Premise: One of the possible comparative essays from time period #2 (the classical period – 600 B.C.E. and 600 C.E.) is that of comparative systems of “social inequality”. Specifically – the Mediterranean region (Greece and Rome) - India and China. All the major classical civilizations not only established great social inequalities but also assumed that inequality was inevitable and desirable. Confucianism argued that both elites and commoners should respect and complement each other, but the culture urged deference on social inferiors. Greek philosophers such as Aristotle wrote about the inevitability of slavery, arguing that it was essential to provide the means for the wise elite—the aristocracy—to govern. The Indian caste system, religiously sanctioned in what came to be Hinduism, marked people off in terms of occupations and permissible social contacts. Similar insistence marked gender relationships, with male superiority clearly defined. These systems of inequality—rather different from what most modern people are comfortable with—raise questions about how much attention ordinary men and women should receive for this long period in world history. Can we just note their presence and marked inferiority and leave it at that?

I. In the past few lectures, we have explored the social systems of the classical world, mainly in China, India, and the Mediterranean.

- Each of these classical civilizations had a distinct social system that marked its particular definition of social inequality, and each also had a slightly different version of a patriarchal gender system.

- The social systems of the classical world in general were characterized by a greater acceptance of inequality than we see today and a much different cultural framework for inequality overall.

- Such social systems are an important aspect of our sense of the past.
  - Ordinary people have a historical legacy of their own, and they matter in terms of the legacy of the larger societies in which they existed. Social experiences and structures are relevant to the framework of world history as a whole.
  - Some historian’s might argue that because they were marginalized, ordinary people, perhaps women in particular, should not take up too much of our attention. We will look at arguments for why the inequalities of these civilizations should be more than simply a matter of record.

II. Each of the classical cultural systems provided explanations for why social inequality was both necessary and justified.

- The Greek philosophers argued that slavery was essential for the conduct of society because only with slavery could sufficient production occur to support the upper class.

- Confucius put forth a similar argument. A minority of people in the upper classes (the gentlemen) would be wise and able to govern well; they owed these dispositions to the lower classes.

- Hinduism made the social inequality statement quite directly: different people are in different social layers. Those who act appropriately in the current social layer will earn the possibility of spiritual advancement.
III. None of these systems was designed to justify inequality, but they all did so.

- In contrast to the modern world the classical world, especially the elites of the classical world, clearly saw social inequality as essential.

- Nonetheless, these social systems were not as rigid we might imagine.
  
  - The caste system of India, for example, seemed inflexible, but levels of wealth could vary considerably within a caste. There were also subgroups within castes called jati, and one could move among these with much greater ease than among castes.
  - In the Mediterranean slave system, slavery could involve extremely harsh working conditions, but more slaves were involved in domestic service, tutoring, and even running stores and shops.
  - Confucianism urged a distinction between gentlemen and ordinary people, but it was possible for a bright peasant boy to gain an education and achieve a position in the imperial bureaucracy.
  - None of these systems was as static in practice as it might seem in theory, although mobility among classes was not common.

- With some exceptions, many social groups, although technically unequal, did not have routine daily contact with one another.
  
  - Peasants, for example, were certainly subject to exactions by landlords, but on a day-to-day basis, the landlords were not their employers in the modern sense.
  - Indian historians have argued plausibly that the caste system was not characterized by routine interference. If you followed your caste obligations and did not try to assume inappropriate relationships, you might be left with substantial opportunity to observe your own group culture and maintain group contacts.

IV. The gender systems of classical civilizations were patriarchal.

- Many classical societies—particularly China and Greece—depended on quite high rates of female infanticide.

- Just as with the system of social inequality, however, the system of gender inequality must be seen through the lens of the individual civilization. All the classical civilizations were patriarchal, but not all of them were patriarchal in the same way.
  
  - In classical China, where Confucian culture was actively used to describe appropriate family relationships, the family was a mirror of society; thus, the older father in the family was the emperor, and women, as a subordinate group, were to be productive and deferential.
  - In India, Hindu legalists debated the question of whether a woman who lived up to her obligations in this life would advance to being a man in the next life.
  - In classical Greece, upper-class women were confined to the household. Rome was somewhat more lenient; the patriarchal strictures there, at least for a few centuries, were probably the least severe.

- How did women tolerate these distinctive gender signatures?
  
  - Patriarchy tended to isolate small groups of women in separate households, so women didn't have much opportunity to gather in groups and compare notes.
  - Women were themselves victims of the dominant culture. They were told that they were inferior, and many of them internalized this notion.
Individual women could be forceful within the patriarchal system. Ban Zhao, writer of a manual specifying how women should behave in classical China, was herself an educated, upper-class woman.

Patriarchal strictures operated with greatest force in the upper classes. In the lower classes, inequality was less marked because men and women knew that both parties were essential to the economic survival of the family.

Two additional points are crucial to the question of how women survived the system.

- Although women were inferior in the patriarchal system, they were not the outright property of men.
- In all the patriarchal systems, there was a certain possibility of leeway over time.

V. Why do all these different systems of class and gender matter?

- Some scholars have argued that different versions of patriarchy could produce different male behavior.
- The importance of different social systems is even more obvious in the area of technology.
  - The technological levels of classical China and the classical Mediterranean differed considerably. The Mediterranean was known for its civil engineering and construction, while China excelled in practical technological innovations in the area of production.
  - These differences may be explained, in part, by differences in government or cultures, but the most obvious explanation is that if the Chinese wanted to improve productivity, their most obvious recourse was to invent a new technological device. When landowners in the Mediterranean wanted to improve productivity, their most obvious recourse was to acquire more slaves.
  - The social system helps explain different production arrangements, different technological experiences, and, as we will see in the next lecture, different foreign policies.
- It is certainly likely that the classical Chinese civilization faced the greatest degree of recurring social protest; the civilization that probably faced the least was classical India.
  - Classical China nested social inequality in a Confucian culture that insisted that hierarchy had to be leavened by reciprocal benefits. The system of inequality, combined with the cultural system, thus produced situations of unrest, in which the peasants thought their actions were justified by the value system.
  - Classical India reinforced the caste system with religious rewards and sanctions. Because social groups were kept partially separate in the caste system, they did not interact as directly as landlords and peasants might in China.
- Social cultural systems also matter in terms of the attachments ordinary people developed to their societies and social order.

VI. The legacy of the classical social systems was both specific and general.

- India still grapples with remnants of the caste system, even though it has been outlawed for more than half a century. Elements of Confucian social thinking still mark the Chinese experience. Slavery systems are officially gone, but the influence of classical thinking about slavery certainly marked history. Some of the assumptions involved in patriarchy, although now eroding, continue to be influential as well.
- The larger legacy that we continue to contend with is the extent to which inequality was assumed and deeply embedded in economic systems, access to literacy, and political rights.