

Captions :

LOVERS IN BEIJING

Photographic essay by
Cédric SPILTHOOREN

China 2009



Photo 01 - KAN and CHUAN

Kan - 28, only child, Japanese teacher, born in Beijing.

Kan : *"My parents are divorced. I spoke of my sexuality to my father. As my determination to assume my choice made him even more angry, I forced him to accept it because there was just no alternative. In my job – teaching – it is best not to speak of it.*

Chuan - 31, IT worker, one sister, originally from Shandong province.

Chuan : *"I haven't yet spoken about my sexuality to my parents but I would like to. People from Shandong province are very traditional, which creates more pressure and stress. My little sister knows and had difficulty accepting it; I'm not even sure that she has fully accepted it yet. When she found out, she called me every evening, in tears. The people I work with don't know.*

We met in June 2008....one month later, Kan came to live in my flat. We have just bought our own place and intend to settle there. We would like to see people's mentalities evolve, and that one day our parents would accept the way we are. Some of our friends know and this has not affected our friendship. "



Photo 02 - MAIZI and XIAOMI

Maizi - 26, only child, political science student, born in Inner Mongolia

Maizi: *"I haven't spoken to my parents about my sexuality. I would like to do so, or rather I intend to do so."*

Xiaomi – 29, only child, works in publishing, born in Beijing

Xiaomi : *"I would like my parents to know that I'm attracted to girls. We met on July 20, 2008. Only one of our friends knows about us. He understands our desire to live together. Others think that our choice will make us unhappy. We live together, sharing a flat with other people. We share the same room but none of our flatmates knows of our relationship.*

We would like to find two gay men to marry as soon as possible in order to reassure our parents about our futures. We have to save face. Then we will divorce and maybe....then it would be the right moment to reveal our real relationship to our parents. We think that once our parents understand the situation, it will be easier for us to live together. But the time isn't right just yet...."



Photo 03 - ICE and KEYUE

Ice - 21, only child, student web designer. Born in Beijing.

Ice: *"I haven't spoken to my parents of my sexuality."*

Keyue - 30, English teacher, divorced, mother of a little girl, two brothers and a sister.

Keyue: *"I haven't spoken to my parents of my sexuality. All the same I would like to be recognized as being lesbian, especially by my parents. We have been together since January 2009. We don't live together but would like to. Apart from our female friends, no-one is aware of the situation. For the Chinese, gays do not exist, or if they do exist, people think that they are mentally ill. That said, the gay community is starting to become more visible in the bigger cities (associations, bars, restaurants). Mentalities are evolving slowly, especially amongst younger people. Some aren't at all shocked by our way of life nor even by the idea of trying this sort of experience."*



Photo 04 - XIAO LIN and RIKKI

Xiao Lin - 25, only child, from Tianjin. Parents: Retired restaurateurs.

Xiao Lin : *"I've been living in Beijing for the last three-and-a-half years. I run a shoe shop. I've been sharing an apartment with Rikki for three years. When my parents come to visit, they can't not notice Rikki as she is always with me. I never discussed my sexuality with my parents, they are not my friends. However our relationship is obvious so they do know about us. It doesn't bother me anymore but you should know that I've just bought two apartments in Tianjin, one of which is for my parents. I'm sure that that has....helped things along. In fact, now when my parents come by, Rikki goes off shopping with my mother."*

When I was a child, I looked and behaved like a boy. By the time I got to adolescence, I was more or less set on my sexual orientation. My mother sent me to see a psychiatrist. He told her that it was normal to experiment at that age and to leave me be. I was depressed because my parents told me that people like me could not be happy in our society. Officially, homosexuality was still considered to be a mental illness. You have to put yourself in their place. My father even wanted me to have an operation to become a boy so that I could be sexually « normal ». Today the situation in China has changed a lot. Gay people have started to show themselves....not all of them of course, but the situation is really changing."

Rikki - 27, only child, born in Beijing. Father restaurateur. Mother retired.

Rikki : *"I work in a clothing company. I'm in charge of window dressing. I want to change people's mentalities about lesbians. My parents have guessed that I'm gay because they know Xiao Lin (my mother gets on well with her). But I have never spoken openly about it to them. All my friends know and it is not a problem. We would like to marry and to adopt a child; we'd like to move to Canada to be able to live our dream."*



Photo 05 - KANG and LI SA

Kang - 26, one brother. Doctor in Economics. Living in Beijing for the past four years.

Kang: *"Not many people know that I'm gay and it is out of the question to tell my parents....at least for the moment."*

Li Sa - 43, actor, married with a 13-year-old son. Born in Beijing. Mother, housewife. Father deceased.

Li Sa: *"I live with my wife and my mother. My wife knows that I'm gay. She knew before we were married but she loves me and it didn't pose a problem for her. I'm fairly free....of course I don't bring friends back home. I told my mother I was gay when I was 17....no reaction."*



Photo 06 - ZHAO and DI

Zhao - 24, only child, unemployed, from Heilongjiang province. Father, civil servant; mother, unemployed

Zhao: *"I've been living in Beijing for ten months and I share a flat with some female students. I have a degree in English. I spoke of my sexuality with my parents...their reaction was to lock me in the house. Then, I told them I'd be « good », that I wouldn't do it again, so that they would let me out...which they did, but they forbade me from having any lesbian relationships. If I had to describe my sexuality, I'd say that I am bisexual. Some of friends know that we're together. Some don't understand. Others think that it is just a passing fad. For the older ones, they just don't accept it. But things do change; internet is helping a lot. Mentalities are changing at last...at least in the big towns. For many of us, we live like this between the ages of twenty and thirty and then marry and settle down. The pressure from our families is still very strong.*

My girlfriend and I really want to live together but we know that it will be difficult. I don't know what the future will bring...."

Di - 25, one step-sister, from Jiangxi province. Father, artist and university professor. Mother deceased.

Di: *"I've been in Beijing for seven years and publish art books. I also work at a local newspaper. I first spoke to my father about my sexual orientation when I was 19. His first reaction was anger but he quickly accepted it.*

I spoke to him about it because my girlfriend asked me to. My father knew several of my girlfriends, but he hasn't yet met Zhao. All my friends know that I'm gay, it has never posed a problem. I think maybe I'm bisexual....I want to have a stable relationship with Zhao, but I don't want to marry."



Photo 07 - XIAO YING and YAO

Xiao Ying - 22, only child, studying journalism. Born in Beijing. Mother runs a bookshop, father train driver.

Xiao Ying : *"I haven't spoken of my sexuality to my parents. I'll do it once I'm earning enough to survive on my own. I want my parents to really know who I am. I don't think it will be easy; it will be as hard for them to hear as it will be for me to tell them, but I don't want to hide who I am. Some of my friends know that I'm gay and it has caused no problems."*

Yao - 22, only child, studying journalism, works part-time. Born in Beijing. Mother retired, father gardener in public parks.

Yao : *"I haven't yet spoken to my parents of my sexuality but I will, however not before I'm thirty because that is the official age for getting married. I know that they will refuse to accept it. We met two years ago at university. It's the first time that either of us has been in love. We want to live together, buy a house, have a dog..."*



Photo 08 - IDEN and JANE

Iden - 22, only child, works in the jewelry industry. Born in Beijing. Parents retired.

Iden : *"I talked to my parents about my sexuality. My mother asked if I was lesbian, as I frequently brought girlfriends back home. Most of my friends are lesbian. I told her that I was too, but she had guessed so already.... "*

Jane - 21, only child. Lives at the university. Comes from Jilin province. Studying for a degree in financial and taxation studies. Parents are business people.

Jane : *"I haven't spoken to my parents about my sexuality and I don't think I will. They are very traditional, they won't accept it. My parents are no longer together but they didn't divorce because of me. My father thinks that a girl should study in order to be able to get a good husband. Most of my friends know I'm gay. Many of them are gay themselves. We've been together for a year and a half ; we met on internet."*



Photo 09 - ANTON and HAIBEI

Anton - 24, Russian, living in Beijing for two years. Works in logistics.

HaiBei - 25, one sister. Illustrator in a state factory. Comes from Hebei province, seven years in Beijing.

HaiBei : *"I haven't spoken to my parents about my sexuality. We met a month ago in a nightclub in Beijing. We see each other a lot and would like to live together. Anton likes living in Beijing and doesn't want to go back to Russia for the moment. "*



Photo 10 - RAN and WEN

Ran - 21, only child, TCSL student (teaching Chinese as a second language.) From Yunnan province, 4 years in Beijing. Father, teacher, mother doctor.

Ran : *"I haven't spoken to my parents about my sexuality. I would like to do so, or rather I want to do so. I think it will be hard for them to hear and for me to tell them, but I don't want to hide my sexuality and my real nature. Some of my friends know, but not all. Two of them hate me since they discovered I was lesbian. We had been fairly close before."*

Wén - 23, one brother. Has been studying at a Business and Financial School in London for six years. Originally from Guangxi province. Parents work in commerce.

Wén: *"I haven't spoken to my parents about my sexuality but I'm going to, because they have to know. I'll probably tell them in the near future.*

We've been together for six months, and we live together whenever we are both in Beijing. We don't want to be like some Chinese lesbians who get married to mask their homosexuality ; we want a real public wedding."



Photo 11 - SHIN and XIAO DI

Shin - 21, only child, biology student. Born in Beijing. Father designer, mother, teacher.

Shin: *"I tried to talk to my parents about my sexuality, to try to give them some hints....but without success. I'm still too young; I will talk to them about it when I've reached an adult age, when it will be harder to question my choice. My friends don't mind that I'm gay."*

Xiao Di - 22, only child, fashion design student. Born in Beijing.

Father, football coach; mother, high school teacher

Xiao Di: *"I think that it won't be possible for my parents to accept my sexuality. My father just might, but certainly not my mother. Maybe I'll talk to them about it one day. My friends all know about it, there was no special reaction from any of them.*

We've been together for three months; we'd like to be able to live together, to get married."



Photo 12 - JEAN and CAROL

Jean - 22, only child, studying law. Born in Beijing

Mother, retired doctor; father in the army.

Jean: *"I'm studying law. I haven't spoken to my parents of my sexuality; they are very conservative and would certainly not accept it. I'm bisexual : for me, there is beauty in both men and women. I spoke about it to one of my friends; the others don't know. It's my first experience with a girl. We've been together for three months and we go out together frequently, but no-one has guessed the real nature of our relationship.*

In China, most homosexual relationships are kept hidden, underground. The pressure from families is too strong. If you don't follow the normal route of wedding and children, some people will think that you have psychological problems. We are still our parents' children. Not many people do their "coming out", although things are changing. At least people know now what a homosexual is....in any case they are familiar with the word."

Carol - 22, only child, law student. Born in Beijing

Mother, restaurateur. Father unemployed.

Carol: *"I'm studying law in the same university as Jean and I want to be a lawyer.*

I live with my father. My parents divorced when I was still very young. They were both addicted to their work; so whatever my sexual orientation, they don't have the right to interfere. I haven't spoken to them about my sexuality, I'll let them find out for themselves. My father isn't living in Beijing at the moment, as he is looking for work elsewhere, so I've been living at his place with Jean for the past three months. Before that we slept at the university.

Most of my friends, a lot of them female, know that I'm gay. Most of them don't mind. I've had other affairs with girls."



Photo 13 - TAI and XIAO HAO

Tai - 25, works in marketing in a decoration company. One brother. From a village in Hebei province. His parents work in a pharmaceutical plant.

Tai: *"I live in a flat provided by my employer. I'm in charge of marketing. I arrived in Peking at the beginning of 2008.*

I spoke neither to my parents nor to my brother about my sexuality. They never asked me about it and for the moment haven't spoken about paying for a wedding. Maybe if I talk to them they'll accept it. I was in the army for five years and spoke about it to one of my good soldier friends. There was no problem. As it happens, all my close friends know about it and accept it. It is my first time with a man. We've been together for three months and want to live together."

Xiao hao - 24, only child, works installing electrical systems. Born in Beijing.

Father works in security, soon to retire. Mother, retired accountant.

Xiao hao: *"The idea of talking to my parents about my sexuality scares me. If I was to talk to them about it, I'm sure that at least initially they wouldn't accept it. Maybe with time....but one day I will tell them, I think it is important. I don't want to lie to them all my life.....its not my fault if I'm gay. I don't think it's a handicap....I'll introduce them to my boyfriend....."*

Only one of my friends knows. He admitted to me that he too liked men. It is my first time with a man. I want to live with Tai.

Over the past few years, the things have changed a lot for gay people. Associations have sprung up, magazines have appeared. The young generation is much more tolerant than the old, which was not at all receptive."



Photo 14 - JING JING and LILI

Jing Jing - 23, only child, works in a social science research laboratory. Father works in the government ; mother works in a children's clothing store.

Jing Jing: *" My parents know that I live with a friend who is a girl, but they don't realize that she is my girlfriend. I don't think that it is the right time to talk to them about it. My close friends know. Apart from one friend who cried all night when I told her that I liked girls, my friends have not been at all critical. They are still all good friends."*

Lili - 24, only child, works as an import/export agent. Native of Tian Jing province.

Parents both work in a factory.

Lili: *"I haven't spoken about my sexual orientation with my parents. It is still too early. I will talk to them when I'm 30, when that sort of revelation cannot be dismissed as being due to immaturity. Maybe they will understand !*

I spoke to my friends because I wanted to clarify the situation. Globally they were fairly understanding. We have been together for more than a year and have been living together for the past 6 months. We met on an internet site. It is important to talk about homosexuality in order to change people's mentalities and get to accept it. Things are starting to change in China : before, people treated us as if we were mentally ill. For sure, many still think that homos aren't normal, but at least they don't look on us as if we were sick."



Photo 15 - MING and YIGE

Ming - 26, only child, studying for a Master's degree in Sociology. From Sichuan province.

Her parents are retired state factory workers

Ming: *"I arrived in Beijing in May 2002. I'm studying for a Master's degree in Sociology and I work at the same time as assistant manager in a technology company. At the moment I live at the university with Yige. This is a deliberate choice so that we can save money to finance our application to study for a PhD in Sociology in an American university. I haven't spoken to my parents about my sexuality. I don't think they could accept it. If ever they found out, they would blame themselves and think that it was they themselves who were not normal for having brought a lesbian daughter into the world. I don't want them to have to bear that weight, it is too much pressure for them. One day, we were watching a film together that spoke of homosexuality. Their reaction was edifying. My mother said «people like that aren't normal....you can't be happy when you're gay ». As for my father, concerning the possibility of having a lesbian daughter, his answer was clear as well: "I'd send her to the hospital". It is also for that reason that I prefer to stay in Beijing. It is easier to manage from afar. I have spoken to my close friends, and their reactions were not exactly a model of understanding. They think that I'm just going through a phase and that it will pass, that I should stop having these sorts of relationships....so my relationship with Yige is hidden for the moment."*

Yige - 24, only child, studying for a Master's degree in Sociology. Native of Shandong province.

Father, doctor. / Mother, university lecturer.

Yige: *"I arrived in Beijing in 2002. I'm studying for a Master's degree in Sociology. I haven't spoken to my parents of my sexuality. I think it would be difficult for them to accept.... I come from a small town. I think my mother has guessed my sexual orientation and she is worried. We never broached the question, but one day I'll have to talk to them about it. Maybe they'll be more receptive later. Most of my friends are aware of the situation....it has never posed any problem. My "tutor" at the university, who knows about it too, has encouraged me to go to live in America because it would be the only way to live freely."*
