

Empowerment through Solitude: Solo Trip and Its Impact on Chinese Females' Development in Emerging Adulthood

Jiaxuan Zhang

High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, Qingbo Yuan, Century Town, Haidian District, Beijing, China
katherine.zhangjx@outlook.com

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Abstract: Driven by economic growth, social media exposure and a high level of education, solo female travelling among young female adults is gaining more and more popularity in China. This study focuses on the travel experience of solo female travelers in emerging adulthood (SFEA) to investigate how solo trips have impacted on Chinese females' development in emerging adulthood. By conducting in-depth interviews, this study reveals SFEA's motivations, challenges and achievements for their solo trips and hence provides a holistic understanding of what roles solo travel plays in developing practical skills and self-confidence. This study brings important implications for policy marketers, public service providers, educators, and parents in designing efficient policies/services to cater to this segment of people and identifying opportunities to help them with their exploration and development. What's more, this study sets the road for future development in female education and the pertinent industries.

1. Introduction

Since the economic reforms started in 1978, China's economy has grown at a fast pace that has shifted all aspects of the Chinese people's lives. The average annual GDP growth rate in China from 1989 to 2024 was approximately 8.86% (Trading Economics, 2024)[9]. The rapid economic growth in China offers young women fundamental access to travel on their own, because the growing wealth within their family, as well as their own savings, makes solo travel possible. And the increasing education level that women receive also alters their goals and ambitions in life. According to a study on consumption habits of Generation Z by The Harris Poll (2019)[8], Generation Z prefers to spend their disposable income on experiences such as travel over material goods. As more and more women get educated, coupled with the impact of the shift in culture, the year of motherhood is generally delayed, which gives women more time and opportunity to travel (Kim, 2023)[5]. Furthermore, the growing popularity of solo travel and the rising exposure of solo trips on social media also encourage more and more young women to embark on their own journey (Wilson & Little, 2008)[10]. The #solofemaletravel and #solofemaletraveler tags on Instagram altogether appear in over 0.925 million

posts at the time of writing, and the #solotravel tag alone has over 10.94 million posts.

The trend of adolescent females embarking on solo travels has gained noticeable momentum as time goes on. 14% of females aged 16-22 in China have undertaken at least one solo. This phenomenon reflects a shift in social attitudes, personal aspirations, and accessibility to resources among younger generations, especially for those females in emerging adulthood.

Emerging Adulthood is a developmental stage coined by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2007)[1], referring to the period between adolescence and full adulthood (typically ages 18-25). It is characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and a sense of possibility. Females at this stage negotiate autonomy and identity. Women in emerging adulthood would possibly take up a considerable proportion of the travel market, as 84% of solo travelers are women, and 70% of Gen Z travelers are embracing solo adventures. Solo travel in emerging adulthood acts as both a catalyst and reflection of this process, offering transformative experiences. Thus, it is especially important to consider solo travel through the lens of emerging adulthood.

Featured by the desire of self-exploration, females during emerging adulthood are especially inclined to the concept of taking adventures and exploring the world. And among their interests, solo travelling can satisfy young females' desire. Things like meeting new people, coping with an emerging situation alone, managing loneliness, and dealing with harassment are all expected challenges on the trip. Having these expectations, female travelers could foresee this trip as meaningful and educational. Setting out with the ambition and aspiration to learn and experience, the outcomes and reflections of their trips are especially important for understanding the significant role that solo trips play in the lives of young females. This sets the foundation for future development in female education and related industries.

Therefore, this study strives to address the topics by diving deep into what roles solo travel has played in terms of developing Chinese SFEA's skills and confidence. It will also provide valuable and detailed insights into young female's unique needs and expectations on solo travel. Identifying their distinctive travel motivations, challenges, and achievements will bring important implications for policy marketers, public service providers, educators, and parents in designing efficient policies/services to cater to this segment of people and identifying opportunities to help with their exploration and development.

2. Literature review

The growth in statistics on SFEA (18-25) indicates that solo travelling is becoming more popular among females in emerging adulthood. Despite female solo travelers in emerging adulthood being on the rise, they are considered an under-researched group of travelers. McNamara and Prideaux (2010)[6] categorized solo independent women travelers into different typologies, emphasizing that motivations and travel styles among this group are diverse rather than homogeneous. The academic research with focus on solo female travelers can be found in the following categories: psychological dimensions (the impact of solo travel on self-efficacy), technological empowerment (the role of safety apps), cultural differences (variations in motivations for solo travel among women from different countries) and policy recommendations (support measures such as visa facilitation, youth travel subsidies, and gender-sensitivity training). Recent research also highlights how personal values shape solo travel motivations. Teng et al. (2023)[7], for example, found that Taiwanese women's intentions to travel alone are strongly influenced by values of escape/relaxation, relationship building, and self-actualization. This reinforces the need to examine motivational dynamics among young Chinese women.

Emerging adulthood is a conception of development during the period 18 to 25. (Emerging adulthood) People who are going through this period distinguish themselves from adolescence and

normative adulthood and are exposed to a variety of possibilities in life that render this period adventurous and explorational. Solo travel is often tied to spirituality and self-empowerment. (Kalisch et al., 2011)[4] Thus, it becomes an important experience for young women. This study focuses on Chinese women in emerging adulthood who are, at the same time, solo travelers who have experienced an unaccompanied travel experience at least once.

However, scholarly attention to how solo female travelling during emerging adulthood contributes to females' development remains lacking. Even though there are some studies that concern the empowerment and development that females tend to acquire after their solo attempts, they have some common gaps yet to be addressed. For example, Jordan and Gibson's study(2005)[3], explores three evident themes that women may face in their journey, which are surveillance, resistance, and empowerment. It studies samples from both the US and UK, aged from 20 to 70. And Elaine Chiao Ling Yang and her colleagues conducted a study on how risks empower female solo travelers. Their study states that Asian women face gendered and racialized risks while travelling alone, but through self-negotiating and attempting to deal with the situation alone, women feel empowered and transformed after the journey (Yang et al., 2018)[11]. However, these two studies have a common lack of focus on a specific cultural context. Besides, the broad age range of the sample ignores the specialty of the phase of emerging adulthood. Furthermore, while Yang et al.(2018) has narrowed the sample to Asian women, there still remains a gap in in-depth research that was solely on the Chinese cultural context.

Considering the prematureness and the financial reliance on family, there has been a tendency for research on women to overlook the age group between 18 to 25. Thus, the educational and developmental significance of solo travel experiences for young women is underexplored.

3. Method

Table 1 Participants Information

Participants	Age	Times traveled alone(1-3,3-5,5-10)	Some cities that the participant has been to
P1	16	3-5	Chongqing, Chengdu, Hubei, Hangzhou, Hunan
P2	16	1-3	Atlanta, Chongqing
P3	16	1-3	Hangzhou, Jiangsu
P4	18	1-3	Guizhou
P5	18	3-5	Shanghai, Inner Mongolia, Zhejiang, Hangzhou
P6	18	1-3	Xiamen
P7	18	1-3	Hunan
P8	19	3-5	Pennsylvania, San Francisco, Shandong
P9	19	1-3	Xian, Hong Kong
P10	20	1-3	Shanghai, Atlanta
P11	24	3-5	Guangxi, Hong Kong, Xiamen, Nanjing
P12	25	5-10	London, Oxford, Sisly, Spain, Singapore, Morocco, Portugal

This study has employed a qualitative and in-depth interview approach to explore Chinese emerging adulthood female solo travelers' travel experiences (motivations, challenges and achievements) and their reported development (e.g., practical skill development, self-confidence). The study adopts a semi-structured questionnaire to flexibly alter the questions based on the participants' different conversation styles. The participants were females who self-identified as female solo travelers and had taken at least one solo trip to another city other than the one they currently live in. Interviews were conducted with 12 female solo travelers aged 16 to 25 years (as

shown in Table 1).

SFEA from different cities in China formed the participant group, generating ample data for this study. Data were collected from June 2025 to August 2025. Interviews lasted between 30 and 54 minutes and were partially held at Tencent meetings and in person. The participants were found by asking around. As the interviews took place, the coding method and audio transcription were done alongside. Before each interview, essential clarifications were addressed.

The interview questions consisted of open-ended questions tied to objective challenges and subjectively perceived challenges, as well as realized self-growth moments. Specifically, they were asked about the intention of the journey (for example, “Why do you want to travel alone?”), the challenges they faced (for example, “Have you ever come across anything that made you feel thorny and challenging? Can you give an example?” and “Have you ever felt insecure during the journey? Can you give an example?”), and development (for example, “What practical skills have you acquired after these trips?”, “What habits have you gained?”, and “How do these trips have to do with your growth and confidence? Do you feel more confident in yourself?”).

Further, the data and transcriptions were revisited and organized into an Excel form, and the selected quotes were translated, grammatical mistakes and repeated information were corrected. These adjustments did not alter the meaning of the responses.

4. Result

4.1 Motivations

To understand the gradual process of adulthood development, motivations, challenges, and perceived growth in terms of acquired skills and changes in confidence level were studied. When participants were asked about their initial motivation for starting a solo journey, their answers fell into 3 categories: personal preference, the dilemma of not being able to find companions, and a deliberate challenge to oneself.

Many participants prefer to travel alone due to various reasons such as they can plan for their own purpose without caring for others’ priorities or immerse themselves into the full enjoyment of the culture, scenes and etc, or take a solo trip to escape from the routine pressure and get recharged.

P1, a 16-year-old, who started her first solo trip since 13 years old and was greatly encouraged by her first success, claimed:

“If you travel by yourself, you can do whatever you want. How to describe that feeling? You just don’t need to listen to others. Of course, it will be more interesting to be with others, but I still prefer to go by myself. Go to another city, walk around in the new environment, and go to the local museums, which often inspire me.” The fascination with solitude and the level of immersion brought by the experience of solo travel attracts teenagers to continue travelling alone.

Similarly, the motivation was shared and asserted by P2, who is currently 16 and has had 2 attempts at solo travel:

“Well, when I was alone, I could do anything! It’s true. It feels amazing, especially for me, who just likes roaming around. It may be perceived as meaningless if you are with someone else. People would want to go to some resort, and I would lose the chance to go around aimlessly. I would definitely prefer to walk around the place where I live and discover interesting things in the neighborhood.”

Many travelers express the exigency of the situation when they could not find friends to go with. It usually occurs when they are going to see a concert, a competition, when the ticket number is tight, or when they are going to events that their friends don’t share an interest in. As P7 explained:

“I just managed to snag a ticket to the concert tour, and that’s how the idea came to me. It was around late June this year. Since I was the only one who got the ticket, I ended up going alone. It felt

like a first step — starting with solo travel domestically, and maybe eventually going abroad on my own too.”

P12, currently 25 years old, who had gone to several European countries on her own, shared her struggle to finally go on a journey herself:

“I started travelling alone around my second or third year of college. I was studying in the UK at the time. My first and second years were during the pandemic, so in my second and third years, I really felt like I had to get out and explore. But a lot of my friends had their own plans, so I started wondering—maybe I should try travelling by myself? I knew Europe had a bit of a reputation, you know, like pickpockets or stuff you see exaggerated online. So during my second year, I didn’t really take that step. I still preferred going with friends—it just felt safer. But in my third year and into my master’s, I finally felt ready to travel solo.”

There are also young adults who deliberately designed the trip to challenge themselves with respect to independence skills and to see the world. As P4, an 18-year-old, explained, *“Life at school has been pretty suffocating at that time, so I just really needed to get out into nature for a while. It was a way to really push myself and see — you know, get a taste of what it’s like to face the real world out there, with all kinds of people and situations.”*

4.2 Challenges

Female young travelers in the study reported facing challenges during their solo journey. Through facing and overcoming these challenges, they acquired new skills and boosted their self confidence. The frequently reported challenges include managing potential insecurity, dealing with unexpected incidents, and interacting with strangers on the way. Additionally, a few respondents mentioned loneliness, illness, culture/language differences and budget constrain as existing challenges as well.

Security is one of the most common challenges that young women face while travelling. It is also a concern that was commonly faced by most of the participants, which was threatening, but also contributes to women’s development of a sound worldview and useful skills in protecting themselves. As P12 stated:

“In some parts of Europe, I really don’t go out after like 8 or 9 PM. That’s when people come out to drink, all kinds of shady stuff starts happening. In other areas, you never know what might happen. Your safety could be at risk. That’s why I’m really careful about timing. Second, I always make sure to save the local emergency number, like wherever I go in Europe—and I’ve been to quite a few countries—I memorize the number you’d call in urgent situations. It’s the fastest and most effective way to get help abroad. If something bad actually happens, calling your friends or parents won’t get an immediate response, and they can’t really do much. You need to contact the local police right away.”

P11 shared her concern about security on her solo trip:

“Safety is always my top priority when travelling alone. For example, when taking a Didi alone at night, I pretend to be on a phone call with my parents. I intentionally make the driver think that my parents know I’m in the car and are aware of my whereabouts—so they’d better not try anything. Also, when choosing a hotel, I always pick one in a convenient and crowded area, like near a subway station. That way, the distance from the subway to the hotel is short, and I don’t have to walk alone for too long.”

Unexpected incidents are often reported to be one of the most challenging and uneasy things to handle during the journey, which is unforgettable and leaves long-lasting lessons for young women.

P12 travelling as a graduate student, shared her emergent multitasking experience in Europe:

“During a trip to Spain, I had to deal with a lot of urgent matters at the same time. I was trying to rent an apartment in Beijing, which meant making calls to real estate agents across time zones. They

would either not answer the phone or be asleep at night, so I had to coordinate and communicate according to their availability. My schedule for those two days was completely disrupted. I remember sitting on a wooden bench in a park, frantically juggling phone calls and emails on my laptop. In the end, I managed to secure a suitable apartment. That experience really taught me that when unexpected challenges arise, staying calm and composed is essential.”

The growing high importance and reliance on cell phones brings troubles that travelers find headache-inducing. As P7 claimed:

“When I think about it, there weren’t too many issues—but one thing did happen: my phone died, and my power bank ran out too. Totally didn’t foresee that coming. And I wasn’t back at the hotel yet, so I had to look around nearby and finally found a portable charger rental at a noodle shop. Then there was another tricky moment: I was in line waiting to get in when I realized I still hadn’t stored my bag. So I asked a stranger in line next to me to save my spot, and I got so lucky. She was super nice. After I rushed to drop off my bag and ran back, she was waving at me from way far away, saying, ‘Over here!’ So I didn’t have to line up all over again.”

Similarly, P3, 18 years old, who has only solo-traveled to Hangzhou once, expressed her memorable experience of leaving personal belongings unwarily:

“Oh yeah, I remember once I left some stuff in a hotel, and they actually called me about it. So I had to go back and pick it up. Definitely taught me a lesson — now I always double-check everything before I check out.”

Interaction with strangers is an inescapable part of solo trips, which requires courage and interpersonal skills for young women. Pleasant conversation often leaves travelers in a great mood and enhances the overall travel experience. As several participants experienced:

“My flight landed after 11 pm on the first day. After finding my hotel, I went out to look for something to eat. At a local barbecue spot, I met a bunch of people from Beijing—mostly middle-aged folks there for conferences. As we talked, it hit me—back at school, I still felt like a kid. But right there, it was like I had suddenly stepped into adulthood.” (P4)

P1 reflected on her most recent trip to Chengdu and illustrated her sweet memory of a kind interaction with a vendor.

Once in Chengdu, around 7 or 8, I decided to go out for a walk and grab some Langya potatoes. The vendor was super friendly—he could tell from my Mandarin that I wasn’t local—he recommended a bunch of cool spots around and even told me which popular restaurants on Xiaohongshu are overrated (lol), then suggested some more authentic places instead. When I told him I was from Shaanxi, he was like, *“Oh, that’s close! You’ll probably like the flavors here then.”* It just felt warm, you know? Honestly, I rarely come across that kind of vibe in Beijing. It felt special.

P8, who visited America alone last year, recollected her days roaming on foreign streets.

“I was just squatting on the street—didn’t feel like going into a shop or walking around—and there happened to be a band playing. So I started drawing them. There was also this homeless guy next to us who started sharing his story about leaving home. He kept saying how much he liked my drawing and told me to keep going, never stop. Honestly, I wasn’t feeling very confident at the time, but the vibe and his words kinda brought me back to life. I felt so energized.”

Loneliness is not at the top of concerns for solo female travelers, but it is reported by some participants as a challenge young females have to deal with on their solo journey. It is a double-edged sword. Young solo travelers enjoy the solitude, freedom, and flexibility that come with solo trips. On the other hand, travelers have to deal with the downside of loneliness, which is a headache for travelers, especially when other challenges are also on the road.

P3, a 16-year-old, expressed: *“There is indeed a sense of loneliness, especially during my first solo trip. When I feel lonely or bored on the road, I often video-called friends to chat or put on headphones to listen to music. To avoid loneliness, I try to fill my itinerary with engaging activities,*

such as visiting museums, trying local foods, or meeting interesting people along the way. It reminds me that life will always have its challenges, but temporary loneliness is something we can overcome.”

Budget constraints are also mentioned as a challenge throughout the trip, especially for young females who may rely on their parents to financially support their solo trip.

P9, a 19-year-old, has been taught to be frugal ever since she was little. Summarized: *“When travelling alone, I always set a budget in advance. For flights, I keep an eye on promotions from different airlines ahead of time and pick the cheapest one that fits my travel schedule. For accommodation, I search online, compare options, and choose a hotel that’s both comfortable and within my budget. I know that without a budget, I might run out of money halfway through the trip. Solo travel has made me realize how important it is to manage daily expenses wisely.”*

4.3 Achievements

After learning about the challenges people have encountered in their journey, the development perceived by the participant is studied through the lens of their newly learned skills and claimed enhancement in confidence.

People claim to learn practical skills or retain a new habit after the journey.

“Travelling alone before, I’ve run into all kinds of situations. Like missing a high-speed train or losing your ID card, I became an expert in all the procedures to get it sorted. Just recently, my colleague lost her phone, and I knew exactly what to do: how to track it, report it, even check security cameras since I’d been through all that myself while travelling solo. I feel like I can handle things much faster now. And it’s not just about problem-solving skills. More importantly, it’s your mindset. When something goes wrong, don’t panic or feel helpless.” (P1)

Travelling in America, P8 reported on her newly acquired habit of documenting people by painting.

“I started documenting the people around me really frequently. Then I got deep into music and the whole aesthetic from the ‘60s to the ‘80s in the US, studied all that history, and started bringing those vibes into my own work. And honestly, some of the stuff that came out of it turned out pretty well. I’m kind of proud of it!” (P8)

The boost in confidence is the most universal answer of solo travelers and is often the reason that keeps them on this way of travelling.

“Honestly, travelling all the way to the other side of the world by yourself is kind of a big deal for me. And it really builds your confidence. There’s something about that kind of exploration—trying to keep everything organized, being in control of your plans—that makes you feel more aware. You notice the life around you in a deeper way. It all adds layers to you, makes you richer inside. That’s what it felt like. That was the takeaway.” (P2)

Similarly, P1 stressed the feeling of self-agency after dealing with all sorts of things alone and making decisions for herself.

“Finishing a solo trip gives me such a sense of achievement. I mean, you start from scratch—getting to know a place, checking travel guides, making plans, dealing with all kinds of unexpected situations on the ground. Especially as a girl travelling alone, it really gives you agency. Every single decision is yours to make, and that comes with a really unique feeling. You’re fully in charge of your own journey—and that’s very different from being at home or even at school.”

P8, reflecting on her journey, came to the realization of the inevitable loneliness in life.

“I’ve become more independent, more willing to talk to people, and I care less about what others think. But at the same time, I also realized how heavy loneliness can be when you’re travelling alone.”

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The results indicate that solo trips enhance Chinese solo female travelers in emerging adulthood’s

development twofold, from practical skills to self-confidence. One of the biggest factors that encourages females to actively engage in solo trips is to intentionally seek development and confidence. As for the development in practical skills, participants had reported growth in skills for securing safety, prioritizing events, and multitasking. As they are solely responsible for the journey, they get the chance to try all the detailed errands from booking tickets to taking care of themselves both mentally and physically. Moreover, as they travel with a limited budget, they learned to meticulously keep an account of their spending, a skill that many had no chance to develop when they travel with their family. Beyond practical skills, most participants claim to be more confident after their solo trips. Especially after their first solo trip, almost all of the participants claim to be surprised that they can actually live alone for a while. Since solo travel usually offers a time to be less socially engaged, which is different from life at both schools and the workplace, young women get to try to eat alone, transport alone, and live alone. This novel experience has made young females aware of their capabilities that they had not discovered. In summary, the findings indicate that the solo travel experience served a significant role in spurring tangible competencies as well as trust in oneself for Chinese women in emerging adulthood.

Also, it is important to recognize the limitations. This study mainly concentrated on Chinese female solo travelers in emerging adulthood. Since China is a country with a diverse culture and a minority, the data in this study were mainly collected from people who were born in Beijing and other northern cities. Thus, this study may not fully capture the complexity and diversity of Chinese culture and travel habits.

While this study focuses on female travelers' development, future studies can conduct research on female solo travelers in different phases of life to gain insights into the different travel experiences of different age groups. As shown in the study on women journeying alone across life stages (Dresler, 2025)[2], the meaning of solitude in travel differs considerably between young adults, middle-aged women, and older travelers. The continued findings would enable parents and educational practitioners to have a better understanding of how to provide effective support during their growth from a young age into adulthood.

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Appendix

The questionnaires used for the interviews are as follows:

- 1) When did you first consider travelling alone, and why did you want to try solo travel?
- 2) When was your first solo trip, and what motivated you to take it?
- 3) Travel Context and Decision-Making
 - a) When and where was your most recent solo trip?
 - b) What specific factors influenced your choice of this destination?
 - c) Did you have any concerns before the trip? What were your main worries?
 - d) How was the trip funded, and how did you manage your budget?
- 4) Key Events During the Trip
 - a) Which activity or scene during the journey did you spend the most time on?
 - b) Did you document the trip in any form (e.g., photos/notes/expense records) before or after travelling? What aspects did these records primarily focus on?
 - c) Did you have any substantial interactions with strangers?
 - d) Did you encounter any unplanned emergencies?
 - e) At which moment during the trip did you acutely feel the need to make a decision independently?

Please describe the situation and your decision-making process.
- 5) Risks and Responses
 - a) Were you aware of any potentially dangerous situations during your trip?
 - b) What specific actions did you take at that time?
 - c) Did you make any safety plans or preparations before the trip?
- 6) Behavioral Feedback and Continuity
 - a) After this trip, have there been any observable changes in your daily behavior?
 - b) During this solo travel experience, what situations did you find challenging to handle alone and still require others' assistance?
 - c) How did the solo travel experience contribute to your self-awareness and personal growth?
 - d) Did the trip lead to any new habits or interests?
 - e) Do you plan to travel alone again? If so, how will your criteria for choosing the next destination differ from this time?
- 7) What do you believe are the long-term impacts of solo travel on self-awareness and personal growth for adolescent females?