

Queer(ing) Taiwan and Its Future:  
From an Agenda of Mainstream Self-Enlightenment  
to One of Sexual Citizenship?

Wei-cheng Raymond Chu

Assistant Professor of English

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

National Taiwan University

[wrcchu@ntu.edu.tw](mailto:wrcchu@ntu.edu.tw)

As parts of an ongoing reflection on the *tongzhi* (roughly equivalent to lesbian/gay/queer, hereafter abbreviated as l/g/q) developments in Taiwan, three critical theses are put forth in this essay. The first is a historical understanding of the excitingly prosperous l/g/q emergence in the 1990s. I offer here a contextual analysis which views this phenomenal rise as the amplified effects of what I call a ‘self-enlightening’ process pursued by the mainstream society since the democratization process starting in the late 1980s. Yet as fortunate as it seems, this coincidence also dictated the specific form the l/g/q movement has taken as well as caused its apparent ‘cool-off’ near the year 2000. The second is a follow-up critical

observation, along the line already mapped out, on the latest change of direction – i.e. what I call the ‘civic turn’ of the l/g/q movement since 2000. This in effect further proves my thesis put forth in the first section and also points at a general perspective on the relative strength (or lack of it) of the Taiwan society versus political power. At the end, I distinguish the l/g/q civil movement in Taiwan from its US counterpart by showing the local transformations of this largely imported discourse with the purpose of providing a glocal comparative framework. To further demonstrate the glocal difference, I also anticipate the historical significance of this new phase of development for the movement itself as well as for Taiwan in general.

### **A contextual retrospection on Taiwan’s *tongzhi* (lesbian/gay/queer) movement in the 1990s**

With today’s l/g/q condition in Taiwan in view, it is difficult to imagine how bad the situation was just more than a decade ago, before the phenomenal rise of the l/g/q movement in the 1990s. For it was only in the mid-1980s, due to the public panic and concern with AIDS, that homosexuality as an issue emerged from the limbo of being relegated almost out of sight along with other ‘social criminalities’ and into the stage center of public sphere, even though it was still viewed as a shadowy figure, cursed and berated, and under constant surveillance by societal voyeurism. And yet, after just

a decade or so, being homosexual in Taiwan has transformed into a minority identity that enjoys a certain level of social legitimacy, and homosexuality itself has even become a kind of 'hot topic', cropping up now and then in the fields of both elite and popular culture.

Yet to review the situation more closely, we find that the real life situation for l/g/q people in Taiwan has in effect undergone very little material improvement. Most of them still dare not come out publicly, and there is hardly any support for being l/g/q as an alternative lifestyle, either in terms of customized private services or protection of equal rights. So what is it that has really changed? Yako Wang, a local sociologist and the author of the first *History of the Gay Rights Movement in Taiwan*, provides an answer which I deem most astute: he defines it as 'a transformation in cultural configuration' (1999: 30-31; Wang's own English phrasing). Which means the biggest impact of the 1990s wave of l/g/q culture and activism lies in a sea change of the mainstream *perception* of homosexuals (from social outcasts to a disadvantaged minority) as well as their cultural positioning (from marginal to rather central). However, beyond this – especially in terms of social resources and legal reforms – progress has been very limited.

This assessment result should not come as a surprise, as from the very beginning Taiwan's l/g/q movement has manifested itself as a media phenomenon in the

mainstream cultural arena. A large proportion of it was even textual, i.e. hit films and novels featuring homosexual themes created hot news along with enthusiastic popular interest. For example, Chen Kaige's *Farewell to my Concubine* (1992), Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) – both are films, while the following are all novels – Chu T'ien-wen's *Notes of a Desolate Man* (1994), Qiu Miaojin's *The Crocodile's Journal* (1994; but it did not cause a sensation until Qiu's suicide in Paris the next year), and Du Xiulan's *Rebel Daughter* (1996): these are but some of the most prominent examples which caught public attention as a result of winning or being short-listed for major, mainstream prizes (national or international). Yet even l/g/q activism which flourished in the 1990s alongside these textual events was predominantly a media phenomenon in the mainstream, as it consisted mainly in activities, protests, or simply press conferences designed to get coverage by the mainstream media, which it did succeed to a considerable degree. This is of course due to the l/g/q activism's lack of resources, which means that it 'cannot but' take up this tactic of 'piggy-backing on the media's interest'. Yet useful as it was, this tactic also dictates the direction of the l/g/q activism, making it over-reliant on the mainstream media. All in all, the reason why it was possible for the l/g/q movement to prosper in the 1990s Taiwan is because the mainstream already harboured a high degree of interest in homosexual issues at that historical conjuncture.

No wonder that the first endeavour of l/g/q activism in Taiwan was an incident involving the mainstream media, namely the 'TTV World News Incident'. In 1990, Taiwan's first lesbian group – 'Between Us' (or 'Entre Nous', since the name comes from a French film with lesbian themes) – was formed, but due to its discreet approach it was hardly known by the general public. That is until 1992, when a leaflet of the group displayed at a feminist festival kindled mainstream media's voyeuristic interest. After trying to contact the group with no response, a team of TTV (Taiwan Television, one of the four airwave TV stations) World News reporters secretly filmed inside a lesbian bar and then cut the footage into a seedy program of gossips and innuendos. Outraged, 'Between Us' mobilized the support of quite a few cultural celebrities and issued a protest statement in *China Times*, one of the most influential newspapers, and thus started organized l/g/q activism in Taiwan.

Retrospectively, there are three things worth special notice about this inaugurating event. First, it is the mainstream media's desire to know that incited or precipitated what originally was not (or at least not a priority) on the emergent lesbian group's agenda of action, and what was certainly exceeding the group's capacity at that time. The latter of which explains the second point, that is why: the group did not stand out by itself but, instead, mobilized cultural celebrities to voice protest; and their willingness and readiness to lend support to the local homosexual cause which

remained unheard up to this moment indicates some drastic change had already been fermented for quite a while and just waited to be imploded. Third, the protest was conducted as a media event and so was that against which it was aimed – they are apparently two sides of the same coin, enabled by the same cultural formation/mechanism. As Fran Martin points out in her monograph on Taiwan's l/g/q movement, 'the image of *tongxinglian* [homosexuality] has become a valued entertainment commodity in 1990s Taiwan. It has become self-evidently "attractive to the audience" and a guarantor of high ratings' (2003: 220).

So it is the mainstream's curiosity (both in its good and bad senses) that brought out Taiwan's l/g/q movement and kept it up throughout most of the 1990s, but where on earth did this interest come from? My theory derives from a full contextualization of the l/g/q movement as one of the latest-comers of the bourgeoning of social movements since the lifting of martial law in 1987, before which Taiwan had been under the authoritarian rule of the KMT (Kuomintang) government for half a century. Only after it did the democratization process officially took off, and along with this political transformation was an enthusiastic determination to establish a really legitimate and more open society – this manifested itself in the explosion of many and varied kinds of social movements for the disadvantaged as well as their positive reception by the mainstream society, which mostly greeted them with sympathetic

understanding and opinion support. I regard this as a 'mainstream self-enlightening process', meaning the dominant society sought to educate and transform itself into a more open, liberal, and modern version. And this process gradually extended from the public sphere to the private as the feminist movement gathered more momentum and expanded its concerns from women's rights to a broader set of challenges to existing gender relations and sexual attitudes, so much so that a 'sex wave' swept over the 1990s and fanned the interest in homosexuality as its most prominent part.

Therefore the l/g/q movement in 1990s Taiwan was as much a mainstream fad as a minority act; in effect, the latter can be said to have ridden on the wave produced by the former. As a corollary, once this wave was over – that is, when the society considered itself as 'enlightened' enough about homosexuals or the media felt informed enough of them after repeated exposure – the l/g/q movement would no longer be able to sustain the same degree of heat and would thus appeared to be gradually dying down. And this is exactly what happened as it got near the year 2000. Yet in fact the movement was entering a new phase, or one should say taking up a new tactic, one that accords better with the actual capacities and real needs of the movement itself. For one thing, we saw various endeavours of institutionalization: not only did l/g/q groups seek to establish themselves as formal organizations or legal entities in order to construct a more solid basis, but businesses became spatially

visible under the daring scheme of building a 'rainbow district'. At the same time, if we look closely at the various kinds of l/g/q activities currently taking place around Taiwan, we would find that, compared with the situation a decade ago when the movement just got started and was concentrated in the capital city and centered on a group of activists who had access to the media, now there are a far greater number of l/g/q groups and different kinds of entities scattered around Taiwan.

### **The 'civic turn'**

Entering into the twenty-first century, as Taiwan's l/g/q movement appeared to be at a all time low and was looking hard for a change, a precious new opportunity for activism suddenly suggested itself due to certain contextual shifts again and thus has coincidentally started what Jeffrey Weeks calls the 'moment of citizenship' (1995: 116-23) or what I call the 'civic turn' of the movement. Just the way the *tongzhi* movement was given the chance to arise in the 1990s, these contextual shifts consist in a series of significant changes originally in the political environment. First, in the presidential election of 2000, the long-standing KMT lost its rule for the first time in half a century to the young opposition DPP (Democratic Progressive Party); and the latter came to office with the new ideological legitimation of 'human rights', thus enabling minority groups to make public claim to their long-negated rights. In the



same year, the Taipei City Government, under the KMT mayorship, openly sponsored an l/g/q festival called ‘Tongwan Jie: Tongzhi Civil Movement in Taipei 2000’ with public budget. And the next year, in order to realize the DPP president’s proclamation of ‘incorporating “international human rights protocols” into domestic legal system’, the Ministry of Justice began to draft a ‘Basic Human Rights Protection Law’, which reportedly included such progressive sections as: ‘The nation should respect the rights and welfare of homosexuals, and people of the same sex should enjoy the legal rights to form families and adopt children’ – thus inspiring heated public discussions about homosexual marriage. Meanwhile, the Taipei City Government continued to sponsor the annual Tongzhi Festival with public budget (though the exact amount decreased every year), and the fifth was held in 2004.

Even to those who are not familiar with Taiwan politics, it should be suspected that this amazing race to act ‘*tongzhi*-friendly’, suddenly begun after the year 2000 when the political situation underwent a major shake-up, probably has something to do with it. Yes it does and, in fact, I want to boldly suggest that it is accelerated by a partisan as well as personal competition between the central administration now run by the newly elected DPP president Chen Shui-bian and the capital city government which has become the highest rank of remaining KMT-controlled administrations, with its mayor Ma Ying-jiou then being regarded as the only candidate who has a

chance of defeating President Chen in his run for re-election. However, it should be noted, the point of this race was not just to woo the so-called '*tongzhi* voters' because obviously, even if there were really voters who could be characterized as such in Taiwan, they would not carry any electoral importance in such a large-scale election. The real trophy, I believe, was to gain the upper hand in a competition to assume an 'enlightened' public image which would still earn political points for the candidates as the post-martial law ambience of seeking 'self-enlightenment' as described above has not yet altogether dissipated.

To further prove this theory, one merely needs to recall that the discourse and concepts deployed by this 'new' l/g/q civil movement – such as 'human rights', 'civil rights' and 'citizenship' – had long been utilized by Taiwan activists in their attempts to improve the l/g/q condition before, only to no avail at all. Right back to the 'pre-movement era' of 1986, Chi Chia-wei, a pioneer and a loner activist fighting for homosexual rights in the wake of AIDS crisis, already appealed to higher courts after his registration for a same-sex marriage had been refused. Chi re-applied in 1998, and after being refused again, made a series of protests against the heterosexist legal system and ultimately requested for a ruling by the constitutional court (which rejected the request as simply out of order; see Chang 2002: 403-406). In the meantime, l/g/q groups collectively participated in the 'Public Hearing on the

Advancement of Homosexual Rights' in 1993, the first of its kind to be convened in the Legislative Yuan, and demanded the protection of homosexual rights be incorporated into the proposed draft of 'Anti-Discrimination Law'. In 1995, in response to the feminist call for revising the patriarchal 'Civil Family Law', l/g/q activists formed the "Homosexual Rights Advancement Committee" to lobby for the legalization of homosexual marriage. But neither of these drew enough public attention or came to any results.

Aside from these, in a series of elections since the mid-1990s, activists also sought to capitalize on l/g/q votes to pressure politicians to proclaim their support on the l/g/q issues. However, given Taiwan's l/g/q votes have yet to emerge as an effective 'voter block' – in other words, given that Taiwan's l/g/q community has, as yet, not enough political strength – the attitudes of most electoral candidates, which range from an unwillingness to be associated with l/g/q issues to a tendency to make merely perfunctory acknowledgement of their support, should not come as a real surprise. Therefore, if we have no reason to believe that the power of the movement has made any quantum leap as the new millennium arrives (in fact many have worried the reverse might be the case), then we should seriously ponder: why have the administrations (*both* local and central) that are usually the last to budge suddenly extended a helping hand, without even being asked, to the l/g/q movement by creating

new opportunities for it and reactivating hopes which had been long been dismissed?

If the answer does not seem likely to lie within the movement, then we could only locate it elsewhere, in the surrounding context which has proven its agency before.

### **What would *tongzhi* civil movement work for Taiwan? Or, The choice between nationalism and citizenship**

This 'civic turn' has effectively re-orientated Taiwan's l/g/q movement towards an agenda of (sexual) citizenship. With its redirected emphasis on 'the claim to equal protection of the law, to equal rights in employment, parenting, social status, access to welfare provision, and partnership rights, or even marriage, for same-sex couples' (Weeks 1998: 37), this new turn will no doubt be the requisite corrective to Taiwan's l/g/q movement, whose former advances concentrated in the cultural sphere but had little gain in the material one. However, as many critics have qualms about the embedded conservative tendencies of such a l/g/q *civil* movement – mainly in the US, where the recent focus on gay 'citizenship' has triggered fierce critiques of this approach as mainstream-appeasing, reactionary, or simply rightist (Bell and Binnie 2000) – it is necessary to first and foremost distinguish the meaning of this civic turn in Taiwan's l/g/q movement from that of its US counterpart. At the same time, in order to make the most of this 'gift from heaven', we should also try to anticipate what this

new approach is likely to encounter, where it is going to lead, and what it could possibly achieve for the movement itself and for its immediate context (i.e. the Taiwan society).

The major distinction that needs to be foregrounded is that Taiwan's l/g/q civil movement has not resulted in any faction splits of the kind found in the US, which is in fact quite natural for a movement that possesses comparatively few resources and cannot afford to split. As to the conservative tendency which is deemed as constitutive of the very conceptualization of 'citizenship' and 'civil society', it is instead borne out by quite a few other social movements, which devote themselves to supplementing or cooperating with the government in policing certain behaviours or even people whom they find unfit for (being) rightful 'citizens' (Ning 2000: 134). And this is the special challenge that Taiwan's l/g/q movement has to face and where it may make a contribution to the democratic development of the Taiwan society. For unlike the Western situation where the concept of 'civil society' originated and developed, in Taiwan its prevalent conceptualization, as demonstrated by the practice of certain social movements which have prospered by their partnership with the government, focuses on the demand for state interventions into neglected 'public' affairs but appears unconcerned with civil liberties and rights that require protection from state incursions – a slant that seems to be shared by many people in Taiwan. In other words,

the society may simply lack the ‘right(s)’ background that is necessary for an l/g/q civil movement to work readily – in the sense that people need to what their ‘rights’ are and care for them before you can use that claim as an effective leverage for activism.

Therefore, such a movement, in order to work at all, in fact faces the formidable task of having to create from scratch a suitable environment for itself. Yet such a task is not only a must for the movement itself; it also carries historic significance for the democratic development of the Taiwan society as a whole. For the peculiar slant of Taiwan’s civil society towards the state reflects a historical entanglement that is still there today. From the early moment when the term ‘citizen’ was translated into Chinese, it already contained strong nationalist overtones (as *guo-min*, which is closer to ‘national’ than ‘citizen’). And even if its more accurate form of translation (as *gong-min*, which replaces the nationalist denotation with that of the ‘public’ as implied in the related phrase ‘civil society’) has also been current for quite a while in daily language (used for street names and even as part of the heading of one long-established school course: *Gongmin yu daode*, i.e. ‘Citizenship and Morality’), the general understanding and usage of this term remains pretty much the same as that with apparent nationalist denotation. In other words, most people understand themselves as ‘citizens’ only in terms of their ‘responsibilities’ to the nation, but

hardly in their 'rights' to be protected by and from the state. This is in effect an overdetermined situation as the concepts of 'citizen' and 'civil society' were originally introduced by Chinese nationalists to refashion the declining empire in a process of modernization, rather than as a conscious effort by the people to defend itself against the absolutist state as in the eighteenth-century Europe (Shen and Chien 1999). The situation did not improve very much in the following century as China was facing a series of national struggles and thus has been rife with nationalist sentiments. Yet it has not got any better in Taiwan recently, as the island is torn apart by a rising native nationalism which concerns itself with foreign threats and domestic traitors in a patriotic game.

That is why I regard the l/g/q movement in Taiwan, especially its recent civic turn, as entrusted with a mission bigger than itself. Due to the sexual conservatism constitutive of nationalism anywhere, l/g/q people are probably the most difficult case for co-option by any nationalist struggles. At the same time, they clearly perceive no foreseeable improvements of their situation as promised by such struggles, and hopes more likely lie in the exertion of civil rights as ingrained in the concept of (sexual) citizenship. All these make them possibly exempt from the hegemonic incorporation by the nation which threatens to engorge all, and their recent civic turn has further prodded themselves on towards the less-trodden road of citizenship and civil rights,

which appear all the more important as a counterbalance to nationalism. Hence the historical role to be performed by Taiwan's l/g/q civil movement seems very clear to me: that is, should it be able to carry on and make progression towards its goal, the movement will not only practically improve the living conditions for l/g/q people in Taiwan but will also exert a positive influence on Taiwan's democratizing process which is far from complete. And this is never the stereotypical self-aggrandizement of a drama queen (or a bunch of them), but a road which Taiwan's *tongzhi*, situated as they are at this particular historical conjuncture, have to take in their struggles to improve their living conditions and to construct a better future.

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