

Queer Identity Negotiation in Taiwanese *Tongzhi*'s Relationships with Mainland Gay Men in China

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In this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with 27 participants to examine how *tongzhi* from Taiwan, a sexually liberal society, manage sexual identity conflicts when dating gay men from mainland China, which is less tolerant of homosexuality. I found that they adopted identity maintenance, accommodation, and assimilation strategies to cope with such conflicts. Drawing on queer intercultural communication research, I also identified and examined the intercultural flows of queer identities and normativities between these 2 non-Western cultural subjects. I argued that Taiwanese *tongzhi*, through appropriating and indigenizing several cultural and ideological discourses, interculturally produced *tongzhi* normativity and generalized it to mainland gay men. Meanwhile, they functioned as queer intercultural agents, reproducing Western gay normativity in mainland China. Furthermore, I demonstrated how the concept of *tongzhi* influences narratives about Taiwan and mainland China, adding a queer perspective to understanding the complexities and dynamics of cross-strait relations.

Keywords: queer intercultural communication, identity conflict, identity negotiation, communication accommodation, intergroup communication

Identity is a pivotal theme in LGBTQ communication studies (Chan, 2017). Such studies primarily focus on identity formation and transformation processes among Asian, Black, and Latino queer subjects in White communities, investigating how non-White queers from conservative sexual cultures perceive themselves and their sexual and racial identities when interacting with White queers from liberal sexual cultures (e.g., Callander, Holt, & Newman, 2016; Eguchi, 2011; Husbands et al., 2013). Little research has explored the converse: How queers from sexually liberal societies communicate and negotiate their identities with those who grew up in less queer-tolerant societies. Simultaneously, queer intercultural communication (QIC) is an emerging research field in LGBTQ communication studies, scrutinizing the intersection of queer studies—with its critical examination of universal and normative sexual frameworks—and critical intercultural communication, which investigates the intricate interplay between culture, identity, and power (Chávez, 2013; Eguchi & Calafell, 2020). While research in this domain has critiqued the oppressive impact of Western queer normativity on non-Western societies (e.g.,

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Eguchi, 2015; Huang & Brouwer, 2018a), it has overlooked the nuanced existence of hegemony and power in the interactions between non-Western cultures and queer subjects. To fill these gaps, this study examines how *tongzhi* (a term indigenous to Chinese culture for describing queer people) from Taiwan, China, a sexually liberal society, negotiate their queer identities in their relationships with gay men from mainland China, which presents a relatively conservative environment for queer people.

Over the past decade, attracted by supportive educational policies and higher income, many Taiwanese *tongzhi* have crossed the Taiwan Strait to study and work in mainland China. Naturally, they have encountered mainland gay men and communicated with them to build friendships, have sexual relations, and commit to romantic partnerships. Although Taiwan and the mainland are both regions of China and have many cultural, language, and lifestyle similarities, they differ in many ways because of long-term disunity after 1949 (Chen, 2013). Relevant to this study, sociocultural perceptions of homosexuality have evolved differently on the two sides of the Strait, and distinct *tongzhi*/gay identities and communities have emerged in these two localities under historically, politically, and culturally nuanced social conditions (Chou, 2000). Accordingly, identity conflicts and negotiations may be unavoidable issues for Taiwanese *tongzhi* during their interactions with mainland gay men.

This study scrutinizes the identity negotiation process of Taiwanese *tongzhi* through their narratives of conflicts arising from their interactions with mainland gay men. Following Ting-Toomey (2005), I define identity negotiation as a process “whereby individuals in an intercultural situation attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others’ desired self-images” (p. 217). Probing deeper into this process can enhance our understanding of the intercultural (re)productions of *tongzhi* normativity and Western gay normativity that collectively regulate Taiwanese-mainland queer interactions. It can also broaden our knowledge of the intercultural flows of queer identities and normativities across non-Western cultures and subjects. Moreover, this study expands the body of literature on identity among gay men with liberal homosexual cultural backgrounds in conservative societies.

Following Huang and Brouwer’s (2018b) suggestion to “avoid using any one fixed phrase so as to signify the fluid and constantly contested meanings of homosexuality in China” (p. 144), I use terms like queer, *tongzhi*, gay, homosexuality, and same sex to signify non-normative sexualities in this article. Taiwanese participants typically refer to themselves and their mainland counterparts as “*tongzhi*,” while in contemporary mainland China, individuals erotically attracted to same-sex people employ “gay” and other terms to describe homoeroticism. I adhere to their terminologies when referring to their sexual identities and use “queer” as an umbrella term to signify all sexually dissented subjects in both Taiwan and mainland China. I also use “queer” as a theoretical lens to critique the hegemony of sexual normativity and “destabilize the normative knowledge production of intercultural communication” (Eguchi & Calafell, 2020, p. 3).

***Tongzhi* in Taiwan**

Taiwanese queer subjects use the term *tongzhi*, a Chinese translation of the international communist term “comrade,” for self-identification. This term is composed of two characters: *Tong* (same), the same character for “homo,” and *zhi* (goal or aspiration). It was revered as the most sacred term in revolutionary and socialist China, referring to people who selflessly fought for the socialist collective interest. Thus, it was widely used as an honorific. In postrevolutionary and postsocialist China, sexually non-

normative communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China appropriated and queered this term to describe their sexuality and to construct an indigenous queer identity (Chou, 2000). However, this does not mean that queer subjects in all Chinese societies share a unified *tongzhi* identity and strategy of resistance. Compared with their counterparts in Hong Kong and mainland China, Taiwanese *tongzhi* are more passionate about confrontational identity politics. They actively appropriate and indigenize the Euro-American model of queer liberation through the discourses of “coming out” and human rights. This preference is closely linked to the historical and political environment in Taiwan.

Following the retreat of the Kuomintang to Taiwan, Taiwan has endeavored to maintain a close alliance with the United States to secure financial support and military protection. In Taiwan, Americans are viewed as privileged, and the American culture—symbolizing democracy, progress, and freedom—is regarded as superior. Within such a historical and political context, American sexual knowledge and discourse gradually migrated to Taiwan, contributing to the formation of non-normative sexual identities among Taiwanese *tongzhi* and serving as strategic tools for them to resist heteronormativity and conservatism (Chou, 2000). Following the abolition of martial law in 1987, Taiwan was transformed into a highly politicized society. Thus, various marginalized voices, especially those related to sexuality and gender, were empowered to speak out publicly and extensively, gaining societal visibility and power (Chou, 2000). Moreover, in an effort to otherize mainland China as backward and to craft an image of Taiwan as a free, democratic, and globalized society, some Taiwanese politicians vigorously promoted political agendas focused on *tongzhi* rights (Chou, 2000; Kong, 2019). These sociopolitical dynamics enabled Taiwanese *tongzhi* to adopt a confrontational approach to attaining queer liberation. They positively engaged in *tongzhi* movements, such as the Taiwan LGBT Pride, to demand sexual rights based on conduct, identity, and sexual liberation (Kong, Kuan, Lau, & Friedman, 2021; Lee, 2017). They appealed for the recognition of diversified family formations, especially through same-sex marriage legalization, and defended the freedoms of individuals whose sexual desires had been degraded and tabooed (Lee, 2017). Antidiscrimination policies were launched to ameliorate the social environment for sexual minorities (Hang, 2018). Today, Taiwan exhibits a significant acceptance of homosexuality following decades of political struggle. The New York Times regarded Taiwan as a “beacon” for queer rights in Asia (Jacobs, 2014), and in 2019, Taiwan became the first region in Asia to legalize same-sex marriages (Hollingsworth, 2019). Nevertheless, Taiwanese and mainland Chinese same-sex couples remain unable to register their marriages in Taiwan (Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association, 2023).

Gay Men in Mainland China

Compared with “*tongzhi*,” the English term “gay,” which lacks a linguistic and cultural equivalent in Chinese, is now more prevalent within the mainland gay community in describing one’s sexual identity. However, this does not imply that mainland homosexual subjects have been completely Westernized or that they practice homosexuality as Western gay people do. Instead, as Huang and Brouwer (2018a) observed, “they are historical and cultural bodies who revise [the Western] queer discourse by their embodied day-to-day practices” (p. 110). In other words, the transnational notion of gay has been revised and transformed by what is “Chinese” in mainland China.

Although homosexuality was decriminalized in 1997 and de-pathologized in 2001 (Kong, 2010), mainland gay men today still experience hostility. In the World Values Survey, 67.5% of Chinese mainland

participants considered homosexuality “never justified,” compared with 27.4% of Taiwanese participants, and 70.8% were unwilling to have homosexual neighbors (Haerpfer et al., 2020). The Chinese government maintains an ambiguous policy called the Three No’s, namely no approval, no disapproval, and no promotion (Chow & Cheng, 2010), allowing for antihomosexual sentiment. For example, Weibo, one of mainland China’s most popular social media platforms, announced plans to remove homosexual content according to government censorship guidelines prohibiting online content deemed obscene or vulgar (Kong et al., 2021). The government’s position is also reflected in the legal status of homosexual individuals in mainland China. They have yet to receive legal protection, and same-sex marriages have not been legalized.

Nevertheless, some queer scholars highlight the depoliticization of same-sex eroticism in mainland gay communities and attribute it to the government’s stringent regulation of political movements (Chou, 2000; Kong, 2019). Kong (2019) notes that mainland gay men, especially among the younger generation, tend to construct their sexual identities economically and culturally rather than politically. They downplay queer rights activism and instead seek a middle-class, consumption-based, urban lifestyle (Kong, 2010). Some social activists also critique mainland gay men who adopt a confrontational approach to sexual liberation. Eryan (1997), the editor in chief of an Internet journal that focuses on the situation of sexual minorities in mainland China, argues that radicalizing the conflict with the government and politicizing same-sex eroticism neither helps nor reflects the fundamental desire of the majority of homosexuals for social understanding. Additionally, mainland gay men express divided opinions on legal advocacy for same-sex marriage. The debate revolves around the conflict between same-sex marriage and the traditional Chinese heteronormative family. Even if legalized, individuals may hesitate because of concerns about familial harmony (Wei, 2010). Meanwhile, the absence of legal regulation of same-sex relationships affords same-sex couples ample opportunities to develop diverse forms of intimate relationships (Wei & Cai, 2012). Extending this discussion, Wei (2010) suggests that for mainland gay men, gaining acceptance from their families and broader society is more important than the pursuit of marriage rights.

Family indeed serves as an indispensable affective source for mainland queers in a less tolerant societal environment. Simultaneously, it represents a repressive and surveillant institution over their everyday lives, limiting their access to economic, social, and cultural resources (Huang, 2023). The tension between sexuality and family compels mainland queers to adopt a series of adaptive and indigenous strategies of practicing queerness. Some come out to their families, destroying familial harmony and potentially leading to “leaving home” (Huang & Brouwer, 2018a). Meanwhile, quality living and financial success often become preconditions for coming-out practices (Huang & Brouwer, 2018a). Other mainland queers integrate sexuality and family within a dynamic interplay of negotiation and competition, navigating their queer lives within the familial kinship system (Chou, 2000; Huang, 2023; Huang & Brouwer, 2018a). For example, some mainland queers enter into “*xinghun*,” a nominal marriage between a gay man and a lesbian woman, to ease the tension between same-sex desires and the heteronormative expectations of their families (Choi & Luo, 2016). They perform the script of heterosexual marriage within their families while pursuing same-sex relationships in their private lives. Such practice not only undermines the hegemony of heteronormativity through queering the notion of opposite-sex marriage but also “challenges homonormativity’s investment in same-sex marriage” (Huang & Brouwer, 2018b, p. 141).

Identity Conflicts in Gay Men's Intergroup Communications

Given the sociocultural differences in the understanding of homosexuality between Taiwan and mainland China, as well as the distinct *tongzhi*/gay identities and cultural practices of gayness, Taiwanese *tongzhi* may experience sexual identity conflicts when living in mainland China. Although Taiwanese *tongzhi* mostly encounter these sorts of conflicts in interpersonal encounters with their mainland counterparts, they may nonetheless regard them as intergroup conflicts (i.e., between two groups of gay men) rather than interpersonal conflicts. Taiwanese *tongzhi* may create a "Taiwanese *tongzhi*" in-group and a "mainland *tongzhi*" out-group, as is the case with the Taiwanese *tongzhi* who participated in this study. However, the in-group/out-group categorization may stem not only from different conceptualizations of homosexual identities but also from nuanced self-identified cultural and political identities, especially among the younger generation. Kong (2019) notes that young Taiwanese *tongzhi* stress a striking contrast between Taiwan and mainland China because of distinct socioeconomic and political cultures. Additionally, some Taiwanese politicians, aiming to distinguish Taiwan from China, strategically advocate queer politics. Their political agenda may have contributed to shaping the image of culturally backward mainland China for the *tongzhi* community, particularly in the domains of gender and sexuality. Thus, such political dynamics may conduce to Taiwanese *tongzhi*'s creation of a "mainland *tongzhi*" out-group.

Research on intergroup communication among gay men often focuses on the context of gay people of color within predominantly White gay communities. Their perceived identity conflicts are evident in the contrasting conceptualizations of sexual identity and race. For example, Eguchi (2011) explores the evolution of his identity as a gay Asian-American man after transitioning to America and discovers that his racial category, gender, and sexual identity are the primary sources of conflict in this process. Meanwhile, these studies demonstrate the dominance of Whiteness in shaping notions of desirability within local and global gay communities. Specifically, non-White gay men are frequently perceived as sexually inferior and/or undesirable (e.g., Callander et al., 2016; Eguchi, 2015; Husbands et al., 2013), representing a form of sexual racism. In contrast, limited knowledge exists about intergroup communication among gay men of the same race with different cultural backgrounds. This includes interactions between Taiwanese *tongzhi* and mainland gay men, which are explored in the present study.

In this regard, communication accommodation theory (CAT) could serve as an effective theoretical and analytical framework for systematically exploring Taiwanese *tongzhi*'s intergroup communication strategies to solve identity conflicts with their mainland partners. CAT is a general framework emphasizing relational and identity processes that determine people's communication strategies in interpersonal and intergroup interactions (Gallois, O'garra, & Giles, 2005). It assumes that communication encompasses both referential meaning and identity (Gallois et al., 2005). In communication, individuals adjust their reactions according to their evaluations of their interlocutors' identities, motivations, and behaviors (Gallois & Giles, 2015).

According to CAT, communication regulation involves two main orientations: the accommodative stance and the nonaccommodative stance (Gallois & Giles, 2015). Individuals deploy accommodation strategies to adjust their behaviors to consider the other's needs, desires, and behaviors, and to appear similar to and show respect for the other. They deploy nonaccommodative strategies to be less considerate of the other's needs, desires, and behaviors and to communicate more as group members, distinguishing

themselves from other groups and expressing pride in their own social identity. Examples of nonaccommodative stances include divergence (i.e., intentional differentiation from partner) and maintenance (i.e., lack of interactional changes) strategies.

Intercultural Circulation of Queer Identities and Normativities

As a field of inquiry, QIC draws on literature related to the transnational and global circulation of queer identities, performance, and politics (Chávez, 2013; Eguchi & Calafell, 2020). This literature highlights and critiques how non-Western cultures and subjects are compelled to conform to the Western normativity of sexuality within the context of transnationalism and globalization (e.g., Binnie, 2004; Eguchi, 2015; Yep, Alaoui, & Lescure, 2020). Historically, while instances of same-sex eroticism can be observed in various cultures, the notion of sexually identifying as "gay" is a distinctively modern and Western invention (Yep et al., 2020). Along with associated sexual cultures, practices, and ideologies that signify sexual freedom and liberation, Western gay formations "travel, by choice and by coercion, imposing Western values and ideals on non-Western cultures within and outside of Western countries" (Chávez, 2013, p. 87). These Western sexual perspectives, with their perceived "advanced" and "progressive" image of liberalism, often become the benchmark for sexual modernity on a global scale, leading to the evaluation of non-Western cultures as sexually "underdeveloped" and "backward" (Eguchi & Calafell, 2020). However, queer formations in non-Western cultures are not mere duplicates of those in Western cultures. The interplay between local and global sexual understanding, alongside unique historical and political contexts, collectively contributes to the complex emergence of queer meanings and identities in non-Western cultures (Binnie, 2004). The Taiwanese *tongzhi* identity and the mainland gay identity, as discussed, showcase the complex, contradictory, and dynamic nature of Chinese queer males' assimilation into and resistance to Western hetero-/homonormativities.

QIC scholars have critiqued the transnational and global circulation of Western gay normativity for its role in hegemonically structuring intercultural same-sex relationships between queer people of color and their White counterparts (e.g., Eguchi, 2011; Zhou, 2020). In particular, Zhou (2020) examines the discursive construction of a Chinese-Caucasian gay male couple celebrity as "Chinese top, British bottom" within social media platforms, which apparently challenge the racialized "dominant, masculine White top versus submissive, effeminized Asian bottom" convention embodied in White gay normativity. Nonetheless, he argues that this construction, while counterstereotypical, still privileges the hypermasculine "Chinese top" and downgrades the "British bottom" because of his nonconformity with the aforementioned racialized convention. Therefore, it reinscribes, rather than undermines, transnational White gay discourse and normativity. However, the role of Western gay normativity in queer color-to-color relationalities remains underexplored. In this vein, Eguchi (2015) identifies and critiques the impact of White gay normativity on Asian queer males' intercultural production of desire through interrogations of queer Asian-Black relationships in the context of White gay America. As an Asian transnational, cisgendered gay man, he repeatedly utilizes his own queer color-to-color relationalities to "disidentify from the homoeroticism of Asian-White colonial encounters" (p. 35). However, he recognizes that his queer Asian-Black relationalities "remain a contested site of reinforcing the larger macroconditions and structures of White/Western imperialist power" (p. 40).

The process of identity negotiation between Taiwanese *tongzhi* and mainland gay men, which forms the core of this study, reveals the competing dynamics of diverse queer identities and normativities in a queer color-to-color interaction context. This negotiation process serves as a battleground for ideological struggles among *tongzhi*, mainland gay men, and, potentially, transnational White gay normativity. By examining such queer intercultural interactions, I intend to elucidate the potential existence of hegemonic discourses and normativities that control and surveil the intercultural knowledge productions of Chinese homoeroticism.

To better grasp Taiwanese *tongzhi*'s identity negotiation processes and the intercultural flows of queer normativities, I formulate the following questions, which guide the study: 1) What conflicts do Taiwanese *tongzhi* face during identity negotiations with mainland gay men? 2) What strategies do Taiwanese *tongzhi* adopt during identity negotiations with mainland gay men? 3) What discourses do Taiwanese *tongzhi* employ to elucidate their negotiation processes?

Methods

Data Collection

I conducted semistructured interviews with men who were born in Taiwan, had been to or were currently residing in mainland China, and had been in a committed relationship with or dated a mainland man online or in person. All participants self-identified as *tongzhi* or gay. Interviews not only allow Taiwanese *tongzhi* to elucidate the complex, multifaceted, contradictory, and dynamic nature of their identity negotiation processes but also have been proven as a productive way to investigate the cultural, political, and ideological discourses embodied in the (re)productions of Chinese homosexual identity and hetero-/homonormativity (e.g., Choi & Luo, 2016; Huang & Brouwer, 2018a, 2018b).

Given the sensitivity of sexualities and queerness in mainland China, Taiwanese *tongzhi* may not actively disclose their queerness when traveling or living there. Accordingly, I identified eligible participants through existing contacts using snowball sampling. Specifically, I invited some mainland gay friends living in Fujian Province and Shanghai to assist in identifying potential participants. Fujian shares geo-cultural similarities with Taiwan, and Shanghai is famous for its cosmopolitan city image and economic strength. Furthermore, both Fujian and Shanghai have many Taiwanese people. Accordingly, these two areas are likely to attract Taiwanese *tongzhi* for short- and long-term stays, and mainland gay people living there might have had interactions with them. Moreover, I encouraged participants to pass along the information of this study to other potential participants; consequently, these participants assisted in recruiting additional participants. After each interview, I promptly wrote an interview memo, organizing and summarizing the key information provided by the participants. In the writing of the last few memos, I noticed significant repetition in the newly acquired information compared with what was previously obtained, which led to the termination of further participant recruitment. This decision was based on the concept of saturation in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

I interviewed 27 Taiwanese *tongzhi* aged 20 to 44 (average age 31). Participants had resided in mainland China from 14 days to 19 years (average years: 6). During the research, 12 participants resided in Taiwan and 15 in mainland China. Twenty-six had engaged in sexual relations with mainland men, and 19 had been or were currently in a committed relationship with a mainland man. To respect participants'

privacy, demographic data not relevant to this research, such as participants' job and income information, were not collected. Participants' names were pseudonymized.

Interviews were 50 to 120 minutes long; three were conducted via instant messages and the others via voice calls. After providing informed consent, participants were invited to recall one or more impressive dating or romantic experiences with mainland men, the situations or conflicts they experienced, and how they managed these situations and conflicts. Interviews were conducted in Chinese. Voice call interviews were audio-recorded, while instant messaging conversations were digitally saved. I transcribed the interviews verbatim in Chinese and subsequently translated the excerpts included in this article into English.

Data Analysis

I conducted a deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyze the interview data. Along with the research questions described in the "Intercultural Circulation of Queer Identities and Normativities" section, two key areas of interest, namely, identity conflicts and negotiation strategies were identified before the analysis to guide the categorization and interpretation of the data. The interview transcripts were organized into these two categories through multiple reviews. Data were then further coded within each category. Specifically, I assigned names to each conflict reported by the participants and subsequently grouped similar conflicts to establish the primary types of identity conflicts. To identify negotiation strategies, I employed the framework of three common strategies (i.e., accommodation, divergence, and maintenance) from the CAT and mapped the participants' reported strategies within this framework. However, the participants did not report any strategy that aligned with the definition of divergence, and some strategies could not be classified within the existing framework. I therefore synthesized and introduced assimilation as a new type of strategy.

Despite my efforts to include diverse samples, the participants represent only a small subset of the Taiwanese *tongzhi* community with unique experiences. The snowball sampling method may have resulted in a homogeneity of perspectives, social classes, and generations among the participants, yielding limited intracultural diversity. For example, participants are predominantly under the age of 35 and possess a university degree or higher. None have been married to same-sex or opposite-sex partners. Moreover, most participants interacted with young mainland gay men in economically advanced cities, and they seldom communicated with those from underdeveloped or rural areas. In other words, participants' experiences predominantly reflect those of young, middle-class, and unmarried Taiwanese *tongzhi*, who interact with a small group of young and urban mainland gay men. With this limitation in mind and inspired by QIC scholarship, my analysis goes beyond empirically identifying identity negotiation patterns to critically examining the cultural and ideological discourses embodied in the negotiation process. Specifically, I understand the interview narratives as discursive fragments and make a critical/cultural endeavor to examine discourses of sexuality, marriage, nation, and more within these narratives. By critical/cultural endeavor, I mean my analytical efforts to investigate "power relations, social stratification, cultural dominance and resistance, and the interplay of disparate material and symbolic resources" (Huang & Brouwer, 2018b, p. 143). Following Ono (2009), I focus on identifying forms of domination and the exercises of power within Taiwanese-mainland relationships and commit myself to "be[ing] in opposition to, or to resist[ing], hegemonic political and ideological formations" (p. 76) in the lives of Chinese queers.

Identity Conflicts

I define identity conflict as the perceived incompatibilities between Taiwanese *tongzhi* and their mainland dates or partners about their ways of being *tongzhi/gay*. In the interviews, after the participants described such conflicts, I asked whether they attributed these conflicts to differences between Taiwanese *tongzhi* and mainland *tongzhi* or solely to individual disparities with their partners. From their answers and explanations, I identified several types of conflicts commonly viewed as stemming from intergroup differences. More importantly, I scrutinized the recurring and pervasive queer discourses and normativities in their articulations of these conflicts. This examination helps us to better understand how identity conflicts occur.

Social, cultural, and legal frameworks about homosexuality have shaped distinct perceptions and possibilities of same-sex relationships and lifestyles in Taiwan and mainland China. This perspective was endorsed by the majority of the participants. Several participants viewed same-sex relationships that cannot “progress” to marriage as “having no future,” leading to inevitable identity conflicts with mainland gay men. These men, because of personal, familial, sociocultural, and legal reasons, did not incorporate same-sex marriage into their queer future plans. For example, Ryan (age 44) aspired to “find a partner and get married in Taiwan or the partner’s country,” but his mainland date, hindered by legal restrictions, could not meet this expectation. He acknowledged that this conflict caused him to be hesitant about pursuing intimate relationships with mainland men. Samuel (age 27) proposed to his ex-boyfriend the idea of getting married abroad but received a silent response, sparking a heated argument between them. His ex-boyfriend argued that such a marriage would bring enormous pressure to his career and family, while Samuel countered, “[If we don’t get married,] then what am I after all these years we’ve been together?” In my view, participants who encounter such conflicts, like Ryan and Samuel, endorsed the principle of same-sex marriage as a parameter of a desirable same-sex relationship. They privileged it as the yardstick for measuring all queer relationships, thereby marginalizing non-marital coupledness as undesirable and ill-fated.

Participants’ emphasis on same-sex marriage highlights their assimilation of a heteronormative ideal—the marital-style coupledness—into *tongzhi* ideology. It represents their production of a form of homonormativity, which Lisa Duggan defined as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them” (as cited in Chan, 2021, pp. 114–115). Arguably, the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan has not only provided Taiwanese *tongzhi* with marriage rights but has also contributed to the rise of a hegemonic homonormativity within the Taiwanese *tongzhi* community and in Taiwanese-mainland gay interactions. Luke’s (age 41) observation echoes this argument. As he analyzed, Taiwanese *tongzhi* had “matured” in their perspectives on same-sex relationships after the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan. He noted that “[among Taiwanese *tongzhi*,] more and more people are leaning toward settling down [and pursuing marriage] ... [However, same-sex marriage] is illegal in the mainland, so [mainland *tongzhi*] are still mostly into one-night stands.” Mason (age 31), who has had two relationships with mainland gay men, now avoids such relationships, stating that “with the option [of same-sex marriage in Taiwan], I feel like I would want to get married.” Luke and Mason highlighted how institutional dynamics affect the practices of same-sex intimate relationships among Taiwanese and mainland queers. More importantly, they advocated for the inclusion of *tongzhi* who aspired to marry, as exemplified by Luke’s use of the term “mature” and Mason’s change in preference, but not dissident queer. Ahmed critiques heteronormative society for compelling queers to “become acceptable to

a world that has already decided what is acceptable" (as cited in Huang & Brouwer, 2018a, p. 7). In this context, I argue that colluding with heteronormativity, Taiwanese *tongzhi* marginalized and excluded mainland gay men who are unable or unwilling to pursue same-sex marriage, thereby relegating them to a subordinate position that is neither accepted by the *tongzhi* world nor the heterosexual world.

Some participants mobilized the *kaifang* discourse to articulate such conflicts with their dates or partners. The term "*kaifang*" denotes the lifting of barriers and restrictions, and it can also describe a person whose mindset is liberated and unrestrained. It carries a positive connotation within Chinese societies, particularly as it pertains to the far-reaching national policy of "reform and opening-up" (*gaige kaifang*) in mainland China. However, these participants appropriated and indigenized this term to privilege Western sexual norms and ideologies that symbolize "advanced" and "progressive" liberalism. For example, Ryan attributed the identity conflicts he experienced with mainland gay men about same-sex relationships and other aspects to the developmental "gap" between Taiwan and mainland China. He asserted that the acceptance of homosexuality "is an inevitable process for a society to achieve a civilized and *kaifang* state." On that basis, Taiwan was considered more *kaifang*, granting Taiwanese *tongzhi* greater imaginative freedom within same-sex relationships, such as "marrying a guy, bringing a boyfriend home, introducing him to the family, and living together." In contrast, mainland China was deemed less (*bugou*) *kaifang*, potentially leading mainland *tongzhi* to suppress same-sex desires and "go back to heterosexual relationships." He remarked, "On the issue of homosexuality, the mainland is like Taiwan 30 years ago." By using Western sexual perspectives as a benchmark, Ryan portrayed mainland China as sexually backward. Notably, this portrayal was echoed by almost all participants.

Ryan attributed Taiwan's *kaifang* to Taiwanese *tongzhi*'s relentless efforts in "continuously discussing and explaining the issue of *tongzhi* in public spaces," which in turn has increased societal acceptance of *tongzhi* and led to the legalization of same-sex marriage. Following the same rationale, Matthew (age 27) expressed discontent with what he perceived as the "cowardice" of mainland gay men, as evidenced by their constant "hiding in the shadow" (*bugan jianguang*). He criticized the reluctance of mainland *tongzhi* to come out and advocate for their own rights, which, from his perspective, had resulted in the illegality of same-sex marriage in mainland China. Evidently, Ryan and Matthew appropriated the Western discourses of "coming out" and queer rights to privilege confrontational queer politics. In the "*Tongzhi* in Taiwan" section, I argued that several sociopolitical dynamics collectively empower Taiwanese *tongzhi* to attain liberation through a confrontational Western approach. This explains why Taiwanese *tongzhi* may be more passionate about confrontational identity politics than their counterparts in Hong Kong and mainland China. In the "Gay Men in Mainland China" section, I also demonstrated that, in the context of the government's stringent regulations of political movements, mainland gay men depoliticize homoeroticism and focus their queer resistance on negotiating with, integrating into, and contesting heteronormative familial structures. In other words, queer politics in Taiwan and mainland China exhibit different emphases. However, those like Ryan and Matthew, who advocated confrontational politics as the optimal approach to queer liberation, overlooked the historical, political, and social contexts of mainland China. Serving as local agents of the transnational discourse of queer confrontational politics, they criticized mainland gay men for their indifference to the queer rights struggle. This shows one way in which Western queer normativity circulated and shaped Taiwanese *tongzhi*'s identity negotiation with mainland gay men.

Chinese queer scholars have argued that the potential to come out is constrained by one's cultural underpinnings (Huang & Brouwer, 2018a; Kong, 2010). The "coming-out model" has been criticized for its roots in White, individualistic, middle-class, urban perspectives (Chávez, 2013; Kong, 2010) and its failure to recognize the significance of relational selfhood essential in familism, collectivism, and Confucianism (Bie & Tang, 2016; Kong, 2010). However, many participants employed the Western discourse of "coming out," with some also incorporating the *kaifang* discourse to illustrate their experiences of identity conflicts about mainland gay men's reluctance to publicly disclose their non-normative sexualities. In this vein, Jacob (age 25) and Michael (age 35) voiced their dissatisfaction with many mainland *tongzhi* who did not use their real photos on dating apps, while asserting that Taiwanese *tongzhi* rarely did so. In the interviews, they blamed mainland *tongzhi* for not being *kaifang*, emphasizing that their reluctance to use real photos conveyed their fear of being identified as *tongzhi*/gay and their hesitance to "be themselves." These narratives implied coming out as a parameter of *tongzhi*/gay identity development and as a precondition for being an authentic self, which resonated with the perspectives presented in the Western "coming-out model" (e.g., Cass, 1979). In addition, the emphasis on the Western benchmark for "advanced" and "progressive" sexuality, as embodied in the discourse of *kaifang*, became a discursive resource that Taiwanese *tongzhi* drew on to justify their appropriation of "coming-out" discourse. However, Wei (2007) argues that mainland China's stance against public homosexuality underlies its intolerance. Jacob, Michael, and other participants encountering similar conflicts failed to recognize the inadequacy of Western sexual norms as a universal yardstick for global sexual practices. They also failed to notice the structural challenges faced by mainland gay men in navigating the ways of coming out proposed by them and the transnational queer discourse. Again, Taiwanese *tongzhi* functioned as queer intercultural agents, reproducing White gay normativity in their identity negotiations with mainland gay men.

Heteronormative families serve as significant sites for Taiwanese *tongzhi* and mainland gay men to practice nonnormative sexualities. Both need to adopt a series of adaptation and resistance strategies to navigate the tension between queerness and heterosexual families (Brainer, 2019; Chou, 2000; Huang, 2023; Lee, 2018). *Xinghun* (nominal marriage) is a common strategy employed by mainland gay men, as showcased in the "Gay Men in Mainland China" section. During the interviews, many participants shared that their mainland dates or partners had either planned to or had already engaged in *xinghun*. Although they understood and empathized with the "family pressures" faced by mainland gay men, they nevertheless expressed difficulties in fully respecting and understanding such practices, which led to identity conflicts with mainland gay men. The majority emphasized that *xinghun* was merely a "show." In this regard, Michael, who studied in the West and currently resides in Shanghai, provided a typical account. He appropriated the discourse of *tongzhi* identity to challenge the performativity of *xinghun*, arguing that "*xinghun* is just a show; it doesn't suggest they are facing their own identity." Michael's conceptualization of *tongzhi* identity appears deeply influenced by Western gay normativity. He persisted in using the international dating app Tinder rather than local alternatives to find dates, despite acknowledging Tinder's limited user base in mainland China. He expressed being attracted to mainland gay men who also have overseas educational experiences and share his interest in English-language theater and music. In this context, I argue that Michael strongly follows the Western gay principle of excluding heterosexual marriages from the notion of gay/*tongzhi* identity and lifestyle.

Essentially, the participants' criticism of *xinghun* is that it problematizes some heterosexual marriages that are not founded on romantic love and procreation, suggesting an internalization of Western perspectives on sexuality and (heterosexual) marriage. Chou (2000) notes that historically, heterosexual marriage in China was a partnership unrelated to romantic love and sexual orientation, allowing for the coexistence of same-sex desire within the framework of heterosexual marriage. With the cultural imperialism of Western romantic love and individualism, marriage is required to be passionate and intimate and thus becomes "an oppressive and torturous institution for PEPS [people who are erotically attracted to people of the same sex] in a way it never was before" (p. 104). The prevalent "performance" of *xinghun* among mainland queers illustrates their resistance to this institutional oppression through the cultural practice of queering heterosexual marriages. Such practices can shield nonnormative sexualities from a heteronormative society (Choi & Luo, 2016; Huang & Brouwer, 2018b). In this context, the "show" problematized by those participants, as Huang and Brouwer (2018b) argue, signifies "a queer union that goes beyond the sex-love-marriage matrix" (p. 141) and potentially "opens up space to disturb the hegemony of heteronormativity in marriage arrangements toward a queer world-making" (p. 141).

In summary, through appropriating and indigenizing the cultural and ideological discourses of *kaifang*, hetero-/homonormativity, queer confrontational politics, coming out, (Western) marriage, White gayness, and, among others, Taiwanese *tongzhi* normativity and Western gay normativity were (re)produced in constructing and articulating identity conflicts with mainland gay men. Particularly noteworthy was their common mobilization of the *kaifang* discourse to legitimize these normativities and produce an identity hierarchy. By identity hierarchy, I mean that Taiwanese *tongzhi* positioned themselves as sexually advanced while stigmatizing mainland gay men who did not conform to those normativities as sexually backward. Moreover, this hierarchy, along with *tongzhi*/Western gay normativity, has functioned as a justification for intergroup negotiation strategies.

Identity Negotiation Strategies: Maintenance, Accommodation, and Assimilation

I employed CAT as a theoretical and analytical framework to investigate Taiwanese *tongzhi*'s identity negotiation strategies. Specifically, I examined how they asserted, modified, challenged, and supported their own and mainland gay men's queer identities in response to identity conflicts. Maintenance and accommodation strategies were conceptualized following CAT theory, and assimilation, a newly identified strategy apparent in participants' described behaviors, extends CAT theory.

Nearly all participants reported using identity maintenance strategies oriented toward asserting their *tongzhi* identities, with disconnection being predominant. In particular, disconnecting from mainland gay men was commonly adopted to navigate identity conflicts related to same-sex relationships and heterosexual marriage. For example, Samuel was in a long-distance relationship in mainland China that lasted three and a half years. Samuel's boyfriend accepted a blind date arranged by his parents and subsequently married. Despite the boyfriend identifying himself as gay, Samuel considered that "he was not a true *tongzhi*" because of his heterosexual marriage and previous sexual experiences with women. Samuel refused his boyfriend's proposal to sustain their romantic relationship and decided to end it, deeming it the only way to resolve the conflict. Samuel's narratives echoed the *tongzhi* normativity that emphasizes avoiding relationships with women. This normative perspective was shared by the majority of participants,

who, unsurprisingly, likewise expressed their disconnection from any mainland men who might potentially enter or had already entered into heterosexual marriages, especially those with straight women.

In most cases, particularly within dating contexts, participants simply asserted their own *tongzhi* identities and ideologies without seeking to transform those of mainland gay men. As Ryan remarked, "mainland *tongzhi*'s values and ideas were not easily changed." However, in a few cases, especially within committed relationships, participants not only asserted their own identities but also attempted to assimilate their counterparts' identities with their own. I refer to these strategies as identity assimilation strategies, wherein participants encourage mainland gay men to align with their *tongzhi* normativity. For instance, John's (age 37) rejection of sexually monogamous relationships conflicted with his mainland boyfriend. He considered himself to be more *kaifang* regarding how to be a *tongzhi*, thus firmly asserting, "If he wants to be with me, he must adapt to the way I am."

Some participants reported more subtle ways of achieving assimilation. For example, Jayden (age 29) described instilling in his mainland boyfriend the potential for same-sex relationships:

He's hesitant to come out and hasn't considered same-sex marriage and family before, probably because . . . he hasn't seen any such examples around him. So, I shared with him some stories of same-sex couples forming families from Taiwan, mainland China, and other areas. I want him to know that more and more people in the world are determined to pursue this path.

The communicative stance presented in assimilation strategies is ambiguous. Although the goal is to enact similarity, which makes these strategies accommodative, the positive adjustments that define them as an accommodative stance are absent, rendering the approach nonaccommodative (Gallois et al., 2005). Gallois and Giles (2015) argue that the distinction between accommodative and nonaccommodative stances relates to whether one party considers the other's desires. At their core, such strategies represent attempts to impose the *tongzhi* normativity on mainland gay men, exerting influence over their understanding and practice of gayness. The frequent occurrence of the words "educate," "guide," "enlighten," and "remind" in their narratives indicates that, while they considered mainland gay men's ideologies and identities sexually inferior, they used such strategies to convey their dominant status. As Matthew put it, "[Taiwanese *tongzhi* and mainland *tongzhi*] are totally different, except both parties are men. We are more *kaifang*." Accordingly, assimilation strategies primarily represent a nonaccommodative stance adopted by Taiwanese *tongzhi*.

Identity accommodation strategies refer to Taiwanese *tongzhi*'s practice of adjusting their identities to be more like their partners' identities to resolve conflicts. For example, Evan (age 25) gradually recalibrated his expectations about same-sex marriage after his boyfriend, who was born into a conservative family and "tortured" by rigid parental discipline, refused his marriage proposal. He actively shifted his attitude from aspiring to marry to embracing a long-term and stable relationship without marriage, exemplifying a change in his *tongzhi* ideologies. Nevertheless, participants seldom reported using these strategies. In other words, they mostly asserted their own identities during identity negotiations with their mainland counterparts. This may suggest uneven flows of queer identities and normativities between Taiwanese *tongzhi* and mainland gay men, with Taiwanese *tongzhi* dominating.

Conclusion

In this study, I investigate how Taiwanese *tongzhi* negotiate their queer identities with mainland gay men by articulating the identity conflicts they experience. I not only enrich the research contexts in the literature on gay men's intergroup communication but also explore how certain historical and cultural factors, rather than race which is commonly discussed in the literature, can result in bias and identity conflicts impacting Taiwanese *tongzhi*'s intergroup interaction process. The incompatibilities of perspectives on same-sex intimate relationships, heterosexual marriage, queer rights struggle, and the coming-out issue constituted common sources of identity conflict. Moreover, I identify three patterns of identity negotiation strategies and provide baseline knowledge for a new pattern—assimilation—thereby extending our understanding of CAT.

This study also intends to fill a specific gap in QIC research by addressing the scarcity of knowledge on the intercultural flows of queer identities and normativities between non-Western cultures and queer subjects. Specifically, I have attempted to explicitly identify and elucidate the existence of hegemonic cultural and ideological discourses in the intercultural productions of *tongzhi* identity and normativity within Taiwanese-mainland queer relationships. By appropriating and indigenizing these discourses, *tongzhi* identity and normativity were "legitimately" generalized to and even imposed on mainland gay men. Furthermore, I aim to respond to Eguchi's (2015) call for "continu[ing] to interrogate, challenge, and problematize discursive and ideological functions of White gay normativity" (p. 40) in queer color-to-color (dis)connections. I demonstrate that in a time of queer globalization, Taiwanese *tongzhi* have functioned as a local queer intercultural agent to reproduce Western gay normativity in the Asian space. The global dominance of this normativity represents the cultural and ideological imperialism of Western modernity, which is deeply rooted in the realities of liberal capitalism (Eguchi & Calafell, 2020). Accordingly, I echo Eguchi (2015) in arguing that queer color-to-color relationships can be a contested site for reinscribing and reinforcing the structures of Western imperialist power within and beyond Western countries.

In addition, this study examines how the concept of *tongzhi* influences narratives about Taiwan and mainland China, highlighting the interplay between politics, interregional tensions, and queer experiences in these regions. Interviews reveal that Taiwanese *tongzhi* use the *kaifang* discourse to differentiate Taiwan from mainland China because of the unique contemporary queer experiences in Taiwan. This study adds a queer perspective to understanding the complexities and dynamics of cross-strait relations, specifically the estrangement between the two sides. However, it is important to approach such arguments with caution. Kong (2019) notes that some Taiwanese politicians strategically support *tongzhi* politics to advance their political agendas against reunification. This can lead to a biased preconceived notion among Taiwanese *tongzhi* that reunification would threaten their liberated queer lives. In this context, some participants may intentionally differentiate Taiwan from mainland China and construct a self-perceived identity hierarchy in the interviews. Unfortunately, many participants avoided overt political issues, limiting the potential to thoroughly address the intersectionality of sexual and political identities.

This study has some other limitations. First, it is important to reiterate that my analysis captures only the identity negotiation experiences of a selected group of Taiwanese *tongzhi*. Brainer (2019) notes that in the queer narratives of older Taiwanese *tongzhi*, the discourse of coming out is absent, and many have experienced heterosexual marriages. Thus, their experiences of identity negotiation with mainland gay men and the

discourses they employ are likely to differ from my findings. In short, the convenience sample poses limitations on the applicability of the findings. Second, to focus on the research questions about identity conflicts and associated negotiation patterns, this study does not investigate cultural similarities between Taiwanese *tongzhi* and mainland gay men. Additional research is needed to examine the relationship between their cultural similarities and Taiwanese *tongzhi*'s identity negotiation processes. Third, our understanding of mainland gay men was based on Taiwanese participants' accounts, which emphasized sociocultural influences and yet may have downplayed mainland gay men's agency. Future research should investigate mainland gay men's perceptions and compare their identity negotiation practices with those of Taiwanese *tongzhi*.

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