Waiting for Mr. Right: The Meaning of Being a Single Educated Chinese Female Over 30 in Beijing and Guangzhou

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SYNOPSIS

Although female singlehood has become a lifestyle in western countries, never married and being over 30 is still viewed as “special” in contemporary China. Chinese single females live in a culture of traditional social prejudice against singlehood. Traditional family and societal values in general place pressure on single females to marry and have a child. This phenomenological study explores the meaning of being single and presents a firsthand view of how such women feel. Ten never-married single females over 30 years of age took part in one-on-one telephone interviews. Constant comparison data analysis revealed three major themes in their lived experiences of being single: (1) awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of singlehood; (2) ambiguous attitudes towards marriage; and (3) adjustments in life needed to make living as singles worthwhile.

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Introduction

While the idea of a woman remaining single after the age of 30 has become broadly accepted in western culture, it has only recently become a prevalent phenomenon in modern Chinese culture. These never-married Chinese females are labeled “left-out ladies” and “3S” ladies [single, seventies (born in 1970s), stuck]. This phenomenon has attracted much attention from the media and the government especially because of the increasing numbers of such women in Chinese society. China is a developing country where the ideological system is changing as communist collectivism clashes with western capitalism. While modern western values support these women’s choice of remaining single, the old traditional values put pressure on them to get married while young. Why do these women stay single and what are their lived experiences? This paper will answer these questions, and bring single females’ voices to life.

Research on western single women

Lewis and Moon (1997) reviewed articles about single women and synthesized the evolving images of single women in western countries. Prior to the 1960s there was a definite stigma attached to women who remained single past age 25. By the 1970s, attitudes had changed dramatically. Many positive reasons for prolonged singlehood were espoused such as the opportunity for higher education, enhanced personal development, and the feminist spirit that women should not need to rely upon a man to support them. By the 1980s an older single female (26–45) was not uncommon and was generally accepted as part of a normal lifestyle. Throughout the 1990s and into the new century, single women of all categories were leading full and contented lives and becoming masters of their own fate. Many educated women became powerful influences in education, business, and industry and in state and federal governments (Domenico & Jones, 2006; Lewis & Moon, 1997).

Recently, researchers have become more interested in exploring the lived experiences of older single women through qualitative research to add depth to earlier findings and to better understand this population. For example, Lewis
and Moon (1997) found that single women have unresolved ambivalence about being single. Women in their study recognized both advantages and disadvantages to singlehood, yet retained a guarded attitude about the possibility of marriage, and although mostly content with being single, many women simultaneously experienced feelings of "loss and grief" about not being married or having children (p. 115). The findings were supported by Fuller (2001), who investigated the lived experience of singlehood as perceived by 10 professional African American women who had never married. The author found that these never-married women also perceived the pros and cons of living as a single woman, including internal (i.e., distrust of male patriarchy) and external factors (i.e., the lack of suitable choices as one grew older). Trimberger (2005) identified six forms of support that enable a woman to have a satisfying single life, namely, (a) fulfilling work; (b) connections to the next generation of single women; (c) owning a home; (d) intimate relationships with friends and extended family without legal commitments; (e) a collegial colleagues with similar values and lifestyle; and (f) power to control one's sexuality. Overall, the narratives from single women suggest that single life can be satisfying and meaningful, but they also indicate that social stigma and prejudice still exist in modern societies (Baumbusch, 2004).

Other studies have examined whether single life negatively influenced single women. Fong and Amatea (1992) investigated 141 married and single women academics and found that those who were single had significantly higher levels of stress symptoms than the married-parent women. Single women used passive coping strategies more often than married women even though they had high levels of career commitment, career satisfaction, and personal resources. In Sandfield and Percy's (2003) study, single women were found to have an incomplete identity, often feeling lonely and isolated and out of touch with the traditional married family with children. In their study, single women reported that being single was the consequence of their failure to maintain heterosexual relationships, and/or they thought they were at fault in some way for ending past relationships that might have led to marriage. These findings are consistent with Loewenstein's (1981) study of the satisfactions and stresses of older single females; he found that 15% of the participants reported low life satisfaction.

Study on Chinese single women

For more than two thousand years, Chinese culture has been dominated by the influence of Confucian philosophy that advocates patriarchal beliefs and values (Lin & Ho, 2009). Confucian philosophy sets highly rigid rules for traditional Chinese women to obey to keep them highly subordinated in society. For example, san cong si de specifies three acts of obedience and four virtues as a model for Chinese woman. San cong means a woman should obey her father before marriage, serve her husband in marriage, and follow her son after her husband's death. Si de refers to fidelity, tidiness in the home, proper (respectful) speech, and commitment to needlework (Tang & Lai, 2008). Thus, in traditional China, social and cultural expectations for women were quite simple: to marry and have children and be obedient to all males.

However, an alternative lifestyle for women evolved between 1860 and 1930 in the Canton Delta of China (Stockard, 1992). In this region, a girl who married would not necessarily move to her husband's home and family although patrilocal residence was the norm in most of China. She could continue to stay in her natal home for an average of four to five years, although she would pay several visits to her husband's family. This delayed in-living with the husband's family was rooted in the recognition of daughters' economic value to their natal family. The Canton Delta relied upon women to produce silk cloth. The delay in patrilocal residence extended a daughter's value for her natal family. Female independence to work and live at home had other liberating effects. The bride-daughter (as Stockard called these married girls) could negotiate with her husband's family to stay home until the husband's death. She could also pay them for the freedom to divorce an abusive husband, or remarry if that was her desire, or even live as a sworn spinster (Stockard, 1992).

After the new Republic China was built in 1949 under the leadership of Mao Zedong, there were three waves of single adults born in China (Du, 2008). The first was in 1950s when the first Law Policy was implemented. This allowed people in unhappy marriages to get a divorce more easily than in prior generations. A divorce wave occurred in the country and many unhappy arranged marriages were ended. This left many women single, although many did eventually remarry. The second wave emerged in the 1980s after the end of the Red Culture Revolution. Many young people who were originally from urban areas and forced to work in the countryside delayed marriage in the hope of returning to the cities and starting a family there (Honig, 1988); The third wave of single adults occurred in the 1990s. By this time economic prosperity had greatly improved the lives of many Chinese. With economic development came the western values of equality for women and egalitarian marriage; many young urban women who were economically independent remained single for what they perceived as a better quality of life or because of the lack of male suitors. New statistics in 2006 showed that in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, the number of single people exceeded one million; scholars believe this number marks the fourth wave of single life (Zhang, 2006). The demographic characteristics reveal that most singles live in big cities, with the majority of them holding at least a bachelor degree, and the number of well-educated single females exceeds that of males (Du, 2008).

Although single women are forming an increasing social group in China, in-depth research on these single females has not been done. Ferguson (2000) interviewed never-married American-Chinese and Japanese women to explore their singlehood. The author found four factors that accounted for their delayed marriage: (1) they could continue living with their parents; (2) their status as the eldest or only child put them in charge of caring for aged parents and this was considered a high family priority; (3) the possibility of pursuing higher education; and (4) a perceived lack of suitors. But of course this sample cannot be directly compared to an indigenous Chinese sample; thus more research of the latter is warranted.

Cui (2011) discussed how traditional mate-selection criteria play a role in the single phenomenon. Under traditional mate-selection criteria, a husband should have a higher socioeconomic
status and be more successful than his wife. Therefore, educated females expect to marry a male with a more successful career and higher socioeconomic status than them. These criteria limit the scope of choosing an ideal partner for educated single females. From the perspective of mobility theory, females’ appearance, relative age and house-keeping ability can contribute to upward mobility by marrying a male with better socioeconomic status, while males usually resort to downward mobility and marry a younger female (Wang, 2012). Males who meet an urban single female’s high expectations are more likely to marry a younger lady than a single female of his age. These factors have led to the outcome that many single educated women have had to choose singlehood as a lifestyle. Cui’s and Wang’s studies were based primarily on theoretical hypotheses. Our study proposes to employ qualitative research to more deeply understand the true experiences of single Chinese women.

The current study

In the present study the authors utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the meanings of being a single heterosexual Chinese female over the age of 30 in Mainland China. The age cut-off was defined as 30 based on Ferguson’s (2000) findings that most Chinese- and Japanese- American women reported that the expected age of first marriage was in one’s mid- to late-20s, and that Asian women who enter their 30s unmarried are unusual and form a unique group in their cultures.

Erikson (1980) proposed that all humans progress through eight psychosocial stages during the life cycle. Erikson’s theory has been widely tested and has become an important framework used to interpret human development. The sixth stage is called “intimacy vs. isolation” and in general spans the years of 18–35. The main tasks of this period are to develop emotional and physical intimacy and build satisfying, long term relationships. If unsuccessful, the individual will experience a “developmental crisis” that results in feelings of depression, isolation, and loneliness. Erikson’s theory may be relevant for single females over 30 in Mainland China who may not fulfill the task of building intimate relationships.

Methods

Study design

A phenomenological qualitative design was used to collect and analyze narrative data (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology, which is both a philosophy and a research approach, provides the framework for answering the general question of how a single female perceives her life. A basic principle of phenomenology is that because everyone experiences life in a unique way, reality is subjective and can be understood only from the perspective of the individual (Moustakas, 1994). Compared with other qualitative approaches, research on a single female’s lived experiences would benefit from phenomenological methods that allow participants’ voices to be heard and their experiences to be known (Lewis & Moon, 1997). Individual, in-depth interviews allowed exploration of the complexity of women’s feelings about their singlehood including how they and their significant others view their single life.

Participants

Participants in this study were recruited through a convenient sample of the first author’s (henceforth referred to as the “primary researcher”) friends and colleagues in Beijing and Guangzhou, the largest cities in north China and south China respectively. Sampling from these two cities has a unique value. As Beijing is the cultural center of China and Guangzhou is the earliest open-city in China, people living in both of these cities are more influenced by western culture and values. Participants met the following criteria: (1) single and never-married; (2) of Chinese nationality; (3) 30 years or older’ (4) living in Mainland China; and (5) holding at least a bachelor’s degree. Detailed demographic information of these participants is listed in Table 1.

Data collection

Data was collected in 2009. After potential participants’ telephone numbers and email addresses were obtained, the primary researcher contacted each of them to explain the purpose of the study and asked them to participate in telephone interviews. Participants signed consent forms and returned a digital image of the signed consent form to the authors to indicate their agreement to participate in this study. Interviews were conducted on a Saturday or Sunday when participants were free from work and were home alone. Participants were asked questions along two general themes: “Tell me about your experiences of being single,” and “What are the strengths/challenges in your life of being older and single?” The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participant.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed as verbatim for each participant. These transcriptions were subjected to constant comparative narrative analysis (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Since the interviews were done in the Chinese language, the entire interview was transcribed in Chinese. Following a first reading of the transcripts, a second-round of careful reading extracted a list of invariant expressions. An invariant expression is a few words that are necessary and sufficient to constituent a category that is understandable for understanding (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, the meanings of these expressions and statements were generated in Chinese before being translated into English.

By placing all the statements back into the conversation contexts, the researchers were able to clearly understand the meanings of the statements (see Table 2 for an example of how this was done). Respondents’ expressions were organized into themes that were broader and had more general categories. After the themes were identified, the researchers referred back to the original transcripts to check for accuracy. A final validation was done by having the respondents read the themes and comment on their accuracy (Creswell, 1998). All ten participants stated that the themes represented the essences of their experiences.

Three major themes arising from the analysis, (1), awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of being single; (2) ambiguous feelings about marriage; and (3) adjustments to
single life, are described with their subcategories of meanings below.

**Awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of being single**

All participants first spoke about the positive aspects of being single. They enjoyed advantages such as the freedom, autonomy and independence to live their lives as they wished. As the interviews continued, participants became more relaxed and as they felt safer and more familiar with the researcher, they switched to sharing about aspects that were bothering them; we refer to these as disadvantages. Their chief complaints included loneliness and social pressure from kin to marry, similar to the findings of Lewis and Moon (1997).

**Table 1**

Demographic information of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>Has a boyfriend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Doctoral student</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>University faculty</td>
<td>Ph.d</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Print company employee</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>University staff</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Doctoral student</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>University staff</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Government employee</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>IT Company employee</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Government employee</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K.</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>School counselor</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sub theme: personal independence**

Freedom and autonomy were the most frequent expressions of the advantages of single life. For example, Participant L, a university employee and a doctoral student, stated:

I feel that the biggest advantage of single life is freedom. Whatever I want to do, I do not need to ask for others' permission... Another point is I have the autonomy, how to say, I can choose what I like. When buying clothes, for example, I do not have to consider the price or a husband's opinion.

Financial independence is viewed as another advantage of being single. Eight participants talked about their satisfaction with their financial situations and the freedom of being able to support themselves and the ability to send some money to parents and siblings. Participant P, who worked for the government and had a well-paying job, replied, "I bought an

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**Table 2**

Invariant expressions and labels of participant Zh.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of relevant expressions of participant Zh</th>
<th>Labels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Single life is simple, yes, very simple, and very rhythmic. I can make fun for myself, and arrange my own schedule, and make myself more excellent, making progress. This is my single life.</td>
<td>1. Simple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I am very independent, eh, how to say, it is free, independent, very free, and then, very self-centered, not being disturbed by others, what else, (I) can make a lot of friends, and no constraints, no need to think about having children, not constrained by social rules. That is it.</td>
<td>2. Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sometimes I feel some loneliness, and when I need to turn to someone but I don't know whom to turn to. I face many, many difficulties. I face the dark night by myself and the ordeal of killing the time</td>
<td>3. Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My mum worries a lot, worried about me, very much, at least I feel it. My relatives, friends, all worry about me a lot. They are kind of sick for me, you know, when they meet a young male, they always ask him whether he is married and think about introducing him to me, you know. I feel very guilty to make them behave like this. They all worry about me, they care for me.</td>
<td>4. Freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The older generation cannot understand why I keep being single until this age. They will think this is problematic and embarrassing. Many people will think I have some mental or physical deficiencies. Or that I am too choosy. They do not have any proof, but they can judge you.</td>
<td>5. Making friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I understand how people think about me, I don't care, and I do what I want. Because you are yourself, no matter if you are single or married. I don't want to change to another person, this is why I am charming (laughing).</td>
<td>6. Lonely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I feel superior of being single, very good, free, and enjoyable. Because I am single, I can like anyone, and others can like me. I am very free.</td>
<td>7. Face difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I will marry myself to someone within one to two years. You know, as a girl, you have grown up and need to think a lot, such as having a child. But I am paradoxical, to be frank, I do not want to pick one who does not match me.</td>
<td>8. Worry and care from family/relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I feel, the most disadvantage of a single life is that being single for a long time will make you feel lack of security. Then (it) will greatly influence the criterion you select your mate. ...You need caring, and you will tend to find a man older than you. You won't care his appearance that much as before.</td>
<td>9. Guilty about letting parents worry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Feel good and superior about being single</td>
<td>10. Being thought of as problematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Being assumed as deficient</td>
<td>11. Being assumed as deficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Don't want to change self for others</td>
<td>13. Don't want to change self for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Feel good and superior about being single</td>
<td>14. Feel good and superior about being single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Will marry within a given period</td>
<td>15. Will marry within a given period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Paradoxical feelings about marriage</td>
<td>16. Paradoxical feelings about marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Lack of security</td>
<td>17. Lack of security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Need caring from me</td>
<td>18. Need caring from me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
apartment to take care of my mother. My mother is very satisfied with me. She invested a lot on my education, and now she is so happy to see I am an independent person and can help her.”

Sub theme: loneliness, pressure, and social stigma

Apart from the advantages of single life, loneliness was perceived as a significant disadvantage. Stress from work and the challenge of making meaning of one’s single existence were also mentioned as difficulties. Participant Zh, a university counselor in Guangzhou city, and who was not in an intimate relationship at the time of the interview, said:

Sometimes I feel some loneliness, and the need to turn to someone but I don’t know whom to turn to. I face many, many difficulties. I face the dark night by myself and the ordeal of killing the time.

Social stigma was not only experienced by the single women themselves but also by their family members who put pressure on them to marry. Participant C, teaching at a local university, stated:

They (parents) push me, of course [to marry]. In the traditional Chinese culture it is considered an offense to parents to be unmarried over some age. You can imagine how my parents feel about my singlehood, and I totally understand their feelings.

Participant C was discouraged when she went to visit her brother and found her parents there helping with the new baby. After that incident, she made fewer visits because her parents would criticize her marital status which annoyed her.

Another participant said, “My parents feel ashamed when other relatives ask about my singlehood. No parent wants their child to be viewed as problematic by others.” Participant Zh shared her point of view:

The older generation cannot understand why I remain single until this age. They will think this is problematic and embarrassing. Many people will think I must have some mental or physical deficiencies. Or that I am too choosy.

In Chinese culture, filial piety is based on Confucianism which states that single women should make their parents happy by getting married and having children, especially male children. Participant Zh continued, “My parents worried about me a lot... I felt very guilty.” Another participant, B, a doctoral student, imagined her future this way:

I felt very guilty.

Another participant said, “I felt very guilty.” Another participant, B, a doctoral student, imagined her future this way:

I felt very guilty.

Participant P, a government employee, noted:

I admit I was a proud girl before. I had a good job, financial situation, and he really loves me. I won’t care much about his looks and other characteristics that you cared about before. For example when I was in my 20s I wanted a handsome, cool, and romantic guy, but now after passing 30, I have lowered my expectations. I will say okay if he is a good man with a good financial situation, and he really loves me. I won’t care much about his looks and other characteristics. I don’t have time to be too selective.

Ambiguous feelings about marriage

When talking about marriage, almost all of the women expressed contradictory feelings about the topic. All participants expressed that they would like to get married sometime in the future. They admitted to being single only because they were trying to find the “right one”. They also felt that they would have to give up some important selection criteria and select a less than preferred partner if they were to marry.

Sub theme: holding on to an ideal image of men and marriage

Although these women did have many opportunities to date, most of their relationships lasted only a short period of time because they felt the man was not the ideal partner. Participant A stated, “Although I don’t care much about a man’s looks, the man should be respectful and understanding of my feelings. Many men do not have this ability.” Participant P, a government employee, noted:

I want to be cared for and protected, but men seem more concerned with themselves. Maybe they think I am old enough and do not need to be taken care of, but I have very traditional values about marriage. Most men I date do not bring me that feeling. They want a girlfriend who is very obedient and respectful.

Participant B said that some men “were scared by females with smart brains and good executing skills”.

The women also talked about having an ideal marriage, and worried about being stuck in an unhappy marriage. As Participant B stated, “I saw another girl at my age get into an unhealthy marriage. She is not happy. Compared with her plight, I would rather keep my single status”.

In sum, participants believed in an egalitarian marriage and held out for a man with many of their ideal qualities. Yet, their own experiences have shown them that their vision of an ideal marriage may not be possible with most men because the latter hold traditional patriarchal values and desire a woman as a secondary partner, rather than as an equal partner.

Sub theme: changed mate-selection criteria

Although participants still hold ideal expectations of men and marriage, their mate selection criterion had been lowered considerably compared to their expectations when they were in their early twenties. Participant Zh, age 34, said:

Being older influences the criteria I use to select a mate. You will tend to find an older man more caring who provides financial security. You will not care much about other characteristics that you cared about before. For example when I was in my 20s I wanted a handsome, cool, and romantic guy, but now after passing 30, I have lowered my expectations. I will say okay if he is a good man with a good financial situation, and he really loves me. I won’t care much about his looks and other characteristics. I don’t have time to be too selective.

Participant P expressed her opinion about selecting a partner: “I admit I was a proud girl before. I had a good job, and beauty. I set the bar high for any suitor. But now after
failed intimate relationships in the past, I have to tell myself, ‘You just need a man to be your husband, not someone to show off’. But even if I lower my expectations, it will be hard to find a good man.”

Sub theme: desire to have children

A big concern for this sample of women was their ability to have a child. They felt they needed to get married soon while they were still in the “fertile age group”. Participant X, an IT corporate employee, talked about her concern, “I will get myself married within one or two years. If you are too old you cannot guarantee you can get pregnant, and that will be a worse situation for me”. Participant X was in a 9-month intimate relationship at the time of the interview but was not fully satisfied with the relationship. She, however, hesitated to end the relationship because she might not find a better partner and never have children. Participant G, who worked as a university administrator and had just ended a short romance with a foreign man, expressed her feelings, “I would get married tomorrow if I meet the right person, but it probably won’t happen”.

Obviously, the single women interviewed showed very contradictory feelings towards men and marriage. On one hand, they were eager to marry and lowered their expectations, but on the other hand, they still held out for a more ideal match which prevented them from being close to marrying.

Although China has welcomed many western values for more than thirty years, the old traditional values still dominate people’s perspectives: women should be married and have a child. With huge pressures from both family and society, the worries of being single often dominate the lives of these single women. Chinese females in this sample worried deeply about losing the beauty of youth and the reduction in fertility as they age.

To conclude this section, in the opinion of these women, an ideal marriage is a wish and a strong desire, but the advantages of being single and the reality of finding a suitable partner makes marriage less appealing. Being single is at times uncomfortable, but contemplating marriage is a bit frightening. As Participant Z said, “Being single, no one supervises your daily life, so you can sleep late and not eat breakfast, but if you live with a person, he will push you to have a more organized life”.

Adjustments to single life

Choosing to stay single means that one has to adjust to a single life. Out of the ten participants, seven expressed that it took some efforts to adjust to the life of singlehood and fit into Chinese society, but efforts are made to cope with the problems.

Sub theme: skillfully facing inquiry of marriage status

The most disturbing thing for the women was to face enquiries from others about their marital status. In China, asking about one’s marital status is a normal conversation topic. But this kind of inquiry induced anxiety in this sample of women. Although most of the inquiries probably came out of good intentions, they still affected the participants’ feelings about themselves. Participants stated that they got tired of answering or explaining why they remained single. Therefore, learning to skillfully respond to these questions became one necessary life skill. The participants said that they could usually ignore the negative feelings raised by these kind of inquiries, and forced themselves to give kind and caring answers. For example, participant D, a corporate employee, said, “Although I know some of them may not have positive intentions, I would like to think they really care about me, otherwise it will make me unhappy”.

Sub theme: active isolation of oneself from married friends

One coping strategy was to reduce or avoid association with past friends who were now married. The women admitted that they had less in common with their married friends and this at times led to awkward situations. As participant M, a university staff, stated:

The center of their [married friends’] lives is their husbands and children. It is so natural for them to talk about their husbands and children, but to me this is not the topic that I can contribute to. Thus, I actively isolate myself from these married friends because we no longer have the same interests.

In some American studies, older single females felt overlooked by their married friends (e.g., Anderson, Stewart, & Dimidjian, 1994). However, our single participants did not report being left out; instead single Chinese females stated that they were the ones who actively isolated themselves from other married individuals. Chinese participants would like to attribute this situation to their own subjective choices rather than social pressure and believe that in singlehood they can control their destiny and this demonstrated self-mastery.

Sub theme: making new friends

Instead of sticking with old married friends, single women sought out other singles as their new friends. Building new friendship supported them in their daily life. Participant D, a Christian, stated:

I have several good friends from church, most of them are single like me, but one of them is married without children. We meet every week in church and sometimes during weekends. We also call each other to pray during the week if anyone needs help. These activities occupy much of my time, and make me feel that the days are easier to cope with. Staying with them is an important part of my life.

Participant X made friends with some of her colleagues from work and attended the badminton club organized by her company with several other single colleagues every Monday evening. She was also taking a dance class with another female colleague. Participant B developed good friendship with several fellow students in her department. They shared shopping information and sometimes shopped together.

Sub theme: getting used to being alone

Although new friends are seen as being able to brighten the days of the participants, they noted that it was not easy to...
make new friends. Sometimes participants had to befriend those younger than themselves who were still single because many of those from their own age group were already married. Some admitted that at times they had to learn to get used to being alone. To pass the time, Participant E watched Korean dramas, series by series, during weekends. Another strategy was living with parents as expressed by Participant L. Participant C’s mother occasionally came to live with her for short periods. But most of the time these single women had to get used to being alone.

Discussion and conclusion

To conclude, three main themes with several sub-categories were generated from the data. First, these Chinese never-married single women in our study are fully aware of the advantages and disadvantages of being single. The advantages they reported in common are freedom, autonomy and independence, while the disadvantages include loneliness, and pressure and stigma for being unmarried. Second, these women hold contradictory attitudes towards marriage. On the one hand, they had a strong desire for marriage and had lowered their selection criterion for a mate. On the other hand, they embraced their role in the workplace while waiting for Mr. Right to come along, someone who would respect their independence and intelligence. Lastly, as singles, they have to learn how to skillfully deal with others’ enquiries about their marriage status. One way to do this was to actively isolate themselves from married friends while building new friendships. Nevertheless, they often struggled with getting used to the solitary life of being a single.

In our opinion, in general, this sample of older, single Chinese women are living a rich life. They are well educated, earn a decent income, and enjoy their single lives. However, in a society still dominated by traditional culture, the pressure from both family and society inevitably bring about negative consequences. Thus, the women struggle to maintain a balance between the advantages of singlehood and the desire for marriage. Compared to western societies that generally accept the single woman status, there is little public or governmental support in China for older, single women. An advocacy stand is needed from the public media and government policies to project a more positive perspective on the phenomenon of being single. In other words, being single should become a normal lifestyle option (Kaslow, 1992). The public should not view single women staying single as a dysfunction in adult development (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007).

This study begins to fill a critical gap in the literature on the never-married older women in China. It not only provides information about their experiences, the reasons why they remain single, and their attitude towards marriage. It also provides insights into how social and family factors influence these women’s life experiences, self-image and their attitude towards marriage. Another significant contribution of this study is that it gives voice to the newly emerged group of never-married educated women in a developing country. It is noteworthy that the participants in this study were living a fulfilling single life, but attempted to cope with the pressure from family and society and their strong desire to marry and follow traditional Chinese norms.

The current study is limited in the following aspects. First, a small convenient sample was used and generalization to the wider population cannot be made. Yet generalization is not a purpose of a phenomenological study. The purpose is to generate new theoretical propositions (Fig. 1). Second, telephone interviews might limit the depth of the interview conversation. Without face to face interaction, participants may not have felt comfortable to be completely open and honest in their responses. But as the majority of the interview lasted about one hour, some amount of rapport was developed that would allow some degree of honesty and openness.

Based on the findings from the current study, directions for further research are indicated. In Fig. 1 several propositions are forwarded for further study. The phenomenological approach is a good way to understand participants’ perspectives and listen to their true voices. Future research could improve the methodology by conducting face-to-face interviews with more participants to obtain in-depth and comprehensive knowledge of this phenomenon. Another meaningful direction would be to ask questions about coping strategies and the environmental influences that make singlehood more bearable. This information could be valuable to counselors...
who could begin to develop a theoretical approach for helping older single Chinese females.

In summary, this study is unique in that it investigates a previously ignored personal and cultural phenomenon in mainland China. Nine important themes were identified that will hopefully contribute to enhanced professional understanding of this experience and possibly motivate more studies of the older, single, Chinese female.

References


Cui, Xiaolu (2011). A brief analysis of the love and marriage problems about older single, Chinese female. Hopefully contribute to enhanced professional understanding of this experience and possibly motivate more studies of the older, single, Chinese female.

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