Individualization of Marriage and Work Life Choices: A Study of Never-married Employed Women in Hong Kong and Tokyo

Hiromi Tanaka
Meiji University, Japan
Catherine W. Ng
Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

Abstract

Current social changes in post-industrialized societies include the rise of alternate ways of living. One notable development in this light is the increase in the number of single-person households. This article intends to offer insights on the social meaning of the changing patterns of individualized ways of living among never-married employed women. In so doing, we aim to contribute to academic discussions on individualization and life-course or biographical changes, which so far have not adequately reflected non-Western experiences. Based on qualitative studies of never-married employed women in Hong Kong and Tokyo, we examine their life choices on marriage and work to better understand how individuals craft their ways of living. Our analysis reveals that individualization of women's lifestyles does not necessarily involve a dramatic surge in individual autonomy or the erosion of the traditional marriage institution. We argue that in East Asian late modernity biographical freedom for women is still constrained by the conventions that characterized the first modernity.

Key words

Individualization, women, marriage, work, East Asia

Introduction

One of the key features of current social changes is the rise of alternate ways of living in post-industrialized societies. Lifestyles are now more diversified, and life choices have become multiple. More and more people are living outside of the normative heterosexual marriage. One notable development in this light is the increase in the number of sin-

gle-person households, largely due to three phenomena: rising divorce rates, enlarged never-married populations, and delayed marriages. While these changes, called a "second demographic transition" (van de Kaa, 1987) by demographers, can be observed in official statistics of national governments and international organizations such as the United Nations, statistical data alone cannot adequately address the issue of what such changes mean to individuals and their everyday lives.

This article attempts to offer insights on such social meaning of the changing patterns of individual ways of living. Of particular interest to us is the unique minority group of never-married employed women in two East Asian cities－Hong Kong and Tokyo. We examine their life choices on marriage and work to better understand how individuals craft their ways of living. Our focus on East Asia aims to contribute to two bodies of literature. First, we believe that analyses of East Asian cases will enrich the discussion on and the understanding of the processes of individualization since academic discourses on life course or biographical changes have so far largely neglected the non-Western context (recent exceptions: Chang & Song (2010); Suzuki, Ito, Ishida, Nihei & Maruyama (2010); Yan (2010)). Second, Hong Kong and Tokyo represent major urban spaces in the region from which emergent forms of lifestyles in time tend to spread to less urban areas.

In the following sections, we first review existing theories of individualization and singlehood to seek their significance for research on the changing patterns of individuals' lives－particularly women's lives－in East Asia. We will then present recent demographic changes to the never-married populations in Hong Kong and Tokyo. This will be followed by analyses of the social positioning (including social stigma and social images) of never-married women in these two societies based on contemporary discussions of singlehood among the general public. Lastly, we examine how never-married employed women individually craft their life choices based on the empirical interview data. This paper hopes to shed light on how the individualization of life choices manifests itself in two post-industrialized East Asian cities.

Individualization and Changes in Women's Lives: West and East

The changing pattern of people's ways of living has been a major

theme in the academic discourse on the present social changes with respect to modernity (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994). The individualization thesis developed by German sociologist Ulrich Beck and his colleagues (e.g., Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1994, 1999, 2002) has received wide attention due to its potential for explaining a significant part of current social formations that involve drastic changes of what has been established in the earlier phases of modernity. According to Beck, these changes entail "radicalization" of the principles of the first modernity and one of these principles is individual autonomy (Beck, 1983).

According to Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (1999), individualization has two major characteristics: a) the disintegration of the 'old' structure of lifestyles and the resulting destabilization of conventional categories of class, gender roles or family; and b) the rise of precarious freedom in individual life choices (p. 157). The two strands are inter-related. Old institutions such as the welfare state and family no longer function as safety nets as they used to. At the same time, in today's modernity, individuals increasingly find themselves under pressure to craft "a life of one's own" and to search for self-realization (i.e., driven "to reach for the stars in their lives") (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 22). On one hand, this results from the weakening of social constraints of traditional norms and values based on the old categories of class and social status as well as gender and may offer new possibilities for people's pursuit of self-realization, which was severely constrained in former traditional societies, for example, through family origin. On the other hand, new biographical freedom is linked with increased pressure for crafting one's original biographies (or "biographical originality" in Honneth, 2004), and at the same time individuals are in a way forced to take responsibility for the fate of one's own life. Thus, according to the individualization theory, biographical freedom is accompanied by the individualization of personal risks too. In other words, Beck contends that the radicalization of individual autonomy is a constitutive part of the process of the individualization of lifestyles; yet it also increases the precariousness of biographical freedom.

Several researchers have elaborated on individualization, particularly the question of biographical freedom with a focus on changing gender roles and women's life choices. Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1994) discusses changes in women's normal biography, i.e. "the traditional life rhythms

of people" (p. 120; translated by the authors). Beck-Gernsheim discusses the question of a changing relation between family and individualization in a transition from normal biography to do-it-yourself biography (Bastelbiographie; Hitzler, 1988) or elective biography (Wahlbiographie; Lay, 1984) in order to understand the changes in women's lives. According to her, in the earlier phase of modernity women's lives were characterized by the pressure to commit to solidarity. The private/public divide in the social relations and the gendered divisions of labor that supported this divide offered a basis for women's normal biography. Women were ascribed to the private sphere and their primary role was defined to belong to family. This lower degree of women's biographic originality though also meant more social security and stability for women (Beck-Gernsheim, 1994; Geissler & Oechsle, 1994).

In West Germany such notion of women's normal biography was, according to Beck-Gernsheim, rapidly established in the 1960s and then began to change in the 1970s. While the old model of men's lives (male breadwinner) is still effective, new models emerged for women's lives; allowing more and more women to make their own life plan, reflecting their individual expectations and wishes. Of particular importance in this change was women's new relation to the employment sector and the new life perspectives which arose from their newfound employment situation; hereby though women did not necessarily lose their attachment to family (Geissler & Oechsle, 1994, p. 148).

In their empirical study on future life planning of younger generations of women in Germany, Geissler & Oechsle (1994) found that the female biography had only partially changed. They developed four types of women's life planning: a) a family-centered lifestyle (familienzentrierte Lebensführung), b) an occupation-centered lifestyle (berufszentrierte Lebensführung), c) a double lifestyle (doppelte Lebensführung), and d) an individualized lifestyle (individualisierte Lebensführung). The normal female biography that sees family as the ultimate place for women continues to exist as a family-centered lifestyle supported by some younger women, but new patterns are emerging. An occupation-centered lifestyle concerns women who place priority on employment and their career in their lives. A double lifestyle refers to women who are oriented to both family and employment. According to Geissler & Oechsle (1994), this lifestyle emerged as an ideal for women who are able to work like men

and live a similarly materialistic life to what men do, while still carrying some traits of being female, biologically speaking (e.g., they cannot work during a certain period if they become pregnant). The fourth type－individualized lifestyle－is held by some women for whom it is important that their way of life is original. Even if they choose to work, their motivation is not to work, but to pursue their self-actualizing life project. This makes it different from an occupation-centered lifestyle. What is unique about these developments in Germany (and probably in other Western European societies as well) is that while various types of women's lifestyles have arisen, resulting in traditional women's lives being de-legitimized (Geissler & Oechsle, 1994) (or with the result that these traditional women's roles are no longer the only legitimate form), and while women are engaged in work outside of their family, their dissatisfaction with traditional gender roles has grown (Beck-Gernsheim, 1994). This could be because they now have higher expectations of gender role equality, or that a fundamental change has not occurred in traditional gender roles.

One highly individualized lifestyle among women is singlehood. Because marriage continues to be normative, those who do not get married are regarded as deviants and are marginalized as an "ill-defined minority group that exhibits a conspicuous deviant pattern of functioning in terms of the dominant value system and the structural designs" of the society (Forsyth & Johnson, 1995, p. 91). People who do not fit the dominant social norms are often stigmatized. These people who are the discredited or the discreditable often suffer mentally from being different from the Normals and struggle with their identity in their interaction with these Normals (Goffman, 1963). However, research on Western societies documents some changes of the stereotypes about single women. Tuula Gordon conducted extensive research of single women in Australia, the United States and Finland in the early 1990s (see Gordon, 1994a, 1994b). She contends that while the conventional image of 'old maid' still exists, a new image of single women has emerged. She examined the concept of "city single", saying this concept has a more positive connotation in that unlike old maids, women city singles choose to live this way. The term 'city single' presents the single woman working in a city as active, powerful, independent, lively. Gordon (1994b), however, does not forget to mention the negative connotations of 'old maids' and 'city singles': the former are 'odd' as they are some-

how 'unable' to marry, while the latter are 'bad' because they do not abide by the institution of marriage.

What about individualization in East Asia? Do disintegration and surged biographical freedom characterize East Asian women's lives as well? Our literature review led us to hypothesize that individualization of women's lifestyles in East Asia may differ from that in Western societies such as Germany. The "second demographic transition" (e.g., delayed marriage and long-term singlehood) has a different trajectory in East Asia than in the West. Most striking is the rigidity of the institution of marriage in East Asia. Western theories of individualization and singlehood tend to regard singles as those who reject the notion of traditional marriage and family norms (see Beck-Gernsheim, 1994 and Gordon, 1994a, 1994b). In contrast in Japan, for example, while the majority of the population (70%, according to Japan Government, Cabinet Office, 2009) supports that marriage is an individual decision, that individuals should be free to marry or not marry, there is some indication that the younger generation of women (those in their twenties more so than those in their thirties and forties) have swung back to desiring the traditional homemaker role for themselves (Harada, 2005; see also Hakuhodo, 2008). Furthermore, cohabitation is not as acceptable and widespread in the East as in the West (Matsuo, 2001; Lee, 2000). In Tokyo as well as in Hong Kong, for example, premarital sex, while not taboo anymore, is still not as common as in the West, and pregnancy outside wedlock, while not completely unheard of in present days, is still frowned upon by many. The norm remains that a couple marries before starting a family.

Related to the marriage and family institution are gender roles. The International Social Survey Programme (2002) asked respondents in many countries whether they agreed with the gendered division of labor ─ "A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family". The percentages of the respondents who answered 'strongly agree' or 'agree' in West Germany, East Germany and Japan were respectively: 23.3 percent (7.8 percent for 'strongly agree'; 15.5 percent for 'agree'), 14.6 percent (3.8 percent; 10.8 percent), and 30.9 percent (14.7 percent; 16.2 percent). Hong Kong did not participate in this survey, but a study commissioned by the Women's Commission (2009, March 5) that aimed to gauge the community's views and perceptions on gender-related issues found that over 50 percent of the respondents

strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that "women should put more emphasis on family than career".

In other words, evidences alert us to be cautious about applying Western-oriented individualization theory directly to East Asia, because of the rigidity of norms of the marriage institution in this region, and because there seems to be a stronger embracement of traditional gender roles by a larger segment of the population in the East than in the West. This means that there is a need to examine more closely the East Asian situation and how it contextualizes how women in the East might craft their lives differently or the same as their Western counterparts. This study contributes to that examination by studying never-married employed women in Hong Kong and Tokyo. In the following, we first present the social contexts single women in these two cities have to contend with, and then, interview data of never-married employed women. This will be followed by analyses of their individualization negotiation processes.

Dramatic Increases in the Never-married Populations of Hong Kong and Tokyo

The percentage of never-married citizens in a population is a major indicator of delayed marriage and/or prolonged (or lifetime) singlehood. The size of the never-married population in Hong Kong and Tokyo has been on the rise (see Table 1). This development is more striking for women than for men. Although in both societies the figure is slightly higher for men than for women, the pace of increase has been much higher for women (for Tokyo, see additionally Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2005). In 1986, 31.1 percent of the Hong Kong male population aged between 30 and 34 were never-married. That figure rose to 54.4 percent in 2010; i.e. an increase of 23.3 percentage points from a base of 31.1. The comparable figures for the female never-married population were 14.8 to 38.6, representing an increase of 23.8 points from a much smaller base of just 14.8 in a short span of 24 years. In 1985 in Tokyo, among the male never-married 30-34 age group, there was an increase of 9.4 percentage points from a base of 40.1; among the comparable female group, a massive increase of 20.6 percentage points from a much smaller base of just 19.5.

Table 1

Percentage of never-married people (Hong Kong, Tokyo, Japan, by sex, selected years)

	Hong Kong						Tokyo (Japan)					
	Male (%)							Male (%)				
Age group	1986	1991	1996	2001	2006	2010	Age group	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
25-29	64.2	66.5	72.7	76.5	82.6	85.5	25-29	70.4(60.4)	74.2(64.4)	75.8(66.9)	79.4(69.3)	81.3(71.4)	70.6(71.8)
30-34	31.1	33.5	39.0	45.4	51.6	54.4	30-34	40.1(28.1)	43.9(32.6)	48.2(37.3)	54.1(42.9)	57.7(47.1)	49.5(47.3)
35-39	14.3	15.4	17.9	25.2	30.5	30.7	35-39	24.5(14.2)	28.6(19.0)	31.5(22.6)	33.1(25.7)	32.9(30.0)	38.5(35.6)
40-44	8.4	8.9	9.6	11.8	16.1	20.8	40-44	14.7(7.4)	20.0(11.7)	24.2(16.4)	24.5(18.4)	25.8(22.0)	31.4(28.6)
45-49	7.3	5.8	6.0	7.9	8.9	13.0	45-49	9.0(4.7)	12.7(6.7)	18.5(11.2)	20.7(14.6)	21.0(17.1)	26.1(22.5)
	Female (%)							Female (%)				
Age group	1986	1991	1996	2001	2006	2010	Age group	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
25-29	39.4	47.9	53.8	60.1	71.6	74.6	25-29	43.4(30.6)	53.5(40.2)	59.4(48.0)	65.3(54.0)	70.1(59.0)	64.1(60.3)
30-34	14.8	21.0	26.4	30.2	34.6	38.6	30-34	19.5(10.4)	24.1(13.9)	30.8(19.7)	37.6(26.6)	42.9(32.0)	40.1(34.5)
35-39	7.5	10.2	13.6	17.7	19.5	21.7	35-39	13.3(6.6)	14.8(7.5)	18.3(10.0)	22.0(13.8)	23.8(18.4)	28.7(23.1)
40-44	3.4	5.8	8.0	12.0	14.7	16.1	40-44	9.8(4.9)	11.4(5.8)	13.0(6.7)	15.3(8.6)	17.7(12.1)	23.0(17.4)
45-49	2.0	3.2	5.1	6.8	10.7	12.6	45-49	8.2(4.3)	8.8(4.6)	10.7(5.6)	11.6(6.3)	13.4(8.2)	18.9(12.6)

Source: Hong Kong Government (2009), *Women and men in Hong Kong: Key statistics 2009* (pp. 8, 30 for years 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001); Hong Kong Government (2011), *Women and men in Hong Kong: Key statistics 2011* (pp. 9, 38 for years 2006 and 2010 excluding foreign domestic helpers); Japan Government, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Statistics Bureau. (2011). *2010 Population census of Japan;* Japan Government, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Statistics Bureau. (2007). *2005 population census of Japan.* Vol. 2-1; Japan Government, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Statistics Bureau. (2001). *2000 population census of Japan.* Vol. 2-1; Japan Government, Management and Coordination Agency, Statistics Bureau. (1996). *1995 population census of Japan.* Vol. 2-2-13; Japan Government, Management and Coordination Agency, Statistics Bureau. (1991). *1990 population census of Japan.* Vol. 2-2-13; Japan Government, Management and Coordination Agency, Statistics Bureau. (1986). *1985 population census of Japan.* Vol. 2-2-13.

Table 2 shows the median age at first marriage in Hong Kong and Tokyo, which rose by about 3 to 5 years between 1980/1981 and 2010. Again, this change was more dramatic for women than for men. For Hong Kong women, the median age at first marriage rose from 23.9 in 1981 to 28.7 in 2010 (an increase of 4.8 years in a span of just 19 years, as compared to 4.2 years for men); for Tokyo women, from 26.1 in 1980 to 29.7 in 2010 (an increase of 3.6 years, as compared to 3 years for men). This development shows a clear trend of later marriage in both societies.

Table 2

Median Age at First Marriage (Hong Kong, Tokyo, Japan, by sex, selected years)

	1980/ 1981	1985/ 1986	1990/ 1991	1995/ 1996	2000/ 2001	2005/ 2006	2010
Hong Kong - Male	27.0	28.0	29.1	30.0	30.2	31.2	31.2
Hong Kong - Female	23.9	25.3	26.2	26.9	27.5	28.2	28.7
Japan - Male	27.8	28.2	28.4	28.5	28.8	29.8	30.4
Japan - Female	25.2	25.5	25.9	26.3	27.0	28.0	28.6
Tokyo - Male	28.6	29.0	29.3	29.6	30.1	31.2	31.6
Tokyo - Female	26.1	26.3	26.7	27.3	28.0	29.2	29.7

Note: The figures for Hong Kong are from 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2010.
Source: Hong Kong Government (2011). *Women and men in Hong Kong: Key statistics 2011,* p. 44; Japan Government, Ministry of Health, Labour, Welfare (2011). Jinko dotai tokei nenpo. Shuyo tokeihyo (Saishin deta, nenji suii)[Demographic Statistics Annual Report. Major Statistics (Latest data, trends)]. Published on December 1, 2011. Retrieved March 15, 2012, http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/jinkou/suii10/

These data show that in both Hong Kong and Tokyo, never-married women are not as rare as they used to be. Still one needs to ask whether the environment surrounding single women catches up with this numerical development. How far has the marriage-related norm changed? What about the conventional views about women who remain single into their older ages?

Social Stigma and Social Images of Never-married Women in East Asian Modernities

Historically, remaining single at an older age was regarded as a deviant behavior in many societies, including Hong Kong and Tokyo, and hence stigmatized. This can be seen from certain derogatory terms that refer to older never-married women, such as 'old maid'. In Hong Kong, old maids are called 'lo ku por' ('old auntie grandma'). Lo ku pors are negatively connoted to be old and not married because no men want them as wives. They are associated with a whole host of traits that are the opposite of what a traditional Chinese man might look for in a subservient homemaker wife; such as being unattractive and unkempt, not feminine, too stubborn, strong or blunt in character, opinionated, argumentative, impetuous, and not sociable. In traditional Chinese terminology, a man marries by 'taking in' a wife (men *tsui* wives), and a woman marries by 'giving herself to' a man (women *ga* husbands). 'Tsui' and 'ga' are related to the concept that in marriage, the woman ceases to be a member of her (maiden) home to become a member of her husband's household. In this paradigm, lo ku pors are those who seem not able to 'give themselves away' because few men want to 'take them in'; in other words, lo ku pors cannot 'ga' because no men want to 'tsui' them.

Similar terms exist in Japan, too. 'Ikazu goke' refers to women who get old without marrying. 'Goke' actually means a widow and 'ikazu' means not going, that is, not leaving her maiden home for marriage. This term originates in the Edo period (1603-1868). In the Meiji period (1868-1912), a 'jinglish' word for old maid, 'old miss' (orudo misu), was introduced in the context of expansion of education for girls and women. As educational attainment for women increased, they took occupations such as teacher. Many of these women did not marry and continued to work. It was a new social phenomenon, not favored by everyone. Then bureaucrats (particularly from the ministry of education) and educators seriously discussed the effect of higher education on women and their life course with respect to marriage (see Kato, 2006). For many, it was the opposite of 'ryosai kenbo' or 'good wife, wise mother', another catchphrase in this early era of modern Japan. Like 'ikazu goke', the term 'old miss' gives a negative impression of a single

woman as having always something to say and being loud. In the 1980s, another description joined this array: 'remaindered Christmas cakes' (ureanokotta kurisumasu keki). This phrase specifically refers to women who are over 25 and still not married, as if women over 25 have no value, just like Christmas cakes after the 25th of December. All these descriptions were introduced because never-married women who were older than the average age of marriage constituted a 'rare' group of people. They were a minority that did not fit society's 'standard' way of life, or the dominant norm.

In the past two decades or so, somewhat later than in the West, new discourses on single women began to emerge in Asian industrialized societies. In Hong Kong, a neutral term emerged in the 1990s to describe single women: dan sun lui yan (single-person woman). Instead of the traditional old maid concept, single women are perceived to be unencumbered and independent. In Japan as well, new images of single employed women emerged at the turn of this century. 'Ohitorisama' (single person) can be seen as a Japanese counterpart of the term 'dan sun lui yan'. The term is coined by journalist Kumiko Iwashita (2001) to describe an independent, mature woman who enjoys her life, both company with friends and time alone. In Japan, some restaurants, bars and traditional hotels reject unaccompanied guests. In the case of hotels it is sometimes feared that such guests may commit suicide (Iwashita, 2001, p. 5). This has prompted Iwashita to launch an initiative to enhance the quality of single women's lives by improving the environment surrounding them so that they can enjoy gourmet, travel, and other cultural activities. The term 'ohitorisama' differs from older terms that refer to single women in that it has positive connotation of single women's lifestyle.

There is also the term dan sun gwai cheuk (single-persons nobility) in Hong Kong to describe single men and women (although more often men than women) who are rich, live well, and know how to enjoy life. A similar term, 'dokushin kizoku' (single aristocrat or aristocratic bachelor), exists in Japan. This term refers to single men who have money and enjoy single life. People are beginning to view singles as a privileged class because they are free and have the means to live the way they choose. The perception that men and women are not married after a certain age probably because they are difficult to get along with and dif-

ficult to live with has not disappeared entirely, but has been chipped away by new attitudes toward them, as indicated by these descriptive terms about them.

More recently, two other terms 'arafo' (around 40) and 'makeinu' (lost dog) created some fervor in Japan's media. 'Arafo' refers to women who are around 40. While women around 40 are not necessarily single, the term is associated particularly with never-married, employed women in their late 30's and early 40's. These women, unlike the 'old miss' and the 'Christmas cake', are imaged as powerful, independent individuals who can decide what to do in their life. Hereby one can see that a positive meaning is given to single women. Same positive image underlies the term 'makeinu' (Sakai, 2006). Junko Sakai—an essayist in her late thirties and not married herself—sees mature single childless women as satisfied with their lifestyle despite a persisting social stigma towards these women (see below).

Why Do Women in East Asia Not Marry?

The emergence and expansion of new terms referring to never-married women suggests that older single women still attract much attention in the society as a 'unique' social group. While there are signs that never-married women are receiving more positive views from society, there is still ambivalence about their life choice. There is the changing perception that single women can be happy, independent and powerful (for Hong Kong, see additionally C. W. Ng & E. G. H. Ng, 2004), but old negativity about the abnormality persists (e.g., H. Tanaka, forthcoming). 'Arafo' women are criticized as wanting everything from work to partnership (A. Tanaka, 2008), and the term 'makeinu' is coined by Sakai (2006) to arouse concerns about the prevailing stigma still attached to older never-married women. Despite that these women are content with how they live their lives the public continues to criticize them for their age-incongruent marital and parental status. Sakai therefore has offered the provocative and self-deprecatory 'lost dog' ('loser')—a seemingly new derogatory term—to older single childless women to present themselves with, since by doing so, Sakai argues, they are more likely to receive sympathy and pity rather than criticism, and that makes their lives easier. This implies the enduring power of the traditional institutions of

marriage and family and related conventions about gender roles.

Several studies attempt to understand the trend to avoid or postpone marriage in light of women's active decision to not marry. McDonald (2000) stresses the unresolved issue of gender equity in the private sphere as a major factor that causes women to refrain from marrying and having a child. This is pressing especially in East Asia, in which traditional gender norms still prevail (McDonald, 2008). Tsuya and Bumpass (2004) contend that without this issue being resolved, educated, financially independent, employed women will remain reluctant in getting married and having a child. Similarly, Nemoto (2008) found that some of the Japanese women she interviewed held a negative image of marriage and family on the basis of traditional gender roles and rejected the idea of marriage. These findings correspond with the thesis of changes in values in that women envision new values and norms as a result of their increased opportunities in higher education and employment (Atoh, 1997).

It is true that never-married employed women in Hong Kong and Tokyo are more common today than some decades ago. Still it is a question of whether social and cultural values of these two East Asian societies have changed enough so that the new lifestyle of single women can be accepted as a social norm. About 15 years ago, Forsyth & Johnson (1995) observed singlehood in American society and argued that it could be best described as "normal deviance". The increasing number of singles makes them 'normal' in a sense that they are not rare anymore, but this does not necessarily correspond with their social and cultural acceptance in the society (Forsyth & Johnson, 1995, p. 101). Is this phenomenon also observable in East Asian societies? How do individual women make life choice decisions given the social environments that they are in? How do they negotiate round society's resilient ambivalent attitudes towards their slowly normalizing abnormal marital status?

Never-married Employed Women Informants

Table 3 shows the list of never-married employed women interviewed for this study, and Table 4 consists of the semi-structured interview questions adopted. We included only single heterosexual women in

full-time paid employment who are not in a cohabitation relationship. Interviews were conducted from 2001 to 2004 in Hong Kong and from 2009 to 2010 in Tokyo. The topics covered in the Tokyo interviews were guided by the Hong Kong study; but the Tokyo study had extra questions to explore in more depth the informants' life trajectories and perceptions of their current single status as well as their consciousness of the societal view of singlehood. Interviewees were assured of confidentiality of data, and their names and jobs have been disguised in this paper. The interviews basically took a free-flow format that allowed the informants to speak or elaborate on the topics of their choice whenever they wished. In Hong Kong, it was not easy to get interviewees to agree to a sustained session that normally lasted from one-and-a-half to two hours, and one contact reported that a number of her single female colleagues declined to be interviewed. The situation was similar in Tokyo. Several women who agreed to be interviewed were not necessarily cooperative. One of them declined, saying that she began to feel insecure, as the interview date approached.

Table 3
Profile of the informants

a) Hong Kong (Total: 17 informants)

Name*	Age	No. of children and age	In a relationship	Living arrangement	Profession**	Education	Overseas education/residence
Alice	29	-	Yes	Parents, younger brother	Financial analyst	Bachelor degree	Yes (US)
Amy	45		No	Younger sister in mortgaged flat	Nurse	Bachelor degree	Yes (Australia)
Anita	40		No	Parents, younger brother	Assistant general manager	Bachelor degree	No
Cory	40	-	No	Nephew in mortgaged flat	Nurse	Master degree	Yes (NZ)
Ella	43	Daughter (2+ years old)	Yes	Alone in staff quarters with daughter and helper	University teacher	Doctoral degree	Yes (UK & USA)
Enid	36	-	Yes	Alone in family flat	Sub-editor for TV	Master degree	Yes (Canada)
Gigi	41	Expecting a baby	No	Alone in mortgaged flat	University teacher	Doctoral degree	Yes (UK)
Hannah	Late 30s	-	No	Alone in mortgaged flat	Assistant to director	Bachelor degree	Yes (France)
Jean	31	-	No	Parents, younger brother	Mid-level manager	High school	No
Letty	50	-	Yes	Alone in rented flat	Teacher	Master degree	Yes (UK & Canada)
Mandy	39	-	No	Alone in mortgaged flat	TV producer	Master degree	Yes (UK)
Millie	48	-	No	Alone in mortgaged flat	Insurance consultant	High school	No
Pamela	36	-	No	Alone in mortgaged flat	Vice- president in bank	Master degree	No
Pauline	42	-	No	Parents, elder sister	Administration officer	Master degree	No
Rosie	42	-	Yes	Alone in fully paid-up flat	Social work officer	Master degree	No
Sharon	41	-	No	Mother	Secretary	Post- secondary	Yes (Canada)
Yvette	41	-	No	Parents in mortgaged flat	Creative director	Post- secondary	No

Note: * Names are disguised. ** Profession has been changed slightly to render it less specific.

b) Tokyo (Total: 17 informants)

Name*	Age	No. of children and age	In a relationship	Living arrangement	Profession**	Education	Overseas education/residence
Aiko	36	-	Yes	Younger sister in grandmother's flat	Office worker	Master degree	Yes (UK)
Akiko	57	-	No	Alone in apartment/ office	Self- employed artist/ designer and president of own company	Bachelor degree	Yes (US, France)
Erika	34	-	No	Alone in apartment	Art director	Bachelor degree	Yes (US)
Emi	29	-	Never	Alone in rented apartment	Office worker	Bachelor degree	No
Fumi	31	-	No	Alone in rented apartment	Office worker/Secretary	Bachelor degree	No
Hana	34	-	Yes	Alone in apartment	Art director	Bachelor degree	No
Kayo	31	-	No	Brother in a rented house	Office worker	Bachelor degree	No
Keiko	37	-	No	Alone in apartment	Nutritionist	Bachelor degree	No
Momoe	42	-	No	Parents in their house	Mid-level manager	Post- secondary	No
Nana	34	-	Yes	Parents, sister, brother-in-law, nephew and niece	Office worker	Associate degree	No
Reiko	44	-	No	Alone in mortgaged house	TV producer	Bachelor degree	No (frequent oversea travel)
Risa	30	-	No	Parents in their house	Office worker, secretary	Bachelor degree	No
Saki	41	-	No	Parents in a mortgaged flat	Office worker	Bachelor degree	No
Saori	49	-	No	Alone, but near mother's	Office worker	Associate degree	No
Sayaka	46	-	No	Parents in their house	Office worker	Associate degree	No
Seiko	49	-	No	Alone in mortgaged house owned by mother	Fashion designer, sometimes at boutiques	Associate degree	No
Toko	36	-	No	Alone in apartment	Yoga instructor	Associate degree	No

Note: * Names are disguised. ** Profession has been changed slightly to render it less specific.

Table 4
Semi-structured interview questions

Present Circumstances: Age, nature of current marital status, summary of current activity

Life History:**
 	
  Childhood and family background
   - When and where born; how old was your mother, when you were born?
   - Family composition (who, gender, age, education, job, place to live); mother working?
   - family circumstances (emotional, economic, stability, mobility, interaction)
   - extended family (geographic and emotional proximity)
 	
  School life/education
   - when and where went to school (mobility and stability)
   - experiences of/memories of school
   - when left school/further education
   - any qualifications
 	
  Working history
   - when started, whether changed jobs
   - types of jobs (occupation, size of the company, position)
   - how long stayed in jobs
   - feelings about jobs
   - working hours, commuting hours
 	
  Leaving home/leaving care
   - When
   - what precipitated
   - experiences and feelings
   - how well prepared
     Or: any plan to leave parents' home?
 	
  Friendships
   - important friendships and relationships as growing up
   - whether local network of friends, what based around, how (easily) made
   - whether still in contact, still important
 	
  Further relationships
   - boyfriends (girlfriends)/partners
   - living together or not
   - on current relationship: a) interaction; b) relationship
   - relationship breakdowns and separations
 	
  Home moving (migration)/stability
   - experiences of moving
   - where from/to
   - what precipitated
 	
  Health conditions
   - Any handicap/disease, etc.
 	
  General values and attitudes
- What do you think about the following opinions?
 	
Women should stay at home, while men work outside.
 	
Married couples should get divorced, if they do not love each other anymore.
 	
A parent should sacrifice his/herself for his/her children.
 	
It is the first son's duty to take care of the parents.
 	
If a parent is old and cannot make a living on his/her own, his/her child should live together with the parent.

Who are the 10 most important persons in your life?

What are your first thoughts about the following words?
  Single women,
  Single men,
  Marriage,
  Family,
  Children,
  Work,
  Money,
  Hong Kong*/Tokyo**,
  Feminism/gender equality**, and
  Your future.

Perceptions on singlehood:**
  In international comparison, Japan has a very high rate of marriage.
  Why do you think this is so? Why do you think it is now declining?
  More men are remaining unmarried these days. Why do you think it is so?
  Do you think their reasons are different from women?
  Do you think men and women experience the single lifestyle similarly or differently, and in which respects?
  In many European countries single women still decide to bear children. Do you think this is an option in Japan? Why or why not?
  What do you think is the popular opinion of single women? How is it true or false?

Public-space questions:
  Can you describe your job to me?
  Do you like your job?
  Is work important to you?
  Do you work very hard?
  Are you ambitious, career-wise?
  How do you get on with your colleagues at work?
  How does singlehood impact your work life?
  Do you feel any discrimination at work?
  Is there anything you would like your work organization to do for you?

Private-space questions:
  How do you like living alone (or with family, etc., whichever applies)?
  Do you do housework?
  Do you cook?
  How oft en do you entertain at home?
  Do you feel lonely?
  Do you like going out (to restaurants, movies, for instance) by yourself?
  Do you have a lot of friends?
  Can you describe your ideal partner to us?
  What, if anything, would you like to change about your life?

Others:**
  Is there anything you live for?
  Do you have any future life plans?

Note: Questions asked only in Hong Kong are marked with *, those only in Tokyo with **.

Despite the difficult nature of this study, we were able to talk to 17 never-married employed informants in each city through our social networks and by referrals. We disseminated the invitation to participants via various means, such as electronic media. We asked our contacts to introduce potential informants to us, and our informants to spread the word to their friends, colleagues and acquaintances. We tried to keep the demographics of the two samples as compatible as possible. This snowball sampling method meant that the two sets of informants represented self-selected groups, in the sense that the women were ready to talk about their situations frankly. All the informants were about the median age of first marriage (28.2 for Hong Kong in 2006, 29.7 for Tokyo in 2010; see Table 2) or older. The Hong Kong women aged between 29 and 50, while the Tokyo women, between 29 and 57. Five women in Hong Kong and three women in Tokyo were in a romantic relationship at the time of interview. Two women from the Hong Kong data had a child out of wedlock. The ethnic backgrounds of the informants were rather homogenous in both samples. In Hong Kong, all informants were ethnic Chinese, and all but three were born and raised in Hong Kong. The locals identified themselves as 'Hong Kong people'. Among the three overseas Chinese, two were born in Hong Kong and migrated to Canada in their formative years, and one was from France. All of the Tokyo respondents were born and raised in Japan; and, at the time of the interview, they lived in the Tokyo metropolitan area, worked in Tokyo, and had family members and relatives in areas usually not too far from their living arrangements.

On the whole, Tokyo informants, in comparison to Hong Kong informants, were younger, more of them were non-professionals and fewer of them worked long work hours. A major difference between the two groups lies in their living arrangement. We gathered this information on living situation because previous research on households shows that some countries including Japan have a growing number of single adults who do not leave their parental home (Yamada, 2004). Although a majority of our informants were able to maintain their own accommodation (Hong Kong: 11, Tokyo: 13), most of the Tokyo informants lived in rented apartments, while eight of the Hong Kong informants lived in mortgaged flats and one Hong Kong informant even lived in a paid-up home. This difference in the home ownership sit-

uations of the Hong Kong and Tokyo informants may be partially due to some structural factors, such as economic instability and high real-estate (or land) price in Tokyo since the 1990s. Against these backgrounds, the housing pathways in the life courses of younger generations in Tokyo have changed dramatically in the recent years; particularly, homeownership is decreasing among younger generations and many single adults tend to remain at their parents' home until they marry or even for good if they do not marry (see Hirayama & Ronald, 2008).

Another reason for the difference in home ownership situations may be related to the higher middle-class status of the informants in Hong Kong. Many of the Hong Kong informants were professionals. They belonged to the middle-income group, and earned more than the median monthly salary of HK$30,000 for workers in the managerial, administrative and professional sector (Hong Kong Government, 2001, p. 53). Most of the informants in the Hong Kong sample had Bachelor's, and many of them were Master's or doctoral degree holders. In comparison, the Tokyo data included two women with Master's degree, and very few of the Tokyo women informants were managers or professionals. Although the Tokyo data did not include as many managers as the Hong Kong sample, most of the Tokyo women were not from the lower strata of society and had jobs that allow them to make a living. All of them had postsecondary educational backgrounds, and a majority held a university or junior college degree. Despite the comparative educational and career differences, the two datasets are not incompatible. This is because although an increasing number of women in Japan are pursuing postgraduate degrees, it is still not as common a phenomenon as in Hong Kong. Furthermore, women are highly marginalized in the Japanese employment system, having limited opportunities to develop careers (see Ogasawara, 1998).

Are Never-Married Employed Women Happy?

Overall, both the Hong Kong and Tokyo informants viewed themselves positively. The dominating perception among the informants of their single status was that they had 'freedom'. One Tokyo participant said she looked up to a senior colleague who was around 40 years old

and not married as her role model. One Hong Kong informant said that she saw the stereotype of lo ku por (old maid) in movies, but felt that the characters did not look like her at all. Although the Hong Kong and Tokyo never-married employed women interviewees were aware of the stigma and negative connotation associated with 'old maid', and the 'social gaze' at their atypical marital situation, they did not see themselves as 'abnormal' or social deviants. They were not ignorant about the negative social views of older never-married women, such as 'poor', 'miserable', 'pitiful' and 'bad', but many saw themselves as 'free', 'independent', 'responsible', 'hardworking' and 'lively'. The most mentioned downside of being not married was feeling 'lonely' sometimes.

The following two assumptions are often cited as the most likely explanations for the increased singlehood among women: (i) increased labor force participation of women; and (ii) change in marriage- and family-related values and norms. The first explanation usually emphasizes increased financial independence of women through their economic activity, which means that women no longer are pulled to marriages for economic reasons. The second explanation stresses that women are increasingly rejecting the norm that one should necessarily marry. Several studies point out that some younger women develop uneasy feelings about the asymmetric gender relations within the family because they perceive their parents' marital relationship as being unhappy (on Japan, Kamano, 2004). This is similar to what Gordon (1994a, 1994b) found in her study of Western women, whom she found to be "voluntary singles".

The first reason above holds for our study of Hong Kong and Tokyo never-married employed women. Our data suggest that it is true that many of our informants do have a higher degree of financial independence than the average female population, which means that they do not have to marry for the sake of economic security. In this light, the stress placed by Western individualization theories on 'precarious freedom' and 'individualized personal risks' when individual women choose to craft the unconventional life choice of singlehood seems less applicable to our samples of informants. In Hong Kong's case, the city has a strong sense of self-reliance (a 'can-do' spirit) and the citizens have been socialized to rely less on the state and more on personal achievements through meritocratic systems, such as capitalistic work organizations. If there is a danger of an increase in precariousness asso-

ciated with an increase in biographic freedom, it lies less with the crumbling of social and public policy structures (since East Asia has fewer provisions of social welfare and safety nets than in the West to begin with), and more with the evolving extended family and community support systems (which have played a stronger role in providing support networks for East Asian women). Notwithstanding, our study also shows that work influences marriage and career-partner choice decisions in aspects other than economics.

The second reason above is not so obvious among our informants. Our data suggest that single women in Hong Kong and Tokyo by and large espouse positive views on the social norm of marriage and the conventional marriage institution. They do see asymmetric gender relations, but they do not reject marriage *per se*. However, behaviorally, they are not getting married as the majority of the population do. This incoherence seems to suggest that increased biographical originality (i.e. freedom to determine one's biographic choices) echoed in the individualization theory (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) does not necessarily mean that individuals are active in making decisions according to their desires, and that this freedom is perhaps not entirely 'free' (Koo & Wong, 2009), but rather, partially constrained.

Centrality of Work

Working hours are notoriously long in Hong Kong and Tokyo. According to a survey, employees in Hong Kong on average work 48.7 hours per week, 22 percent higher than the 40 hours recommended by the International Labour Organization (Community Business, 2010). In Tokyo, on top of the 15.4 hours of overtime work, the average monthly working hours for male regular workers (in companies sized more than 30 workers) are 159.2. (The situation for female regular workers in Tokyo is less demanding. Their average monthly working hours are 125.7 (excluding 9.7 hours of overtime work).) (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, Bureau of General Affairs, Statistics Division, 2011)

Work exerts direct and indirect influence on single women's career-partner choice decisions and behavior. Many of the informants in Hong Kong, who were professionals, reported working long hours. In the Tokyo sample, office workers said they worked overtime occasion-

ally, and professionals who worked in the media sector and advertise-
ment agencies at the time of the interviews said they frequently worked
overtime. However, overall, neither of the two groups of informants
complained about the long work hours. It is probably a norm that
workers, both female and male, in the two societies accept and comply
with. The informants are quite dedicated to doing their jobs well and
a majority of them also derive pride and joy from their good job
performance. As a result, most probably feel comfortable with long
work hours if that is what is needed to fulfil job duties satisfactorily.
Some Hong Kong professional informants complained about not having
time to date. Tokyo informants did not specifically complain about that.
But for both samples, long working hours likely mean less time and
more difficulties in finding a boyfriend.

Some informants in the Hong Kong sample and the majority of the
Tokyo informants are non-professionals. Their working hours are short-
er in comparison. Furthermore, in Tokyo's case, women's working hours
are not as long as men's due to different labor structures for the two
genders in the gendered Japanese employment system (see above).
Irrespectively, the majority of our informants in the two cities, pro-
fessionals or not, are responsible, diligent and conscientious workers
who take their job duties seriously. For some, if long hours are needed
to perform their jobs well, they feel obligated to work those hours. For
others, even though they work regular hours, they are also highly com-
mitted to their jobs.

What is interesting is that although the Japanese employment system
biases against women workers more so than the Hong Kong system (in
the sense that men in Hong Kong, too, work more, are better paid and
dominate more decision making positions than women in Hong Kong;
but in Japan, it is even more so), most women in our Tokyo sample
also find work satisfying. The Tokyo informants, in comparison to the
Hong Kong sample, felt less attachment to work; but similar to the
Hong Kong sample, most of the Tokyo informants said they found
work worthwhile and wanted to work for as long as possible, possibly
all their lives. Although many of them, particularly those who are not
self-employed, are marginalized in the gendered employment system
work nonetheless occupies a significant part of their lives and is central
to them.

Work-Marriage Decision: Work and Marriage

Although our informants are committed to work, when asked whether work takes priority over dating and marriage, both Hong Kong and Tokyo informants generally feel that they desire both. They do not seem to avoid or delay marriage purposefully in order to be good or successful at work. For some, quite the contrary, if given a choice they preferred marriage over work. One Hong Kong informant said that if she had a boyfriend, she would not be working such long hours. She would choose going out, eating and shopping with her boyfriend over working overtime anytime; but since she had no boyfriend, she might as well work. Another Hong Kong informant explained that she did not like to waste time. She said, since she had no boyfriend, after work she would just go home and watch TV. Since watching TV is a time waster, she prefers to work late.

In Tokyo too, many informants expressed their wish to marry someday. Older informants as well, hold a desire to marry, and three of their responses were: 'If I have a chance, I want to marry at least once'; '[marriage is] something to yearn for for me'; 'After all I want to marry. Yes. I want to make a family and, I don't know whether I can have a child at my age, but I think I want one, if possible'. While most of our Tokyo informants are satisfied with their current life, the norm that marriage is an important part of a happy life is strong. Some feel sorry for their parents because of their single status. One explained her concern for her parents this way: 'In my hometown, my brother is not married yet, me neither. So I feel sorry for my parents, thinking it would be nice if my parents also could carry their grandchildren in their arms.' They seem to understand (and empathize with) their parents' wish to have grandchildren, but at the same time feel quite helpless because they are not married and therefore cannot produce children to fulfil their parents' wish.

Constraints on Having Both Work and Marriage

The majority of our informants desire to have both a job and a marriage, despite the fact that they are among the minority in the population who seem to be postponing or avoiding marrying. In other

words, there is a degree of discrepancy and dissonance between attitude (viewing marriage as desirable) and behavior (not actively attending to finding a marriage partner). In Geissler & Oechsle's (1994) terms, many of our informants behaviorally are adopting individualized lifestyles, the motivation of which is to pursue self-actualization; yet somewhat para-doxically, a few desire the female normal biography, and many desire to lead a "double lifestyle" of work and marriage. In other words, al-though many informants desire work and marriage, they are not married (that is why they were in our samples to begin with). It is interesting to note that one Hong Kong informant asked out loud, 'Where are all the men?' The implication seems to be that despite active searching, she could not find a man, or the right man. However, her interview data did not indicate that she had earnestly explored various options in trying to find a partner.

It emerges that as single women become more financially in-dependent, they have less of a reason to marry men for financial security. Also, work has become central to their lives, as it involves long work hours and women themselves take certain pride in it and have good feelings about a job well done. Such centrality of work gives them a sense of achievement, a high degree of satisfaction, besides providing them better financial means. For the informants who have achieved a degree of career success, it means that they have more resources to pur-sue personal interests. Among the Hong Kong informants, many men-tioned that they enjoy studying part-time, taking painting and calligraphy lessons, travelling, window shopping to learn more about design, and so on. Tokyo respondents have diverse interests too, and enjoy hobbies such as travelling, dance, sports, shopping, and eating out. Over time, finding a partner recedes in importance and urgency, as they attain a higher level of life satisfaction from their job or career, and from their other personal pursuits. In other words, a direct result of work being central to single women's lives is that they have less time for dating and less opportunity to meet people. An indirect result of this centrality of work is that they attend to actively finding a partner less and less.

Many of our informants in both cities desire to marry and at the same time perceive the 'dark side' (negative aspects) of marriage. One contributing factor to being passive about marriage is that they see it as somewhat burdensome. In Tokyo, many informants associate mar-

riage with 'hardship' and 'responsibility'. In Hong Kong, many informants see it as a loss of 'freedom' and 'independence'. A few Hong Kong informants said that when they are single, they are accountable to only themselves. They said if they were married, they could not just come and go; they would have to be more considerate and would have to take their husband into consideration and inform him of their whereabouts. One Hong Kong informant said that marriage and children are a lot of work, and said, quite honestly, 'I stay single maybe because I am selfish.'

The other contributing factor to Hong Kong informants not marrying is that some of the informants are observant of the difficulties faced by working mothers. Family-friendly policies are not widely available in Hong Kong, or Tokyo. In highly competitive capitalistic economies like Hong Kong and in highly gendered employment systems like the ones in Tokyo, few organizations offer their employees options to balance work and family. In addition to the lack of support from the commercial sector, there is also a perceived structural disadvantage for working mothers in terms of minimal public policy and social service support for more balanced work-life options. For those informants who saw working mothers' tough career/family juggling act, and who were thinking ahead to having children after marriage (either because they themselves desired children and/or because they felt obligated to produce grandchildren for their parents), they might have been extra cautious about getting married. In other words, concerns about work-family conflicts might deter some women from taking active steps to 'be married'.

Furthermore, our informants in both cities tend to have some expectations of their partner that conform to traditional roles, despite the fact that they themselves are leading somewhat unconventional lives, and generally, not strictly adhering to the traditional dependent, second-sex female role. Traditionally, men dominate the public sphere and women are ascribed the domestic role; men are the breadwinner who provides for his homemaker wife and children; and men are the protector and women the protected. Never-married employed women in our Hong Kong and Tokyo samples are committed workers who have financial means and who would like to continue working for as long as possible. Professional informants in our samples are financially quite independent, and are relatively high achievers who are proud of their

accomplishments. They seem to be well functioning "city singles" (Gordon, 1994a, 1994b), and seem to conform to the images of 'single-persons nobility' and 'single aristocrat' rather than that of 'lo ku por' and 'ikazu goke'. Yet intriguingly, many of our informants expressed their feelings that their partners should, at least to an extent (and if not in substance, then at least symbolically) be providing for them, protecting them, extending care toward them and/or helping them learn and grow.

In Hong Kong, when asked what traits they looked for in a partner, a surprisingly large number of informants mentioned that their partners have to be as financially stable and/or intelligent, worldly, strong, knowledgeable, and so on, as they are, if not more so. One Hong Kong informant specifically mentioned that her partner must be taller than her. ('I'm five-foot-seven-or-eight in heels,' she explained.) Being asked why she did not marry her former steady boyfriend, a Tokyo informant replied, 'His income was not enough and his job was unstable. Also, my parents did not like him.' Many of the Hong Kong and Tokyo informants talked about the character of their ideal partner and the values he had to share with them (e.g. gentle, earnest, respectable, honest, happy, friendly, having integrity, not too money-minded, loves art/outdoor activities, fun, not boring, 'as focused as I am; knows what he's doing and where he's going', confident, and so on). These narratives show that for the majority of the informants, the man should possess at least as many good qualities as the woman, and should not be less of an achiever than the woman.

Many of the informants in this study are well-adjusted high achievers in life (e.g. educated with multiple personal interests and pursuits) and at work (e.g. enjoying job satisfaction and earning a higher pay packet than the average woman worker). It is of course natural that women seek 'good quality men' for partnership. However, our study found that some residual gender role stereotypes are at play in the sense that the man should not be the weaker party in a relationship. Hereby it appears that culturally neither men nor women are seeking a new paradigm of gender relations although economically women are catching up with men. In addition to the structural constraints (e.g. lack of provisions for work-family balance options) to achieving new gender roles, there are cultural constraints (e.g. continual subscription to traditional gender

roles). In both Hong Kong and Tokyo, there is a possibility that never-married employed women do not settle into a marriage partially because they can afford to continue being single, and partially because they are careful not to settle for a 'less than ideal' lifetime partner. Sociologists found evidence that human behavior can change before their attitudes change (e.g., Mason & Lu, 1988). Behaviorally, some women in Hong Kong and Tokyo are crafting individualized lifestyles for themselves, but attitudinally, concepts about gender roles seem to be evolving at a slower pace than this individualization process.

Conclusion

Overall, the women interviewed in both cities are independent, happy and confident. They do not see themselves as victims, and certainly not 'deviants'. They do realize that they are the minority, somewhat 'off the track', a social curiosity and therefore subjects for 'social gaze', but are quite comfortable with their singlehood status. This signifies that the phenomenon of an increasing number of single women in Hong Kong and Tokyo is being normalized, and it is slowly becoming a 'normal deviance' social development.

Work is central to our informants' lives－for professionals and non-professionals alike. The Hong Kong and Tokyo never-married employed women informants in this study are financially independent and highly motivated workers. Many of the Hong Kong and some of the Tokyo informants are professionals who are high economic achievers, and they derive satisfaction and pride from their work lives. They do not necessarily mind working long hours if that is what it takes to do their jobs well. Most of the Tokyo and some of the Hong Kong informants are non-professionals; but they, like the professionals in our samples, also take pride in their jobs in that they are aware of their contribution and are ready to make efforts to improve their skills and to give quality job performance. Most of our informants (whether non-professionals or professionals) have many and diverse personal interests and pursuits.

The centrality of work exerts direct and indirect influence on women's life choices. For some, it practically means less time to date and less opportunity to meet people. For most, whether they work long or

regular hours, the centrality of work enhances their life satisfaction, rendering them perhaps more 'demanding' in their choice of a partner. Many of the informants feel that their partner should preferably be financially, intellectually and emotionally as mature/stable as they are or more mature/stable than they are. It could be because they feel that their partner has to be their equal or more in order for him to be able to add value to their lives. They also seem to espouse conventional marriage ideals of men being the provider/protector (the stronger party) and women being the provided/protected (the weaker party).

Marriage curtails freedom and independence and it exerts responsibilities on the two parties concerned. Both men and women usually take this into consideration when considering getting married. For employed women in Hong Kong and Tokyo, additionally, they may also take into consideration the challenging work/family juggling act; especially for those who feel obliged to get married and have children because their parents are unhappy about being 'grandchildless'. Despite the fact that most of our informants perceive marriage as a positive social norm, and would readily say that they desire both work and marriage, they nevertheless are not married, setting them apart from the majority of the population. This suggests that they may adore and keep distance from marriage at the same time.

Despite shifts in women's and men's relative economic positions, conventional ideals about husband and wife roles persist. Work/family balance issues continue to affect working mothers much more so than working fathers. Both men and women (as our informants have shown us) continue to subscribe to existing socio-structural norms. Our study shows that the norms are not catching up with women's rising economic and social status partially because women themselves are not seeking a new paradigm for gender relations, despite their increasing power and ability to shape one. In other words, there is change, but there is also continuity.

Our informants have the means to freely make life decisions and to freely act based on their needs and desires. According to individualization theory, their increased biographical originality (life choice freedom), arising from their social and economic status, means that they would be actively taking action to fulfil their needs and desires. It would then follow that women in paid employment ─ especially successful ones who

desire marriage and career－would be both married and working. Our study indicates otherwise. Our never-married employed women informants are not active in finding a partner despite the importance they place on marriage.

This denotes that increased biographical freedom is not 'truly free'. It is contextualized and constrained by social norms, conventions and attitudes that are slower to change than economic restructuring. The biographic originality for Tokyo and Hong Kong women (particularly those who are intellectually, financially and emotionally confident) behaviorally pans out to be one of being passive about marriage (i.e., to delay marriage or to not marry). The singlehood status is normalizing and there is less stigmatization attached to it. As women's socio-economic status improves in these two societies, continual subscription to conventional gender, marital and family values translates into an increasing number of never-married women. This picture of how biographical freedom manifests itself among East Asian women's marriage and work options is worth noting by individualization theorists.

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Biographical Note: **Hiromi Tanaka,** Ph. D., is an Assistant Professor at Meiji University School of Information and Communication, Japan. Her main research interests are social change and modernity, life course and biography, intersectionality, social risk and wellbeing. She is the author of *Japanese women's networks and gender politics in the age of globalization* (2009). Her recent publications include articles on low fertility (*Japanese Studies 29*(3)) and ambivalences in women's biography (*Different Perspectives on Biographies,* 2011). Email: hiromi@meiji.ac.jp

Biographical Note: **Catherine W. Ng,** Ph. D., is a Senior Teaching Fellow in the Department of Management and Marketing at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her research interests include women in management, women workers' cooperatives, and women entrepreneurship. She has published articles and book chapters on single working women (*Doing Families in Hong Kong,* 2009), workplace democracy (*Economic and Industrial Democracy, 30*(2)), female politicians at the district level (*Asian Journal of Social Science, 36*(5)), and women leadership (*Asian Journal of Women's Studies, 13*(1)). Email: mswhng@polyu.edu.hk