

Emancipation in Everyday Life: Women's Singleness and Feminism in 1920s China

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Abstract

During the 1920s, Chinese intellectuals affiliated with the New Culture and May Fourth Movements considered women's singleness (女子独身, *nüzijidushen*), or the choice made by women to be unmarried (女子不婚, *nüzijibuhun*), a central part of discussions of marriage, family, and gender—"the women's questions" (妇女问题, *fùnǚwèntí*). This paper investigates women's singleness by drawing on the work of Shen Zijiu (沈兹九, 1898–1989), a Chinese feminist who examined the causes and consequences of this gendered social practice through the conceptualization of everyday life. This intellectual history engaged with the social history of the gendered division of labor in the early twentieth century and the cultural history of intellectual debates during the May Fourth Movement. Deriving evidence from surveys of women professionals and workers in the 1920s, this historical inquiry into Chinese feminism in the 1920s explores the alienation of female labor, the visibility of women in China's urban industries, and the emergence of women's singleness in the wake of capitalist development in the early twentieth century. Meanwhile, the research examined the public debate over women's singleness in which Shen Zijiu participated, in connection with the reconceptualization of marriage, family, and love in the context of anti-Confucianism, liberalism, and social evolution in the 1920s. This everyday feminism is indicative of single women and gender politics in China's postsocialist situation, which, as the author argues, posits a critique on the epistemological, theoretical, and political outlook in today's China.

Keywords: singleness, Shen Zijiu, everyday life, women's emancipation, feminism, social reproduction

Women's singleness, conceived as an anti-marital social and cultural practice and a non-marital gender relation, is nothing new in China. During the 1920s and 1930s Chinese intellectuals affiliated with the New Culture and May Fourth Movements considered women's singleness (女子独身, *nüzijidushen*), or the choice made by women to be unmarried (女子不婚, *nüzijibuhun*), a central part of discussions of marriage, family, and gender—"the women's questions" (妇女问题, *fùnǚwèntí*) (Yu, 2001; Zhang, 2008). Like the contemporary phenomenon described by Mu Zongguang, women's singleness in Republican China emerged as a social phenomenon and cultural practice among educated women in urban areas.

This paper investigates women's singleness by drawing on the work of Shen Zijiu (沈兹九, 1898–1989), a Chinese feminist who examined the causes and consequences of this gendered social practice through the conceptualization of everyday life. Departing from contemporaneous scholarship on Chinese women's singleness, which associated it as a practice with a certain regional culture or as an expression of anti-marital resistance, this intellectual history engaged with the social history of the gendered division of labor in the early twentieth century and the cultural history of intellectual debates during the May Fourth Movement. Deriving evidence from surveys of women professionals and workers in the 1920s, this historical inquiry into Chinese female intellectuals and feminism in the 1920s explores the alienation of female labor, the visibility of women in China's urban industries, and the emergence of women's singleness in the wake of capitalist development in the early twentieth century.

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Meanwhile, the research examined the public debate over women's singleness in which Shen Zijiu participated, in connection with the reconceptualization of marriage, family, and love in the context of anti-Confucianism, liberalism, and social evolution during the May Fourth Movement.

Shen's feminist view is distinguished by her understanding that singleness is a new social phenomenon, one that emerged from fundamental changes in everyday life brought about by capitalist development through technology, transportation and urbanization. Examining everyday life enabled Shen to see women's singleness as the key to understanding the social structure and modernization of an emerging society. Along with other May Fourth liberals, Shen praised women's singleness as a progressive element of women's emancipation from China's patriarchal social structure and gender relations. Her views were also in line with those of 1920s sociologists and social developmentalists, who singled out its negative effects on social reproduction. Shen's analysis differed from those of 1920s and 1930s feminist discourses, however, insofar as those analyses understood being single as a Chinese woman's only option for liberation. By conceptualizing everyday life, sexuality, and gender relations as she did, Shen perceived women's singleness as a social practice that is characteristic of any modern society and a sign of civilization.

In other words, rather than seeing a single woman as the Other or an anti-marriage "abnormal" individual in modern society and human development, Shen Zijiu internalized women's singleness as both a feature and a result of modernization and civilization, one that is essential to human life in a society structured by capitalism. Compared with contemporaneous male intellectuals, who discussed feminism in the context of nationalism and modernism, Shen analyzed singleness through a feminist perspective that connected it with women's everyday lives and signified social conditions that required structural reforms of marriage and family. Meanwhile, in contrast to contemporaneous female intellectuals, who celebrated feminism in the context of anti-patriarchy and liberalism, Shen's feminism located women's consciousness of singleness in changing material lives under capitalism that emerged when the alienation of female labor occurred in urban industries.

I argue that this form of everyday feminism emerged when the new gendered division of labor and the specialization driven by capitalism made women more visible in cities and also when large traditional households transformed into smaller nuclear families in China in the years after World War I. By linking these trends to everyday life, Shen's feminism represents a political consciousness derived from the material reality of Chinese society in the 1920s, in which the social structure of marriage and family allowed women's singleness to emerge as a distinct culture among young, urban, educated women. To eliminate women's singleness as a counter-development threatening social reproduction, Shen's feministic agenda attempted not only to locate these social conditions but also to call for transformational social reforms. Therefore, Shen Zijiu should be seen as one of the most progressive thinkers and social reform proponents to have emerged during the May Fourth Movement.

1. Women's Singleness in China, Shen Zijiu, and "Civilization and Singleness"

Scholars and intellectuals often predicate arguments about Chinese women's singleness on a discourse informed by women's consciousness of equality, freedom, and liberty. Women's singleness featured a modern liberal activism that elevated women's independence and promoted the principle of gender equality. European feminism influenced Chinese feminist intellectuals, who regarded women's singleness as an important accomplishment of the New Culture Movement in spurring China's progress toward becoming a modern society. They also noted its path-breaking rejection of Confucian-based arranged marriage and patriarchy (Yu, 2001; Liu and Qiao, 2001; Zhang, 2008; Kuo, 2012). Studies analyzing women's singleness in the early twentieth century, however, downplayed its ultimate significance. Like the rest of the modernization agenda in Republican China, women's singleness supposedly failed to exert much influence because of the short duration of liberal and feminist movements under *Guomindang* (国民党, the Nationalist Party) rule, the turmoil caused by the War of Resistance and the Civil War, the foreign origins of many of its concepts, and the upheaval of the Communist revolution (Liu and Qiao, 2001; Zhang, 2008; Kuo, 2012).

Nevertheless, archives-based studies have investigated the relationship between public discussions and the emergence of unmarried women's organizations, finding that women's singleness enjoyed its greatest influence in China's urban areas between the 1920s and the 1940s. (Yu, 2001; Su, 2012) At the same time, studies of marriage resistance and regional culture in South China have found substantial continuity in unmarried rural women's customs and delayed-transfer marriage practices, such as when a wife lives in and financially supports her birth family in local communities of the Canton Delta between the Qing and Republican eras (Topley, 1975; Stockard, 1989; Siu, 1990).

Studies of the Republican Civil Code and case records also have shown that Chinese women, empowered by the liberal idea of being single and independent from men, deployed their legal rights, seeking divorce at rising rates from the 1930s into the 1940s (Kuo, 2012).

Rather than studying the roots of and practices involved in becoming and being single among Chinese women, as existing social, cultural, and sociological analyses intend, my intellectual history examines how Chinese intellectuals responded to the social and cultural phenomenon of women's singleness when Chinese society was being transformed and structured by capitalism in the early twentieth century. Moreover, instead of identifying Shen Zijiū as a female voice in contrast to those of male intellectuals, my historical research places Shen's feminism in the context of public debates over singleness in the 1920s, in which opposing political agendas of social transformation were articulated and intertwined.

Along with her contemporaries, Shen Zijiū employed feministic analysis as part of a collective intellectual endeavor to observe, understand, and make sense of the perceived crisis in marriage and the family social structure when the alienation of labor was flourishing in China's urbanizing cities. After her first husband died in 1919, Shen studied at the Women's Advanced Normal Education School in Tokyo, where she discovered the writings of European feminists. Shen Zijiū's analysis of women's singleness in her article "Civilization and Singleness" (文明与独身, *Wenmingyu Dushen*) was first published in *The Women Miscellany* (妇女杂志, *FunüZazhi*) in 1923. This was her first publication on singleness, written as she became a feminist activist and writer along with a number of women writers in the May Fourth era, such as Ding Ling, Shen Yanbing, and Zhang Ailing.

During the 1930s, Shen became a well-known feminist writer and chief editor of two major women's magazines published in Shanghai: *Women's Garden* (妇女园地, *FunüYuandi*) and *Women's Lives* (妇女生活, *FunüShenghuo*). In 1936, Shen Zijiū organized the "Shanghai Women's National Salvation Committee" (上海妇女救国会, *ShanghaiFunüjiuguoahui*). Later, Shen, along with the anti-war democratic women leaders Song Qingling and He Xiangning, initiated and organized protests against the Guomindang's non-resistance policy before total war between China and Japan broke out in 1937. During the 1937–1945 War of Resistance, Shen fled to Indonesia and Singapore, where she met her second husband Hu Yuzhi, a leading left-wing intellectual and anti-war activist. They collaborated with the local Chinese anti-war communities in Singapore and the Dutch East Indies and organized a self-defense army against the Japanese that operated in 1941 and 1942. Shen joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1939 and, after she returned to China in 1948, served as a committee member of the China's All Women's Federation (Dong, 1991: 2–16).

Shen Zijiū wrote "Civilization and Singleness" after completing her studies in Japan, where she was deeply influenced by the Finnish philosopher and sociologist Edvard Westermarck (1862–1939). Chinese and Japanese intellectuals found Westermarck's work *The History of Human Marriage* (1891) persuasive, especially its application of Darwinian natural selection theory to numerous social phenomena. Westermarck's analysis covered marriage and family practices across a wide range of societies and he also discussed the evolution of moral emotions. With the breakdown of the traditional Confucian arranged marriage and the extended family system, Westermarck offered a nuanced bio-sociological theory to redefine marriage as a social institution that rests on a biological foundation that developed through a process in which human males came to live together with human females for sexual gratification, companionship, mutual economic aid, procreation, and the joint rearing of offspring. Shen employed Westermarck's bio-sociological theory to investigate how capitalism and urbanization changed women's everyday lives. She argued that capitalism and urbanization made possible the conditions enabling the independence of middle-class professional women who resisted the Confucian form of marriage based on the patriarchal family structure and, more broadly, hierarchal gender relations.

2. Everyday Life, Female Labor, and Women's Emancipation

With the establishment of the Republican state in China in 1912, a few elite women became provincial senators in Guangdong, challenging the gender hierarchy of China's male-dominated political structure (Zhu, 1984:438). Meanwhile, the labor army of female workers in urban industries further threatened the existent male-dominant social structure. In the 1920s, women entered the workforce in large numbers, a social consequence of the immense numbers of people who left their places of household registration. According to Chen Changheng, a well-known demographer of the 1920s and 1930s, of a total population of 400 million, approximately 17 percent lived apart from their families in 1920, a dramatic increase over the 3 percent who did so in 1917 (Chen and, 1920:53).

Educated women became professionals, starting careers once occupied by men alone. As Chen Heqin, a women's movement activist and sociologist, wrote in 1924, "ten years ago, except for teachers and doctors, there were only a few women doing unskilled manual labor. Now a small portion of jobs that only belonged to men before are open for women, such as bank tellers, railroad clerks, saleswomen in department stores, company clerks and bus conductors and so forth" (Chen, 1924).

With tens of thousands of peasant women streaming into factories, women from both the countryside and the cities staffed large entertainment venues, cafes, coffee shops, tea houses, bars, and dance halls. They also serviced the sex trade. According to China's First Labor Year Book, the total number of women workers in 1915 was 245,076, which was 37.8 percent of the total laboring population. By 1919, approximately 45 percent of workers in China were women (Wang, 1928: 549). While women could be seen and heard everywhere in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin and other major Chinese cities, smaller households with fewer than four residents became increasingly visible, as manifested in the dismantling of large households and the progressive emergence of the "small family" (xiaojiating) in cities. As Pan Guangdan, an influential Qinghua University sociologist, observed, the average size of ordinary households nationally in 1922 was 4.0 residents while it was 3.4 residents in Shanghai, and "the conditions that allow the old big families no longer exist and small families will inevitably replace them" (Pan, 1934:118).

This "new phenomenon of visible women" in the 1910s and 1920s brought women's everyday lives to the attention of the state and social thinkers as a problem that needed to be understood, and a mode through which new political strategies had to be worked out. Male elites both in and out of government believed that the migration of women to the cities and the associated gain in social autonomy threatened the stability of the patriarchal system and was the cause of the formation of smaller family units in the cities. That is, according to Pan Guangqian, for male elites and the government, those who serviced the sex trade and the entertainment and leisure sectors were perceived as sexually seductive social evils and health risks (Pan, 1934:119). Women in China had to live in the patriarchal system and, therefore, legitimated the system through family life and marriage. Although they sent their earnings back to the countryside to support large households there, their labor served as the economic pillar of urban consumption (Pan, 1934:120).

For educated women who poured into banks, department stores, and other urban industries, the price of independence was maintaining their unmarried status because workplaces refused to hire married women (Li, 2004: 295). As a result, educated and professional women increasingly delayed marriage as long as they could or were reluctant to be married at all. Marriage-resistance associations, such as the No-Marriage Association (*Bujiahui*, 不嫁会) and the Women's No-Marriage Club (*Nüzibuhunjulebu*, 女子不婚俱乐部), also emerged in the Nanjing, Jiangsu, and Shanghai region between 1916 and 1919 (*Nüzibuhunjulebu*, 1919). Organized by educated women, these associations promoted singleness as a form of collective resistance against patriarchy in the family structure.

While marriage and family enslaved women in the household, collective non-marital public life was considered "the beginning of happiness" for women (ibid.) Yet, at the same time, they felt pressure from family and society, where tradition dictated that marriage was every woman's destiny (Li, 2004: 296). According to a 1923 study by Li Wenhai, who collected and edited surveys on women's vocations and education from 1920 to 1949, the average age at which women who worked as teachers in towns and cities in Jiangsu Province were married was twenty-six years. Some married as late as thirty-nine years of age. In addition, laboring women's parents encouraged their daughters to be married late because they could support their families financially as single women (Li, 2004:297–298). In this regard, the new life of women in the cities constantly flew in the face of these constraints and practices to create endless social strain and lived contradictions.

In 1929, the Nationalist State issued *The Married Women's Inheritance of Property Executive Details* (易嫁女子追诉继承财产实施细则, *Yijianüzizhuhuisunjichengcaichanshixize*), which asserted the importance of women's rights of property inheritance as a means of supporting their daily routines and achieving economic independence (Republican Government Announcement 30, 1929: 1). The expansion of cities such as Shanghai supplied a vast space for imagining and configuring a new form of life for women. Mass media—popular magazines, newspapers, advertisements, radio, and movies—pointed to ceaseless changes in material life introduced by new consumer products and a conception of domestic scientific life in nuclear families that were driven solely by young women and departed from the inherited tradition of large households.¹

The 1911 Revolution, the growth of nationalism, and the flood of women into workplaces compelled progressive movements in China to recognize women as a subordinate population in Chinese society who were in need of liberation. Progressive intellectuals and women's movement promoters identified women as human beings who deserved equal rights and a social life outside of kinship or familial relationships.ⁱⁱ Chinese women were seen, in particular, as the underlying premise for nationalism and emancipation movements, asserting that they were equal to men. Meanwhile, the question whether Chinese women should be liberated generated public debates in progressive journals and magazines. The late-Qing anarchist-feminist He Zhen believed that women's subordination was a manifestation of human suppression that was not particular to women but rather generalized to everyone.ⁱⁱⁱ Other Chinese thinkers at the beginning of the twentieth century linked women's collective subordination to the building of the nation-state, the best way to measure whether China would become modern. The recognition of women's subordination was central to the rhetoric of national strengthening and of China's modernity from the 1898 Reform Movement onward.

While anarchism, nationalism, and feminism emerged almost simultaneously in early twentieth-century China, the desire to search for a pure feminist tradition and other movements also emerged to justify women's emancipation efforts. These women's activities included the women's suffrage campaigns of the mid-1920s, which began with narrowly elite movements and extended to both middle- and working-class women; the promotion of women's education by Christian missionaries or the Qing and New Republican states; and the emergence and development of women's societies, especially during the New Culture and the May Fourth Movement (Edwards, 2008). Even though they had distinct political agendas, China's progressive intellectuals were convinced that women's emancipation must be realized by enlightened elites through the state apparatus, institutions, or associations.

While the abovementioned intellectuals considered China's Confucian tradition to be patriarchal and uncivilized, women's emancipation served as the measuring stick of modernization and the degree to which it was becoming civilized. In other words, they understood women's emancipation as a top-down social movement focused on legal reform campaigns devoted to gaining equal access to citizenship, education, property, and divorce. In addition, the few women novelists of the May Fourth period, such as Ding Ling, placed young educated women at the center and penned the "new women" of independence, marriage resistance, free love, and sexuality, in which emancipation was understood as the free expression of an individual's feminist consciousness and anti-patriarchal and gender equality activism (Ding, Barlow, and Borge, 1990; Wong, 2014).

3. Being Single: Emancipation in Everyday Life

In "Civilization and Singleness," Shen, writing under the penname Se Lu (Dong, 1991: 35), discussed the phenomenon of singleness that was becoming increasingly common in the modern world. For Shen, singleness, unmarried status, was not only a question of modernity and civilization, but also ultimately a question of everyday life, of society, and of gender relations. She asserted that it was true that everyday family life, as the unit of every species' life, was biologically gendered and productively driven by sexual desire (Se Lu, 1923: 287). Shen wrote, "our life consists of two sexes. As for all the species that have two sexes, the union of two sexes that leads to reproduction is necessary to continue our everyday life—the unit of life. Therefore, as an instinct, when (one sex) is mature, he/she will look for the opposite sex. If separated, he/she will feel an exceptional pang of remorse" (Se Lu, 1923: 287).

Shen emphasized the universality of heterosexual desire, reproduction, and everyday life. She quoted Edvard Westermarck's statement in *The History of Human Marriage* (1891) to explain that "even among the most timid creatures, the male will fight for [the union of the two sexes]. Therefore, the elimination of desire is impossible" (Se Lu, 1923: 287). While the union of the two sexes determined the reproduction of any species on the planet, the equality of men and women that was based on their biological characteristics, i.e. sexual desire, was natural and inevitable. In this regard, because everyday life was naturally reproductive through the union of the two sexes, human reproduction depended on the presence of the social conditions that allowed it to take place.

For Shen, the conditions that made the union of the two sexes—the continuity of everyday life—possible were crucial because they explained the meanings of civilization, society, and modernity as well as the significance of women's emancipation. Shen differentiated the union of the two human sexes from unions in other species because human beings united through a ritual or a legalized ceremony. Other activities involving the union of the two sexes, such as the sex trade and being single, were considered illegitimate. Instead of examining the conditions underlying marriage, Shen chose to investigate singleness—for its varying conditions of production and those crucial moments of change that were experienced differently by women and men in everyday life.

According to Shen, a society was savage if “women’s lives are about being kidnapped or bought and becoming men’s slaves at the price of a little living expense” (Se Lu, 1923: 290). In an uncivilized society, singleness did not exist because “men were easily able to find women and get married.” Shen argued, though, that singleness existed in early civilized societies, such as Greek and Rome, although singles were severely punished because “marriage was considered a public obligation, not a private matter” (Se Lu, 1923: 290). Shen argued that in modern civilized societies the number of single men was magnified because the cost of living and the consumption of luxuries were dramatically increased, yet the gendered division of labor remained. She wrote that, “as living conditions are improved, men’s lives are about supporting the whole family, yet most women still don’t have conditions that allow them to have independent lives. Meanwhile, men cannot treat women as slaves and must take good care of their children. More importantly, women usually are fond of luxuries, which, for most men, are not affordable” (Se Lu, 1923: 290). Unlike her Chinese liberal feminist contemporaries, whose view of civilization was predicted on a discourse of women’s consciousness of equality, freedom and liberty, Shen asserted that it was not China’s past tradition that made men patriarchal. Rather, civilization and modernity were based on both men’s and women’s consciousness of gender equality.

For Shen Ziju, singleness as a structural feature of modern society was essentially a contradiction of and within civilization. On the one hand, singleness was a social phenomenon of civilizational development because it signified human emancipation from hierarchy, a sign of liberalism and individualism. Like the positivists in debates over singleness, Shen believed that a body’s (*shen*, 身) becoming single (*du*, 独) manifested progressive consciousness and an act of liberation from dependency on and subjugation to others. That is, singles claimed ownership of their bodies, resisting marriage and family, the social institution that had traditionally been granted the legitimacy needed to sustain the hierarchal and patriarchal structure.

On the other hand, unlike contemporary modernist thinkers, Shen Ziju perceived singleness as the result of social hierarchy and its status as a form of resistance as a sign of this structural problem in a civilized society. Shen considered singleness a “malady” that interferes with social reproduction and development. In other words, singleness runs against the legitimate activity of reproduction—the marriage ritual—that continues and sustains society. As a counter-developmental social malady, however, singleness became more popular in modern societies, according to Shen, because it was a “specific phenomenon of a civilized society” (Se Lu, 1923: 290). Shen disagreed with critics such as Li Zongwu, who blamed singles for disrespecting the social obligation to marry and therefore deserved legal punishment (Li, 1921).

Diverging from this traditional view that privileges marriage, Shen considered singleness a structural problem in the economic system of every modern civilized society that failed to provide the conditions for gender equality and women’s emancipation. Shen asserted that the economic system at the time not only failed to provide the necessary conditions for women to sell their labor power, but it also turned women into commodity consumers, which made them even more dependent on men. Therefore, women’s emancipation should be considered a logical consequence of reforming the economic system, which would make women economically independent. Shen wrote that “everyone is economically independent when society provides childcare expenses” (Se Lu, 1923: 290). In other words, by linking it with the everyday lives of the two sexes, Shen redefined singleness as an internal structural problem of modernity and civilization. This structural problem indicated that gender inequality was rooted in the existing gendered division of labor and the social system that sustained and reinforced unequal gender relations and women’s dependence on men. Therefore, women’s emancipation was no longer predicated on a discourse of women’s consciousness of equality, independence, and liberty. Rather, according to Shen, it was about a systematic, structural reform that would eliminate the conditions of gender inequality and free women from domestic labor and consumption.

For Shen Ziju, locating the causes of singleness in modern civilized society was crucial if a future systematic reform was to eliminate singleness. She insisted that “in a savage society, people’s enjoyment in everyday life came only from satisfaction of natural needs and instinctual desires.” However, men’s and women’s interests and desires had multiplied because everyday life had been improved through new inventions, industries, transportation and wealth (Se Lu, 1923: 288). New interests and heightened desires generated new satisfactions and sources of enjoyment: “Our everyday life has improved our *jinshenli* (精神力, spiritual power), which makes men’s and women’s sexual desire stronger. To meet these new life satisfactions, those areas of satisfaction and enjoyment that are caused by family life are shrinking.” Therefore, “today, singles can enjoy the same as, if not more than, married people” (Se Lu, 1923: 289).

Shen understood everyday life in modern civilized society as a space where the production of social relations and the production of enjoyment would take place. Living conditions in modern everyday life were constantly changing according to more fundamental transformations in social and economic circumstances. These changing conditions were registered at the level of entertainment—leisure time. For Shen, people enjoyed themselves through the production of a collective practice and culture, such as the culture of being single. In other words, fundamental changes in everyday life generated social spaces within a dense fabric of networks and channels of sociality and reduced the significance of family in people's lives.

Shen asserted that, with the decline of family life, increased spiritual power enhanced certain ideals, including ways in “which young men and women choose their ideal mate and want to organize a peaceful, joyful, equal, and free family, so as to have their ideal life.” Shen warned, however, that “the higher the ideal is, the more difficult it is to be realized; so singleness is inevitable” (Se Lu, 1923: 289). Shen believed that women were more inclined to choose singleness based on past experience and contemporaneous social conditions: “It is because in the past they lost the ability to live independently and therefore being married is the way to make a living, even though they had ideals. Now once they obtain their independence through education, they are reluctant to abandon their ideals” (Se Lu, 1923: 289).

Contemporary social conditions produced a culture—*jingshenli*, a desire or a consciousness of love or longing for an ideal mate beyond the basic instincts of sexual desire. This desire for love was not only the condition of the union of the two sexes, but also the condition of gender equality and women's emancipation, characteristics of social progress. In other words, Shen envisioned modern, civilized societies, in which people increasingly chose singleness because new economic and social conditions enabled a new set of social relations and networks to flourish outside of the household. More importantly, for Shen Zijiu, singleness was an important aspect of modern society, even if its importance differs from group to group, according to their situations and socially established activities. Therefore, women were more inclined to choose singleness because of their experience with dependence on marriage in the past, which differed from that of men.

Singleness as a positive view of social progression and women's liberation reflected a trend that ran from the 1910s into the 1920s towards smaller households, as attested to by the promotion in mass media of new forms of consumption and new commodities for the nuclear family of “free love” (*zìyóulián'ài*, 自由恋爱). In this period, intellectual discussions of “free love” first emerged in progressive journals such as *New Youth* (*Xīnqīngnián*, 新青年) and *Independent Weekly Remarks* (*Dúlìzhōukan*, 独立周刊), as expressions of resistance to arranged marriage, so as to promote a monogamous family structure (*yīfūyīqīzhì*, 一夫一妻制) (Bi and Wang, 2011: 105–107). Chen Duxiu, the founder and chief editor of *New Youth*, claimed that an individual was free to choose her/his lover and marriage should become a ritual for celebrating the union of a woman and a man based on their free will to love (Du Xiu, 1918: 99). At the same time, public discussions of “free love” emphasized sexuality and spiritual companionship in rejecting the patriarchal Confucian family structure, so as to create an equal gender relation.

In his essay “The Evolution of Men” (*Nánrén de jìnhuà*, 男人的进化), Lu Xu criticized arranged marriage for interfering with women's will to “free love”—freedom to choose their lovers, enslaving women's bodies to satisfy their husbands' sexual desires: “When a bride is in her husband's bed, she only has obligations [to have sex with him]. She doesn't even have the freedom to negotiate a price. How could she have free love?” (Lu Xu, 2005: 254). In his remarkable essay “The Question of Love” (*Lì'āiwèntí*, 恋爱问题), young Mao Zedong asserted that love existed not to satisfy sexual desires but rather to cultivate equal companionship between the two genders for “a higher-level spiritual satisfaction” (Mao, 1990: 436). In this regard, the concept of “free love” was directly linked to women's subjugation, free will and liberty, the assumption of which entailed the ownership of bodies and the priority of spirit over body. That is, women's subjugation to men through marriage was understood as a claim of ownership by men over women's bodies to fulfill their male sexual desires, to obtain physical satisfaction. “Free love” demanded women's free will to love and proposed the possibility of freeing women's bodies from enslavement, claiming women's ownership of their own bodies and isolating their bodies. Therefore, marriage was redefined on the basis of equality. Both women and men had equal freedom to love and equal ownership over their own bodies.

By the same measure, Shen's analysis pointed to the greater likelihood that isolation and alienation would occur. Singleness (*dushen*) both expressed the desire to thin out social relationships under the Confucian system and constituted the behavior that satisfies that desire.

The body (*shen*) no longer belonged to others—husbands, families, and parents—rather, it belonged to oneself (*du*) alone. The realization of social autonomy through singleness was realized, however, at the price of alienation, because women had to sell their labor to achieve economic independence.

In this regard, the discussion of singleness explicitly reflected the history of the post-May Fourth era, when women entered the workforce in large numbers. At this time, the idea that female labor was free labor for capital accumulation in China and elsewhere was reevaluated. Chinese intellectuals broadly understood women's emancipation as a form of liberation from the patriarchal family and a new freedom to participate in social activities. Shen's analysis of everyday life and society drew on socio-biological terms and neologisms, such as sex (*xing*, 性), civilization (*wenming*, 文明), and evolution (*Jinbua*, 进化), that were popularized during the 1920s. Along with other social theorists, Shen viewed society as a real, tangible space occupied by individuals, where norms, conflicts, and relationships were mediated in family and other social collectivities including gender-segregated groups.

Viewed from the perspective of everyday life, Shen's analysis of singleness is particularly compelling, for three reasons. First, it explicitly placed the production of singleness into an evolutionary social-developmental framework rather than diagnosing it as a psychoanalytically typical case of paranoia. Conservative reformists such as Lu Xun and Li Zongwu viewed the psychology of singles as abnormal, pathological, and anti-social. They attempted to alienate singles as the Others in social life: the irresponsible and misbehaving elements of society. Singleness, as a pathological and abnormal social phenomenon, therefore needed to be prevented, so as to sustain family-based social norms. In contrast to this conservative reformism, Shen redefined singleness as the logical consequence of evolution and social development, requiring fundamental reform of the social structure that provided the material conditions for gender inequality, dependence, and the gendered division of labor.

Second, by linking everyday life to the universality of the union of the two sexes and sexual desire, Shen distinguished herself from those who viewed singleness positively as practice of spiritually pure love aimed at preventing the occurrence of gender relationships that were based completely on sexual desire. Zhu Qianzhi, a famous philosopher of the 1920s and 1930s, wrote that many May Fourth female intellectuals, such as his wife Yang Meilei, believed sex was unclean while pure love without sex was sacred and clean (Zhu, 1928: 2–3). Among the May Fourth intellectuals in the debate over “free love,” such as the young Mao Zedong, sex or sexual desire was considered a base desire for physical satisfaction that distracts individuals from pursuing spiritual satisfactions, such as ideal spiritual companionship. Therefore, singleness was considered an expression of idealistic purism and asceticism.

Shen Zijiu argued, in contrast to this view that even the most ascetic Christians and Buddhist monks engaged in indulgent sexual lives. In other words, sexual desire, or the body, cannot be separated from spiritual desire, or the mind. Rather, physical and spiritual satisfactions in everyday life contributed equally to the evolution of civilization and social development. Shen posited singleness as such a position, a way of conceptualizing reality from the materialistic vantage point of women's and men's lives.

Shen Zijiu viewed singleness was a structural problem in and of everyday life, civilization, and modernity, one that embodied contemporaneous social contradictions. Singleness as both a social malady and a positive phenomenon of social progression signified the underlying social contradictions that, Shen believed, must be overcome through social reforms. When everyday life was improved by modernization, the financially independent, socially autonomous, and physically liberated single women in fact posed a threat to the settled legalized conceptions of patriarchal relations between the two sexes. Shen's effort to universalize the inevitability of heterosexual desire in everyday life and to diagnose singleness as a malady reasserted the integrity and stability of the household unit by enforcing the traditional role ascribed to wife and mother, however modernized they were in their material lives. Shen's discourse on singleness through the perspective of everyday life inadvertently inspired not only a fear of progressive social disorder and conflict but also a growing sense that the processes guaranteeing biological reproduction—the motor of the progression of everyday life—were in danger of disappearing altogether.

Shen offered not only a critique of a social structure in which gender inequality and hierarchy were rooted but also a critique of the internal contradiction of modernization—which manifests in both development and anti-development. In this regard, women's emancipation is not just about liberation from patriarchy and gender inequality, but also involves the structure that reproduces the social relations of gender inequality and, more importantly, the transformation of that structure.

To highlight the connection with everyday life in Shen's feminism, I argue that feminism is an historical process that produces knowledge of the social structure and development and is rooted in the intellectual observations of material reality. Women's singleness and feminism stake out a "position" in society—the oppositional practice of being unmarried and at the same time a collective subject of womanhood in a modern and civilized society, a way of making sense that is affected by and can in turn produce knowledge of society and the world that then shapes structures of power, work, and wealth.

4. Conclusion

My account of Shen's feministic analysis of women's singleness does not attempt to construct a biography, nor does it attempt to portray her as a Communist-leaning feminist because she joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1939.^{iv} Drawing upon materials from Shen's work on women's singleness, I focus on how Shen's feministic analysis, by linking theory with women's everyday lives, viewed women's singleness as the effect of a long and complex process of historical development stemming from social and economic changes spurred by capitalism in the early twentieth century. I argue that this form of everyday feminism emerged when the new gendered division of labor and specialization under capitalism made women visible in cities and when large households transformed into nuclear families in China in the years following World War I. From the perspective of everyday life, Shen's observations pertaining to singleness and women's everyday lives should be considered the most recent manifestation of social unevenness—structural contradictions—produced by capitalism and reflected in the everyday lives of women.

Shen views singleness as an everyday social phenomenon that manifests in the fabric of the everyday—an expanding locus of human satisfaction and enjoyment—and the subjective aspect of a social space that is the center at which people place themselves. As the extension of this social space horizon differs from group to group, Shen envisioned women as more inclined to singleness based on past experience, which differed from that of the other sex. That is, singleness as a practice, a consequence, and a social phenomenon of the production of enjoyment, social space, and progressive culture would disclose the unobserved natures that qualified and quantified social differences, according to specific situations and activities.

As a response to debates over women's singleness in 1920s China, Shen Zijiu's analysis was deeply engaged with the conceptualization of everyday life, emphasizing the material and spiritual causes of urban educated professional women's singleness as a social phenomenon. Shen's feminism of women's independence and the crisis of marriage in the early twentieth century anticipated the state of and public attention to Chinese women's singleness in China in the twenty-first century. While the aforementioned *China Daily* article addresses women's singleness as "the result of economic prosperity," Mu's arguments are predicated on a discourse of women's consciousness of equality, freedom, and liberty. In contrast, Shen's analysis offers a materialistic critique of the social structure where singleness is produced and rooted. It also offers a feministic critique of capitalism at the individual level. Her feminism provides a point of reference from which to understand singleness and its relationship to everyday life among young urban middle-class women, which sheds light on gender dynamics in contemporary China.

Notes

ⁱTani Barlow (2008: 288-316) addresses mass media and the promotion of a new scientific domestic life in advertisements.

ⁱⁱTani Barlow (2004: 44-54) analyses a collective notion of "woman" as a category beyond kinship and family.

ⁱⁱⁱPeter Zarrow (1988: 796-813) and the recent translation of He Zhen's feministic works (Liu, Ko, and Karl, 2013) discuss He Zhen's anarchism and feminism in relation to the emergence of Marxism in China.

^{iv} Historical studies of Shen Zijiu and her intellectual endeavours were largely absent from Euro-America until Shen's editorship was discussed recently by Yuxin Ma as evidence of the development of press writings by Chinese women from 1898 to 1937. Although Shen did not join the CCP until 1939, Ma characterizes Shen's feminism and her journalistic endeavours in the 1920s and '30s as a manifestation of Communism. Ma's examination of women's feminism in China explores "the flexible and plural meanings of nationalism and feminism in China" (Ma, 2010: 13). Shen Zijiu's feminism is therefore characterized as Communist—one of the plural meanings of Chinese feminism. It is also seen in opposition to male feminists, who offered feminist rhetoric yet conflated feminism with a nationalist agenda. According to Ma (2010), Shen's female feminism contributed to the emergence of a gendered "public sphere" in China.

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