

Mui Tsai Issue as the Embodiment of Innate Ambivalence in Colonial Hong Kong

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“Mui tsai” refers to young girls who are sold to, and brought up in better-off families and serve as family bondservants until they get married. This practice prevailed in 19th-century China and continued in Hong Kong well into the 1930s. As the British Empire primarily saw Hong Kong as an entrepot serving for economic ends, the Hong Kong government consciously refrained from intervening in Chinese affairs or bothering with social projects. Nevertheless, the idealized principle did not save Hong Kong from a destined dilemma, since a piece of the colony inherently bore the paradox between poverty and wealth, between Chinese traditions and European cultural values, as well as between the imperialist pursuit of self-interest and the universal advocate for freedom and equality.

In this context, the colonialism in Hong Kong was far more complicated than onefold oppression, exploitation, or indifference. As shown in the case of the mui tsai problem, the Hong Kong government had to deal with the outcries from multiple groups including the local poor, Chinese elites, colonial officials with various opinions, feminist activists both in Hong Kong and Britain, and critics from other Western countries (especially the US.) Therefore, the lengthy negotiation on the mui tsai issue since the late 19th century showed how the Hong Kong government was confronted with mixing pressures from the local, British, and global contexts, which reflected the irreconcilable ambivalence innate in colonial Hong Kong.

As the majority of female children who were sold to the better-off families as domestic servants were from poor households, the mui tsai issue primarily reflected the confrontation between colonial Hong Kong and the local lower class. According to Miners, since “the mass of Chinese...in the colony of Hong Kong lived in conditions of grinding poverty and were always liable to be brought to the brinks of starvation by floods, drought, or pestilence,” (Miners 464). Selling daughters to the wealthy could not only reduce the poor parents’ economic pressure, but also secure a better life for their daughters. Sometimes the living standards of a servant in an upper-class household were better than that of families of a lower socio-economic background, which made many lower-class girls consider the mui tsai system as “the very heaven and highroad to fortune.” (Carroll, “A National Custom” 1478). Hence, the popularity of mui tsai mirrored the huge wealth gap and the harsh situation of the poor in colonial Hong Kong, where the rich mercantile class coexisted with peasants,

immigrants, and refugees, together creating the steady demand and supply of domestic servants.

In some way, the mui tsai system functioned as a "charitable institution" that provided the disadvantaged groups, namely the lower-class "surplus female children" and their impoverished parents, with necessary social aids (Yip 311). According to Carroll, in many cases not only were these girls "taught" and "tended" in the wealthy households, but they were also patronized to marry free men when they reached adulthood "A National Custom" 1475). Although not every mui tsai lived such an easy life, the system was indeed one of the few social institutions that contributed to sheltering the vulnerable groups in the 19th-century Hong Kong, which pointed to a vacuum field in the colonial administration. Since "the aim of the occupation" was predominately "for commercial purpose," (Chiu 13) the early Hong Kong government saw little need to provide any social service that did not produce economic profits, thereby largely alienating the disadvantaged groups and preventing them from sharing the prosperity of the entrepot economy. Therefore, without adequate governmental investment to social welfare, the abolition of the mui tsai system caused a growing possibility of infanticide and abandonment. According to Miners, as the regulation of the mui tsai system got increasingly strict since 1929, more wealthy families chose to employ maidservants rather than buy a mui tsai (475). As a result, from 1927 to 1929, the number of children's corpses collected by the Sanitary Department rose from 1185 to 1851 (Miners 475).

In addition to the charitable function, the mui tsai system was also a major institution that absorbed and organized the lower-class girls to exchange their manual labor for daily necessities (but not wages). Since Hong Kong was primarily designed as an entrepot, "industrial development was not under any form of government control nor did it receive any official encouragement" (Chiu 33). Under this background, the lower-class females in 19th-century Hong Kong did not have as many opportunities to be wage laborers in factories as their counterparts did in modern industrial cities like London or Shanghai.

Consequently, girls from poor families were likely to be prostitutes if they were not or could not be a mui tsai. The 1876 census proved this, showing that "five-sixths of the almost 25000 Chinese women in Hong Kong were prostitutes" (Carroll, "A National Custom" 1470). In short, the mui tsai system meant a sense of social and economic security for the lower class in the 19th-century Hong Kong. Thus, the attempts to abolish the system evoked the pre-existing tensions between the colonial government and the poor masses, which reflected the ambivalence embedded in the entrepot nature of the colony, such as that between wealth and poverty, between economic profit and public investment, between the government and the governed.

While many poor families found female children burdensome, local Chinese elites (mostly merchants) regarded keeping mui tsai as a necessary part of their domestic life and a form of charity according to Confucian values. These merchants, due to their intermediary position at "the border of the British and Chinese," (Carroll, *Age of Empires* 59) could, on one hand, intervene with the colonial administration of Hong Kong and on the other hand take the responsibility of defining the Chinese cultural identity. Hence, the Chinese merchants proved to be both essential co-operators and huge obstacles for the colonial government. In this context, the lingering debates and negotiations about the mui tsai problem is indicative of the ambiguous relationship between Hong Kong government and the Chinese elite class, which reflected the administrative and cultural ambivalence rooted in colonial Hong Kong.

The administrative ambivalence referred to the fact that, in spite of the title of the British Crown Colony, the administration of Hong Kong was fundamentally inseparable from cooperation with local Chinese elites. The reason for this governance structure, according to Carroll, traced back to the “colonial ignorance, indifference, and incompetence” between the 1840s and 1860s when “the British had no grand design for Hong Kong” and made little efforts to construct the civil service (*Age of Empires* 60). In this context, the Chinese merchants’ role in the governance of Hong Kong society was especially significant in terms of social care and public security. Take the Tung Wah Hospital as an example; stimulated by the “colonial government’s failure to provide suitable medical facilities for its Chinese subjects,” (Carroll, *Age of Empires* 61) Chinese merchants established this public institution and successfully shaped their image as the savior of the disadvantaged groups. More profoundly, with the rise of the merchants’ reputation, many Chinese who felt insecure about the “unfamiliar British law” even resorted to the hospital’s committee to help with their “civil and commercial disputes” (Carroll, *Age of Empires* 62).

Unofficially legitimizing the merchants as the authority in the public field. The Chinese merchants moved even further when they engaged in regulating the public security. They established the District Watch Force at the point when even Governor Bowring admitted that the police office under the colonial government was “costly, dislocated, and inefficient” (Carroll, *Age of Empires* 63). Consequently, the District Watch Force not only won the hearts of the local Chinese and Western residents but also “attained legal status” in 1891 (Carroll, *Age of Empires* 65). The two institutions for medical care and public security demonstrated how the vacuum in the colonial governance gave the prominent merchants an opportunity to shape themselves as the protector of the Chinese subjects and the helper of the British colonizers. Gradually, their growing power created a dilemma of Hong Kong government: not only did the Chinese elites become an indispensable force to help deal with local matters, but they could even overshadow the authority of the colonial government based on their legalized status or public reputation.

Within this administrative situation, the mui tsai problem became a battleground where the colonial government and the Chinese elites intensely argued and negotiated about who was the ultimate authority over this issue. When Hong Kong Chief Justice John Smale condemned wealthy mainland merchants for bringing the mui tsai custom to Hong Kong, which he saw as “slavery for the purpose of prostitution” and the cause of kidnapping, he explicitly asserted his as well as the British Empire’s legal power to judge this Chinese practice as “violating British and Hong Kong laws” (Carroll, “A National Custom” 1463). Based on this judgment, certain aspects of the merchants’ engagement in Hong Kong was accused as being both immoral and illegal, which undoubtedly offended their image as the savior of the Chinese communities and the guard of local social order, an image that they so hard constructed by investing in public projects like the hospital and the police force. Moreover, the attack on their habitual practice in Hong Kong triggered their “fear that the British would dominate the local administration,” (Chin 137) which threatened the Chinese leaders’ growing desire and ability to manage their own affairs in the colony.

Ironically, since the governance of Hong Kong was, from the very beginning, inseparable with the Chinese elites’ mediation, these Chinese leaders were able to respond to the attack on their engagement by further engaging in the administration of Hong Kong and reemphasizing their authority. Shortly after Smale’s open criticism, a group of Chinese merchants proposed to establish Po Leung Kuk, which aimed to “stamp out the crimes of

kidnapping...and provide relief for prostitutes" (Chin 135). As soon as Governor Hennessy approved this proposal and appreciated the "bona fides of these Chinese gentlemen," the Chinese merchants not only succeeded in distinguishing their custom of keeping mui tsai from crimes like kidnapping and prostitution, but also once again displayed their significance in assisting the government to protect the weak and keep the social order (Carroll, "A National Custom" 1472). The debate reflected how the colonial government and the Chinese elites tended to mitigate but never completely solve their in-between incompatibility through negotiation, compromise, and cooperation. Thus, perpetuating the ambivalence embedded in the administration of Hong Kong.

In addition to the ambivalence of the administrative power, the debates between the government and the Chinese elites, as well as the debates within each side, also exposed their diverse visions about the "Chineseness" of Hong Kong, (Yuen 96) thus, co-creating the cultural pastiche of the colony. While Smale's passion for banning the age-old Chinese custom reflected a kind of colonial concern that tried to reshape Hong Kong into "a model of British good government" and "a living exhibition of European civilization," (Carroll, "A National Custom" 1469) many other officials in the Hong Kong government preferred to "respect Chinese customs" rather than enforce radical reforms (Pedersen 168). This confrontation laid the foundation for the ambiguous cultural identity of the colony. On the one hand, the majority of the population was Chinese and most of their social matters were taken care by the Chinese elites; on the other hand, it was fundamentally under the rule of the British Empire, whose imperial ambitions involved not only the territorial and commercial expansion but also the diffusion of its culture and civilization - which was bound to challenge local Chinese traditional values.

The Chinese elites reacted to these colonial narratives in multiple ways, which further complicated the notion of "Chineseness" in Hong Kong. Most of them attempted to convince the Governor that the mui tsai system was "a respectable Chinese custom that should be allowed to continue," (Carroll, "A National Custom" 1464) since the practice not only rescued the poor girls from starvation or prostitution, but also constituted part of the order of the elites' domestic life. This potentially resonated with the Confucian concepts of benevolence and ritual. Unlike these elites who considered the mui tsai system representative of the ideal Chinese way of thinking and behaving, some Western-educated Chinese like Dr. Yeung Shiu-chuer advocated the banning policy due to a different attitude toward the shaping of "Chineseness" (Smith 99). When Dr. Yeung claimed that the abolition was "in the interest of humanity, the prestige of China," which could help the Chinese "keep pace with the advancement of civilization," (Smith 99) he framed colonial Hong Kong within a Eurocentric hierarchy in which Hong Kong preserved the Chinese identity but should develop its civilization in a modern Western manner. Hence, for these reformist Chinese elites, banning the mui tsai system meant the emancipation of oppressed Chinese women, thus symbolizing the reconstruction of Chineseness in Hong Kong, which was based on the Western values while enhancing the Chinese prestige. As mentioned above, the government and the Chinese elites' various ideas about the mui tsai system derived from their multiple perspectives about what to do and how define the Chineseness of Hong Kong, perspectives which participated in blurring the cultural identity of colonial Hong Kong and further complicating the cultural ambivalence.

Throughout the mui tsai issue, the Hong Kong government not only had to deal with the local lower class and elite class but was also were entangled with multiple British groups

in Hong Kong, ranging from missionaries to feminists to anti-slavery activists. Due to the administrative and cultural ambivalence rooted in colonial Hong Kong, the government did not come up with a clarified decision about the mui tsai system until 1923. The government's ambivalent attitudes, plus the typical Chinese-style custom against Western values, thus inspired local British individuals and organizations to turn Hong Kong into an arena where they could exercise the ideologies and movements that prevailed in the modern Western societies. It was their participation that added more complexity to the ambivalent nature of colonial Hong Kong. Mrs. Haslewood, the wife of a British naval officer in Hong Kong, was one of the most significant participants in the mui tsai issue. According to Hoe, Mrs. Haslewood not only published her "strongly worded" critique of the mui tsai custom in the local press, but also continued her campaign back in England through the medium of famous newspapers like the *Spectator* and *The Times* (Hoe 240). The influence of her voice was more than embarrassing for the Hong Kong government. Under the propagation of critique by Mrs. Haslewood, along with other activists such as Miss Pitt and Mrs. Smale, Hong Kong was no longer a "leased trading post" out of the sight of the "proto-nation," which was built upon and maintained by the precarious balance between the colonial government and the Chinese communities (Pedersen 164). Instead, as Hong Kong became the new focus of feminists and anti-slavery activists. This British colony on the periphery of Far East came to represent the extended battlefield of the soaring human right movements in the late-19th-century Western world.

However, the Hong Kong government was opposed to Mrs. Haslewood's suggestion of abolishing the mui tsai system immediately. As Hong Kong officials explained the issue to London as an "alien culture" and warned of "the dangers of listening to ignorant cranks" both at home and in the colony, it became clear that the growing call for freedom and inequality in Britain was fundamentally contradictory with the essential nature of Hong Kong, since the colony was seized for the economic purpose and run by the elastic cooperation rather than democratic principles (Pedersen 169). Although the pressures from the radical British communities did push the Hong Kong government to pass the Female Domestic Service Ordinance in 1923, the mui tsai problem was yet far from eradication. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the negotiations and confrontations between the colonial government and the British activists complicated the mui tsai issue both in practice and in ideology, thus serving as another proof of the irreconcilable ambivalence rooted in colonial Hong Kong.

When positioning Hong Kong into the global context between the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the mui tsai issue would have more implications. According to Carroll, "with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1870, the colony was becoming a popular destination for European and American tourists," which to some extent rewrote the colonial identity of Hong Kong ("A National Custom" 1478). No longer a monofunctional entrepot, it attracted the worldwide gaze from various perspectives. Hence, not only was Hong Kong known for its exotic, Chinese-style nature and culture, but it also served as a multifaceted representative of the British Empire that displayed the imperial glory, or exposed its shameful stain. Hong Kong's new role as an imperial representative especially drew the attention of those upper-class English women who joined Mrs. Haslewood's campaign. As they particularly emphasized on "the fact that slavery existed in a British Colony when it had been abolished internationally," (Hoe 241) the urgency of banning the mui tsai system was connected to Hong Kong's international image, thereby linking to the worldwide reputation of the British Empire.

Furthermore, since the second half of the 19th century was a unique period in America when anti-slavery movements were of the first importance, the mui tsai practice in colonial Hong Kong appeared to be a potential threat in a broad sense. When American consul general David Bailey pointed out the possibility that "Chinese immigration to America would lead to the same kind of slavery practiced in Hong Kong," (Carroll, "A National Custom" 1483) his concern lay not in Britain's global reputation but in the social and political situation of America. In this way, due to the mui tsai issue, Hong Kong entered the world stage not only as a representative of the British Empire but also an increasingly important node in international relations, which was fundamentally contradictory with its essential identity as a colonial entrepot.

In conclusion, the abolition of mui tsai system was such a long and twisted process that it seemed like an example of incompetent social reforms. However, the significance of this issue, as well as the entire history of colonial Hong Kong, lies exactly in its ambiguity and unsettledness. As can be seen from the manifold debates revolving around the issue, every stance was rooted in a specific political, economic, or cultural landscape, which cannot be reduced to a unified conclusion. Today, many age-old questions embodied in the mui tsai issue, such as those about wealth gap, cultural identity, and democratic rights, continue to trigger intense discussions in Hong Kong. Instead of judging right or wrong, we may learn from the historical ambivalence and unfold the social complexity inherited from the colonial period.

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