With the passing of the Mui Tsai Ordinance in 1932 in Malaya, the practice of employing female child servants within Chinese households quickly fell out of favour. The decline of Mui Tsai (a euphemism for "little sister" in Cantonese), however, was not a straightforward affair for the British Colonial Office, who found themselves embroiled in a delicate tussle between anti-slavery and white feminist lobby groups, the Chinese elite, and the Protestant Church in Hong Kong and Malaya. The moral outrage, as expressed by abolitionists, was that the Colonial Office had turned a blind eye to the Chinese tradition of owning slave girls in its dominion, a custom that was unfitting of western civilisation. Here lay a dilemma for the British Empire: how were the officials to "civilise" the Chinese without demolishing constructed boundaries between themselves as "enlightened masters" and their "backward subjects"? Conversely, in deferring to the Chinese out of respect for their customs, thereby maintaining those boundaries, how would the British Crown uphold its moral ground as the harbinger of civilisation? To quote Ania Loomba, this anxiety over the intrusiveness of colonial intervention highlights a contradiction about Colonialism itself: that "it needs both to "civilise" its others and to fix them into "otherness". As a motive of Britain's self doubt over the colonial enterprise, the protracted process of abolishing Mui Tsai in the crown colonies carried far greater social and political impact than a mere matter of administration. Eviscerated in the process are the assumptions of who and what constituted the categories of coloniser/colonised, as with the often taken for granted ideas of a monolithic and omnipotent British Empire. These emerging doubts could — and in fact did — eventually force the British to reassess the basis of European cultural superiority.

This article briefly revisits some of these tensions as events surrounding the Mui Tsai Commission unfolded in Malaya. Following mounting pressure in Hong Kong to reform bonded servitude, colonial officials dispatched a team to survey local opinions on the Mui Tsai, culminating in the Mui Tsai Commission Report in 1937. More than just providing insight into the bureaucratic process of colonial knowledge production and racial classification, the discordant positions between the Majority and Minority Reports in the Commission's findings paint a picture of competing visions of the British Empire. These polarised positions elucidate yet another episode in the long history of colonialism's unresolved tension between the particularism of imperial exploitation and the universalistic discourse on freedom and social progress.

**Constructing Chinese Domestic Mastery**

On 18 March 1936, colonial secretary J.H. Thomas appointed Sir Willfrid Woods, Edith Picton-Turbervill and C.A. Willis as members of a Mui Tsai Commission to investigate the whole question of mui tsai in Hong Kong and Malaya and of any surviving practices in those territories of transplanting women and children for valuable consideration, whether on marriage or adoption, or in any other circumstances, and to report to the Secretary of State on any legislative or other action which they may consider practicable and desirable in relation to these matters.

Thus began the group’s journey to Hong Kong and Malaya in 1936. In their tour of the colonies, local officials and prominent members of the Chinese community including mercantilist, Lee Kong Chian, were interviewed. The Commission report, spanning over two hundred pages, would be accompanied by six hundred pages of interview transcripts and written responses to a questionnaire. A large proportion of the evidence was dedicated to ascertain if the cultural practice of mui tsai was an entrenched practice among the Chinese, as well as to determine the structural conditions of abuse, if present.

Such ethnographic endeavours have long been regarded as techniques of surveillance that reinforce western constructions of native culture. Edward Said has famously argued that the representations of the “Orient” in European texts, travelogues, interview
transcripts and other writings contributed to the creation of a dichotomy between Europe and its “others”. This dichotomy was central to the creation of European culture as well as the extension of its hegemony over foreign lands. Since the 1860s, a large colonial bureaucracy thus occupied itself with indexing people and their attributes through censuses and ethnographies, recording exchanges, documenting practices and classifying routines. This commitment to empirical observation inadvertently generated and reaffirmed European perceptions of natives, framing indigenous people in what appeared to be characteristic behaviours: racial stereotypes were very much by-products of colonial encounters.

In many colonies, colonisers regarded the position of women within the family and religious practices as indicative of degenerative native culture. Ann Stoler (2002) has demonstrated the management of domestic affairs within colonial households to be an important boundary marker and a symbol/expression of colonial power in Sumatra. Claire Lovelie’s study of bonded servitude in Singapore and Darwin has similarly argued that:

“The symbolic and practical significance of domestic mastery to colonial power meant that in the colonial scheme of things, a good and moral domestic master constituted a good and moral coloniser.”

Thus, the discourse of the corrupting Chinese master not only condemned non-white domestic mastery while elevating white domestic mastery, it discredited the Chinese as capable of colonial mastery. It inferred that while the Chinese had the class power and wealth to employ servants, the way they practised colonial mastery excluded them from coloniser status.

The Chinese were not, of course, a monolithic group, but the construction of “othered Chineseness” was critical in locating the heterogeneous Chinese within hierarchies of race and culture. These knowledge production techniques involved the coding of the Chinese in ways that rendered them increasingly, availability, invisibility and depersonalisation. Thus, the mui tsai were demonstrated to be longstanding symptoms of a cultural sanctioning slavery, the “deficiency” of Chinese culture would warrant swift colonial intervention to protect vulnerable girls.

Yet despite the proclamations of erstwhile Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill in 21 March 1922 that he was “determined to effect the abolition of the system” within a year, the appointment of the Duke of Devonshire as the new Colonial Secretary in 1922 dissolved the efficacy of the Female Domestic Service Ordinance, instituted under the charge of Churchill. Following the vehement objections from Hong Kong and London against mandatory registration of servants, Devonshire put off the registration of domestic servants indefinitely in fear of Chinese reaction. Enthusiasm for the reforming campaign died down and was only revived by feminists in the early 1930s.

This reversal of policy between Churchill and Devonshire was just one of the many well documented debates on the mui tsai issue. By the time the committee of Woods, Wills and Picton-Turbervill had embarked on their journey to the Far East, the issue had already been in circulation for close to two decades. The eventual commission report would come to represent the final, albeit unsuccessful move by the British colonial administration to close off an international cause célèbre that had cost them their moral legitimacy.

While a recount of these events is not possible in this short discussion, it is noteworthy that the discordant positions within the commission report reiterate a conflict between the British imagination of themselves as benign masters and the hidden transcript of imperial exploitation. The next section briefly explores this tension using excerpts of the Majority and Minority Commission Reports as source material.

Internal Debates Within the Commission

The Majority Report of the Commission, signed by Woods and Wills, emphasised that while abuse of girls did happen, they were rare, frequent and usually swiftly dealt with, thereby dispensing with the need for an overhaul of the status quo. The report also argued that while the transactions of girls were occurring at a larger scale than the commission was able to identify, the definition of each case and the need for a committee to determine. While it is clear that her political stance received little political resistance and for inspection and supervision where needed. It was expected that the other Malayan Governments would reach the same decision when they heard before them the draft of the proposed legislation.

Whether Picton-Turbervill’s Minority Report had been directly responsible for the legislative about-turn is difficult to determine. While it is clear that her political connections with prominent politicians helped set an abolitionist agenda, her framing of the mui tsai question as an issue of child protection was equally, if not, more significant. As Suzan Pedersen argues, Picton-Turbervill’s recommendations began a series of challenges which identified age as the key ground for anti-slavery reforms.

Overall, the Minority Report received substantial attention and support because the language of the report appealed to both reformers and officials. However, the government of Hong Kong unanimously rejected the proposals. Even so, the rising tide against the practice had meant that many within the British officialdom were already beginning to dissociate themselves as mui tsai apologists. In September 1937, the newly appointed governor of the Straits Settlements Sir Shenton Thomas surprised many when he decided to support Picton-Turbervill’s Minority Report independently. After garnering the support of Colonial Secretary William Ormsby-Gore, measures were taken to secure the Hong Kong government’s cooperation.

In contrast, there was little resistance to the Minority Report in Malaya and it went largely uncontested. In 1938, the Secretary of Chinese Affairs for Singapore reported that:

“The government of the Straits Settlements, recommended to the Secretary of State for acceptance, subject to variance of detail necessitated by local conditions, the principle embodied in the Minority Report that all girls must be safeguarded who for any reason whatever are transferred when under the age of twelve from their parents to persons other than relatives. It was decided that this could be best done by an amendment of the Children Ordinance and a committee was drafting the necessary legislation at the end of the year. This will provide for notification of the transfer of girls under the age of fourteen and for inspection and supervision where needed. It was expected that the other Malayan Governments would reach the same decision when they heard before them the draft of the proposed legislation.”

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Interestingly, the Majority Report was premised on stereotypes of Chinese as caring masters: Woods and Wills reported how they were “told repeatedly by Europeans an intimate knowledge of Chinese life that the normal Chinese attitude to children is one of affection and often of over-indulgence.” This restated the Colonial Office’s oft used alibi of cultural difference to defer to the Chinese to self regulate the practice.

Despite the Colonial Secretary’s insistence that both reports “have a very great deal in common,” the Minority Report by Picton-Turbervill was, in stark contrast, a strong indictment of the colonial state’s “rhetoric of social progress” would be better suited to child protection was one of many challenges which identified age as the key ground for anti-slavery reforms.

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Susan Pedersen (2001) has suggested that the mui tsai controversy appeared to be significant because it resulted in a “maternalist” system of checks and balances within a colonial setting; home visits by women inspectors to ensure the well-being of girls were instituted in a time when Europe itself was questioning the “policing” of families by the welfare state. Conversely, the extent of such intervention did not immediately translate into an eradication of the practice. Maria Jaschok (1988) and Suzanne Miers’ (1994) discussions of the mui tsai problem in the late 1970s and early 1980s revealed that many had not even heard of mui tsai legislation. At most, the child protection laws provided rudimentary recourse for more fortunate children who managed to escape; it could not, much less abolish, the practice of child servitude. The British could not successfully in an age where the discourse of rights do not enjoy the luxury of criticising a clumsy target like “colonialism”; instead they must manoeuvre the socio-cultural specifics of Asian countries which label the discourse of rights as an inherently “western” construct.

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Conclusion

While the mui tsai problem has largely faded from public consciousness since the post-war years, the domestic service economy is now an entrenched reality for many Asian societies. With women arriving from the neighbouring countries in Indonesia, Philippines and South Asia into the “tiger economies” of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, the new rich in Asia are now masters of domestic workers in their own homes. Ironically, the legacy of colonialism’s ethno-racialisation of its subjects continues to manifest itself through the exploitation of “darker skinned” domestic workers. It remains to be seen if humanitarian groups can be successful in an age where the discourse of rights do not enjoy the luxury of criticising a clumsy target like “colonialism”; instead they must manoeuvre the socio-cultural specifics of Asian countries which label the discourse of rights as an inherently “western” construct.


REFERENCES


ENDNOTES