

THEORIZING THE CHINESE: THE *MUI TSAI* CONTROVERSY AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF TRANSNATIONAL CHINESENESS IN HONG KONG AND BRITISH MALAYA

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Although questions of community identity had been subject to debate within the Chinese world for centuries, the rapid extension of European imperial power during the long nineteenth century invested the question of Chineseness with new significance. Open conflict with the British East India Company and the British government in the early nineteenth century, as well as the subsequent expansion of European missionary activities in China, raised pressing questions about Chinese tradition and the future of the Chinese polity. The rapid growth of the coolie trade – where China assumed a significance position as a supplier of workers within a global imperial labour market – in the late nineteenth century resulted in the development of numerous overseas Chinese communities that reached out beyond Southeast Asia where there were long established Chinese merchant communities and extensive cultural networks. These new enclaves of Chinese labourers met the need for cheap labour that could perform hard and repetitive tasks under difficult conditions.

The proliferation of these overseas Chinese communities, however, posed a challenge for Chinese authorities as they tried to secure the loyalty of these mobile groups to the Chinese nation. During the early twentieth century, different factions that were competing for power in China developed and constructed different narratives of Chineseness, with the hope of winning the

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support of the overseas Chinese in order to build a modern Chinese nation.² By Chineseness, I am referring to the ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ qualities that both Chinese and non-Chinese believed to be the distinctive characteristics of Chinese people. While these discourses on Chineseness varied in the emphasis they placed on ethnicity, language, culture and political allegiance, they nevertheless shared a common transnational vision – their definitions of Chineseness were not restricted by the geographical boundaries of the Chinese nation-state. These different narratives insisted that these overseas Chinese, whether they lived in London or Singapore, would remain Chinese. At the same time, these mobile Chinese established a range of discourses, practices and institutions that connected them to their home villages, regions of origin, and the notion of ‘China’ itself. Shops, secret societies, boarding houses, and political groups (like the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party)) as well as shared dialects, kinship networks, domestic arrangements and foodways provided important bonds that linked these communities outside China to the idea of Chineseness.

While both leaders in China and mobile Chinese were constructing visions of Chineseness, the political authorities that presided over these mobile communities were also trying to theorize the Chinese. This desire to define the essential characteristics of Chineseness was especially strong in the British domains in Southeast Asia where Chinese communities were frequently large and exercised considerable economic and cultural influence. For example, in British Malaya, which consisted of the Strait Settlements, the Federated Malay States (FMS) and the Unfederated Malay States (UMS), the Chinese played a very important role in maintaining and controlling the local economy.³ They were so numerous that a British traveller observed in the 1930s, ‘the real Malays appear to have been engulfed in the rising tide of the Chinese invasion.’⁴ In Hong Kong, another stronghold of British imperial authority in Asia, the majority of the population had always been Chinese. With the turbulent emergence of the Chinese Republic, the Chinese populations of British Malaya and Hong Kong not only increased dramatically but debate over Chineseness was also invested with even greater political significance. Within this context, it is clear that the British felt an urgent need to espouse some form of theory in order to understand and, to a certain degree control, this highly mobile transnational population who were simultaneously British subjects and (in many cases) deeply attached to China and narratives of Chineseness.

² For a brief account of these different narratives see: Prasenjit Duara. ‘Nationalists Among Transnationals: Overseas Chinese and the Idea of China, 1900-1911,’ in *Ungrounded Empire: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini. New York: Routledge, 1997, 36-60.

³ British Malaya was a term used by officials to refer to the region which included modern day Singapore and Malaysia. It did not correspond to any particular colony that bore such name.

⁴ Robert W. Foran. *Malayan Symphony: Being the impressions gathered during a six months’ journey through the Straits Settlements, Federated Malay States, Siam, Sumatra, Java and Bali*. London: Hutchinson & Co., 1935, 30.

In this essay, I shall employ the *mui tsai* controversy that lasted roughly from the late 1880s to the late 1940s to illustrate how the British constructed a transnational discourse of Chineseness that was grounded in understandings of gender and the family. *Mui tsai*, which means ‘little sister’ in Cantonese, was the South China version of a practice in which girls were acquired at a young age by a family to work in their households as servants and would be married off by this same family when they reached adulthood, usually around the age of eighteen.⁵ Although this controversy intersected with broader imperial and international debates over slavery and indenture, it was given a distinctive racial and cultural encoding as ‘Chinese traditions’ and ‘Chinese values’ were often invoked both to defend and to attack the practice. In other words, *mui tsai* was seen as a particular and essentially Chinese practice. Through constructing and refining their knowledge about ‘Chineseness’ in this controversy, the British – both in London and in Southeast Asia – were able to locate this highly mobile group within the hierarchies of race and culture that structured the imperial mind and, in so doing, reaffirm their roles as colonizers.

While simple racialised stereotypes of the Chinese played an important role in this discourse, it should be noted that these British discourses were the product of the collaboration of indigenous ‘experts’ as well. This essay will not only demonstrate that Chinese were active agents in shaping these imperial debates, but it will also stress that British discussions of *mui tsai* as a marker of Chineseness were borne out of encounter between two transnational systems. In Hong Kong and British Malaya, Chinese community leaders who articulated a discourse of Chineseness to reaffirm ties to China encountered agents of the British Empire who were trying to penetrate Southeast and East Asia to protect and build upon on their established interests in the region. Thus, at the heart of this article lies my intention to fashion a transnational history of the *mui tsai* controversy, highlighting the ways in which it produced visions of Chineseness out of the conjuncture between the Chinese diaspora and the British empire. Transnationalism, as James Watson defines it, ‘describes a condition by which people, commodities, and ideas literally cross-transgress-national boundaries and are not identified with a single place of origin.’⁶ Watson’s definition of transnationalism highlights two essential elements of the discourses surrounding *mui tsai* that the remainder of this essay explores: they were not bound by national boundaries and it is difficult to attribute their formation to one locality alone. In this article, the *mui tsai* controversy becomes my vehicle to evaluate the formation of a British transnational narrative on Chineseness that not only utilized knowledge that was gathered as a result of this controversy but also accumulated from the fragmentary archives about China that the British had built over the centuries. Such an approach will not only allow me to go beyond the Manichean division of

⁵ Some of the regional variation of this practice in China included ‘pei nu’ and ‘ya tou’.

⁶ James L. Watson. ‘Introduction: Transnationalism, Localization, and Fast Foods in East Asia,’ in *Golden Arches East: McDonald’s in East Asia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, 11.

metropole and periphery of traditional imperial history, it will also highlight the closely knitted networks which existed among colonies and facilitated the flow of information, labour, and knowledge that sustained the empire.

Despite its long duration, the *mui tsai* controversy has only gained sporadic attention from historians. While the recent work has fruitfully located *mui tsai* in the history of feminism and humanitarian reform, it frequently downplays the importance of the debate in shaping visions of mobile Chinese communities and ignores the transnational nature of this controversy. Susan Pedersen's recent article reconstructs the ways in which the controversy allowed British feminists to influence and shape imperial politics.⁷ Yet she fails to offer a contextualized reading of the broader political context of these debates, especially the controversy's role in calling the motivations of British rule in Hong Kong into question at a time when there was widespread anxiety about Chinese politics in the wake of the Chinese Revolution and the emergence of the Republic. Based on oral accounts, Maria Jaschok's *Concubines and Bondservants: The Social History of a Chinese Custom* begins to restore the voices of the *mui tsai* to the historical record. While I agree with her argument that these *mui tsai* were not perpetual victims and demonstrated great strength in the face of adversity as they struggled to improve their own conditions, I do not think that becoming concubines of wealthy men was the ultimate path for *mui tsai* to escape their oppression.⁸

Historians of Hong Kong have also explored the controversy. However, with the exception of Norman Miners, who produces a rich account of the controversy based on extensive British sources,⁹ most historians of Hong Kong regard the *mui tsai* controversy as a moment in the construction of the colonial modern when Chinese tradition was challenged and oppressed women were liberated.¹⁰ The incident is evaluated as a milestone in the women's

⁷ Susan Pedersen. "The Maternalist Moment in British Colonial Policy: The Controversy over 'Child Slavery' in Hong Kong, 1917-1941." *Past and Present* 171 (May 2001): 201.

⁸ Maria Jaschok, *Concubines and Bondservants: The Social History of a Chinese Custom*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1988, 113.

⁹ See Norman Miners. "The Abolition of the *Mui tsai* System, 1917 to 1924" and "The Abolition of the *Mui tsai* System, 1925-1941," in *Hong Kong Under Imperial Rule, 1912-1941*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1987, chapters 8 and 9.

¹⁰ Angelina Chin identifies the *mui tsai* with prostitutes as two identities of lower class migrant women and argues that their identities were "invented" by the colonial authority for the sake of its governance. See Angelina Chin. "The Management of Women's Bodies: Regulating *Mui tsai* and Prostitutes in Hong Kong under Colonial Rule 1841-1935." *E-Journal on Hong Kong Cultural and Social Studies*, issue 1, 2001; Pik-Wan Wong views the controversy as the formation of a colonial modernity headed by the 'progressive' Chinese elite who worked with European women to save the *mui tsai* who were both gender and class victims. See: Pik-Wan Wong. *Negotiating Gender: the Women's Movement for Legal Reform in Colonial Hong Kong*. (University of California, Los Angeles, Ph. D thesis, 2000); Hon-Ming Yip argues that *mui tsai* were active cultural agents who reshaped tradition, see: Hon-Ming Yip. "Women and Cultural Tradition in Hong Kong," in *Engendering Hong Kong Society: A Gender Perspective of Women's Status*, ed. Fanny M. Cheung, 307-340. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1997; Smith highlights the role "moral and enlightened" Chinese Christians played in the movement to eradicate the practice, see Carl T.

movement in Hong Kong while the Empire often serves as a backdrop. Most importantly, all of these scholars use the label “slavery” without critically reflecting on the applicability or limitations of this label at all. Against this historiography, here I use the *mui tsai* controversy to explore how imperial knowledge about cultural difference was constructed and transmitted and how such processes empowered different imperial actors to put forth their own visions of empire. The complexity of this controversy will also demonstrate the interdependency between the various communities within the imperial system.

Transnationality and the *mui tsai* controversy

When, after returning from a brief sojourn in Hong Kong, Colonel John Ward focused the British Parliament’s attention on the issue of *mui tsai* in 1917, he had no idea that the issue would remain so prominent in imperial politics over the following decades and that the ensuing debates would reshape British understandings of their position in Southeast Asia. In fact, since the late nineteenth century, the Colonial Office had been concerned with the question of *mui tsai*. At that time, it instructed the Hong Kong government to conduct several enquiries to assess whether, as some European residents of the colony claimed, the practice amounted to slavery. These enquiries resulted in an amendment of the legislation regarding the protection of women and girls in Hong Kong and in the wake of this rationalization of legislation the Colonial Office was satisfied.¹¹

But, three decades later, Colonel Ward’s enquiry was to have far greater consequences, largely because it was noticed by activist groups in Britain. Their continuous campaign to pressure the Colonial Office and raise public awareness in Britain were some of the major forces that led to the passing of *mui tsai* ordinances in Hong Kong in 1923 and 1928, which were designed to eradicate the practice. The metropolitan uproar about *mui tsai* reached its zenith when Commander Hughe and Mrs. Haslewood published their book, *Child Slavery in Hong Kong: The Mui tsai System* in 1930. Hughe was a retired Lieutenant Commander who was stationed in Hong Kong in the early 1920s. In their accounts, *mui tsai* was represented as being synonymous with slavery. Given Britain’s long-standing official opposition to slavery and the slave trade, the Colonial Office and the Hong Kong government were thus placed under enormous pressure to end the practice immediately.

As *mui tsai* moved to the centre of British representations of their Hong Kong colony, British reformers also learnt that the practice could also be located in several areas in British Malaya. This discovery resulted in the

Smith. “The Chinese Church, Labor and Elites and the *Mui tsai* Question in the 1920’s.” *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 21, (1981): 91-113.

¹¹ Norman Miners. ‘The Attempts to Abolish the *Mui tsai* System in Hong Kong, 1917-1941,’ in *Hong Kong: A Reader in Social History*, ed. David Faure. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2003, 466-467.

formation of a *Mui tsai* Commission in 1936. Consisting of two former colonial officers and a MP who was also a leading female activist, this commission interviewed numerous witnesses, among them the Haslewoods, and travelled to the colonies to meet with informants. Questionnaires were distributed in the colonies prior to the arrival of the commission and residents were encouraged to give oral testimony in front of the committee. Despite this extensive and thorough preparation, the members were not able to offer a unified and coherent conclusion about the status of *mui tsai*. In the end, Miss Picton-Tubervill, the female member split with the committee and produced a minority report in which she strongly advocated an all-embracing scheme of children protection. This scheme included the registration of all forms of adoption, an administrative measure that she believed should remain open indefinitely.¹²

The rest of the committee, on the other hand, simply concluded in their majority report that it would be 'a long and tedious business' to abolish the *mui tsai* system.¹³ The publishing of this report became the lynchpin of the controversy as it identified the practice of *mui tsai* as a transnational phenomenon central to Chinese life in Hong Kong and British Malaya. In highlighting the deeply rooted nature of *mui tsai* within these transnational Chinese cultural formations, the majority report circumscribed imperial responses to *mui tsai* and in its wake a number of amendments were made in British Malaya and Hong Kong to existing *mui tsai* and child protection ordinances. The outbreak of World War II, however, essentially put an end to the controversy. After the war, when the last girl on the *mui tsai* register reached the age of eighteen, the controversy theoretically and officially ended.

This brief account suggests that the *mui tsai* controversy is best analysed through a transnational frame. As a practice that was threaded through the cultural formations of the Chinese diaspora in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia and as a discursive object that concerned reformers, politicians and community leaders in a variety of sites, it is simply impossible to pinpoint one single nation in which we may ground any narrative of the controversy. Antoinette Burton argues that the nation 'has no originary moments, no fixity outside of the various discourses of which it is an effect.'¹⁴ This observation is very suggestive for approaching the history of the debates over *mui tsai*, for this controversy was central in the simultaneous projection of both Britishness and Chineseness from a range of disparate sites. As the Straits Settlements' Acting Secretary of Chinese Affairs (SCA) contended

much of the criticism of the *mui tsai* system comes from a misunderstanding of it, from ignorance of the appalling conditions in

¹² Great Britain Commission. *Mui tsai in Hong Kong and Malaya: report of commission*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1937, 248.

¹³ Ibid, 245.

¹⁴ Antoinette Burton. 'Introduction: on the Inadequacy and the Indispensability of the Nation,' in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 5.

which the daughters of the very poor live in China, and from the high sentimental value that most Englishmen and Englishwomen place on the word 'Home'.¹⁵

Although elements of the Chinese elite were a major force in the campaign to eradicate the system, the Acting SCA's comments highlighted the fact that it was due to the effort of the British activists that the practice of *mui tsai* received so much international attention. As such, grounding the controversy within the boundary of the Chinese nation will leave out many essential elements that sustained the debate over *mui tsai*. On the other hand, it would be equally problematic to evaluate the debate only within the locality of Hong Kong or British Malaya. While it was recognized by the Colonial Office that Hong Kong and British Malaya were two very different dominions and the Chinese population in Hong Kong was more homogenous than that in British Malaya, the public at that time tended to view the two colonies on a par.¹⁶ As one Colonial Office official stated in an internal minute:

in the public eye in this country [Britain] at any rate, there will be a tendency to ignore the difference of local circumstance to contrast the policy of one colony with that of the other.¹⁷

For reform-minded sectors of the British public, *mui tsai* represented one of the evils the Empire had to deal with in their holdings east of the Suez.

Another reason why it is not appropriate to study the *mui tsai* controversy within the framework of the nation-state is because the practice developed within Southeast Asia as a result of Chinese migration into the region. In the wake of the report of the *Mui tsai* Commission, the Colonial Office clearly stated that:

the practice [*mui tsai*] has spread to Malaya under the influence of the Chinese immigrants who are numerically and economically an important factor in the States [of British Malaya].¹⁸

During a meeting with representatives of the Colonial Office, Sir George Maxwell, a former colonial official in British Malaya who served on the League of Nations' Slavery Committee, argued that the practice was 'indigenous' to Hong Kong while it was 'exotic' in Malaya.¹⁹ He went on and suggested that the *Mui tsai* Commission should extend its investigation to Canton since he believed 'it is from Canton that the main stream of *Mui tsai*

¹⁵ Extract from Legislative Council Proceeding, 'Mui tsai Bill', January 26th 1932, CO 273/582/8.

¹⁶ Minute, March 30th 1932, CO 129/539/3.

¹⁷ Minute, November 17th 1937, CO 825/22/10.

¹⁸ Report on Commission of *Mui tsai*, 1937, CO 825/23/3.

¹⁹ Report on Meeting with Sir George Maxwell, March 31 1936, CO 825/21/2.

[was] introduced into the colony.’²⁰ Although Sir Maxwell’s contention of the indigenoussness of the practice in Hong Kong was doubtful, his statements clearly reflected the perception that *mui tsai* was a transnational practice that connected various Chinese populations. If the British authority wanted to develop a practical solution, they would have to consider the situation of *mui tsai* in several localities. In this case, not only the strong link between Hong Kong and Malaya was recognized, but China was also identified as part of this network. Colonial officials in British Malaya shared Sir Maxwell’s contention. When it was known that the government of Canton passed legislations to regulate the problem of *mui tsai*, colonial officials in Malaya were optimistic that the *mui tsai* problem they dealt with locally would improve as these new regulations would ‘gradually have an educative influence on the Chinese who emigrate to Malaya.’²¹

***Mui tsai* and the question of Chineseness**

This belief that the regulation of *mui tsai* in Canton would ultimately transform *mui tsai* in Malaya underscores the centrality of knowledge production and dissemination within these imperial debates. As Bernard Cohn points out, the process of colonization was more than just the conquest of physical space. It was also the conquest of an epistemological space which the colonizers were not familiar with.²² In effect, colonization was a conquest of knowledge where the colonizers strove to assemble and order a coherent body of knowledge about the language, land, social practices and mentalities of the colonized. Through this process of making what previously unknown known, colonizers constituted, projected and protected their authority. The *mui tsai* controversy, I argue, allowed the British to develop and consolidate knowledge about the ‘hidden’ space of the Chinese family in particular and more broadly what they believed to be the ‘Chinese character.’

It should be noted, however, that the resulting visions of Chineseness were extremely flexible and were capable of supporting arguments both for and against the abolition of the practice. At times, this narrative on Chineseness was even extended to make sense of the workings of the Republican Chinese government. Here I want to discuss the approaches the British employed to collect information about the practice of *mui tsai* and the kind of knowledge that was created from these processes.

Although *mui tsai* was a legally accepted category in Chinese society, for the British it was a slippery concept that eluded the social categories or forms of labour that the British were familiar with at home or elsewhere in the empire. The girls were neither slaves nor domestic servants. *Mui tsai* was

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Acting Secretary of Chinese Affairs, Federated Malay State, quote by Governor Clementi of the Strait Settlements, Clementi to Colonial Office, September 17 1930, CO 273/564/6.

²² Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, 4.

also not an inherited social status nor was it was a status that would be maintained in perpetuity.

Moreover, a particular concern of British colonial officials and social reformers was that these young women were sexually vulnerable because of their age and gender. Both British reformers and the colonial state in Hong Kong often portrayed the girls as naïve and isolated and, as a result, suggested that they would easily be coerced or lured into prostitution. In one of their official dispatches, the Hong Kong government argued that

mui tsai are very largely children who have not reached the years of discretion and need to be protected from the clutches of procurers whose business is to entice inexperienced *mui tsai* away to be trained as prostitutes and ultimately sold into prostitution.²³

This meant that any attempts to ‘rescue’ these young women had to be carefully planned, as the colonial government believed that *mui tsai* would eventually become prostitutes if the practice was simply abolished or if the girls were simply liberated without proper guidance. It was these concerns that drove the Hong Kong government to establish mechanisms to police this practice. In 1923 all *mui tsai* were required to be registered with the government and they became the wards of the SCA. There were regular government inspections to check on the conditions of these registered *mui tsai*. The treatment of *mui tsai* was carefully regulated and any change in their status, be that reaching the age of eighteen, marriage, or death, had to be reported to the SCA. If the employers failed to report these changes, they would be prosecuted and fined. There were nine conditions under which employer of a *mui tsai* could be charged. These were: ill-treatment of a *mui tsai*, keeping an unregistered *mui tsai*, bringing an unregistered *mui tsai* into the colony, failing to report the disappearance of a *mui tsai*, failing to report the intended removal from the colony of a *mui tsai*, failing to report change of address, failing to report the intended marriage of a *mui tsai*, and failing to pay wages.²⁴ These provisions reveal that the colonial state in Hong Kong was not only concerned with protecting *mui tsai* themselves but also protecting the state’s ability to police this practice.

As Cohn points out, the British colonial knowledge depended on a number of ‘investigative modalities’ in order to collect facts in India.²⁵ The type of approach that was applied in the *mui tsai* controversy, I believe, was similar to what he calls ‘surveillance modality.’ It was originally developed to define those who ‘wander[ed] beyond the boundaries of settled civil society’ and ‘beyond civil bounds.’²⁶ But in colonial societies, the knowledge that the

²³ Hong Kong Government to Colonial Office, March 20 1929. CO 129/453.

²⁴ *Prosecutions in Hong Kong concerning Mui tsai*, July 7 1936, CO 825/21/1.

²⁵ Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, 5-11. Cohn identifies these as the historiographic, observational/travel, survey, enumerative, museological and surveillance modalities.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

imperial authority possessed was not simply the product of the ruler's ideologies, but rather was actively created in various sites, through a range of social relationships, and through a variety of institutions. Tony Ballantyne has suggested that it is important for historians to identify how colonial knowledge was produced out of these structures and to create an 'architecture of empire', establishing the 'fundamental structures [of cross-cultural contact], the levels at which knowledge was created, consumed, and transmitted.' Ballantyne argues that at the bottom of this 'architecture' of imperial knowledge systems was the development of 'local knowledges' that depended on the colonial state's ability to cultivate 'local informants' and access a wide range of specific and localized knowledge traditions.²⁷

While information collected from *mui tsai* inspections and register can be seen as an important element of the 'architecture' of British colonial knowledge in the Chinese world, British authorities actively sought out other sources of knowledge, especially those that they believed to be 'authoritative' and 'authentic'. Just as members of the East India Company recruited *pandits* to produce and translate Indian 'traditions', learned members of the Chinese communities in Hong Kong and Malaya were consulted as to what was 'the Chinese tradition' on adoption and slavery. In Hong Kong, the District Watch Committee (DWC) was a body of eminent Chinese men which the colonial government regularly consulted regarding affairs related to Chinese customs, including *mui tsai*. Colonial authorities in Hong Kong described the DWC as

[an] experience and erudite body; every member is prominent and active commercially and socially, in the Chinese community, and two members are solicitors and one a barrister, all three qualified in England.²⁸

This description of the DWC underscores that authority of this body of local informants rested not only on their identity as being prominent members of the Chinese society, but also that their professional qualifications were recognized in Britain strengthened their position as reliable and moral sources of insight into the Chinese world. This meant the DWC had particular authority within the 'architecture' of colonial knowledge in Hong Kong and, as a result, their knowledge of *mui tsai* had particular legitimacy. When asked whether *mui tsai* was slavery in disguise because money changed hands when a girl was transferred, the DWC pointed out

[b]y Chinese custom, many of the major events in a person's life are accompanied by the passing of some financial or other material consideration (betrothal presents, for example, which are sometimes

²⁷ Tony Ballantyne. 'Empire, Knowledge, and Culture: From Proto-Globalizations to Modern Globalization,' in *Globalization in World History*, ed. A. G. Hopkins, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002, 131.

²⁸ Hong Kong government to Colonial Office, May 5 1932, CO 129/539/4.

given in cash) and that the giving of ‘ginger and vinegar money’ to the parents of a girl who is being adopted does not approximate to buying and selling her.²⁹

Through translating ‘Chinese traditions’ for the British, this group of local informants helped the latter to understand a custom that was not readily comprehensible with European social formations. But as we shall see later in this essay, this emphasis on the role of money in Chinese daily life would foster the British imagination of the Chinese character as materialistic, money-focused and immoral.

The other crucial source of information in the imperial debate over *mui tsai* were British ‘China hands’. Some of these ‘China hands’ were genuinely devoted to the study of Sinology and they spent a significant portion of their time in educating themselves about Chinese culture and language while serving in China and colonial governments in Hong Kong and Malaya. The opinions of Dr. E. J. Eitel, for example, on Chinese social practices were a prominent element in the long sweep of British debates over *mui tsai*. Eitel served in the Hong Kong government in the late nineteenth century and he developed a significant reputation as an authority on language, race, custom and history in the Chinese world.³⁰ Eitel’s *Europe in China* (1885) was a tremendously influential vision of the development of Hong Kong and remains one of the best known works on the early history of Hong Kong.³¹ Eitel’s Hong Kong experience and his reputation as an expert on China invested his views on *mui tsai* with particular importance. In an 1880 report on *mui tsai*, Eitel framed the contemporary practice within a broad historical framework, arguing that ‘the custom of purchasing young girls for the performance of the lighter domestic duties became the general practice of all well-to-do families since time immemorial.’³² He ended his report by arguing that the practice reflected the semi-developed state of Chinese culture, because the Chinese civilization was not as advanced as that of Europe, the practice of *mui tsai* ‘has its legitimation as the best possible form of social development under the circumstances.’³³

Missionaries, another group that claimed close knowledge of Chinese society, were also prominent in these debates. In the early twentieth century, British missionaries and mission societies published large amounts of literature that focused on the ‘barbaric’ treatment of women and children in China and used this gendered vision of Chinese society to invest missionary work amongst Chinese people with greater urgency. These texts presented maltreatment of children and women as a prominent and defining

²⁹ Minutes, 1932, CO 129/539/4.

³⁰ Eitel’s works included: *Buddhism: its historical, theoretical and popular aspects. In three lectures*, London: 1873; *A Chinese dictionary in the Cantonese dialect*, Hong Kong, 1877; *Feng-shui: or, The rudiments of natural science in China*, London, 1873; *Three lectures on Buddhism*, Hong Kong, 1871.

³¹ E. J. Eitel, *Europe in China The history of Hongkong from the beginning to the year 1882*, London, 1895.

³² E. J. Eitel, ‘Report on Slavery,’ *Hong Kong Government Gazette*, February 4th, 1880, 130.

³³ *Ibid*, 133.

characteristic of Chineseness. One missionary writing in the 1920s, for example, declared that ‘the worship of ancestors..provides the heathen [Chinese] parent with both a right and a motive to slay his female children, or alternatively to sell them into slavery.’³⁴

Before leaving for Hong Kong and British Malaya in 1936, the *Mui tsai* Commission interviewed one Mrs. Kirke who had been carrying out missionary work in Yunnan, a region in Southwestern China. When asked how the Chinese treated children, Mrs. Kirke, who claimed to ‘know the Chinese’, said that the Chinese valued the opportunity to make more money over the welfare of children and that they only loved their own blood. Thus affluent Chinese showed no mercy towards ‘slaves’ that they bought, which they viewed as their own property and were treated like chattels.³⁵ Although Kirke only stayed in Hong Kong for a brief period of six weeks, when she was asked about the condition of *mui tsai* in Hong Kong, she argued that a conviction of cruelty to a *mui tsai* carried no shame on the island. She also suggested that inspection by a lady would not improve the conditions of the girls as ‘the people [Chinese] are so secretive’ and there was no way the inspector could ‘get the better of the Chinese.’³⁶ Even Sir Woods, chairman of the *Mui tsai* Commission, acknowledged before leaving for the colonies that he was told by

“someone who is interested more particularly in the question of prostitution in the East” that the system of *mui tsai* was “a means of obtaining concubines for their [Chinese families’] sons.”³⁷

That such statements were produced by the *Mui tsai* Commission suggests that this official investigation not only solicited new information and knowledge about the Chinese domestic sphere but that it also prompted the reaffirmation of long standing Orientalist arguments about Chineseness. Thus it presented a vision of *mui tsai* as reflecting the patriarchal, materialistic, and highly sexualized nature of Chinese society. This governmental assessment of *mui tsai* was a moment when various forms of Orientalist knowledge about ‘China’ – whether produced by governmental investigation, Chinese ‘informants’, ‘China hands’ or missionaries – were solicited and compiled. Even though the resulting visions of the social function and moral status of *mui tsai* varied (with, for example, the views of the DWC diverging greatly from that of missionaries), they shared a common insistence that this practice was fundamentally and essential *Chinese*.

This view was constantly reiterated by colonial officials stationed in both Hong Kong and Malaya. Their official dispatches to the Colonial Office on

³⁴ Charles H. Coates. *The Red Theology in the Far East*. London: Chas J. Thynne & Jarvis, Ltd., 1926, 149.

³⁵ Verbatim Report of the Second session of the *Mui tsai* Commission at the Colonial Office, April 3 1936, CO 825/21/2.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

mui tsai were filled with comments on what they believed to be ‘typically Chinese’. Colonial officials used the Chineseness of *mui tsai* in a variety of ways, from using it to explain why the practice should be abolished or, conversely, why it needed to be ‘tolerated’. This argument also proved a useful shield against charges of inaction from activists at home. In response to the charges of inaction made by Miss Picton-Tubervill, an official in the Colonial Office pointed out in an internal memo that if Picton-Tubervill wanted the eradication of the practice, she should first ‘ally herself with some bootleggers in the best traditions of prohibition.’³⁸

The SCAs in Malaya and Hong Kong were crucial sources of knowledge on the Chinese within the empire, but were also painfully aware of the political stakes of intervening in the Chinese domestic realm. While the Malayan SCA lamented that the Chinese possessed a ‘curious psychology,’ the Hong Kong SCA argued that the Chinese were bounded by tradition and, given this, they did not question the existence of the practice of *mui tsai*.³⁹ It was custom and for that reason alone, it was enough for them to insist that British should not interfere with the practice.⁴⁰ In a similar vein, Sir Clementi, who was a China-hand and served as Governor of both Hong Kong and Malaya amidst this controversy, used his experience in handling the Chinese to argue that *mui tsai* might not be as serious a problem as some British activists had portrayed. Since money was central in any kind of marital arrangement, he argued that ‘one might as well call Chinese wives, concubines and daughters “slaves”’.⁴¹ In the same dispatch, he went on and pointed out in a causal manner that ‘the Chinese do not regard the *mui tsai* system as cruel or morally wrong,’ and if house-to-house inspection was carried out as suggested by some British activists, they would feel violated and resentful of the intrusion into their homes.⁴² It would be very difficult to trace the origins of this defence of the colonial management of Chinese communities and to what extent, if any, it was the result of personal contacts these officials had with the local Chinese.

Ultimately what is important about these arguments is not their authenticity but rather that this body of knowledge on ‘Chineseness’ was seen as of great value to the empire. These debates over the connection between *mui tsai* and Chinese were produced from a variety of sites and circulated between various colonies and the metropole. In this context, the notion of ‘Chineseness’, of the particularity of Chinese culture and identity, became an answer not only to the question of the nature of *mui tsai*, but more broadly to all sorts of questions the British encountered in dealing with their Chinese throughout the empire.

³⁸ Cowell, Minute, 1937, CO 825/22/8.

³⁹ Verbatim Report of the Forth session of the *Mui tsai* Commission at the Colonial Office, April 14 1936, CO 825/21/2.

⁴⁰ Hong Kong

⁴¹ Clementi to Secretary of Colonial Office, February 23 1929, CO 129/514/2.

⁴² Ibid.

In addition to being epitomized as a phenomenon that reflected the ‘Chinese character’, *mui tsai* also became interwoven into British representations of the Chinese Republican government from 1911. Legislation governing *mui tsai* was not only passed in Hong Kong and Malaya, but also in several provinces in China, including Canton (the province closest to Hong Kong). When the Hong Kong governor Sir Clementi first learnt of the legislation passed within the Republic in 1929, he asserted that these were merely ‘paper tigers’. Clementi suggested the regulations ‘will not really be enforced’ since the Canton administration was very unstable because of the civil war and it ‘cannot possibly have time to attend to social reform.’⁴³ By 1932, when it was clear that the legislation was having not impact on *mui tsai* within the Republic, Colonial Office officials suggested that the laws were ‘only window dressing for foreign edification’, a phenomenon which they saw as being ‘typical of China.’⁴⁴

Conclusion

In her discussion on Chineseness, Ien Ang argues that the attempt to define ‘Chineseness’ has operated as a prison-house in which people’s identities are trapped.⁴⁵ This analogy can certainly be applied in the British discourse of Chineseness in which aimed to ‘know’ the Chinese and thus establish better control over them. By defining what was and what was not Chinese, the British gradually strengthened their epistemological colonization in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. But looking beyond this attempt to generate and systematise knowledge to shore up their power over the ‘Others’, we should not overlook the implication of this discourse of Chineseness for the British themselves. In the transnational system of the British empire, discourses born in Asia circulated back to the metropole and were an important element in debates over the nature of the empire and the distinctiveness of ‘Britishness’ itself.⁴⁶ As Ann Stoler points out, the differentiation between ‘us’ and ‘others’ was also a way for the British to identity themselves as one despite the differences of gender, class, and political affiliation.⁴⁷ The greediness of the Chinese and their cold-heartedness towards those in need in society stood as a stern reflection to the kind, benevolent, and Christian image that the British people and the empire were supposed to embody. The unfortunate fate of the *mui tsai* reaffirmed that imperial sense of duty that energized activists at

⁴³ Clementi to Colonial Office, November 20 1929, CO 129/514/3.

⁴⁴ Minute, Putley March 1932, CO 129/539/4.

⁴⁵ Ien Ang. *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*. London: Routledge, 2001, 11.

⁴⁶ Tony Ballantyne. *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire*. New York: Palgrave, 2002, 190.

⁴⁷ Ann Stoler. ‘Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule,’ in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, 25.

'home', reformers who believed that the presence of such an inequitable system could not be tolerated under the Union Jack.

This essay is only the first step in exploring the transnational construction of Chineseness, a set of discourses that were crucial for the British to maintain their rule in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong during the early twentieth century. While I have focused on how this debate over *mui tsai* allowed the British to theorize the Chinese and, at the same time, reinforced the cultural superiority of the empire, it would be interesting to study to what extent the presence of the British had moulded Chinese narratives on Chineseness in this part of the British empire. While this is outside the scope of this essay, I believe that this is an essential avenue for future research to explore the complex engagement between two transnational cultural systems operating in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia: the Chinese world and the British empire. This encounter, of course, was further complicated by the presence of Islam in Southeast Asia, the existence of important indigenous communities and other Asian diasporic communities (such as the Tamil communities in the Malay Straits and Singapore). These groups also posed important challenges to British authority: the rise of Malay nationalism during this same period, for example, no doubt seriously questioned British authority.

But, as this essay has shown, the British intrusion into Southeast and East Asia during the nineteenth century required them to build new and increasingly systematic understandings of Chinese communities. The debate over and regulation of *mui tsai* was an important element of this project, as it required the British to develop a knowledge of Chinese 'domestic' life, assess the basis of *mui tsai*, and decide how best to manage this practice. These questions about the nature of colonized Chinese communities produced a range of competing answers from a variety of different British groups. For many British activists, the *mui tsai* were the grounds on they could reassert the need for the civilizing mission and the pivotal role that metropolitan ideologies should play in the empire. Conversely, while the colonial state in Hong Kong always maintained that the practice evolved from the Chinese civilization, their version of "Chinese tradition" was constructed in such a way that would allow them to maintain their indispensability in the running of imperial affairs. Positioning the *mui tsai* as their "alter ego", the British activists and the Hong Kong colonial government not only constructed different versions of the others but also competing versions of "self".⁴⁸ The Colonial Office, in this incident, served a mediating role, attempting to strike a balance between powerful public opinion at home and the colonial officials, whose expertise they had to rely on in maintaining the imperial interests in the Far East. This delicate yet intense interaction between the public at home, the colonial officials, and the Colonial Office was a manifestation of the transnational nature of the empire whose workings were underpinned by the transmission of knowledge between various imperial domains.⁴⁹ Such

⁴⁸ Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 3.

⁴⁹ Ballantyne. *Orientalism and Race*, 15.

interchanges debunk the myth of the empire being a centralized power structure where the periphery remained powerless. Each community, regardless of its geographical location in the empire, could assert its power and influence within the system at times. Ultimately, the *mui tsai* controversy reveals the dynamic and constantly negotiated nature of both power relationships and cultural boundaries within the British empire and the ways in which the reach of British imperialism into Southeast Asia meant that although China itself remained sovereign, Chinese identity was increasingly entangled with the reality of British global power.