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W *The Other* Women

Mistress culture is rampant in Hong Kong, yet mention of its existence is still considered taboo. Ysabelle Cheung explores this abstract, social phenomenon that has carved out a place for itself in the modern institution of relationships. Additional reporting by Natasha Chan and Henry Tsang



Vertiginous high heels, a dash of red smeared on the collar, an unknown number on the caller ID – the mistress, or the other woman, is often more a symbol than a reality in society’s ideological views of sex and all its titillating infidelities. But those who have spent some time in Hong Kong’s skin, whether in the upper echelons of society or in chance, hush-hush conversations at cha chaan tengs, will be aware of the city’s arrangements of kept women. It’s strange then, that in the very city where you can walk into Wan Chai and slap down money for a night of pleasure, talking about mistress culture and its financial contracts is still considered taboo. But what’s at the root of this culture – and how did it develop into a full-blown phenomenon?

The price of milk

There’s an old adage, ‘why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?’ The concept isn’t new – why force a marriage when you can have a bit on the side? – but in Hong Kong, the phrase denotes a fluid boundary, rife with vague definitions and moral grey areas. Yinai, the slang term for women who embark on these relationships (usually with a married, older man), translates roughly as ‘second

milk’ in Cantonese, but of course, these women aren’t ‘free’. There’s an arrangement. The contract is often verbal: in return for their physical and emotional affections, sometimes even love, they are rewarded with cold, hard cash, up to hundreds of thousands of dollars every month, as well as receiving lavish gifts, apartments, cars and other material objects. Thus the meaning of ‘free’ in this context, if we are to look at the culture of yinai ▶

(and ‘xiaosan’, another term for mistresses which translates as ‘third person’), relates to the freedom of adultery, which is now its own breeding culture rather than a by-product in the realm of relationships.

There are whispers that every wealthy man in the city has had at least one by his mid-60s, and there’s talk of even third or fourth mistresses in the mix. But still, the stigma of keeping a mistress sticks, even though legally there’s no crime to bring to court (not for the lack of trying – there have been several past cases of overruled propositions relating to mistress and adultery culture). Similarly, being a mistress is something that most women we speak to within such an arrangement treat with the utmost discretion.

This discretion is certainly something Vanessa, a wealthy married Hong Kong businesswoman (indeed, many yinai still continue to work), adheres to. She receives a ‘salary’ of \$150,000 per month from the man who keeps her as his yinai. When we speak, she seeks repeated confirmation that we will not use her real name, profession or any other details that might be traced back to her. “I am not stupid enough to tell everyone about this. Only my PA knows, and now you,” she tells us.

Katie, a former mistress we speak to, is another person who requested her name be changed. She confesses that her family did not know about the arrangement, and her friends just assumed she was in a long-term conventional relationship.

These situations are delicate. As with all mistresses, no matter whether their relationship is rooted in love or a nature more clinical and transactional, Vanessa, Katie and thousands of other women have made (and continue to make) a choice to be involved with a married man for financial compensation.

Richard Burger, author of *Behind the Red Door: Sex in China*, undertook intense surgical research on the prostitution and sex industry in China, and found mistress culture to be intertwined, yet separate, from that world. Because mistresses are not prostitutes, he explains, their lives are infinitely more comfortable, as long as they keep schtum. “They have only one ‘client’ and do not need to seek new ones every day as prostitutes do,” he says. “Prostitutes and escorts, except the highest-paid escorts, live a hard and challenging life, facing constant fear of arrest and worrying about where their next meal will come from. Mistresses usually live a life of relative luxury with their needs met.”

Coming to an arrangement

The combinations and contracts are endless, but there are a few characteristics that define a yinai-lover relationship. Firstly, the financial payouts. Secondly, the man is usually older and married (although there are, of course, cases of male yinai, and homosexual yinai affairs). Thirdly, both parties are fully aware that the married portion of the relationship will not change – the man will not leave his wife – whether out of courtesy, commitment, or the juggernaut force of Hong Kong’s most powerful social initiative: fear of ‘losing face’.

Indeed, this fear is one of the reasons why B, a flight attendant who has received a number of expensive gifts from her lover over the years, including an apartment and a car in her name, says her lover won’t leave his wife. “He said he

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married her for business and he’ll lose so much if he leaves her,” says B. “But he loves only me.”

B met her lover at a fundraising function, when she herself was in a long-term relationship. “After a while, [my lover] told me that he had fallen in love with me and wanted to be with me – I didn’t know if I should have felt happy or sad. But we started having an affair,” she recalls.

Slowly, B’s boyfriend began to recognise changes in his girlfriend, and the accumulation of expensive goods that were piling up in her home. “My boyfriend was furious but he didn’t know who it was,” says B. They broke up, and B is now exclusive to her lover, but not just out of monetary gain. For her, the relationship is firmly rooted in emotional, as well as financial, security.

“I knew he was married from the beginning. I hated myself for a while,” she says. “But although I know it’s cliché, I know that he truly loves me. Even if he loses his feelings for me later on, he will look after me for the rest of my life. He has paid for everything from the beginning until now.” B states that, in return for money and gifts, she offers herself fully, emotionally and sexually, closely aligning her yinai relationship with a conventional one.

Katie, a woman in her mid-30s, cites her main regret in her now-ended 10-year-relationship with her married lover as ‘not asking for more money’. “I thought I was in love. I was too scared to ask for more,” she says. Raised in Hong Kong’s notoriously inadequate public housing units, Katie subsisted on food rations for most of her childhood and dreamt mainly of finding ‘Mr Right’, a man who could make her life comfortable, financially. She met her married lover after graduating from high school – he was her boss at the time – but her contract with him was murky and unstated. Financial compensation was inadequate, the payments infrequent.

“At the beginning, whenever he went on business trips, he would buy me small gifts and was kind,” she says. “Later on, he said he would buy a flat but he never did. But I was in love. And I couldn’t ever think of a future with him. I just had to be unhappy that way.” They parted ways after she asked for more financial support. He refused.

Vanessa’s situation is slightly different, although not uncommon in yinai culture. Raised with a silver spoon in her mouth, she married young into a similarly wealthy family – but she entered into a ‘business arrangement’ with Mr S – who she refuses to call her lover – as a means of protecting herself, should her husband ever leave her. Her tone is transactional when we speak. “There is no love in this. Mr S is fat and ugly, and it is all about the money. I need money from a source other than my husband,” she says. Vanessa met Mr S while attempting to pursue a career for herself – they embarked on a business partnership together. One night on a business trip, after two years of working as platonic colleagues, he came for her. “He said he’d always had the hots for me. I remember crying and hating myself. I remember trying to scrub off the putrid smell of his sweat,” she says. “He came back for me the next evening. And the next.” In return, Mr S offered Vanessa financial security by making her partner in one of his investment companies, from which she draws a \$150,000-a-month salary. “I’ve always been dependent on people and before ‘that’ happened I was given the opportunity to stand on my own two feet. But ambition got the better of me. Now, there’s no turning back.”

Although mistress culture is mired in confidentiality, the affected parties rarely exclude the wife, the children and friends, making the phenomenon possibly Hong Kong’s worst kept secret. “I know my husband has mistresses younger and prettier than me,” says Vanessa, speaking realistically in terms of her marriage and her consequent yinai arrangement.

Even anecdotally, mistress culture seems to be rampant in the city. “I would say three families out of 10 are affected by mistresses,” says a teacher at a local primary school in Wong Tai Sin. “I see so many families torn apart by this culture at my school. One father was caught, and the wife threatened her husband with suicide. She took drugs. Their little boy had to go to school on his own while she now works in a fast food restaurant. But there is no discrimination from other kids or parents that know about these situations. At this point, they are not surprised to hear these stories.”

Although Hong Kong’s mistress culture seems to have materialised out of the ether, with most women meeting their lovers through work, social functions or even through friends (there’s no social structure as with the mistress housing apartments in Shenzhen, or the pattern of pimps picking up university students outside Chinese schools), it is now being validated with its own branch of support groups, ‘dating’ websites and peer-to-peer social debate.

A lonely or new yinai and xiaosan can turn to the active bbs.xiaosan.me, a website slash forum founded in 2010 by xiaosan and frequented by Hong Kong and Mainland women. The site, in keeping with the confidential nature of mistress culture, implements a strict membership policy, requiring a message through a chatroom, several social media accounts and a membership fee paid via Taobao, in order to even post a message. Topics range from ‘my diary’ to ‘emotions’.

“I parted ways with my ex-husband two months ago after discovering he’s a gambler,” says one mistress in her early 20s, in an open thread to all the mistresses on the website. “He took all my money, the bastard! But that wasn’t the end. I found out that I was carrying his baby. The turning point came when my Hong Kong ex-boyfriend came to visit and I started crying and told him everything. He told me to come back to him, he would take care of me even though he has his own family. I was touched. But he seems too tired. He’s 65 and I want a family – what should I do?” Dozens of women respond to these posts, some with advice, and most with stories of their own. It’s a support group for a culture that is now more phenomenon than exception to the rule: just as a young girl might seek advice on what steps to take next with a boyfriend, or a married woman pursue emotional remedy for her marital issues, yinai can now simply log online and find hundreds of others like themselves, negotiating their financial and sexual contracts.

There are also instigating platforms relating to the mistress phenomenon alongside response sites. Lenny Lu, a young, social media savvy Shanghaiese app designer, co-launched Spoil last year, an app that pairs up AI (attractive individuals) with SI (successful individuals). Upon registering, the options for a profile run the gamut from the usual dating choices (height, weight, preference for first date), to more specific, financially flexible options. As a female, if you’re looking for a millionaire, billionaire or trillionaire, all you have to do is scroll to your desired option – and you can decide if you want to meet a married man too. The system works similarly to an auction – the man places his preferred highest bid on his page, the woman either agrees or tries to negotiate a higher price, and the courtship begins. The bid (or price) is for the first date only.

“One factor a girl cares most about is, ‘is this boy serious? Will it be a waste of time?’” explains Lu. “Since the boy’s sincerity is the key factor, why not price it to expedite the process before each party’s passion declines? The advantage for this is to skip time for girls and boys at the beginning and increase the survival rate of a possibly wonderful relationship.” Lu is well aware of the mistress connotations Spoil has, especially since it targets areas with a proliferation of both businessmen and young women – Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau. “If someone really wants to

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find a mistress, and the other one agrees to be his mistress voluntarily, there is almost no legal way to stop them, in reality or on our platform,” he says.

Not all opinions on mistress culture are as black and white as Lu’s statement. Assessment of mistress culture is often divided, whether or not the party airing their views is involved or not. “Some friends who know are happy for me,” says B, “others are worried as they think he is using me and I will end up heartbroken.”

Jeremy Kwong, a Hong Kong manager of BNP Paribas, mentions his own circle of male friends, a lot of whom have yinai on the side. “The mistress always possesses something the wife lacks. If the guy manages to find a mistress who makes him happy and knows exactly where she stands in the relationship, who’s to say it’s wrong?”

Ultimately, entering and committing to a yinai relationship is a matter of choice, perspective and priorities. The three women we spoke to now have divergent thoughts on the way their lives have panned out.

“It’s almost prostitution and it’s sad that women have to resort to these measures to make a good living,” says Vanessa. “Those who think love trumps everything are fools. Money talks. In 10 years’ time, I would have exhausted my looks. Who will want me then? If you are married to someone powerful, you can end up with nothing in the divorce proceedings. That is the scariest thought for me. I am preparing for my future.”

Katie, a woman no longer in a yinai arrangement, reflects on her relationship. “My family wanted me to marry young,” she says, mentioning that even now, few know of her previous situation and are still urging her to find a life-long partner. “But now I know that it’s better for women to have their own careers.”

The sentiments of Vanessa and Katie, however, are altogether different to those held by B – she admits her relationship isn’t perfect, but her arrangement makes her happy. “My mum keeps asking me when I will get married but I told her that marriage is meaningless,” she says. “What is marriage? Just a drawing on a piece of paper? Only love is meaningful and money is important. I am a lucky girl to have found both in one man.” ■

* The names of all the women quoted in this story has been changed at their request

