

ICCGL: Cultural Communication via the Internet and GLBT Community Building in China

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By GayChinese.net/ICCGL

Abstract

This paper introduces the states of existence and characteristics of gay websites in mainland China. Based on the work and experience of the Information Clearinghouse for Chinese Gays and Lesbians (ICCGL) and its website GayChinese.net in the past six years, it also discusses the operation and significance of this NGO whose major audience are GLBT individuals on the mainland. Meanwhile, the paper attempts to reveal aspects of gay life in contemporary China by analyzing the various cultural conflicts emerging within or in relation to the gay websites.

Introduction

It is estimated that there are 30 million homosexuals in China. Since they are generally absent from the mainstream media and largely blocked from many other channels of communication, the Internet has taken up the role of functioning as a positive factor in bringing together GLBT individuals and influencing the developing GLBT movement.

At this juncture, Chinese GLBT people live in a complex reality that is unique in many ways. Internet Cultural Communication via the Internet, against this background, has become for them an inseparable part of the gay agenda and community building.

Part 1. Early Internet Cultural Communication among Chinese GLBT

Individuals

The last few years of 20th century saw that surfing the Web became for Chinese youths a new entertainment and way of gaining information. Personal computers started to popularize, Internet users dramatically increased in number, and Internet cafes were found everywhere in the city and the country alike. Fresh vehicles for interpersonal communication, such as e-mails, instant

messaging devices, BBSs (bulletin board system) and Internet chatrooms, all came into being. Personal webpages and websites also emerged in large number along the new trends.

Around 1998, mainland China's first gay websites (such as Gztz.org, *Hua zhui hongchen*, *Yangguang didai*, etc.) emerged. Before the Internet era, gay men in China seeking peers could only visit haunts like public toilets, bathhouses and parks, while lesbians had virtually no public gathering places to go to. Gay bars that had just appeared were all located in big cities. All these rendezvous were often harassed by the police.

The newborn gay websites, on the other hand, provided GLBT individuals with a safe, efficient and trans-regional channel to communicating with each other. There is no wonder that personal ads and chatrooms initially took up a huge portion of web space. Gays and lesbians with Internet access instantly discovered a new world where they no longer felt depressed and lonely because of isolation. Apart from satisfying their sexual needs, GLBT individuals badly needed mutual emotional support and thus popularized the BBS. A fledging gay literature came into existence, in addition to wide-spread erotica in writing or picture available on the then largely uninhibited Internet.

On the whole, gay websites from this period were simple in construction, unvaried in service provision, unified in readership catering, and similar to each other in feature setting. They barely provided a platform on which personal ads were posted and messages exchanged. Legal and safe-sex information were lacking, and news updates were few and far between. The characteristics of a website tended to reflect its webmaster's personal preferences and dislikes.

Part 2. Status quo of Gay Websites in China

We estimate that there are in mainland China 300-400 websites that primarily serve GLBT people. These websites have been one to seven years old. Most gay websites that once existed have gone through their lifecycles within one or two years. There are only about ten gay websites that have been running for six or seven years. GLBT individuals experienced the coming and going of websites as part of their lives.

With differences in form and state of existence, Chinese gay websites play different roles in community building.

1. Characteristics of Gay Websites

As organizations whose very existence relies on the Internet, Chinese gay websites possess distinct characteristics, including:

1) "Independence": the primary characteristic

Most gay websites were started and developed through their founders' personal endeavors. Therefore, they are being run independently and have become the most active and vital elements among all kinds of GLBT organizations. Independence, if only in a very limited sense, is the

strength of these websites that can be put into positive use for future community work, since independence would enable them to freely choose the path to take and the role to play.

2) Lowness in Initial Costs & Technical Requirements

At the initial stage, establishing and maintaining a gay website requires no big expenditures or considerable technical knowledge. Usually there are only one or two founders who, after briefly studying the basics, construct an independent website by adopting ready-made programs. Such a low threshold has made it possible that new gay websites continue to emerge and prosper.

3) Uncertain Prospect

The maintenance and development of a website is often subject to its owner's personal will, financial conditions and technical capabilities. At critical points, some outstanding gay websites imported the concept of organizational construction and the mode of running a commercial firm, transformed personal decision-making into group decision-making, and thus went through the developmental bottlenecks that they had encountered, while some others chose to close down because of poor planning and lack of vision.

Interplaying with external factors, the above characteristics define the roles that different gay websites have assumed in GLBT communities and influence the ultimate direction toward which a website is heading.

2. Orientations of Gay Websites

As a cluster of organizations developing independently, gay websites in mainland China play special roles in GLBT movement and life. What follows are the most typical:

1) News Agencies That Voice Oneself

In mainland China, voices of flesh-and-blood GLBT individuals are absent from the traditional media and thus they seem practically non-existent to the majority of the population. So, better gay websites have shouldered up media responsibilities by spreading accurate information and reporting on gay-related news to the gay population as well as the general public. Take GayChinese.net for example. Since its establishment six years ago, the website has published over 10,000 items of news stories and articles that range from gay movements, cultural and legal issues to HIV/STDs prevention information, many of which were republished by other websites too. The spreading of all this information helped enhance the self-awareness of GLBT individuals across the country.

2) Platforms on Which to Support & Interact with Each Other

As was said, gay websites provide GLBT individuals with a safe, efficient and trans-regional channel to communicating with each other. When the Internet came to China, gays and lesbians with access to it instantly discovered a new world where they no longer felt depressed and lonely because of isolation. Apart from satisfying their sexual needs, GLBT individuals badly needed mutual emotional support and thus popularized the BBS. At present, blogs, instant messaging devices, and audio/video chats are equally in fashion.

On the other hand, Q&A columns, Tongzhi Wenda on GayChinese.net for instance, also have impact on the Chinese gay life. With the insight provided by the columnist, some individuals overcame their psychological or emotional crisis and started to live and love in more wholesome ways; yet some others who felt inspired have taken up voluntary work for the gay community.

3) Soil in Which GLBT Culture Is Created and Spread

Internet gay fictions were published and republished on a number of websites. Some became well-known and are still very influential. For example, the novel *Beijing Story* (*Beijing Gushi*) was adapted into the movie *Lanyu* by Hong Kong gay film director Stanley Kwan.

GLBT culture is also embodied in a profusion of digital magazines, Internet radio programs, paintings and drawings, amateurish digital videos, etc available on the Internet. Chinglish jargons like MB (money boy, i.e., a male prostitute) and 419 (for one night, i.e., one night stand) were created in chatrooms and forums and spread to everyday use.

3. New Developmental Directions

As new gay websites continued to emerge in recent years, some new directions of development have appeared.

1) Appearance of Many Websites Specifically Serving Local GLBT Individuals

The lack of distinct local characteristics in early gay websites had to do with the scantiness of gay sites available then. Since these older, more mature, nation-oriented websites have taken up big “market” shares, newly emerging gay websites tend to avoid direct competition with them by focusing on more grass roots work. Lately, local gay websites committed to serving the locals have appeared even in some medium-size or small cities in more remote regions.

These sites at large have carried out local community activities such as sports events, performing shows, outings, as well as anti-HIV/AIDS intervention programs. Relying on local gay websites as their platforms, regional gay communities are gradually taking shape and greater effects.

2) Gradual Shift of Orientation

In demand of monetary resources, some gay websites have started to re-orient themselves in either or both of the following directions:

a) Commercialization

Most gay websites were initiated with connection to their founders’ personal interests, and at the start characterized by being non-profit. As the sites developed, however, significant increase in operation costs have induced some website to become partially or even fully commercialized.

For example, many commercializing websites have gone into collaboration with telecommunications companies on jointly launching subscription services of mobile phone short messages (SMS, including personal ads, specially ordered video clips, etc.) at charge. In addition, many gay websites carry advertisements for commercial gathering places. Some sites-turned

online clubs charge membership fees; some other websites run online stores selling disks (DVD/VCDs), books, sex toys, etc.

Since a “queer economy” is yet to become a substantial market force in China, there are many obstacles for gay websites that strive to be commercial. More, most of the commercializing sites have not yet registered as industrial/commercial businesses with the governments, so they are taking legal risks to trade online.

b) NGO Formalization

As HIV/AIDS prevention interventions are being carried out among the gay population, some gay websites have taken part in the work.

These websites are in close contact with all kinds of AIDS care organizations, gay organizations and CDCs at every level. They actively participated in various activities and took executive and managing responsibilities of some programs.

Such an NGO operation style and structure has inspired some gay websites to become imitators. Maintenance of a website is no longer their sole concentration. Instead, they reached out to intervene in HIV/STDs prevention.

3) Rapid Emergence and Swift Development of Websites Serving Niche Audiences and Featuring Specialized Sections

Early in their development, most gay websites had identical sections and even overlapping content. Later, some websites realized that a site would not survive without individuality, so they took pains in building up special sections and supporting specific target groups. New sites featuring Internet radio broadcast, literature, or campus life came into existence to cater more specified needs.

4. Current Major Obstacles For Gay Websites

1) Imbalance Between Gay-men Websites and Lesbian Websites

Among the 300 operating gay websites, less than twenty websites exclusively serve lesbians, besides a few others that serve both gay men and lesbians.

Lesbian websites generally face more technical and financial challenges.

This phenomenon concerns the gay community. Some gay websites originally having a male-dominating audience set up new space exclusively for lesbians; some gay-men websites started to collaborate or simply merged with lesbian websites. For example, Fujian Tongzhi (for gay men) and Fujian Lala (for lesbians) have begun to operate together.

2) Ambiguous Legal Status and Operating Risks

Before 2004, Chinese Internet sites seeking legal status had to go through very complicated procedures and meet very rigid requirements to register with the government. For personal websites that have no regular source of funds, formal organization or background as commercial

firms, most attempts at registration proved to be in vain. Of all gay websites in China, the solitary cases of successful registration were all from those who collaborated with local CDCs on certain programs, and had the CDCs assuming the identity of their supervisor apply for registration in their stead. In 2005, however, the threshold for Internet site registration has lowered and all websites in mainland China are required to get registered. A good number of gay websites have since succeeded in registration, although their frequently used BBS still needs special permission which is seldom granted.

3) Financial Crisis and Its Cause

When a gay website is established in China, the initial costs will amount to approximately 30-50 U.S. dollars every year, covering fees for the simplest virtual server and an independent domain name, while voluntary workers usually do not receive payments. This total is affordable for most webmasters.

As the website develops and reaches a certain amount of page views, and the super-cheap virtual server can no longer satisfy increasing visits and needs to be upgraded, the rent for a server will rocket up. It is often seen that ISP companies force big-traffic websites to buy an expensive dedicated server, threatening to shut down their websites otherwise.

By comparison of the pricing differences between China and America in buying Internet services, we have discovered that the Chinese price is much higher, usually three to five times of the American price. When GayChinese.net was still hosted on the mainland, our ISP urged us with threats to buy a dedicated server at 1, 5000 U.S. dollars per year. Consequently, we moved the site to America where we started to rent a shared hosting server at about 240 U.S. dollars annually, while the scale and page views of our website remain basically unchanged.

While in China the annual dispensable income per capita is under 1, 000 U.S. dollars, gay websites experience financial problems almost universally as their webmasters or work teams have to bear unreasonably expensive fees for operation.

4) Mixed Content and Quality, Deficient Organizational Construction

Since the content and quality of a website are subject to its directors or maintainers' conduct, stance, scope of knowledge and capabilities, low standards in any of these aspects sometimes attributed to the conscious or unaware spreading of wrongful opinions, or worse, to illegal content that had appeared on some websites.

For gays and lesbians (especially the young) who reside in remote areas or small towns, gay websites are their only link to the gay population. Criminal offences, such as Internet fraud, would practically be condoned to happen should the website maintainers be negligent.

In terms of organizational construction, most websites are lacking in a well-defined orientation, target-group specification and long-term developmental planning. Few success stories from other organizations were ever introduced for inspirations, and likewise, few opportunities for sharing experience between websites came to past.

5) Potential Copyright Crisis

Most gay websites pay little heed to Internet copyright ownership. Apart from low vigilance of protecting one's own copyrights, cases of copyright infringement abound, most in the case of feigned authorship. Such phenomena cast a potential threat to the future development of gay websites in China.

Part 3. Development and Experience of GayChinese.net/ICCGL

1. Phases of Development and Experience of Operation

The website GayChinese.net was established in March 1999 by Kevin and Keinnng, a gay couple based in Xiamen, China. K & K, as friends called them, published heart-warming stories of how they got to know and love each other on this site, which immediately gained attention from a profusion of GLBT Internet users. To many, K & K's family-blessed relationship was the very goal of their own. GayChinese.net was then a strongly personal site.

From 2001 on, GayChinese.net started to have new volunteers who have more diversified professional trainings, and its personal colors gradually faded away.

In order to continue and expand the work of GayChinese.net, we formed in the United States a non-profit organization named Information Clearinghouse for Chinese Gays and Lesbians (ICCGL). ICCGL has begun operation and maintenance of GayChinese.net since the time it obtained tax-exempt status under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of America. Now GayChinese.net is a brand name of ICCGL.

Multi-angled investigations into the progress of GayChinese.net from a personal website to a trans-national, independent NGO are worth making. In analysis of GayChinese.net's development, we have discovered some factors that have taken positive and critical effects through this process.

1) Independent Operation as Strength

Independent Operation enables GayChinese.net/ICCGL to be impartial in dealing with complex inter-personal and inter-organizational relationships. By so doing, we have also avoided struggling for resources and service objects with other organizations.

Essentially, independent Operation is also required of institutions that play the role of media.

2) A Well-defined Mission

Ever since its establishment, ICCGL has clearly defined its mission and objectives, which are universally praised.

Mission Statement

Information Clearinghouse for Chinese Gays and Lesbians (ICCGL) is [...] dedicated to providing critical and as-yet unavailable information of interest to Chinese speaking gay, lesbian,

bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community worldwide.

ICCGL advocates understanding and acceptance of gays and lesbians wherever they are.

ICCGL takes no position on political matters or matters of state policy, but instead seeks to encourage tolerance and equality for all.

Objectives

ICCGL supports programs that provide information to Chinese speaking GLBT, including worldwide developments on issues concerning GLBT, information on physical and psychological health for GLBT, educational materials and cultural expressions.

3) Talents as the Most Important Asset

The cultured and liberal atmosphere within the GayChinese.net staff unites an excellent team of voluntary workers. Variations in cultural background, professional training, gender and sexual orientations make this team well-balanced. A few outstanding young volunteers have started their “internship” with GayChinese.net and are our back-up manpower.

4) Special Organizational Structure and Management Style

The increase in manpower gradually transformed the organizational structure of GayChinese.net. The founders K & K withdrew from day-to-day maintenance work and a team of workers took their stead, deciding on current affairs and strategic plans through discussions. In GayChinese.net, there is no hierarchy, but voluntary assumption of responsibilities for the sake of doing better jobs. This style of work poses the least limits to our members’ creativity on the one hand, but also causes the problem of low efficiency on the other. Consensuses on many a matter were only reached after repeated or even lengthy discussions.

5) Timely Re-adjustment of Developmental Direction

In the past, GayChinese.net/ICCGL closed down chatrooms, personal ad service, and galleries that were in conflict with its mission and developmental direction. With the passage of time, news, literature, Q&A columns (including general advice and legal advice) have been placed in prominence instead. Later development has proved that the page views of GayChinese.net are still relatively high without the oft-seen attraction of instant messaging devices or homoerotic pictures.

6) Self-protection by Legal Means

GayChinese.net was originally named Aiqing baipishu (Love’s Whitepaper) in Chinese. In 2003, we have adopted the commonly-used short form “AiBai”, in place of “Aiqing baipishu”, as our official Chinese name. In order to protect our site’s intellectual property, we designed our logo and had it registered.

Also, we have entered into agreement with every contributor to our Wen ku (Literature) section lest any copyright dispute should occur.

2. Obstacles and Cultural Conflicts

1) Predicaments of GLBT Cultural Communication via the Internet

By translating from English, Russian, Italian, Japanese and other languages articles that deal with various gay-related cultural issues, GayChinese.net/ICCGL often introduces interesting and inspiring information of foreign GLBT cultures to Chinese gays and lesbians.

On the other hand, GayChinese.net is also collecting and editing articles on homosexuality in China, either historically or contemporarily. Some such essays have been arranged to publish on our site. By contrast with their Western counterparts, however, lack of originality and weakness in conclusion are easily detestable in this corpus of indigenous studies, partly due to the reason that fewer prominent Chinese scholars are working in this field.

Wen ku (Literature) as a GayChinese.net featured section attracts many contributors who write in various genres such as fictions, poetry, essays, plays, etc. But just like most other works that are only published on the Internet, these works are usually sentimental and lacking in literary value and social significance. Worst still, some are even unhealthy and misleading in their attitudes toward relationship issues and ethics.

We think it an important question as to how we can guide the development of gay literature in Chinese forth in a brighter direction so that it will positively influence GLBT individuals and, in particular, assist the youths to establish healthy views of relationship and the gay life.

2) GLBT Culture on Campus versus College Conservatism

Despite the tightness of its own budgets, GayChinese.net/ICCGL has funded small-scale gay activities on college campus since 2004. We hold the opinion that the future of Chinese gay movement is largely dependent on whether the gay youths now have well-adjusted self-identity and constructive view of the gay community. Therefore, we lay emphasis on this issue and are prepared to devote more time and energy on promoting gay youth culture.

Yet in practice, restricted by various limitations imposed by the school, many groups comprised of gay students found it difficult to proceed with their work. They couldn't register with the school as formal associations and had to carry out their plans in the name of gender or AIDS studies rather than gay issues. Such forced evasiveness hinders college GLBT cultural communication from reaching a bigger population.

3) Journalistic Objectivism versus Protectively Concealing Information

In today's China, more than half of the gay-related stories in the media are negative or even derogatory. Many gay websites chose not to republish such report, holding the view that given the rather harsh reality for GLBT people in China, gay websites are obliged to create a stress-free ambience for those who they serve.

In consideration of its orientation as a news provider for the community, GayChinese.net thinks that since the negative report truthfully reflects how the general public still mistakes homosexuality, republishing such report will compel the gay population to become more aware of the unfriendliness of their surroundings, and will thus encourage them to think more in community

terms.

4) Built-in Weakness of Legal Service

The Legal Advice and Information column on GayChinese.net is the first of its kind in mainland China. It has collected a large number of cases pertinent to GLBT lives.

As a matter of fact, however, most Chinese legal professionals ignore the existence of gay legal issues, and the general public entertains very weakness concepts of law. This results in the oft-seen phenomena that many GLBT individuals had very inadequate legal knowledge until troubles occurred to them. More sophisticated legal service can only happen after a popularization of relevant legal knowledge among the GLBT population in China.

3. Future Directions

In the coming years, GayChinese.net/ICCGGL will continue to provide information on the website and expand its work to some other related fields:

Law: Collecting, editing and analysing of legal documents, information and cases; observing and accounting legal incidents; popularizing basic legal knowledge.

Publication: Editing, printing and publishing GLBT-related books.

Construction of Archives: Collecting, editing and storing historical documents, pictorial information, books, articles and theses into a library, eventually building up professional gay archives.

Education: Education and consultation services for GLBT college students.

Part 4. Conclusion

As a case of the development of Chinese gay websites, GayChinese.net with its experience accounted above has suggested one of the possible direction in which Chinese gay websites may be able to progress. Via the Internet, a certain audience have internalized the values and cultural ideas advocated by GayChinese.net and have thus enhanced their own self-identification and life attitudes. By attempts at spreading its influence to the general public and providing them with accurate information, GayChinese.net is not alone among Chinese GLBT people in working to realize the vision that under law, all social groups respect each other, develop with equal opportunities, and co-exist in harmony.

Reference

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