



WILLIAM WANG PHOTOS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

A young Chinese woman who goes by the profile name North uses her cellphone to find dates via Tantan, a Chinese dating app.

# Traditions die as Chinese love goes digital

**WILLIAM WANG**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

BEIJING—"It's become a part of my life," admits Liu Qian on the topic of online dating. Over the last decade, her computer and smartphone have helped her to meet a multitude of suitors and lovers.

"Your family may have some rules for you, but when you are not home, things are different," she says. "For example, one-night stands: they're really common. Almost everyone I know has had that experience."

Liu is riding a wave that is sweeping away centuries of Chinese social tradition.

The country's economic reforms began in the early '80s and, although state media retains a tight grip over television and radio, Internet access provides a mind-expanding explosion of sexual consciousness. Today, with 1.28 billion smartphones in use, technology is reshaping the game of love in ways that few imagined.

Politically sensitive news and resources have become much more accessible, but the masses seem more interested in western entertainment.

Television shows like *Girls* and *Masters of Sex* are available online, and they may be more responsible than any other factor for the shift in young Chinese attitudes.

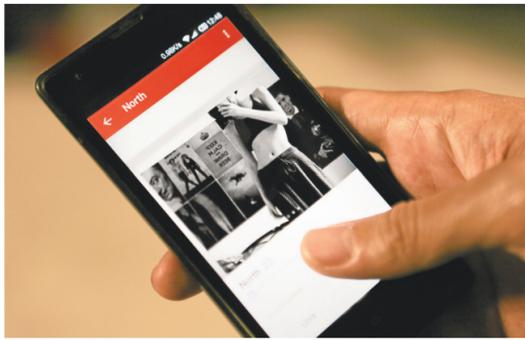
Iris Bian, 28, is a market researcher based in Beijing. As a woman who watched *Sex and the City* at the age of 14, she knows that in China her attitudes are urban and progressive. But she says that such attitudes are spreading to the farthest reaches of the country.

"Even if you are living in a third- or fourth-tier city," she says, "you still know how to use Momo, right?" Momo is a cellphone app that has been widely used in China to facilitate casual sexual encounters.

Traditionally, dating in China was marriage- and family-focused. It was common for parents and their social circle to suggest who to date, and which restaurant to dine at. Sex and marriage carried the weight of passing on ancestors' lineage.

Today, China is rife with sexual imagery. Pornography may technically be banned, but scantily clad women, animated breast GIFs and images of women licking blurry objects regularly appear on ostensibly non-sexual web pages.

"It's so confusing," says Jemimah Steinfeld, author



Tantan, essentially a Chinese version of Tinder, has become the country's top hookup app.

possibilities in life," she enthuses. "It opens and diversifies your lifestyle, your life choices."

Bian concludes that people figure themselves out by dating; the better they figure themselves out, the better their chances are of finding happy, healthy, long-term relationships.

Momo was once the primary app used for one-night stands, though Tantan has recently replaced it, with trysts arranged quickly thanks to GPS. "These apps allow you to be more open, and a person's purpose becomes more direct," says one man, who does not want to share his name. "There are a lot of opportunities to hook up when people are looking for the same thing."

The LGBT population may be the group most helped by this digital revolution. Ji Faye, a young professional in Beijing, points out that you can't just ask someone at a group dinner if they're gay, but you can easily check if they have a presence on an app like Blued or Aloha.

When Steinfeld wrapped up her research, she concluded that dating apps, a growing normalization of casual sex, and more dating in general are in aggregate positive changes for Chinese young people. They now have a means to wrest from their parents control over their own love lives, a freedom taken for granted in the West.

Liu Qian, by traditional Chinese standards, is a "leftover woman," past her prime age for marriage. But the 34-year-old is enjoying single life. She checks GPS-based dating apps daily to see who's around.

"If someone is interested in you, that means you are charming," she smiles. "Knowing that you're charming is a good thing in itself, regardless of if you go to the hotel with him or not, isn't it?"

of *Little Emperors and Material Girls: Sex and Youth in Modern China*.

She sympathizes with youth who still face traditional sexual repression. "On the other hand," she says, "they go online and they have all these things just popping up, just going. 'Have sex, have sex, have sex, click here to have sex, click here to watch sex.' It's bonkers."

A young woman who goes by the name of North on Tantan — essentially a Chinese Tinder — enjoys the new freedoms but acknowledges how much has been lost. "In today's society, it's becoming impossible to hold onto traditions."

## Failed sex ed

"Janet" is a Nanjing woman who was raised ignorant of sex and reproduction.

Her parents had told her the common fib that they'd found her next to a garbage bin. It wasn't until she was 16 that a boyfriend employed chopsticks and a bowl to demonstrate the shocking mechanics of reproduction.

During a later date, she saw a porn video, which corroborated what her boyfriend had told her. "My God, I thought it was gross," she confesses. "But on the other

hand, I could certainly feel something going on in my body."

But watching porn is a poor way to get information about reproductive health, and China is far behind western countries in sex education. Rates of sexually transmitted diseases, once rare in the Chairman Mao years, have now soared.

Sex ed classes were implemented nationally in 2008, though the China Daily reported some students found the instruction inadequate. Contraception, for instance, was often not covered.

Today, unplanned pregnancies are rife, with a likely low estimate of 13 million abortions performed yearly: a rate approximately three times greater than that in Canada. An additional 10 million morning-after pills are sold annually over the counter in China.

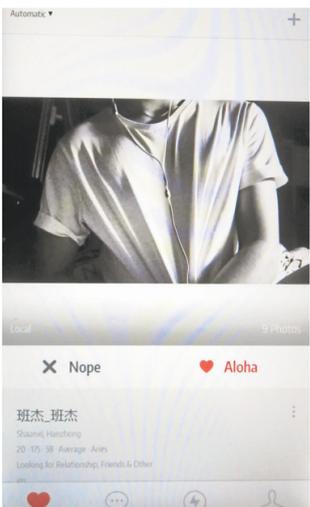
"I'm all for sexual liberation," says Steinfeld, "but at the same time I think that when you have new freedoms you have to understand these freedoms as well."

## Liberating for LGBT

Bian has researched multitudes of dating apps for her job, and, of course, uses them personally. "More people means more

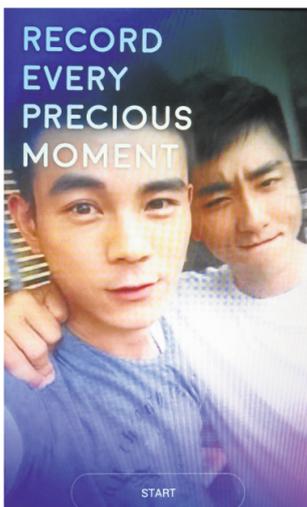
## AN APP FOR EVERY BODY

China's younger generation is using apps for love and sex. Here are five of the favourite relationship apps



### TANTAN

Since Tinder requires Facebook access, Chinese people use Tantan, its local equivalent. You know the drill: swipe right on anybody who catches your eye, left for those who don't. Users can only connect with people they're interested in. Available in China.



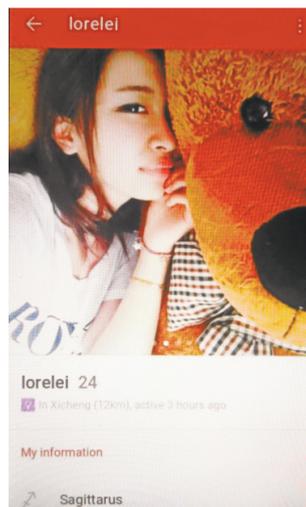
### MOMO

Having built its name on casual sex, Momo is now working hard to change its rep. Since Momo went public in December, the app is trying to become more of a community-building messaging service. Users may join groups or connect with friends of friends. Available in China.



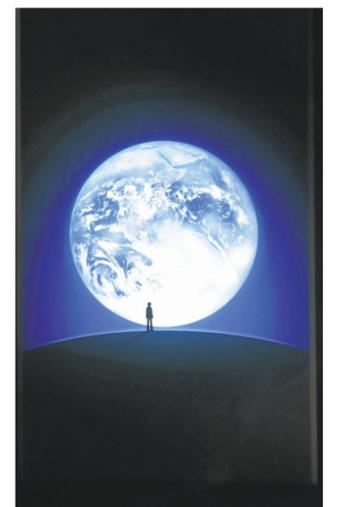
### WECHAT

This app first got popular helping people hook up, thanks to its location-based Shake or People Nearby functions. Then it grew mainstream and became more of a Facebook-type app, though there are still many who join WeChat groups explicitly for dating or sex. For people who meet on other apps, connecting on WeChat is often "the next step" in a relationship. Available internationally.



### BLUED

When Blued creator Geng Le worked as a police officer, he felt that he was the only gay man in the world. Today he connects 12 million gay men in China, plus another three million abroad. Blued tells you who's nearby, and if they're tops or bottoms. Drop a pin to see who's near any spot in the world. Available internationally.



### ALOHA

This Taiwanese app, likewise for gay men, is more of a social networking site. Users keep everyone updated with messages and photos. They can chat with people live, follow updates on men they're interested in, and anonymously like handsome hunks. Available in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Canada, U.S., Australia, Singapore, Italy, Britain, Japan, Germany, Japan, France, Macau, Thailand, New Zealand, and Malaysia.