

Too late for love?

In a town where men routinely act the playboy into their forties and beyond, what hope do their female counterparts have of snagging The One after 35? **Angie Wong** looks for a glimmer of hope amid a sea of doubt

"It's easier to be killed by a terrorist than it is to find a husband over the age of 40," states one of the characters in the 1993 Tom Hanks/Meg Ryan romcom *Sleepless in Seattle*. "That statistic is not true!" comes the response. "It's not true, but it feels true."

Admittedly the upsurge in global terrorism since the early 90s has probably evened out the odds a little, but the general perception remains that a woman's chances of finding 'The One' depreciate with increasing rapidity after she enters her mid-thirties. But does this view ring true in modern Hong Kong? And if so, what's a girl to do about it?

The numbers, for what they're worth, make for discouraging reading. First up, it doesn't help that there are more women than men in Hong Kong: 3.6 million to 3.3 million according to the Census and Statistics Department's 2008 figures. And the numbers get scarier when you look at the ratio of single 35-year-old men to women: 50,100 to 67,000. Fast forward a couple of years to 37, and it's an even more alarming 47,300 single men to 68,000 single women – and the gap continues to widen year on year until both sexes level off at around 48,000 aged 55. The age of brides, meanwhile, peaks at 29, with 3,835 blushing beauties strolling down the aisle in 2008, and fall significantly every year after. At 35, there were 1,539 brides in 2008, compared to 1,884 grooms. At 40, the figures are 628 versus 949. These statistics don't tell the whole story of course, but they are enough to leave those dreaming of happily ever afters in a cold sweat.

The experts don't offer much hope either. Violet Lim is the founder of Lunch Actually, a dating service that has paired off more than 200 confirmed couples in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia – with 80 marriages – since 2004. When asked what chance a woman in her mid-thirties has of finding a long-lasting relationship in Hong Kong, Lim takes a long pause before saying: "Hong Kong men compared to Malaysian and Singaporean men are more open-minded to date women

over 35. But most single men who come into Lunch Actually request to be paired up with women 35 or below." And what were the company's success rates for finding a mate for 35+ women? "It is hard for us to find them someone," she admits.

Harsh as this may seem, these are the consequences of a super competitive market. We asked one 36-year-old female expat dater who plays her chances with online dating sites, and she described the market thus: "With some very keen local girls it's hard [for] a Western woman to compete."

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An Australian former Mid-Levels resident told us how she swapped her prominent financial position in Hong Kong for a lesser position and lesser pay in London at age 35. Unsurprisingly, she offered a similarly pessimistic view for expat women. "I found it hard to meet anyone who was stable and wanted a long-term relationship [in Hong Kong]," she said. "I also found the majority of men were more interested in local women and the pool of nice, normal, single, available men much smaller. I did not want to end being 40 and single in Hong Kong like so many other Western women I saw there. Men [in London] find me attractive and I don't have to compete with Asian girls." She, like many other expat women we spoke to, said they first considered moving out of Hong Kong to increase their chances of finding love at 34.

But while leaving the city might be the last resort, it's not the only option. Lim offers hope to career women in the form of advice. Be

vulnerable, she recommends, drop the mask and change your patterns. "Before dates, leave the powersuit at the office and slip on a black dress," she says. Get feminine. Just be out there. Accept every invite. Drop your criteria list and be open-minded to men of all shapes and sizes and income levels. But the most important message is to stay positive.

A 36-year-old singleton, who admits to lying about her age, echoed this view. "I always try to be optimistic," she says. "I always accept invites from new people to parties. I think most of my single friends accept you won't find The One in Mes Amis, apart from one who swears by Dusk Till Dawn." She also suggests joining wine tastings, tennis clubs and enlisting friends for pair-ups. Though, she warns, whatever you do, "Stay out of Wan Chai."

But what do the men think? "Guys usually don't choose older women," said a 34-year-old male private wealth consultant we spoke to. "The cut off age is 32-33." He adds that men shouldn't feel like they are the bad guy for opting out of a relationship with a woman 35 or older. "Biologically, and logically, it's better to choose younger women if [the man] wants to have children. It's just a smart decision."

"Men are like dogs, they can smell desperation," chips in one 34-year-old male art trader, rather cruelly.

Thankfully not all guys agree. "I want to have kids," said a 33-year-old applications developer. "It's a cliché, but I want a mature partner. Women over 35 have a better sense of security; they are more settled, and grown into their habits. I know what I want in life. What I'm not looking for is someone who is on a journey of discovery. I want to know who you're going to be at the end of the tunnel. If I'm dating a 26-year-old, how the hell am I going to know who they'll be at 30?"

This sentiment was echoed by a British musician in his late thirties: "If I want to play around I look for someone who's 25, if I want to settle down I look for someone who's 35."

Hope, it seems, springs eternal.



Catch him while you can Love is a game for the young, if you believe the stats