

## Never Been Kissed

**Hen Yiqi and Tan Seo Yean**  
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More people in Singapore are staying single despite the efforts of Cupid - and the Government. In the first of a series of Nanyang Technological University final-year journalism projects, we look at why an increasing proportion of young people are remaining - or choosing to remain - single.

AMONG the growing ranks of Singapore's singletons, none can surely be more dateless, or more desperate, than Mr Adam Chen.

His love life - if that term can be applied to his 10-year long car crash of social gaffes, clumsy jokes and tongue-tied mutterings to the opposite sex - makes the eyes water.

Mr Chen, ever the romantic, envisaged having a girlfriend at 17 but alas, he's never had a relationship - 10 years on.

His rare dates all seem disasters of stilted conversations and over-eager protestations of love before the startled girl murmurs 'let's just be friends' and flees.

If it is any consolation - and it won't be - he is far from alone. Singleton Singapore is a growing phenomenon, as young people find it harder to meet, greet and keep a member of the opposite sex.

The proportion of single men in the 30 to 34 year age group jumped from 33.3 per cent in 1998 to 40.8 per cent in 2008. More than 29 per cent of Singaporean women were single in 2008, compared with 21.6 per cent in 1998.

Men with below secondary school qualifications were most at risk, with 47.8 per cent still single in 2008, while 36.4 per cent of women with university degrees were in the same boat.

### Not from lack of trying

THE writers of this report conducted an informal survey in February with 50 unmarried men and 50 unmarried women between the ages of 18 and 35. They found that 65 per cent knew of at least one person who is over the age of 25 but has never had a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Apart from leaving many people emotionally unfulfilled, the singleton life will obviously have an adverse effect on Singapore's already low birth rate, which sank to a nadir of 1.23 per cent last year.

Demographer Yap Mui Teng of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) says: 'If (the singles) keep delaying (marriage), they will become parents only at an older age... Such singles may get to the age where they have to support old parents and young children and find themselves sandwiched. They may have a problem getting the family size they want.'

The age difference between these parents and their children may also be too wide, resulting in a communication gap.

There is plenty of blame to go around, from pushy parents putting education first to same-sex schools, a fear of making a fool of oneself, and a growing social acceptance of the go-it-alone lifestyle.

There are also plenty of people trying to solve the problem, from tarot card readers to relationship counsellors, dating agencies, and those same pushy parents. And this being Singapore, there is a government body - the Social Development Network (SDN) - helping out.

Finding love is an age-old conundrum, of course, but the quest seems to have become much harder for Singaporeans of late, despite no lack of effort.

Or in Mr Chen's case, perhaps too much effort.

When he fell in love for the first time during his polytechnic days at age 17, he messed it up. Every day during class breaks, he would passionately declare in Mandarin: 'Wo ai si ni le! (I love you to death!)' to the girl he liked - in front of all his classmates.

He even grabbed her hand suddenly in the midst of a project discussion and stared into her eyes beseechingly. The girl shook off his hand. His project mates fell into a stunned silence. Not surprisingly, she kept her distance after that.

### **Tarot cards and mushroom hair**

FOR others, it is perhaps a case of not trying hard enough.

Ms Loh Pei Xuan (not her real name), 28, clings to the belief that she will meet Mr Right - 'tall, tanned, outgoing, popular' - when the time is right, so why go out of her way?

Ms Violet Lim, founding director of dating agency Lunch Actually, says many Gen Y singles suffer from a 'checklist syndrome'. She says the mass media, from magazines to movies, has bombarded them with so many images of perfect people and unrealistic views of relationships that they are unwilling to compromise on their idea of the ideal mate.

Ms Loh, an accountant, has been waiting for her Mr Darcy since age 15: 'I hope for love at first sight, and I hope my Mr Right will just appear in front of me.'

Ms Loh and others bear out the findings of a survey conducted by Lunch Actually last year of 200 singles. It found that 14 per cent of singles here are leaving it to fate to help them find their significant other, up from 8 per cent in a 2005 poll.

Ms Loh hopes to experience a Hollywood-style romance that will touch her to the depths of her soul. She dreams that once she starts talking to 'The One', they will find a soulmate in each other and have endless conversations.

Many single women like Ms Loh do nothing about their situation - although some do seek 'divine help' to unearth Mr Right. Tarot card reader Kelvin Wong, 28, says the bulk of his clients are women aged between 29 and 40.

Dr Adrian Wang, a consultant psychiatrist at Gleneagles Medical Centre, has also seen many young and depressed clients: 'Society expects people in their 20s and 30s to pair up. Even our Government expects people to make babies.'

He believes the self-esteem of people in their late 20s or early 30s would definitely be affected if they have never had a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Expectations are one thing, but the country's many single-sex schools are not giving youngsters the social skills needed to find mates, say others.

Take Mr Chen, who went to the all-boys Maris Stella High School: 'Sometimes, I have nothing to say to the girl I like but I still want to talk to her, so I would tease her.'

'You have mushroom hair' and 'You have carrot legs' are just some examples of what Mr Chen says to girls.

Ms Lydia Gan, co-founder of consultancy Clique Wise and dating portal Wow-Her.com, says Mr Chen's behaviour is common among people educated in single-sex schools.

Many of them are also computer science or engineering students, she notes: 'Maybe it's because they are not used to hanging out with people of the opposite gender, they don't know how to contain their excitement or anxiety.'

Application engineer Tan Chen Xi (not his real name), who studied at a top boys' school, has similar 'girl' problems.

The 26-year-old is described by pals as 'stable and mature' but has never had a girlfriend. He says: 'Meeting girls and possessing the skills to communicate with them is supposed to come naturally, but it doesn't for me. On dates, it often comes to a point where I don't know how to continue the conversation.'

After graduating from university last year, he finally plucked up the courage to ask his course mate, whom he had liked for more than two years, out. On the fifth date, she crushed his hopes when she said she saw him only as a friend.

Ms Suki Tong, who conducts an elective course on the basics of dating and developing relationships at Singapore Polytechnic, says: 'A co-educational school will normalise one's interactions with the opposite sex and help one to be relaxed in the presence of members of the opposite gender.'

But Assistant Professor Mika Toyota from the sociology department at the National University of Singapore (NUS) does not think a single-sex secondary school background is the issue: 'Most people become active in dating only at around 18 years old. In fact, I feel that people from single-sex schools are keener to find a boyfriend or girlfriend.'

However, she believes they also have a bigger fear of rejection compared with peers from mixed schools.

'Single-sex schools in Singapore are usually the top schools. They are doing so well in school; they do not consider themselves a failure. Thus if they are rejected in love, they would view the rejection a lot more acutely,' he adds.

Take Mr Mark Oh (not his real name). In 2003, the 30-year-old fell for a woman but was too shy to make an overture. After two years, he decided to distance himself from her, but not before writing a letter confessing his feelings.

She wanted to meet him after reading the letter, but he did not turn up.

'I was too embarrassed to talk to her in person,' Mr Oh says, adding that he assumed the woman wanted to meet him to reject him in person.

Ms Gan, whose website provides dating tips and relationship advice, has strong words for this particular group of singles: 'They don't want to put in the effort because they don't value the relationship. They value their face rather than their future happiness, which is stupid.'

### **Studies first, social life later**

ALSO to blame are parents who push their children to excel academically at the expense of a social life.

Housewife Heng Lee Cheng, 63, was opposed to the idea of her human resource executive son Kelvin Tan, 36, dating while he was in school.

'I feel that dating would definitely affect his studies so I told him many times during his school days that I disapprove of students dating,' she says. 'I always tell him, with a good career, you never have to worry about whether there would be girls falling for you.'

Teacher Alfred Soh (not his real name), 27, who has never had a relationship, says his parents would 'get into a fit' if girls called him at home during his secondary school and junior college days.

'It's quite impossible to start that bond when your mum is constantly listening in on your phone conversations with female classmates,' he says.

Dr Wang says: 'This is what I call bad parenting. The role of the parent is to help a child to achieve his best potential. And that includes learning how to socialise.'

'Let them learn about how to deal with relationships, learn how to nurse a broken heart, learn how to interact with members of the opposite sex.'

Of course, there is also the view that being single is not the end of the world.

### **Single and happy**

IPS's Dr Yap believes being single is no longer a strange or uncommon lifestyle choice. There may even be a quiet celebration of the single status, says Singapore Management University (SMU) political and trend observer Eugene Tan.

Take Ms Sandy Goh, 26, for instance. The events planner had her first boyfriend when she was 18, and has been in two relationships lasting four years and six months respectively.

Single now, she is in no hurry to get into another relationship: 'I think I still have some time to look around. And I don't want to waste my time dating the wrong person. I would like to focus on my career until I meet the right guy.'

Such a sentiment is shared by many Gen Y singles, says Prof Tan: 'Singlehood is perceived as self-liberating and a manifestation of one exercising one's choice, unaffected by societal norms and expectations.'

As such, more are marrying later. The median marrying age for men is 29.7 years, and 27.1 years for women, compared with 28.7 and 26.2 in 2000.

Some experts attribute Singapore's Gen Y singleton culture to technology and globalisation, which have made jobs more competitive.

'You're competing with the best of the world who have the latest technology, rather than just the guy down the hall who sleeps after lunch,' says SMU Associate Professor Norman Li, whose research areas include mate preference.

To remain ahead in the rat race, many young people shelve romance and marriage to spend more time and energy on their careers.

### **Govt as matchmaker? No thanks**

BUT the solutions to the singleton problem are as hard to pin down as the causes.

The Singapore Development Unit (SDU) for graduate singles and Singapore Development Service (SDS) for non-graduate singles merged in January last year, and has worked with various partners to initiate over 2,000 programmes such as the SDUTrust Dating Treats, offering events or services packaged for singles by nine accredited dating agencies.

SDU-SDS was renamed the Singapore Development Network (SDN) in October last year. SDN lowered the age ceiling of 40 and also cut annual membership fees from \$30 to \$10 to attract more young people, but not much has changed.

Ms Ada Lim, the founder of the Dating Loft, claims a 50 per cent success rate in pairing singles participating in her events.

However, a street poll of 50 single women between 18 and 35 showed that more than half would not try SDN activities. One said: 'SDN has a bad reputation; it sounds like social engineering.'

Prof Toyota believes the lack of interest in joining SDN activities boils down to the network's poor image: 'Even if people do join, they may not come clean.'

Adds Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Associate Professor Lee Chun Wah, who specialises in public communications: 'There is this perception about SDN that even for relationships, you need the Government to give you a hand.'

It doesn't help that many believe only down-on-their-luck singles nearing their expiry date join the SDN these days. The Dating Loft, a dating agency accredited by the SDN, says the median age for male participants is 34, and for females it is 33.

Human resource executive Leong Wai Fun, 23, who attended an SDN event last year, says: 'I felt sian (bored in Hokkien) the minute I reached the venue. Because everywhere I looked, the guys seemed to be in their 30s, all too old for me.'

Mr Soh, too, has started to despair. He has joined SDN activities regularly since his university days. Yet after 20 outings, and much anticipation, he remains single.

He is no longer holding his breath that the SDN will work for him, and points out that he notices a lack of people in his age group - 24 to 28 - at its events.

But he believes time is still on his side. Indeed, about 65 per cent of those interviewed in the street poll do not think negatively of those aged 25 and above who have not had any relationships.

'They have not met the right one' is the most common refrain.

Meanwhile, Mr Chen, still alone, has had a change of heart and has vowed he will no longer be an 'umbrella' - easy and convenient for girls to use.

Love is no longer a priority; his focus now is on working hard to earn more money. His Facebook picture of a forlorn-looking clown has been changed to one with his mug photoshopped onto a million-dollar note.

Money, he says, is the most important thing in the world: '(I'm) now learning not to be emotional.'

## **THE WRITERS**

Hen Yiqi and Tan Seo Yean are both final-year students from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

They decided to focus on singles for their final-year journalism project after stumbling on a Netizen lamenting his 'evergreen' single status in an online forum last September.

They zeroed in on Generation Y singles, particularly those above the age of 25, who have never been in a relationship before, as they are a contrast to the perceived open-mindedness of this demographic.

They conducted a survey with 100 young singles, interviewed scores of others, and also talked to sociologists, academics, and matchmakers.

Yiqi says: 'We also wanted to take a bottom-up approach in discussing the issue of rising singlehood.'

Her project partner adds: 'After all, Generation Y will have a huge impact on the birth rate in Singapore.'