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Single Women in Urban China and the "Unmarried Crisis":

Gender Resilience and Gender Transformation

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Abstract

In contemporary China, a palpable sense of concern pervades discourse on (heterosexual) marriage as a successful marriage is commonly perceived to be ever more difficult to realize. A closer look at the discourses around the so-called "unmarried crisis," and the plight of the single woman in the city in particular, is fruitful because it can index the tensions and contradictions wrought by broader social changes in Chinese society that have accompanied rapid economic growth in recent decades. This study is especially motivated by keen interest in contemporary gender relations, women's changing social roles and identities, and gender equality. Drawing upon preliminary ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Beijing in June 2008, I analyze the experiences and stories of a handful of single (ever-, never-married) women who are over age 25, and thus over the ideal, as well as the average, age of marriage. My goal is to understand what being single means from their perspectives, including to what degree marriage is central to their self-identities and life goals. From their experiences, I hope to gain a sense of whether or not this trend inspires new conceptions and practices of femininity and womanhood, and family and kinship, in contemporary China.

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Introduction: China's "Unmarried Crisis"[1]

In contemporary China, a palpable sense of concern pervades discourse on (heterosexual) marriage as a successful marriage is commonly perceived to be ever more difficult to realize. The trials and tribulations of dating, marriage, and divorce are popular topics in fiction, television serials, and films as well as Internet blogs. An entire industry to help people solve marital problems has sprung up, comprising expert advice columns and self-help books, television talk shows, professional marriage counselors, divorce lawyers, and a plethora of creative match-making services.

Statistics validate such malaise. China's marriage rate has steadily declined since 1987 (See Chinese families become smaller…). Despite overall population increase, the numbers of couples officially registering first marriages has fallen by some 3.5 million between 1992 and 2005 (See Wang et al. 2008). At the same time, China's divorce rate continues an upward swing. In 1985, 450,000 million divorces were granted. In 2005, 1.79 million couples divorced-- three times as many (See Wang et al. 2008).[2] And from 2005 to 2006, the divorce rate increased from 1.37 to 1.46 divorces per 1,000 people, as 1.9 million divorces were registered in 2006 (See Divorce, Chinese style). The national divorce rate is around 20%, but is higher in cities, earning the dubious distinction of matching the US rate of nearly 50% in places like Beijing (Yardley 2005a,b).

Related to the overall drop in marriages is the steady increase over the past two decades in the average age at first marriage, likewise most notable in the large cities. In 1981, the legal age at first marriage was raised from 20 to 22 for men and from 18 to 20 for women, to encourage later marriage in the interest of slowing population growth (Xiao 2005: 254).[3] In 1985, the singulate mean age at first marriage was 23.6 for men and 21.8 for women (Das Gupta and Li 1999: 646 table 1). By 1999, it had risen to 24.8 for men and 23.1 for women (http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=GenderStat&f=inID%3A20). In Beijing in 2007, the average age at first marriage for men was 28.2 years and 26.1 years for women (See Blue book reflects …) The situation has led some to label urban singles "marriage averse" or "afraid of marriage" (See Wang et al. 2008). The generations of "singletons" born post-(19)80 under the stricter, "one-child" urban family planning policy are alleged to exemplify the trend, as well as "flash" marriages and divorces, due to their stereotypically self-centered

[1] See "Chinese women waiting longer…"
[2] Much of the increase is attributed to the 2003 marriage law revisions that streamlined the divorce process for no-fault divorces (See e.g., Yardley 2005 a,b).
[3] Later marriage correlates to a lower birth rate.

and irresponsible natures (See Wang et al. 2008; Young couples quick to give up …).[4] Urban single women are similarly castigated for being too picky or too modern and cosmopolitan, or are pitied for being overlooked, and called "leftover ladies" (*shengnü*) (See Waiting for Mr. Right…; White-collar women troubled …).

In China (as elsewhere) heterosexual marriage has long been the prerequisite for the family formation and continuity,[5] and marriage has been nearly universal.[6] Along with childbirth, it is the central marker of adulthood. Family in turn is an important arena of gender socialization and identity making. For much of Chinese history, a woman's identity, role, and status derived from her kinship position and membership in a kinship group (Barlow 1994). Today, femininity is still associated with those characteristics befitting a "traditional" "virtuous wife and good mother,"[7] although women's social status may depend more on the conjugal relationship than ever before (Xiong 2005). As a social and economic entity, the family unit is the building block for the modern nation-state, as the producer of citizenry and of labor. Symbolically, a harmonious family begets harmonious society and a stable polity. Given the paramount significance of family historically and culturally in China, it is no wonder that shifts in marriage patterns garner extensive attention and cause consternation. Thus, although the state encourages late marriage as part of its effort to limit family size, the specter of large cohorts of unmarried singles raises alarm. Indeed, when releasing the recent data on unwed singles, the Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau warned: "problems with relationships or marriage not only affect citizens' work, study, or life, but also bring about uncertainty to society as a whole" (Cao 2007).

A closer look at the discourses around the so-called "unmarried crisis," and the plight of the single woman in the city in particular, is fruitful because it can index the tensions and contradictions wrought by broader social changes in Chinese society that have accompanied rapid economic growth in recent decades. This study is especially motivated by keen interest in contemporary

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[4] However, not all discourse is negative. Serious attempts are made to understand the trends. For example, young people are lauded for exercising caution in selecting a spouse because it suggests they hold monogamous marriage in highest regard, and want to avoid divorce (See Wang et al. 2008).

[5] The family is literally reproduced through procreation and also reproduced as a socio-economic unit, as marriage entails transfer of labor and property, and symbolically as it perpetuates the ancestral line.

[6] Compared historically with Western Europe, Asia as a whole and China in particular had a very low percentage of never-married women (Watkins 1984). A survey conducted with 200,000 farm families in China around 1930 found fewer than 1 in 1,000 women were never-married (Ibid). Even so-called sworn sisters or marriage resisters of Guangdong and Hong Kong in the early 20th century were ritually married.

[7] Even socialist labor heroines and model workers exuded feminine virtues, such as being self-sacrificing (i.e., exhibiting a maternal "nature") for the ultimate greater good of the country as well as the family, although more visible markers of gender difference were muted (see e.g., Gail Hershatter's work).

gender relations, women's changing social roles and identities, and gender equality. Drawing upon preliminary ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Beijing in June 2008,[8] I analyze the experiences and stories of a handful of single (ever-, never-married) women who are over age 25, and thus over the ideal, as well as the average, age of marriage. My goal is to understand what being single means from their perspectives, as women who fall outside the norm or, more positively, are trendsetters. How does marital status (rather, the state of being single) figure into their self-identity and daily life experience? Do their self-perceptions reinforce or contest mainstream gender conceptions? What insights into current gender relations and equality do single women's experiences provide? Some experts argue that delayed marriage is a marker of women's greater independence due to improved social and economic status (e.g., CASS sociologist Wang Zhenyu cited in Waiting for Mr. Right). Are women then single by choice, and content with their situation? Might this trend inspire new conceptions and practices of femininity and womanhood in contemporary China, or even new formulations of family and kinship?

Methods and Organization

This research is very much in its beginning stages. During June 2008 I was able to collect some secondary materials, attend a singles networking event, and establish rapport with nine key informants. Each was interviewed during a 2-3 hour session. In addition, I spent at least an afternoon or evening if not a full day with all but one of the women, participating in everyday activities like window shopping, going to a park, hanging out at home, or meeting with their friends in a bar or club, in order to build up rapport and get a sense of their personalities and lifestyles. This paper draws upon their words and experiences as well as secondary source materials.

The informants were all heterosexual women. They ranged in age from 25-38; the majority was over 30. Two were divorced from foreign spouses, and one was divorced from a Chinese man. The others had never been married. None were cohabitating with men, but two were currently in a sexual relationship with men. All nine had urban household registration (*hukou*). Of the nine, two were recent migrants to Beijing from small cities in other provinces. Most of the others were originally from Beijing (4) or Shanghai (2), and seven had registration for either city. In addition, one had US permanent residency and a Hong Kong residence permit; three others had also previously

[8] One set of interviews was conducted in Lund, Sweden, in May 2008.

lived in Hong Kong. Three held MBA degrees earned abroad, and one had a PhD from a top domestic university and had done postdoctoral research abroad. All four had traveled abroad frequently for business or research. Three others had earned college degrees from elite universities in China and had likewise traveled abroad for work or leisure. One migrant woman had a high school diploma and had taken some courses toward an associate's degree (*dazhuan*). The other migrant women had only a primary school education. The professions of the women were as follows. One was an academic, two worked in finance, two worked in a foreign-owned industry, and two worked in media; their monthly salaries ranged from 25,000-75,000RMB. Both of the migrant women worked in hotel service. One was a front-desk manager earning a monthly salary of about 2,500RMB and the other was a chambermaid earning about 1,000RMB.

A host of factors have been shown to contribute to the trend toward late- and non-marriage among women in China's largest cities. Among them are demographic factors combined with cultural particularities shaping the marriage market, women's increased education and employment opportunities, a competitive market economy that demands long hours of young people, an emphasis on romance and love as the basis of marriage, a growing acceptance of premarital sex and cohabitation, the rising costs associated with marriage (e.g. housing, ceremony), enjoyment of single life, and doubts about marriage. At the same time, each woman has her own unique personal history of being single. Below, I delineate how some of these factors are reflected in women's own narratives and experiences. At the same time, I discuss additional themes that emerged from the women's stories that suggest alternative ways of looking at the issue. Throughout I note how gender influences their choices and decisions on marriage.

A Marriage Squeeze?

Nationwide, China actually has a surfeit of bachelors due to what demographers refer to as a "marriage squeeze" created by a shortage of potential brides. The female deficit is in turn attributed to sex discrimination exercised through son preference and sex-selective new reproductive technologies (Li et al. 2005; Das Gupta and Li 1999). China has a convention of men marrying slightly younger women and women marrying slightly older

men.[9] Hence Das Gupta and Li calculate the bride shortage by comparing ratios of males to younger females by five-year male birth cohort (1999: 647, tables 2&3). They predict that at least 12 per cent of men born after 1985 will be unable to find wives (1999: 633). That is, the marriage market from 2013 forward will be particularly imbalanced (See Li et al. 2005). These so-called "bare sticks" are predominantly poor, rural men, and have received much attention.

Nevertheless, the proportion of single women relative to men is increasing, and among certain age groups in urban areas especially it is already greater.[10] This imbalance perhaps can also be explained in part by a "marriage squeeze" demographic. To explain the theory succinctly: women have a shorter window of time than do men in which to find a spouse and get married. In urban China today, a general consensus held by men and women alike is that the ideal age of marriage for women ranges between 25-28 years old, peaks at age 30, and falls off dramatically thereafter. (In rural areas it is much lower, but the same principle applies. See Gaetano 2008). The ideal age of marriage for men starts at 30 and extends to age 40, before beginning to decrease (See Chai 2008...).[11]

The pairing of younger women with older men follows a practical logic. In seeking out potential spouses in the contemporary setting,[12] men tend to prioritize women's age, looks and personality; as beauty is perceived to decrease with age, women's marriage "shelf-life" is thus shorter than men's. Xia, age 35, shared with me this sexist, albeit humorous, ditty circulating on the Internet conveys a popular sentiment that women's desirability declines with age.

> A 20-year old woman is like a basketball, everyone scrambling for it;
> A 30-year old woman is like a ping pong ball, everyone hitting it back and forth
> A 40-year old woman is like a soccer ball, everyone wanting to kick it

[9] However, historically this was not always the dominant or only pattern. For example, at the turn of the century in South China, a common practice for poorer families involved adopting a young girl as a daughter-in-law who could first serve as a nursemaid to her younger future husband.
[10] A recent 1% population sampling survey conducted by the Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau found a 1.6% increase in the population of singles over age 15, among which the proportion of women was 0.9% higher than men (Cao 2007).
[11] Women's opportunities for remarriage may also be fewer than men's (See Yardley 2005 a,b). However, remarriage is on the increase, especially in large cities (See Wang et al. 2008).
[12] It should be noted that the criteria for (heterosexual) mate selection have varied in China historically.

> A 50-year old woman is like golf balls, the further away it is hit, the better.[13]

At the same time, women tend to prioritize men's salary, career status, and future financial prospects; men under 30 years of age are less likely to meet these criteria, hence are less desirable potential mates.

These normative marriage patterns are reflected in and may be reinforced by institutional gender inequality. First, as mentioned previously, state policy and law legitimate the convention that men marry younger women. Second, women generally face greater employment discrimination, especially after marriage and childbirth, and discrimination increases with age. Reportedly, some career women hide the fact of their marriage from management, out of fear that they will be passed over for promotions or otherwise placed on the so-called Mommy Track[14] (See More career women…). Here again, state policy stipulating earlier retirement for women (age 55) than for men (age 60) lends credibility to differential, if not discriminatory, treatment of older women in the workforce. Together these factors may compound women's economic and social dependency on men.

In the second half of this paper I discuss how my informants crafted identity in light of these normative constructions of gender and marriage that largely denigrate single women over 25. The informants' narratives collectively touched upon several themes, which I indicate with headings and sub-headings. To illustrate, I either quote directly from the informants or I present anecdotes from their life stories as told to me. In the "discussion" sections I provide a short summary of the informants' orientations to the various narrative threads, and analyze their significance. In particular, I note that many themes resonate with narratives of singleness by women elsewhere in the world today.

Marital Status and Self-Image: Explaining Singleness

In China as in many societies throughout history, single women are regarded as a "deficit" or "deviant" identity that requires justification (Allen and Picket 1987; Reynolds et al. 2007). In this section I consider how women articulated the causes and processes that led to their current single status.

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[13] Translation mine, from the original:
20岁的女孩像橄榄球，人人抢，30岁的女人像乒乓球，人人打来打去，40岁的女人像足球,
人人都想踢，50岁的女人像高尔夫球，扔的越远越好。

[14] The Mommy Track refers to how mothers (and perhaps all women) in the workforce are unfairly regarded as less committed to their jobs and less capable of focusing on their work, allegedly due to the distractions of their maternal responsibilities.

Too old?

My informants were in accord that most men in China seek women younger than themselves. “It’s too late for romance and love. Men don’t want a woman as old as I,” 35-year old Juhua said frankly. A majority of informants had hope of marrying (again) someday, but were realistic in their expectations of what men were available to them and whom they would most likely attract. Twenty-five year old Mei from Sichuan felt pressured to wed by age 30. Having been badly deceived by a two-timing Beijing bachelor, she learned not to expect too much from marriage. “I’m not reaching for the stars,” she said. She does not demand that her future husband own a car or a house. He need only have a steady job and future prospects. Juhua said she would be happy to find a divorced man over 45, with or without kids. Moreover, she felt someone at this age would be serious about the relationship and marriage. In these various ways, single women adjusted their desires to meet the reality of a constrained marriage market.

Unattractive?

Given the common perception that men seek beautiful women, it is not surprising to learn that single women are stereotyped as unattractive. Most informants sought reassurance of their good looks or desirability. The usually self-confident 35-year old Juhua wondered aloud why it was that, as far as she knew, men didn't find her attractive: "I am not so bad looking, though neither am I beautiful. I am average. So, why [aren't they attracted to me]?" However, she also acknowledged that she had not felt attracted to any of the men introduced to her by her married-couple friends.

Thirty-two year old divorcé Rong told me she owns dozens of formal gowns, which she used to wear to parties that she enjoyed attending when she was studying abroad. Now, back in Beijing, she frequently turns down invitations to go out to dinner, clubs, or parties, because she prefers a quiet life alone. However, she confessed, "sometimes I just put them on in front of the mirror. So I know I can still look gorgeous if I dress up." Clearly, Rong took pleasure and pride in her appearance and her potential to appear attractive to others. But at present, she had no time for or interest in socializing.

At 35, Xia values her still youthful looks and vigor, and puts much effort into maintaining them. However, her conception of youthfulness is not explicitly focused on appearances or attracting men so much as attaining well-being and enjoying exercise. She swims regularly and has been practicing yoga at a fitness center for four years. Recently she had taken up boxing and was

looking into salsa dancing. Her knowledge of TCM was extensive and she often advised me on what herbal tonics or supplements to take to stay healthy. Every month she has a facial and full-body massage. Her parting words to me, which I received as a text message at the Beijing airport, urged me to think positively: "Dare to dream and you will never grow old." Xia's dream involved getting married, but for the time being she emphasized the importance of caring for the self, advising me: "Drink lots of water, and love one's self and one's body."

Wrong time, wrong guy

Nearly all of the women in the study had experienced at least one serious relationship that did not lead to marriage due to it being the wrong time for marriage, or the wrong guy to marry. Yuling, age 36, turned down a marriage proposal from her "first love," her undergraduate classmate at university. At the time she wasn't ready for marriage, because she wanted to first develop herself, pursue her own interests and discover her own talents. The ex-boyfriend eventually married and had a child, but they stay in touch. Her second love, a Hong Kong man, broke up with her because his prejudiced parents could not accept their son marrying a Mainlander. For the past seven years, Yuling has been deeply involved with a married family man, 15 years her senior, with whom she believes she has "Destiny" (*yuanfen*). She therefore has no regrets about her past.

Both Ning Wu, 38, and Rong, 30, had a similar experience of marrying the wrong guy. Each married a foreigner, separated from their spouse after about 6 months, and initiated divorce. Ning Wu met her American husband in graduate school in the US. After marriage, he became abusive and exhibited signs of mental instability. She moved away from him but provided emotional support to him from afar while he received professional psychological intervention. Although he made good progress in treatment, she felt she "couldn't stay married to him after what I'd been through," and proceeded to initiate a divorce. Rong met her Korean husband while an undergraduate in China. She set aside her own plans to attend graduate school in the US to marry and settle in his native county, but only on the condition that he devote himself to learning English so they could apply to study in the US together. But not long into her marriage she discovered her husband preferred going out drinking with friends to studying. His "inability to hold up his end of the bargain," combined with his unwillingness to censure his parents for putting inordinate pressure on her to conceive a child, drove her to separate and then pursue divorce. However, he contested her decision so the process dragged out

for two years. In retrospect, she said to me, she has realized that her-ex husband completely lacked ambition, discipline, and ability.

Juhua says she missed many opportunities to have a boyfriend, especially in her 20s, because she was impervious to men's interest in her. When male classmates would invite her to do something with them, she would just tell them truthfully that she was too busy studying. She didn't realize at the time that her refusal to their advances would lead to her being single at 35. Now she regrets not making time for dating. In retrospect, she knows college was the best time to meet someone. Most of her married friends met their spouses while in university. Channels for socializing grow narrower after graduation, so there is less opportunity to meet new people. Juhua's observation was shared by many other informants.

Character flaws (self)

Several informants reflected on their own personal shortcomings that may have prevented them from finding romance or having a successful relationship. Juhua berated herself for being too independent, too strong, and too inflexible. Her friends likewise criticize her for not being "gentle" (*wenrou*). She explained to me that men do not want a woman like her who expresses strong opinions, especially ones counter to theirs. Indeed, she frightened off one prospective boyfriend not long ago by arguing about politics on a date! She attributed her strong personality to having become a responsible adult at an early age, taking care of her younger sibling following the early death of their mother. By linking her nature to childhood experience, Juhua indicated that she would be unlikely to ever change.

Twenty-seven year old Huanhuan likewise feels she is too "open" for most Chinese men to accept. They judge her harshly, finding her too experienced and too worldly, and not feminine enough. "They just don't get my jokes," she complained. She wishes Chinese men could accept her as she is, and recognize that, deep down, she is really a "virtuous wife and good mother" who longs to marry and have "a big family with many children."

On the other hand, Huanhuan was wary of being too "weak" around men and in a relationship. When she discovered her first serious boyfriend, a college classmate, was cheating on her, her first reaction was to forgive him. The moment was an epiphany for her. She recognized in herself the same despicable tendency displayed by her mother, who for years excused Huanhuan's father's infidelities. Determined to be stronger than her mother ever was, Huanhuan forced herself to break up with her boyfriend.

Similarly, 38-year-old Fang Min broke up with her long-term boyfriend several years ago because she did not like the subservient way she behaved after they moved in together. Like a perfect housewife she did all the laundry, cleaning and cooking. Reflecting on this, she exclaimed perplexed, "But I hate cooking!" For a few years now, Fang Min has lived independently in an apartment she owns, sharing space with three long-haired cats. She has decided against marriage on principle, the only one of my informants to do so, because she does not like the person she would likely become if she married. Indeed, her more recent break-off of a long-term affair with a married man was premised on a similar rejection of a stereotypical and unequal gender role. She became angered by the many demands he placed on her to prevent their relationship from being discovered by his wife and kids, such as not calling on weekends.

Character flaws (other)

The testimonies in the previous section imply that women were as critical of men as they were of themselves in apportioning blame for failed or missed relationships. Although Juhua was self-critical, she was also other-critical. For example, she said that she would happily marry a man who earned less than her, or who was less educated, but no man she knew would accept that: "Men care about face too much," she concluded.

Other informants shared this opinion about Chinese men in particular. Huanhuan was convinced that "Chinese men are very insecure," especially in regard to their virility and sexual performance. Huanhuan seemed to be regarded by her male friends as something of an expert on sex. Many times she explained to Chinese lovers and platonic friends (including her friend's husband), that the size of male genitalia was not related to race or ethnicity, nor was proportional to height or weight. She says she will never tell her Chinese lovers that she has slept with Western men, because they would feel insecure. Moreover, when she is with them physically she must constantly reassure them of their masculinity and sexual prowess, which "is a real drag." Their insecurity means she cannot be entirely truthful with them about her own sexuality. Thus, she has concluded, "I cannot truly be myself with them."

Like Huanhuan, both Rong and Ning Wu favored western men. These women have foreign coworkers, former classmates, and friends, and hence ample opportunity to meet foreign men for romance. But their preference is not just happenstance. It is also their rejection of rigid codes of behavior applied to their gender by Chinese men that propels them to seek out Western men, whom they believe to be less bothered by their lack of

"traditional Asian femininity." In this regard they are a lot like young professional Japanese single women studied by Karen Kelsky (2001).

Many informants also share with their Japanese counterparts a desire for a cosmopolitan partner, which some felt they could not find among local men. For example, on a first date with a Chinese guy arranged by her grandfather, Huanhuan suggested going out for *sushi*, and was aghast to learn that her date had never tried it. Moreover, men from wealthier foreign countries were seen by some to embody modernity regardless of their particular class status or family background. Both Mei and Xia were intrigued by Western men: each told me a fairy tale about someone they knew who had met a foreign man in Beijing, fallen in love, and then emigrated. But Mei bemoaned that her inability to speak fluent English would impair her chances of having such a happy ending herself. She had looked into English lessons but tuition for the course would cost 6 months' salary! Xia said she was puzzled by foreign men, for they seemed to be attracted to Chinese women whom she did not consider pretty. Her ignorance about them combined with her poor English language skills ruled out her dating foreign men.

Summary

In this section I investigated how women explained being single, and I conclude that none are single by choice *per se*. Rather, some postponed marriage--purposefully or unwittingly--as they dedicated themselves to their own careers and interests. Others simply have not yet met the right man. And Huanhuan, still in her 20s, just enjoys dating different men for the time being. Those who had bad experiences with men had to end a relationship to maintain their own well-being or integrity. Their narratives are complex, as are narratives of singleness generally (Gordon 1994). Their stories contain ambivalences and contradictions common to testimonies of single women elsewhere in the world, such as a mixture of chance and choice, or fate and agency (e.g. Reynolds et al. 2007), of voluntary and involuntary results (e.g. Stein 1981), and internal and external causal factors (e.g. Lewis and Moon 1997). In short, their single status seems to result from decisions made when faced with imperfect options. Their experiences also show their frustration with conflicting gender identities. As modern women, they are encouraged to pursue education and develop their careers, and be self-sufficient and independent. They also desire to follow the traditional path of marriage and family. The possibility to "have it all" is made difficult when a potential mate, and society in general, judges them by inflexible gender norms into which they do not easily fit. Negotiating these contradictions motivates them to

postpone marriage, or to turn toward Western men, or to turn from marriage altogether.

In the next section I consider how single women negotiate dual understandings of marriage as both a social and familial duty and a personal desire, as pursuit of the latter entailed postponement of marriage, and potentially staying single. Every informant felt social pressure to get married, and moreover felt obligated to respond to pressure put on them by their parents and elders, as well as from friends. At the same time, most had their own aspirations for marriage, which they viewed as an emotional as well as more practical pairing of two individuals.

Perspectives on Marriage

As a Duty

When she turned 26, Huanhuan's grandfather sat her down for a serious chat. He told her that biology determines age of marriage. Girls must marry before 25 or risk inability to bear children. He warned her that if she waited another year, she might start thinking differently and lose the desire to marry. Moreover, it was her duty (to the family) to marry in the coming year. Since then Huanhuan has been on two dates arranged by her grandparents, but she didn't find either of the men to be right for her, as they were not as open-minded, fluent in English, or worldly enough for her taste.

Juhua has been on several "coffee dates" arranged by her married-couple friends. She is willing to go on the dates, but also feels pressured to go because her friends think she should be married. In fact, she is shy when speaking with strangers and finds the dates awkward. None has turned out well, as she found the men to be patronizing, as explained previously.

Yuling's and Fang Min's mothers have both been actively seeking eligible men to introduce to their daughters. Fang Min's mother attended match-making events in public parks, but her daughter refused to meet with the potential suitors. Recently though her mother has stopped making efforts. Fang Min explains, "My siblings all have children so my parents are content to leave me alone." Yuling's mother has doggedly scoured singles' advertisements in the newspapers, screened candidates, and set up dates for her daughter to meet eligible men. Yuling plays along, for she keeps her long-running affair with her married lover a secret even from her parents. She has met some very compatible men through such meetings, but not one who she felt was equal to her lover. Indeed, the dates only reinforce her commitment to her relationship.

As Personal Desire

Huanhuan says she shares her grandfather's goal of seeing herself wed, but she just won't settle for anyone. Rather, she is looking for a "true love." Nearly every informant shared her ambition, except a few who had soured on romance due to past experiences of heartbreak.

Xia, an optimist, believes that men want more than just beauty and sex in a spouse. (For such desires, she noted, they could simply turn to prostitutes – whom she described as rural women looking to make some quick money.) "In marriage, men seek a woman they can love, because only feelings can make a marriage last." Despite having been jilted by her boyfriend of seven years, Xia maintained a romantic outlook. At age 26 she had fallen in love with a divorced man sixteen years her senior. Her parents strongly objected to the match due to their age difference and the fact of his being divorced, but she followed her heart. However, out of consideration for them she declined to marry him before he left China to pursue business opportunities in Latin America. She chose to wait for him to return, or to send for her once he could support them both. Meanwhile she enrolled in Spanish language lessons, planned their wedding ceremony, and communicated regularly with him through Internet and telephone. She supported his decision to hire a translator, a Chinese college student studying abroad and fluent in Spanish, to help his business succeed. But she does not forgive him for marrying the translator, which he did purely for practical business reasons, thus breaking her heart. Moreover, by marrying someone he did not truly love, she lost all respect for him. Though her friends scold her for being naïve and overly trusting of men, she is sure that she will find someone who can make her feel happy. Xia's idealistic view of love surely helps her to keep a positive view of her future and make sense of the past, as it puts her on moral high ground compared with her ex-fiancé. It also distinguishes her favorably from other women who might pursue men for only money (or sex).

Yuling's faith that she and her lover are meant for each other makes her sure that the difficulties they face as a couple due his "unavailability" (i.e. his being married) will somehow be overcome. She describes their relationship as an intellectual and spiritual partnership. Through the relationship each has matured emotionally and grown individually. She credits her career success to the relationship, for although she is ambitious, it is her partner who gives her confidence and strength to move forward, especially in face of the sex discrimination she has encountered in her professional life. Paradoxically, she admires her lover's deep commitment to his wife and grown children. From

Yuling's perspective, his generous economic support to his family makes him a good husband and father.

Likewise, Huanhuan has learned a lot about herself and relationships through her successive romances. She no longer views marriage as just being about securing a future through money, a car, and a house. "Relationships are about give and take," she explained. She is currently seeing an older, divorced foreign man, and feels she has grown a lot through their relationship. She says her married girlfriends are also learning about relationships and maturing emotionally --- by having extra-marital affairs.

Rong's outlook on romance was cautious at best, and this was understandable given her past experience. Her self-confidence in her appearance and the satisfaction she derived her professional accomplishments were tempered by her sense of failure. In her words: "I have been unsuccessful in my personal life." She felt her divorce to be a black mark on her otherwise impeccable resume. The divorce was finalized over five years ago, but her parents have hidden this news from extended relatives, friends, and neighbors because they find it scandalous. Her parents' unsupportive attitude reinforces Rong's sense of ineptitude, of having fallen short of their high expectations of her. She views her life as one uphill struggle to prove to others, especially to her parents, that she is not just mediocre, and her divorce was a major setback. Rong's past experience has hardened her heart. She loved someone deeply, but it didn't lead to happiness. To protect herself from being hurt again, she has grown a shell around her heart. Although she is not actively seeking a partner, when she is ready to she will choose someone who is financially stable, as her ex-husband most certainly was not.

Mei, who had fallen in love with a Beijing guy only to discover that he was involved with another woman at the same time, also has lost faith in love. "Everyone is just out for money and for themselves," she said cynically.

Summary

In the above section I demonstrated how women negotiated pressure put on them by others who remind them of their duty to marry, and their own desire to wait for the right person to marry. Like women elsewhere in Asia where pressure to marry is great, such as in Japan (Rosenberger 2007) and Indonesia (Situmorang 2007), my informants developed creative strategies to cope. I also considered their ambivalence over whether to marry for love or for some more practical reasons. Interestingly, most informants implied that they had gained new knowledge, about themselves or about others, in the process of dating and falling in love, as well as through the painful process of heartbreak.

Thus they turned the process of being single (or becoming single again) into a rich experience, counter to any stereotype of time wasted. This aspect of their narratives is worth exploring further, as I do not think it has been discussed in literature on singleness historically or internationally. Yet it resonates with ideas about modernity as a project of self-making (Giddens 1992).

Next I explore these women's identities by examining their lateral social relationships, including with family of origin, and their views of gender difference. I look at how they reconcile their current life trajectory as unmarried and childless women with the normative life course, in which adulthood for women is attained through a linear progression from daughter to wife and mother.

Perspectives on Woman's Life Course

On the one hand, most informants ascribed to a belief in innate gender differences and believed marriage and motherhood to be a fundamental aspect of womanhood. On the other hand, they were actively constructing their lives around alternative conceptions of female personhood, rooted in traditional kinship roles (e.g., dutiful daughters), as well as more modern roles (e.g., as financiers of family members and entrepreneurs), which hold out the possibility for challenging normative ideas of gender and life course.

Yuling is the eldest of three daughters and is both filial and responsible. She used her earnings from her corporate job in a foreign industry to purchase her parents a new apartment in the city and to pay her younger sister's university tuition. One of her sisters is married and has a son, whom Yuling adores. Every night she speaks to her nephew before he goes to sleep. Speaking of him, Yuling speculated that perhaps she could accept never having children, because she so enjoys being an aunt. Although she had always longed to have a big family of her own, her desire to maintain her relationship with the married man was greater. She was more or less resigned to the situation. However, she adamantly believes men and women are fundamentally different. "Every woman needs a man. Women need men to support and care for them."

Yet, Yuling also offered evidence that women can be mutually supportive, even in regard to career development. Over one year ago she organized a meeting of several of her single female friends, all professionals. Since then, the original group has grown to about a dozen members who meet monthly to network and share knowledge about developing their careers and starting

businesses. Four of its members have already launched successful small businesses.

Juhua also believes men and women are naturally different. But, unlike Yuling, she believes that it is easier for a woman to stay single than it is for a man, in part because a woman can forego sex whereas a man cannot. In her opinion, a man who foregoes sex with a woman is abnormal, though not necessarily gay, and for this reason she shies away from dating men who are still bachelors at the age of 40. Also like Yuling, Juhua feels quite satisfied in her kinship roles, and does not particularly want children. In fact, she has been like a mother to her younger sister since her teens, when their mother passed away. Currently she visits her father in his apartment almost every weekend, and also spends a lot of time with her sister, brother-in-law, and niece. With a fulfilling academic job, an apartment of her own, numerous friends and many things to do in a cosmopolitan city, she rarely feels lonely. "I like my life," she said frankly.

Xia likewise owns a big apartment in the suburbs. But she doesn't live in it because she feels lonely. Instead she stays with her retired parents in their cramped apartment in the city. Even living with them, she often feels lonely, for example when it is raining and she has no one to call to chat with. "I don't have many people to talk to," she said. She also believes that if she doesn't ever marry, she would become weird (*guai*). In her opinion, all spinsters become eccentric mainly because they do not have sex. She also said, matter-of-factly, that she would unlikely be financially self-sufficient should she remain single, at least not with her current employer, because the company rarely promoted women and also they would probably let her go early. (As I noted above, the legal retirement age for women is lower than for men, compounding some single women's concern about the future.) As I explained already, Xia kept a positive attitude that her active search for a husband would pan out. Nonetheless, she also had a contingency plan. She would turn her passion for fitness and health food into a business: a combined yoga center and organic food store/café in the suburbs. Indeed, she was already looking into training as a yoga instructor.

Summary

The discussion of the narratives presented above suggests that single women do not only identify with the linear life course, or define themselves solely through relationships to marriage and children. Careers, home ownership, urban consumer culture, friendships, and family of origin provide important and satisfying sources of emotional fulfillment and identity. Research on

unmarried women in Europe, N. America and Australia historically and into the present, as well as in contemporary Japan, demonstrates they have played important emotional, social, and economic roles in their families of origin as well as in religious organizations and civic groups (e.g. Adams 1996; Allen and Pickett 1987; Berend 2000; Burnley 1987; Rosenberger 2007; Watkins 1984).[15] In turn, single women obtained legitimate social identities from these roles. My research indicates similar findings for single women in contemporary China. Informants held diverse views on female sexuality. For some, single status did not preclude sexual relationships. Such views reflect a general trend in China toward greater tolerance of sex independent from marriage and procreation (e.g. Jeffreys 2007).

Conclusion

The narratives of single women in Beijing discussed here are complex and contain many ambivalences and contradictions. They thus express the tensions and contradictions of women confronted with numerous opportunities and choices, and new expectations and desires, including for both successful and fulfilling careers and marriages, which are not easily compatible with more rigid gender norms. On the one hand their stories illustrate the lack of social acceptance and support for singles in contemporary China. On the other hand, they indicate that single women are constructing meaningful lives, maintaining their independence and integrity, building networks of friends or other singles, and emphasizing kinship roles in family of origin. In these ways, their experiences are not dissimilar to those of single women elsewhere in the world today.

[15] An interesting exception is the single Batak women from Medan studied by Situmorang (2007: 300), who as unmarried women (along with unmarried men) are excluded from familial *adat* activities.

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