**AP World History: Chinese Concubine CCOT (Changes and Continuities Over Time)**

Classroom assignment: small-group discussion

***Focus question: How has the Chinese practice of having concubines/mistresses, including their role and status, changed over time, and how has it remained the same? Why?***

Individual assignment: Write one page on the following (single-spaced if hand-written, double-spaced if typed):

1. Summarize the key ideas from these two articles, including both changes and continuities.
2. Explain how the reading influenced your thinking about the topic.
3. Connect this topic to one of the following: China in another era, another culture, a TV show or movie, or a novel.

The History of Concubines in Qing China

Women in elite households called the childbearing years of marriage the years of "rice and salt," and they generally constituted the busiest time in a woman's life. Duties connected with raising children, looking after sick or aging household members, and managing certain economic aspects of the household required much time and energy, even with the assistance of servants. Once she made it through these years and into her fifties, however, the burdens of household life began to ease. Having proven herself by bearing and raising children and assisting in household management, a woman in a wealthy household had earned a high place within its hierarchy. She had increasing time to devote to literary pursuits as well as religious devotion, usually some form of Buddhism.

It would be around this time, or slightly earlier, that a woman's husband might bring one or more concubines into the household. The intrusion, sexually and otherwise, of a younger woman was sometimes a source of stress, but owing to the beliefs about physical maturation discussed above plus the widespread social acceptance of concubinage and relatively greater male sexual promiscuity, a common reaction was for women to turn to private pursuits as a respite from the decades of hard work they had endured. Laws and social custom strictly forbade a concubine from taking a wife's place, so there was usually no threat to her social standing or status within the household. From the Song dynasty onward, there was a sharp legal distinction between wives (also called "primary wives") and concubines (also called "secondary wives"), with the former having higher status.

Wives were expected to defer to and obey their husband. The primary wife typically assisted her husband by taking care of household matters (keeping financial records, supervising servants, etc.) so that the husband could concentrate on his tasks in the "outer" sphere--studying for the civil service exams, for example. Husbands and wives ideally adhered to a division of labor that left relatively little time for them to be with each other.

Marriages were usually arranged by parents and other family members. In elite households, marriages served to reinforce business and political alliances between families. Because husbands and wives were often strangers prior to marriage, one might wonder how common it was for couples to love each other. A loving marriage was in fact the ideal situation, and diaries, poems and other forms of literature attest that such marriages, if not a majority, did sometimes exist. "Love," however, has a number of different aspects. The typical Chinese conception of a "loving couple" was that as they go through life's trials and tribulations together, they gradually appreciate each other more and more, acquiring a deep, mature affection in their later years akin to that of cherished friends.

Ideally, husbands and wives tended to their respective functions with diligence, cultivated their moral virtue, and gradually became spiritually closer. Sometimes that happened; often it did not. Husbands could be violent, and wives could be bossy and vindictive. There was no shortage of ways husbands and wives could make each other’s lives miserable. It was generally acceptable for husbands to beat their wives as a form of "education." Beating a wife to death, however, would result in serious legal problems unless it could be shown that she had behaved extremely improperly and the husband had not actually intended to kill her. Wives beaten by their husbands often reacted by beating the concubines or maids.

Relations between a single husband and a single wife could be complicated enough. Concubines made matters even more intricate. In wealthy households, most men in their forties or fifties had one or more concubines. A man at this age who could afford a concubine but did not have one would have been a social oddity. As you might imagine, these concubines were usually young and in the prime of their physical beauty. A man might tell his wife, for example, that he was acquiring a concubine so that she could have someone to help her out with household tasks now that "my dear wife" is getting older. Other husbands told their wives that having a concubine (or two) was necessary for status reasons. When the husband began spending most of his nights in the quarters of the new concubine, jealousy was certainly a possible result, especially if the husband and his primary wife had been having regular sexual relations prior to the concubine's arrival. The introduction of a concubine, particularly the first one, was nearly always tense for all parties. The young concubine would have made the wife aware of how much she had aged, and, although the wife might not dream of talking about them in direct terms, sexual issues complicated the emotional responses.

The wife's legal status in the household was secure. She would always outrank any concubines. After the initial shock, several courses of action became possible. During the daytime, men and women generally lived in separate places. Under such circumstances, husbands were often unable to protect concubines from the wrath of a jealous wife, who could make a concubine's life miserable in many ways. Some wives, on the other hand, became increasingly detached from household affairs and turned to religion (usually some variety of Buddhism) for solace. In other cases, wives and concubines got along fine, some becoming dear friends. When the age difference was great, as if often was, some concubines looked to the wife as a substitute mother figure. As with relations between husbands and wives, relations between wives and concubines were open to a rather wide range of possibilities.

Concubines often came from impoverished households. Typically, they would be sold to traveling concubine brokers (or their agents) while still small girls. The concubine broker would calculate the cost of raising and educating the girl and weigh it against how much she could command as a concubine at age sixteen or seventeen. The broker would pay the girl's parents a sum that, when added to the cost of raising the girl, was still less than her anticipated selling price. To most readers such cold calculation and trade in human beings may sound heartless and cruel. Before reaching that conclusion, however, we should keep several things in mind. First, personal freedom for nearly *anyone* in premodern China, male or female, was much less than what we have in today's United States. Second, had the girl not been sold, her life would probably have been one of constant toil just to keep one step ahead of starvation. Training to be a concubine, though rigorous, provided girls with education and a measure of material security. A concubine in a wealthy household might be able to enjoy a quality of life her mother back on the farm could not even imagine. Or she might be beaten to death by a jealous wife. Fate would have been hard to predict.

Corruption Blurs The Lines Of China's Mistress Culture

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China's leader Xi Jinping has made a crackdown on corruption a centerpiece of his administration. He's vowed to root out corruption from the bottom to the top, or to use his expression, to "go after the tigers as well as the flies."

When it comes to corrupt, high-ranking officials, there's a reliable source for tips: scorned mistresses. Some have even taken to shaming their lovers on social media, and the scandals have made international headlines.

**The Mistress Standard**

Young women who are mistresses in China are professionals, and some get a very handsome salary for what they do. According to reporter James Palmer, if high-rolling businessmen and government officials don't have a mistress, they don't get respect.

Reporter James Palmer, who has studied mistress culture in China, says what often begins as a commercial-sexual relationship transitions into what the men see as an emotional one. The women, he says, see it as purely business, but sometimes it takes on emotional meaning for them too.

Palmer says that in some ways this mistress culture is just mirroring traditional Chinese habits, which he says has a history of men having multiple wives. "[But also] when you get powerful men in a patriarchal society, they're going set up women of their own," he says.

**The Mistress Life**

Anthropologist Tiantian Zheng knows first-hand what women go through to become mistresses. She spent two years studying sex workers in China and wrote the book Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Post-Socialist China. To gain their trust, she herself worked as a hostess in brothels. Zheng didn't offer sexual services to clients, but the other hostesses did.

"In the [hostess] world, being a mistress is one step up," Zheng says. "It is a dream ... to be kept as mistresses or to marry the clients, eventually." Zheng says hostesses will do everything from singing romantic songs and lavishing all sorts of attention on the client to achieve an immediate intimacy that keeps them coming back. She says it is very common that the regular clients would propose keeping them as mistresses.

Zheng says that for these women, being a hostess was a way out of the bottom rung of society. And becoming a mistress is a ticket to the top.

"Usually the clients [are] responsible for all of the [mistress'] living expenses, entertainment fees and amenities," she says. "Plus a handsome monthly amount which the woman could put in her own bank account."

Mistresses can make a lot of money, Zheng says. She has encountered mistresses who owned businesses, multiple homes and various investments. But it's still sex work, and these women have to deal with police raids, gangsters, abusive clients and the daily threat of assault.

"These are rural women; they [come] from the countryside to the city looking for jobs because of the intolerable poverty in the rural areas," she says. "That [poverty] was engendered by decades of biased government policies against rural people."

Zheng warns that it's easy to think of the hostess and mistress culture in pure black-and-white terms. She says it is somewhere between the two; not pure empowerment, and not pure victimization or exploitation.

**The Public Image**

Public scandals involving mistresses have made for bad press, and reporter Palmer says some in power are trying to portray mistress culture as a cause of corruption, rather than a symptom.

"The government has pinned its image on being anti-corruption, and anti-corruption is linked to the idea of cracking down on vice, cracking down on drinking and gambling and sex work," he says. "And the government tries quite hard to push the idea that the mistresses cause the corruption, rather than that the corruption causes the mistresses."

Palmer says that view hasn't quite taken hold, however, and that the public does appear to understand that it is a distraction and that the officials are the ones who are powering the mistress economy in the first place.

Unlike the pre-Communist era, when affairs were private matters, today’s dirty laundry is often aired in the online world. For example, Da Beini, the “richest mistress in Shanghai,” 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, a white Lexus sedan and many other items that many assume were gifts from her benefactor.

“First wives” are fighting back. The mistress boom is contributing to a surge in divorces – and fierce battles over property when relationships collapse. China’s divorce rate now hovers at about 20%, a fivefold increase since the nation began economic reforms more than three decades ago.