

Society W's Wendy Tse on leaving private banking to pursue the art of matchmaking

| BY AMY TAN |

When Wendy Tse was a private banker, she realised that many of her friends were single even though they were highly eligible. "They were all single not for two or three months but for a very long time. I was single as well and I found it difficult to meet people. It is easy to meet people in clubs but they are not who you really want to date or pursue a relationship with," she says.

Soon, Tse started matchmaking her friends. It was not long before she discovered that she had quite a knack for matchmaking. "I did it for fun and quite a few of them got married. Then, I had people asking me to help set them up," she notes. To see if she could make matchmaking a viable career, Tse took a summer programme on the psychology of love and attraction at Columbia University in New York. She later found out that matchmaking is a big industry in the US. After speaking to and learning from the matchmakers there, she decided to be a part-time matchmaker and start her own matchmaking agency, Society W. Last year, she left her lucrative career in private banking to be a full-time matchmaker.

While Tse derives a lot of fun from matchmaking her clients, she highlights that there is also a lot of hard work involved. In order to find the right match for them, Tse sits them down for a two-hour interview. "We have to really understand how they tick, how they work, their relationship history, how they were brought up, their family background, what their parents' marriage was like. It's very in-depth," she says. "On top of that, we find out what they are looking for in a partner and most importantly, why?"

Psychology of love

Tse has encountered many occasions where clients come to her ready with a cheque, wanting her to find them a match quickly. This is where her training in psychology comes in. "We talk to them a bit more and they will say they are over their past relationships. But if you look at their expressions, you can tell that they are not," she says. "You need to be intuitive. So, some level of understanding psychology is very critical because most of the time, communication is only 30% based on the words you are saying. Everything else is facial expression, body language and tone."

In order to provide this personalised matchmaking service to her clients, Tse only takes on a maximum of 15 clients at any one point in time. She currently has a waiting list of clients. Society W offers three membership types — standard, privilege and elite. The standard membership starts from \$49 and puts clients' profile in the agency's matchmaking database. They also receive exclusive invitations to Society W events. The elite membership, on the other hand, charges up to "five-figure sums", where Tse and her team hunt for a match beyond the agency's database and arrange a minimum of three highly screened dates. Clients in this programme also receive date preparation consultation from the team.

According to Tse, Society W has had to turn away some clients for treating it like an escort agency. "Some people come to us and say, 'I just want a hot young girl.' We tell them, 'If you want a beautiful woman, then maybe you should learn to dress a little bit better.' And if they refuse to change anything about themselves, then I tell them, 'I'm sorry I can't help,'" she explains.



Tse: We feel that everyone is eligible in their own right

To be sure, Tse believes that everyone can find a match. "If I can't find them matches easily, I would tell them to wait, because I have a waiting list and maybe when they come back at another time, I will have someone more suitable," she says. "It's really the attitude that they come with. So, if they come with a good attitude, everybody can be helped."

Tse also has a number of clients who sign up for the agency's dating consultancy services. "This is not matchmaking. We help them with the entire process of date preparation and they have achieved success based on their own efforts. It's actually surprising that we have that many success cases," she says.

Meanwhile, Tse has launched a programme called "How to Find a Husband in 15 Steps". She created the programme after she was admitted to "The Love MBA" in 2011, a highly selective matchmaking programme with renowned dating expert Rachel Greenwald, who is also a *New York Times*' bestselling author and acclaimed matchmaker for over 800 marriages. Tse's programme is an adaptation of Greenwald's 15-step plan. "I've adapted to Singapore because there are some cultural nuances that don't apply here," she says.

She attributes this programme to helping her find a husband. "One of the steps is to make sure you go out with someone new from your own social network every week. I'm quite sociable, so it wasn't a big deal

for me, but it was still out of my comfort zone," she says.

Tse points out that time constraints are one of the main reasons why clients need a matchmaker. "Generally, the clients who come to us are older than the ones who are on dating apps such as Tinder and Paktor, because these people are much more serious and they have to have the financial capabilities to afford a service like this," she says. "We feel that everyone is eligible in their own right but typically, [our clientele] has gone down the path of white-collar professionals, successful entrepreneurs, lawyers, bankers and doctors."

To help her clients find a match, Tse always carries her business card with her. "I used to be that weird girl sitting at Raffles Place, looking for potential matches for my clients," she says. "If I see a suitable girl, I'd go up to her with my business card, introduce myself as a matchmaker and ask if she's single. If she is, I'd ask if she's interested in meeting this great guy and then, I'd explain a little bit more. Most people who are single are open to it."

These days, Tse has a team of hunters who help Society W find the right match for her clients. In addition, she looks for potential matches for her clients through social media. She also takes extra care in ensuring that the match is not someone who is already in her

clients' social network. "Singaporeans are increasingly open to matchmaking but at the same time, they're still shy. So, a lot of people come to us but they don't tell their friends. We make sure we check whether they're mutual friends on Facebook before we match them," she says.

Managing expectations

For Tse, the most difficult part of being a matchmaker is managing the clients. "There is a fine balance between having the authority to tell them what to do and making sure you are their cheerleader at all times so that they feel encouraged," she says.

After every date, Tse collects data from the matches in order to give feedback to the clients. "When we see recurring themes, that's when it's a real issue and we will have to highlight it to the clients and try to help them," she says.

However, it is not easy for Tse to cushion the blow when it comes to delivering negative comments to her clients. "I can say it in a gentle and nice way, but if I feel that I am not getting across, then I'll just say it as it is. There's no easy way to tell a client, 'Your date said that you're boring.'"

To expand Society W's reach, Tse is looking to launch a dating app that allows users to protect their reputation and identity until they are ready to meet their matches. "I think the reason why a lot of people don't want to go on Tinder is because they don't want their faces there. The reality is that Singapore is so small and the chances of a friend seeing you are so high. Someone may screenshot your picture and send it to people you know," she says. The app will be launched this year and will adopt a freemium model.

Since becoming a full-time matchmaker, Tse has been constantly upgrading her skills. She has undertaken a number of certified courses awarded by the Singapore Workforce Development Agency in order to get accredited by the government. The courses include establishing and running a dating agency, providing personalised dating services, and organising dating events. "You don't need to be accredited, but Singaporeans have this mindset that if you're accredited, it's safer," she says.

Tse believes that matchmaking is still considered an alternative career. According to her, a lot of women are interested in becoming a matchmaker because it is fun, but they do not want to take the risk of starting their own business. "It was easy when I was doing it small and part-time, but when I launched into it full-time, the stress was immense. I went through months of sleepless nights because I was worrying about the profits and losses, and whether I was making enough money to cover the cost," she says.

She adds that as a business owner, her earnings as a matchmaker can probably match her previous salary as a private banker. However, she notes that the singles market in Singapore is not big. "The singles market in Singapore is only 500,000 to 600,000 people. As a matchmaker, I'm only interested in the 25- to 50-year-old range. So, within that range, it's only about 380,000 people," she says.

Although the market is small, Tse asserts that there is still room for Society W to grow organically. "I've never been a money-driven person, so I believe in slow organic growth," she says. "I love what I am doing now and I don't think I will ever go back to banking." ■