

A Semiotic Transition of “Tongzhi” in Chinese Society - A Study of Social Change from a Linguistic Perspective

Tongyi Zhang*

School of Humanities, Communication University of China, Beijing 100024, China

*Corresponding email: 202510050103248@mails.cuc.edu.cn

Abstract

The Chinese term “Tongzhi” (Comrade) has undergone a millennium evolution, transitioning from an ethical description of “sharing the same ideals and goals” in the pre-Qin period, to a symbol of revolutionary political mobilization in modern times, to a universal term used by the Chinese people in the People’s Republic of China, and ultimately to its contemporary semantic differentiation. This paper adopts a dual perspective of sociolinguistics and historical sociology, utilizing Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic capital, Giddens’ theory of structuration, and social change theory to systematically examine the semantic expansion, field of use transfer, and emotional color changes of the term “Tongzhi” in different historical stages. It reveals the mechanisms of power relations reconstruction, social structure transformation, and collective identity construction reflected behind the address term. The study finds that the semantic evolution of “Tongzhi” is not simply a linguistic phenomenon, but an accurate reflection of social form changes, political system reforms, and cultural psychological transformations. The initiative to revive the use of the term “Tongzhi” in 2025 reflects the deep-seated demands of contemporary society for equal interpersonal relationships and a purified political ecology.

Keywords

“Tongzhi”, Semantic change, Social transformation, Linguistic capital

Introduction

Language is not only a communication tool, but also a carrier of social structure and cultural values. Language is a mirror of society, and address terms are the most sensitive scale on this mirror. The rise and fall of an address term often records a society’s power structure, interpersonal ethics, and collective psychology more accurately than any institutional text.

Research background and problem statement

The term “Tongzhi” in Chinese provides an excellent analytical sample. Factors influencing this change are identified, including socio-economic transformations and historical-cultural developments [1]. The term “Tongzhi” derives from an ancient philosophical proposition: “Those with the same virtue share the same emotion and idealism, and those with the same heart share the same Comrade”, a saying dating back 2,700 years. It has traveled through multiple historical stages, including the ethical communities of the pre-Qin era, Neo-Confucian circles in the Song and Ming dynasties, modern revolutionary camps, the political system of

New China, and eventually evolved into a set of semantically diverse usages in contemporary society. Each semantic shift precisely corresponds to significant social changes, whose passion for social justice leads, paradoxically, to repression of the empowerment and emancipation of self (lessness) through others [2]. What deserves more attention is that in July 2025, *People’s Daily* specifically published an article calling for the term to return to the mainstream. This phenomenon has been categorized in the theory of lexical change as temporal polygenesis. This event itself constitutes a sociological phenomenon worthy of deeper exploration. The mandate that Communist Party of China (CPC) members should address each other as Comrade, not by official rank as an expression of equality and shared values has been reemphasized by the Party leadership time and again [3]. The core issue of this article is: What sociological logic does the semantic evolution of “Tongzhi” as an address term follow? How does it reflect and participate in the millennial leap of Chinese

society from a patriarchal clan system to party politics, and from a planned system to a market society? As we all know, people who was called by “Tongzhi”, is renowned in China as a national role model, famed for his routine altruism rather than for any acts of exceptional braveness or daring [4]. The return of the “Tongzhi” is to some extent a reflection of the current ideological uncertainty and nostalgia for the Chairman Mao era. For example, *Comrade Detective* offers for consumption an object of ironic nostalgia that is speaking both to the Cold War past, its propaganda mechanisms, and its veiling of historical truths, as well as to the present, and its more chaotic power and influence structure [5].

Research objectives and significance

Providing a “long-term and cross-disciplinary” Analytical Paradigm for Sociolinguistics is very important. Classic studies in Sociolinguistics have primarily focused on synchronic language variation, such as William Labov’s social stratification research on New York City’s English. However, this article extends the research horizon to a historical span of 2,700 years, attempting to establish an analytical paradigm for “Diachronic Sociolinguistics”.

The theoretical contribution of this paradigm lies in its demonstration that appellations are not only a “mirror” of social stratification (reflecting existing structures), but also an “engine” of social change (participating in the construction of new structures). Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic capital emphasizes that language is a tool of power, but this theory lacks sufficient empirical verification in the Chinese context. The case of “Tongzhi” provides an ideal field for verification - from the pre-Qin period to the present, every expansion or contraction of the meaning of “Tongzhi” can be precisely mapped to a reconstruction of power relations. Through this case, this article aims to extend Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power from Western experience to Chinese experience, providing empirical support with the specificity of Eastern society.

Simultaneously, this paper attempts to transcend the unidirectional logic of traditional sociolinguistics, which posits that “language reflects society”, by introducing Giddens’ structuralization theory and establishing an analytical framework of “bidirectional construction between language and society”. Address

terms are not only subject to social structures (such as the mandatory use of the term “Tongzhi” as mandated by a central notice in 1965), but also, in turn, reshape social structures (for instance, the prolonged use of the term “Tongzhi” has indeed diminished some of the perceived hierarchy between officials and civilians). The Comrade-style love developed by following the Mao-era injunction to prioritize revolutionary politics over personal matters [6]. This bidirectional construction relationship is particularly evident in the term “Comrade”, offering a new analytical tool for the theoretical deepening of sociolinguistics.

Historical Sociology has long focused on macro-level societal transformations, such as the transition from traditional to modern society. Although hope is dismissed in several everyday and academic discourses as escapism or cruel optimism, if investigated ethnographically, the affect and practice of hope emerge contextually as both practical reason and semiotic ideology with important political implications [7]. However, macro narratives often lack explanatory power for micro-level mechanisms: We know that Chinese society has shifted from a hierarchical system to a pursuit of equality, yet the question remains: How does this shift unfold in everyday life? This question requires research at the micro-level to answer. Without doubt, Language practices are both regulated and produced by the social, while at the same time, they act upon and can transform the social order [8].

Address terms serve as an ideal medium connecting macro-structure and micro-action. In daily interactions, whether an individual chooses to address someone as “Tongzhi” or “Mr. X or Ms. X” is a seemingly trivial linguistic behavior, but it is actually a projection of macro-social structure at the individual level. This article, through a micro-examination of the address term “Tongzhi”, attempts to reveal how macro-social changes are realized through specific linguistic practices. This research approach can compensate for the deficiency in “mechanism explanation” within historical sociology and provide an empirical answer based on Chinese materials to the classic question of “how structure transforms into action”.

Theoretically, firstly, this study tries to examine Tönnies’ theory of the transformation from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. Tönnies believes that the

essential characteristic of modern society is the transformation from an organic *Gemeinschaft* to a legal *Gesellschaft*, with interpersonal relationships shifting from “essence will” (*Wesenwille*) to “choice will” (*Kürwille*). The change in emotional connotation of “Tongzhi” - from virtue resonance (essence will) in the pre-Qin period to institutional norms (choice will) in contemporary times - provides an accurate case study from the Chinese-speaking world for this theory. However, this article also attempts to point out the limitations of Tönnies’ theory: In the Chinese context, “*Gemeinschaft*” and “*Gesellschaft*” are not completely distinct, but there are many overlapping areas, and the semantic evolution of “Tongzhi” precisely demonstrates this overlap.

Secondly, this study tries to supplement Durkheim’s theory of “social integration”. Durkheim believed that modern society faces a crisis of “anomie” and requires a new integration mechanism. This article attempts to argue that the address term system itself is a social integration mechanism - when shared address terms (such as “Tongzhi” during the New China era) are disintegrated, the symbolic foundation of social integration is also shaken [9]. This argument extends Durkheim’s integration theory from the institutional level to the linguistic level. Thirdly, this study tries to localize and expand Bourdieu’s “symbolic violence” theory in China. Bourdieu pointed out that the ruling class exercises symbolic violence through language - imposing a specific linguistic order on the ruled class, making them accept it as “natural”. This article attempts to reveal a paradox: Behind the seemingly equal terms of address, there may lurk new inequalities. For a long time, the focus of research in Chinese sociolinguistics has been on topics such as dialect variation, language and gender, and language and social class, while systematic research on address terms, a special linguistic phenomenon, has been relatively weak. This paper takes “Tongzhi” as a case study, attempting to establish an analytical framework applicable to the study of Chinese address terms. This framework includes: a semantic stratification model for address terms, a social field analysis method for the use of address terms, and an explanatory framework for the dynamic mechanisms of address term changes. The disciplinary significance of this work lies in its ability to

provide a new research direction for Chinese sociolinguistics: the sociology of address terms. This direction has already garnered considerable research in the English-speaking world (such as Erving Goffman’s analysis of address strategies and the application of Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson’s face theory to address terms), but it remains unexplored in the Chinese-speaking world. This paper aims to lay the foundation for the establishment of this direction through a case study of “Tongzhi”.

Practical significance

Address terms have never been a “minor matter”. In the contemporary Chinese political context, the choice and use of address terms are directly related to the health of the political ecosystem. In recent years, the prevalence of titles such as the leader of Bureau, Division, and Director, within the system has essentially reflected the erosion of the principle of organizational equality by bureaucratic hierarchy. When an ordinary cadre is referred to as the leader of a division, the message conveyed by this title is: You are first and foremost a leader of a division, and only secondarily a person. However, the core logic of the title “Tongzhi” is precisely the opposite: You are first and foremost a “Tongzhi” - an equal organizational member - and only secondarily the holder of a certain position.

The 2016 *Code of Conduct for Intraparty Political Life under New Circumstances* explicitly requires that everyone within the party should address each other as Comrade. In 2025, the *People’s Daily* once again called for the return of “Tongzhi” to the mainstream. This series of institutional arrangements and public opinion guidance is not simply a matter of language norms, but an important component of political ecological governance. This article provides a historical perspective on the semantic changes of “Tongzhi”, which can help understand the deep logic behind these contemporary policies: Why “Tongzhi”? Why now? What social issues are it trying to address?

The management of address terms is essentially a linguistic policy behavior. From the central government’s notice in 1965 to the party’s guidelines in 2016, and to the public opinion calls in 2025, the state’s intervention in addressing terms has presented a clear trajectory. However, what are the effects of these interventions? What is their social acceptance? Under

what conditions are they effective, and under what conditions do they fail?

This article can provide several empirical judgments through historical comparison: First, mandatory institutional arrangements (such as the 1965 notice) can change the usage frequency of address terms in the short term, but they cannot alter their deep semantics - the rapid marginalization of “Tongzhi” after the reform and opening up is a clear example. Second, the vitality of address terms ultimately depends on whether they align with the deep needs of society - the reason why “Tongzhi” became a universal term during the New China period was not only due to institutional compulsion, but also because it responded to the strong demand for equality in society at that time. Third, when social needs change, no institutional force can maintain an address term that is disconnected from social psychology for a long time. These judgments have direct reference value for the formulation of current and future language policies: Language policies should not merely “dictate how people speak”, but should first understand “why people speak this way”, and then find effective guidance paths. Then, we can include some truth in Chinese linguistic, because many sociolinguistic theories originate from Western, industrial, and ideologically monolingual (and often Anglophone) societies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and many of the European nation states. This fact leads to a theoretical bias [10].

The term “Tongzhi” was appropriated by the homosexual community as a self-designation in Chinese after the 1990s, a phenomenon that holds significant analytical value in sociology. Men and masculinity are in a “crisis”, because men’s historically unquestioned privilege and patriarchal power are being challenged through advances toward equity for other groups [11]. It illustrates a universal social mechanism: When the mainstream discourse system excludes a certain group, that group often “hijacks” words from the mainstream discourse to construct its own legitimate identity [12]. This mechanism is not unique in Chinese - “xiaojie (miss)” has degenerated from a respectful title to a synonym for a specific profession, and “zhuanjia (expert)” has degenerated from an academic title to an ironic term, all following the same logic. Through analyzing the process of the appropriation of “Tongzhi”,

this article can establish a model of “subcultural appropriation of address terms”, providing an analytical tool for understanding broader language-power interaction phenomena.

Meanwhile, this analysis also bears practical relevance: In contemporary society, striking a balance between respecting the identity expression needs of subcultural groups and maintaining the mainstream appellation system is a genuine challenge faced by cultural governance. The historical research presented in this paper demonstrates that the semantic flexibility of appellations is their inherent source of vitality - a completely fixed and unchanging appellation system is bound to be fragile. Therefore, the understanding of the semantic diversity of “Tongzhi” should not be perceived as a threat to its purity, but rather as an embodiment of the self-adaptive capacity of the language system. Of course, where the boundaries of this adaptation lie requires further normative discussion, but that falls beyond the scope of this paper.

Literature review

Following the founding of the People’s Republic of China, “Comrade” underwent a process of generalization. As Kohlenberg describes, it became the default social appellation for all citizens, erasing traditional hierarchies of age, status, and occupation in public spaces. This period represented the peak of its sociological function: to create a sense of horizontal solidarity and a “revolutionary family” among strangers. Weatherley recalls how calling a shop assistant “Comrade” was a way to affirm mutual respect and shared national destiny. The “Mass Line” and Anti-Bureaucracy: Kohlenberg provides a critical analysis of the term’s role within the Communist Party of China. He argues that the insistence on calling each other “Comrade” is not mere nostalgia but a disciplinary mechanism. It is intended to enforce the “Mass Line” by suppressing the emergence of a “master-servant” relationship and preventing officials from developing a sense of entitlement or bureaucratic mentality. Ambiguity and emotional distance: However, this equality came with emotional detachment. Wang points out that in the post-Mao era, as society sought to move away from intense political struggle, “Comrade” began to sound “cold” and “distant”. In literary analysis, the use of “Comrade” between former lovers is shown to

deliberately create a bureaucratic and impersonal barrier, shutting down emotional intimacy in favor of political formality.

Theoretical framework and methodology

The research path of this paper is an interdisciplinary comprehensive research with sociolinguistics as the core framework, classical sociological theory as the explanatory tool, diachronic semantic analysis as the clue, and synchronic functional analysis as the landing point. Its methodological orientation belongs to interpretative research, rather than descriptive or exploratory research. Its goal is not to present what it is, but to explain why and how it is possible.

Chinese vocabulary has a long history of development and evolution. The many meanings and semantic evolution of the word “Tongzhi” need to be diachronically sorted out in order to investigate the semantic characteristics, scope of use and social functions of each stage one by one. Semantics is not a static entity, but a symbol system that evolves dynamically with the changes of social structure. On the basis of inheriting the basic logic of the historical comparison method, this method strives to go beyond the pure internal comparison of language, and tries to put semantic changes in the causal chain of social changes.

Within each historical stage, this paper further analyzes the specific functions of the “Tongzhi” appellation in the specific social context, such as identity identification, hierarchy resolution, political mobilization, and minority self-reference. This approach derives from Malinowski’s functionalist view of language, which is that the meaning of language lies not in its referent object but in its function in social interaction. As a speech act, the function of address terms depends on the context of use and power relationship. Appellation is the language practice of power relations. This paper will study how the semantic generalization and shrinkage of “Tongzhi” reflect and reproduce the game between state power, social hierarchy, mainstream and marginal groups. Foucault’s discourse theory and Bourdieu’s language capital theory are the theoretical tools of this paper. Appellation is not a neutral reference tool, but a micro mechanism of power operation. Who has the right to use what appellation and on what occasion is the embodiment of

power distribution.

This paper draws on the metaphor and metonymy theories from cognitive linguistics to examine how the new semantic meaning of “Tongzhi” emerges. Such semantic shift does not stem from random association. Instead, it adheres to the principle of salience: avoidance itself creates prominence, and the resulting semantic deviation grants the term distinctive cognitive saliency. Lakoff and Johnson’s cognitive linguistics theory profoundly reveals that metonymy is not a rhetorical decoration, but a basic human cognitive style; metaphor is not a linguistic phenomenon, but a thinking phenomenon. This will be the core theoretical basis of this paper. The migration of “Comrade” from revolutionary political discourse to sexual minority discourse follows the cross-domain mapping logic of “revolutionary mobilization → rights demands”, and the two domains share the structure of “exclusion - unity - equality” [13]. The core feature of this research methodology is that language is not regarded as a self-contained symbolic system, but as a linguistic mapping of social structure; social theory is not regarded as an external explanatory framework, but as an analytical tool with structural isomorphism with language phenomena. The combination of the two is the macro social relationship reflected by the micro language practice of appellation.

Analysis and core findings

The core meanings of “Tongzhi” (Comrade) in the history of the Chinese language

In the context of the pre-Qin period, “Tongzhi” was not a specialized appellation but a modifier-head phrase meaning “people with the same aspirations”. It had similar meanings to terms such as “xiansheng (mister)”, “zhangzhe (elder)”, and “jun (lord)”, all of which were used as titles among friends. From a sociological perspective, the use of “Tongzhi” in the pre-Qin period was strictly confined within the ethical community of the scholar-bureaucrat class. Its function was to identify “who is one’s own kind” - a kind of identity recognition mechanism based on moral consensus. At this time, “Tongzhi” did not carry any political connotation, and its core was an extension of the Confucian logic that “those who follow different doctrines should not collaborate”. Zheng Xuan of the Eastern Han Dynasty commented on “Zhou Li·Da Situ” (Ancient Chinese

Administrative System) by saying, “Tongzhi means friend,” marking the beginning of “Tongzhi” taking on the rudiments of an appellation. However, it must be pointed out that the transformation of “Tongzhi” from a phrase to an independent appellation did not occur overnight, but rather underwent hundreds of years of semantic accumulation.

It was the upheaval of the late Qing Dynasty that propelled “Tongzhi” onto the political stage. In 1893, Liang Qichao referred to fellow reformers as “Comrade” in his Letter to Wang Kangnian. In 1894, Sun Yat-sen founded the Xingzhonghui (An Ally of *Society for the Revival of China*), and in its constitution, he urged, “To all Comrade, let us strive together.” In 1905, the Chinese Revolutionary League was established, and its constitution stipulated that “members have the responsibility to introduce Comrade”. Thus, “Tongzhi” completed its crucial transition from an academic term to a political designation. The sociological implications of this transformation are profound. Traditional Chinese society’s interpersonal relationships are built on kinship, geography, and professional ties, while modern party politics demands a new type of identification mechanism that transcends kinship and geography. “Tongzhi” provides precisely this mechanism - it uses political ideals as a bond and organizational contract as a framework, constructing a brand-new way of social connection. As Bourdieu said, this is a new way of distributing symbolic capital: You no longer gain identity based on birth, but rather through the title of “Tongzhi”, “Lifestyles function as dynamic forms of symbolic stratification, expressed through consumption, cultural preferences, and everyday practices”. In 1918, Sun Yat-sen published *Letter to Comrade at Home and Abroad* and *Letter to Comrade in Southeast Asia*, and left behind the famous quote in his *Last Will and Testament*: “The revolution has not yet succeeded, Comrade must still strive hard!” At this time, “Comrade” had completely become a political identity symbol for revolutionaries, and its emotional connotation shifted from the moral resonance of the pre-Qin period to the shared fate of modern times.

In 1920, Mao Zedong, Luo Xuezan, and others began using the term “Tongzhi” in their communications. In 1921, the party platform adopted by the first National Congress of the CPC clearly stipulated that “anyone

who recognizes the party platform and policies and is willing to become a loyal party member can be accepted as a party member and become our Comrade after being introduced by one of the party members, regardless of gender or nationality.” This was the first time that “Tongzhi” was given a new political meaning in China’s official documents. Its revolution lies in three “no distinctions” - no distinction of gender, no distinction of nationality, and no distinction (implicit) of rank. This regulation fundamentally subverts the hierarchical appellation system of traditional Chinese society.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the term “Tongzhi” quickly expanded from a term used within the party to a general term used by the general public. In 1959, Mao Zedong specifically instructed the party to refer to each other as “Comrade”, and when reviewing Li Da’s “Commentary on Practice Theory”, he circled all the words “Chairman Mao” and changed them to “Comrade Mao Zedong”. Zhou Enlai led by example - when the staff referred to him as “Premier”, he solemnly interrupted and said, “Don’t call him Premier, it’s better to call him ‘Comrade’ within our party.” In December 1965, the central government issued a notice on the issue of addressing Comrade within the party, requiring that “all personnel holding positions within the party should refer to each other as Comrade in the future”. This is a typical symbolic revolution, whose purpose is not to change the power structure itself, but to change the way power is expressed, thereby changing people’s perception of power. This measure is naturally the beautiful vision of communist idealists.

However, the use of language and the change of lexical meanings, Administrative orders are just one of many factors that ultimately depend on whether they comply with the laws of cognitive linguistics and sociolinguistics. Undoubtedly, in Chinese, “Tongzhi” cannot assume the nature of a universal appellation from a pragmatic perspective. The rich requirements for appellation expression in Chinese social culture and the economic requirements for individual oral language expression jointly restrain this beautiful and romantic pragmatic ideal. Nowadays, the Chinese term “Tongzhi” is more commonly used as an address among members within the Chinese administrative system. According to the 1979 and 1989 editions of *Cihai* (the *Sea of Words*,

China's most authoritative comprehensive encyclopedic dictionary). "Tongzhi" also has two meanings: "general address among Chinese citizens" and "general address among citizens of socialist countries". But by the 1999 edition of *Cihai*, these two meanings had been deleted, only retaining "shared interests and political ideals" and "titles used among members of the same political party". The change in this definition accurately records the ebb tide of the term "Comrade" from being commonly used by the general public to being exclusively used within the party.

A more impactful semantic shift occurred in the 1990s. According to sociolinguistic surveys, since the 1990s, "Tongzhi" has been widely used as a self and mutual term among Chinese gay men. The social mechanism of this semantic transfer is that when the frequency of use of a word in the public domain decreases, subcultural groups often "appropriate" this word to construct their own identity. Just as "miss" has evolved from an honorific to a specialized professional term, the semantic shift of "Comrade" is the result of the combined effects of language economy principles and social marginalization. According to the data retrieved from the corpus of the Center for Chinese Linguistics, Peking University (CCL), out of 75,804 "Tongzhi" use cases, there are zero cases that mean "male homosexual", and the displayed results mostly use "gay" for political reports and news [14]. But in online media and entertainment news, the use of "Tongzhi" as "male homosexual" has become quite active. The division between official discourse and folk discourse reflects the multi-layered structure of contemporary Chinese social discourse system [15]. In July 2025, the *People's Daily* published an article calling for the return of the term "Tongzhi" to the mainstream, marking the beginning of a semantic return. From a sociological perspective, this is not simply a linguistic nostalgia, but a deep-seated social demand - in the current era of increasingly severe identity labeling and the quietly breeding of bureaucracy, society yearns for a title symbol that can break down hierarchy and return to equality.

Sociological theoretical analysis

The semantic evolution of the term "Comrade" is not simply a linguistic phenomenon, but a linguistic mapping of China's social structural transformation,

power relationship restructuring, and collective identity construction. During the late Qing Dynasty and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, various social organizations emerged in large numbers, with members calling each other "Comrade".

However, the degree of acquaintance between people may not necessarily reach intimate relationships, and their relationship maintenance no longer depends on the emotions naturally generated in daily communication, but on the recognition of organizational rules and goals. This change means that "Comrade" has transformed from a specialized interpersonal term to an institutionalized identity marker in modern organizations. From a sociological perspective, the semantic transformation of "Tongzhi" during this stage can be explained by Durkheim's transition from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity. The unity based on homogeneity in traditional society has been replaced by the organic unity based on functional division of labor and common goals in modern revolutionary organizations. "Comrade" no longer refers to personal friendship, but to membership in a political community.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the term "Tongzhi" quickly expanded from an internal term within political parties to a universally used term throughout society, replacing many titles with feudal hierarchical colors. Language is a tool for reshaping class. The replacement of appellations during this period was not a natural evolution, but a result of the active intervention of state power in the social communication symbol system. Replacing hierarchical titles with "Tongzhi" is essentially promoting the principle of socialist equality through language practice. The interpersonal relationships in traditional Chinese society are centered around oneself and extended outward, forming a hierarchical pattern of closeness and estrangement. The generalized use of "Tongzhi" attempts to dissolve hierarchy and construct a flattened social identity through universal titles. Address forms are a form of linguistic capital, whose use reflects and reproduces social power relations. The deep driving force behind the return of "Comrade" lies in the renewed demand for collective consciousness in society. Against the backdrop of the increasing trend toward social atomization, the impoverishment of titles reflects

the weakening of interpersonal connections. Comrade, with their characteristics of dehierarchy and deutilitarianism, respond to society's thirst for organic unity. They gently brush away the dust of identity attached to titles, allowing individuals to return to mutual recognition of their simple personalities.

Therefore, in July 2025, *People's Daily* issued a clear call for the return of "Tongzhi" titles to the mainstream. The article *Appellation and Ethos* pointed out that: "Appellations are not only related to etiquette in communication, but also to the honesty or frivolity of the social atmosphere. In recent years, there have been many voices calling for the return of 'Comrade' as a normal appellation to the mainstream, which is also a manifestation of the return of a simple social atmosphere. I welcome it with both hands. The true emotions and feelings in titles are worthy of pursuit and praise." This is precisely the embodiment of the sociological theory analysis mentioned above. The call for the return of the term "Tongzhi" is essentially not a simple replication of history, but a linguistic reconstruction of core values such as equality, unity, and dignity in society after the primary stage of socialism enters a new stage of development. The change in the term reflects the structural transformation of Chinese society from revolutionary founding to reform and opening up, and then to the new era. The future direction of this term will be largely influenced by factors such as the evolution of the main contradictions in Chinese society and the adjustment of national governance logic.

Theoretical analysis of semantic drift from "Tongzhi" to "Male Homosexual"

The semantic transfer of the term "Tongzhi" from a political appellation to "Male Homosexual" is not an occasional language phenomenon, and there is a social cognitive logic behind it. When Roman Jakobson, based on his exploration of the problem of aphasia, distinguishes two aspects that characterize language - metaphoricity and metonymy - he touches on an important issue that will become a central theme for some of his followers. This question is the materiality of language. From the point of view of the aphatic himself, metaphoricity and metonymy express two extreme ways of relating to the material of language. The first mechanism that plays a role in this is the metaphorical

mechanism of "avoidance is emphasis". Metonymy is not only a rhetorical device, but also a cognitive way of thinking, with its core being the principle of salience - using more easily observable and memorable salience to refer to non-salient. The cultural character of the Chinese nation tends to be implicit, and tends to be ambiguous and avoid issues related to homosexuality. However, avoidance itself precisely constitutes highlighting. When the conventional semantics of "Tongzhi" (such as political party members, social appellations) fade away and the implicit new meaning of "homosexual" emerges, the latter gains additional cognitive significance due to going against expectations.

In 1989, Hong Kong resident Lin Yihua named the first homosexual film festival he planned the Hong Kong "Tongzhi" Film Festival, giving "Tongzhi" a special meaning. Later, in Taiwan, Hong Kong and other places, "Tongzhi" took the lead in evolving into a name for homosexuals [16]. The influence of this usage continues to expand, and the Chinese Mainland is also affected [17]. Another important reason why this term has risen rapidly is that the term "Tongzhi" is less commonly used by modern young people. Due to its aging and strong revolutionary color, young people have lost the basic meaning of "Comrade". In this case, the rise of new meanings is not so difficult [18]. There is a clear linguistic metaphorical mapping logic behind this phenomenon. The logic behind this metaphor is that two groups share a structural experience of being excluded by the mainstream, needing to unite and strive for equality. Homosexuals have achieved a semantic reversal from "insulting appellation" to "symbols of self empowerment" through this.

The emergence of the new meaning of "Tongzhi" marks the strategic transformation of sexual minority groups from passive exposure to stigma to active appropriation of symbols. Homosexuality is a natural and normal sexual orientation of a minority of humans. But in the reality where mainstream values are not yet fully accepted, group members complete self naming through language practice, which itself is a value rational action as Weber put it, that is, replacing institutional change with symbolic reconstruction. Bourdieu's theory of subcultural capital has precise applicability here. As a code word for circles, the use of

“Tongzhi” itself constitutes a distinguishing cultural capital, and those who can identify and correctly use this meaning prove that they belong to a specific subculture circle. This type of capital does not rely on economic resources, but on information and identity, and has typical subcultural characteristics. Generation Z establishes their identity by deconstructing traditional symbols. They do not reject the concept of equality, but refuse to be indoctrinated [19]. For Generation Z, the political meaning of “Tongzhi” has been suspended, and its homosexual meaning has become the default option [20]. This rupture is not the decline of language, but the projection of intergenerational power relations in the symbolic domain.

The term “Tongzhi” has drifted from a political appellation to a label for homosexuals. This shift essentially constitutes a bottom-up symbolic revolution: Marginalized groups adopt metaphorical representation and lexical appropriation as cognitive instruments, and the redistribution of linguistic capital as a practical strategy, prior to the institutional recognition of sexual minorities by mainstream discourse systems. This phenomenon also reveals a deep paradox: When the formal system or language system of a society cannot provide equal status and recognition for specific groups, everyday language becomes the last stronghold of resistance and a construction space. The many meanings and semantic drift of the term “Tongzhi” are precisely a linguistic epitome of the structural tension between the demands for equality and the reality of hierarchy in Chinese society during modernization transformation.

Conclusion

The semantic evolution of the word “Tongzhi” spanning more than 2,700 years is by no means a simple lexical replacement, but a condensed history of the transformation of China’s social structure. The appellation “Tongzhi” has undergone multiple stages of semantic transformation. It was first adopted within ethical communities of the pre-Qin period before evolving into a symbol of political mobilization used by modern revolutionary parties. Later it became a universal address after the founding of New China, and has now acquired diversified contemporary meanings amid recent calls to restore it to mainstream use. Every shift in this term precisely mirrors the social structures, power dynamics, and collective mindsets characteristic

of its respective historical era. Through a long period of sociolinguistic research, this study reveals that address terms are not only the mirror image of social stratification, but also the constructor of social structure. It is not only the language capital described by Bourdieu, but also the distribution of symbolic power. It is also the action medium in Giddens’ structural theory, which is subject to institutional arrangements and reacts to the remodeling of social relations. In 2025, the *People’s Daily* called for “Comrade” to return to the mainstream. This event itself is a strong social signal, reflecting the deep demands of society for rebuilding an equal communication order and purifying the political ecology at a time when social atomization and identity labeling are intensifying.

In the future, the semantic system of “Comrade” will tend to be stable, forming three main functional fields, showing obvious stylistic differentiation. The first is institutional adherence to the political field. In the political life within the party and the official exchanges within the system, the status of “Comrade” will be further consolidated as a political and ethical symbol that dispels hierarchy and emphasizes equality. With the deepening of national governance of political ecology, this title will continue to be used as an institutional tool to combat bureaucracy and maintain organizational identity. Its semantics will be strictly locked in the normative level of “mutual address of Party members” and “general address of socialist citizens”, showing the characteristics of de hierarchy and de utilitarianism. The second is the symbolic solidification of the subculture field.

In the mass media, cyberspace and specific social circles, the meaning of “gay” as a reference to gay groups (especially gay men) has basically solidified. This meaning originates from the marginal groups’ “symbol appropriation” and self empowerment in the mainstream discourse, and has a strong social psychological foundation. As long as the mainstream society’s institutional acceptance of sexual minorities is not yet fully mature, the semantic meaning of this “ring code” will continue to exist, and even be strengthened in specific groups as a kind of subculture capital.

Finally, the functional ebb of the public field. In daily social interactions (especially among young groups), “Comrade” as a general term will continue to be used

less frequently. Because of its strong revolutionary color and “aging” characteristics, it is not in line with the intergenerational psychology of Generation Z, which pursues individuality and refuses to be indoctrinated. It was difficult for it to restore its status as a universal name in the middle of the last century. In the public sphere, it will be more regarded as a kind of address with a sense of distance, formal or slightly retro color.

The study of the term “Comrade” provides a highly Eastern analytical template for sociolinguistics and also points out several directions for future research. The first is to deepen the analytical paradigm of “long-term sociolinguistics”. Previous sociolinguistic studies have mostly focused on variations at the synchronic level, such as gender and class differences.

Future research should introduce more historical dimensions to examine the path dependence of appellations in the process of “structuring”. The Chinese appellation system has strong historical continuity, and exploring the social structural isomorphism mechanism behind this continuity is the key to building an independent knowledge system for Chinese sociolinguistics. The second is to focus on the microgame between “subculture appropriation” and symbolic power. The semantic drift of “Comrade” reveals how marginalized groups resist and construct their identity through language practice.

Future research should pay more attention to the generation mechanism of “meme culture” and “circle slang” in the internet age. These seemingly informal language variations are actually the forefront signals of social identity fragmentation and reorganization, and an important window for understanding contemporary social integration mechanisms. The third is the coordinated governance of language policy and social identity. The transformation of “Comrade” indicates that simple language standardization cannot independently take effect without social reality. Future language policy research should shift from “regulatory” to “guiding”, focusing more on the social motivations and emotional colors of language use. How to seek a dynamic balance between respecting the natural evolution laws of language (such as subculture innovation) and maintaining mainstream social values (such as equality and unity) will be the biggest challenge faced by language planners.

In summary, address terms evolve continuously according to actual usage needs, and the generalization of address terms refers to the relaxation or removal of the restriction on the referents of a particular address term. The fate of the term “Comrade” will ultimately depend on how Chinese society defines the relationships between people in the process of modernization transformation. It is both an echo of history and a signpost for the future.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funds.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to show sincere thanks to those techniques who have contributed to this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Chashchina, E. A. (2026) Semantic evolution of words “drug” [Friend], “tovarishch” [Comrade], and “brat” [Brother] and their derivatives in Russian language from eleventh to seventeenth centuries. *Nauchnyi Dialog*, 15(1), 151-169.
- [2] Moolla, F. F. (2023) The road not travelled: Tracking love in Frank Anthony’s the journey: the revolutionary anguish of Comrade B. *English in Africa*, 50(1), 73-98.
- [3] Kohlenberg, P. J. (2017) The use of “Comrade” as a political instrument in the Chinese Communist Party, from Mao to Xi. *The China Journal*, 77(1), 72-92.
- [4] Weatherley, R. (2023) Serving the people or serving the party? The utilisation of Lei Feng in Chinese elite politics. *Asian Affairs*, 54(1), 84-100.
- [5] Popescu-Sandu, O. (2020) What would Lenin do?: multidirectional Cold War nostalgia in Comrade Detective. *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 420-434.
- [6] Wang, P. (2022) Love during China’s Cultural Revolution: evidence from a “sent-down” couple’s private letters 1968-1977. *The History of the Family*, 27(2), 370-390.
- [7] Silva, D. N., Borba, R. (2024) Sociolinguistics of hope: language between the no-more and the

- not-yet. *Language in Society*, 53(5), 775-790.
- [8] Boutet, J., Fiala, P., Simonin-Grumbach, J. (2025) Sociolinguistics or sociology of language. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2025(292), 41-57.
- [9] Gonzales, D. M., Feenstra, P., Argando, D. (2024) Moral anomie from Émile Durkheim's point of view. *International Journal of Ethics & Society*, 6(3), 9-16.
- [10] Smakman, D., Barasa, S. N., Smith-Christmas, C., Albury-Garcés, N. (2024) Towards cultural diversification in sociolinguistics. *Slovo a Slovesnost*, 85(2). 127-149.
- [11] MacMillan, C. (2025) When men seek support and Comradery: fathers' rights groups and the complexities of manhood. *Men and Masculinities*, 28(3), 267-286.
- [12] Zhou, Z. B. (2022) Besides Tongzhi: tactics for constructing and communicating sexual identities in China. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 32(2), 282-300.
- [13] Bao, H. (2019) Queer Comrade: towards a postsocialist queer politics. *Soundings*, 73(73), 24-37.
- [14] Zhang, K., Zhuang, H., Lu, C., Zhang, J. (2023) Discursive representations of sexual minorities in China's English-language news media: a corpus-based study. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10(1), 1-11.
- [15] Zhang, K., Lu, C., Zhang, J. (2022) Chinese media representations of Tongzhi (2009-2019). *Discourse & Communication*, 16(3), 305-325.
- [16] Kong, T. S. (2020) Toward a transnational queer sociology: historical formation of Tongzhi identities and cultures in Hong Kong and Taiwan (1980s-1990s) and China (late 1990s-early 2000s). *Journal of Homosexuality*, 1-25.
- [17] Liu, W., Li, E. C. Y. (2025) The geopolitics of queer archives: contested Chineseness and queer Sinophone affiliations between Hong Kong and Taiwan. *Sexualities*, 28(3), 1118-1138.
- [18] Qin, Q. (2022) The Beijing rainbow film festival: Between depoliticisation and performative activism. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 24(10), 1438-1450.
- [19] Bao, P. (2025) Generational linguistic conflict in digital fields: Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and cross-cultural decoding hegemony of Z-generation internet slang. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 1-24.
- [20] Hu, Y. (2025) Queering the no-name: Upcoming summer and the problematic of representational impossibility. *Cultural Critique*, 128(1), 153-182.