

## **The Sisterhood of Boys: Experience of Effeminate Students in Local Boy Schools**

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Abstract: This paper problematizes the silenced parts of male sexualities. Male effeminacy has long been categorized as a male homosexual attribute in society and academic researches. However, this paper argues that this essentialized equation of “effeminacy = gayness” is perpetuating the dichotomy of “heterosexuality/homosexuality”, and thus simplifying the internal complexities of masculinities. Through studying the experiences of effeminate friendship in local boy schools, this paper examines how and why the effeminate boys formed and self-identified their friendship as “sisterhoods”. It then investigates the forms of capitals that the sisterhood of boys obtained and pursued in order to thrive in schools. Through participant observation in the sisterhood gatherings, this paper also outlines the performances of their masculinities and femininity in different spaces. The research findings show that the experience of the sisterhood is not simply a gender and sexuality matter. Instead, the hierarchy of boys also intersects with other aspects of social life, such as spaces and different forms capitals. The formation of sisterhood is a significant milestone to the effeminate boys, as this friendship gives subjectivities to these effeminate boys that transcend their “subordinated” sexuality in schools.

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the experiences of effeminate students in Hong Kong Boy Schools. It studies the formation of a Sisterhood of Boys in single-sex schools, a semi-public space for the masculinization of boys. Effeminate boys in senior forms (F.4 and above) usually exist as a solid group, who perceive themselves, or are perceived by other students, as 'sisters'. This challenges the conventional gender expectations to males in Boy Schools.

Before going into the empirical findings, it is necessary to think about the question of 'What constitutes the sisterhood in Boy Schools?' Prior to the formation of the sisterhood, individual members are usually identified with their effeminacies by other boys first. Members of the school identify a student as effeminate through their feminine mannerisms, including their body movements and high tone of speech. Another feature of effeminacy is the students' interests in gossiping about particular topics of discussions, including criticizing others' behaviors and appearance, as well as spreading information of teachers, students and School Affairs. The identification of effeminate boys usually takes place in their junior years of study. During these few years, the majority of the classmates contribute to labelling and identifying the effeminacy of boys. This leads to the formation of sisterhood at their senior years of study. Due to specific occasions, effeminate boys have chances to cooperate or meet with each other. Because of the labeling, these effeminate boys also know the effeminacy of the other boys. As they gather and know each other better, they later form the Sisterhood of Boys in their senior years of study. The Sisterhood of Boys is popular for its members' emotional expression with the group members, as well as their self-identification of their 'bitchiness'.

Sisterhood of Boys is considered as a 'deviant' masculinity in Boy Schools. After all, the labeling of effeminate boys is premised upon different processes of 'othering' by masculine boys, such as sexist jokes about their effeminacy. As such, this paper explores the power dynamics between masculine and effeminate boys, and within the Sisterhood of Boys. By doing so, it seeks to understand how gender and sexuality intersect with other cultural forces to regulate and discipline our everyday life.

## **Comparison of the Two Boy Schools**

This research recruited informants from two single-sex Boy Schools on the Hong Kong Island. School A is a government secondary school in the Causeway Bay while School B is a sponsored school in the West Point.

### *The Background of the Schools*

School A is a top 'elite' and traditional Boy School in Hong Kong which is famous for

its outstanding academic achievement. Because it is government funded, the school has no religious background. Students come from families of different social classes. Students from lower-class family and upper-middle class are of even proportion.

School B is also a traditional elite Boy School and it is founded and sponsored by a Catholic society. The secondary school has a kindergarten and primary school extension, in which around 30% of the students are directly admitted from the primary school section. A majority of the students are from middle-class families.

*The Hierarchy and Hegemonic Masculinity of the Schools*

From the empirical data collected from interviews, this research outlines different hierarchies of masculinities in the two schools. These hierarchies are determined by the amount of ‘social capital’ possessed by the male students. The main sources of prestige come from social network and academic performance. Social network refers to the students’ social life in the school, which includes their relationship with teachers, positions occupied in extra-curricular activities, as well as sports ability. As for academic performance, it refers to the specific artistic talent or outstanding performance in particular subjects. The social network and academic performance together constitutes Bourdieu’s concept of “social capital”. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is “the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, in other words, to membership in group”. The more social capital a student possesses, the higher recognition they receive and therefore the higher their position in the hierarchy of boys. Those who fail to achieve both socially and academically are at the bottom of the hierarchy and referred to as “poisoned” boys (毒男). The “poisoned” boys are at the lowest position of the hierarchy because “good” high School Boys are expected to be “sociable” and “active” in schools. The anti-social “poisoned” boys are subordinated against other boys because they deviate from the hegemonic ideals of masculinity.

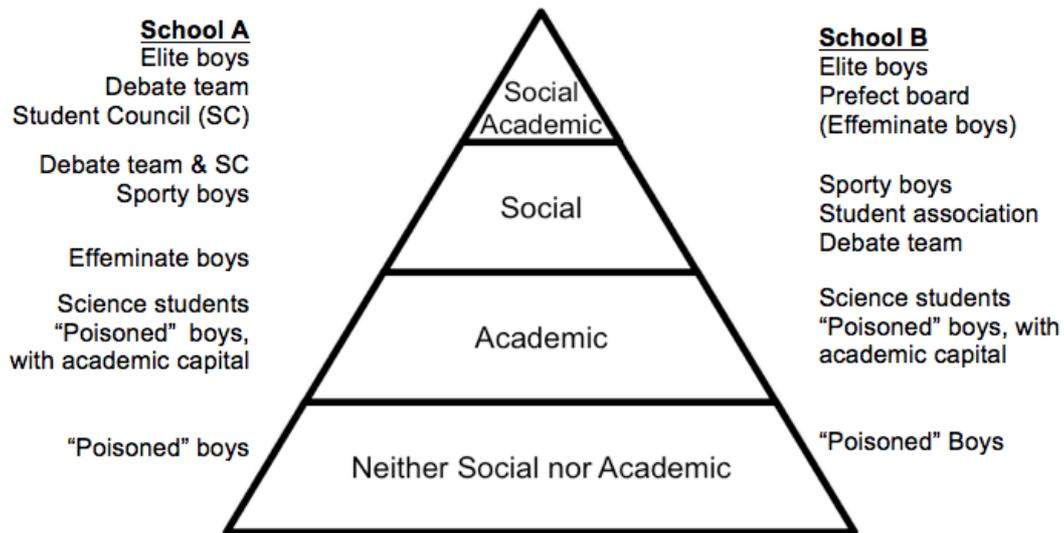


Figure 1 The hierarchy of boys in School A and School B

Figure 1 outlines the hierarchy of boys in schools. Students who simultaneously have public recognition of their social skills and academic achievements are in the top level of the hierarchy. These boys are popular and respectable in schools. Not only do they study well, but also hold key positions of extra-curricular activities. The second level of the hierarchy is students who are “sociable”. These students are active in playing extra-curricular activities (ECAs), including sport teams, student council, prefect board, etc. The “poisoned” boys who are not active in ECAs are in the lower position of the power hierarchy in schools in a sense that they are “anti-social”.

This hierarchy explains the different experience of effeminate boys in the two schools. In School A, student council and the debate team are two important ECAs. Student council has a strong leadership role in the student body, usually occupied by senior team members. The membership of student council usually comes from the debate team, which has students from all both junior and senior forms. These are dominated by masculine students who have the skills and social networks across higher and lower forms. The connection between senior students and junior students allow the positions in the student council and debate team to be contained within the social group. Those who are not in this network, such as the effeminate boys, cannot take up any positions in these two important ECAs. On the other hand, the effeminate boys I have met possess academic capital but do not have any significant social capital like the masculine boys who are in the SC and debate team. There is no “passing on” of positions within the group. But the group of effeminate boys I studied have managed to take over a significant ECA committee, the English Society, in 2013. The Society receives support from many influential teachers and therefore has a high status in the school. Yet because these effeminate boys do not have a connection with those in the junior forms, it is

unlikely that the positions will pass on to the next generation of effeminate boys. Because masculine SC and debate team boys possess more “social and academic capital” than the effeminate boys, they are in higher positions than effeminate boys. This maintains the power of hegemonic masculinity and the subordination of effeminate masculinity.

In School B, prefect board is the most influential and prestigious organization and receives a lot of support from teachers and other students. The Head boy plays an important role in selecting other prefects and participate in the selection with the discipline master. Effeminate boys often dominate key positions in the prefect board committee, and these effeminate boys usually recommends other effeminate boys from the junior form to the discipline teachers. As a result, the prefect association passes along the sisterhood in the school. Also, similar to School A, effeminate students often have the image of having specific talents and outstanding academic results. On the other hand, student association and debate team are less popular in School B. As a result, effeminate boys in this school have more dominance than those in School A. Therefore, even though effeminacy is a form of deviant masculinity, the “capital” obtained by effeminate boys allow these boys to achieve dominance in the school.

## **Methodology**

### *Sampling*

This research focuses on Boy Schools in Hong Kong because single-sex schools are a more male-dominated sector than co-education schools. As femininity is not supposed to appear in Boy Schools, effeminate boys thus appear as a group of boys that troubles the hegemonic masculinity in Boy Schools by offering an alternative and non-normative possibility of male sexuality.

Informants are recruited based on my social circle. I studied in School A and knew informants LP and SL during their junior years of study. After the interview with LP and SL on November 3, 2013, they introduced KL to me and they described KL as an example of a ‘radical’ feminine boy in their school. Another informant, EL, comes from School B. He was recruited to the interview as I knew him from a debate competition three years ago.

### *Semi-Structured Interview*

From November 2013 to early December 2013, three semi-structured interviews are conducted with four effeminate boys from two different secondary Boy Schools in the Hong Kong Island; each session lasts around one hour. All interviews are conducted in Cantonese and in casual talk mode. As the interview content includes some sensitive personal

experience of the informants, this research uses abbreviations to represent their identity and schools. One interview is conducted between two feminine boys (SL and LP) who are close friends in School A. They belong to an inner friend circle in the school that has a strong ‘sisterhood’ bonding. Another interview is conducted with a feminine boy (KL) that is considered as ‘radically feminine’ by SL and LP. Because of this, KL is not formally included in the sisterhood of SL and LP. The third interview is conducted with EL, who is from another Boy School in Hong Kong Island. EL also has a sisterhood bonding with his effeminate peers in the school.

### *Participant Observation*

Upon invitation from informants, SL and LP, to their dinner gatherings, this researcher conducted in participant observation on October 31, 2013 and January 28, 2014. The dinner gathering was a regular meeting for the sisterhood of SL and LP. All five members of the sisterhood attended the gathering and most of their conversations were about gossips of School Affairs and each member shared their experience and feelings in their classes. There are intimate interactions among the members. For instance, a member lied on LP’s shoulder after he finished his meal. Further participant observation will be conducted later during the ECA meetings organized by the inner circle.

## **The Bonding of the Sisterhood of Boys**

As mentioned in the introduction, an effeminate boy identifies other “sisters” in the junior years of study and form their sisterhood group in senior years of study. Although many teachers and students know the existence of a Sisterhood of Boys, this sisterhood largely exists in symbolic form. This is because the sisterhood has never officially declared its existence to other members of the school. The term “sisterhood” is not an official name used by the effeminate boys. At first, the term is given by masculine boys in the schools to represent the effeminate boys, which is based on the femininity of the “sisters”. This term is later admitted by effeminate boys because they call their close friends as “sisters”. However, in both of the sisterhoods of School A and B, the effeminate boys I met could not recall any formal recognition or rituals of their friendship by themselves.

### *The Naming of the Sisterhood of Boys*

Despite “sisterhood” is initially a term given by masculine boys, it does not mean that the Sisterhood of Boys are passive subjects in the schools. Effeminate boys actually give a name for their sisterhood. Interestingly, the two effeminate groups coincidentally use the

same name for their sisterhood, which is as *zhibahui* in Chinese (至八會). The sisterhood group in School A has another English name called WAB (We Are Bitches). When being told of this coincidence of the group name, EL enthusiastically expresses, “this name is too great and representative!” The term *zhibahui* originates from the friend group of female celebrities. The female celebrities form *zhibahui* organizes regular gathering activities and share gossip among the group. The group becomes popular when some group members were invited to an entertainment television programme, ‘Club Sparkle’ (星星同學會), by the Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) on May 29, 2009. The informants were inspired by the ‘bitchiness’ of the friend group and therefore named their inner circle as *zhibahui*. They formed their *zhibahui* group on Facebook. Informant LP shares the rules of their *zhibahui*:

1. Any new members should be nominated by existing members and receive a unanimous vote from all clubmates.
2. All discussions and photos should not be spread, implied printed or shown to any non-club members under any circumstances. Severe punishment will be given to those who don't obey this rule.
3. All kinds of topics are welcome to share, including sex. Please contribute as much as you can.

Naming is important for the formation of a sisterhood in a sense that naming helps unite effeminate boys together. As Watson suggests, “names have a transformative power that binds them as individuals to society” (1986:629). Although “sisterhood” is initially given by masculine boys aiming to label the “deviant” femininity of the boys, the effeminate boys still acknowledge their friendship as a sisterhood. It is because the term sisterhood helps effeminate boys to identify their peers. The giving of “sisterhood” by masculine boys illustrates Foucault’s idea of “problematization”, in a sense that “given the problematization”, the sisterhood is “able to respond to the issues it raises in their own way” (Gutting 2005:103). The “*zhibahui*” name is the product of “problematization”. It serves the function of uniting the sisterhood and pushing it into a closer and more intimate friendship. Upon giving the name of the group, there are a number of rules set for the sisterhood by effeminate members. The sisterhoods also have online Facebook groups, in which they can share information of the school and their classmates, etc. In this sense, through giving names, effeminate boys create and maintain a connection with each other because the group produces a platform for the sisterhood to exchange information.

### *The Selection of Effeminate Boys*

However, not all effeminate boys become members of the sisterhood. The sisterhood of School A disregards the membership of effeminate boys because they show a sense of superiority over others. The Sisterhood of Boys emphasizes an egalitarian friendship and they dislike students who are arrogant. One effeminate boy outside the sisterhood is AC, who is described by LP as being “too mean”. AC often shows a sense of superiority over other students. AC is very proud of his family and often insults people by attacking their parents. For example, AC often attacks other students by saying “no one desires to possess your mother even if she takes off all her clothes” (你阿媽係紅館除曬衫都無人要丫!). AC also attacks others in terms of academic abilities, saying that “you are not qualified to talk to me”.

Some effeminate boys are quasi-friends with the sisterhood because they are not trustworthy. In the sisterhood of School A, there are effeminate boys that are not considered as the sisterhood’s close friends. The informants are conscious that these boys cannot keep secrets and spread the contents of their gossips with many other students and teachers. As such, LP and SL only share gossip regarding those outside of their friend group with the ‘big-mouth’ friends, but not their own secrets and experience. Similar experiences also occur in the sisterhood of School B. Informant EL points out that his sisterhood’s entrance requirement is very strict. “Only those who is not ‘big-mouth’ and trustworthy can join the Facebook group,” says EL, “the content of the Facebook group is very private and personal that involves secrets of the School And our sisters and we have to ensure it won’t be spread out.”

The selection of members of the sisterhood suggests another function of the sisterhood. *Zhibahui* not only serves as a consolidation of friendship among effeminate boys, but also helps to delineate the real and core member of their sisterhood. The Sisterhood of Boys in School B, as EL tells, does not have any explicit rules for recruitment of members. Yet, it put much emphasis on the trustworthiness of the effeminate boy.

Apart from trustworthiness, the Sisterhood of Boys hates boys who think themselves as superior over others. As long as the sisterhood feel the sense of superiority among the particular boy, they will not maintain a friendly attitude to that boy. For example, effeminate boys who attack others by their academic results are not recruited to the sisterhood. Within the Sisterhood of Boys, the effeminate boys emphasizes an egalitarian interaction style. The sisterhoods in School A and School B does not have a leader for their sisterhood. In School B, EL says their sisterhood is quite equal and all members have discussions together before making any decisions. As for School A, LP appears to be the leader in the sisterhood. However, the following conversation between LP and SL explains this illusion:

- LP: We don't have a leader because anyone can be the initiator of an activity.
- SL: (*smile*) but it appears that you (LP) are always the initiator and decision maker ...
- LP: No! Not at all! You know, you guys often don't respond in the group. Sometimes when there are multiple suggestions, none of you come out to make a conclusion. So, someone has to speak for a final decision, right? I am not that totalitarian...

*Public and Private Display of Intimacy of the Sisterhood of Boys*

In some casual talk with masculine boys in schools A and B, many of these boys think the sisterhood often expresses their love to their effeminate members in different contexts. For example, effeminate boys sometimes use emojis and words of “love you”, “miss you”, etc., to express their intimacy with their “sisters” on Facebook. In schools, effeminate boys also have close interactions with each other, such as gathering in small and rounded circles during break time. This is different from the communication style of masculine boys, in a sense that they are not that close and expressive than the Sisterhood of Boys.

From the perspectives of effeminate boys, they are not aware of their expressiveness, and that they do not deliberately perform to other masculine boys in such an expressive way. However, in an interview with the Sisterhood of Boys in School A, the effeminate boys recall and explain three contexts where they “express” their intimacy, of which the first two are concerned with public display of intimacy, while the other with private expression of intimacy.

The first context is in schools, where the sisterhood often stick together during break time. This gives a perception to other students in the school that this is a means for the sisterhood to show their closeness with each other. However, according to the effeminate boys in School A, they gather in such a close way because they often share gossip and information when they meet each other. They are not deliberately showing off their closeness or marking their sisterhood to masculine boys. They gather in a circle because they want to prevent other boys from listening to their conversation. By forming an “exclusionary” circle, the sisterhood feels comfortable and safe to share information with each other. This circle is therefore a private space within the public space, in a sense that the circle helps to exclude masculine boys from the school and unify the effeminate boys together.

The second context is the expressive words on Facebook. As I told the sisterhood that masculine boys find the sisterhood often uses Facebook to express their intimacy, they clarified that they do not intend to show off to masculine boys. Instead, they use Facebook to express that they are thankful to have such a group of great friends. When a member of the

sisterhood faces adversity, they use Facebook to show their support and encouragement to that member. In times of argument, the sisterhood uses Facebook to recall memories of the friendship, hoping to remind their members of the great times they had. In other words, Facebook is a platform through which the sisterhood maintain and reinforce their friendship.

The above contexts are public spaces that are subject to public surveillance. Masculine boys and teachers can see the interactions of the sisterhood in the schools and Facebook. However, in their private gatherings, the effeminate boys think their interactions are very different from that in public spaces. In the private gatherings of the Sisterhood of Boys in School A, effeminate boys express their intimacy bodily. For example, upon ordering food in the café, one of the effeminate boys (HU) laid on LP's shoulder. The effeminate boys explain that they do not need to hide their intimacy during these private gatherings. The gatherings are occasions in which they need not bother to care about how others judge them. "It is a time for us to share our deepest experiences and secrets," HU explains.

It follows that private gatherings become another safe place for the sisterhood to express their intimacy with each other. They perform differently in public spaces in a way perceived by the effeminate boys that is "more socially acceptable". They are aware of the bodily interactions with their friends in schools. Most of their interactions visible to the public (Facebook and schools) are conducted in verbal and written forms.

The expression of intimacy in public and private spaces maintains the bonding of the Sisterhood of Boys. As EL suggests, the Sisterhood of Boys is different from the friendship of other masculine boys in that the sisterhood has a higher solidarity. Friendships of masculine boys are usually quite discrete, in a sense that each friendship only has two to three boys. Moreover, masculine boys seldom gather in groups in schools. There are two key elements that contribute to a stronger bonding of the sisterhood than masculine boys, namely, exchange of information (gossips) and expression of "love" in the sisterhood. Through verbal communication in public spaces, the sisterhoods share gossip as a means to maintain common topics and ensure interactions with each other. Facebook allows a non-verbal and written platform for effeminate boys to express their love to the friends. Love here does not refer to a romantic love relationship, but an affection in a close friendship. Apart from written form of expression, the private gathering is another occasion where effeminate boys can express love through bodily interactions. Expression of love is important for the bonding of sisterhood as it binds the effeminate boys together at an emotional level.

## **Positions of the Sisterhood in Schools**

### *Academic Position of the Sisterhood in the School*

Effeminate boys usually possess particular talents in certain arenas. In School A, KL is known for being good at physics, LP as good at chemistry and SL as good at mathematics. Although AC is an effeminate boy that is not in the sisterhood, his sense of superiority over other boys comes from his academic strength. He ranks the top in the Arts stream and he is also proud of his lawyer parents. For the sisterhood in School B, effeminate boys are also popular for their talents. EL describes his male sisters as follows:

We have one who will probably get 5\*\* in English, one who is good at taking photographs, one is good at painting ... umm... actually he doesn't really paint so great, but he thinks he paints well. We also have one who is good at knitting, and he often teaches our sisters knitting, we have another one who is good at computer, and he is very cute. And I am good at debating and capable of talking. Our circle doesn't have a common talent, but most of us are capable of drawing.

From the examples raised by the informants, effeminate boys are usually involved in soft activities in schools, such as academic study, painting, knitting, etc. For other boys, these soft activities are attributed to the feminine aspects of the sisterhood. Effeminacy is negatively associated in the sisterhood. For example, effeminate boys are often regarded as gays. However, the experience of effeminate boys in the two schools are quite different from those boys recorded in various literature. In the ethnographic study of high school queer boys by O'Connor (1994), effeminacy causes isolation of the boys. In many Western high schools, "verbal abuse as a derisive strategy is operationalized ... as a means to regulate and polic[e] masculinity" (Kheler 2004:108-9). Because effeminacy is perceived as a gay attribute in society, effeminate boys are often bullied by masculine boys verbally and even physically.

However, the sisterhoods of boys in the two schools did not report cases of being bullied by masculine boys. Contrarily, masculine boys somehow show respects to effeminate boys. The experience of effeminate boys in this research is very much different from previous studies (O'Connor 1994; Martino 2000; Kheler 2004). Much of the previous ethnographic work reported that the effeminate boys are lonely and have little social support from their friends. For example, a respondent in O'Connor's study, Tommy, suggests that his friends also suffer from the bullies because of their connection with him (1994:9). Nonetheless, in School A and B, effeminate boys are connected with each other through the sisterhood. Even though some effeminate boys do not belong to the sisterhood, masculine boys still attribute them as a member of the sisterhood. Another reason that the Sisterhood of Boys is not bullied is due to

the talents that the effeminate boys possess. These talents can be viewed as another attribute of the sisterhood that transcends their effeminacy in schools. The possession of talent is a key marker of the sisters' pride. In this sense, feminine students obtain capital by possessing specific talents in schools. As such, even if one does not rise up to a 'talented' level, he still perceives himself as good at painting, as mentioned in informant EL's words.

The talents are respected by masculine boys because masculine boys do not acquire the skills possessed by effeminate boys. The informants express various occasions in which their talents contribute to their schools. For instance, because KL is good at physics; he is the physics leader of a study group among non-feminine boys. SL also observes that boys will not offend KL in case they need help from KL to deal with physics matters. LP tells that although AC is an arrogant effeminate student, he is the top student in Arts stream and students in Arts stream do not dare offend him. In School B, EL also says that because his sisterhood is good at painting, he and his sisters are responsible for the inter-class board design competition for the past few years. He also shares his friend's experience that some boys seek out his effeminate friends for tutoring services.

#### *Social Capital of Boys in the Schools : Sports Activities*

Effeminate boys are not active in sport activities in schools. All the informants express that they do not play particular sports in schools. EL explains, "because I don't think I am that type of person". SL and LP say in cases where they are forced to play sports, such as physical education classes, they will not join other classmates in playing football or basketball. They will play badminton with their close feminine friends instead. "Rarely do other boys play badminton during physical education lessons because they will gather to play football or basketball," LP expresses. Effeminate boys consider football and basketball as 'hyper-masculine' sports. In both of the two schools, none of the effeminate boys join these two sport activities. There are no restrictions in joining these sports among masculine boys. Any boys are welcome to join the play during recess and lunchtime. However, not all masculine boys play sports. As LP says, basketball or football boys are boys who are typically masculine, and he calls these boys as 'hyper-masculine' (特别男性化). SL supplements LP with an example, "there are some gentle and polite boys who neither play sports nor being effeminate, and no one discriminates them or forces them to play sports. They are not effeminate, but just gentle." School B also shares a similar situation in that the boys who play sports are typically masculine and there are masculine boys who do not play sports.

The phenomenon of considering football players as "hyper-masculine" is actually a

heteronormative understanding. Martino (2000) also finds that footballers and basketballers are “distinctive peer groups ... that wield considerable power” in high schools. As he traces what kind of “power” that attracts boys to play the sport, he finds that the sports help students to be able to “get attention of the opposite sex”. By playing football, boys can show off their intelligence while they “don’t need to put emphasis on being brainy” (Martino 2000). Kheler finds that in high schools, there is a “polarity between the masculine football field and the feminine arts arena” (2004:102). This often happens in the form of verbal abuse by the hyper-masculine boys to gay and effeminate boys. Indeed, the effeminate boys I interviewed do agree that there are some verbal abuse over their effeminacy. However, they do not see these verbal jokes as offensive.

A reason for this is that rarely do the jokes point to a particular individual effeminate boy. The jokes often point to the sisterhood in an indirect and implicit way. Members of the schools are supposed to understand their meanings. The joke-maker assumes every member of the schools is capable of decoding the underlying messages. These jokes sometimes also appear during lesson time where teachers are there. For example, when there are some feminized or abnormal topics, other students will look at the feminized students or shout out a particular feminized student’s name.

The effeminate boys usually do not have hard feelings because of the jokes. They understand that people are generally simply kidding and people do not have bad intention. “It’s not a big deal. Sometimes we also laugh at fat people,” says LP. Whether or not the informants feel offended depends on their friendship with the boys. The sisterhood of School A hates people who laugh at their effeminacy without trying to get to know them. LP says, “those who laugh at us before knowing us are really cheap!” He outlines a flow of ‘friendship building’ with masculine boys:

Before being friends with those masculine boys, most of them must have made fun of our effeminacy. Later, because of some occasions, such as School Activities or class projects or discussions, we get familiar with each other and since then we become friends. But of course not as close as our sisterhood.

In School B, EL describes a harmonious friendship between the sisterhood and masculine boys. “There isn’t explicit separation between the boys and our sisters,” he says, “they won’t isolate the girls and sometimes we play together crazily.” EL exemplifies by the case of his effeminate friend,

We have a crazy sister, JL, who plays with boys in an insane way. For example, when the boys yell ‘oh! JL is coming!’ and JL will lie on the boys and asks, ‘Yes, I am

coming! You wanna play with me?’ Our sisterhood does get along with other boys in a friendly way, and the boys won’t specifically laugh at our effeminacy.

The possession of cultural capital in schools determines feminine students’ relationship with masculine boys. As mentioned earlier, the majority of effeminate boys are appreciated because of their capability in certain expertise than other boys, such as arts, academic performance, etc. These skills become a form of capital that symbolizes effeminate students with position in school, as this capital has contributions to the school and is beneficial to masculine boys, at least when skills are needed. Because effeminate boys possess this cultural capital, they obtain certain positions in schools that is respected by other masculine boys. As such, their femininity is tolerated in Boy Schools. For example, in School B, the sisterhood helps the class to win the champion in the inter-class board design competition. They are also nominated to in-charge of their school’s graduation dinner by their classmates. On the other hand, in School A, KL is invited to be the leader of a study group that is comprised of non-feminine boys. In this situation, KL’s academic capital enables him to get along with masculine boys.

#### *Social Position of the Sisterhood in the School: Teacher-Sisterhood Relationship*

The sisterhoods selectively establish close and friendly relationship with a few teachers. However, they also hate some of the teachers in their schools.

In School A, both the sisterhood and the majority of masculine students do not like both lazy and married teachers. The sisterhood think the lazy teachers are mean, somehow homophobic while making meaningless jokes in class, and not qualified to be their teachers. However, the sisterhood identifies some teachers who are trustworthy and, most importantly, ‘gossip-able’, in a sense that these teachers share similar ‘bitchy’ personality with the sisterhood. Initially after they identify the bitchy personality of the teachers, effeminate students stay with the teacher after class to talk about some hot gossips, usually about school affairs and students. Later, they find the teachers during recess or lunch break. And finally, they introduce other effeminate student friends to the teachers and start gossiping with each other regularly. ‘Bitchy’ teachers do not necessarily be female. In School B, the sisterhood is also close with two male teachers, one of them is effeminate and another is masculine yet gossipy. EL says School B is often described by teachers and students as a matrilineal society. During the interview, EL mentions “Our sisters are pretty powerful in the school” for a number of times. Apart from the aforementioned cultural capital of feminine boys, relationship with teachers and positions in school also gives ‘power’ to these feminine

students. EL shares several stories about his sisterhood's relationship with teachers:

Our sisters are friends with most teachers. At times, some teachers will tell our sisters for not being so feminine, in a kidding tone. Sometimes, teachers will make fun of our sisters during lessons. ... We also make fun of some teachers. For example, we point to male teacher's chests and say, 'Hey! Mr. C, your chest is bigger than yesterday!' Most teachers play with us and we are all very happy in school.

\* \* \*

There is a group of bitchy teachers gathered in the corner of the staff room, including my language teachers. There are some spare chairs for our sisters, so that when we visit the teachers, we can gossip like we are having meetings.

\* \* \*

There are some old conservative teachers, but they won't judge any of our sisters, probably because we are so capable of handling school affairs. For example, I help my Mathematics old male teacher to collect all homework. Sometimes, I help him to mark the assignment as well. So, because we handle everything in a right manner, they won't judge us.

#### *Social Position of the Boys in the School: Extra-Curricular Activities*

In the social hierarchy outlined earlier in Figure 1, students who plays extra-curricular activities (ECAs) are in the higher position of the hierarchy in the schools. It is because through the ECAs, students can establish a social network with boys of other forms. When boys begin their senior years of study, they begin engaging in ECAs and become core committee members of the activities. Usually, students who are committee members of some big associations are popular in schools and they are considered as "capable" students by other members of the school.

The big associations in School A include student council (SC), debate team, school houses, English Association. Student council is very influential in the school because it is responsible for organizing student activities and handling all matters related of ECAs. During the annual open days, the student council is the coordinator of the event and all ECA associations have to follow the SC's instructions. As for debate team, it helps the school win a lot of inter-school matches. Besides, usual members of student council are also committee members of debate team. There is a heritage system for student council, in a sense that senior SC members usually identify some junior form debate team members and give them different opportunities to assist the SC in organizing School Activities. The SC members also

encourage the junior debate team members to join SC in their senior years of study. As such, many students view the debate team and student council as the same entity. English Association is another big association in School A because it is supported by many English teachers in the school. There are also many student members in each form. School houses are usually dominated by sportive students and it is in-charge of various big sport events, including the athletic meets and swimming gala. The committee members are also the mentor of the orientation camp for secondary 1 students. As such, school houses have exceptionally good connection with junior form students.

The Sisterhood of Boys in School A has to search for ECA posts every year. It is because they are not familiar with the sisterhoods of senior years. The senior sisterhood will not pass along the ECA posts to junior sisterhood. However, the sisterhood usually approaches the teacher-in-charge of English Association to show their interests in helping the club. The teacher selects the chairperson of the club based on the students' English language ability. For this reason, the teacher chooses members of the sisterhood because their language ability is impressive to the teachers. The sisterhood volunteers to be on the committee for the English Association because it is a big ECA in the school. It has a large number of student members and it is supported by all English teachers. Helping in the English Association therefore symbolizes the status of the sisterhood in the school.

In School B, the two important ECAs are Student Activity Associations (SAA) and Prefect Association respectively. SAA is less powerful in school because the committee members are keen on organizing joint School Activities and seldom dominate internal School Affairs. The Prefect Association, on the other hand, deals more with internal School Affairs. Usually, the discipline teachers will consult the head boys for suitable candidates of the prefect association. The effeminate head boys would recommend members of the sisterhood to take these positions. This cycle repeats every year and therefore the sisterhood occupies influential positions of the prefect association in the school.

### *Resistance and Power of the Sisterhood in Schools*

The sisterhoods in School A and B do have conflicts with other members of the school. In School A, the sisterhood does not maintain a friendly relationship with the student council and the debate team. They tend to see the SC and debating team as identical in School A. SL reports that when he was in secondary 1, he was once interested in being a member of the debating team and student society in the future. Yet, he later gave up because he found himself not suitable in these activities, in the sense that the core players of these ECAs are 'typically' elite guys in the school in terms of their speech and social skills. The sisterhood

thinks the SC group forms an ‘exclusive’ circle in a sense that they only invite their friends to join the activities organized by the student council. On the surface, the SC group promotes itself as serving the school. However, the effeminate boys think the SC group is not realizing their responsibility as a student council. LP and SL comment on the SC as follow:

SL: The committee members are actually playing within their own friend group during the SC activities.

LP: Because these SC members are debate team members, their behavior is very aggressive. You can feel their aggressiveness anywhere. They often make fun of others in an indirect and implicit way. They see themselves as superior to other students, particularly in ECAs and interpersonal relationships.

SL: There is an obvious gap between the two in the everyday school life. The SC boys often show a sense of superiority over other boys and pretend to be ‘cool’. Their facial gestures just very ‘hateful’ that they appears to be superior.

LP: Yes! Their speech is very ‘fake’ and ‘surfaced’ and it is obvious that their conversation with other non-SC classmates is just for ‘social’, and the conversation is very empty and ends quickly.

KL also shares similar comments on the SC boys:

I hate the SC boys because they are just so useless and they often make mistakes in organizing School Activities. Secondly, they often laugh at us (*effeminate boys*). In the SC group, there are boys who are top students in School And boys with poor academic results. I am particularly angry when those rubbish mocks at us. What do they think they are? They simply gain power by sticking with those top SC members.

(Me: They usually mock at you in a direct way?)

No, they won’t laugh at us directly, unless we have direct interactions. Usually, you know they are mocking at you by looking at their facial expressions. Their smiles are so offensive. For example, when we walk along the corridor, they won’t say hello to you. They smile and walk away. From their smiles, you’ll know they are treating you as a psycho freak.

In School B, the sisterhood dominates the Prefect Association, they are not hatred of any particular group of masculine boys. This also explains why teachers and students in School B describe their school as a matrilineal society. The power of feminine boys was even recognized by the school in the following case:

Our inner circle was involved in a serious incident that happened in our school because our circle is feminine and many of our members belong to the Prefect Association.

Certain junior form boys took photos of the underwear of a female teacher, and the school had to handle this affair. Our circle has established a friendly network with junior boys, and is popular among these boys. The school did not directly ask us for help, but they eventually found the SD card by mobilizing our network in the junior form.

The Sisterhood of Boys in School B maintains harmonious relations with the majority of the boys, except one. That boy once had oral intercourse with a feminine boy and spread this experience around the school. That boy is heterosexual and he had oral intercourse ‘just for fun’. EL says eventually other boys did not insult the feminine boy, but turn to blame the heterosexual boy for being so ‘cheap’ to spread the experience.

### *Social Capital and Resistance from the Sisterhood*

The experience of the sisterhoods in School A and B is very different. The sisterhood in School B is very influential and they gain respect from both teachers and students. However, the sisterhood in School A is less powerful and significant. This is largely because of the degree of social capital established by the sisterhood. According to Pierre Bourdieu, “in every society people deploy and use their capital in political struggles to establish and maintain dominance and power” (Wilk & Cliggett 2007:186). In the local Boy Schools, the social capital consists academic achievement, teacher-student relationship, sports ability and positions of ECAs. Among these components, ECAs are the most influential type of capital. It is because it helps students to establish connections with other members of the School And gain respect from them.

In School A, the Sisterhood of Boys thrive in the school by nominating themselves to the teacher in-charge of the English Association. This is because the English Association is an influential ECA that can compete with the student council. The question is, then, why does the sisterhood need to compete with the student council? The Sisterhood of Boys claims that the SC is ambitious and the masculine boys often show a sense of superiority over other students. It is this sense of superiority perceived by the effeminate boys that creates a tension between the sisterhood and the SC. This sense of superiority indicates the higher position of the SC in the hierarchy of School A. The SC is superior to the sisterhood not only because the masculine boys “inherited” the powerful student council from senior students, but more fundamentally the effeminacy of the sisterhood is a subordinate and deviant masculinity in society. In other words, the ECA and masculinity establish the superiority of masculine SC boys over the sisterhood.

Masculine boys express their sense of superiority over the sisterhood through their

everyday encounters with the sisterhood. As mentioned earlier, when the sisterhood walk along the corridor, the SC boys won't say hello to them. Instead they smile and walk away. The sisterhood feels that from their smiles, they are treating the sisterhood as psycho freaks. In other words, resisting this sense of superiority is actually a resistance to the subordinating attempts of the sisterhood's effeminacy.

Travis Kong (2004) in his study of homosexuality elaborates how gay, as a deviant masculinity, resists dominant gendered norms. He suggests that gay boys "make rectifications to their current situation, so that they can gain social and cultural capital" and move to an upper social position (Kong 2004:20). This applies to the case of effeminate boys as well. The sisterhood are conscious of the disciplinary power of their effeminacy from the masculine boys. They hope to occupy positions in the English Association, which has an equivalent influence with the SC. This helps strengthen their social capital in the school. This explains why they use the bulletin interview to attack the SC. Besides, they establish friendly relationships with a few teachers. This is another form of social capital of the sisterhood. This explains why the sisterhood invites a gossip-able teacher to the interview with the SC. They hope to stop the SC from fighting back during the interview by using the disciplinary power of the teacher.

The story in School B seems to be very different from School A, in a sense that the sisterhood appears to be very powerful in the school. This is again because of the social capital possessed by the sisterhood. The sisterhood occupies the key positions of internal ECA, which is the prefect association. Their academic talents contributes to their school and their classmates. For example, the effeminate boys offer tutorials for masculine boys. The sisterhood also has a good relationship with teachers. Similar to the sisterhood in School A, they often gossip with a few gossip-able teachers.

Table 1 outlines the components of social capital possessed by the sisterhood in the two schools. The sisterhood in School B has a higher position than the masculine boys in all three aspects. On the other hand, the sisterhood in School A is only more powerful than the SC in terms of teachers' support. As such, the social capital of the sisterhood in School A is weaker and thus have less influence and competing power to the SC. In School B, because of the higher social capital of the sisterhood, members of the school recognizes the contribution and power of the sisterhood. Therefore, the sisterhood and masculine boys are in a more harmonious relationship than that of School A.

	School A		School B	
	Masculine boys (the SC)	Sisterhood	Masculine boys (the SA)	Sisterhood
Academic achievement	Half of them are top students of the school	Outstanding	Average	Outstanding
Influential ECA	Inherited	not inherited	joint school activities; not inherited	Internal school activities; inherited
Relationship with teachers	N/A	A few close and friendly teachers	N/A	A few close and friendly teachers

Table 1 A summary of the components of the social capitals of the sisterhood

### Between Hegemonic Masculinity and Effeminacy

The sisterhood performs differently in schools and public area. Within the schools, the sisterhood are bitchy and effeminate. They do not hide their femininity in front of teachers and other students. For example, they call other effeminate friends as “sisters” in classes. They also gossip together and yell in high-pitch during recess. During their *private gathering* in café, they express more of their intimacy. There are more bodily intimate interactions among the sisterhood. The small table of the café is a private space for the sisterhood in which they consider the table as a comfortable and safe space to express an intimate friendship. As the sisterhood walks on streets and *other public areas*, they consciously hide their effeminacy and perform masculinity. For example, when they share their gossips in the MTR, they carefully lower their pitch. Sometimes they also remind other effeminate boys to avoid their bitchiness in the MTR.

Figure 3 outlines the three spaces in which the sisterhood perform masculinity and femininity differently. From the diagram, it shows that the effeminate boys perform differently depending on the degree to which they are exposed to the public. The café is a micro-space in which the sisterhood considers as a private place for them share their deepest sentiments with their “sisters”. The school is an intermediate level of space in which the sisterhood interacts with many other teachers and students. Yet, they are familiar with each other and boys know the existence of the sisterhood in the school. The streets are the macro-spaces in which public surveillance of the sisterhood’s effeminacy is everywhere. It is a place that is full of uncertainty to the sisterhood, in a sense that people on the street and the sisterhood do not know each other. For this reason, the effeminate boys behave in a “socially acceptable” way of masculinity.

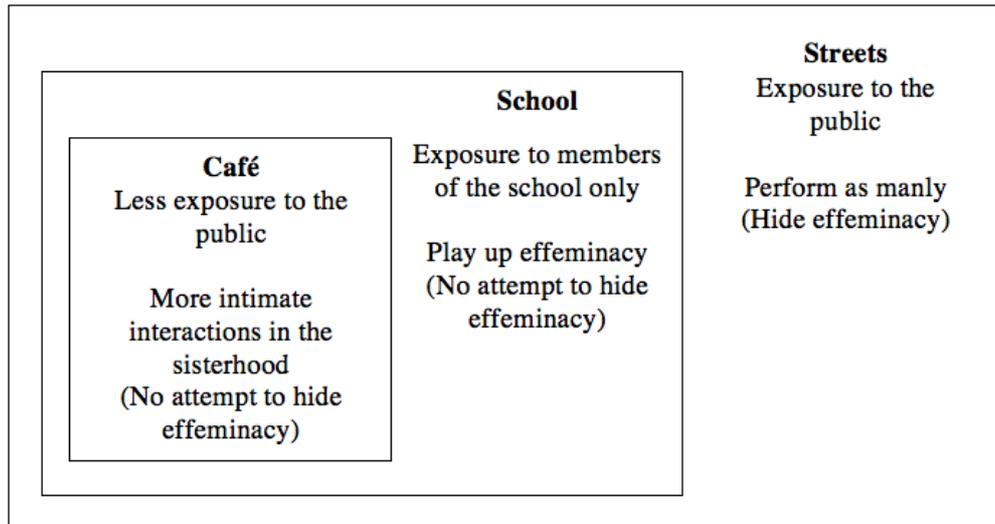


Figure 3 Performance of masculinity and effeminacy in macro- and micro- spaces

There exists a subjectivity of the sisterhood as it can choose to perform or hide their effeminacy in different contexts. This implies that the sisterhood internalizes the concept of hegemonic masculinity and they are conscious that male effeminacy is a deviant sexuality in society. Despite the resistance to hegemonic masculinities in schools as discussed in the previous section, the Sisterhood of Boys still recognizes the disciplinary power of their effeminacy in society. When the sisterhood tries to hide their effeminacy and perform in a manly way, they are actually subjectively self-fashioning their femininity. In Foucault's sense, the deployment of subjectivity as a normalizing regime involves "an individual who incites to relate oneself as a particular kind of subject" (Martino 2000). The sisterhood identifies their effeminacy as a "socially inappropriate" mannerism because it imputes homosexuality. As such, they police their mannerisms among themselves in public spaces, even without any direct disciplinary forces from other people on the street.

However, in their private gathering, the sisterhood has more intimate interactions than in schools and public areas. As discussed before, it is because the private gathering is a comfort zone for the sisterhood. The sisterhood feels that it is not necessary to hide their inner part of themselves under this circumstance. The reason why the café is a "comfort zone" for the sisterhood is that they are not exposed to the public. Despite the presence of customers from other desks in the café, the sisterhood considers their own table as safe because the café is noisy and dark. Every table is playing their own games and chatting. In this way, the sisterhood finds that the café can be a safe place that do not have much public surveillance. This encourages the intimate interactions among the sisterhood in the café. It is because through these intimate interactions, the sisterhood can give out their "true" selves to their

“sisters” and express their love to the sisterhood.

The school is an intermediate level of the space for the sisterhood, in a sense that it is neither public nor private to the sisterhood. It is not a private space for the sisterhood because there are many other teachers and students in the school. Although members of the school know the existence of sisterhood, the sisterhood still avoids expressing their “true” selves and intimacy in front of other students. It is also not a wholly public space for the sisterhood because they know the environment and people well. As a result, the sisterhood does not hide their effeminacy in the school, but only hides their emotional attachment to the sisterhood.

Instead of hiding their effeminacy, the sisterhood plays up their effeminacy in the school. The formation of the sisterhood is the realization of effeminacy among the boys themselves. The reason why there is a sisterhood for this group is due to the labeling and verbal abuse directed at the effeminate boys. Instead of conforming to these disciplinary abuses and acting manly, the effeminate boys form the sisterhood and continue with their effeminacy. According to Kong, in the gay homosexual world, another form of resistance is to “use back the femininity as weapons to challenge the disciplinary gender order” (2004:20). The formation of sisterhood plays up the femininity of the boys and establishes solidarity among themselves. The connection established among the effeminate boys help to hedge against the abuses from other boys. On the one hand, the sisterhood offers social support to effeminate boys. On the other hand, the sisterhood can even jointly combat against boys who make these abuses.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examines how effeminate boys unite and form their sisterhood in local Boy Schools. Initially the term “sisterhood” is a name given by masculine boys aiming to label and denigrate the effeminacy of the boys. However, this labeling in turn helps the effeminate boys to identify their peers, reclaim the label, and eventually form a friend group among themselves. The second part of this research studies how the sisterhood thrive in schools through occupying academic and social capital in schools. These effeminate boys possess academic capital because of their specific artistic talent and outstanding academic performance. Social capital is another important means of upgrading the sisterhood’s position in the school. The sisterhood tries to occupy key positions in the extra-curricular activities. They also establish good relationship with teachers. The individuals’ academic and social capital empowers the sisterhood in the school and further leads to their resistance against the hegemonic masculinity (sporty, academic excellence of straight-acting boys) in the school. Lastly, this paper identifies how effeminate boys perform their effeminacy differently in

various social contexts. The sisterhood performance varies with their exposure to the public according to the scale of the spaces. The sisterhood consider their private gathering as a safe space because masculine boys are separated from them. As such, they do not hide their effeminacy and intimacy in private gatherings. However, the sisterhood consciously performs “manliness” on the streets because they are exposed to the public and they have to behave in a socially acceptable way. In the schools, the sisterhood plays up their femininity because the sisterhood assumes everybody in the schools know about their effeminacy. They play up their femininity as a means to hedge against the hegemonic masculinity in the school.

This research denaturalizes the equation of “effeminacy=homosexuality”. This research illustrates that the experience of effeminate boys does not only result from homosexuality. For example, the sisterhood’s resistance to other student bodies point to their irresponsible behaviors. By essentializing the idea of effeminacy as a homosexual attribute, sexuality is deployed to simplify the complexities of male sexualities. Therefore, this research studies the experience of effeminate boys in attempt to suggest alternatives of male sexuality and to challenge the sexuality dichotomy in society. Another goal of this research is to challenge the hierarchy of boys in society. This research argues that hierarchy of boys is not simply a gender and sexuality matter. Instead, the hierarchy of boys also intersects with other aspects of social life, such as spaces and social capital. In the two Boy Schools, effeminate boys are not necessarily in a subordinated position than masculine students. Instead, by establishing social network and academic achievement, effeminate boys can be in a respectful position in the school. The labeling of effeminacy as a deviant masculinity constructs and reinforces the vulnerability of effeminate boys. However, the formation of sisterhood shows that the effeminate boys do have subjectivity in schools. Therefore, this research hopes to show that the gendered understanding of hierarchy of boys sheds the agency of effeminate boys and reinforces the power of hegemonic masculinity.

As Foucault (1990) puts it, “there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses”. Male effeminacy should not be “silenced” as a homosexual attribute. Besides, it is not merely a discourse of gender and sexuality. As a sexuality performance, male effeminacy intersects with space, social capital and other institutional forces to form the effeminate male subject.

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