

Queering Female Kinship Terms:
Reappropriation of *jiemei* and Reworking
of Sexual Identities in China

By

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Abstract

In contemporary Chinese contexts, language is an important tool for people to negotiate identities and create distinctions. This paper analyzes the usage of female kinship terms among gay men in a Chinese queer advocacy group, focusing on one specific term *jiemei* (sisters). Through both in-person and digital ethnographic fieldwork, including one-on-one in-depth interviews with group members, I explore how the queer group members, as a distinct community of practice, continuously construct stances, social relationships, and negotiate their gender and sexual identities by reappropriating the term *jiemei*. By proposing a typology of *jiemei register*, with the mechanism of higher orders of indexicality, I argue that not only is *jiemei* multifunctional and multifaceted across social contexts, but the indexed intimacy and solidarity, yet sometimes dialectical distancing, associated with *jiemei* is bi-culturally unique. In the meantime, by combining theories of language ideologies and tactics of intersubjectivity, I show the heterogeneous *jiemei register*, shifting identities and contesting language ideologies among the queer group members contribute to their divergence from and challenge to a monolithic and stereotypical social type: stigmatized effeminacy under societal heteronormativity and binary gender roles. In summary, through a linguistic anthropological perspective, this paper helps better understand the innovative language use of Chinese queer community in relation to their gender and sexual identity within and beyond the group.

Introduction

In the spring of 2021, during my volunteer interview with PFLAG China¹ in Suzhou, the interviewer, Chunchun², referred to his male colleague, a core member of PFLAG China in his early 30s, in a blatantly feminine way, “You will later have the opportunity to meet *Ruima* (睿妈, Mother Rui) from the committee once embarking on the team, and I am sure you will love him³!” It was not until another interviewer jokingly explained to me that *Ruima* is gay that I realized something interesting was going on⁴. As I gradually befriended this group, I was fascinated by the rich corpus of the female kinship terms they deployed, along with various dramatic mannerisms. These gender-inverted, transgressive, and exaggerated terms (also see camp talk, Harvey, 2000), including but not limited to *jiemei* (姐妹, sisters), *mama* (妈妈, mother), and *nühai* (女孩, girl) pervaded the community across different social events. Interestingly, as of the summer of 2022 with long-term participation and observation, I eventually found myself accustomed to this register among the group members, even adopting *jiemei* myself and engaging in the *sisters register* with them on a frequent basis.

As I discovered, far from being exclusive to gay men, these “non-normative” terms were readily accepted and shared by other group-affiliated members, including lesbians and straight

¹ Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays China, founded in Guangzhou in 2008 and renamed to True Self (出色伙伴) in 2021, is an independent grassroots organization formed by LGBT individuals, their parents, friends, and allies to support LGBT people and their family. My main field site for this research, PFLAG Suzhou, is one of its many chapters. For more information on the organization, see <https://www.chuse8.com/>

² All the names of my research participants appearing in this paper are pseudonyms (either voluntarily chosen or randomly assigned) to protect their identity.

³ All the interview quotes and excerpts throughout this paper were transcribed and translated from Mandarin Chinese to English by me. I intentionally keep the address terms, which are key to my research, in the original Chinese form, like *jie* and *ma*.

⁴ Note that all third-person pronouns in the singular form in Mandarin Chinese share a unified pronunciation (*tā*) regardless of gender, which leads to my failure of identifying the gender of the referent by conversation.

allies. The seemingly simple linguistic choices nevertheless led me to a series of questions: Why do gay men from the group use female kinship terms and how exactly do they use them? Are there multiple while hidden meanings and functions behind these terms? How can a single lexical choice, along with other embodied characteristics, inform the complicated interpersonal relationship and group dynamics? Why do other members from the group would adopt the same address terms for communication as those gay men do? With all the questions in mind, my personal experience as a volunteer provided me with a great opportunity to investigate and reveal this mystery as an ethnographer.

Focusing on *jiemei*⁵ (sisters) among all the female kinship terms used among the group members, this paper examines how queer men⁶ in China creatively engage and contest with specific lexical choice to interact and negotiate their identities and social relations. It will proceed as follows: First, I will lay out the foundational theories on language and identity (gender and sexuality) that illuminate my own research. By reviewing relevant literature on (mostly Western) gay speech with a focus on gender inversion, this paper suggests a more localized and contextual perspective to analyze linguistic features that are characteristic of a particular social group. Next, I will present my research methodology before tracing the historical development and recent transformation of *jiemei* in the era of social media with its heteronormative and family-centered basis in the Chinese context. Then, I will elaborate on its multiple sociocultural meanings as an indeterminate social index (Kiesling, 2004) as well as an appropriated gay register. I will also show how group members variously manipulate the

⁵ My choice of *jiemei* among the rich lexicon presented in the appendix is motivated by a combination of my personal interest, observed frequent word use in the group, as well as the valid representation after preliminary research.

⁶ For clarification, in this paper, “queer men” is worded politically but factually a synonym for “gay men” given my targeted research participants.

intertextual gap (Bauman & Briggs, 1990) of *jiemei* to present themselves with flexibility vis-à-vis the enregistered gay speech—an imagined social type of effeminate gay men (Johnsen, 2008), or “0s” in Chinese context (Zheng, 2015; Zhou, 2023). Finally, I will draw the conclusions based on my current findings with potential future areas of study that my findings might recommend.

Theorizing on Language, Gender and Sexuality

Identity has always been an important topic in language and sexuality research (Milani, 2017). In their groundbreaking work on language and identity, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) consider identity “as an outcome of intersubjectively negotiated practices and ideologies” (p. 493). Aligning with post-structuralism and performativity theories (e.g., Butler, 1990; Leap, 1996; Barrett, 1999; Hall, 1999; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Chun, 2016; Milani, 2017; Jones, 2018; Calder, 2020; Zhou, 2022), I consider identities, especially those gender and sexuality, as social productions, constructed and materialized through linguistic and other semiotic practices/performances. Given their co-constructed nature interactionally and contextually, identities are multiple, transient, and fluid—not essential or predetermined. In recent decades, the fields of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology have thus attached great importance to locally organized identities as opposed to macro-social categories (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Calder, 2020).

Acting long as important components of academic inquiry, gender and sexuality are closely connected with language and other semiotic practices. In the first place, according to Cameron and Kulick (2003), gender precedes sexuality in that the construction of sexuality

(specifically being heterosexual or not) is mainly based on one's attributed speech style, either being gender-appropriate or gender-deviant. In other words, as they argue, "the linguistic characters that are commonly imagined to index homosexuality are often ones that also index gender" (p. 73). It is indexicality, which heavily relies on ideologies, that serves as the mechanism by which gender and sexuality are materialized through, or performed through language (Butler, 1990; Ochs, 1992; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Kiesling, 2019). Usually, indexical differentiation and categorization under socially embedded ideological framework would covertly lead to power inequality (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Zhou, 2022). Just like Anglo-Americans' use of Mock Spanish (Hill, 2008), likewise, stereotypically linking gay men's speech with femininity/effeminacy would perpetuate the discourse of gender/sexual hierarchy which idealizes hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). This again conforms to hegemonic gender ideologies promoting heteronormativity, which regulate sexuality in society and make masculinity most socially legitimate (Kiesling, 2019; Wei, 2017; Chun, 2016; Milani, 2017).

Beyond identity, similarly, social meanings and relationships are forged and developed in the process of *language-in-interaction/language-in-culture* (Kiesling, 2004; Silverstein, 2022). In other words, language is inseparable from human culture, and it is the real-time social interactions among speakers that play an essential role in shaping the specific language use. For instance, in his study on American young men's culture, in addition to the stance of "cool solidarity" it encodes, Kiesling (2004) simultaneously explores the indeterminacy of the social index/address term, *dude*. He thus argues that the complexity of language use lies in situated sociocultural contexts within which different discursive interactions occur.

Ongoing debate has persisted regarding the universality of the gay community and gay

speech patterns. A significant body of research has illuminated diverse voices and heterogeneous identities across queer communities (e.g., Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Calder, 2020). Many scholars in the third wave of sociolinguistics also seek to understand how people's positionalities are shaped by individual linguistic behaviors (Eckert, 2012). In the same vein, they attach great importance to the concept of *community of practice* (see Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992), which is defined as "social groupings that come together regularly for certain activities, thereby developing shared repertoires, including linguistic behavior" (Motschenbacher, 2011, p. 164). For instance, Wushu (38)⁷, a senior volunteer at PFLAG China, pointed out the current stigmatization of Chinese gay communities (e.g., promiscuity) due to stereotypical media portrayal. He thus believes that any individual's actions should not be attributed to the collective level. Following this principle and dimensions of contextuality and fluidity (Motschenbacher, 2011) in Queer linguistics, I will examine the heterogeneity of the gay men's feminized speech and highlight the linguistic distinctiveness and richness of the group in the following sections.

Language Ideologies & Gender Inversion in Gay Men's Speech

Contrary to prevailing scholarly views in political science, I consider *ideologies* in my work as *regimes of value* that "operate in everyday life" following Gal & Irvine (2019, p. 13). As one of the most important theoretical concepts in linguistic anthropology, language ideologies are "the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests" (Irvine, 1989, p. 255), or "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use"

⁷ Numbers in parentheses refer to the age of each research participant.

(Silverstein, 1979, p. 193). With various forms, language ideologies could be either explicit (what people *say* about language) or implicit (how do people *actually use* language) reflected and embedded in linguistic practices (Woolard, 1998; Gal 2023). Though language ideologies reflect “partial visions of the world” (Gal & Irvine, 2019, p. 2), they allow researchers to connect between micro- and macro-level interactions to analyze various social, cultural, and political questions (Gal, 2023; Ahearn, 2021). Influenced by gender and language ideologies (Cameron, 2014), gay men are stereotypically believed to exhibit feminine characteristics in their speech, appearance, and acts (e.g., gay lisps, higher pitch, refined look, see Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Calder, 2020; Rule & Alaei, 2016). A large array of previous research has already shown that different gay communities have long been adopting various feminine terms, like “girls,” and “queens” in their daily interactions across time and region (e.g., Legman, 1941; Cory, 1951, as cited in Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Graf & Lippa, 1995; Johnson, 2004; Johnsen, 2008). The similar phenomenon can also be found in popular movies, television, and reality shows since last century (e.g., *The Boys in the Band*, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*).

However, these cues linking one’s sexual orientation are by no means universally applicable. For example, Cameron and Kulick (2003) distinguish the difference between those who sound gay and are gay. Other studies have also demonstrated the variation among gay men/lesbians in terms of their familiarity with homosexual slang or personal traits (e.g., [Penelope] Stanley, 1970; Conrad & More, 1976). In addition, gay-related linguistic features are sometimes even irrelevant to one’s sexual orientation, as Cameron and Kulick (2003) exemplify in their descriptions of gender inversions used by a high-school coach for belittling a boy’s lack of masculinity or by a college girl lying to parents about a roommate of the opposite sex. In summary, to reiterate, there is no homogenous gay community and no such thing as gay or

lesbian language, which reflects the tension between “representation” and “reality” in language and gender ideology (Cameron, 2014), or inaccurate and simplistic gendered language ideologies (Ahearn, 2021).

In contemporary Chinese context, language has become an important tool for people to negotiate identities and create distinctions (Zhang, 2017; Zhou, 2022). A few scholars have made critical contributions to linguistic shifts tied to gender and sexual identities in Chinese queer communities.⁸ Chou (2000), for example, unprecedently analyzes how *tongzhi* has been actively reappropriated from a historical token meaning “comrade” to an umbrella word referencing LGBTQ+ by Hong Kong queer activists since the 1980s. Guided by his seminal work, Wei (2017) and Zhou (2022) reflect on the recent development and changes of the homosexual-themed discourses and labels both in the setting of Chinese universities and across different social groups. However, less attention is paid to how queer individuals as members of a collective group use language in social interactions. In other words, most Chinese queer scholarship touches upon language use but do not dig into linguistic practices from an anthropological perspective. By exploring diverse ways Chinese queer communities employ linguistic and other semiotic resources to construct, consolidate and contest their identities and social relations, my research will contribute to the growing literature on the language use of underrepresented queer communities in contemporary China.

In contemporary American context, Johnson (2004) ethnographically studies how black gay men draw on black discursive and social practices to reappropriate heteronormative terms, like *house*, *family*, and *mother* with unique bi-culturality. In alignment with his work, I argue that

⁸ “Chinese” is referred in a cultural and Sinophone sense, including populations from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

Chinese society, with its historical specificity and family-focused traditional values, could also offer a unique site for studying distinctive queer community's language use. This is indeed another move towards decentering Western-centric view on the existence of a universal gay language, just as Leap and Boellstorff (2004) argue for “discarding Americanist vision” and “forging a more inclusive, respectful and decentered sexual politics” (p.7).

Take my research as an example. Even though “*jiemei*” and “sisters” may share the same denotational meaning, their respective and multiple interactional meanings/functions (Kiesling, 2004; Silverstein, 2022) indexed by distinct cultural backgrounds, changing social contexts and relationships across temporal-spatial dimensions are by no means homogenous. Chances are that different members within the same group would hold different perceptions and attitudes of *jiemei* at different times. For example, Hua Xiaodiao, a popular gay influencer on Chinese social media platform Bilibili, contrastively asserts in his episode *Gay Slang Award*⁹ that *jiemei* only circulates among Chinese lesbians, not gay men. Therefore, to truly understand what *jiemei* means for the gay men, a localized and contextual ethnography, as “the necessary partner to the analysis of discourse” (Hall & Davis, 2021, p. 93), is necessary to gain a more nuanced and holistic picture of the group dynamics.

Research Methods and Positionality

Data from this research project are primarily generated from two sources: my ethnographic fieldwork (with interviews) at PFLAG China (mainly in Suzhou) both onsite

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gEUEF46Ens>

(2021-2022) and online (2021-2024), as well as complementary textual analysis on Chinese multiple social media platforms from 2022 to 2024.

As a then-active student volunteer of PFLAG China in Suzhou, from 2021 to 2022, I participated in various community-based activities, from public coming-out story-sharing sessions, volunteer recruiting/training sessions to weekly social gatherings. My long-term engagement and established rapport even enabled me to frequently interact with the community online during the Covid-19 and after I went to study in the US, in 2022, through multiple WeChat group chats. In the meantime, interested in how community members use language to interact and negotiate their identities and social relations, I managed to conduct in-person ethnographic field work to better understand the community as well as each member through immersive participant observation.

I began conducting individual semi-structured qualitative interviews with both volunteers and other non-volunteer community members in summer 2022. As expected, it took longer for me to get community members whom I previously did not know to really talk about themselves. All 15 research participants, aged between 23 and 38 who identify themselves as gay (n=13) and lesbian (n=2), were recruited from the WeChat group chat with diverse places of birth, family backgrounds, education levels, and occupations. Apart from their own life stories as sexual minorities, I tended to focus on asking questions about gay men's feminine language use as well as their interpretation of these words and why they think gay men used them in certain contexts. Each interview lasted from 60 to 150 minutes and was digitally recorded for transcription with their consent. As I revised and developed my project, I decided to conduct follow-up online text and audio interviews with some previous research participants while recruiting and interviewing

some new interlocutors, including gay men and straight women with similar questions for more nuanced perspectives.

In addition to collecting traditional, ethnographic interviews, I have also worked in digital spaces from 2022 to 2024. While Western societies have developed sophisticated gayborhoods, Chinese queer physical space is relatively scarce (Zhou, 2022). However, given the rapid development of media technology, digital ethnography has innovatively transformed our world and life not only as a research tool but also as part of the environment and daily life (Pink et al., 2016) in the era of social media. Using digital ethnography/chatnography (Kaihko, 2019) as a research method, I incorporated several WeChat social event group chats of different sizes consisting of members of PFLAG China (and their friends, who are predominantly males), some of whom I knew and had encountered before. Except for one small-group friends I know well, I have been acting more as an observer than as a participant in other chats, given the high level of activity (sometimes over one thousand messages per day), and my limited connection to them. I have focused on following numerous conversations and paying attention to anything relevant to the research at hand, especially gender-inverted linguistic forms and styles.

I would also like to take this opportunity to reflect on my positionality in my (digital) ethnographic participant observation. I have come to realize how my research project is deeply shaped by my own multiple identities/positionalities, including both as a researcher and a member of the specific Chinese queer community I study (Shah, 2017). My own position as a volunteer and then-active member of PFLAG China since spring 2021 enables me to establish rapport and keep in frequent touch with many group members. Thus, I am grateful how my long-term deep engagement with the community, heavily built on my shared identities (Chinese

citizen, non-heterosexuality, youth generation, etc.) with the community, has greatly contributed to my smooth process of entering the field site and conducting field work with maximum access and effectiveness.

However, at the same time, the inevitable tension between estrangement/detachment and intimacy/involvement reflected in the tension between participant as an insider and observation as an outsider lingers around ethnographers (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2020). When considering my layer of identity/role as a young graduate student studying in the U.S., which is relatively distant (both geographically and socially) to my research participants/interlocutors who live and work in China and are unfamiliar with academia, not only do I find myself lacking substantive participation through daily conversations, but my connection with them seems to be somewhat shallow and fragile. Whenever others engage in conversations and discussions that I am not familiar with or lack enough context, I would feel unsure whether my personal interpretation of their language use would be valid and reliable. In addition, though I have already developed some level of rapport with group members, my abrupt presence as a researcher watching their daily activities could arguably affect how some people interact. These are emerging concerns with which I have grappled throughout my research process.

Lastly, I have also engaged extensively with a collection of relevant forum posts and texts from Chinese social media platforms including Weibo, Zhihu, and Baidu Tieba as well as Chinese male same-sex dating apps, like Blued and Fanka. To minimize biases, I have been reflexive in all my responses and personal thoughts while continuously consulting other professionals who are familiar with my research topic and context.

Decoding *jiemei* in (Heteronormative) Chinese Contexts

To give a brief background of contemporary Chinese society, homosexuality as a sexual identity and same-sex desires and practices has long been overshadowed under the heteronormative family and kinship system in China (Zheng, 2015; Wei, 2017). It was not until the 1990s that Chinese decriminalized homosexuality, de-pathologizing homosexual identities started to emerge due to both global and local social movements (e.g., *tongzhi* as an appropriated and indigenized gay identity term originated in Hong Kong, see Chou, 2000). Though the public has developed more awareness of homosexuality in Chinese culture, which contributes to the visibility of homosexual identity and alleviation of social homophobia or homophobia (Wei, 2017; Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2011), there is a lack of legal protection and official recognition of queer community in Chinese society. Given the current government's authoritarian repression of queer organizational social advocacy and LGBTQ+ content censorship in schools and mass media, numerous institutions, activists, and individuals resort to survival tactics like self-censorship, ambiguity, and euphemism when expressing their sexual identities and voicing their opinions (Zhou, 2022). In sum, overall attitudes towards sexual minorities in Chinese society tend to be conservative.

Changing Usage of *jiemei* in Contemporary China

Jiemei, literally denotes as elder (*jie*) and younger (*mei*) sisters collectively, is a female kinship term originated in Chinese traditions with great emphasis and values on family-oriented networks and traditions (e.g., Kong, 2023; Yan, 2003; Rofel, 2007). As one of the most widely used kinship terms, *jiemei* has long been recurrently appearing across a wide variety of cultural landscapes, including one of “The Four Great Classical Novels” of Chinese premodern literature,

Dream of the Red Chamber. According to the Online Chinese Dictionary, *jiemei* refers to both older and younger sisters together. It applies to the referent/addressee whether she is a biological sibling or a non-related friend with usually a common interest (e.g., *dixiong jiemei*, “brothers and sisters,” especially used among church group members). Compared with English contexts where *jiemei* is used mostly to reference kin, it contains a broader scope and is frequently used as both a referential and a direct address term. When used in the plural form, *jiemei men* (-men as a plural suffix in Mandarin Chinese, like -s in English), it could be considered an alternative for “everyone” showing politeness, respect, and intimacy. As one of my Chinese female friends and a recent college graduate Mary (23) comments,

“This is a polite, non-offensive address term mostly for general female groups. Compared with ‘everyone,’ it is more directional, and the connotation of intimacy will help create solidarity within the group. As social media becomes increasingly important in our daily interactions, these kinds of non-offensive words can bring me more sense of security when, for example, seeking help from someone I’m not familiar with.”

The dynamic use of *jiemei* becomes even more evident as she goes on to address how it functions differently between as a *referential* term and as an *address* term, “while I use it to describe the relationship between me and my good sisters, for example, “*jiemei jùhuì*” (sisters’ party), however, I will refrain from calling my best friends *jiemei* given its pragmatic function of performing politeness with general audience.” Likewise, there are some iconic parodies on Chinese social media featuring speakers ironically deploying *hao jiemei* (good sisters) to build fake sisterhood and curry favor with the higher-ups¹⁰. This same distancing and nuanced feeling

¹⁰ https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1hA4m1A7U8/?spm_id_from=333.999.0.0

associated with *jiemei* also speaks to other female participants. Rachel (24), an alumna of mine and a social media content creator, describes, “I think it sounds more of a nickname **on the internet**; in real life, I feel that calling strangers or people you are not very familiar with *jiemei* can enhance the relationship. If you don’t know the other person’s name, you can just use ‘*jiemei*’ (sisters), ‘*bao*’ (babe), ‘*jiaren*’ (family), etc. as a replacement.” Interestingly, while Gu (23), a graduate student in the US, shares the idea that “online celebrity and internet” has a huge impact on their linguistic choice, she also deems it in certain context a filler word. As she replies, “I use the word *jiemei* because there is no better word out there.” The nominal role of *jiemei* suggests that sometimes what people say does not necessarily correspond to what they mean.

In addition, recent decades have witnessed the increasing visibility of “male sisters” or *nan guimi*¹¹ in various forms of pop culture as well as people’s daily conversations. Regardless of one’s gender expression or sexual orientation, a guy could be a “male sister” with his close female friend in a deep level of friendship. It is even possible to sometimes see two heterosexual male friends jokingly use *jiemei* to strengthen homosocial relations without homosexual eroticism.¹² Thus, the applicability of *jiemei* has been continuously shifted and expanded across different social contexts, partially breaking away from its origin, which speaks to the flexibility of a social index (Kiesling, 2004) with the notion of intertextuality (Bakhtin, 1981) as well as the process of decontextualization and recontextualization (Bauman & Briggs, 1990). It has already been noteworthy that *jiemei* as a creative index is open for reinterpretation (Silverstein 2003; Gal, 2023) by only looking at its changing landscape in heterosexual indexical market (Eckert,

¹¹ *Guimi*, an online buzzword adapted from *Gui’zhong’mi’you* in traditional Chinese literature, originally refers to close female friends in a lady’s chamber.

¹² Likewise, “male mother,” or *nan mama*, is sometimes plausible and acceptable for addressing caring straight men.

2008).

Circulation of *jiemei* among Chinese Gay Men

Though lacking systemic academic record and exact origin, *jiemei* has always long been used among Chinese gay men as both Chinese premodern novels and extant literature demonstrate (e.g., Zheng, 2015). However, in the first place, why do gay men in China use feminized language like *jiemei* at all if that is at risk of breaking heteronormative social norms? To answer this fundamental question, I turn to insightful perspectives from my interlocutors for possible explanations. Many of them have touched upon how it should be considered an imitation of the original heteronormative system. Kangkang (28), a professional photographer and social justice/LGBTQ+ activist, has been fighting against gender-based violence ever since his childhood. He attributed this cultural phenomenon to the absence of means of linguistic and social expression tailored to gay communities. As he maintained,

“There is no way for gay men to find a suitable cultural vehicle to place their liking for men... We have been exposed to the heterosexual cultural system since young...and some gay men may put themselves in a feminine perspective more quickly or preferentially.”

Since the 2010s, though imbued with ideological connotations, *jiemei* register has become an increasingly popular component among gay men in China, along with Lingsh, ¹³ K-pop, and diva culture. Based on my content analysis of multiple Chinese social media platforms and interview data, the booming media technology, popular culture, and online influencers’

¹³ Lingsh, a system of lexical and phonetic characteristics derived from Taiwanese singer and gay icon Jolin Tsai’s speech pattern with a Taiwanese accent, is appropriated by the gay community in Mainland China for subculture building and identity construction.

adoption of *jiemei* have all played an important role in promoting the trendy use of *jiemei* in contemporary Chinese gay communities. Many netizens on Zhihu, Douban, and Baidu Tieba attribute this trend to a phenomenal Chinese historical TV series, *Empresses in the Palace*; others mention Chinese online influencers, among whom one of the most successful beauty influencers “lipstick brother,” Li Jiaqi, is famous for using *jiemei* as his catchphrase to attract millions of audiences. As one comment on Zhihu reads, “almost all gay men like to watch this show (*Empresses in the Palace*) whose plots are quite dramatic. Subconsciously, they start to call each other *jie’jie mei’mei* (reduplication of *jiemei*, which serves to enhance the tone of intimacy).” Correspondingly, Xigua (29), an IT consultant in Suzhou, replied to my question about when and where he first knew *jiemei* as a distinct gay register,

*“Nobody calls me jiemei, but I know this word because people in our WeChat group chat use it. I don’t have an opinion if other people use it. **Just don’t call me that.** Many short videos on Bilibili (a Chinese YouTube-like platform) also show a similar phenomenon. It must’ve started a long time ago.”*

Together with comments from those netizens, Xigua’s response elicits several interesting points. First, the way in which *jiemei* register is disseminated across multiple channels highlights the iterative and quotable quality of language as performatives (Kulick, 2003). What is more, through his explicit metapragmatic comment on *jiemei*, while he recognizes and is somewhat familiar with the prevalence of people using *jiemei* within the gay community, his assertive language ideology underlying the inappropriateness of involving with *jiemei* himself (e.g., “Just don’t call me that.”) aligns with socially dominant expectation of heterosexual masculinity and implicitly suggests that he is different from those who actively use *jiemei*. Even though attributing men with femininity in a positive way is possible, dominant heteronormativity still

makes salient the stereotypical connection between feminine men and homosexuality way by default throughout Chinese society. Therefore, the possibility of alternative integration of *jiemei* into Chinese gay communities reflects the reappropriation of a heterosexual female kinship term through manipulating the intertextual gap with extra effort.

How to Play with A Single Word

As Johnsen (2008) claims, the utterance of a word can reference pragmatic values in specific contexts. Inspired by Kiesling's framework (2004), I have identified and proposed a typology of *jiemei* register in which I will below describe and analyze specific interactions gleaned from my ethnographic data. I also think about the flexibility of the structured term using the concept of indexical ordering (Silverstein, 2003). The following discussion is divided into three major parts: (1) *jiemei* as what I call a "referential semi-code," (2) *jiemei* as an indeterminate in-group affiliative index, and (3) derivation and multimodality of *jiemei*.

***Jiemei* as Referential Semi-Code**

The semi-code nature of *jiemei* echoes Johnson's (2004) detailed and insightful ethnography on American black gay men's reappropriated and reclaimed feminine language use. Johnson explores the biculturality and dual functions of heterosexual terms in his study, arguing that black gay vernacular performance adds another layer of meaning (black gay idiom) on those terms while maintaining their original meanings. He also points out that homosexual use could disguise its vernacular meaning under the heterosexual surface. In my research, likewise, as a female kin term, besides its association with femininity, *jiemei* is stereotypically used in

conjunction with Chinese characteristic hyperfeminine performance like *sajiao* performance (Yueh, 2016) to index homosexuality not least among feminine/flamboyant men, or more specifically, 0s (bottoms) in the Chinese context according to binary sexual roles among gay men compared with 1s (tops). Thus, as more than one of my interlocutors claim, “he is a *jiemei*” in gay context is just equivalent to “he is gay,” especially a bottom.

Despite the dominant ideological framing that makes this colloquial more accessible to the Chinese heterosexual society, this somewhat unstable and covert semi-code is still not legible to all. First, just as the skit of my introduction shows, the unified pronunciation of the third person pronoun he/she/it in Mandarin Chinese as well as with the identical linguistic form of *jiemei* whether referencing women or gay men contribute to its disguise and confusion. Further, not everyone is equipped with the knowledge to identify indexical connection between saying *jiemei* and gayness from the speaker. As my data in the following sections reveal, this indexical connection is intricate in that it includes not only the speakers’ sexuality, but also their judgment about social contexts, relationship with and stance towards other participants in the discursive interaction. Now, consider the following excerpt when Zhuli (26), a group member and a friend of mine, told his awkward experience uttering *jiemei* at his workplace to me and his other gay friends at a dinner:

jiemei men (sisters)! Is it because I speak jiemei too many times when talking to you guys? I just spontaneously called one of our straight male colleagues jiemei at work today. That was so::: awkward. Thankfully, he didn't quite get what I meant. OH MY GOD, I should definitely stop saying that word to you all again.

This is a vivid example of context collapse between Zhuli and his colleague, and *jiemei* was reified as a code under the disguise of its original heterosexual meaning. In the meantime,

his explicit awkwardness conveyed by his reflexive comments proves and reinforces the coded nature of *jiemei* that would otherwise become inappropriate outside the expected gay context. In addition, though not displayed above, his hyperfeminine performance, along with other gay slangs and idioms surrounding *jiemei* register as co-texts in the piece (Silverstein, 2022) all contribute to its bi-culturality containing both heterosexual implications and unique Chinese gay subcultures.

***Jiemei* as Indeterminate In-group Affiliative Index**

Using feminine terms to build community and create a sense of belonging among gay men is nothing new. In his extensive ethnographic study on American and European gay communities, Johnsen (2008) points out that “its use [girls] can express solidarity by emphasizing group membership” (p. 157), saying it “means one of us” (p.158). In the same vein, despite its multiple functions (as I show below), there exists one common and essential function of *jiemie* as an in-group term across contexts: that to build community and strengthen connection (Cf. Kiesling, 2004). Nearly every interlocutor from the group I talked to mentions this layer of social meaning and my observation also proves the same finding. Xùsheng (24), a service designer and new volunteer at PFLAG China, described in detail how cautious when using this complicated term,

“I’m not the kind of person who will take the initiative to call someone jiemei...even if they are gay, because I don’t know if they can accept this kind of term... It may sound like a term for someone who is a little more feminine in general. I didn’t accept people calling me that at first, especially those I was unfamiliar with or straight guys, and I felt weird about it. But with you guys, it doesn’t matter. I feel that jiemei is not a feminized title but a kind of friendly, interesting, and habitual expression, and everyone is like this.”

Xüsheng's thoughtful answer epitomizes the context-sensitivity of *jiemei* with multiple layered social meanings. With his reflexive metapragmatic awareness, the indexicality of *jiemei* could be shifted from a first order indicating gay men's femininity to a second order signaling non-feminized intimacy, humor, and inclusivity highly depending on who the speakers and listeners are. He is also highly aware that not every gay man accepts female kinship terms like *jiemei*, which again emphasizes the indeterminacy and flexibility of the social index as well as people's contesting language ideologies. His weird feeling about using it with straight or strange people reflects the nature of *jiemei* as an in-group affiliative term; and it is within the trusted group that unique solidarity and intimacy are habitually reinforced.

Consider another illustrative instance below where Rui (*ruima* in the introduction), a core member of PFLAG China and an Airbnb owner, introduced new volunteers to his fellow team and welcomed them to join their "family" at his workplace (which is usually the site for community activities),

"Come here, I want you to meet your jiemei men (sisters)! This is Wang Jie (Sister Wang); this is Zhang Jie (Sister Zhang); that is Li Jie (Sister Li) ..."

By innovatively adding *jie* (elder sister) to one's last name as the excerpt shows, which is also a referential tradition in Mandarin Chinese, Rui successfully utilized the nature of in-group affiliation to quickly bring closer the social distance and build a strong sense of belonging and intimacy among the strangers whose collective mission is to create a gay community/family in the future. Even though *jie* might denote respect for the elder in Chinese hierarchical order, the fictive and tropic use of feminine kinship term in a recontextualizing and resignifying queer sense, along with accompanying linguist and bodily features of the speaker as the interaction

unfolds, could instead contribute to achieving equal and friendly relationships (Nakassis, 2014).

Apart from referencing other in-group members, *jiemei* possesses diverse linguistic properties, patterns and pragmatic functions, including self-reference, address term, interjection, and modal particle on a frequent basis. I list five linguistic properties of *jie(me)*¹⁴ with their respective patterns and pragmatic functions across conversational contexts. As an important sidenote, they are by no means mutually exclusive nor rigidly categorized but are always overlapping and interdependent. I will elaborate each function with specific examples.

Table 1. List of Patterns and Pragmatic Functions of *jie(me)* across Conversational Contexts

Linguistic Properties	Patterns	Examples	Functions
interjection	as entire utterance, usually written with exclamation mark	e.g., “ <i>Jie!</i> ”	exclamation, building solidarity and intimacy
modal particle ¹⁵	sentence-final particle	e.g., “OMG, <i>da jie!</i> (elder sister)”	emotive, teasing, exaggeration
dual address/reference	in group settings, after addressees’ name	e.g., “ <i>Gua Jie</i> slays.”	wide-ranging depending on interactional contexts (greeting, question, compliment, agreement, persuasion, etc.)
address	within a sentence as either initial or final	e.g., “I think so, <i>jie.</i> ”	
self-reference	echoing previous references, anaphora	e.g., “ <i>Jie</i> (I) had Italian food today.”	poetic, appealing
conversion (from noun to adjective)		e.g., “He is so <i>jiemei.</i> ”	evaluative/metasemiotic

¹⁴ Oftentimes, “*mei*” is omitted and people would simply use “*jie*” instead of “*jiemei*.”

¹⁵ In Mandarin Chinese, modal participles (*yuqi zhuci*) are words used at the end of sentences to indicate mood or attitude.

Excerpt 1: Dual address/reference

- 1 Chun: How come *Gua Jie* disappeared?
- 2 Xigua: I always watch you guys in silence.
- 3 Lo: Don't be silent. Get high.
- 4 Chun: Ohohohoh Ok (reply to 2).
- 5 I tagged you, but you ignored.

This short excerpt, extracted from the WeChat social event/gaming group chat with more than 200 hundred group members, captures two group members asking why their friend Xigua had been inactive online. Chun directly started the sentence by uttering *Gua Jie* (Sister Gua), implying the prevalence of *jiemei register* and the in-group affiliation. Grammatically speaking, *Gua Jie* as a third person singular pronoun in the sentence serves as a referential term, and the sentence seems to be asking others but not Xigua himself the question in the group setting. However, following this question, it was the referent Gua himself who answered this question. Alternatively, it is common for those other than Gua to reply if they knew the answer. Thus, it is arguable that the “ambiguous” term functions here as both a referential and an address term. There is no doubt that in other contexts *jie(me)* simply acts as an address term, as shown in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 2: Address term

- 1 Feng: *Harry Potter* is indeed difficult, *jie*.
- 2 Not an easy piece.
- 3 You can read children's books instead.
- 4 LOL...My English is not good either...

5 But doesn't that mean we should work hard?

6 Zhuli: Is that (previously mentioned book) difficult? *Jie*, I am quite interested after you recommend it.

7 Yes *jie*! (reply to 5)

8 Feng: I think it is easier than *Harry Potter* (reply to 6).

9 Zhuli: *Jie* (you) are already really great.

In this dialogue, Feng (29) and Zhuli (26) are two close friends from a small WeChat group of five. As a start-up entrepreneur and an English learner, Zhu was seeking advice on English learning tips from Tang, who recently resigned from a local law firm in China to pursue a master's degree in Sweden. Tang recommended reading several English books, and they were talking about levels of difficulty for each book. They have later decided to read and improve English together. Even though group members are physically apart all over the world, they maintain a good relationship and keep in touch on a daily basis. From the excerpt, we can see, as an address term, *jie(me)* is adopted by both speakers in a frequent, flexible, and coherent manner. It is usually located within a sentence as either initial (line 6) or final (line 1 and 7), and we can even see "*Jie*" replace "you" as a subject in line 9. These two excerpts both demonstrate that the functions of *jiemei* are wide-ranging depending on the specific interactional contexts, such as question (1.1), emphasis (2.1), agreement (2.7), compliment (2.9), etc. In the following excerpt, besides (second person) address and (third person) reference, I will show how *jie(me)* is feasible for self-reference from the same group chat.

Excerpt 3: Self-reference

1 Zhuli: Has any *jiemei* ever bought a Kindle?

2 Zhishu: me [sic].

3 Zhuli: How do you feel about it?

4 Is it practical?

5 Zhishu: Not really.

6 Zhuli: Then I won't buy it.

7 I heard that if you buy e-books on it, you have to pay extra money.

8 Zhishu: Kindle has withdrawn from the Chinese market and now there are no official available e-books.

9 Zhuli: *Soga* (homophone from Japanese phrase “そうか”, meaning “Oh I see”).

10 Zhishu: *Jie* (you) are looking at second-hand, right?

11 Zhuli: I did't even see it.

12. Hahahahahaha.

13 Zhishu: *Jie* (you) have so much rice (meaning so rich).

14 Zhuli: LOL, *jie* (I) wish, too.

Jiemei is also seen multiple times with flexible indexicalities throughout the conversation. Zhu was consulting with another group member, Zhishu (29), about purchasing an e-reader Kindle. In the first line, Zhuli used *jiemei* in a collective and referential way for possibly every group member who is willing to participate in the conversation. After Zhishu gave a positive response, the conversation turned to a somewhat private and Q&A chat between the two. In line 10, Zhishu addressed Zhuli with “*Jie*” in replacement of “you,” and again in line 13. As a direct reply, in line 14, Zhuli echoed back by uttering “*jie*” as an anaphora in replacement of “I” for self-reference. In addition, both participants’ familiarity of youth culture and use of internet slangs (e.g., having rice) help create a relaxing and humorous atmosphere, which further builds up a stance of intimacy and connection in the group.

Furthermore, *jiemei* can function as an interjection expressing exclamation, shown by both excerpt 2 (“Yes, *jie!*”) and excerpt 4 (“*Jie!!!!*”), as well as a modal particle without carrying

a lexical meaning. Tangtang, a member of PFLAG China and an active organizer of several local LGBTQ+ communities in Hangzhou, southeast China, had planned a special party night inviting discussion on *jiemei* register among Chinese gay men earlier this year. He shared what he had heard about from the audience. As someone comments,

*“jiemei, in many cases, has little to do with gender and is often used as an **modal participle** to express exaggeration and playfulness, as well as act to be cute. For example, when you hear other people talking about their spicy sex life, you can use ‘OMG, da jie (elder sister)’ to express surprise, and this is not intended to address them...”*

Excerpt 4: Exclamation

1 Zhishu: *Jie* started to text in Chinese and be yourself.

2 Feng: Right! I agree! It starts to feel equal. He should also accommodate your language!

3 I feel your determination! And you are really friendly!

4 I am so proud of you! [sic] *Jie*!!!!.

5 Zhuli: Yes *jie*.

6 Love uuuuuu [sic].

Akin to excerpt 3, *jie(me)* carries multiple linguistic properties and pragmatic functions within a single conversation, where Zhishu and Feng praised the courage Zhu had taken to speak out and complain about their Pakistani friend in Chinese instead of English. Before that, they mainly communicated in English as the Pakistani friend does not speak Chinese, and Zhu had to rely on translation for assistance. As an exclamation, written with exclamation marks, *jie(me)* is usually stood out as a whole utterance/sentence for the group members to convey the utmost excitement and emotions.

Analogous to the sense of distance associated with *jiemei* among heterosexual female speakers, sometimes *jiemei* can evoke a dialectical distancing feeling in certain Chinese gay context. As Kangkang elaborates,

“I do rarely use it to address others when I feel socially awkward and need to say something to get myself out of trouble. For example, when someone I don’t really feel attracted to tries to flirt with me at a party, I would just jokingly say, ‘jie, please don’t!’ In that way, I can turn them down and ease up the embarrassing atmosphere without sounding too harsh.”

While Chinese females attempt to politely enhance the relationship by calling each other *jiemie*, Chinese gay men would instead draw the boundary with those they are not romantically attracted by addressing them with *jie(me)* while maintaining in-group connection. Therefore, in building community and strengthening affiliation, not only can *jiemei* index solidarity and intimacy, but it could also index distance as an indeterminate social index.

Derivation and Multimodality of *jiemei*

In his ethnographic study on *bahasa gay* language in Indonesia, Boellstorff (2004) discovers that its lexicon “is more than just a collection of words” and “is a set of patterned **derivational** processes that together constitute a language game” (p. 255). Featuring not only multiple linguistic properties and pragmatic functions as I have described, *jiemei register* also contains a rich repertoire of derivatives, among which using *jiemei* as an adjective for appraisal is an important linguistic conversion as the table above shows.

Furthermore, characterized by linguistic creativity, the group members have been

constantly diversifying and inventing many interesting and nuanced derivative forms and morphological shifts of *jiemei* in their daily interactions. Below is the excerpt of my interview with Zhishu when we discussed different derivatives *jiemei* can take on:

Me: I often see you guys use different terms in the group chat, like “jiezi,” “jimei,” “jie,” and “jie’jie.”¹⁶ What do you think is the difference between these forms?

Zhishu: There are of course slight differences that have to do with a speaker’s tone. For example, jie sounds more colloquial than jimei and is more flexible and applicable in daily conversation; jie’jie is more emotionally appealing among close friends; jiezi is more playful and teasing. People also use different forms depending on whom they speak to, whether they are familiar with, as well as their acceptance level of these words. There are also subtle dynamics of using these terms between online and physical spaces...

Correspondingly, Zhishu’s personal take well aligns with my ethnographic data regarding the more predominant use of “jie” than “jimei” itself in colloquial use among the group members. Moreover, this flexible morphological varieties not only demonstrates the essential role of social context in using the rich *jiemei register* but also establishes a higher indexical order in which specific stance-making and relationship-building, such as playfulness and teasing, are further indexed.

What is more, *jieme register* is only a partial manifestation of all the rich linguistic resources and strategies Chinese gay men could creatively leverage, which is beyond the scope of this paper. In addition to *jiemei* and *mama*, numerous words and phrases have also featured their conversations of all kinds throughout my fieldwork, as shown in the appendix. Beyond

lexical terms, other linguistics and semiotic practices, including prosodic features, dressing style, bodily appearance, and in-group shared knowledge and humor surrounding tropes, stereotypes, practices, etc. all play a significant role in defining queer identities emergent in social interactions (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). For example, in terms of prosodic nuances of *jiemei* register, as Feng emphasized, “even though I call both my straight female and gay male friends *jie’jie*, I will definitely use different intonations. That is, I raise my pitch and my voice becomes elongated when calling my gay friends *jie’jie*.” This prosodic style is completely consistent with the hyperfeminine *sajiao* performance discussed above. To further illustrate, below are two iconic gay memes expressing solidarity and intimacy, which overtly contain both sisters-related captions and female images, that have been viral among gay men on Chinese social media for the last few years. Compared with a heterosexual perspective on intimacy and solidarity, the ones deployed by Chinese gay communities appear more sassy, campy, and queer. Therefore, a multimodal approach to queer linguistics, as Calder (2019) demonstrates, is valuable for gaining a complete picture of the way in which language and identities intersect. Only by attending to a wide-ranging co-text(s) along with can we obtain the most accurate and comprehensive insights into the nuanced semiotic process of enregisterment and identity work.



(1) “Sisters of one mind can break the metal.” (2) “Sisters recognize each other.”

Figure 1. Iconic Gay Memes of *jiemei* on Chinese Social Media

In sum, given that *jiemei* initially indexes femininity, intimacy and stereotypical effeminate homosexuality, building on its lower level indexicalities, by reappropriation of *jiemei* (e.g., deployment of exclamation and modal particle), it is not difficult for gay men to incorporate their unique subculture (e.g., humor and teasing) into consolidate solidarity and intimacy in a non-heteronormative way, and even reconfigure new relationships. This process thus enables a high level indexicality of *jiemei*, which simultaneously maintains, subverts, and even enrich its original meanings (Silverstein, 2003; Johnson, 2004).

Divergence from and Challenge to “Effeminate Gay Men”

As Gal (2023) claims, “Scholars examine not only the register itself, but the way participants assemble and use register fragments to enact person types, that is, to voice them, and in that way to align with or against stereotypes” (p. 7). In other words, not only the register per se, but how the speakers engage with it matters. Following her insight, to further investigate my inquiry on the reappropriated *jiemei register*, which of its original meanings are maintained and which are subverted? What kind of person and social types do the gay men enact and voice them? Are they aligning with or against stereotypes?

Leap (1996) has examined the linguistic features of “gaydar,” which help strangers to identify each other as gay in a novel conversation. With the ongoing process of globalization and cross-cultural communication, Chinese gay communities are undergoing both globalized and localized influences (Kong, 2019). To reiterate, as a feminine kinship term, *jiemei register*

(including other related co-texts) is ideologically closely associated with male homosexuality, and thus enregistered as a specific social type (Agha, 2005), namely the stigmatized “effeminate” gay men under Chinese heteronormative context. While Western society categorizes gay men’s sexual position and identity as a hierarchical dichotomy between tops and bottoms, “1s” and “0s” are corresponding categories in China (Zheng, 2015; Zhou, 2023). Under the process of enregisterment, *jiemei* speech or those who speak as *jiemei* would be described as subordinate “0s” (bottoms). For instance, Xigua, one of my interlocutors in the previous section, identifies explicitly as not “0s” (this does not mean they are “1s,” as they could be “0.5s” or any number between), which accounts for the reason why he refuses to align with *jie mei register* and with being considered effeminate. When gay men use *jiemei* in their conversations, they would be stereotypical categorized as a group of “0s” who desire masculine “1s,” *nanren* (men) in comparison with *jiemei*.

Thinking Tactics of Intersubjectivity

Bucholtz and Hall (2004) put forward an important theoretical framework of sociocultural linguistics—*tactics of intersubjectivity*, which suggests that one of the ways people construct identities is to deploy relational and intersubjective “sameness/adequation” and “difference/distinction” through multiple semiotic processes. The shifting gender positions through language use among Hindi-speaking *hijras* Hall (2014) studies is exemplar of her own theory. Following their profound framework, in addition to characterizing Chinese queer men’s heterogenous labeling practices, Zhou (2022) proposed *tactical identity* to understand Chinese plural queerness in that even individuals perform multiple sexual identities across contexts

through linguistic style-shifting.

In the same vein, as a female kinship term indexing in-group affiliation among gay men, *jiemei* could be deemed a tactic of adequation for the group members to socialize and grow cohesive regardless of their divergent intentions and gender expressions. This could lead to significantly contrastive ways of speaking the *jiemei register* among different group members, considering it contains far more than a single lexical term. Alternatively, the motivation regarding the principle of distinction could be that those group members are resistant to the societal expectation about masculinity; as a result, they simply adopt the female kinship term, in whatever way they want, to collectively challenge the traditional gender norms and binary thinking. This seems valid given the multiple ways of using *jiemei register* as I have examined from my field work. Just as Marcelo, an Instagram queer influencer, claims, “*jiemei* is a friendly term that excludes heterosexual men but includes everyone else” (just as Figure 2. demonstrates the distinction between *jiemei* and *chou nanren*, or jerks in English).

Shifting Identities & Contesting Language Ideologies

Even though group members may use *jiemei register* in a collective manner, their underlying language ideologies could vary and conflict with heteronormative expectations above, which might cause differences in their definition of *jiemei*, potentially challenging the stereotypical type *jiemei register* would enact. As I gradually explored, the use of *jiemei* is also more complex than this binary would suggest. Instead of using the term to perpetuate homonormativity and identity stigmatization, the group members strategically manipulated the intertextual gap of

jiemei, explicitly negotiating their own positioning in relation to the imagined enregistered gay speech while inclusively identifying and labeling more social members outside the community as *jiemei*. Below is the excerpt of an exemplary conversation in a WeChat group chat.

Left Column: Original Mandarin Text

Right Column: English Translation

S: 像橘子(指 J), 姐妹都喜欢。

S: I can't believe you even like **sisters**.

J: 🙄 谁规定不能喜欢姐妹, 姐妹比臭男人强多了 ←

J: 🙄 Who stipulates I can't? They are way better than jerks.←

S: 但我就不会把你当喜欢我的啦, 就是姐妹啦 |←

S: But I won't take you as my love. You are just my sister!←

Figure 2. Script of Two Gay Men Disputing about the Indexicality of *jiemei* from the WeChat Group Chat

We can see in the image above that two group members, S and J who held different opinions on the social group implied by *jiemei*, were arguing about the feasibility of having a crush on their “sisters.” Given that both self-identify as 0s, S adhered to the ingrained enregistered gay speech, adopting *jiemei* to index a “feminine” gay friend while excluding a romantic/sexual relationship because of the incongruous sexual positions between the two. In other words, S rejected the possibility of dating between two hypothetical bottoms or “0s.” On the other hand, by asserting that no rule said he could not date *jiemei*, J diverged with S in their understanding of *jiemei*, challenging S’s heteronormative values on 1s/0s (top/bottom) dichotomy regulating *jiemei*’s constrained desire and how a typical *jiemei* should behave. The explicitly contesting language ideologies in conversational confrontation above not only manifest but also consolidate the indeterminate and multifaceted dimensions of *jiemei*, thus pluralizing the

social types of the involved speakers. In addition, some group members will radically apply *jiemei* to anyone regardless of their gender or sexuality. As William (25), another member from the same WeChat group of five, claimed in our interview,

“jiemei has nothing to do with age, gender, or sexual orientation for me. It could be an honorific term, also a term of endearment. I don’t necessarily have to call an unfamiliar or unfriendly gay person jiemei, and I could possibly call a close straight male friend jiemei.”

More than one of my interlocutors admitted that they strategically embrace or avoid using *jiemei* across different interactional contexts. Many clearly stated that calling gay friends *jiemei* should be no problem; however, they would not do so in front of their straight friends for fear of potential trouble rooted in yet unfriendly attitudes and stigma towards homosexuality in Chinese society. Thus, they were obliged to perform heteromascularity as a “normal” man in the public sphere and to “maintain a split self in public and in private” (Zheng, 2015, p. 145).

Disappointedly, those who hold high levels of self-acceptance told me that even though they had come out to some friends and family members, they still pretended to have girlfriends in the workplace. Among them is Maurice (37), member of PFLAG China and a physician from Suzhou who had successfully come out to his parents. When asked about his attitude towards *jiemei*, he replied, “I don’t oppose it. It could be used jokingly in private, but I would suggest refraining from using in public. After all, it’s not impossible to participate in my [straight] colleagues’ family and childbearing topics.”

Therefore, by turning to both theories of language ideologies and tactics of intersubjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004), especially the principle of "adequation and

distinction,” given its sociocultural indeterminacy, the heterogeneous and non-congruent *jiemei* register among the gay men contribute to their divergence from and challenge to a monolithic and stereotypical social type: effeminate gay men.


The shifting identity lies in not only how speakers consciously adjust their own language use, but also how they are perceived and addressed by other intersubjective speakers. In the following excerpt from a WeChat group of over 50 volunteers in PFLAG Suzhou, the conflicting identity of our old friend in this paper, Rui, is reflected by the contrastive kinship terms group members choose to address him.

Excerpt 5: *Ruima* (Mother Rui) vs *Ruige* (Brother Rui)

1 J: *Mama*, my event ends at 4 pm. Do you think I can make it?

2 Rui: I think so. You can come over after dinner.

3 dc: *Ruige*, can I go?

4 Feng: Ahh... someone is still calling him *Ruige*? 

5 Zhan: I still do!

6 J: This *jie* (referring to dc) is a newbie.

This conversation follows Rui’s proposal of organizing a social dinner (aka “family dinner”) at *Zhang Ma*’s (Mother Zhang’s), an active parent volunteer in PLFAG Suzhou. The group members applauded the suggestion even though they differed in how to address Rui. In the first place, that Rui is a respected, kind and charismatic senior group leader result in many younger members like J and Feng calling him *ruima* (Mother Rui) instead of *ruijie* (Sister Rui). Still, “dissidents” like dc and Zhan from the excerpt adopt the distinction principle to call him *ruige* (Brother Rui), an obvious male kinship term on the completely opposite side combined with the

subsequent debate on the two address terms. Feng's rhetorical question along with a naughty emoji ending in line 4 reinforces the obsolescence of the name "Brother Rui" and implies that almost no one calls him like that anymore. In line 6, by excusing dc as a "newbie" different from them, J implies that those who know Rui well **should** address him as "Mother Rui." Far more than singularity, the multilayered identity of an individual is shaped and negotiated through multiple address terms imbued with tension and controversy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through the lens of linguistic anthropology, I have attempted to illustrate how a simple word *jiemei*, as a form token of gay men's speech registers, deserves critical and detailed attention by attending to its multifunctional usage as an indeterminate social index open for identity/desire and relationship negotiation among members of PFLAG China.

Contextualization is of essential prerequisite for linguistic interpretation, especially when it comes to analyzing a single term like *jiemei* in relation to different speakers and hearers in multiple social situations. Just as Kiesling (2004) argues for his study on American address term *dude*, "[w]ithout context there is no single meaning that *dude* encodes" (p. 297). With this priority in mind, I have thus managed to situate the term in the specific Chinese sociocultural context and integrate the heteronormative foundation of this term into my comparative analysis.

As Gal (2023) argues, "Indexical sign use presupposes context, but can also creatively transform it. Such creative indexicality is the use of a variant in some context where it is socially unexpected" (p. 7). Building on the presupposition of feminine intimacy *jiemei* implicates, a

second, or even higher orders of indexicality/creative indexicality (Silverstein, 2003) has been achieved within the group through the ongoing process of linguistic reappropriation (e.g., gayness). In other words, a word or sign can shift from the immediate use to a more reflective use, resulting in multiple layered indexical meanings and the reconfiguration of social identities. Through reappropriating and recontextualizing *jiemei* in their daily interactions for a wide range of pragmatic purposes, members of PFLAG China have established an alternative indexical market distinct from the heteronormative society (Eckert, 2008).

As heteronormative ideologies of gay men's gender expression and speech type persist in Chinese society, *jiemei* is usually negatively associated with effeminate gay men ("sissy" or "0s" in Chinese context). Thus, the noncongruent entextualized voicing effects (Agha, 2005) away from stereotypical gay registers manifested in their rich application of *jiemei* across contexts as well as their shifting identities challenge the sociohistorical models of identity (Wortham, 2006) of Chinese gay men as a stigmatized effeminate group. This innovative performance of partial adherence to the social persona by *jiemei* again highlights the poststructuralist idea of social identity as performative. Just as Calder (2019) claims, to apply Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity in the sociolinguistic literature, "individuals can challenge binary gender roles themselves by performing their identities in ways that don't conform to the male-female dichotomy" (p. 334). In a nutshell, by using *jiemei register*, the group of gay men are simultaneously working towards fleeting intimacy and distance, as well as diverging from stigmatized effeminacy.

This work suggests several remaining areas for research. First, in terms of the research scope, following multimodal principles, other related linguistic and semiotic resources are worth

the attention and inquiry. Next, apart from the predominant gay men users, what would lesbians and even straight allies in the group make of and even use this term? How would their distinct perspectives and interactions inform my current research findings? Whether or not *jiemei* serves to fundamentally reclaim Chinese queer people's (especially gay men's) sexual subjectivity, like how *tongzhi* profoundly shapes Chinese society, remains to be seen given its multidimensional pragmatic functions across contexts as well as inseparable connection with femininity. This needs more immersive observation and comprehensive empirical data in my future research. Finally, just as Zhishu suggests, "there is a dynamic difference regarding *jiemei register* between online and in-person spaces." Given the interconnectedness of my previous in-person and online ethnographic fieldwork, I will consider separating online and in-person contexts of queer communities to see how the two sites potentially influence and shape each other.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Table of Documented Feminine Terms within members of PFLAG China

Term	English Translation	Description
老娘 (<i>lao 'niang</i>)	Your mom (self-referential)	Someone who wants to emphasize their authority and higher status in the group.
名媛 (<i>ming 'yuan</i>)	The socialite	Someone who is famous for going to a lot of parties and social events.
女王 (<i>nü 'wang</i>)	The Queen	Someone who is decisive, dominant, and assertive.
厨娘 (<i>chu 'niang</i>)	The female chef	Someone who likes cooking.
美女 (<i>mei 'nü</i>)	The beauty	Someone who is good-looking.
酒女 (<i>jiu 'nü</i>)	The wine girl	Someone who likes going to bars and drinking.
乖乖女 (<i>guai 'guai 'nü</i>)	The good girl	Someone who is docile.
搞笑女 (<i>gao 'xiao 'nü</i>)	The funny girl	Someone who is funny.
富婆 (<i>fu 'po</i>)	The rich woman	Someone who is rich.
倒贴女 (<i>dao 'tie 'nü</i>)	The girl who loses money	Someone who has a giving personality and is always sacrificing in a relationship.
渣女 (<i>zha 'nü</i>)	The scum woman/ maneater	Someone who is not loyal in a romantic relationship and might pursue casual sexual relationships with multiple people.
玉女 (<i>yü 'nü</i>)	The jade woman	Someone who has a pure appearance.
修女 (<i>xiu 'nü</i>)	The nun	Someone who is celibate or has been single for a long time.
知性女人 (<i>zhi 'xing 'nü 'ren</i>)	The sensible woman	Someone who is sensible and well-educated.
麻辣女兵 (<i>ma 'la 'nü 'bing</i>)	The spicy female soldier	Someone who is tough and athletic.
女特务 (<i>nü 'te 'wu</i>)	The female spy	Someone who is vigilant, especially in terms of gossip.

Appendix B: Original Excerpts in Mandarin Chinese

Excerpt 1: Dual address/reference

- 1 Chun: 瓜姐这两天怎么消失了
- 2 Xigua: 我一直都是沉默看着
- 3 Lo: 不要沉默, 嗨起来
- 4 Chun: 哦哦哦好吧
- 5 艾特你也不理人

Excerpt 2: Address term

- 1 Feng: 哈利波特确实挺难的姐
- 2 不简单的
- 3 你可以看看儿童书
- 4 笑死...我自己英语都没那么好...
- 5 但是不好不就代表可以努力嘛!
- 6 Zhuli: 这个难吗? 姐, 听你推荐后蛮感兴趣的
- 7 是的姐!
- 8 Feng: 我觉得比哈利波特简单
- 9 Zhuli: 姐已经很棒了

Excerpt 3: Self-reference

- 1 Zhuli: 有没有姐妹买过 kindle
- 2 Zhishu: me
- 3 Zhuli: 你用下来觉得怎么样?

4 使用的场景多不多?

5 Zhishu: 不多

6 Zhuli: 那我不买了

7 听说在上面买电子书, 还要额外付钱

8 Zhishu: 已经退出中国市场了, 现在官方没有电子书了

9 Zhuli: 嗦嘎

10 Zhishu: 姐看的是二手吧

11 Zhuli: 我都没看

12. 哈哈哈哈哈

13 Zhishu: 姐真有米

14 Zhuli: 笑死, 姐也想有米

Excerpt 4: Exclamation

1 Zhishu: 姐打中文, 说明开始做自己了

2 Feng: 好棒

3 对哦! 我同意! 开视平等了...他也应该迁就你的语言!

而且感受到了姐的坚定! 而且很有好

4 I am so proud of you! 姐!!!!.

5 Zhuli: 是的姐


6 Love uuuuuu.

Excerpt 5: *Ruima* (Mother Rui) vs *Ruige* (Brother Rui)

1 J: 妈妈我下午活动, 4点结束来得及吗

2 Rui: 来得及, 吃饭过来好了

3 dc: 睿哥，我可以去吗？

4 Feng: 啊... 现在还有人在叫睿哥？

5 Zhan: 我叫啊

6 J: 这位姐刚来不知道