Understanding Singleness: A Phenomenological Study of Single Women in Beijing and Singapore

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Abstract

The aim of this phenomenological study was to gain a better understanding in the lives of single women by exploring their thoughts and experiences of being single. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews of a group of six well-educated, ethnic Chinese single women aged between 30 and 45 living in Beijing and Singapore. Transcribed interviews were analysed through reading and rereading and culling for like phrases and themes that are then grouped to form clusters of meaning. Through this process, we found four salient themes: (a) the women had equivocal feelings over the reasons they were single; (b) they recognized the advantages, disadvantages, and ambivalence of singlehood; (c) they took a pragmatic approach towards their singleness; and (d) they coped singleness with various practical strategies. Implications related to clinical practice and areas of further research are discussed.

Keywords

Single Women, Phenomenological Study, Lived Experience, Beijing, Singapore

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Introduction

Singlehood is usually defined as the state of being unmarried or uninvolved in a romantic relationship (DePaulo, 2007). There may be assumptions out there that singles are frustrated, less worthy, or abandoned. Despite an increase in singlehood in recent years, this does not mean that the single life is not still wrapped in stigma (Strijbosch, 2015). Women may be particularly vulnerable to feeling stigma related to being single in Confucian societies. Although it originated in China, Confucianism has spread across South Asian regions including Singapore (Wang & Abbott, 2013). Confucian values emphasize heavily in marriage and childbearing, therefore getting married is considered a social responsibility, yet more women are increasingly postponing and even foregoing marriage (Gaetano, 2014).

In both China and Singapore, demographic trends indicate a growing number of single women. In China, the number of single women has risen significantly, from 5.5% of the population in 1995 to 21.6% in 2010 (Attané & Gu, 2014). The highest proportion of single women live in China's large cities of which Beijing tops the list (Fincher, 2016). Demographic statistics in Singapore show a similar trend. Over the last 10 years, the proportion of single women aged between 25 and 29 rose from 60.9% in 2007 to 68.1% in 2017 while the proportion of those aged 30 to 34 went up by 3.9 percentage points to 32.8% (Strategy Group, 2018). Notwithstanding this demographic trend, single women in these two societies dominated by large ethnic Chinese majorities continue to be viewed with concern by both the public and the

state. They are labelled pejoratively as "leftover ladies" in China or are seen as demographic threats in Singapore.

With the prevalence of singlehood among women in these two countries predicted to remain high, it behooves us to better understand the experiences of single women in the face of significant cultural, societal, and governmental pressures. Undoubtedly, single women experience pervasive ambivalence about their singleness (Sharp & Ganong, 2007) given that any absence of supports such as financial affordance, self-establishment, social supports, career establishment, and its stability will place them in a difficult social position (Dales, 2014). The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of single women. Single women were studied due to societal pressures for women to find a mate and produce children (Wang & Abbott, 2013). A few overarching questions guided our research:

(1) How do women experience their singleness in this inhospitable environment?
(2) What explanatory accounts do women give about their single status?
(3) What unique challenges do women face in negotiating singleness in a society that values marriage and children as essentials for women's life trajectories?

Literature Review

The Positive Aspects, Drawbacks and Ambivalence of Singlehood

In recent years, there has been increased interest in exploring the lived experienced of single women. Literature revealed a great variety of experiences to the life of singlehood: some enjoyed the perks of living singly, whereas some who are single may feel negative emotions or ambivalence about unviable potential mates. According to Erikson's (1994) pioneering work on human psychosocial development, healthy developing individuals pass through eight stages of development. During early adulthood, typically spanning 20 to 39 years old, the establishment of intimate and reciprocal relationships is emphasized. An inability to form such relationships may result in a sense of isolation, leading to feelings of darkness and angst. While Erikson (1994) did not specify marriage to be the only pathway to foster development at this stage, entry into a committed long-term romantic relationship is considered to be central to normative human development (DePaulo, 2007). People in such relationships are also viewed to be psychologically healthier and considerably happier than those who are single (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Conversely, some studies have explicitly associated singlehood to certain mental health and well-being risks, notably in the aspects of romantic and emotional loneliness (Adamczyk, 2016). Examples of other associated risks include higher levels of stress symptoms (Fong & Amatea, 1992), loneliness, and isolation (Sandfield & Percy, 2003). While there have been some recent studies observing more positive aspects pertaining to singlehood (e.g., single individuals may have stronger social ties and more social connections than married persons, Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016), these remain relatively rare. Given the possible risks to mental health and well-being associated with singlehood that many studies allude to, further research leading to a better understanding of the experiences of single women would be well-warranted.

However, there is a danger that these findings imply that singlehood among women is a health problem (Moore & Radtke, 2015). Instead, what has been commonly viewed as a problem is the societal predilection to perceive single women as problematic aberrations who fail to conform to the social and cultural norms of marriage and motherhood (DePaulo, 2007). In many cases, many "problems" faced by single women appear to be how they are perceived.

For example, studies show that single women, in particular, have often been perceived to be lonelier, less caring, and more dysfunctional (Byrne & Carr, 2005). In some social contexts, single women are derogatively labelled as "selfish, irresponsible and materialistic" (Yamada as cited in Dales, 2005).

On a different note, Lewis and Moon (1997) identified the unresolved and unrecognized ambivalences in single women. Their findings were built upon by the authors to develop concrete clinical recommendations for therapists. Similarly, Sharp and Ganong's (2007) phenomenological study made observations of pervasive uncertainty among single women, paving the way for a useful discussion on coping strategies. A growing awareness of this discrete social phenomenon of singlehood has fortunately led to more literature that is aimed at exposing such marginalization and stigmatization, thus allowing it to be more readily challenged (Reynolds, 2013; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003).

The Pragmatic Approach: Coping Strategies Towards Singlehood

A notable way in which the challenge of singleness has been mounted can be found in the growing body of research that explores the experience of single women about their pragmatic approach and the strategies used in overcoming singleness. These in-depth qualitative studies provide a more textured and detailed insight into the lives of these women, leading to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their complexities. For instance, Trimberger's (2005) in-depth interviews with single women led to the identification of key support elements that foster a fulfilled single life such as intimate relationships with friends and extended family. Also, the notion of "ohitorisama" coined by Iwashita (2001) suggests that, to legitimate their social presence, single women should overcome the obstacles of living alone by developing resistance to embarrassing social situations.

To some extent, the diversity among single women is often overlooked by researchers (Moore & Radtke, 2015). Single women are a heterogeneous group with different subgroups that live qualitatively different experiences (Sharp & Ganong, 2007). There is therefore considerable value in studying specific subgroups. Most qualitative studies on single women have been conducted in North American (e.g., Lewis & Moon, 1997; Moore & Radtke, 2015; Sharp & Ganong, 2007) and Western European countries (e.g., Reynolds, 2013; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Simpson, 2016). Nevertheless, as observed by Lesch and Van der Watt (2018) in their study of single women in South Africa, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of similar studies that have been conducted in more geographically diverse locations. These include China (Wang & Abbott, 2013), Indonesia (Situmorang, 2007), Israel (Lahad, 2013), Japan (Dales, 2014), Malaysia (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009); Nigeria (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014), and Poland (Adamcyzk, 2016). This present study seeks to contribute to this diverse and expanding pool of resources by exploring a different context wherein the experience of singles women can be understood and usefully applied.

Singlehood in the Context of Beijing and Singapore

From the Cultural Perspective

Singlehood among women in Beijing and Singapore, two urban societies dominated by large ethnic Chinese majorities, is associated with complex connotations that are linked to both culture and public policy. In China, single women near or over 30 years old have been pejoratively dubbed "sheng nu" or leftover women (Gaetano, 2014). These singles, who are often well-educated urbanized women, are considered devalued if they do not marry by a certain age (Wang & Abbott, 2013). This level of overt stigmatization, however, is uncommon

in Singapore. Nonetheless, there still is a stigma attached to being a single female that has been largely perpetuated through the idealization of marriage and a couple of cultures fostered by public policy (Strijbosch, 2015).

From the Institutional Perspective

In a way, the categorization and stigmatization of single women in Beijing and Singapore have found more modern roots. In Singapore, societal attitudes towards single women, particularly single graduate women, have been cast in a socio-economic light related to the country's demographic problems of very low fertility rates. Childbearing outside marriage is extremely rare in Singapore, accounting for fewer than 2% of births (Jones, 2012). Therefore, marriage is seen as the primary, if not the only catalyst for fertility. When a 1980 population census indicated that there was an increasing proportion of unmarried graduate women, the Government of Singapore established an agency, the Social Development Unit (SDU), to address this issue by actively matchmaking single graduate women (Williams, 2014). As a telling reflection of the stigma surrounding its intended target audience, the SDU was pejoratively nicknamed "Single, Desperate and Ugly" (Strijbosch, 2015). While the SDU has since been disbanded, media attention remains focused on the culpability of single women in the context of the country's low fertility rate (Au-yong, 2018) and government policies favouring marriage and motherhood, such as preferential public housing allocations, still remain firmly in place (Strijbosch, 2015; Williams, 2014). In China, on the other hand, the state interest in family planning has been dominated for the past four decades by the one-child policy, an initiative that the country is only beginning to unravel (Zhang, 2017). Recently, growing concerns over low fertility rates particularly in urban centres have shifted the Chinese Government's attention towards the number of growing number of singles. Concerns over the long-term adequacy of social support systems in particular have led to recent public discussion of several initiatives that have been popularly regarded as discriminatory towards singles, such as the taxing of childless people to pay into a "reproductive fund" and the establishing of preferential tax, education and housing policies for couples with children (Zuo, 2018). Whereas not as targeted and comprehensive as the state-led initiatives directed at single women in Singapore, policies such as these are likely to add to the categorization and stigmatization already felt by single women in China. The experience of single women living about the multiplicity of cultural and societal prejudices and pressures they face in Beijing and Singapore is explored in this study. This study explores these issues to promote a better understanding of what it means to be a single ethnic Chinese woman living in Beijing and Singapore.

The Researchers

A study is influenced by the unique worldview of the researchers. Before moving on to discuss methodology, we provide an overview of the personal context for the study: who we are, what drew us to the topic, and our personal investment in it. The first and second authors played an important part in creating this article, in solidifying thoughts, reflections, and arguments, and in helping the third author analyse and examine the data.

As the first author of this paper, my original research interest in undertaking this study emerged from two reasons: the first was my professional experiences as a developmental psychologist and lecturer and the second was as the main supervisor of the third author. Over the years of my professional experience, I observed the global demographic profile is changing in terms of delayed marriage, increased education, and career opportunity for women. A rise in women's social status has also resulted in the growing number of singles. Many women nowadays are degree-holders, exposing them to careers and incomes independent of men who

are supposed to be their guardians as defined by social norms and traditional customs. From the point of view of Confucian philosophy, Chinese have put much more emphasis on marriage. Upon interaction with a few of my students and clients who stay single after 30s, it was clear that marriage is not meant for everyone. I feel that it is a personal choice. Yet, mountains of research in developmental psychology tell me that it is not good for men to be single, no, nor women neither. And it overestimates considerably the likelihood that married people do much better than the unmarried or divorced. Actually, there are many women in the world who are single and do rather well for themselves. This inspired me to rethink singlehood as somewhat subjective and open to interpretation. My thought reminds me to take a fresh perspective in order to gain understanding of what it means for a woman to stay single in Confucius societies. As the second author of this paper, my interest on this topic is largely attributed to my personal experience as a single woman during my middle adulthood. Amid the shift of women's roles in the society, the stigma of a woman to get married is still deeply engrossed in the eastern society, typically in the Chinese culture. Experiencing my life as a single career woman who is pursuing the postgraduate study, I came to the realisation that any form of human relationship (i.e., married, single, divorced) is, in fact, a way of lived experienced either by choice or by force of an unfavourable outcome. To me, framing any individual with any set of roles or even expectations is rather unfair and biased. As an academician with an immense interest in research, I always believe that an empirical study can yield a more holistic and reliable interpretation of a social norm as such. Hence, getting involved in this study allowed me to examine and highlight the challenges of the single women in an empirical manner. More in-depth and personal narratives by the single women in this study offer a contextual overview towards singlehood in Singapore and Beijing; I think this social norm should be regarded as a fundamental facet of human development instead of being stereotyped as a social turmoil.

As a third author of this paper, my interest in singlehood evolved with my life experience being a single woman in China. From a young age, the idea of needing a partner is something that was so ingrained in my culture, and society set an expectation to get married at a certain age. If we are not working towards reaching the goal of marriage, there is a societal-enforced stigma surrounding women who do not marry. Completely unforeseen, I was also experiencing the social stigma single women are facing in the communities. I come from a traditional Chinese family, and every time, I get asked about my dating status without fail especially when I entered my 30s. People started to tag me a "leftover" behind my back to pressure me into marrying as early as possible. I wanted a fresh start in a new setting, so I decided to move to Singapore for my education. However, some people I used to know in high school had already gotten married and it made me question my choices. I began to wonder; do I need to get married? I know there should not be a rush to get married because not everyone is equipped for it. I have seen friends divorce or who are unhappy with their marriage. I believe being single should not be looked down upon. Many of those so-called "leftover woman" are likely happily single because they are independent and have good income. All of these led me to focus on the experiences of single women as the basis for my undergraduate research in order to better understand how they perceive and cope with singleness.

Method

Design

In our study, we used a phenomenological approach to collect and analyse the experiences of the participants. Broadly defined, a phenomenological study "is one that [is] focused on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experienced what they experience" (Patton, 1990, p. 71). A basic premise of phenomenological theory is that

reality is subjective and only fully understood from the perspective of the individual as everyone experiences life in a unique way (Moustakas, 1994). However, there is also recognition that lived experiences do not occur in a vacuum and can be socially shared (Patton, 1990). This is a particularly important consideration in the case of singlehood where the designation and widespread stigmatization of singles as a group can profoundly affect individual experiences (Byrne & Carr, 2005). In this study, therefore, we focus on the shared experience of singlehood as opposed to individual differences.

Positioned within the wider domain of phenomenology, we used a transcendental phenomenological approach which was pioneered by Edmund Husserl (2002). Interpreted, developed, and applied in various ways by subsequent phenomenological researchers (e.g., Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994), its application in this study essentially comprised five practical steps: (a) epoché, in which we as the researchers are aware of our own experience and feelings concerning the phenomenon and to set aside any judgement or bias during the study; (b) data collection, which was done through interviews that explored the participants' perception of their lived experiences; (c) data analysis that involved the highlighting of significant statements and the clustering of these significant statements into themes; (d) the writing of textural and structural descriptions based on those themes; and (e) the writing of a composite description that represented the essence of the experience which focused on the common experiences of the participants.

Participants

In keeping with the rationale of this study, it was important to recruit participants "who had directly experienced the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2002, p. 104). We recruited six women living in either Beijing or Singapore. We initially posted flyers including our study, names, and contact details on our social media pages to recruit potential participants in both regions listed. Once interested participants were contacted, we conducted an initial online phone screening. In the phone screening, we explained the study and our roles, as well as obtaining basic demographic information in order to ensure all participants fit the predefined criteria.

To be included in this study participants had to (a) identify as ethnic Chinese; (b) be over 30 years old; (c) not be married or in a committed long-term romantic relationship at the current time of the research or have never married; and (d) hold a tertiary qualification. The cut-off age of 30 was based on observations that for most North-Asian women the expected age of marriage is in their mid- to late-20s and that those still unmarried in their 30s form a distinct group (Ferguson, 2000). This is also in line with the preoccupation of Singaporean public policy with dwindling levels of fertility that drop significantly after age 30 (Straughan, 2013). To encourage participation across the wider pool, we also utilized snowball sampling by asking original participants if they knew of other single women whom we might be able to interview. We asked original participants to relay flyers containing our contact information to other individuals. Of the 25 possible participants who met the inclusion criteria and whom the researcher approached for this study, only six agreed to participate, with four participants were recruited through snowball sampling.

Demographic details of the participants are listed in Table 1. The study only included participants who identified themselves as heterosexual as the pervasive discrimination faced by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender population in China (Mountford, 2010) and Singapore (Ojanen, Hong, & Veeramuthu, 2017) was highly likely to lead to significant differences in experiences from the heterosexual majority. The selection of participants with tertiary level education was deliberate as research indicates that education levels play a role in influencing women's experiences of singlehood (Cwikel, Gramotnev, & Lee, 2006).

Furthermore, as discussed above, Singapore public policy also targets graduate single women as a particular group. Of the six participants in the sample, two completed master's degrees and four bachelor's degrees. Regarding employment, four have full-time jobs and two are full-time students. Four of the participants have had at least one long-term relationship lasting several years. Of these two are divorcees. The remaining two participants reported having some, albeit limited dating experience. At the time of the interviews, none of the participants was in any committed long-term romantic relationships.

Table 1. Basic demographic information of participants

Participants	Age	Occupation	Educational level	Residence
Jiajia	34	Student	Bachelor's	Singapore
Nina	32	Actress	Bachelor's	Beijing
Tintin	42	Self-employed	Master's	Beijing
Wei	44	Self-employed	Bachelor's	Singapore
Ann	38	Student	Master's	Singapore
Vicki	39	CEO	Master's	Beijing

Procedure

The proposal for this study was reviewed and approved by the Psychology Ethics Committee of the University of Northampton. Before the collection of any information, all participants were sent an information sheet which provided an overview of the study purpose and methodology. The information sheet also emphasized that participation in the study was voluntary while describing the procedures in place to ensure confidentiality. A consent form was also circulated together with the information sheet. All participants signed the consent forms and returned a digital image of the signed consent form. During the study, participants were not asked to provide any information that would reveal their identity. Instead of names, each participant was given a unique participant code for identification. The names used to describe the participants in this study are fictitious.

The participants were interviewed in August 2018 while they were at home alone in the evening. Before each interview session, participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that they could decline from answering any question without having to explain. The researcher conducted the interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule of questions. These generally sought to uncover the participants' feelings towards being single, the benefits and challenges they perceive from being single, and their experiences of single life. Participants were given debriefing forms at the end of the interviews.

Only one interview per participant was conducted for a total of six interviews. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin either in person or via video-conferencing using social media applications. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours and were recorded. Permission for recording the interviews was obtained from all participants. Each interview was subsequently transcribed first in Chinese and then translated into English by the researchers. Details that could lead to the identification of participants (e.g., participant names and specific place names)

were omitted in the interest of confidentiality. To strengthen the validity of the research, participants read their transcribed interviews in order to verify the accuracy of their experiences as recorded by the researchers (Creswell, 2013).

Before commencing the study, we undertook a process of epoché by reflecting on and blocking biases and assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). During the research process, and especially during data analysis and interpretation, we employed a process of bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Bracketing activities were reflective and included keeping a diary about our thoughts and feelings on the subject in order to remain aware of any personal biases and knowledge. Specifically, all three of us share a Confucian heritage and are naturally influenced by Confucian values due to our upbringing and socialization, which is an area of contradiction. Although people have more liberal attitudes to singlehood nowadays, there is no doubt that singlehood still conflicts with the traditional view of Confucian philosophy.

Coming from a place of intersecting privileges (Chinese, middle class, educated, and with a major in Psychology), we began to use our voice to advocate for the single women from a psychological perspective. There were times in which we had to actively monitor the desire to give unsolicited advice to the participants regarding their singleness. It is also important for us to have bracketing during the data analysis phase to make sure the voice of the participant was presented in an honest and truthful manner (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). We composed field notes as soon as the interview had finished to document perception of the interaction between the researcher and the participant. Furthermore, we did not conduct an extensive literature review until data had been collected, so that we did not restrict our data collection and analysis to something already known in the literature (Chan et al., 2013). All questions asked during the semi-structured interviews were phrased in a general and nondirective manner to allow participants to tell their own story in their own terms.

Data Analysis

In this section, we described specific steps that we employed to analyse the data collected through semi-structured interviews. We used a modified Van Kaam method as outlined by Moustakas (1994) to analyse the data. As a first step, we read a printed copy of the entire transcripts in order to get a sense of the text as a whole. After reading several times in its entirety, we horizonalized significant words or phrases from the complete transcript of each participant in a spreadsheet table. This would incorporate expression such as words, phrases, sentences, or emotional responses which were related to singlehood experiences. Examples can be "It is very sad when you are alone and sick. I had to go to the hospital by myself, and, and, and at this moment, I really wished I had someone in my life; I found it harder and harder to meet the right person; freedom. I can do whatever I want to do." Upon identification, we reduced significant statements that were repetitive or overlapping based on two questions: (a) Is this statement important for understanding the phenomenon, and (b) Is this statement repeated? This helps separate the invariant constituents or horizons of the phenomenon from redundant information. Following this, we carefully clustered the invariant constituents into emerging themes. Using the first participant's narratives, we identified some emerging themes such as *freedom* (e.g., "Freedom, I can do whatever I want to do, without a care in the world"; "When you are alone, you only have to worry about yourself"), *need for companionship* (e.g., It is very sad when you are alone and sick. I had to go to the hospital by myself, and at that moment, I really wished I had someone in my life"; "Also it is better to have someone to dine together with you"), and *difficulty of finding mate* (e.g., "I found it harder and harder to meet the right person"; "I will have to be someone that I am proud of. I have very high standards").

Using the invariant constituents and themes, we constructed an individual textural description about the topic "singleness" for each participant. When constructing the

description, we returned to the interview transcript to ensure that the textural portrayal was accurate. These included verbatim excerpts from the participant to add to the richness of the description. For example, when analysing the first participant's interview transcript, difficulty finding a mate seemed to be a major theme describing reasons for singlehood. In her transcript, she mentioned,

> I became more demanding. I should not try to get married for the sake of getting married. I guess I need to find someone with similar financial background, otherwise the relationship would not be sustainable if I have to pay for everything. I found it harder and harder to meet the right person. I will only get married with some if I think we can live the rest of our lives together. It could be someone that I am proud of. Anyway, I have very hard standards. I need to have the sense that he will be a good father to our kids. It would not matter when I meet the right guy. I will just know . . . Sometimes it is just fate.

The textual descriptions were then used to expand on the imaginative variation and construct an individual structural description. In this stage, we identified possible variations of the structural qualities of the experience from different vantage points. When imaging possible variation in meaning, we identified difficulty in finding a Mr. Right as another possible interpretation. For example, this was made clearer as we initially observed that the participants focused on her own behaviour (demanding) for this difficulty. The participant then provided significant details of what she felt would be a suitable partner. She acknowledged that she was demanding in this respect, indicating some self-culpability in this. This then shifted to external factors, the inability to meet the right person. The participant provided significant details of what she felt would be a suitable partner. The was an express reference to fate in this process indicating the large role of external forces in her belief. The individual textural and structural descriptions were then synthesized into a composite description, providing an integrated description of the essence of the experience for each participant. In order to identify common themes across all participants, we read through the composite descriptions while listening to the audio recordings in order to familiarise ourselves with the overall feeling of participants' experiences (Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, & Palmér, 2019). We began with a search for initial codes to generate tentative labels for chunks of data in the form of phrases and sentences that captured the essence of the meaning of the participants' experience. During the process, we moved back and forth between the participants' composite descriptions to ensure accuracy in the process of interpretation of participant statements. Once this stage had been completed, we aggregated initial codes into categories according to their similarities, and in turn, we organized aggregated categories into 11 theme clusters. Upon further analysis, we synthesized the theme clusters into four main themes to reflect the lived experiences of all six participants. For each theme, we synthesized all the included quotations to bring out the main ideas, or a summary of the content provided by the participants. The findings are presented in the Result sections.

Results

We revealed a wide range of themes in our thorough analyses of the participants' interview transcripts. Four major themes emerged that best reflected the participants' shared experiences of singleness: (a) they had equivocal feelings over the reasons they were single; (b) they recognized the advantages, disadvantages, and ambivalence of singlehood; (c) they took a pragmatic approach towards their singleness, and (4) they coped singleness with practical strategies. Under each main theme we further divided into sub-themes.

Equivocal Feelings over Reasons for Singlehood

All participants spoke about the reasons why they were single. In a pattern similar to that seen in Lewis and Moon (1997), all of the six participants started their explanations by pointing out what was wrong with themselves as a reason for why they were single. Among them, biological factors, career commitment, and inability to find a match were the common reasons remarked.

Biological Factors

For some, this took the form of self-deprecation on their appearance and aging. These were clearly demonstrated in the participants' statement.

> Tintin: Oh, I don't seem to know many men in my life. I don't know why, probably *I am not a very attractive female* to most Chinese men. [Nervous laughter]
>
> Wei: *I am getting older every day*, and I am not sure where can I meet new guys. All men like young girls, right?

These two quotes reflected the singles accounted appearance and age as their reasons for being single. To some extent, the sentiment of self-effacement is unsurprised given the singleness they experienced at middle age as age-related changes are commonly a concern for women.

Career Commitment

As the interviews progressed on to other questions, the participants started to shift their observations for why they were single to external circumstantial factors. Some participants admitted that they had prioritised career over a relationship. This can be observed through Vicki's statement: "*I seem to have been very busy [for my job]*. There has been *no time to fall in love, get married*. Doesn't it sound very miserable?" Vicki further added on "In China, *men still have various expectations for women*, such as cooking and having children. I really don't have the time [to fulfil their expectations]." In the case of other participants, however, culpability was expressed more neutrally. For example, also referring to her work Nina opined:

> *I guess my work requires me to get away for a few months sometimes*. It's hard for some guys to accept it.

Overall, career commitment was the most common focus of self-blame by the participants as it has occupied much of their time that indirectly refrained them from making the efforts to staff off a relationship.

Constraints in Meeting the Right Person

Aside from work, most participants complained that they were unable to find a suitable man. For example, Nina remarked: "There are a lot of single people around. But *it is hard to find someone you like*." Similarly, as the interview went on, Wei shared that "Maybe I am *not meeting the quality of men* I would like to be dating."

In general, the difficulty in finding a compatible mate has formidably hurdled participants from pursuing a romance relationship. The extent to which the participants were conscious of their equivocation between blaming themselves and blaming external

circumstances is unknown. We did not confront the participants with this observation nor did any of the participants' remark on this detail. None of the participants indicated that they were single by choice.

Recognition of the Advantages, Disadvantages and Ambivalence of Singlehood

Clearly, living in singlehood is complex and never an easy journey. In the study, participants discussed the advantages and disadvantages, as well as their ambivalence living their singlehood. In the following, we first explored the advantages of being single.

Social and Emotional Freedom

Participants highlighted social and emotional freedom to be the main advantages of singlehood. Of these, the terms "free" and "freedom" were most commonly expressed.

> Jiajia: Freedom. ***I can do whatever I want to do***, without a care in the world.
> Ann: ***Freedom is the best thing about being single***.
> Tintin: Freedom. The biggest advantage of being single is freedom. ***You don't need to compromise anything at all***. You can do what you want to do and when do you want to do it. You still ***have a lot of autonomy***. Staying a single person actually helps you ***avoid responsibility*** . . . In general, ***you have much time on your own***; the focus is on the individual.

Generally, social freedom was mainly illustrated by the participants as being liberal from responsibilities, obligations, and commitments as well as having more free time.

Another advantage highlighted by the participants is being emotionally free. Vicki described this:

> It's really like you can eat your fill and ***do not have to worry about anyone*** else [a traditional Chinese saying]. [Laughter]. ***I don't need to worry about other people's feelings***.

Ann echoed:

> I am really happy now, in a good mood all day long. I ***no longer need to consider another person's feelings or mood***.

These comments showed that participants enjoyed the social and emotional freedom without any relationship commitment.

The Absence of Companionship and Emotional Support

When moving on to discussing the drawbacks of being single, participants gave more varied answers. Of these, the lack of companionship and support were highlighted by five participants that were mostly associated with negative valence. For example:

> Wei: . . . if something happens, who can you discuss things with? ***I need someone*** to help me to make decisions and to give me some directions. [Laughter] And eating alone sounds quite ***miserable*** right? Moreover, it feels very ***cold and sad*** to sleep alone.

Similarly:

> Vicki: ... when people feel *vulnerable,* there is *no one around*. Once I had a high fever of 40 degrees, and I had to take care of myself. I feel very *sad* when I think about it.

This was also responded by Tintin: "more and more friends are getting married, and when they have children, they may have another way of life. You may gradually *move away from these friends*." These quotes reflected the sentiment of the participants who experienced the absence of partnership and social supports which were then evoked negative emotions in the most participants such as miserable, sad, vulnerable to name a few.

The Ambivalence of Singlehood

In the lived experience of singleness, participants appreciated the freedom that it tagged along; nevertheless, they were also battling with emotional loneliness. To illustrate, one participant did not feel that there were any advantages to being single, though she acknowledged that she had more freedom and free time:

> Wei: I seem to *have more free time*, a lot of free time. You can control your own schedule, and it seems that you are free to do whatever you want to. But my heart still *feels empty*.

As for Jiajia, she shared her similar view:

> I *can do whatever I want* [when I am single], without a care in the world . . . [but] it's very *sad* when you are alone and sick. I had to go to the hospital by myself. At that moment, I really wished I had someone in my life.

These views demonstrated the ambivalence in experiencing singlehood. The comments on whether to appreciate the advantages, to reject the disadvantages or to acknowledge the ambivalence of being single were accounted as the premises on how they acknowledged singlehood from a different angle.

Pragmatism Towards Singleness

As a whole, participants in this study took a pragmatic view towards their single lives. This view was reflected by several aspects they shared including their realisation of the ideal and realistic marriage and efforts taken to adapt themselves into the cultural and institutional norms.

The Realisation of the Ideal and Realistic Marriage

Most participants held realistic expectations of marriage. Overly positive expectations can be hard to satisfy as it poses the risk of being continually disappointed if they do not adjust what they expect from marriage to reflect reality. For instance, Ann stated:

> [Ideally], *I believe that there are good marriages*, and there are couples who still love each other very much after many years of marriage.

[In reality], ***Everyone enters marriage with expectations.*** I feel that ***marriage is not like a fairy tale***, that once I get married, I will be happy from now onwards forever. Conflicts are ultimately unavoidable in marriage. Somehow, ***I still need to set realistic expectations*** for a successful marriage.

Although many participants did have an image of an ideal marriage, they were aware that this would not be easy to realize. The same was held by Nina:

I guess because I have never been married, I do have some dreams about marriage, but I do understand ***there is no such thing as a perfect marriage***. At times, reasons for attraction can become sources of irritation.

Despite holding on to the anticipation of marriage, most participants, however, were relatively aware that marriage can never be attained effortlessly in reality.

Adaptation to Cultural Expectations and Institutional Norms

Most people were inclined to be influenced by the overarching etic aspect such as the implicit rules underlying the society or the cultural aspect that impacts their emic experiences indirectly like identity construction and social interactions, let alone middle-aged single women who are often stigmatised. Participants in this study faced pressure to get married due to cultural expectation, typically from their parents. This was expected given the North Asian context of our study in which that cultural influence is prevalent.

Jiajia: It's [The pressure of being single] actually not that bad except my parents. In ***a traditional Chinese family, parents always want their kids to get married and have families of their own***. It's very normal. They are a bit concerned that I'm not married yet.

Similarly, Vicki also responded:

I am almost 40. ***My parents have been hoping that I will get married and have children from when I was in my early 20s***. They have been looking forward to it for too many years and are already so disappointed.

On the other hand, talking about her divorce and current singlehood, Ann also shared a similar sentiment that traditional views of marriage remain strongly entrenched:

My family still feels a sense of shame because they face judgment from people for the failure of my marriage. I know they perceive me as someone else's leftovers. However, we live in modern days; look around our environment - ***so many people choose to get divorced***, to leave an unhappy relationship or for other reasons.

When comes to what society values women most, Nina shared her perception: "***a woman's rule in life is to be married and a housewife***."

Living in a community, it is inevitable that one, to some degree, complies with the embodied rituals. These illustrations reflected how voices of "others" like family or friends in the institution were imposing the ideas of what "should" and "should not" be obliged by single women.

Coping with Practical Strategies

Although most participants experienced pressures resulting from the perpetuation of cultural practice and institutional norms, they dealt with the constraints through proactive approaches: withstanding the external pressures, seeking for social and emotional support, and developing self-worth.

Resistance to External Pressures

In examining how singles dealt with their social life, what surprised us was although they encountered a chorus of voices urging them to go on the relationship escalator to marriage, participants did not buy into societal expectations that they have to be married. They chose to withstand its influence. For example, Vicki professed:

Even if there are some opposing voices [on being married or single], ***there is no impact on me actually***.

Similarly, Ann indicated that "***I don't really care*** how other people feel about my own happiness." What Nina stated further illustrated this situation: "My family basically ***gave up reminding me*** of my marriage."

Despite experiencing various pressures externally, these quotes demonstrated how singles resisted the voices of dissent. It is difficult to say, however, whether the participants' indifference to these pressures reflected acceptance, defiance, or resignation.

Seeking Social and Emotional Supports

Obtaining social support appears to be one of the ways to cope with singlehood. For instance, Ann, who underwent a drastic change in her life after her divorce, mentioned:

I am just freed from a 10-year long marriage. In the face of a new life, I chose to ***go back to school***, ***meet new friends***, have a new life and a new future.

In the same vein, Vicki maintained:

I have quite some ***friends***, males, and females. ***If I feel lonely***, I can easily ***find a friend to go out and chat***.

These excerpts described the opinions on how singles sought supports from various sources such as to mingle with friends or to pursue study to enrich their single life.

Acknowledgement of Self-Worth

Developing self-worth was an utmost essential to fill the emotional void of loneliness and stress for single women. Participants held various views on this matter. Vicki noted the value she attained from work derived from her self-realisation about life choices:

I love my job and ***work brings me a sense of accomplishment immensely***. Life is all about choices; you can't have everything right? Work is my choice.

Aside from that, Tintin responded:

[With or without a partner] People should live their own lives, understand themselves, ***do the right thing***, ***to be able to love others*** and ***give back to the community***.

These examples highlighted the importance of self-worth participants attained from either work or realisation of the values of life in constructing a better inner self which enables the extension of love in a broader context.

Discussion

Findings of this study suggest that the lives of single women are complex and multi-faceted. Nevertheless, there exist some threads that run through these narratives which help best describe the way single women position their identity within the context of a cultural and social environment that categorizes and stigmatizes them.

Overall, our findings corroborate those of similar phenomenological studies on singlehood in other parts of the world. The finding that the participants had equivocal feelings about the reasons for their singlehood which vacillated between internal factors related to their own agency and external factors related to chance and circumstance have been highlighted in a number of other studies (Dales, 2014; Lewis & Moon, 1997; Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007). In contrast to these studies, however, the accounts of these participants appeared to emphasize the role of external circumstances in their reasons for being single. It is possible that this seeming lack of agency may have been pronounced as most of our participants can be considered involuntary singles (Adamczyk, 2016; Reynolds et al., 2007). In this study, none of the participants indicated that they were single by choice even though it is a relatively common reason cited for being single (Frazier, Arikian, Benson, Losoff, & Maurer, 1996). Coupled with this reason, dedication to career and the inability to find a suitable match were deemed to hinder participants' marriage. It is, however, interesting to note that career commitment that is relatively controllable by the participants is viewed as a barrier to marriage as it could be reciprocal instead, by which one is single; therefore, time is dedicated to work, or vice versa. One possible explanation for this finding can be attributed to the idea that work is considered as one of the ways to achieve a meaningful life during middle adulthood (Erikson, 1994). However, this has to be interpreted with caution given that in most cases, pursuing a career is a continuous effort from the onset of young adulthood to thrive for a better life. Besides, it does not necessarily warrant a meaningful life considering other factors might possibly contribute to a valuable life at middle adulthood. Hence, putting the blame on career over singleness for a more meaningful life appears to be ostensible. As we did not explore this issue further with the participants during the interviews, it would be impossible to discount other possible reasons why the participants favoured externalizing blame. Possibilities include its use as a defensive mechanism to minimize a sense of failure (Reynolds et al., 2007) or its manifestation as a wider reflection of an individual's self-determination and self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The proper identification of the reasons for this behaviour will be important in a clinical setting where specific issues relating to self-esteem, self-efficacy, or other similar factors may need to be addressed.

Another finding of the study suggests that single women understood the advantages and disadvantages of being single. Despite coming from different cultural and social contexts, the word "freedom" and its associated terms were most frequently used by the participants to describe the advantages of being single. On further analysis, we were surprised to find remarkable similarities between some of the terms used by our participants and those in the related literature that was reviewed (e.g., Addie & Brownlow, 2014; Lesch & van der Watt, 2018; Lewis & Moon, 1997; Wang & Abbott, 2013). Having said that, it would be apparent to

just simply associate singlehood with freedom as being psychosocially free can possibly which is attributed to the fact that they have a greater swath of time and resources to work with living the single life. Being single allows them have freedom to look inward in the search of needs instead of feeling like a failure. Besides, the sense of freedom is a subjective state of being where most individuals, single or married, define it rather differently. Therefore, the particular ubiquitousness of this term may warrant further research into what connotations this concept entails for single women in a broader spectrum than the psycho-socio perspectives and whether different meanings are ascribed to it by married individuals.

While exploring the disadvantages of singlehood, findings show that single women struggled from the absence of companionship and emotional support. It seems to suggest that singlehood has resulted in emotional void in participants that was associated with negative valences such as miserable or sad. Similar findings such as loneliness (Adamczyk, 2016), stress (Fong & Amatea, 1992), and isolation (Sandfield & Percy, 2003) were also highlighted. On the contrary, participants also experienced the ambivalence of living in singlehood: freedom on one hand; loneliness on the other hand. The result was similar with that of Sharp and Ganong (2007). This outcome is likely to be related to the freedom of singlehood that allows them to build better social connections (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016); however, it may also refrain them from the fulfilment of normal life development (DePaulo, 2007) such as childbearing. Clearly, to some, singlehood can be conflictual at times. Hence, it is crucial to investigate the reasons why such ambivalence arises in comparison with that of similar experiences by the married people—appreciating marriage yet yearning for freedom. Such future research may, for example, help advance our understanding of how women perceive and deal with the dilemma associated with singleness, contemporary marriage, or similar relationships. Aside from the benefits, such research could bring to the clinical practice of family therapy and counselling; it would also add to the limited body of comparative work done between single and married women (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016).

Overall, participants in this study appeared to adopt a sense of pragmatism towards their singlehood status. This behaviour can be seen as a defence mechanism (Sharp & Ganong, 2007) or even as contentment (Lewis & Moon, 1997). Though being single, participants still held the desire for marriage yet cognised the realistic of marriage in real life. The complex lived experience of the middle-aged single women, had, to some extent, shape their perspectives on marriage with a more realistic manner. This finding can thus be explained by Erikson (1994) who holds that one may view marriage as optional at middle adulthood due to the change of time and the shift of virtue (Fleming, 2004). Nevertheless, it would be too thin to deduce that mid-aged single women did not consider marriage as an obligation due to a certain fixed paradigm. This premise is relatively insufficient to give account to the complex psychological phenomenon of "what is desire?" versus "what is the reality?" In fact, dealing with the inability to accomplish any important life event will leave the individual with a dilemma to remain hopeful, to accept the reality, or feel torn between the two until one is attained or replaced. Undergoing such a dilemma is not limited to the subject of marriage; neither does it confine to any age in particular. Thus, it is understandable why participants in the study were realistic yet still desirous of marriage. Clearly, there is a limitation in defining the view of the mid-aged adults pertaining to marriage as optional based on Erikson's model. With regards to their expectations for marriage, this issue was nevertheless not investigated more in-depth during the interviews, it would be difficult to point to any particular reason for this, however some studies have hypothesized an association with a desire for children (Sharp & Ganong, 2007) and the idealization of marriage (DePaulo, 2007).

In contrast to the intense contemplation of future family trajectories that was observed to be common among single women in their mid-20s to early-30s (Sharp & Ganong, 2007), participants in this study, however, demonstrated their ability to adapt to the overarching etic

aspects (e.g., cultural expectations and institutional norms) embedded in the society. Often, single women were connoted as the "leftover lady" in China (Gaetano, 2014), "dysfunction" (Byrne & Carr, 2005), and worst of all, "the demographic threats" in Singapore (Strategy Group, 2018). Considering how single women were labelled and perceived negatively, it seems to suggest that the Eastern cultural norms seems to underlie the society subtly. Participants of this study were imposed with various social expectations by significant others and society. This has resulted in the feelings of great stigma, which continues to shape their lives, often requiring them to find a way to contribute. This behaviour manifested their flexibility in shaping their emic experiences as mid-aged single women for the betterment of self and society. This phenomenon can be described by Erikson's (1994) psychosocial development model which states that developing social responsibility and acknowledging the sense of self-accomplishment are some of the primary tasks during middle adulthood. Although further research will be necessary, the identification of behaviour that promotes better adjustment in single women would be a significant contribution to clinical practice.

A related finding demonstrates that single women coped with single life by using practical strategies. This outcome is consistent with Sharp and Ganong (2007) who found that the singles managed their singlehood with different strategies. Participants of this study dealt with the challenges of singlehood by resisting external pressures. This finding is similar with that of Iwashita (2001). To some, the external pressures exerted little to no effects as most of them chose to resist the social stigma and continued their social endeavours proactively. Seeking social and emotional supports were some of the coping strategies adopted by the participants. This proves the needs for intimate bonding with family and friends that deemed to be significant for the singles (Trimberger, 2005) to pursue a healthier and happier life. Additionally, participants found that developing self-worth was essential to coping with singlehood that was devoid of emotional intimacy. This result may be related to middle-aged adults who develop self-value for their well-being and give care to others unlike young adulthood where love is the priority (Erikson, 1994). Although this assumption seems to offer an explanation as to why participants established self-value in coping with their singleness, it, nevertheless, does not correspond to the reason directly as self-worth should not be a privileged value sought after by the middle-aged adults only. Hence, there is a need to call into question the limitation of Erikson's model in describing human development stage with a fixed paradigm which, to some extent, reflects the implicit Westernised social values (Fleming, 2004). Therefore, it may not be appropriate to interpret human development of various social contexts with a one-size-fits-all model. Here, further research into the experiences of women in more varied cultures on how they deal with the challenges of singlehood, particularly those further removed from what can be colloquially termed modern Western values may shed more light onto the strength of the association between specific cultural and societal characteristics and the lived experiences of single women.

This study has a number of limitations mainly related to resource constraints in terms of manpower and time. While the number of participants in our study was within the acceptable range of 5 to 25 individuals necessary for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013), it nevertheless, fell into the lower end of that range. Also, participants were not singled out to one type of single (e.g., divorced single or always single). A larger pool of participants of a specific type of singles may have added other dimensions to our findings. Typically, phenomenological studies aim to collect a large amount of data through multiple, in-depth interviews as well as through broad, general questions (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In the present study, this was not possible because of advised constraints on the duration of the interviews as well as the limited resources available to transcribe and translate them into English. As a result, questions used in the semi-structured interviews were phrased more

directly than what would be usual in a typical phenomenological study. Participants, however, were allowed to speak freely and to provide as much elaboration as necessary in their answers.

Several possible areas for further study have already been highlighted in the discussion above. In addition to these, it is recommended that more in-depth and directed research be undertaken within more specific contexts. For example, future research could be directed specifically at single women in either Beijing or Singapore to bring out any particular cultural or societal nuances that shape their social identity and experiences on singleness. Although the current study has contributed in several ways in enhancing our understanding of single women in both cities, more time could also be spent on interviews to obtain a more granular description of their lives. With this richer level of understanding as a foundation, more tailored clinical strategies for therapists and counsellors working with this group can be developed.

The goal of this study was to contribute to the growing body of research on the experiences of single women worldwide. By using a phenomenological approach to guide this study, it has been useful in expanding our understanding of how ethnic Chinese women in Beijing and Singapore experience their singleness. The participants in this study shared the reasons for their singlehood, the challenges they faced and the advantages they gained as well as the dilemma of the gains and losses they had living as singles. Nevertheless, as a whole, they adopted a pragmatic attitude towards their singleness cognising ideal marriage and marriage in real life. Apart from that, they were proactively adapting to the cultural and institutional norms in the society where they lived. Though dealing with dynamic challenges in singlehood, they actively sought for social and emotional supports and developed self-worth to fill in the voids in their social life. To some, the ability to withstand pressure appeared to be the main coping strategy. Time and manpower limitations made it difficult to explore their experiences within the broader context of their lives, such as their childhood, their religious and cultural beliefs, and their views on family and sexuality. Nevertheless, we hope that the exposure this study gives to this segment of single women will act as further validation of their life course and facilitate greater acceptance of their status in society.

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