

# Tongzhi in China: A Social Marker or Not?

Yuzhi Chen

*University of Pennsylvania*

This paper presents and discusses the use of the term *tongzhi* (同志) as an example of language change in progress in the People's Republic of China (PRC). I review data from different historic phases based on previous research as well as data from past and contemporary media sources. These are presented to test Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog's (1968) social marker theory concerning the unmarked and marked uses of the term. Furthermore, underlying social and economic motivations are taken into consideration as they relate to *tongzhi*'s semantic changes. From its reference to people with the same ideals to a term specifically referring to people in sexual minority communities, the term *tongzhi* has undergone tremendous shifts in semantic implicature. Thus, I argue that *tongzhi* has multiple meanings for different groups of speakers, and it does not always categorically fit into Weinreich et al.'s (1968) social marker theory. Given *tongzhi*'s distinct connotations, the pedagogical implication of the data analysis presented here is that it is advisable to integrate socioeconomic and cultural factors into the teaching and introduction of *tongzhi* to learners of Chinese.

## Introduction

1) *Geming shangwei chengong, tongzhi rengxu nuli*  
革命尚未成功，同志仍需努力。

As the revolution is not yet completed, all my followers must endeavor to carry it out (Dr. Sun Yat-sen's will, 1925, as cited in Fang & Heng, 1983, p. 496).

2) A scene cited from a renowned Chinese novel entitled *Yehuo Chun-feng Dou Gucheng* (*Revolutionary Struggle in a Historic City*; 野火春风斗古城) is described as follows:

只要唤出'同志'这两个字来，送你们这二十里地就不算白费了。

After the barber successfully deduced that those men are actually party members of the China's Communist Party, he explained to Yang Xiaodong (the heroine) by saying that "as long as you call me Tongzhi (同志), I don't care escorting you all the 20 miles." (Li, 1981)

3) *Kan le G&L duo xiang zanmei yi sheng*: "Geming shangwei chengong, tongzhi rengxu nuli!"

看了《G&L》，多想赞美一声：“革命尚未成功，同志仍需努力！”

After reading *G&L Gay Magazine*, I want to say: "As the revolution is not yet completed, *tongzhi* must endeavor to carry it out" (as cited in Wong, 2005, p. 770).

The above quoted three contexts where *tongzhi* (同志) is used lead to different interpretations towards the meaning of *tongzhi*.

Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the first president and founding father of the Republic of China left sentence 1 in his will, in which he called on his fellow revolutionists to carry on the revolution. *Tongzhi* in Sun's will is used as an equivalent term for revolutionist followers.

As for the second scene depicted above (sentence 2), identifying oneself as a *tongzhi* (comrade) who upheld the same political ideals as the Communist Party did was regarded as an honor at that time, a common phenomenon in some old Chinese novels and movies, especially in those that depict the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949). Here, *tongzhi* is used as a means to identify whether one is a party member or has the same revolutionary ambition. Thus, this usage of *tongzhi* involves stronger political and revolutionist connotations, and serves as an address term rather than a generic referent as it does in Dr. Sun Yat-sen's will.

Sentence 3 concerns the gay/lesbian activist's stylized usage of *tongzhi* in *G&L Magazine*, a magazine created for a target audience of Chinese sexual minorities. Here, the address term *tongzhi* functions as a synonym of gay and lesbian.

Therefore, from the above three examples, a huge discrepancy in the meanings of *tongzhi* can be spotted. The term *tongzhi* has been undergoing frequent semantic shifts over the years, along with the socioeconomic changes in the People's Republic of China. However, as one may also notice, *tongzhi* still retains its specific meaning as *comrade* in given contexts (i.e., China's political context).

The major purpose of the present paper is to apply Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog's (1968) theory of social markers to data collected from previous research (Scotton & Zhu, 1983, 1984; Wong & Zhang, 2001) as well as from past and contemporary media sources. Labov's (1963) Vineyard study shows how phonological features of language use change in the course of immediate social interaction. Likewise, I delve into my case by reviewing the socioeconomic context of the given historic period. By recourse to this theoretical framework, I examine whether the term *tongzhi* as a language change in progress matches the features of a social marker. Also, this paper relates the phenomenon of language changes to underlying social changes. I conclude by presenting my personal insight into the pedagogical implications drawn from the results of the data analysis.

### Theoretical Framework

Labov's (1963) study of socially conditioned sound change in Martha's Vineyard is a foundational work which delineates the role of sociolinguistic variation in diachronic change. In this study, Labov notes that the more "summer people" are around, the more phonological variations that the locals use diverge. It is through the use of centralized diphthongs that the speaker is marked as a "Vineyarder". Hence, the centralization of diphthongs functions as a social marker to distinguish whether one belongs to "summer people" or the "local folks." Moreover, Labov (1963) notes that "one cannot understand the development of a language change apart from the social life of the community in which it occurs" (p. 275), which clearly relates the language change to its underlying social motivations.

Weinreich et al. (1968) further explore the role of sociolinguistic variation in diachronic change. According to Weinreich et al. (1968), the distribution of a

particular sociolinguistic variable with certain social features may be restricted to a limited number of people or a certain social group. The researchers thus argue that “linguistic forms may become *social markers* when they represent a language change in progress” (as cited in Scotton & Zhu, 1983, p. 478, emphasis added). According to their work, while a particular form may be affected by a language change in progress, the distribution of the given form is usually restricted to some level. And, if the usage of this form involves certain social features, then the particular form becomes a social marker, because it is accepted and used by a limited number of people or a certain social group similar to the “summer people” of Labov’s (1963) study.

Labov (2001) later explains that social markers exhibit “social recognition... usually in the form of social stigma” (p. 197). He posits that markers vary based on the social characteristics of speakers (e.g., class, age, gender), and speakers generally have a social consciousness of using such particular linguistic forms.

The Vineyard case in Labov’s (1963) study illustrates how phonological features of language use change in the course of immediate social interaction; this is closely related to underlying social and economic motivations. On the other hand, the term *tongzhi* has been undergoing tremendous semantic changes in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These changes are an example of shifts in semantic implicature. Despite the differences in my case and Labov’s (1963) Vineyard case (i.e. semantic shifts versus phonological shifts), one point that deserves attention is the fact that social context is of vital significance in understanding a (socio-)linguistic phenomenon. Furthermore, under different social circumstances, the distribution of a certain linguistic form may or may not be restricted to a given group of speakers. In the paper, I will analyze whether *tongzhi* in the PRC (from an address term to a word with gay and lesbian connotations) falls into Weinreich et al.’s (1968) conceptualization of social markers.

## Literature Review

In communicative interactions, address terms can serve as the first message from the speaker to the addressee. The issue of address terms in America has been approached by various researchers (e.g., Brown & Ford, 1961; Ervin-Tripp, 1973 as cited in Zhu, 1992) since the 1960s. In China, address terms have also been long under close scrutiny. Cho Yueren (1956) delved into this issue in the 1950s. At that point, terms like *xiansheng* (Mr., 先生), *taitai* (Mrs., 太太), *xiaojie* (Miss, 小姐) were most commonly used among Chinese speakers. Similar to Cho’s (1956) findings, Zhu (1992) also observes that before the founding of the PRC, females according to their marital status were conventionally called *taitai* (Mrs., 太太) or *xiaojie* (Miss, 小姐). However, the picture has changed after the 1949 Liberation, the address term *airen* (lover, 爱人) was commonly used for both males and females in marriage and is indicative of an equal social status (Zhu, 1992, p.151). The founding of the PRC generated the promotion of a new address term, *tongzhi*.

Previous researchers have focused on the usage of address terms within the social structure as a whole, while there are a growing number of studies (e.g., Ju, 1991; Scotton & Zhu, 1983, 1984; Wong & Zhang, 2001) that explore address terms (especially *tongzhi*) from other perspectives. For example, Scotton and Zhu (1983) propose that variation in linguistic forms like *tongzhi* creates a certain ambiguity,

which allows speakers to change social distance and to negotiate rights or obligations freely. Ju (1991) relates the use of address terms to cultural values, and examines the “depreciation” and “appreciation” of some address terms (e.g., *shifu*, worker, 师傅; *xiansheng*, Mr., 先生) in China. Wong and Zhang (2001), on the other hand, study the reconstruction of the linguistic resources (e.g., *tongzhi*) used to build an imagined Chinese gay/lesbian community by a Chinese gay/lesbian magazine.

Despite previous studies on the address term *tongzhi*, little current research has provided updated information concerning the recent shift in *tongzhi*'s semantic implicature. Therefore, in the present paper, I focus on *tongzhi*'s usage in different contexts and in more recent periods, so as to examine whether distinct usages reveal any features of *tongzhi* as a social marker.

## Data Analysis

### Tongzhi in the Xinhai Revolution (around 1919)

In 1911 (during the late Qing Dynasty), a political protest movement known as the Railway Rights Protection Movement erupted in an attempt to prevent the government's plan to hand over China's railway development projects to Westerners. The movement was launched by a group named “*Baolu Tongzhi Hui*” (Railway Protection Alliance; 保路同志会). This is perhaps the first large-scale usage of *tongzhi* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (“*Baolu Tongzhi Hui*”, n.d.).

The introduction of the term *tongzhi* into modern Chinese was widely attributed to Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who employed it to describe his followers (Yi, 2005). In 1918, in order to bolster revolutionists' morale, Dr. Sun successively issued *Gao Haiwai Tongzhi Shu* (A Letter to Followers Overseas; 告海外同志书) and *Zhi Nanyang Tongzhi Shu* (A Letter to Followers in Southeast Asia; 致南洋同志书) (Wu, 2012). Among the members of *Tongmenghui* (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance; 同盟会) who had the same aspiration to overthrow the Qing Dynasty, people greeted each other with *tongzhi*. Moreover, Dr. Sun's last words were “*Geming shangwei chenggong, tongzhi rengxu nuli*” (As the revolution is not yet completed, all my followers must endeavor to carry it out; 革命尚未成功, 同志仍需努力). During this period *tongzhi* was employed to identify party/group members who bore similar aspirations and had a desire to fight for the same political ideals (Zhang, 2007).

Apart from the members of the Chinese Nationalist Party, even members of other parties such as the newly founded Chinese Communist Party (CPC) also referred to their peers as *tongzhi*, according to many sources (e.g., Luo & Mao, personal communication, 1920, as cited in Wu, 2012). The official debut of the term *tongzhi* is in CPC's first statement of its political goals, which states, “those who uphold CPC's Constitution and policies can be accepted as our Party members, as our comrades” (*Fan chengren bendang danggang he zhengce, junke jieshou wei dangyuan, chengwei women de tongzhi*; 凡承认本党党纲和政策者, 均可接收为党员, 成为我们的同志) (“Constitution of the Communist Party of China”, 1921). Therefore, *tongzhi*, with a relatively limited scope of usage and a restricted meaning, was used mainly by alliance members with the same political aspirations, thus serving as a marker to distinguish those who uphold certain revolutionist ideals from the common people.

## Tongzhi after the founding of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC)

*Tongzhi's* political and revolutionist connotation intensified during the Communist Revolution (1921-1949) and after the founding of the PRC in 1949. It is a period that witnessed a large-scale promotion of *tongzhi* as a general address term meaning “comrade” by the CPC, as can be seen from the below data sets.

- a) Chairman Mao Zedong: *Xiaoping Tongzhi, zengmeyang?*

毛泽东主席：小平同志，怎么样？

Comrade Xiaoping, how's everything going?

Deng Xiaoping (Vice President): *Hengzhi Meishi.*

邓小平副主席：横直没事。

I'm fine.

(from an interview with Wang Guangmei, the wife of Vice President Liu Shaoqi; Huang & Wang, 2006)

- b) Wang Yuanmei (a writer): *Mao Zhuxi, Wo shibushi lai cuole?*

王元美：毛主席，我是不是来错了？

Chairman Mao, am I in the wrong room?

Chairman Mao Zedong: *Meicuo meicuo, huanying zuojia Wang Yuanmei Tongzhi.*

毛泽东主席：“没错没错，欢迎作家王元美同志。

No, no. Please welcome Comrade Wang Yuanmei.

(from Huang Zongying's memoir, Huang, 2007)

- c) A: *Zhang Tongzhi, rangwo bahua shuowan.*

张同志，让我把话说完。

Comrade Zhang, please let me finish.

B: *Wang Tongzhi, qingshuo.*

王同志，请说。

Comrade Wang, please go ahead.

(from a movie *Nv Tiaoshui Duiyuan* (1964) 《女跳水队员》)

- d) *Xiang Lei Feng Tongzhi Xuexi!*

向雷锋同志学习！

Let's learn from Comrade Lei Feng!

(Editorial of *China Youth* (1963), in which Chairman Mao Zedong wrote this well-renowned inscription to encourage Chinese people to learn from the selfless role model, Lei Feng.)

As should be clear from the above three examples, *tongzhi*, as an address term with the connotation of *comrade*, is no longer confined to party members at that particular period. It is widely used to refer to party members (e.g., Vice President,

Deng Xiaoping) as well as common people (e.g., Writer Wang Yuanmei, Comrade Zhang/Wang). Moreover, *tongzhi* can occur in different forms, such as “given name + *tongzhi*” (e.g., Wang Yuanmei *Tongzhi*, Lei Feng *Tongzhi*), “family name + *tongzhi*” (e.g., Zhang *Tongzhi*) (Scotton & Zhu, 1983). The unmarked usage of *tongzhi* in this period is attributable to deliberate nation-wide language planning.

According to Labov’s (1963) Vineyard study, language changes (phonologically, in this case) occur subconsciously, without any deliberate manipulation. The semantic shift of *tongzhi* in China constitutes a case of deliberate language change to cater for political causes. The promotion of *tongzhi* as “comrade” or “workers having a common goal” assumes several political purposes: to reduce social and economic disparities among people who had been in different social classes before the Communist Revolution, thus granting everyone with an equal status in New China; to replace titles with feudal and capitalist characteristics such as *laoban* (boss/proprietor; 老板) and *xiansheng* (Mr.; 先生), thus eliminating any possible influences of feudalism and bourgeoisie; and to identify those who had the same goals of building a communist society, thus supporting “the political leftist or subversive causes” (Liu, 2008, p. 53). Basically, *tongzhi* at that point became the most appropriate title of address for everyone and replaced all other honorific titles, “showing egalitarianism among all Chinese loyal to the PRC” (Scotton & Zhu, 1984, p. 328).

During that period, *tongzhi*, serving as an unmarked choice, was widely accepted and employed by people from distinct social and economic backgrounds. The meaning of *tongzhi* seldom varied along with the different contexts in which it was used. Given that the distribution of this linguistic form (*tongzhi*, as comrade) is neither variable nor stigmatized, *tongzhi* at this particular historic stage fails to manifest the features of social markers.

### **Tongzhi after China’s socioeconomic reform (after 1978)**

According to Lee-Wong (1994), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) saw growth in *tongzhi*’s connotations of intimacy and revolutionary solidarity. The term *tongzhi* could no longer be freely used to refer to everyone, since it became a term to distinguish comrades from enemies again, as it did before the founding of the PRC.

The picture continued to change after the Cultural Revolution. With the reform and opening-up policy of 1978, the post-Cultural Revolution witnessed the term losing its strong political connotations. Furthermore, as Scotton and Zhu (1983, 1984) claim, *tongzhi* then primarily functioned as a marker to achieve social distance. According to Scotton and Zhu (1983), *tongzhi* was used by speakers who intended to change the relationship between self and addressees in a particular context, so as to negotiate of “rights and obligations holding between S and A” (p. 486). The following data illustrate this point:

- a) A faculty member hopes to leave the university for a new job in a research institute. He talks with the university vice-president:

Instructor: Huang Fu Xiaozhang, wo youjianshi genni tantan. Wo xiang diaodong gongzuo, dao keyan gangwei qu. Ni tongyi ma?

教师：黄副校长，我有件事跟你谈谈。我想调动工作，到科研岗位去。你同意吗？

Vice-President Huang, I have something to talk about with you. I hope to go and work in a research institute. Will you agree?

President: *Liang Tongzhi, you kunnan, women bangni jiejie. Diaogongzuo, women buneng tongyi.*

校长：梁同志，有困难，我们帮你解决。调工作，我们不能同意。

**Comrade** Liang, we will help you if you are in trouble, but we won't let you go. (as cited in Scotton & Zhu, 1983, p. 487)

In this case, the faculty member is showing his respect to the vice-president, calling him by his title instead of *tongzhi*. On the other hand, the vice-president calls the instructor *Liang Tongzhi* as a means to make his power more salient by reminding the instructor of their superior-to-subordinator relationship. Furthermore, according to the vice-president's response, it seems that the vice-president is not happy with the instructor's request. Thus, the use of the term *tongzhi* here serves as a way to deliver a slight reprimand from the superior, because the vice-president seems to perceive the instructor's behavior as not in line with the status quo (Scotton & Zhu, 1983).

- b) A worker pays the director a visit, and implies a request for a job transfer for his son Xiao Song:

Worker: *Zhang Sizhang, mei chumen a. mangba?*

工人：张司长，没出门啊。忙吧？

Director Zhang, you aren't out. Busy?

Director: *A, Lao Song, ni jia Xiao Song kaiche bucuo le ba.*

司长：啊，老宋，你家小宋开车不错了吧。

Hello, Lao Song. I suppose your Xiao Song can drive very well now.

Worker: *Wo he tama danxin, pa ta zhuangren. Sizhang Tongzhi, ni nengbuneng gei Xiao Song diaoge gongzuo?*

工人：我和她妈担心，怕他撞人。司长同志，你能不能给小宋调个工作？

His mother and I are worrying that he might run over someone one day.

**Comrade** Director, do you think you can transfer him to another job?

(as cited in Scotton & Zhu, 1983, p. 488)

The term *tongzhi* is used by an inferior worker in this particular context. In the first sentence, the worker is still using *sizhang* (director) to show his respect by making the director's power more salient. Yet, in the second response, the worker starts calling the director *tongzhi*. Given the fact that the worker is trying to request a job transfer for his son, he is manipulating the relationship and decreasing the social distance between him and the director by referring to the director as *tongzhi*. In other words, the inferior is using *tongzhi* to remind the superior of their relationship as that of co-members or proletariats, so as to make his request sound more reasonable (Scotton & Zhu, 1983). Thus, the term *tongzhi* here is a marker employed by a subordinate to shorten the social distance between self and the superior.

- c) A and B are middle-aged deputy directors who have known each other for fifteen years:

A: *Wo xiang zhejiashi mingtian zaochen dei zuowan.*

我想这件事明天早晨得做完。

I think this must be done by tomorrow morning.

B: *Tongzhi, ni zenme xiangde? Bu keneng.*

同志，你怎么想的？不可能。

**Comrade**, where did you get that idea? It is impossible.

(as cited in Scotton & Zhu, 1983, p. 489)

In this case, the term *tongzhi* is used by an addressee who possesses a similar social status as the speaker. Given the content of the two sentences, it is obvious that A is imposing a seemingly impossible task on B, and that B is questioning A's idea by reminding A of their equal status. Here, *tongzhi* is employed in an exchange between two familiars, and serves as a marker which allows B to "diminish A's individual pride" (Scotton & Zhu, 1983, p. 489).

From the aforementioned data and previous analyses, even though the term *tongzhi* had been gradually losing favor with much of the population, it was still used by certain generations in the post-Cultural Revolution period. Having lost its strong political connotations, the term became a general term of reference again.

Wang (2012) notes that such changes in the definition of *tongzhi* are revealed in the *Chinese Dictionary*: the 1979 version defined *tongzhi* as "an address term among Chinese people"; the 1989 definition was "a general address term among people in communist countries" and the 1999 version deleted such definitions (as cited in Fang, 2007, p. 29).

As previous research has suggested (Scotton & Zhu, 1983, 1984), despite its ever-decreasing influence, the term did gain some new functions, such as to decrease social distance, to maintain superior-inferior disparity, and to maintain an equal exchange. Therefore, the term took on different underlying meanings in distinct contexts, and was restricted to a limited number of users. In this regard, *tongzhi* again falls into the category of a social marker which has several social features attached.

### Tongzhi in the context of sexual minorities

In the late 1980s, the semantic meaning of *tongzhi* shifted again. Since China's reform and opening up policy in the late 1990s, the meaning of the term has fallen out of its original usage and is used to mean gay and lesbian among members of the sexual minority community. In 1989, Hong Kong resident Lin Yihua organized a gay/lesbian movie event, Hong Kong Tongzhi Film Festival. This is recognized as the starting point of *tongzhi* having the connotations of sexual minorities (Zhen, 2007). In this particular context, *tongzhi* no longer takes on the role as an address term; instead, it is merely a general reference to sexual minorities. The data set cited from a gay/lesbian magazine below manifests such specific usage:

- a) Since the inauguration of *G&L Magazine*, all our work has been carried out under the most difficult of circumstances. Our goal is to make a con-

tribution to our community. Perhaps what we have done has not improved the lives of *tongzhi*. Perhaps our work has not been effective in dealing with anti-*tongzhi* forces.

- b) Kan le G&L duo xiang zanmei yi sheng: “Geming shangwei chengong, tongzhi rengxu nuli!”  
看了G&L, 多想赞美一声: “革命尚未成功, 同志仍需努力!”  
After reading G&L Gay Magazine, I want to say: “As the revolution is not yet completed, *tongzhi* must endeavor to carry it out!”
- c) *Tongzhimen, rang women yiqi wei lixiangguo, wutuobang yiqi nuli, fendou.*  
同志们, 让我们一起为理想国、乌托邦, 一起努力、奋斗。  
*Tongzhis, let's join our efforts to strive and struggle for our utopia.*  
(excerpts above cited in Wong & Zhang, 2000; Wong, 2005)

*G&L Magazine* is a gay/lesbian magazine in Taiwan, which is aimed at all Chinese sexual minorities. According to Wong and Zhang (2000), who have closely examined the *tongzhi* community, the main purpose of this magazine is to offer support and encourage gay/lesbian Chinese to strive for equality in society.

In the above three quotations, *tongzhi* is used with a specific connotation of sexual minorities. According to Zhen (2007), the term *tongzhi* was initially an argot within a small coterie. Gay movie critic Mark Lin recalls in *A Brief History of Tongzhi* that he used to call a lesbian *Zhu Tongzhi* in the late 1970s, as a way to tell her sexual orientation. Lin claims that film festival organizer Lin Yihua led sexual minorities to get rid of the shackles and find a comfort zone in a catchword (Zhen, 2007). Thus, this term has been generally accepted by the Chinese gay/lesbian community. And, in the present age, a growing number of *tongzhi*-related terms emerge, such as *tongzhi* literature, *tongzhi* films, *datong*, an abbreviation for *daxuesheng tongzhi* (college *tongzhi*).

However, the usage of the term with this particular connotation is confined to the members of the sexual minority community, and it has not yet been embraced by the larger Chinese community. Some critical views exist towards the extension of the meaning of *tongzhi* (Wang, 2001). According to Wang (2001), many Chinese still attach deep affections to the term *tongzhi*, which from their perspectives constitute a sense of sublimity; to some people, using *tongzhi* to refer to sexual minorities is regarded as a huge mistake which gravely humiliates those who uphold the same political ideals.

Thus, between the heterosexual and homosexual communities, controversies over the orthodox usage of *tongzhi* abound. In other words, in the wider community, *tongzhi* still constitutes a social marker because it has not yet been accepted by the whole heterosexual community. Within the sexual minority community, with its move from an argot to a widely accepted reference, the term *tongzhi* fails to take on the features as a social marker, as the term is applied equally to all.

### Tongzhi in China's political contexts

Despite the changing semantic meaning of *tongzhi* in different historic period, it is worth noting that the meaning seldom changes in China's political context.

- a) *Fan chengren bendang danggang he zhengce...junke jieshou wei dangyuan, chengwei women de tongzhi*  
凡承认本党纲和政策... 均可接收为党员，成为我们的同志  
Those who uphold CPC's Constitution and policies ... can be accepted as our Party members, as our comrades.  
(Constitution of the Communist Party of China, 1921)
- b) *Dahui yizhi xuanju Maozedong Tongzhi wei zhuxituan zhuxi.*  
大会一致选举毛泽东同志为主席团主席。  
Comrade Mao Zedong was unanimously elected as the Chief President of the Presidium.  
(Communiqué for China's 9<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress, 1969)
- c) *Quanhui chongshenle Maozedong Tongzhi de yiguan zhuzhang, dangnei yilv hucheng Tongzhi, buyao jiao guanxian.*  
全会重申了毛泽东同志的一贯主张，党内一律互称同志，不要叫官衔。  
The Third Plenary Session reiterated Mao Zedong Tongzhi's consistent position that party members must call their peers *Tongzhi*, rather than their official title.  
(Communiqué for Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, 1978)
- d) *Zhongyang jueding, jianyu Bo Xilai Tongzhi shexian yanzhong weiji, tingzhi qi danren de zhongyang zhengzhiju weiyuan, zhongyang weiyuan zhiwu.*  
中央决定，鉴于薄熙来同志涉嫌严重违纪，停止其担任的中央政治局委员、中央委员职务。  
Given Comrade Bo Xilai's serious violations of discipline, the central government decides to suspend him from the politburo.  
(as cited in Xinhua News Agency, 2012)

When the CPC was established in 1921, *tongzhi* had already been used to refer to those who uphold CPC's ideals and policies. The usage of *tongzhi* can thus distinguish those who supported the CPC from those who did not. Later, with the continuous nation-wide promotion of *tongzhi* as a general address term, its political connotation (*comrade*) remains the same in the political context, as can be seen in the Communiqué for China's 9<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress. In today's newspaper coverage, *tongzhi* is still the single appropriate title for the CPC members (Tang & Qu, 2008). Even when covering negative information regarding a Party Member (as shown in the third example, Bo Xilai's suspension), *tongzhi* is still employed to modify the ousted Party member Bo Xilai. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the term *tongzhi* has maintained its original political meaning of comrade in China's political contexts, and that it keeps its role as a marker to distinguish members of the Communist Party of China from those who are not.

### Pedagogical Implications

In general, *tongzhi* has been undergoing tremendous semantic shifts throughout different historic periods. Given diverse interpretations towards *tongzhi*'s semantic meanings in different contexts, it must be overwhelmingly

confusing for learners of Chinese from different social and political backgrounds to grasp its meanings. Hence, to teach *tongzhi* to learners of Chinese, it is advisable to integrate socioeconomic and cultural factors into the introduction of its usage. Among its various semantic meanings, *comrade* as its only sustaining political connotation has a special role in China's political setting. Furthermore, it must be clearly stated that *tongzhi* as a general address term is no longer used among much of the population, except by the older generation in China. Also, there still exists a large number of critics who hold the conservative opinion that the term *tongzhi* should be employed to refer to those who share the same political ideals instead of the same sexual orientations. Thus, *tongzhi* with an allusion to the sexual minorities has not yet been entirely accepted by the whole heterosexual community. It would thus be inappropriate (even dangerous) to use the term arbitrarily.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have adopted Weinreich et al.'s (1968) argument of social markers to analyze the data regarding the usage of *tongzhi* in the People's Republic of China. These data show that under different historic circumstances, *tongzhi* possesses distinct connotations. In most cases, *tongzhi* functions as a social marker among particular groups of speakers. In general, *tongzhi* refers to revolutionary followers (during the Democratic Revolution), comrade (among CPC members), and gay/lesbian (in the sexual minority community); *tongzhi* was also once used as a discourse strategy (after the 1980s). Among its various meanings, *tongzhi* as a general address term (from 1949 to 1978) fails to fit into the features as a social marker, because it replaced all honorific titles and was politically promoted as the only appropriate address term in Chinese society. The same applies to the sexual minority community, because *tongzhi* in this context is a special code which refers to all sexual minorities.

To sum up, as a language change in progress, in most cases the users of *tongzhi* in China are akin to "the locals" in Labov's (1963) Martha's Vineyard study. With the influx of the "summer people," the speech of the locals was gradually changed. Just like the locals in Labov's study, the users of *tongzhi* in China are also under certain influences, such as social and/or economic changes after China's reform and opening-up or from the sexual minority community. Therefore, my observation of different usages of *tongzhi* in China lends support to Labov's (1963) idea that "one cannot understand the development of a language change apart from the social life of the community in which it occurs" (p. 275).

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Yuzhi Chen is a Master of Science in Education candidate in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include socio-cultural perspectives to language and identity, and task-based teaching and learning in language classrooms.

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