

SPOTLIGHT

Coming of age in modern China

The economically independent younger generation is less keen on marriage and long-term relationships

By YANG YANG

yangyangs@chinadaily.com.cn

On a freezing evening in late January, Han Dan and a female friend jumped into a taxi in Beijing.

Han sat in the back, and before long a conversation between her female friend in the front and the driver turned to the subject of marriage.

The driver was a middle-aged man from Yuncheng, in North China's Shanxi province, a medium-sized city whose main claim to fame is that it is where Chinese civilization is said to have originated.

"In my hometown, if a woman doesn't marry before she's 27 or 28, we reckon she must have a screw loose," the taxi driver said.

The female friend turned to Han, 31, in the back and laughed.

"Did you hear that? 'She must have a screw loose.'"

Han shrugged.

Han, 30, a cartoonist born and raised in Beijing, said she cannot envisage a day when she will get married.

"Whether you're married or single, they're just different lifestyles," she said.

Although traditional ideas about marriage and what it means continue to hold great sway over Chinese society, delaying marriage, or declaring one's intention not to marry at all, is becoming more common as material well-being improves, Han said, echoing the opinion of experts.

"It's also because women are becoming more economically independent," she added.

In 2015, there were more than 200 million single adults in the country, the National Bureau of Statistics said, and the proportion of the population living alone had risen from 6 percent in 1990 to 14.6 percent in 2013, or more than 58 million people.

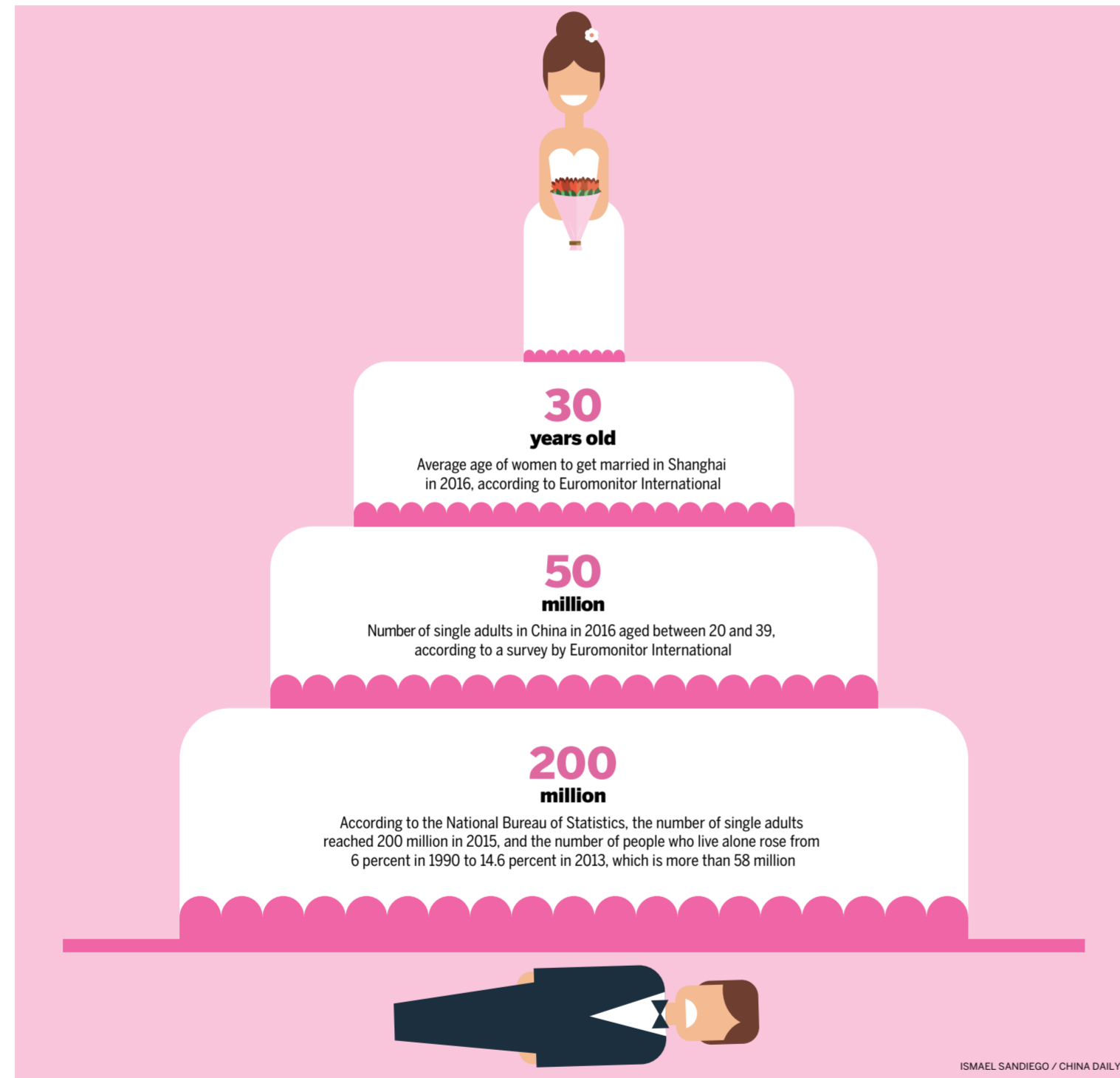
A survey by the market research company Euromonitor International in 2016 reckoned that the number of single adults between 20 and 39 years old in China had reached more than 50 million.

The great bulk of them live in cities of comparatively advanced social and economic status, such as Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Shenzhen, the survey found.

One reason for the increasing trend of young people remaining single is a change of attitude toward marriage and its meaning in life, as many tend to pay more attention to their growth as individuals, said Gong Lanyun, 29, of Beijing.

"There are a lot of problems that marriage cannot solve. Originally men and women got married for economic reasons or to have children, not to satisfy two people's emotional needs. Generally, marriage cannot meet a couple's emotional needs. In modern society, it can't meet material needs, either, because many women earn more than men."

Gong, who has her own house in Beijing and recently quit her job with an IT company to pursue her dream of working in literature and the arts, said she is sticking to her lofty ideals about



love and marriage, "as impractical as those in South Korean TV shows, in which one can die for his or her beloved," she said.

"There was one reason that she has never had a serious romantic relationship, either at Peking University where she studied psychology, or in the United States, where she continued her studies for four years.

"There was a time in the US when I quite enjoyed dressing up, dating guys and dancing with them, but for me it was still not the good way to find Mr Right.

"I am expecting someone who can grow together with me, both as a lover and a good

friend, a highly matched soul mate, so it's very difficult. If it cannot be like that, what's the point of getting married?"

As society advances, the values and views of life that the sexes hold are becoming more disparate, which is why it is so hard for modern men and women, especially those living in first-tier cities, to find the right partner, said Chen Hao.

Chen, 32, a computer programmer who has lived in Beijing for more than five years, said that since breaking up with his last girlfriend more than a year ago, he has lived with a couple in a rented apartment.

"Things are heading in the right direction, but

society should be more tolerant toward different models of relationships between the sexes," he said. "I always believe that urban life to some extent will break family units down to lonely individuals who will pursue their freedom."

Apart from his onerous duties with an online education company, Chen spends a lot of his free time watching performances such as plays, symphonies and ballets, movies, attending reading clubs, traveling and trying well-rated restaurants.

"However, I don't really enjoy being alone. I have to fill my time with things or just sleep," he said. So he has been expecting a new romantic relationship.

But Chen said it is difficult to find Miss Right, because he has high requirements: Good looking, well built and emotionally matched.

"Another reason is that I don't want anything to upset the apple cart."

Despite the downsides of being lonely, being single means you are free to do whatever you like without considering a girlfriend's or boyfriend's opinions, he said.

On the other hand, there is no one to turn to as you face the pressures of city life and the irritants of work, not to mention no regular sex life, he added.

Apart from having problems finding the ideal person, Chen also attributes delaying getting married to practical problems.

"I'm 33, I don't own a car, and I don't own a house, so I have few chips in the marriage market."

Li Yinhe, a sociologist, said that staying single is as much a trend in North America, Europe and East Asia as it is in China, and people in this country are delaying marriage because of "the very high price of divorcing, mentally and financially."

"So many people would rather simply live together and not get married. There are so many responsibilities in marriage, especially when couples bear children. For that, you have to sacrifice a lot, and in the main, single people have an easier life," Li said.

"In addition, the social status of women has improved, so they have jobs with which they can pay their way, which is one important reason why they can delay getting married or just stay single."

In Shanghai, the average age for women to first get married was 27 in 2012, and 30 in 2016, according to Euromonitor International.

Han in Beijing said she enjoys being single. As a cartoonist, she spends her free time doing her art, watching movies, reading books, exercising, meeting friends or going for walks, which adds up to "so many things I can do."

"So I don't want a man to undermine my happiness, not to mention getting married or having children. We are the generation of the one-child policy, and we are so used to being alone. For me, living alone is a normal state."

Although they live interesting lives at the moment, Chen and Gong acknowledge that they fear aging.

Gong said she lived through a period of depression after returning from the US in 2014. Unable to work, she had to go back to her hometown in Southwest China's Guizhou province and live with her parents.

"At the time, I realized how terrible it is to face sickness and death alone," she said.

Chen said: "The biggest worry is my parents. They are getting old and they want me to have children. Then there is the fear of being sick and of dying alone."

However, Li, the sociologist, said that as China gradually ages, the eldercare industry is developing. As it grows, worries that single people have about aging will diminish, which means more people can choose to stay single, she said.



Young women use WeChat's "Shake it" option to link up with boys nearby on Jan 18 in Hangzhou, in East China's Zhejiang province.

LIAN GUOQING / FOR CHINA DAILY

Cats, cuddly toys and custom bouquets

Single people are spending more money on themselves, creating big business opportunities

By YANG YANG

Two mobile games have recently become hugely popular in China.

One is Love and Producer, in which girls can experience romantic relationships with four different handsome men. In January, it overtook the popular strategy game Honor of Kings on the Apple Store's free download charts, but was soon overtaken by Tabikaeru: Journey Frog — about a lonely frog who loves traveling.

Love and Producer and Tabikaeru: Journey Frog are said to be played mostly by single young women who desire romantic relationships or want to play a motherly role.

While both are free to download, some users are spending a lot of money on the various add-ons.

These mobile games are just two examples of the rising consumer demand by the increasing single population in China, who tend to spend more money on themselves, creating new business and economic opportunities.

You need only look at other economies, such as Japan and South Korea, which are experiencing similar trends, to get a glimpse of China's future.

In Japan, for instance, one-fourth of men and one-seventh of women in a survey chose to remain single, according to a *Nikkei* report in 2015.

The money that single women spent on food and clothes was 2.7 times that of married women, showing that single people pay more attention to the quality of life, the report said.

As early as 2007, a report by *New Weekly*

magazine surveyed 1,024 single people in China from 16 cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu in the southwest, and Guangzhou and Shenzhen in the south.

Of the respondents, 28.6 percent said they would buy luxury goods without much hesitation, and 16 percent said they frequented bars, including karaoke bars, at least once a week. About 31.6 percent said their biggest monthly expense was entertainment, partying or other social occasions.

A report issued last year by online travel agency Lvmama said bookings for people traveling alone were 1.8 times those of 2016. Usually 80 percent of customers, mainly from first- and second-tier cities, would book travel arrangements one or two days before departure for the May Day holiday, the National Day holiday and Spring Festival. On average, they spent 14 percent more money than married people.

Chen Zhiya, a student at Peking University, said that in a restaurant called New Yorker in the Zhongguancun area of Beijing recently, a diner asked her to take photos of him with a big toy bear that waiters usually place opposite customers who are alone.

"I found it all a bit embarrassing, but he looked happy," Chen said.

New Yorker is not the only restaurant that provides such a service. At the popular hotpot chain Haidilao, staff members also put fluffy toys across from diners, presumably to provide companionship.

Reflower, a delivery service for bouquets of flowers, has recently become popular. The company says 78.8 percent of buyers are women, of

whom 53.5 percent buy flowers for themselves. Chris Guo, 36, an IT worker in Beijing who lives alone, is one of Reflower's customers.

"There are times when everything goes wrong, but beautiful flowers can cheer me up, because from them you can see how great the world is, no matter how things are," she said.

Due to social networking platforms, singles are not as isolated as they used to be, but they inevitably feel lonely sometimes, which is why many are choosing to raise pets, especially cats.

"More and more people seem to be getting cats," said Charlotte Qiu, 34, who has done exactly that.

Qiu, of Suzhou, in East China's Jiangsu province, has her own home and lives alone, and the cat has become an important companion, she said.

"She's a bit noisy and clings to me a lot, but every morning when I open the bedroom door and see her sitting there waiting for me, it's such a wonderful feeling.

"At first I spent a lot of money on her, buying quality toys, food and other cat products, but now she has grown up and I know more about what she likes and dislikes, so I buy less."

China had more than 58 million pet cats and more than 27 million pet dogs by 2014, becoming the second largest pet market after the United States, according to Zhiyan Consultancy in Beijing.

The market value of pet care in China will reach \$2.6 billion next year, overtaking the United States as the world's largest market, according to market researcher Euromonitor International.