

8.7 Life in Ming China (1368-1644 AD)

Source: Buckley, P. ed. (1993). *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook, 2nd edition* (NY: Free Press), 215, 221; Andrea, A. and Overfield, J. (2001). *The Human Record, Vol. II, 4th edition* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin), 129.

A. Sample Contract for Purchase of a Concubine

Background: During the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 AD) attitudes toward commerce in China became more positive. By the time of the Ming Dynasty contracts were commonly in use to finalize the sale of a house or cattle, sell a daughter as a concubine, place a son up for adoption, hire workers, and form business partnerships. Examine the sample contract for purchase of a concubine and answer questions 1 – 3.

The undersigned, _____, from _____ village, has agreed to give in marriage his own daughter _____, aged _____ years, to the second party _____, as a concubine, through the mediator, _____. On this date the undersigned has received _____ amount as betrothal payment. He agrees to give his daughter away on the date selected by the second party. He will not dare to cause any difficulties or to exhort more money from the second party. He also guarantees that the girl has not been previously betrothed, and that there is no question as to her origin. Should such questions arise, or should the girl run away, he will be held responsible. Should the girl die of unexpected circumstances, it is her fate and not the responsibility of the second party. This contract is drawn up as evidence of the agreement.

Questions

1. Why did the father and the “second party” sign a contract?
2. What does this contract tell us about the life of women in Ming China?
3. In your opinion, how would use of contracts support increased commerce?

B. Life of a Silk Weaver

Background: This edited excerpt is from an oral history from 14th century China. It is the story of a silk weaver named Yao. Silk weavers were considered highly skilled and led better lives than most workers. The oral history was written down by a scholar named Xu Yikui. Read the excerpt and answer questions 1 – 3.

A. One morning Xu Yikui walked over there and found it to be just a rickety old house. There were four or five looms in a room, arranged in a row from the north to south, and about ten workers, all of whom were laboring with both hands and feet. They looked pale and spiritless.

B. Yao the silk weaver stated that though my job is a humble one, I can earn two hundred cash a day. The master provides me with food and clothes, so I can use my wages to support my parents, wife, and children. We are far from having delicious food, yet neither are we suffering from hunger and cold . . . The material I weave is very beautiful and highly valued by people. Thus the master can easily sell the products and we are able to earn our wages easily.

Questions

1. How does Xu Yikui describe the living and working conditions of the silk weavers?
2. What does Yao the silk weaver say about his life and work?
3. How do you explain the discrepancy in their observations?

C. Wang Daokun’s Biography of Gentleman Wang (c. 1575)

Background: Wang Daokun was a merchant, a scholar, and a government official during the Ming dynasty. His writing provides insight into business practices during this period. Read the excerpt and answer questions 1 – 2. Mr. Wang lives in Shanghai. Being open and confident he has attracted the respect of many capable and prosperous people who compete to attach themselves to him . . . Mr. Wang set up the following guidelines for his associates: do not let anyone who lives in another country control the banking; when lending money; never harass law-abiding people unnecessarily or give them less than they need; charge low interest rates on loans; do not aim at high profit and do not ask for daily interest. These principles led customers to throng to him, even ones from neighboring towns and provinces. Within a short time, Mr. Wang accumulated great wealth.

Questions

1. What is the underlying principle that motivates Mr. Wang in business?
2. In your opinion, would Mr. Wang be a successful businessman in the contemporary capitalist world? Explain.