

Hong Kong's Tongzhi Movement

Through the Eyes of Queer Sisters

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Queer Sisters

Prelude

In Hong Kong, we have our own version of the "lesbigay" movement, which we call the Tongzhi Liberation Movement. Before we go any further, however, there is a need to discuss first what and who are *tongzhi*; the concept's relationship to the political, social and cultural context of Hong Kong; the meanings, directions and content of the Tongzhi Movement.

姊妹同志 (Zimei Tongzhi) Queer Sisters, as a feminist group, fights for women's sexual rights. We try to re-locate, re-inscribe and re-dispose ourselves in the existing *tongzhi*, women and human rights movement.

Tongzhi (同志)

Tongzhi is a word (sign) of multiple meanings and possible interpretations. Besides its meaning as derived from a literal rendering (which means comrade, with the same goals and aspirations), what it means varies according to temporal and spatial elements. On the one hand, it was a respectable word used to indicate Chinese communists. But it has gradually and ironically -- become a word used pejoratively to describe people coming from communist China. People in Hong Kong these days might, for example, joke that "After the first of July, those *tongzhi* from main-

land China will come and liberate you." Such comments suggest fear and helplessness. On the other hand, Chinese people in Hong Kong, as well as those in Taiwan, mainland China and overseas, have appropriated this word to cover homosexuality.

Tongzhi (同志) is now a popular representation for homosexuals in Hong Kong. In Chinese, homosexuality is formally translated as *tongxinglian* (同性戀). So, when the word *tongzhi* (同志) was used by Hong Kong's best selling newspaper, the *Oriental Daily News*, in a headline for a negative news story about homosexuals having s/m sex, the connection between *tongzhi* and homosexuals was rendered both inevitable and rigid. Thus it became a newly-formulated, conventional sign depicting homosexuals.

Nevertheless, some people think that this kind of parallel is illogical because homosexuals do not necessarily have the same goals and aspirations (zhi----志). These people now are trying their best to "expand" the meanings of *tongzhi* to include people of different sexuality/sexualities, or people who have the same goal (同) in the liberation of different sexuality/sexualities. *Tongzhi* (as a noun, e.g. sexual identity, or as an adjective, e.g., *tongzhi* studies) is still very problematic in Hong Kong, but it keeps the discussion flowing.

Same (tong ---- 同) Aspiration (zhi---- 志) as Whose?

The above mentioned "new" concept of *tongzhi* emerged originally from a positive intention of inclusiveness aimed at extending the umbrella of the Tongzhi Liberation Movement to cover all people of different sexuality/sexualities. But it subsequently became problematic.

Firstly, neither sexual orientation nor the movement related to it suggests one and only one aspiration (zhi----志). Most of those identified as *tongzhi* do not consider themselves as sharing

a common (tong ---- 同) aspiration (zhi---- 志) in the liberation of people of different sexuality/sexualities. Even if they do recognise the aspiration (zhi---- 志), they do not conceive of it as one and the same (tong ---- 同) as other understandings, without differences. Secondly, self-reclamation is about power. If homosexuals now have the power to reclaim themselves in the name of *tongzhi*, other parties and people of different sexuality/sexualities, who are marginalised not only by heterosexist society, but also outside the homosexual community, find it difficult to locate themselves in the existing, pervasive discourse of *Tongzhi*, which only refers to homosexuals. Further trouble arises when we claim *tongzhi* rights or *tongzhi* equal opportunities as it merely refers to the rights and equal opportunities of homosexuals. This is not just because *tongzhi* is now equated with homosexuals, but because people who are not at the oppositional and binary poles created by such concepts as heterosexual and homosexual (consider, for example, bisexuals or transsexuals) find it hard to reclaim themselves in the name of *tongzhi* or within the meanings of *tongzhi*. Not fitting neatly into the construct, they find themselves having less power. As a result, it is more difficult for them to articulate their interests, under any circumstances -- including within the discourse of *Tongzhi*. Even if some people insist on extending the meanings of *tongzhi* in books and newspapers, such actions do not solve the problems of power imbalance among relations of homosexuals and other sexual beings subordinated in the local *tongzhi* community.

A Name of One's Own

There is a good reason for why we spend so much energy discussing the *tongzhi* issue in the first place: it has to do with the localisation of sexual concepts in the liberation movement. In 1991, homosexuality (among men over 21) was decriminalised. But homosexuality was still regarded as a Western invasion, and a men-only thing. Women were totally invisible. Now we know that there has been a genuine development of our own

notion of sex and sexual concepts and the movement that is part of *Tongzhi* discourse.

After the decriminalisation of the male homosexual act, the excitement behind the decision ignited a spark generating such homosexual groups and NGOs as the 10% Club and Horizons. Gradually things died down, however, and the community shrank in size. Nevertheless, Caucasians, those Chinese who came from the western world and men still dominated the scene. Certainly, we as queer sisters were still out of the picture.

No one knows exactly when or from where the word *tongzhi* originated, but now it has become very popular. Before *tongzhi*, however, homosexuals in Hong Kong called themselves 基 (the same pronunciation as gay but without the meaning of being happy). Only very few female homosexuals would call themselves 基. Usually, as women have long been placed in a position of insignificance, they would call themselves 自己友 (buddies from the same community) or 我係 (I am) -- but they would never ask who/what am I?

Also, as local homosexual groups (nearly all *tongzhi* groups are made up of local people now) developed and there were more and more actions dealing with the homosexuality issue, *tongzhi* became more popular and was frequently used by homosexuals and members of homosexual groups. This surely emphasises the local uniqueness of homosexuals' lives and its difference from that in other parts of the world. This, in turn, stimulates more people to discuss *tongzhi* in a rethinking of the local situation of homosexuals and the movement. *Tongzhi* is thus positive here; but, as we explained before, only to homosexuals. Consequently, people of different sexuality/sexualities try to deconstruct the meaning within the entire discourse of *tongzhi*. This they do with the aim of relocating and reclaiming themselves, in such a way that they do not necessarily fall into the binary categories of hetero/homo -- categorised sexual identities from categorised ways of thinking.

To Name or Not to Name

In the West (especially the United States and the United Kingdom), names and identities are vital in the lesbian movement. In those countries that are highly populated, with a sound foundation for and a mature development of civic education and democratic systems, collective "coming out" is an important strategy for consolidating scattered forces, and an obvious way for lesbians to articulate themselves. But in a country where, once one dons a political uniform of whatever style, one may be a target of accusation, we have reservations about the high profile nature of "coming out" as a tactic of the movement.

Yet, we cannot label "coming out" as a purely Caucasian tactic, and any use of this tactic as a negative gesture imposed by white power. "Coming out" in the sense of everyday life -- revealing one's sexuality to friends and family -- is still very positive and encouraging.

Is There a Tongzhi Movement (同志運動)?

It is important to discuss the movement (運動) -- no matter whether from a social movement perspective or from an ideological perspective. From our point of view, a movement should be about vision and mission. And it has to be moving. Viewed from this perspective, there is still no Tongzhi Movement in Hong Kong. But this statement is not fair because the existing *tongzhi* still hope for a Tongzhi Liberation Movement (though they are not conscious of what kind of movement -- of what are the directions, objectives or purviews of *tongzhi* issues).

Due limited space, we do not intend to describe all the work of *tongzhi* groups in Hong Kong in this essay. Generally speaking, each group has its own special goals and means of operation. They do, however, tend to keep things personal and apolitical. For example, the 10% Club has joined the movement "against discrimination" and for "equal opportunities." But when

the group leadership changed, all they seemed capable of doing was having parties, parties and parties. Workshops about personal problems were already seen as "very progressive."

Last year (1996), the Hong Kong Government published a Consultation Paper on Equal Opportunities (sexual orientation) examining the question of whether or not Hong Kong should pass laws against discrimination on the grounds of different sexual orientations. In nearly all the responses of *tongzhi* groups, the term human rights was deliberately left out because of the feeling that the sovereign-to-be, the Chinese government, would not like such "sensitive words". Despite an early position of strong support for an Equal Opportunities Bill covering discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, once it was clear that such a bill was not likely even to get tabled before the Legislative Council was disbanded on July 1, 1997, and would have no chance of proceeding under the Provisional Legislature, hardly a word of protest was heard from all the *Tongzhi* groups.

Now, just before July 1997, the controversial issue of the amendment of the Societies and Public Order Ordinances -- a measure which will reduce the freedom of speech and the power of people -- has arisen. Practically no *tongzhi* groups have stood up and spoken. Nor have they joined the demonstrations or joint actions of other local NGOs, including human rights groups. The spokesman of Horizons even said to the press that the group did not fear this amendment because it would "cooperate" with the government (though we do not know to which government he was referring -- the British Hong Kong government, the Provisional Legislature led by Tung Chee-hwa, or the Chinese Communist government?).

Most of the *tongzhi* groups as a matter of policy do not form alliances with other NGOs, or human rights groups. Consequently, they have refused to join July 1 Link, considering the international NGO conference the group is organising to be too political.

And a few comments on such phenomena: the Tongzhi Movement (同志運動) is stagnant, hardly moving at all in the political arena. Thus, the Tongzhi Movement (同志運動) has become merely *tongzhi* activities (同志活動). Still at a very preliminary stage, we talk about a liberation movement for sexual rights, with the *tongzhi* community as a subaltern group that needs political struggle to re-dispose and re-inscribe its own rights.

To be fair, these *tongzhi* groups have been working in the areas of counselling hot-line services, support groups and entertainment activities that are important to the welfare and morale of the local *tongzhi* community. They have put in a lot of effort and deserve to be appreciated. But they remain apolitical -- or politically inactive, rather, for they have been seen to compromise with the future government, although their influence is very limited.

姊妹同志 Queer Sisters

Claiming that we are a feminist group advocating women's sexual rights, after starting out on our own path in 1995, 姊妹同志 (*Zimei Tongzhi*) Queer Sisters has been crossing borders and boundaries. We decided to form an NGO for women as a subaltern group with the objectives of self-strengthening, boosting self-respect and emphasizing subjectivity.

Our work includes counselling peers through hot-line services, publishing newsletters, organising self-strengthening workshops, presenting and attending talks and discussions about feminist issues and allying with and assisting academics in their efforts to educate.

We do not put sexually subalterned women in the category of female homosexuality. On the contrary, we emphasize the fact that women have the rights to explore, rethink and choose how they are pertinent to the interdeterminacy, heterogeneity, multiplicity of sexuality: no matter with what gender you want to de-

velop relations, what kind or style of sex you enjoy -- and with what gender -- what gender of clothing you want to wear, or, even, what sex you want to be!

Thus the notion behind 姊妹同志 (*Zimei Tongzhi*) Queer Sisters challenges the blind spot of the existing Tongzhi Movement that has overshadowed women and people of different sexuality/sexualities. Our stories, though not yet part of "his"tory, witness the fact that the experience, as well as the subjectivity, of women who do not fall into the oppositional and binary categories of both gender and sexual orientations, has long been neglected, obliterated and marginalised and has therefore become invisible in the patriarchal society and the homosexual-centric *tongzhi* community. We therefore believe in the idea that we should have the right to re-examine our own experiences from the point of view of the subject. Moreover, we oppose the notion that one and only one identity/label can be placed on a person, so that all people who wear the same label will become identical and without distinction. On the other hand, we encourage women to voice and articulate their opinions so that they can fight for their own rights and self-esteem.

We also challenge the existing sexually conservative women's movement that is hetero-centric, and only runs along the tracks of "normal" marriage and family. Early 1996 was the first time we cooperated with other women's NGOs. We formed a Women's Coalition for Equal Opportunities to study the consultation paper on equal opportunities regarding sexual orientation, and also monitored the performance of the newly formed Equal Opportunities Commission. Before that, Hong Kong women's groups had never formally placed sexual orientation on their agenda(s).

This is not merely the first positive effort at cooperation between women's NGOs and *tongzhi* groups; it is also the progressive and innovative starting point of *tongzhi* groups' political activism as they have long been politically sleepy and inward-fo-

cused. We now embrace an open and positive attitude towards politics, and, as a result, we have joined a couple of demonstrations on equal opportunities in alliance with the human rights coalition against the threatened repeal of the amended Societies and Public Order Ordinances, and also, as you all know, joined July 1 Link.

To be involved in the people's movement is not just a matter of justice. It represents our view that the Tongzhi Movement can never be separated from the human rights movement. In the context of a Hong Kong that will soon be handed over to China, this is especially true. The "His"tory of human rights movements has long focused merely on races, classes, gender, religions and disabilities. Though they sometimes mention sexuality, only sexual orientation is raised at the table. There is a complete neglect of human beings as sexual beings in the immense domain of sexuality/sexualities. Consequently, the struggle for one's sexual rights is both a human rights issue and a feminist issue.

One final and vital message: we hope to put forward through discussions, conversations and political struggles, the issues and problems of sexually subalterned women. Once on the agenda of the people's movement and the human rights movement, the issues and the discussions they inspire might, in turn, move local *tongzhi* groups a step further. It's all about movement.