of their religious and sexual identities. Being known as a lesbian in a non-religious school, Lisa was confronted by some junior students 'We know you are lesbian. We aren't afraid of you.' And even her friends criticized her 'You do it even though you know it is wrong and in addition, you believe in God.'

June, who ranked 210 of 244, and some other non-heteronormative students were even expelled from school on the pretext of poor academic performance while the heteronormative students ranked 241 and 242 were not. June and the other students call that year 'the tomboy⁵-cleansing year'.

Intimate exclusion

Excluding Christian sexual minorities from various intimate interpersonal relationships is another spatial strategy of devaluing their sexual identity. Within their families, sexual minority Christians not only experienced the heteronormative expectation of procreation, but also rejection. Joe (20+, gay, student) after concealing he was gay from his family for about 10 years, decided to come out by writing them letters. No one replied. Not only was his sexual identity not accepted, but also were the family members worried that he would contaminate siblings and cousins. They forbade him from joining family gatherings anymore. Although Joe had many cousins, much to his disappointment, they were not willing to reach out and make an effort to understand.

Nancy (23, bisexual, student) recalled how she had ruined her relationship with her family leading to almost a complete breakdown of communication for a long period of time. When her uncle asked her why she had not got a boyfriend, she said I would never have a boyfriend. Her whole family members were angry at her 'impolite' reply and started to be cold and distant to her. She also rejected her girlfriend's request to join her at her church to understand more about Christianity because she had anticipated that this was a form of coming out that would alienate her from all her friends in church whom she had known since childhood. Clearly interactions in intimate relationships do not always provide intimacy and support to Christians' non-heterosexual identities. So how do Christian sexual minorities deal with negative assessments of them and develop or maintain a sense of personal self-esteem and dignity?

Dealing with identity conflicts: conformity and resistance

Concealment of sexual orientation

In many situations, concealment of sexual orientation is the most common strategy to cope with homophobic discrimination, especially among younger people or prior to 1991, when anal intercourse was

still punishable by life imprisonment. Concealment can protect sexual identities while simultaneously preserving other self-identities and avoiding conflict and punishment. In this study, concealment is seen as a spatial strategy – building a closet around oneself.⁶

However, the cost of concealment can be high. In anticipation of rejection and humiliation, LGBTQ people would either conceal their sexual identity in order to be baptized or opt out of baptism altogether; and both are painful choices. Concealment entails lack of support, and can lead to distress and suffering. Gigi (40+), a lesbian pastor, recounted her personal upbringing in a pastor's family. Since childhood, guilt and shame were intertwined in her religious belief. She felt her only alternative was to conceal her sexual identity and confess to God. Only after coming out, did Gigi find relief from the previously prescribed normative female gender role. Some interviewees like Deborah have tried to stay in the Christian space and pray the gay away with a view to curing their gayness or even concealing it to themselves and refusing to acknowledge its existence. She tried but failed.

Life compartmentalization

The most common strategy adopted by our participants was to gradually disclose their sexual identity to potentially supportive and helpful people such as professional therapists or LGBTQ friends who shared similar experiences. Yet they still kept their sexual identity secret from other people, hoping not to become targets of sexual prejudice. Compartmentalization of one's life and using selective disclosure strategies enables the interviewees to move between different spaces.

However, leading a double life also has its costs. Leo (gay, 20+, student) thought that he could not be an active church-goer and a homosexual at the same time. There are very few open gay people in Hong Kong except for some celebrities including singers Anthony Wong and Denise Ho and the legislator Raymond Chan. All the interviewees in this study have chosen to come out to people to whom they feel safe. The choice involves being vigilant all the time in order not to be discovered and thus causing much stress. Without full recognition of their sexual identity, compartmentalizing two identities hinders the full development of other social identities, something others take as normal.

Individual confrontation

Confrontation is another spatial strategy with the view of changing the space by re-defining norms, questioning the rules of the game and creating new rules. Sometimes, LGBTQ people would confront discriminatory statements about homosexuality with a view to change the form of power/knowledge in that specific context. For example, Lisa (20+, lesbian, student) recalled challenging her religious knowledge teacher's comments on homosexuality.

I argued with the teacher and he just kept silent. I asked, 'Sir, why is homosexuality the same as bestiality?' He didn't answer me. He pretended not to have heard my question. I kept on challenging him. He didn't answer and would not look at me. (Lisa)

Thinking back on her 'unforgettable' experience, Lisa attributed the homonegative prejudice of her classmates and teacher to a lack of independent thinking. 'They repeated what other people said. Their ideas are exactly the same as the Society for Truth and Light.' As a Hong Kong youth in a society becoming more open, her self-confidence and eagerness to affirm herself has helped her challenge the stereotypes of sexuality.

Finding new spaces

Finding new spaces often involves making a decision to leave the gay negative space, going to a new church or which is more gay positive. Since the 1990s, LGBTQ-friendly Christian organizations have been established, such as the Blessed Minority Christian Fellowship in 1992, Queer Theology Academy in 2009, One Body in Christ in 2011, Queer Affirming Fellowship in 2012 and Oriented to Christ in 2013. LGBTQ

Christians have been empowered by theological reflection, pastoral care, religious service, social participation, and social campaigns. These newly emerging groups have served as a platform for building up the confidence and social visibility of LGBTQ Christians, identity reinforcement, community building and have mobilized members to challenge discrimination (Yip 2007).

Being demeaned and excluded in previous homonegative churches, LGBTQ Christians have turned to gay-affirming churches for acceptance and recognition. For example, Deborah initially attended the Blessed Minority Christian Fellowship (BMCF) which is a non-denominational Christian community for those marginalized LGBTQ people. Later, she joined a gay-affirming church, St. John's Church and was baptized.

After looking around for two to three years, I finally found a church that does not only accept me but also allows me to be baptized ... I am deliberately not very 'out' at St John's. But St John's is obviously very supportive to people like us. Even if I come out, they would not say 'you are more trouble than you are worth; you cannot be baptized.' Not like that. (Deborah)

In recent years, LGBTQ Christians began to look actively for alternative religious communities and have sought to explore theological capital through establishing new knowledge, language and imagination about religious LGBTQ individuals (Yip 2007).

To resolve the negative attitude of his older sister, Colin (40+, gay, full-time self-employed) invited her to attend BMCF meetings on the grounds that increasing interpersonal contact can enhance favorable attitudes to non-heterosexuals. Reflection of his coming out experience with his siblings, Colin identified the importance of self-acceptance: 'The more you accept yourself, the less you are reluctant to tell your family... Anyone who decides to come out has to acknowledge how much he can accept himself beforehand'.

Conclusions

We need to focus on both macro-political (distal forces) and micro-political (proximal forces) to understand how welfare resources, social recognition and life chances interactively influence erotic and intimate justice in personal life. The former macro political refers to the mobilization of the adversarial protests used to confront governments and institutions. The latter micro political focuses on the relations of power that shape interaction among individuals, collectives, social movement networks and wider society (Yates 2015). Our approach examines how inequality and discrimination are constructed not just on a macro level, but within the micro-political spheres as well as how spatial strategies of individual resistance develop through interpersonal relationships.

In this study, we explore how the physical and social dimensions of space are inextricably intertwined to provide the conditions of possibility for certain subjectivities and life choices. We focus on exploring how various Christian sexual minority selves are negotiated within different social spaces in their personal life that have the physically spatial characteristics and specific practices and forms of power/knowledge. We also document their everyday practices of resistance and spatial tactics in seemingly depoliticized life spheres.

A contextual analysis of 28 sexual minority Christians' stories revealed that the choice of everyday practices in three spheres of life and the associated intimate discriminations in interpersonal relationships is related to how certain forms of power/knowledge are deployed in different spaces and sites. In schools, the interviewees noted how the teachers use what is apparently 'scientific' knowledge about AIDS and tell students that they should not become gay. Some knowledge is constructed as scientific truth with a view to discouraging alternative interpretations. In the family, some Confucian ideas, conventional wisdom and the everyday knowledge of the elders are also being used to support certain social norms and values and make home an unsafe place to express one's views freely. In the church, the pastor can reiterate pre-existing social norms especially through Biblical discourses. These social institutions define what can and cannot be said, what counts as truth. Certain discourses are discriminatory and hurtful.

Identity conflicts are not only cultural and symbolic, but also materially and resource based. Capable or studious gay people were not rewarded or encouraged for their efforts and talents. Instead they were deprived of their deserved rights, status, jobs, and opportunities. Such harassments were often framed as being caring or a form of religious education for the health and well-being of those harassed, ironically leading some to develop mental health problems. Intimate exclusions lead to stress and emotional injuries for sexual minority Christians. These injustices affect access to deserved entitlements and resources, the achievement of social recognition, perception of life chances and actualizing abilities and talents (Ho 2013, 2016; Ho et al. 2014).

Religious life is as important a life sphere as family, love, marriage, school and peer group, especially for Christian sexual minorities. The relationship with God and with oneself is also an important aspect of one's existence and sense of well-being. The church is often connected to family and school through the belief system. Yip's (2005) work shows the impact of the 'detraditionalization' process on the late modern religious landscape, where the basis of religious faith and practice is primarily predicted on the self, rather than traditions and structures. In Hong Kong, gay Christians increasingly chose to leave their original big churches, and turned to the small but homosexual friendly churches, which are often started up by gay Christian themselves. However, when opportunities present themselves, interviewees questioned and reshaped traditions through their choices of confrontation or by leaving the place of oppression and going somewhere else. Christians are subject to exclusion in some spaces but they also participate in the development of new sites where their needs and intimate desires are will be met. Despite the new spaces created through their various strategies as above discussed, they are just 'conditional spaces' (Tang 2011) where their resistance strategies rarely result in securing places of complete safety.

Notes

1. Research participants usually use hybridized signifiers like gay-lo (gay man), gay-poh (gay woman). This hybrid language is known as 'Chinglish' (Ho and Tsang 2000).
2. The word 'tongzhi', whose primary meaning is 'comrade', a form of address used by Communists, was appropriated by gay activist in HK to refer to sexual minorities. It has positive connotations of respect, equality and resistance.
3. Conversion therapy was mainly provided by a conservative religious NGO, the Society of Truth and Light. From what the participants have described, the conversion therapy in Hong Kong is similar to that available in the US.
4. The burning of medicinal herbs on or near the skin.
5. Although Tomboy is used to describe a behaviorally active, adventurous and non-conforming girl in western culture, it often refers to a lesbian in Hong Kong.
6. For the word 'closet', there is a comparable Cantonese word '櫃' and coming out is '出櫃'.

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Notes on contributors

Petula Sik Ying Ho, PhD, is professor in Social Work & Social Administration Department at The University of Hong Kong. Ho's main research and teaching interests are in the areas of gender and sexuality as well as in qualitative methodologies. Her publications have made important contributions to the development of a dynamic theory of gender and sexuality by helping to resist Western hegemonies through empirical case studies that make connections between discourses, cultural practices and political economy in Chinese context. Her books include, *Love and Desire in Hong Kong*, co-edited with Ka Tat Tsang. She is also author of *I am Ho Sik Ying, 55 Years Old* (2013), *Everyday Life in the Age of Resistance* (2015), *Intimacy and Erotic Justice* (in press) and co-author of *Umbrella Politics Quartet* (2015). She also uses documentary films to explore the integration of arts and scholarship.

Yiqian Hu received her PhD from Social Work & Social Administration Department at The University of Hong Kong. Her research interests cover the transformation of intimacy, sexuality, and gender in contemporary China, gender and sex politics in everyday life, and qualitative methodology. Her research topics include the intimacy of Shanghai divorced mothers, and the settlement of Chinese rural–urban migrant families.

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