

On the manifest and latent functions of the mistress

Comment >
Mistresses

The age-old institution of concubinage revived in the 1980s with the advent of bourgeois prosperity in mainland China. Successful Chinese businessmen found young and beautiful mistresses, showered them with expensive clothes and jewelry, and set them up in flats away from wives and children. Overseas investors – chiefly businessmen from Hong Kong and Taiwan – did likewise, taking advantage of their hard currency and passports to attract ambitious mainland girls.

By Yue Tao

By the 1990s, the new concubinage had become a public concern. Moral dramas about it appeared on primetime television. Words like *dakuan* ('big bill', meaning rich customer), *xiaomi* ('little honey', a homonym of 'little secretary'), and *jinsi que* ('gold-feathered bird', meaning mistress) entered common usage. Despite social disapproval, rich men and young women joined hands in concubinage.

After the Asian financial crisis and the global internet bubble, many businessmen found concubines expensive. Hong Kong and Taiwan businessmen, in particular, lost their competitive edge. But economic difficulty did not end concubinage. *Dakuan* changed their strategy and restructured the relationship. Instead of buying flats for their *xiaomi*, they rent them; instead of giving their *jinsi que* an oath of eternal love, they sign renewable contracts. Some concubines are now paid employees with a monthly salary. Their job is to entertain the *dakuan* when he is around and take care of the flat when he is not. Compared with their predecessors, who lived like queens, they are glorified maids.

It is easy to understand why men want concubines. Because of work, they are often away from home. Young, beautiful, tender concubines satisfy their basic needs and release tension. Concubines are also a symbol of success – they satisfy men's vanity and build up their confidence. For many young Chinese men, life is a struggle. They have no capital to invest in frivolous enjoyments until they are middle-aged and married with children. *Chengjia liye* (form a family, make a career) – this old saying still describes Chinese aspirations. Enjoyments like concubines are a reward for doing one's duty, but have to wait till one can afford them.

Young women who volunteer to be concubines are no fools. They take a shortcut to a dream shared by millions of other girls. How else to rapidly attain a luxurious bourgeois lifestyle? The life they live now is one that others strive for years to enjoy. Material luxury is not the only motive young women have to become concubines, however. Some concubines have higher education and a yuppie job; they would be comfortable enough without a sugar daddy. They are more ambitious – they want to set up their own business. They have every-



by Jiang Lidong

thing they need – intelligence, experience, devotion – except venture capital, which concubinage gives them access to. Concubines adore success. Binding themselves to rich businessmen, they take giant steps toward it.

Concubinage also gives nonmaterial satisfaction. Envy is not the least motive for young women to become concubines. They simply cannot stand to see other

less intelligent or beautiful girls living a fancier life. They compete to be cherished by rich men, and the competition is fierce.

The relationship between men and their concubines accords with basic economics. They each have something to give and take. Wives also see advantage in the arrangement. Many Chinese women do not believe in loyal men, much less loyal rich men. A Chinese idiom says a man turns evil once he gets money. Chinese wives cannot agree more. Adultery is in men's nature; money just makes it easier. Chinese wives' strategy is to control their husband's money. They commandeer and allocate their husband's salary. Husbands get only pocket money, which precludes frivolous entertainments.

But when husbands have business thousands of kilometers away from home, such control is impossible. The balance of power tips – husbands now control the budget. Wives who cannot take control prefer concubines to promiscuity: a fixed address means fewer health risks as well as easier surveillance. Women of middle age with children do not expect to find a 'good man' to marry in case they divorce. They see their situation as

hopeless and helpless. They depend on their husband to maintain their lifestyle and send their child to a good school. Where can they find a 'rich and good' man to replace their husband? Husbands, out of guilt or shame, do not want to abandon their family. A predictable and peaceable arrangement is the best possible solution in this intractable situation.

The year of the Chinese Revolution, an American sociologist observed that 'persistent social structures satisfy basic latent functions', and that any attempt to eliminate them without providing an alternative that fulfills these functions is 'doomed to failure'. (Merton 1968:126,135) As long as concubinage satisfies 'basic latent functions' for all concerned *faute de mieux*, it will persist. <

Reference

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