

Language, Cultural Authenticity, and the *Tongzhi* Movement

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1. Introduction

Cultural authenticity has been a major concern for those involved in sexuality-based social movements in postcolonial societies (Boellstorff, 1999; Boellstorff and Leap 2004). The word 'authentic' implies genuineness, credibility, legitimacy, and worthiness of acceptance. In some Asian societies, many believe that same-sex desire is anything but authentic. Even nowadays, same-sex desire is sometimes viewed in Hong Kong as an undesirable product of colonialism. Some consider gay Hongkongers traitors to their own race who have succumbed to Western influences (Chou, 2000, p. 65). How then do gay rights activists in Hong Kong – often known as *tongzhi* ('comrade') activists – build a social movement on something that is regarded as false, illegitimate, and most important of all, 'un-Chinese' or even 'anti-Chinese'? This paper is an attempt to answer this question.

To show that same-sex desire is authentically Chinese, *tongzhi* activists appeal to tradition that is presumably shared by Chinese people all over the world. However, tradition is not a static body of beliefs and practices that is handed down from one generation to another. Rather, it is an on-going interpretation of the past that reflects contemporary concerns. As Jocelyn Linnekin (1983) argues, "the selection of what constitutes tradition is always made in the present; the content of the past is modified and redefined according to a modern significance" (p. 241). Only certain elements of the past are chosen in the invention of tradition. These selected elements are then placed in contexts that are different from their prior settings, and they gain new meanings for those involved in the process (Handler and Linnekin, 1984, p. 280).

Though receiving little attention in the literature, language plays a vital role in the construction of tradition. Through the use of linguistic resources that may have little to do with same-sex desire at first glance, *tongzhi* activists invoke selected elements of the past which are then reworked and reinterpreted to give a sense of legitimacy to their movement and to invent a same-sex tradition for lesbians and gay men in Hong Kong. At the same time, linguistic and other cultural symbols used in the process take on new meanings and new significance. To illustrate these two points, I will discuss how *tongzhi* activists adopt

two discursive strategies to underscore the cultural authenticity of same-sex desire in Hong Kong society.

2. *Tongzhi* and Chinese Revolutionary Discourse

One strategy is activists' appropriation of the term *tongzhi* from Chinese revolutionary discourse. Originating some 2,200 years ago, the label *tongzhi* was initially defined as 'pertaining to people who have the same ethics and ideals.' Its association with political discourse began to strengthen when it was used in Dr. Sun Yat-Sen's will. Dr. Sun, the leader of the 1911 Chinese Democratic Revolution, used *tongzhi* to refer to his followers (Fang and Heng, 1983). The term acquired stronger political and revolutionist connotations during the Communist Revolution (1921-1949). After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, *tongzhi* became an address term among the general public. In this usage, the term *tongzhi* is often translated into English as 'comrade.' In the last two decades, with Mainland China's rapid social and economic changes, *tongzhi* has become disfavored due to its original political and revolutionist connotations. However, in the late 1980s, it was appropriated by gay rights activists in Hong Kong to refer to 'gay men' or 'sexual minorities' in general. In the last few years, mainstream newspapers in Hong Kong such as *Apple Daily* and *Oriental Daily News* also started using *tongzhi* as a term of reference for lesbians, gay men, and other sexual minorities (Wong, 2002). The social history of the term *tongzhi* from the 1911 Chinese Democratic Revolution to the present is shown in Table 1.

Elsewhere (Wong, 2003), I examined gay rights activists' use of the label *tongzhi* to refer to 'gay men' or 'sexual minorities' in interviews and in everyday interactions. I argued that the label *tongzhi* is used as one of the linguistic resources in the construction of a public persona. Although the in-group label *mem-ba* 'member' is common in everyday interactions, activists often use *tongzhi* when presenting the *tongzhi* movement to the general public. In the interview setting, activists' use of *tongzhi* co-occurs with other linguistic resources. These features include idiomatic expressions, H(igh) forms in lexical doublets (Ferguson, 1959), the paucity of utterance particle combinations, and the expressions *so-wai* 'so-called' and *ngo-dei giu* 'what we call.' These linguistic features all carry social meanings that are crucial to activists' presentation of themselves as eloquent, educated and respectable spokespersons of the *tongzhi* movement. Idiomatic expressions and H(igh) forms in lexical doublets index learnedness – a quality that is desirable for activists who aim to present themselves as educated to journalists and researchers. When used to introduce in-group terms, expressions such as *so-wai* 'so-called' and *ngo-dei giu* 'what we call' index the activist's role as spokesperson of the *tongzhi* movement. The paucity of utterance particle combinations indexes the activity in which they are engaged (i.e. an interview with an outsider) (see Matthews and Yip, 1994, p. 338). Due to its association with notions such as collectiveness, public orientation, and political stance, *tongzhi* became the ideal label for activists' projection of a public persona in the interview setting.

While my previous analysis focused on language use data, the present study draws on activists' discussion of the label *tongzhi*. Activists' metalinguistic reflection provides another source of information that adds to our understanding of their use of the term. In both formal and informal discussions, many activists mentioned that the main reason for their use of *tongzhi* to refer to lesbians, gay men, and other sexual minorities is to highlight the cultural specificity of same-sex desire in Chinese societies. The emphasis on

(1) Table 1: Important milestones in the history of *tongzhi* since 1911
(The year represents the approximate beginning of the period.)

	1911	1949	1978	Late 1980s	mid 1990s
	Republican China	Communist China	The opening up of the market economy	The beginning of the <i>tongzhi</i> movement	
Mainland China	'comrade'	'(Communist) comrade'	'(Communist) comrade'	'(Communist) comrade'	'(Communist) comrade'
	Address term for Nationalist revolutionaries	Address term for the general public	The term <i>tongzhi</i> became disfavored.		
Hong Kong	'comrade'	'(Communist) comrade'		'(Communist) comrade'	'(Communist) comrade'
				'sexual minorities' (or 'gay men')	'sexual minorities' (or 'gay men')
		[The use of <i>tongzhi</i> 'comrade' as an address term was widely known in Hong Kong, but it was rarely used due to its Communist and political connotations.]		Term of reference used by gay rights activists	Term of reference used by gay rights activists and mainstream newspapers

cultural distinctiveness is a recurrent theme in the sexuality-based social movement in Hong Kong. At the conclusion of the First Chinese *Tongzhi* Conference held in 1996, *tongzhi* activists issued a manifesto which states the following:

The les-bi-gay movement in many Western societies is largely built upon the notion of individualism, confrontational politics, and the discourse of individual rights. Certain characteristics of confrontational politics, such as through coming out and mass protest and parades may not be the best way of achieving *tongzhi* liberation in the family-centred, community-oriented Chinese societies which stress the importance of social harmony.

(Chou, 2000, p. 278)

Since then, positing radical differences between the West and Chinese societies has been a cornerstone of the *tongzhi* movement in Hong Kong.

Matt, one of the pioneers of the *tongzhi* movement, asserted that the original definition of *tongzhi* is much narrower than the one commonly used nowadays. When I asked him whether he would use *tongzhi* to refer to a gay American, his response was as follows:

I wouldn't call a foreigner *tongzhi*. *Tongzhi* is a local label. I don't think we should internationalize it.... Not only does this label refer to those with same-sex desire, but it also carries certain ideologies about the *tongzhi* movement. Some of those who identify themselves as *tongzhi* are actually not *tongzhis*; although they prefer the same sex, they don't embrace the ideologies that this label signifies. That's why I said this label has political implications. If we use this label to refer to anyone who likes the same sex, I think it's a misunderstanding of its original meaning or it's disrespectful of the person who coined the term.

For Matt, *tongzhi* is a local label that carries culture-specific ideologies about same-sex desire. Among others, these ideologies include the stance against confrontational politics, the emphasis on social harmony in the *tongzhi* movement, and the creation of a cultural identity that will integrate the sexual into the social. The first two are both underscored in the manifesto of the First Chinese *Tongzhi* Conference.

Other activists also stated that cultural specificity played a part in the appropriation of the label to refer to those with same-sex desire, but they did not claim that *tongzhi* should be reserved for those who embrace the ideologies of the *tongzhi* movement. According to Rob, *tongzhi* was appropriated so that Chinese lesbians and gay men would have a label for self-identification. Similarly, Chung, another activist, said that he would call a gay American *tongzhi*, but he added that this might not be appropriate, because gays and lesbians in the U.S. might look at sexuality in a completely different way. Thus, the use of *tongzhi* to refer to sexual minorities in other parts of the world would be like projecting one's own sexual identity onto those in other cultures.

Except Matt, however, all the activists I interviewed said that they would use *tongzhi* to refer to non-Chinese sexual minorities. In other words, for many activists, *tongzhi* does not refer to 'Chinese sexual minorities,' but 'sexual minorities' in general. If cultural specificity is not part of the referential meaning of *tongzhi*, where is 'Chineseness' encoded? I would argue that cultural specificity is part of the indexical meaning of the term. *Tongzhi* is not only a symbol that stands for 'sexual minorities,' but it is also an index that points to the speaker's alignment with the *tongzhi* movement and a salient aspect of his or her identity – namely, 'Chineseness.'

How then do activists use the term *tongzhi* to establish an ideological link between 'Chineseness' and their movement? Gay rights activists manipulate the intertextual gap (Briggs and Bauman, 1992) between their use of *tongzhi* and Chinese revolutionaries' use of the term. By doing so, they invite the comparison between sexual minorities and Chinese revolutionaries. While Chinese revolutionaries used *tongzhi* to call upon each other to fight for an egalitarian state, gay rights activists use the very same term when presenting the sexuality-based social movement to the general public in the interview setting. Despite this difference, both Chinese revolutionaries and *tongzhi* activists promote similar ideals through the use of *tongzhi*. The values espoused by Chinese revolutionaries – for example, freedom, respect, and equality – are shared not only by *tongzhi* activists, but also by Chinese people all over the world. Through the use of the

term, *tongzhi* activists liken their struggle for respect and equality to Chinese revolutionaries' fight for similar ideals in the past. Thus, the *tongzhi* movement is presented as a quintessential Chinese social movement.

3. Qu Yuan and the Dragon Boat Festival

The appropriation of stories about Chinese historical figures is another strategy adopted by *tongzhi* activists to underscore the cultural authenticity of same-sex desire in Hong Kong. By locating same-sex desire in China's past, activists argue that it is indigenous to Chinese culture.

One example is the proclamation of the Dragon Boat Festival as *Tongzhi* Day. The Dragon Boat Festival is on the fifth day of the fifth month of the Chinese calendar (usually in June on the Western calendar). It commemorates the patriotic poet Qu Yuan (340-278 B.C.) who drowned himself, presumably because he was disappointed that his country had fallen into the hands of invaders. Learning that Qu Yuan had jumped into the river, the masses were afraid that dragons and other creatures would swallow his body. They made glutinous rice pockets and threw them into the river to feed the creatures. They also held boat races to drive the dragons away. Chinese people all over the world still engage in these practices every year: dragon boat races are held and sticky rice wrapped in bamboo leaves is eaten on the day of the festival.

However, *tongzhi* activists attempted to reinterpret this narrative which gives meaning to the Dragon Boat Festival. On June 18, 1999, the *Tongzhi* Community Joint Meeting – a coalition of *tongzhi* organizations in Hong Kong – proclaimed the Dragon Boat Festival as *Tongzhi* Day. The point of contention was the reason why Qu Yuan committed suicide. Activists argued that Qu Yuan killed himself, not because he wanted to protest against the invasion of his country; rather, Qu Yuan exhibited affection for the emperor in his poems and committed suicide because he was no longer favored by the emperor.

The proclamation of the Dragon Boat Festival as *Tongzhi* Day incited much public discussion of Qu Yuan's sexuality. In the end, neither activists nor academic scholars know exactly why Qu Yuan jumped into the river. However, what activists can confidently say is that through the proclamation, they succeeded in raising the awareness of the general public about issues concerning gay and lesbian Hongkongers. For two weeks, activists organized a series of social events under the banner of *Tongzhi* Day. These events were publicized on pamphlets distributed at *tongzhi* venues, and they attracted wide media coverage in print and on television. The controversy over *Tongzhi* Day reached its climax on a primetime TV show broadcast a week before *Tongzhi* Day. *Frontiers of the World* – a popular show on current affairs – invited several activists and public figures to discuss issues surrounding *Tongzhi* Day. Although not all the publicity was positive, *tongzhi* activists were at least able to obtain access to the media and present their side of the story (see also Chan 2000. p. 95).

The appropriation of stories about Chinese historical figures like Qu Yuan is a necessary step toward constructing a meta-narrative which provides the *raison d'être* of the *tongzhi* movement. By calling into question Qu Yuan's sexuality, *tongzhi* activists attempted to change not only the public perception of this historical figure, but also the attitude of the general public toward same-sex desire. If a cultural icon like Qu Yuan was indeed someone who desired the same sex, would same-sex desire be still considered evil

or even 'anti-Chinese'? The appropriation of time-honored stories allows activists to describe the golden past of same-sex desire in Chinese culture, its degenerate present (presumably due to the influence of Western sexual morality), and the vision of a utopian future.

4. Conclusion

In a recent article, Mary Bucholtz (2003) argues that authenticity should not be treated as an object waiting to be discovered; rather, researchers should investigate how it is created through language and other symbolic resources. In this paper, I have examined two linguistic practices – namely, activists' appropriation of the label *tongzhi* and their re-interpretation of time-honored stories about Chinese historical figures. Through these two linguistic practices, *tongzhi* activists rework selected elements of the past to underscore the cultural distinctiveness of their movement. At the same time, linguistic and other cultural symbols used in the process have gained new significance. Thus, the Dragon Boat Festival is no longer just an event that commemorates Qu Yuan. At least in Hong Kong, some may remember that it was an occasion on which *tongzhi* activists attempted to raise the public awareness of issues related to same-sex desire. In a similar vein, the label *tongzhi* has become a new term of references for sexual minorities. The frequent use of the term to refer to 'gay men' or 'sexual minorities' in mainstream newspapers indicates that the new meaning has spread beyond the community of practice in which it originated (Wong, 2002).

The two strategies discussed in this paper may seem rather different at first glance. Activists' re-interpretation of the story about Qu Yuan was an attempt to reclaim the past. It is similar to the way in which gay rights activists in Europe and North America have called into question the sexual orientation of such cultural figures as Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci. By locating same-sex desire in the past, this strategy aims to show that it is by no means a modern invention. On the other hand, since the label *tongzhi* is a sacred symbol of Chinese revolutionaries which has little to do with same-sex desire, activists' appropriation of the term may seem baffling at first. While one may argue that Qu Yuan was someone with same-sex desire, no one would contend that Chinese revolutionaries of the past fought for the rights of sexual minorities. Thus, it may appear that activists' re-interpretation of the story about Qu Yuan has to do with reclaiming the past, while their appropriation of the term *tongzhi* was an attempt to make a connection between Chinese revolutionaries and sexual minorities that did not previously exist.

Nevertheless, I would argue that what unites these two strategies is the fact that they are both important components of activists' re-interpretation of past events, the goal of which is to create a new tradition for those with same-sex desire in Chinese societies. Activists' selective appropriation plays an important role in both cases. Traditional symbols of same-sex desire do exist in Chinese culture. Emperor Ai, who cut his sleeve so as not to wake up his beloved Dong Xian, gave a homosexual connotation to the expression 'cut sleeve.' The term 'eating peaches' came to signify same-sex love, because of the half-eaten peach that Mizi Xia gave to the ruler of Wei (Hinsch 1990, p. 53). Yet both Emperor Ai and Mizi Xia are stigmatized historical figures. On the other hand, Qu Yuan is a more appropriate symbol for gay rights activists: not only was he a great poet, but he was also a patriot. By appropriating this cultural icon, activists argued against the view that gay and lesbian Chinese are traitors to their own race. Similarly, before the advent of *tongzhi*, derogatory labels such as *sing-bin-taai* 'perverts' and *si-fat-gwai* 'ass-

lovers' were commonly used in Hong Kong to refer to those with same-sex desire. Through the appropriation of *tongzhi* and the reinterpretation of the story about Qu Yuan, activists attempted to create a new same-sex tradition that would replace the old one. While the old version of the past was symbolized by derogatory labels and stigmatized historical figures, the new same-sex tradition is associated with Chinese revolutionary discourse and national heroes revered by Chinese all over the world. Exerting their right to interpret the history of same-sex desire in Chinese societies, *tongzhi* activists have vowed to change not only the attitude of the general public toward same-sex desire, but also the perception of gay and lesbian Chinese regarding their place in Chinese culture and history.

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