



Women in the Middle

By Andrew Choi Tsz-hong and Edith Liu

In March this year, an episode of Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB)'s current affairs programme Tuesday Report titled *Confessions of Zhong nu*, caused a sensation in the internet chatrooms and became fodder for columnists.

"I feel offended after watching *Confessions of Zhong nu*. I am a *zhong nu* as well. But I don't think a *zhong nu* has to be like that," says Yan, 34, a self-described *zhong nu*.

The term is used to refer to middle-aged women in general, but based on the backgrounds of the women interviewed in the programme, it was understood to apply to women over 30 who are not married.

Nine women were shown in the programme, speaking to the camera or chatting together over glasses of wine. Sharing their feelings about being labelled as *zhong nu* and recounting their stories of failed relationships, they were shown as successful, independent and, for the most part, yearning for love.

For Yan, the programme did not give the whole picture of a *zhong nu*'s life. "It made me feel that those ladies without partners were pathetic," Yan says. "I didn't think from the interviews that they had boyfriends."

Another viewer, Margaret Siu had a similar response. Siu believes that while the programme touched on some truths, it did not show the whole situation. As a single 30-year-old woman, she was worried about finding her Mr Right after watching the programme. "I am afraid of being left on the shelf because it (the programme) says it is hard for women over 30 to find partners." Siu says she felt stressed after watching the programme.

According to Yan and Siu, the programme portrayed women over 30 as underdogs in the search for a mate. While the programme does not explicitly say these unmarried women are single, it gives the impression that the nine interviewees do not have partners.

It turns out this is not the case. Some interviewees do have boyfriends.

Shirley Chan Ming-wai, a 37-year-old drama teacher and actress, told *Varsity* that when TVB contacted her, she was not asked about her status and therefore she did not reveal that she had a boyfriend.

Chan was told that the programme would highlight how *zhong nu* could lead fruitful lives without marriage. She was surprised it focused instead on the "miserable" aspects of their life. Chan's more positive comments were left in the editing room.

As one of the interviewees, she believes *Confessions of Zhong nu* did not distort the facts, but that it is a bit

misleading. "All the attention focuses on the failed relationships of *zhong nu*. It gives the audience the feeling that a bunch of unwanted ladies are whining about their past and their ex (ex-boyfriends)," says Chan.

She also thinks the programme was shallow. For her, having difficult or even abortive relationships is not a big deal. "Except for those who get married to their first love, everyone else must have had a failed relationship before," she says.

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Replying to these criticisms, the programme's senior producer, Shum Ying said it was not the aim of the show to project an image in which *zhong nu* are women left on the shelf. "Our aim was to let our interviewees share their experience with our main target audience - women," she says, "we want to tell them that if they encounter similar problems (failed relationships), they are not the only ones facing these problems. *Zhong nu* should learn from their experience." She adds the programme was not meant to cause anger, fear or anxiety to anyone.

She also maintains, contrary to Shirley Chan's recollection, that the reporters asked if the interviewees were in a relationship and knew whether they had boyfriends. However, in the broadcast programme, the nine interviewees only said they were unmarried or divorced. It never mentioned whether or not they had boyfriends.

Whether or not the programme-makers presented a comprehensive picture of unmarried 30-something

women in Hong Kong is arguable. What is undeniable is that it caused a stir because it touched on certain perceptions of women and expectations of their behaviour in society.

Zhong nu has become a prevalent term in Hong Kong to describe middle-aged, unmarried women as a category. But other countries and regions have their own variations on the theme. In Japan, the term "defeated dog" is used to describe such women as losers. In the mainland, *shengnu* refers literally to "left-over" or surplus women.

A survey of 1,000 netizens and Hong Kong residents, conducted by Commercial Radio's 881903.com, found that *zhong nu* are perceived to have the following main characteristics: high academic qualifications, high demands of life and their partners, a refusal to be called a *zhong nu*, a desire to get married, and a love of dressing up.

These characteristics paint a picture of women who are unable to find partners because they are picky and "high maintenance". Statistics suggest there could be another reason why women aged 30 and above may find it hard to find partners. At the end



Shirley Chan Man-wai thinks that the programme *Confessions of Zhong nu* is a bit misleading.



ANDREW CHOI TSZ-HONG

Susanne Choi Yuk-ping says the rise of women's social status is against traditional Chinese culture.

of 2009, there were more single women than single men in Hong Kong above the age of 21. There are 10,000 more single women between the ages of 25 to 45 than there are single men.

But apart from an increasing number of unmarried women, the prevalence of the new term *zhong nu* can also be attributed to the rise in women's social status. Susanne Choi Yuk-ping, an assistant professor of sociology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) says the trend goes against traditional Chinese culture. In the past, women's roles were as wives and mothers. They did not have to chase careers or social status and there was a widely held notion that men were superior to women.

"But now they (women) are challenging this conservative notion," says Choi, who specialises in gender studies. The term, then, can be seen as part of a backlash against these women.

"This term is very disrespectful to women. Why ask women, not men?" says Donna Chu Shun-chi. Chu, an associate professor who teaches media and gender studies at CUHK's School of Journalism and Communication,

believes the term *zhong nu* compares women to fruits or commodities that have expiry dates. "Has anyone asked men to get married at certain ages or else they pass their sell-by dates?" she says.

Chu says the media frequently stereotypes groups of people even though members of those groups may have very different backgrounds. "The interviewees are all called *zhong nu* despite each having unique stories and personal reasons behind why they are single," Chu says.

Lister Cheung Lai-ping, who is 50 and single, is a case in point. Even though she does not have a partner, she enjoys a fruitful life.

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Cheung has been a key person in the Conservancy Association for years and is currently a consultant for the organisation. She is active in charity work and works tirelessly to protect nature. Cheung's work takes her back and forth between different Chinese provinces, where she can be found helping to prevent desertification in Yunnan and protecting birds in Jiangxi.

She cherishes her life and does not think marriage is necessary. "I think marriage is a 'give and take' process. People always focus on 'take', but not 'give', so it is hard for them to be married and they are upset," Cheung says. "Marriage does not equal success and it is not my first priority."

As for the term *zhong nu*, she believes the media uses it to make their reports more catchy, but she finds it an unfair label that discriminates against unmarried women.



COURTESY OF LISTER CHEUNG LAI-PING

Lister Cheung Lai-ping thinks that marriage is a "give and take" process.

Sharing her thoughts about *zhong nu*, Cheung says some women still pine for a fairy-tale romance, they want to find their Prince Charming. They do not realise that they are looking for a lifelong partner.

"Those women limit their choices of partners because they have set a rigid frame that restricts what kind of men are suitable," she says.

On the other hand, men can be insecure, "They don't consider women with a higher occupational status or who make more money than they do," Cheung says, believing Asian men still want dominance over women.

Women can also show a lack of empathy with their peers. While marriage does not equal success, single women who are successful may be mocked by married women. They may attract jealous comments like "You are successful only because you are single!"

The media and society may try to lump middle-aged single women under one single term, but they are all different. Some are desperate for love, some are fulfilled and happy with who they are. Marriage is not a priority for everyone. As Lister Cheung says, it's the way you live your life that matters. 