

'Second Wives' Are Back

Mistresses are again a status symbol in China. As scandal spreads, the government worries that they are a motive for public corruption.

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SHANGHAI — Li Xin knelt in a hotel room here, wearing polka-dot boxer shorts and a grimace on his face. The deputy mayor of Jining, in Shandong province, was pleading with his lover not to report him to authorities.

But in the end, the 51-year-old official was exposed and sentenced to life in prison. His crime: accepting more than \$500,000 in bribes, which he used to support at least four mistresses in Jining, Shanghai and Shenzhen.

Li's transgressions were minor compared with those of other public officials. A top prosecutor in Henan province, for example, was recently stripped of his post and Communist Party membership after investigators alleged that he embezzled \$2 million to support his lavish lifestyle — and seven mistresses.

"Everyone is saying, 'Behind every corrupt official, there must be at least one mistress,'" says Li Xinde, an anti-corruption activist who researched Li Xin's case and posted on his website a photo of the deputy mayor begging in the hotel room.

China's economic boom has led to a revival of the 2-millennium-old tradition of "golden canaries," so called because, like the showcase birds, mistresses here are often pampered, housed in love nests and taken out at the pleasure of their "masters."

Concubines were status symbols in imperial China. After the Communists took power, they sought to root out such bourgeois evils, even as Chairman Mao Tse-tung reportedly kept a harem of peasant women into his old age.

Now, mistresses have become a must-have for party officials, bureaucrats and businessmen.

"We are in a commodity economy," says retired Shanghai University sociologist Liu Dalin. "Work, technology, love, beauty, power — it's all tradable."

So-called concubine villages — places where lotharios keep "second wives" in comfort and seclusion — are now spread across the nation, in booming cities such as Dongguan, Chengdu and Shanghai.

So common is the practice that it has spawned an industry of private detectives snooping on cheating husbands and their paramours. One such agency, called Debang, based in the western city of Chengdu, underscores how "first wives" are fighting back.

Debang was started by divorced women with one goal: to help desperate wives ferret out their double- and triple-timing husbands and make them pay for their indiscretions.

Debang wouldn't comment, but informed people say the firm has expanded into several cities and has a staff of more than 100.

The mistress boom is contributing to a surge in divorces — and fierce battles over property when relationships collapse. Not long ago, Beijing amended the country's marriage law to make men who indulge in mistresses pay heavy penalties and to give their spouses greater rights in separations.

Now, local governments are starting to take action. This year the city of Nanjing issued an order for all public officials to register their extramarital relationships. In Guangzhou, a prosperous city in the south, a major university issued stern warnings to female students about having affairs and wrecking marriages. And last month, state media reported that Hainan province had stipulated that party members who kept mistresses or had children outside of marriage would be expelled.

Government leaders worry that philandering also could have detrimental effects on China's economy and the credibility of the Communist Party.

State-run banks and agencies have lost billions of dollars to embezzlement and fraud, many at the hands of

officials seeking money to support their golden canaries. In a government review of 102 corruption cases in several Guangdong province cities a few years ago, every one involved an illicit affair.

"If a government official has a mistress, there must be some corruption," says Sun Youjun, a private investigator in Shanghai. "Visits to high-end hotels are not easy with officials' incomes."

Like most bureaucrats, Li Xin had a monthly paycheck of no more than a few hundred dollars. But as deputy mayor for a city of 8 million that's a regional industrial and rail center, Li could easily boost his income. He collected bribes from more than 40 businesses in exchange for helping them with land deals, commodity sales and construction projects, according to interviews and to reports in state-owned media.

Li had a penchant for drinking, people familiar with the case said, and he showered his ladies with expensive gifts and even sheltered some of them in homes.

He met his match in Li Yuchun, the woman who took the photo of him in the hotel room. The two started out as lovers, according to some accounts, and then became business partners.

Li Yuchun exposed him after she learned he was laundering money. After she blew the whistle, she also was sent to jail this summer for five years for harboring a criminal, her brother — a sentence that drew public outcry over the risks of exposing corrupt government officials.

She was so enraged at her prosecution that in the courtroom, she bit her finger and with the blood scrawled on paper: "This is revenge," her lawyer, Jin Xuekong, said.

"She has a very strong spirit," he said.

Jin wouldn't talk about his client's relationship with the former deputy mayor.

As in most cases involving corruption, government officials refused to comment. But in Chinese Internet chat rooms, some called Li Yuchun a "hero mistress."

In Chinese society, the practice of keeping concubines is thought to date back to the Qin Dynasty more than 2,000 years ago, when Confucianism took hold and women were considered inferior.

An entire set of protocols developed on the relationship between men, their spouses and so-called little wives, or concubines. One rule specified how often a man was to have sex with his concubine (every five days).

In subsequent dynasties, concubines were sometimes traded for things or sold or rented to traveling businessmen. Men regarded mistresses as markers of wealth and their elite status in society.

For mistresses, their value and rank largely depended on whether they were able to produce a son and on their dealings with other concubines, a complex relationship that was captured in the haunting 1991 Chinese movie "Raise the Red Lantern."

Unlike in feudal China when affairs were private matters, today's dirty laundry is often aired in the online world. This summer, Chinese media and Web surfers were caught up in the sensational story of the "richest mistress in Shanghai."

Da Beini, 23, became a celebrity after her public row with a 36-year-old Taiwanese businessman over her attempt to sell in an online auction a garden villa in the city of Chongqing, a white Lexus sedan and other items that many assumed were gifts from her benefactor.

At a Starbucks in a high-rent district here, Da denied during an interview that she was a mistress. She wore a black leather jacket and clutched a Louis Vuitton handbag — an original, she said, showing the tags inside. Dangling from her right earlobe were silver letters spelling Dior, and around her neck was a large white topaz.

She said her clothes, her jewelry, her properties — five apartments and villas — were bought with money she earned largely by investing in China's booming real estate market about \$4,000 inherited from her mother three years ago.

"I really don't know why," Da said of the numerous reports in Chinese media that depicted her as a mistress.

"It's the thinking of the whole Chinese society. If you're young and have material things and not bad looking, they assume you must be a mistress."

Wei Wujun, known in China as the "Mistress Killer" because of his prowess for uncovering illicit relations, blames extramarital relationships on post-revolutionary China's "spiritual vacuum."

Last year, 1.6 million married couples in Chinese split up, a 21% jump from 2003, according to government

data. Overall, China's divorce rate, or the number of breakups divided by marriages, now hovers at about 20%, a fivefold increase since the nation began economic reforms more than two decades ago.

Mao gave ideology to the Chinese, Wei said, but materialism is now their god. And many people with power and money are never satisfied, he said.

"There's little government can do to stop it," said Wei, taking a deep drag on a cigarette in front of a gaudy apartment complex, known as a concubine village, in Shanghai's high-end Gubei district.

Few Chinese believe that laws seeking to limit extramarital affairs will have any significant effect on a system in which bureaucrats work largely in secret.

"In developed countries . . . if an official keeps a mistress and buys a house that's not compatible with his income, almost everyone will know overnight," says Huang Jingping, professor of law at Renmin University in Beijing. In China, even when fraud is apparent to insiders, it can go on for years.

As head of Chongqing's vehicle licensing department, Bian Zhongqi accepted bribes from driving school operators and car dealers who wanted licenses or plates. He and his mistress, Zhou Changhui, came up with a plan for a steady income stream.

Drivers seeking renewals of their licenses were supposed to pay a \$6 fee and pass a review of health and driving records. Bian and Zhou extracted an additional \$12 to let applicants skip the process, handing out licenses to thousands.

From 1999 to 2004, authorities said, the couple collected nearly \$400,000.

Standing recently in a small courtroom in Chongqing, a few feet away from his accomplice and lover, Bian sobbed as he explained why he had fallen.

It wasn't greed, the 38-year-old insisted, suggesting that he collected the bribes to keep his mistress happy.

"It's all because I couldn't resist sexual temptation," he said.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fi-mistress22nov22,0,3572737.full.story?coll=la-home-headlines>