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by

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**From public bathhouse to smartphone apps,
has the destiny of Chinese gay men really changed during the past 50
years?**

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Report

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Abstract

From public bathhouse to smartphone apps, has the destiny of Chinese gay men really changed during the past 50 years?

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Because of the pressure from the traditional value, the suppression by the authorities and the misleading propaganda for spreading AIDS, Chinese gay community has gone through more severe misery and discrimination than their western peers during past 50 years. Although a more tolerant social attitude towards homosexuality is slowly taking shape in this country, most Chinese gay men still have to keep their sexual orientation in dark and would not publicly interact with other gay men. The four main characters in this story -- Nian, Sa, Cui Zi-en and Xiao -- represent gay men of four different generations, born in 1990s, 1980s, 1960s and 1930s, respectively. Their personal experiences of

cruising in public restrooms and bathhouses, gay bars and clubs, on the Internet and through smartphone apps demonstrate the evolution of methods for social intercourse in Chinese gay community during the past 50 years. Although the new technologies enable Chinese gay men to enjoy more freedom than ever before, there is still a long way to go before real equality and tolerance could ever be achieved.

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In January 2013, two elderly Chinese gay men were married with a few friends as witnesses in Beijing. The ceremony was, in a word, ceremonial. Gay marriage isn't legal in China, though the men, who asked that their names not be used, consider it as binding as any marriage.

Newspapers covered the event, though they also didn't identify the men. Gay marriage—and how China deals with gays in general—is newsworthy these days as Chinese society deals with homosexuality and the slow retreat from official homophobia. In a sense, the growing toleration of homosexuality in the PRC is a case of back to the future. A century ago, before Western influences began to hold sway in China, being gay wasn't particularly controversial.

Now, after a long period when homosexuality was considered a mental disease, China is slowly making the same transition that the U.S. and other nations have made toward a more tolerant attitude toward gays. Meanwhile, technology is allowing China's gay community to coalesce electronically, making it easier to form relationships that aren't

interrupted by authorities.

Stephen Leonelli, director of the Beijing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Center, an independent, nongovernmental organization, says he admires the courage of the two aging men. Most gays in China remain deep in the closet because of government policies toward them.

Older gays in China remember the repression and struggle, while younger gays are using technology and increased tolerance to lead more satisfying lives. Here are some of their stories.

“This is unbelievable,” says Nian, 23. “You’ll never have to worry about being harassed by policemen while you are man-hunting.”

He is talking about a smartphone app called Jack’d. It connects gays to each other in the realm of digital privacy, such as it is. Nian, who like most other gays in this article asked that his real name not be used, uses Jack’d to find dates.

Thirty-year-old Sa prefers using the Web to connect with other gays. He accidentally found a gay website in early 2000s and became obsessed with it.

Along with the developing of Internet and smartphone apps, technology brings a larger and freer platform to the younger generation of Chinese gay men that was unimaginable by their predecessors.

Before the third edition of *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* was published by Chinese Society of Psychiatry in 2001, homosexuality had been regarded as mental disease for 50 years in mainland China. That prevented most middle-aged and elder gay men from finding compatible partners. Though no longer considered a disease, being gay is still hard in China.

As the first open gay man in China, 50-year-old Cui Zi-En has promoted tolerance for 20 years. He has published gay fiction, made gay films, organized a homosexual culture festival and helped open the earliest gay bar in China in 1990. Gay bars and clubs have since become more and more popular in the Chinese gay community.

Although visiting a gay bar is not as convenient as communicating online, doing so did offer a better rendezvous. Before the bars, the only dating venues were public restrooms and bathhouses. That period of time had left 75-year-old Xiao bitter memories. He was arrested and sentenced for “hooliganism” three times. Two of the three times, he was caught in a public restroom and a bathhouse.

New technologies have created a circumstance for China’s gay men that has never been as safe, comfortable, free and convenient. Thirty years later, Nian found himself never having to worry about being arrested in a public restroom. But is it to say that the destiny of China’s gay men has really changed all that much?

Since September 2011, eight months before Nian showed me the Jack’d app, I had read several stories about women who unwittingly married closeted gay men in China.

Because most Chinese gay men did not dare to come out, no fewer than 10 million Chinese women have been married to gay husbands in this country, according to academic estimates. That number equals to the female population of New York, according to the 2010 U.S. census.

According to a report published in 2006 by Zhang Beichuan, a professor at the medical

school of Qingdao University, the population of Chinese gay men aged 15 to 60 is about 18 million. Based on Zhang's statistics, more than 60 percent of Chinese gay men engage into heterosexual marriage; 38 percent of gay men have the experience of being hurt, both physically and psychologically, by straights; and 21 percent have been insulted after coming out.

“Although facing the topic of same-gender marriage, more and more Chinese seem to become less radical in these years. We could not conclude that homosexuality is really being accepted in China,” says Guo Xiaofei, associate professor at China University of Political Science and Law. “To most Chinese, it is easy to be tolerant to a conception which is abstract, remote and not closely relevant to themselves, but difficult to be tolerant to surrounding gay men. If the homosexual identity is really accepted by people, do you think that so many Chinese gay men would like to engage in heterosexual marriage?”

“For China's gay men to enjoy real freedom, there's still a long way to go,” says Li Yinhe, a retired professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Li is one of the most famous sociologists in China. Her academic interests include sexual norms and homosexuality. Since the publication of her first monograph about homosexuality, *Their*

World: a Study of Homosexuality in China, in 1992, she had been doing research on Chinese homosexuality.

“Although there wasn’t any religious factor in ancient China that was against exclusive homosexual behaviors, as seen in the Western world at the same time, the conception of marriage, family and offspring played the same role,” Li says.

In China’s ancient documents, homosexual behaviors are frequently recorded. The earliest record dates to earlier than 200 B.C. Based on the research of Pan Guangdan, a Chinese sociologist graduated from Columbia University, 10 of 15 emperors in the Western Han Dynasty, which lasted from 221 to 206 B.C., practiced homosexual behaviors.

The fashion continued and reached its zenith in the Ming (1368-1644 A.D.) and Qing (1644-1911 A.D.) dynasties. At that time, because of being popular in higher social hierarchies, homosexual behavior was commonly considered tasteful. Many elegant intellectuals at that time, such as Zheng Banqiao and Yuan Mei, expressed homosexual features.

Detailed descriptions of same-gender sex among men are also found in many famous works of literature, such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection* and *The Strange State of the World Witnessed Over 20 Years*.

According to *The Journey of Secret: History of Chinese Ancient Homosexuality*, authored by Zhang Jie, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, China's gay men did everything that society expected from its straight males, such as getting married to women and carrying on the family lines. They didn't act differently from straights in those aspects. Since their sexual preferences were their own business, others would not interfere.

That began to change in the early 20th century. Li Yinhe says that, influenced by the Western conception of homosexuality, Chinese gay men started to realize that they were a unique social group. Since then, some started to refuse to enter heterosexual marriages or sire children. The harmonious atmosphere held together by traditional family values was broken. Ordinary people started to discriminate against the gay community.

“The situation became worse after the establishment of the People's Republic of China,” Li says. The Communist Party propagandized a puritanical lifestyle that was against love affairs of all kinds, heterosexual or homosexual. It tried to reshape the Chinese to a uniform standard – hardworking and obedient. Because homosexuality was minor group

and was believed to represent capitalism and the old lifestyle, it was forbidden.

“At that time, women were remodeled as neutral-gendered. Femininity was always criticized, let alone gay men,” Li says.

Other than those factors, Chinese gay men hold another heavy burden. In the early 1980s, the time of the first outburst of AIDS in mainland China, gay men were thought to be responsible for the spread of AIDS in China. From then on, the gay community was marked as “devil,” a name it has never succeeded in getting rid of since.

Based on statistics from the Assessment of Epidemic Report of AIDS in China, jointly published in 2011 by the Ministry of Health, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS, and the World Health Organization, heterosexual intercourse and hypodermic needles actually are the top two factors that cause AIDS transmission in China. They account for 46.5 and 28.4 percent of infections, respectively. Homosexual intercourse accounts for 17.4 percent. Only one in every six people who have AIDS in China got the disease because of homosexual behavior. The argument is intentionally weakened in the report, which emphasized that the rate of AIDS in homosexual community was increasing the fastest.

The report found that the provinces recording the most AIDS patients are Yunnan, Guangxi, Henan, Xinjiang and Guangdong. Except for Henan, all are border provinces. Yunnan, Guangxi and Xinjiang are known for drug issues, and Guangdong is reported as the center of China's prostitution industry. Henan is well known for underground blood trading. To avoid being criticized for misconduct in prostitution, drug issues and blood trading, the authorities may have made the gay community the scapegoat.

In another report published by the Ministry of Health in 2004, the infection rate of AIDS in Chinese gay community was found to be 1.35 percent, which is much lower than the rate of drug users' 6.47 percent. This figure is only mentioned one time in the report, but it repeats four times that the 1.35 percent of infection rate among the gay community is 20 times higher than for the general population.

Although not pointing out that homosexual intercourse is the main cause of the spread of AIDS, that conclusion is implied from the report's beginning to the end. The images of homosexuality and AIDS have been bounded together. The fear of the disease strengthens the discrimination against gay community.

Chinese gay men have born misery more severe than those in Western countries. As an ordinary one among them, Xiao's life experience of 75 years is a biography that represents the tragedy shared by many gay men living in China.

I am five minutes early when I arrive at the square in front of the Beijing Books Building. Xiao is already there, standing in a corner, hunchbacked. The skyscraper shadows the slum neighborhood he lives in. His baggy undershirt, shabby shorts and outmoded plastic flip-flops make him look miserable in the sunshine of July. Without his cotton coat, he looks leaner than the man I first saw in the documentary *Love Homo (Aiqing Tongzhi)*, filmed half a year ago and distributed on the Internet.

"I first realized my homosexual urges when I was in primary school," Xiao says. "He' was my classmate. I just felt happy when being with him." His first homosexual affair was discovered by his mother. He was 10 years old. "It was a sunny afternoon," Xiao recalls. "I invited him to my home to study together. After finishing homework, we lay on my parents' bed and chatted. Later, I sucked his cock, and then my mom came in and saw everything." His mother beat him and had not forgiven him on her deathbed 30 years

later.

“I’m not sure whether I inherited the homosexual gene from my mom,” Xiao says. “She was an aggressive woman and behaved rather masculine at work.” He shows me a photo of his mother shot in the 1970s. I see steadiness from his mother’s eyes and a stern face. Xiao emphasizes that his mother could not bear being outdone and performed well at work and in her part-time job after retirement. “I am her only failure in her life,” Xiao says. “She used to say that, no matter how well she did in life, I would always make her feel ashamed.”

Because of his homosexual deed, Xiao was sentenced for “hooliganism” three times between 1977 and 1986, and was sent to “re-education through labor,” a controversial system of extralegal detention that allows police to jail petty thieves and prostitutes without a trial for up to three years. He spent seven and a half years on work farms during that decade.

Xiao was first arrested in 1977. Another gay man informed on him after being arrested. Xiao said the man was a lighting technician for a theater troupe in Beijing. He was a semi-open gay who had multiple affairs with gay actors and the makeup crew members

before the mid-1960s. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, because of his homosexual behavior, he was dismissed from work and sent back to his hometown, a poor village adjoining Beijing in Hebei province. In the mid-1970s, he came back to Beijing to appeal to the government that he should not be fired simply because he was gay. Jobless, he fed himself by cadging meals and borrowing money from other gay men.

Xiao and the man who turned him in were in the same gay social circle. “That guy was ugly and dirty. No one in our circle really liked to ‘play’ with him,” Xiao says with disdain. He says that the man wore dirty and outmoded clothes and looked like a “rube.” No one in the circle would date him and spoke to him rarely. “He always followed us whenever we got together, just like a toady,” Xiao says.

“At that time, there were no such places as gay bars or clubs,” Xiao says. “A few public restrooms and bathhouses were popular rendezvous in Beijing’s gay community.” Almost all gay men in the city assembled at those few places to meet and “play”—as Xiao put it because in that period, the word “dating” was not commonly used. For him and his friends, those places were their social venue to get together. Their “circle” was composed of six or seven members. They used to chat with each other and sometimes walk to other places, usually some restaurants nearby, after meeting each other. For most gay men,

such places were their only hunting grounds for new partners.

The fixed venue of their circle was a public restroom at a corner of the avenue in front of Xiao's home. "I didn't know when the bad guy (the lighting technician) began to notice me," Xiao says. "I never found that he followed me after our 'meeting' until, one day, he stopped me on my way and asked to borrow 40 yuan, which accounted for about 85 percent of my monthly salary." Xiao refused, but eventually gave in to avoid being turned in.

"He promised to give it back in three days," Xiao says. "Of course, he didn't. He disappeared, and I never met him after that."

That man was arrested later. "He went to a public bathhouse, of which the second floor was a gay meeting venue," Xiao says. Xiao heard this from another gay man several years later: "He was so stupid and chose a wrong target. He fondled a man in the pool, but that man was straight. You could expect the result. He was beaten almost to death and then taken to a police station."

Xiao addresses the man as "the bad guy" not only because he was a blackmailer, but also

because he informed on as many gay men as he knew after being arrested. It was a utilitarian strategy to seek mitigated punishment. Because of his “assistance,” several other gay men were arrested.

The 40 yuan didn’t save Xiao. Xiao was turned in and sentenced to re-education through labor for three years. His mother died not long after he was released in 1980. “She asked me in her last moments how she must have sinned in her pre-existence that God had to punish her and let her bear me,” Xiao recalls with tears in his eyes. He says the only person he felt sorry for in his life is his mother. He believes that his mother’s death is related to his gay identity.

Compared to his later two imprisonments, Xiao doesn’t talk much about the first one. His mother’s death stops him from recalling much about it.

Before being caught in 1977, Xiao had taught Chinese in a middle school for 17 years after graduating from university in 1960. He never had a chance to return to his classroom from the moment he was arrested. “Your fault would never be forgiven by people,” Xiao recalls. “When I applied to resume my teaching career, the headmaster said so.” Although he was still a nominal employee of the school, he lost the opportunity to

teach forever. At first he was redeployed to guard a tree farm 40 miles away from his home. One year later, he was transferred to be a security guard of his neighborhood--until his second arrest.

The second arrest galled Xiao more than the first. It was in July 1982. He came to a public bathhouse after an exhausting patrol. "A handsome young man walked in while I was taking off clothes," Xiao recalls. "He ogled me with a kind of sense that is unique to gay people. It is a special feeling just existing among gay men, which the straight guys would never perceive." The young man sat down face to face with Xiao on a bench and gazed at him. "I just cleared up my clothes and didn't meet his eyes at all," Xiao says.

Then the young man crossed his legs and started to sway his feet to touch Xiao. "I stopped to look at him for a moment. He gazed at me with that gay emotion all the time. Then I reached into his pants and started to fondle his penis," Xiao says.

"'It's time to end your show,' the young man shouted at me suddenly. 'I'm a policeman. Put on your clothes and leave with me,'" Xiao recalls.

He was taken to a police station next to the bathhouse. "After we arrived at the police

station, that policeman started to show off to others how he accidentally caught an old pervert while preparing to take a bath,” Xiao says. “He said he knew I was gay at a glance.”

Xiao is still angry about the policeman’s plot. He insists he was innocent and that the policeman should not have entrapped him. Xiao complains that he was first tempted by the policeman and refused twice.

“At that time, some policemen did disguise as gay to approach, then arrest us, but I never heard even one of them was really gay,” Xiao says.

After being detained in a police station for three months, he was sentenced to re-education through labor for two years on a work farm 10 miles south of Beijing. It was a large area composed only of several separate farms. Xiao was sent to Tuanhe farm, which mainly held petty thieves, hooligans and sexual-misconduct criminals.

Xiao says that he didn’t feel discriminated against by other criminals. It was the abuse from the ferocious guards that affected his later life.

On the first day at the farm, a guard publicly warned other prisoners to watch out for potential sexual harassment from Xiao because of his homosexual orientation. The guard never called Xiao by his name or number. He called him “rabbit” -- an insulting name in China towards gay men, as Chinese classified rabbits as feminine animals. “He never missed any opportunity to insult me,” Xiao says, “and he was hypercritical of me, also.” Xiao was assigned higher working quotas than others and was usually punished, even when he had completed his work. The regular punishment included standing under the scorching sun for a long time and being issued short food rations.

“Standing does not mean to stand still. I was asked to bow and raise arms backwards like a plane,” Xiao recalls, “but he seldom confined me. I guess he didn’t want to give me an opportunity to rest.”

I ask why the guard abused him. After long consideration, Xiao says, “He was an uneducated peasant before being enrolled as a guard. I think he just didn’t understand what being gay was. Maybe I was a monster in his imagination.”

Xiao tells me that the guard was fired and arrested a few years later for taking bribes from prisoners. “Several years later, I met him on a bus. I chided him loudly and asked

him for no less than five minutes why he abused me at that time. He sat in the seat, lowered his head, and didn't say anything," Xiao says.

Xiao's third arrest came soon after the second time he was released. This time he behaved like a hero.

One day in autumn 1984, soon after being released, Xiao passed by a park that was a public rendezvous of Beijing's gay community. "I didn't go there for cruising, just passed by," Xiao says. He met a cute young man in the restroom of the park. "He was definitely a real passerby. I knew it at the first glance. He was not gay," Xiao says. Their later conversation proved Xiao's supposition. The young man was an ordinary peasant from a little county near Beijing. He came to the city to buy furniture before his marriage. He planned to look around after shopping, accidentally entered that park and met Xiao.

"We sat on a bench in the park and chatted for a long time. I told him what homosexuality was. He did not fully understand but expressed some interest about it," Xiao says. Then they left the park and chose a public restroom nearby.

The two were caught immediately. "I should have noticed that I was followed by police,"

Xiao says. After being arrested twice, with abundant experience in how to deal with the authorities, Xiao refused to acknowledge any charge. “But the policemen had their own ways,” Xiao says. “They didn’t beat me to make me confess. Instead, they beat the young man in front of my face.” Xiao says the young man was scared, cried out and begged for mercy.

“I couldn’t bear it and stopped the policemen,” Xiao says. “I told them that it was my fault and he was lured and didn’t know anything.” The young man was released. He invited Xiao to his wedding ceremony a few days later.

Xiao didn’t go. He was sentenced to another two-year re-education. That time, he was sent to a work farm 1,000 miles away from Beijing.

In winter 1984, Xiao was sent to Shuanghe work farm, an enclave in Heilongjiang province in Northeastern China. Compared with the painful memory of being abused in Tuanhe, Xiao doesn’t complain much about his last jail experience. During that period, he made friends with an inmate.

“He was always sad. His wife divorced him and left their children after he was arrested.

His two children then lost guardianship and had to feed themselves. He was always worried about them,” Xiao says. “His prison term was longer than mine, so I promised him I would help to raise his children after being released.”

Xiao fulfilled his promise after being released. He sent money every month to the two children from Beijing for six years, until their father was released. In gratitude, the father had his elder boy adopted as a foster son of Xiao. His foster son is now 35 years old. He lives with Xiao in Beijing for six months each year, and the rest of the year with his father in Heilongjiang.

I ask Xiao whether his foster son knows he is gay. “Probably,” he answers. “I have never told him directly, and he has never asked.” His foster son would sometimes accompany him to a nearby park that is a gay meeting venue. Sometimes Xiao’s gay friends address him as “elder sister.”

“He once asked me why they all called me ‘elder sister’,” Xiao says. “I just answered him that maybe it is because I am kind and look like a woman.”

Before his first arrest, Xiao had a two-year marriage and a daughter. “She was a peasant

from Hebei province,” he says of his wife, though he never refers to her as a wife. Xiao says he treated her nicely and looked after her carefully. “We got along with each other in all aspects except for sex,” Xiao says. Although he tried to escape from having sex with his wife through excuses such as his health, Xiao had to do so reluctantly at least one time per month. “I never initiated and was always half-forced,” he recalls. “I just shut my eyes resolutely and imagined I was making love with a man.”

Xiao’s lie didn’t work for long. They divorced soon after their daughter’s birth. His daughter was raised by her mother and changed her surname after her mother remarried. “I don’t know where my daughter is and how she lives,” Xiao says, “I had never seen her since divorced with her mother.”

After his third release, Xiao once disengaged with the gay community for 10 years, from 1986 to 1996. He quit his job at the school to seek a new beginning where no one knew his past. “I didn’t want to date other gay men anymore when I was released from Shuanghe work farm in 1986,” Xiao says. “I hated myself. I caused my mother’s death. I lost my job. I was discriminated by guards. I swore to give up homosexual behaviors.”

He sold tour maps at the rear gate of the Forbidden City in Beijing. “It was very difficult

at that time,” he says. “Contrary to other dealers, I had never defrauded my costumers.”

The profit of selling maps was minimal. To feed himself, Xiao had to pick up leftover food thrown away by tourists. “I felt humiliated, and sometimes I sobbed to myself, but I never was in touch with the gay community at all,” he says. “If there was a gay meeting venue on my way to somewhere, I would detour to avoid meeting them.”

Nowadays, Xiao has a male partner 36 years younger than he is. They met in a park a few years ago and date two to three times a week. The encounter of Xiao and his current partner was unexpected. “I guess it was the mystery of love,” he laughs.

Because of his resignation, Xiao does not have pension. He receives about 750 yuan (about \$120) from a government program each month. His partner sometimes calls on him and brings him food.

Xiao says he feels happy and enjoys the life nowadays. When I ask to interview his partner, he rejects firmly. “He has his family, wife and daughter. We date behind their back. I don’t want to interrupt his life,” Xiao says. “And also, I don’t think he is prepared to expose his gay identity at this time.”

At the end of my interview, a delivery boy knocks at his door. It is a plate valued at 12 yuan (less than \$2). Xiao divides it into two shares. It is his food for the day.

While I am sitting in a café, staring at the steam rising from a cup of coffee, I remember Xiao's meals. My thought is interrupted by the voice of Cui Zi-En. "Frankly speaking, I don't think that there is anything worthy of complaining by China's gay men," he says. He is stylish and middle-aged. His purple scarf and ocher slacks make him look younger than he really is.

"Although China's gay men thought they had been hurt severely, they were of higher status than most Chinese women," he says. His talk reminds me of what Chris Rock said to Adam Sandler in *The Longest Yard*, "Hey! You're white! Smile!"

Cui is recognized as the first openly gay man in China. Being a university professor, he came out to his students in class in 1991, when he was still qualified to teach. After coming out, he was asked to stop teaching. At present, he is a nominal faculty member, but devotes himself to activities promoting gay culture. In the past 20 years, he published

a number of gay novels and film scripts, directed several gay-themed movies and documentaries, and organized lectures about gay topics. In 2005, he organized China's first Homosexual Culture Festival, which was eventually canceled by the authorities. "It was not the end, but a beginning," he says.

"I started to feel that I was more capable than my sisters when I was a little boy," he says. "I thought I could do anything I wanted successfully." He recalls that when he applied for university, he was confident, but his sisters were not. "We received the same education and lived in the same circumstance all the time, but my sisters were always less confident than I was," he says.

He attributes his confidence to Chinese tradition. In traditional Chinese culture, men had enjoyed priorities in politics, economics and culture for thousands of years. Men were the centers of their families and society. Women were subsidiary. This tradition extends to the present, a so-called gender-equal period.

"Today's equality is hypocritical," Cui says. "The inequality and discrimination against females still exist everywhere. The basic social order is still male-centered. So I don't think Chinese gay men's miseries are as serious as they are described."

Cui says China's gay men should come out to fight for their rights. "They should lead the movement, but the most ironic thing was that even in such an unequal society, Chinese gay men's rights were first defended by women, some feminists," he says.

Cui says China's gay men were not considered as a group until the early 1990s, when a small number of gay men came out and attracted public attention. He emphasizes the significance of the appearance of the first gay bar in Beijing during that process.

"In 1990, influenced and enlightened by Western feminist activities, some gay-friendly feminists in Beijing called on to found their own physical base," Cui says. "The slogan of the action was 'Occupy the Bar'."

The feminists contacted some bars and clubs and made block bookings on certain days, hoping their periodic "occupation" of those venues would attract public attention.

Contrary to their expectation, the public was not interested, and the movement turned out to be a failure. But China's gay movement hitched a ride during the process and made its debut in Chinese history.

Cui says that in the early 1990s, pub culture was just becoming popular among Chinese. Most bars and clubs could only make profits on weekends. When the feminists and gay men said they wanted to assemble in bars and clubs during weekdays, bar owners welcomed the business.

To fight against male chauvinism, the feminists attracted all possible groups, including gay men, to participate in bars occupations. “We selected a bar named ‘Half and Half’ and gathered there every Wednesday night,” Cui says. “Gradually, we increased the frequency to twice and three times per week. Eventually, it was turned into a gay bar about two years later.”

Since then, gay bars have begun to appear in Beijing and some other cities. At present, every bar street has its own gay bar. Although gay bars are not sanctuaries and gay people might still be harassed by policemen once in a while, the situation is much better than before. Compared with the elder generation, gay men born between the early 1960s and mid-1970s in large cities like Beijing have more freedom to communicate with each other. Because of the change of venues from public restrooms and bathhouses to bars and clubs, sex was no longer the only concern. China’s gay men started to enjoy emotional communications, just like their heterosexual peers. As Cui says, they had gradually

become a group and came out to the public.

“I seldom go to a gay bar,” Sa says with contempt. “It doesn’t make any sense.” In opposition to Cui on this issue, the new generation, born after 1980 like Sa, seems not so enthusiastic about gay bars and clubs.

Sa was born in the early 1980s in Leshan, a city with a population of more than 3 million in Sichuan province. This southwestern city is a sacred land of Buddhism in China and is well known to the world for a 233-foot-tall stone Buddha sculpture that attracts millions of tourists each year. But the tourists didn’t bring any new conception to the city.

“I never thought that I would come out to my family someday,” Sa says. “It’s impossible to make them understand what homosexuality is.” In his opinion, it would be difficult to explain the concept to his parents, although they were educated.

Sa first realized his homosexual orientation in primary school, but didn’t try to know any other gay men until he entered high school. “It was in the early 2000s, computer games

and Internet became more and more popular in our city,” Sa recalls. “Almost all of the teenagers spent their spare time in cyberbars.” He found a gay theme website by accident and was soon obsessed with it.

“The name of the website was ‘boy sky’,” he recalls. From that website, he knew he was not alone for the first time. He had found his peers.

Out of curiosity, Sa tried to contact a gay man on the website in 2000. “That guy was not local,” Sa recalls. “He lived in an eastern coastal province.” The man was at least 10 years older than Sa. “He had already worked for several years. His financial situation was not bad,” Sa says. After they chatted online a few times, the man decided to travel thousands of miles to call on Sa.

The man invited Sa to a dinner soon after arrival. “I felt a little nervous and scared,” Sa says. “I invited two girls in my class to go with me. My father insisted on going with me, too.” Sa says his father did not know he was meeting another gay man. He must have worried about him meeting a human smuggler, Sa says.

After a boring dinner, Sa’s father was convinced that the man was not dangerous to his

son and left. The man took Sa and the two girls back to his hotel room. He encouraged the girls to go home soon after they arrived. “We talked, and he cuddled me,” Sa says. “He also tried to persuade me to make love to him.” Sa refused and ran away.

The man came to Sa’s school the next day. “He stood at the school gate and talked to many students that he was trying to find me,” Sa says, “but I didn’t want to talk to him any longer.” At last, Sa met him at the school gate. The man explained to Sa that he was not a “bad guy” and expressed his willingness of keeping in touch. “I didn’t say anything during the whole process, and he left at last, disappointed,” Sa says.

Before leaving for college, Sa found his first boyfriend on the website. Having learned from previous experience, Sa selected a local guy. “I didn’t know what he did for living,” Sa says. “I guessed he must have some money because he lived in a luxury apartment by himself.” They dated in the apartment about twice a week. “He never forced me to have sex with him,” Sa says. “Basically, we just chatted, cuddled and watched [videos].” His second relationship didn’t last long, as Sa soon found out that the man was also seeing other men at the same time.

Although neither of his first two love stories ended well, Sa has never lost his enthusiasm

for online dating. I ask how he managed to distinguish gay men online. He gives me the same answer as Xiao. “We have our gaydar, gay searching radar,” he says. “We can easily discern whether a person is gay just by a glance.”

When I ask why he doesn't like going to gay bars or clubs, he says the atmosphere annoys him. “Because most gay men are closeted and have to hide their true selves in daily lives,” Sa says, “they tend to over express their emotions and behave exaggerated when they get a chance.” Sa characterizes those strange behaviors in gay bars and clubs as retaliatory. Other than that, Sa also says that he was worried about being lured in such places.

“Compared to that in the straight world, it is more difficult for a gay man to meet his ‘Mr. Right’,” Sa says, “so many gay men would seize the opportunity when they believe they've met the one, even if it means to sacrifice everything they currently have, including their partners. That's why a relationship between two gay men is usually not as stable as that of a straight couple.” Unlike most gay men who hope to strike up a relationship in gay dating venues, Sa seldom went to those places so as to avoid getting entangled. He preferred a tranquil life with his partner. “We do throw parties sometimes. But we only invite a few close friends,” he says.

“On the other hand, online dating websites are convenient,” Sa says. “It would take a long time to find a really good gay bar when you first move to a new city.” In the existing legal environment, China’s gay bars are discouraged from advertising through the media. “Under most conditions, you can only count on word of mouth,” Sa says.

Other than dating websites, the Internet has provided another platform for more and more of China’s gay men. “You must have heard of the term ‘pro forma marriage’,” Sa says. “I know someone who’s preparing to set up a service website specialized in it.”

The term Sa mentioned is a phenomenon recently emerged in China’s gay community. It is a new model of fake-marriage that is composed of a gay man and a lesbian woman.

Unlike the previous generations, many gay men born after 1980 prefer not to marry straight women. “It is difficult to cheat on your wife forever,” Sa says. “You have to live carefully in a lie. Both the husband and the wife would be hurt at the end.”

Conditions in a pro forma marriage are different. Neither the gay husband nor the lesbian wife has to play straight at home. And because the marriage is simply a cover to show to their parents, the couple won’t interfere in each other’s personal lives. In practice, some

couples even live separately and move together only when visited by the parents. The pressure of getting married troubles not only gay men, but also lesbian women in China. This kind of arrangement is considered a win-win for both of the participants.

While online matchmaking is booming in China, pro forma marriage service websites are also beginning to attract gay men, especially those born between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s who have been pushed by their parents to get married. On the other hand, younger gays like Nian, the man who showed me the Jack'd app, don't consider the websites attractive. Their attention is on dating other gay men.

“Look at this guy,” Nian says. On the screen of his iPhone 4, I see a black-and-white shot of an angular face in profile. The guy in the picture wears a metal earring and has a little beard. He is 31 years old, 5 feet, 10 inches tall, weighs 145 pounds and is less than one mile away. This man is the first result who matches his criteria on Jack'd.

He lowers his voice to avoid being noticed by other customers in the café. Talking about gay topics in public places is not acceptable, even in Beijing, the most international and tolerant city in China.

Jack'd is not the only popular gay social app. Nian introduces several others, including GROWLr, Grindr, Gaydar, Maleforce, Gayvox and Boyahoy.

I'm astonished. It is unbelievable, as Nian says, that gay men in China can openly post their photos and personal information on the Internet to seek dates.

To the post-'90s generation, online chat rooms and dating websites seem outmoded. They prefer surfing the Internet with their cell phones. They are too young to have experienced the time when Internet cyberbars were everything.

"It's the era of mobile network," Nian says while fiddling with his iPhone. "Its best feature is convenience. I can seek my 'Mr. Right' at any time and anywhere I want."

Nian seems open, optimistic and professional at work as an editor at a medical magazine. Only in front of his close friends, he takes off the masculine mask and talks freely about his closeted sexual orientation.

Although still keeping it a secret to others, Nian had come out to his parents and close friends. Compared with older generations, Nian and his peers enjoy greater freedom and

more tolerance. Thirty years after China's economic reform, post-'90s gays are allowed, sometimes even encouraged, to show their unique individualities, including their sexual preferences.

"I could only come out to my close friends and my parents," Nian says. "They are tolerant because they love me. But it is impossible to reveal my sexual orientation to my other relatives or in my working place." Nian's parents have to keep it a secret from their relatives. "They are trying to protect me and at the same time protect themselves," Nian says. "I don't think that they can endure the comments and questions from other family members."

Although more and more organizations and scholars are standing up for the legal rights of China's gay men, there are still obstacles. China's gay men will not have true equality any time soon.

I understand the meaning of what Li Yinhe, the retired professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said: "a long way to go." How many roads must Chinese gay men walk down before they are no longer called gays but simply men?