

Assessing the *Tongzhi* Label: Self-Identification and Public Opinion

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ABSTRACT



Tongzhi is one of several Chinese terms that refer to individuals who are attracted to the same sex. Using data from two different surveys in Hong Kong, this research note examines how the term *tongzhi* coexists with other terms. We investigate the prevalence of self-identification as *tongzhi*, and we explore the extent to which using the term *tongzhi* influences public attitudes toward gay people and gay rights. Activists began popularizing the term *tongzhi* in the late 1980s, but less than one third of the participants in our 2008 survey of sexual orientation minorities ($n = 728$) described themselves as *tongzhi*. Using a split-ballot experiment in a 2013 public opinion poll ($n = 831$), we found that attitudes toward gay people and gay rights were not significantly impacted by whether questions were phrased in terms of *tongzhi* or the main alternative term *tongxinglianzhe*. We discuss how our findings can enrich understandings of earlier research and illuminate avenues for future study.

KEYWORDS

China; gay; Hong Kong; identity; lesbian; public opinion; *tongzhi*

The language of identification can influence sexual minorities' sense of self and the way that they are perceived by others. In English-speaking parts of the world, for example, numerous terms refer to individuals who are attracted to the same sex, but some terms are preferred over others (Glazer, 2010). As an act of self-definition, an individual might identify as *gay* while rejecting alternative terms such as *homosexual*. These labels also influence public opinion. Some studies in the United States have shown that referring to "gays and lesbians," as opposed to "homosexuals," increases the public's acceptance of this minority group and support for their rights (Hechkopf, 2010; Saad, 2005).

Of course, English-speaking societies are not the only ones to have multiple ways of referring to people who are attracted to the same sex. In culturally Chinese societies, *tongzhi* (同志) is one of the terms that serve this purpose.

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In Chinese, the term *tongzhi* is used as an alternative to other terms, such as *tongxinglianzhe* (同性戀者), which also appear frequently in public discourse to denote individuals with same-sex attraction. Even in English texts, some writers have adopted the transliteration *tongzhi* to refer to Chinese individuals who are attracted to the same sex (e.g., Chou, 1997; To, 2003).¹

To the best of our knowledge, there has not been published quantitative research on the term *tongzhi*'s usage and significance. This research note begins to fill that gap. Drawing on data from two surveys, this note examines how the term *tongzhi* coexists with other terminological options in the Hong Kong context. By shedding light on how the term *tongzhi* operates, we hope to help researchers make better-informed decisions concerning language. These decisions can arise at various stages of research, ranging from the solicitation of research participants (e.g., should participants be referred to as *tongzhi*?) to the development of survey instruments (e.g., would the term *tongzhi* bias responses?).

The remainder of this research note unfolds in four parts. It begins by providing readers with a primer on gay activists' appropriation of the term *tongzhi*. This note then presents survey data from sexual orientation minorities² in Hong Kong to investigate the prevalence of self-identification as *tongzhi* and to examine whether self-identified *tongzhis* also adopt or eschew alternative identifiers. Next, this note shifts the focus to the general public. Using data from a public opinion survey in Hong Kong, we examine the extent to which using the term *tongzhi* influences public attitudes toward gay people and gay rights. Finally, this note will conclude by discussing how our data can enrich understandings of earlier research as well as illuminate avenues for future study.

Development of the term *tongzhi*

The Chinese characters for *tongzhi* translate literally as “same will.” The term has a substantial history in the Chinese language. Sun Yat-sen, a revolutionary leader in the early 20th century whom many honor as the founder of modern China, famously stated in his will: “*Geming shangwei chenggong, tongzhi rengxu nuli!*” (“The revolution has not yet succeeded; comrades we must struggle still!”; (Martin, 2003, p. 23). The Chinese Communist Party later popularized using *tongzhi* to mean “comrade” when referring to fellow party members and compatriots. The use of *tongzhi* in this old political context has, however, fallen out of favor since the political and economic reforms of the 1980s in the People's Republic of China (A. D. Wong, 2005).

Meanwhile, some gay activists appropriated the term *tongzhi* as their identity label. Michael Lam, a cultural critic and writer in Hong Kong, claimed that he first used *tongzhi* as an inside joke among friends in his local articles during the mid-1980s (Lam, 2003). The term gained popularity

in Hong Kong when Edward Lam, curator of the first Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, used *tongzhi* in the festival's Chinese title in 1989 (Chou, 1997; Lam, 2003; A. D. Wong, 2005). Over time, gays' and lesbians' appropriation of the term *tongzhi* spread beyond Hong Kong to other parts of Greater China and to Chinese diasporic communities around the world (Ho, 2008).

Activists adopted the word *tongzhi* because they sought an alternative to the existing identificatory terms for referring to individuals who experience same-sex desires. By the late 1980s in Hong Kong, *tongxinglianzhe* (同性戀者) and *gay* (sometimes transliterated into the Chinese character 基, i.e., *gei*) were the most widely used terms for referring to individuals with same-sex desires (Chou, 1997). Both of these terms had derogatory connotations at the time.

Tongxinglianzhe is often understood to be the Chinese counterpart to the English term *homosexual*, although the Chinese characters in *tongxinglianzhe* can be translated more literally as "same-gender loving person." Like the English word *homosexual*, *tongxinglianzhe* has been used widely in legal and medical discourses. As such, commentators have suggested that *tongxinglianzhe* has a history of carrying connotations of pathology and illness (A. D. Wong, 2008; D. Wong, 2011).

Like *tongxinglianzhe*, the Cantonese transliteration of "gay" also has had negative connotations. While the English term *gay* is often associated with pride and has a literal meaning of happiness, those aspects were diminished and perhaps lost in transliteration. This is apparent in how Cantonese speakers use the transliteration *gei* in collocations with other words to produce derogatory meanings (A. D. Wong, 2008; D. Wong, 2011). For example, *gaau gei* (搞基) in Cantonese refers to "engaging in homosexuality," where *gaau* is a verb that usually conveys involvement in an act that is socially disapproved. Meanwhile, *gei lou* (基佬) refers to homosexual men, in which *lou* is a suffix usually attached to men of lower classes.

Both the term *tongxinglianzhe* and the transliteration of "gay" were used extensively in local media coverage of the 1980 MacLennan Incident, which concerned the mysterious death of a young male police inspector in Hong Kong suspected to have engaged in sexual acts with a male prostitute (Chou, 1997). The incident, for the first time, stirred intense discussions about homosexuality in Hong Kong. In public discourse from the MacLennan Incident up to the decriminalization of "buggery" (i.e., anal intercourse) in 1991, *tongxinglianzhe* and the Cantonese transliteration of "gay" came to be associated with the negative image of homosexual men "engaging in illegal, immoral and indecent sexual behavior" (D. Wong, 2011, p. 156). Against this backdrop, activists adopted a new term, *tongzhi*, as a more positive identity label that they perceived as carrying connotations of respect, equality, and resistance (A. D. Wong, 2005).

In addition to using the term *tongzhi* to avoid the negative connotations of alternative options, some individuals prefer the term *tongzhi* because of its indigeneity (Chou, 1997; D. Wong, 2011). The transliteration of the word *gay* from English clearly has foreign origins. *Tongxinglianzhe* also lacks indigeneity in that it refers to homosexuals generally, including homosexuals from diverse cultural contexts. In contrast, commentators often use the word *tongzhi* to refer exclusively to individuals in Chinese contexts. The word *tongzhi* conveys cultural specificity, helping to cultivate a shared positive identity and sense of solidarity among sexual orientation minorities in Chinese contexts and, to some extent, other sexual minorities in Chinese contexts including transgender people (D. Wong, 2011). Some commentators also deliberately use the word *tongzhi*, even in English texts, to remind audiences that the experiences of sexual minorities in Chinese settings sometimes differ substantially from the experiences of their counterparts in other cultural contexts (e.g., Chou, 1997).

Over the years, some activists have attempted to use the term *tongzhi* as an umbrella term covering all sexualities outside the mainstream and all people who dissent from heteronormativity, bringing the term's meaning closer to that of the reappropriated term *queer* in English; however, such efforts have waned since the late 1990s (King, 2001). Commentators believe that the public usually understands *tongzhi* to refer only to individuals who desire same-sex partners (Chou, 1997; King, 2001).

While the reasons for appropriating the term *tongzhi* are relatively clear, other aspects of the term are more opaque. For example, there is very little literature on the extent to which sexual orientation minorities self-identify with the term. In a qualitative study based on 37 interviews of sexual orientation minorities in Hong Kong, A. D. Wong (2008) found that interviewees who were activists preferred the term *tongzhi*, but their non-activist counterparts did not. Beyond A. D. Wong's research, we are not aware of any other existing empirical studies on the prevalence of self-identification as *tongzhi*. This research note presents survey data to address that information gap.

This research note also sheds light on how the general public responds to the term *tongzhi*. Surely, activists appropriated the term to construct a positive identity for sexual orientation minorities. The social understanding of language is, however, fluid. In a content analysis of a popular Hong Kong newspaper, A. D. Wong (2005) found that the term *tongzhi* was often used derisively. His research showed that opponents of homosexuality can "reappropriate" the term *tongzhi*, using it in ways that activists did not intend. Meanwhile, it is possible that alternative terms such as *tongxinglianzhe* have shed some of their negative connotations as Hong Kong society becomes more accepting of sexual orientation diversity. Using survey data, this research note will examine whether the general public responds differently to the terms *tongzhi* and *tongxinglianzhe*.

Self-identification as *tongzhi*

In this part of the research note, we investigate the prevalence of self-identification as *tongzhi* among people in Hong Kong who say they are not heterosexual. Our analysis is based on an online survey of Hong Kong individuals who self-identify as having a sexual orientation other than heterosexual. The survey asked respondents to describe themselves by selecting one or more options from a list of self-identification labels, and *tongzhi* was one of the options. The survey also asked respondents about their demographic characteristics and experiences as sexual orientation minorities in Hong Kong. Two authors of this research note conducted this brief and anonymous Internet survey in 2008. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received prior to fielding the survey.

The study primarily used a snowball sampling strategy for recruitment. Although snowball sampling does not generate a random sample, it is a well-accepted methodology for accessing stigmatized and hidden populations (Bucher & Raess, 2007; Weiss, 2007). Snowball sampling recruits respondents through social networks. It is thus a sampling method that risks excluding “isolates” who are insufficiently connected to such networks. Increasing sample size and diversifying the channels of survey distribution help to reduce these risks (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Southern et al., 2008). Accordingly, the 2008 study recruited a large sample through four different channels.

First, the research team solicited survey participants via e-mail. The team circulated a bilingual (Chinese and English) solicitation message on various Listservs for sexual minority community groups. The solicitation was e-mailed in two waves spaced 6 months apart. Along with asking sexual orientation minorities to take the online survey, the solicitation asked recipients to pass the solicitation to other sexual orientation minorities. Second, the research team forwarded the solicitation to self-identified sexual orientation minorities on two social networking websites; one Web site catered to individuals seeking sexual activity, while the other catered to individuals seeking platonic and professional relationships. Third, the research team posted the solicitation on Internet bulletin boards and blogs that target sexual orientation minority readers. Fourth, the solicitation was distributed as a postcard at Hong Kong’s annual International Day Against Homophobia March and at bars frequented by sexual orientation minorities.

These recruitment efforts generated 792 responses from individuals in Hong Kong. Our analysis sample consists of 728 respondents after excluding 26 respondents who were under 18 years old, 35 respondents who did not report their age, and three respondents who did not answer the survey’s question about identity labels. The age range of the analysis sample was 18–72 ($M = 27.3$, $SD = 8.9$). Of those who responded to demographic questions, 43% identified as male, 57% as female, and 0.1% identified as

“other” (e.g., transgender). The highest level of educational attainment for 39% of respondents consisted of secondary education or less; another 9% held associate degrees; 38% held bachelor’s degrees; and 14% held graduate degrees. Eighty-four percent of respondents identified as ethnic Chinese. Overall, the sample reflected the diverse segments of Hong Kong’s general population. On average, however, the respondents were younger than the general public and had completed more formal education. The sample also included an overrepresentation of Whites (Caucasians). Of the survey respondents who reported their race, 10% identified as White. In contrast, only 1% of the general public identified as White in Hong Kong’s 2011 census (Census and Statistics Department, 2012).

The online survey was conducted in both Chinese and English. Among the survey participants, 543 individuals (75%) took the Chinese version of the survey, and 185 (25%) took the English version. A majority (52%) of the English-language participants identified as ethnic Chinese. Early in the survey, the respondents, all of whom said they were not heterosexual, were presented a list of identification labels and asked to check all the labels that they would use to describe themselves. Table 1 shows the 11 identification labels that the survey presented to each respondent, in the order that they were presented. In each row, the Chinese and English labels have been paired with their approximate counterparts. We included the transliterated term *tongzhi* as an option in the English version of the survey, so that we could examine whether the term *tongzhi* had crossed over from Chinese to English. Meanwhile, the Chinese version of the survey included a few English words. The Chinese-language survey kept the word *gay* in English, as opposed to using the character 基, because the negative connotations of that Chinese character were so strong that we thought respondents would be unlikely to select it. To be consistent, the Chinese version of the survey kept the word *lesbian* in English and also listed *les*, which is a common abbreviation used in Hong Kong.

The survey’s findings provide a helpful snapshot of *tongzhi* self-identification in Hong Kong. As of 2008, *tongzhi* was a self-identification that had been adopted by a segment of sexual orientation minorities in Hong Kong. The term had not been adopted universally. Among Chinese-language respondents, 30% selected the term *tongzhi*. Among English-language respondents, 12% selected the transliteration of *tongzhi* as a self-identification label, demonstrating that the term had crossed over from Chinese to the English language in Hong Kong. Among Chinese- and English-language respondents combined, 25% selected *tongzhi*. In contrast to the fact that only a minority of respondents selected *tongzhi*, 61% of all respondents selected “homosexual” (同性戀), and 64% selected either “gay” or “lesbian.”

Interestingly, for respondents who did choose *tongzhi*, the label was selected in addition to other terms. Among respondents who selected

Table 1. Self-identification labels selected by sexual orientation minorities in Hong Kong.

English Survey		Chinese Survey		Combined
Response Options	Participants	Response Options	Participants	Participants
Homosexual	52%	同性戀	63%	61%
Bisexual	18%	雙性戀	22%	21%
Gay	47%	Gay	23.9%	30%
	(68% of male respondents)		(63% of male respondents)	(65% of male respondents)
Man who has sex with men (MSM)	24%	與男性有性關係的男人(MSM)	15%	17% (39% of male participants)
	(37% of male respondents)		(40% of male respondents)	
Lesbian	19%	Lesbian (les)	43%	37%
	(51% of female respondents)		(66% of female respondents)	(64% of female participants)
Woman who has sex with women (WSW)	9%	與女性有性關係的女人(WSW)	21%	18%
	(24% of female respondents)		(32% of female respondents)	(31% of female participants)
Tongzhi	12%	同志	30%	25%
Women-loving woman	15%	會愛上女人的女人	37%	32%
	(40% of female respondents)		(58% of female respondents)	(55% of female respondents)
Lala	3%	拉拉	12%	10%
	(8% of female respondents)		(19% of female respondents)	(17% of female respondents)
Same-gender loving	20%	與同性相愛之人	39%	34%
Queer	16%	酷兒 / 酷異 / 孳 (Queer)	14%	15%

Note. Data come from an online survey of sexual orientation minorities in Hong Kong conducted in 2008 (English survey: $n = 185$; Chinese survey: $n = 543$; combined: $n = 728$).

tongzhi, almost all (97%) of them also identified as “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual” (雙性戀) and/or “homosexual” (同性戀). Only 2% of respondents selected *tongzhi* exclusively. This scenario contrasts with the increasing mainstream belief in the United States and some other English-speaking societies that individuals who identify as “gay” often completely eschew the term “homosexual” as a stigmatized identity (Peters, 2014). Experience in contexts such as the United States might tempt researchers to understand the term *tongzhi* as an exclusionary substitute for other terms, but our findings suggest that this approach should be avoided.

Impact on public opinion

This section of the research note queries whether using the term *tongzhi* as opposed to *tongxinglian* impacts public opinion about gay people and gay rights. Our analysis is based on a 2013 telephone survey that three of this research note’s authors designed. After receipt of IRB approval, the survey was conducted by the Social Sciences Research Center (SSRC) at the University of Hong Kong.

SSRC interviewed 850 people age 18 and over by telephone in June 2013. The survey was based on a probability sample of landline telephone numbers in Hong Kong. Interviews took 8 minutes to complete on average ($SD = 3.4$ minutes), and almost all interviews (98%) were conducted in Cantonese, which is consistent with language patterns in Hong Kong. The remainder was conducted in English. The cooperation rate was 78% (AAPOR Cooperation Rate 2), and the overall response rate for the survey was 15% (AAPOR Response Rate 4).

In this research note, we restrict the sample to the 831 interviews that were conducted in Cantonese. We do not analyze the surveys conducted in English because the term *tongzhi* was not used in those interviews. We focus on seven items that measure attitudes toward gay people in Hong Kong. For all seven items, we randomly assigned each respondent to one of two conditions. One half of the respondents were randomly assigned questions phrased in terms of *tongzhi*; the other half were assigned questions phrased in terms of *tongxinglianzhe* (and *tongxinglian* for brevity). We designed this experiment to investigate the impact of language on attitudes toward gays and lesbians.

The first item asked “How accepting are you of [*tongzhi/tongxinglianzhe*]?” and had response options of “very,” “moderately,” “a little,” and “not at all accepting.” The next six items were “A person’s sexual orientation does not affect whether I accept that person”; “It does not matter to me whether my friends are [*tongzhi/tongxinglian*] or straight”; “Parents should love their children regardless of whether their children are [*tongzhi/tongxinglian*] or straight”; “[*tongzhi/tongxinglianzhe*] make me nervous”; “[*tongzhi/tongxinglianzhe*] are immoral”; “[*tongzhi/tongxinglianzhe*] should be avoided whenever possible.” Response options were “completely agree,” “somewhat agree,” “neutral,” “somewhat disagree,” and “completely disagree.” We chose these items based on existing scales (e.g., Morrison & Morrison, 2003; Wright, Adams, & Bernat, 1999) because of their relevance to Hong Kong.

In Table 2, we show the impact of using the term *tongzhi* versus *tongxinglianzhe* on attitudes toward gays and lesbians. According to chi-square tests, there are no statistically significant differences between the two terms in any of the items.

After interviewers asked respondents about their attitudes toward gays and lesbians, they asked: “Do you agree or disagree that Hong Kong should have a law that protects people from being discriminated against because of their sexual orientation?” Again, the response options were “completely agree,” “somewhat agree,” “neutral,” “somewhat disagree,” and “completely disagree.” This question did not use the terms *tongzhi* or *tongxinglianzhe*; however, we investigate whether exposing respondents to the respective terms in preceding questions primes respondents in a way that impacts their opinions on gay legal rights. To prime an individual is to stimulate that individual’s retrieval of information or feelings that he or she already

Table 2. Attitudes toward sexual orientation minorities, by terminology used (percentages shown).

<i>A. How accepting are you of [tongzhi/tongxinglian]?</i> 你有幾接受[同志/同性戀者]?				
	<i>Tongzhi</i>	<i>Tongxinglian</i>	Entire Sample	χ^2 test
Very accepting	22	22	22	$\chi^2(3) = 0.61$ $p = .89$
Moderately accepting	35	37	36	
A little accepting	20	20	20	
Not at all accepting	23	21	22	
<i>B. A person's sexual orientation does not affect whether I accept that person</i> 我接受唔接受一個人，唔係基於佢嘅性傾向				
	<i>Tongzhi</i>	<i>Tongxinglian</i>	Entire Sample	χ^2 test
Completely Agree	57	54	56	$\chi^2(4) = 1.61$ $p = .80$
Somewhat Agree	18	18	18	
Neutral	14	15	15	
Somewhat Disagree	3	4	4	
Completely Disagree	8	9	8	
<i>C. It does not matter to me whether my friends are [tongzhi/tongxinglian] or straight</i> 我嘅朋友係[同志/同性戀]定係異性戀對我沒有影響				
	<i>Tongzhi</i>	<i>Tongxinglian</i>	Entire Sample	χ^2 test
Completely Agree	67	69	68	$\chi^2(4) = 6.08$ $p = .19$
Somewhat Agree	10	13	12	
Neutral	11	7	9	
Somewhat Disagree	5	4	5	
Completely Disagree	6	6	6	
<i>D. Parents should love their children regardless of whether their children are [tongzhi/tongxinglian] or straight</i> 無論佢哋嘅子女係[同志/同性戀]定係異性戀，父母都應該愛佢哋嘅子女				
	<i>Tongzhi</i>	<i>Tongxinglian</i>	Entire Sample	χ^2 test
Completely Agree	82	85	84	$\chi^2(4) = 1.96$ $p = .74$
Somewhat Agree	11	8	9	
Neutral	5	5	5	
Somewhat Disagree	1	1	1	
Completely Disagree	2	1	2	
<i>E. [Tongzhi/Tongxinglian] make me nervous</i> [同志/同性戀者]會令我緊張				
	<i>Tongzhi</i>	<i>Tongxinglian</i>	Entire Sample	χ^2 test
Completely Agree	10	9	9	$\chi^2(4) = 1.51$ $p = .83$
Somewhat Agree	14	16	15	
Neutral	14	15	15	
Somewhat Disagree	11	12	11	
Completely Disagree	51	48	50	
<i>F. [Tongzhi/Tongxinglian] are immoral</i> [同志/同性戀者]係唔道德嘅				
	<i>Tongzhi</i>	<i>Tongxinglian</i>	Entire Sample	χ^2 test
Completely Agree	16	14	15	$\chi^2(4) = 4.95$ $p = .29$
Somewhat Agree	6	7	7	
Neutral	21	17	19	
Somewhat Disagree	12	16	14	
Completely Disagree	45	45	45	
<i>G. [Tongzhi/Tongxinglian] should be avoided whenever possible</i> 盡可能都會避開[同志/同性戀者]				
	<i>Tongzhi</i>	<i>Tongxinglian</i>	Entire Sample	χ^2 test
Completely Agree	12	9	10	$\chi^2(4) = 4.79$ $p = .31$
Somewhat Agree	9	9	9	
Neutral	15	12	13	
Somewhat Disagree	14	13	13	
Completely Disagree	51	58	54	

Note. Data come from a telephone survey of the Hong Kong adult population conducted in 2013 ($n = 831$). Sample size varies by item due to item non-response. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Sample limited to interviews conducted in Cantonese. Data are unweighted.

possesses (Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). We examined whether exposing respondents to a particular word—*tongzhi* or *tongxinglianzhe*—in previous questions would stimulate respondents to retrieve particular thoughts or feelings about gay people and their rights. For example, if the term *tongxinglianzhe* has particularly negative connotations, it might stimulate the retrieval of negative stereotypes in someone’s mind, resulting in a rejection of gay rights. The chi-square test in Table 3 shows, however, that respondents’ support for antidiscrimination legislation to advance gay rights did not differ significantly depending on whether respondents had been exposed to the term *tongzhi* or *tongxinglianzhe* in previous interview questions.

In sum, the terminological difference between *tongzhi* and *tongxinglianzhe* did not produce any statistically significant differences in people’s attitudes toward gay people or gay rights. These findings contrast with research from the United States that compares the terms *gay* and *homosexual*. Surveys from the United States have shown that phrasing questions in terms of “homosexuals,” instead of “gays and lesbians,” is associated with lower rates of accepting gay people in the contexts of employment and military service (Hechkopf, 2010; Saad, 2005). One other study from the United States found that asking about “gay and lesbian couples,” as opposed to “homosexual couples,” did not affect the overall level of support for marriage or civil unions for same-sex couples, but it affected the intensity of attitudes (McCabe & Heerwig, 2011).

Research implications

The findings from the two surveys that we have discussed shed light on how to understand earlier studies and how to think about future research. Our

Table 3. Attitudes toward an anti-discrimination law, by terminology used in previous questions (percentages shown).

	<i>Tongzhi</i> used in previous questions	<i>Tongxinglianzhe</i> used in previous questions	Entire Sample	χ^2 test
Completely Agree	46	47	47	χ^2 (4) = 4.02 $p = .40$
Somewhat Agree	16	17	17	
Neutral	21	16	19	
Somewhat Disagree	3	5	4	
Completely Disagree	13	15	14	

Note. Data come from a telephone survey of the Hong Kong adult population conducted in 2013 ($n = 818$). Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Sample limited to interviews conducted in Cantonese. Data are unweighted.

research supports existing accounts that cast doubt on the popularity of self-identification with the term *tongzhi* among individuals in Hong Kong who are not heterosexual (e.g., D. Wong, 2011). While our research cannot speak to the term's popularity after 2008, it appears that statements about the term's popularity as a self-identification label up until 2008 have been overstated. For example, Chou has stated that *tongzhi* is "the most popular contemporary Chinese word for lesbians, bisexuals, and gay people" (Chou, 2001, p. 27), and this claim has been echoed by other scholars (e.g., Lee, 2003, p. 158). Our survey on self-identification, however, encourages critical reevaluation of such assertions (cf. A. D. Wong, 2008).

Our research also provides some guidance on how to understand existing public opinion data. In the past, surveys about public opinion in Hong Kong have deployed different terms. For example, the Hong Kong government conducted a widely publicized public opinion survey in 2005 concerning gay people and gay rights. Its survey instrument referred to gay people exclusively as *tongxinglianzhe* (Home Affairs Bureau, 2006). In contrast, a non-governmental organization called Community Business conducted its own public opinion survey in 2011 and 2012. Its survey instrument referred to gay people as *tongzhi* as well as *tongxinglianzhe* and *tongxinglianrenshi* (同性戀人士), which is closely related to the term *tongxinglianzhe* (Vernon & Yik, 2012). There are many potential explanations for why these two surveys' findings about public opinion differ, including the substantial time gap between the surveys. Readers familiar with research from the United States about the difference between the terms *gay* and *homosexual* might wonder whether the two Hong Kong surveys also produced divergent results partly because of their difference in terminology for gay people. Our research suggests that the change in terminology may not have had as strong an impact as one might predict at first blush.

In terms of the path ahead, future studies could provide more current rates of self-identification with the term *tongzhi*. There are reasons to believe that the term *tongzhi* has become a more popular means of self-identification since the 2008 study. For example, the term has become popularized through widespread advocacy campaigns that use the term *tongzhi*, and some popular celebrities have embraced the term. Use of the term *tongzhi* in positive news reports, such as mainstream media coverage of the Hong Kong Pride Parade (e.g., Chan & Poon, 2013), may also have further popularized the term *tongzhi*. At the same time, it is possible that alternative terms such as *tongxinglianzhe* and *gay* have shed negative connotations over the years and have therefore also become more widely embraced. In particular, individuals may possibly be more willing to self-identify as *gay* now because the *gay* label has been integrated into Hong Kong culture over time, eroding the label's feeling of foreignness (cf. D. Wong, 2011). Future research could investigate these potential changes.

Future research could also further explore how different identification labels interact. While our analysis sheds light on the fact that self-identified *tongzhi* often also describe themselves with other labels for sexual orientation minorities, it did not evaluate the strength of respondents' relative preferences among the labels that they use. Nor did we ask respondents to explain whether different labels apply at different times or under different circumstances. Future research should explore some of these questions about self-identification. It is also worth reiterating that our self-identification study was based on a convenience sample. This sampling method might have contributed to an overstatement or understatement of self-identification rates. We encourage future research to address this limitation by adopting a variety of different sampling methods. In addition, future research could expand beyond Hong Kong, investigating the prevalence of self-identifying as *tongzhi* in other parts of the world.

Importantly, our research underscores the importance of using other terms in addition to *tongzhi* in designing future studies. If researchers seek to study sexual orientation minorities in Hong Kong, materials for recruiting research subjects should be cast in terms that go beyond *tongzhi*. For example, a solicitation asking individuals to participate in a study about the *tongzhi* community risks recruiting only a particular subgroup of sexual orientation minorities in Hong Kong. Similar limitations might also exist in societies outside Hong Kong where *tongzhi* is used as an identifier.

With respect to public opinion, future research could explore whether replacing *tongzhi* with *tongxinglianzhe*, or vice versa, affects public opinion in ways that our split-ballot experiment could not detect. For example, using the term *tongzhi* in advocacy literature might make more of a difference than it did in our public opinion poll. It is possible, for example, that audiences are more likely to associate the term *tongzhi* with positive attributes when it appears in advocacy materials because of the term's historical linkages to political reform and solidarity. If this turns out to be true, the effectiveness of advocacy might be influenced by whether the term *tongzhi* is used.

Finally, as an overarching takeaway, this research note warns readers against analogizing too strongly between the *tongzhi/tonxinglianzhe* linguistic choice in Hong Kong and the "gay"/"homosexual" linguistic choice in Anglo-American contexts. The analogy was weak in our analysis of self-identification and in our analysis of public opinion. Staying vigilant of the analogy's weakness would help researchers to think more clearly when developing future studies on the term *tongzhi* and the label's constituent populations.

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Notes

1. This research note presents transliterated Chinese terms in italics. We use Mandarin transliterations for the term *tongzhi* and terms with the root *tongxinglian*, as well as for a quote from Sun Yat-Sen. We use Mandarin transliterations in these contexts because the Mandarin versions have become popularized in English writing. For other Chinese terms, we use Cantonese transliterations because Cantonese is the dominant dialect in Hong Kong.
2. Clarification on this research note's own use of terminology: for concision, this note generally uses the English terms *gay* and *gay and lesbian* when referring to individuals who are attracted to the same sex. This note sometimes uses the more generic phrase *sexual orientation minority* to refer to individuals who are attracted to the same sex, even though it is a more cumbersome phrase, to underscore the fact that not all sexual orientation minorities self-identify with labels such as *gay* or *tongzhi*. When referring to a broader set of individuals including persons who are transgender or intersex, this note uses the phrase *sexual minority* as opposed to *sexual orientation minority*.

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