

## THE CHINESE CHURCH, LABOUR AND ELITES AND THE MUI TSAI QUESTION IN THE 1920'S

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### *Introduction*

The events leading up to the passage to the Legislative Council of Hong Kong of Ordinance No. 1 of 1923, entitled, "An Ordinance to Regulate Certain Forms of Domestic Service" interested me as an historian of the Hong Kong Protestant Church. It was the first time Chinese Christians in Hong Kong had worked as a group on a social question. Previously individual Christians had written or spoken about public issues, but the organisation of the Anti *Mui Tsai* Society in 1921 was the first major effort of a large body of Chinese Christians to campaign for social change. Of added interest was the enlistment of the labour unions to support its efforts and the active part women took in the campaign.

Dr. Sun Yat-sen in planning the Revolution of 1911 had received the support of secret societies and other groups whose members were from the labouring class. After the revolution some of these elements began to organise as modern labour unions. In the 1920's their desire to express themselves, gain benefits and be recognised as a political force was strengthened by the success of the Russian revolution. Communist organisers were particularly active in Canton. In February-March 1922, the Seamen's Union conducted a successful strike in Hong Kong.

At the same time that labour was asserting itself, there were efforts by women to change their traditional status in Chinese society. One of the features of the fight against the practice of buying domestic servants was the support given by the Chinese members of the recently organised YWCA under the leadership of Mrs. Ma Ying-piu. The *mui tsai* question involved the misuse of young girls and the conduct of their mistresses. It was to be expected, therefore, it would attract the concern of enlightened women. Other than the organisation of the wives of the Directors of the Po Leung Kuk (Society for the Protection of Women and Girls) as a committee to visit the Society's Home and check on its management, there was no active participation by women on the side of those who wished to preserve the system.

The establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1911 brought with it a group of leaders who held liberal ideas on social issues. A disproportionate number of these were Christians or had been trained in Christian schools. There were numerous connections between these officials in the Canton Southern Government of Dr. Sun and the Christians in Hong Kong.

Another facet of the events described in this paper is the clumsy manner in which the Colonial Office and the Hong Kong Government dealt with the problem once it was publicised. They had been quite content to tolerate the custom throughout the years, although some administrators were aware of the abuses inherent in the system. When questions were raised in Hong Kong and England about the system they immediately assumed a defensive stand.

The Colonial Office depended on information supplied to it by the Hong Kong Government. The local administration in turn relied heavily on the opinions of those "respectable" Chinese whom it recruited as its advisers. Then as now, these were the wealthy merchants, landowners and professionals. They did not represent the masses of the people. Their role as leaders of the Chinese community, however, was seldom challenged by the silent majority. It was a surprise to them and to the Government when an aggressive opposition suddenly emerged. This opposition was also led by "respectable" Chinese, some of whom were wealthy, some of the middle class, but practically all Protestant Christians who were motivated by the moral values of their faith and by enlightened ideas of the age.

Their activity did not ingratiate them to Government. A daughter of one of the leaders of the Anti *Mui Tsai* Society told me her father always felt Government continued to hold his position in the Society against him for many years.

### *The Mui Tsai System*

The purchase of girls for domestic service was a long standing Chinese custom. The children who were bought and thus became a part of the household were given the familiar name "little sister", *mui tsai*. However their lot was not always as pleasant as their name. Much depended on the kindness of the master or more especially the mistress. As very young children their duties were to run errands, fetch articles, pick up dropped fans, etc., or they might be placed under other servants to perform household tasks. As they grew older their

position and their work often depended on the social and economic status of the person who had bought them.

In the nature of the case some were sexually exploited by the male members of the family. Some were treated very cruelly by their mistresses. If they were attractive they often were taken by the head of the family as a concubine.

Everyone acknowledged that like all social institutions there were abuses in the system, but the traditional view was that its advantages outweighed its negative side. There were several arguments to support this view.

Only the poor sold their children. If they could not sell them, many would be killed off as infants. Thier lot in a foster home was much better than it would have been in their natural home. They were fed, and clothed and when of proper age a marriage was arranged for them with a suitable partner. Everyone benefited by the system, the child who escaped death or starvation, the natural parent who was lifted out of his poverty at least for the moment, and the purchaser who acquired a servant.

In Chinese society it had long been an unquestioned aspect of the social order. The buying and selling of human beings did not sit well with the English conscience of the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, most colonists felt it was best to leave undisturbed the *modus vivendi* which had been established at Hong Kong between British law and moral standards and Chinese social practice.

After some eighteen years on the bench in Hong Kong, Chief Justice John Smale, not long before his retirement in 1881, openly stated that in his opinion the practice of buying and selling children for domestic servitude was a form of slavery and hence its continued toleration in a British colony was a blot on the honour of England. He received support from anti-slavery groups in England, but his views were not generally welcomed in Hong Kong either by the Chinese or expatriates. There was some stir over the question for a short time and then interest in it died away, not to be re-aroused until the question again came to public attention in 1917.

### *1917 – The Question Raised*

Mr. C. G. Alabaster in defending a client charged with kidnapping raised a legal point regarding the status of children purchased as servants. The report of the case focused the attention of the English

community in Hong Kong on the long established Chinese custom of buying children as domestic servants. This attention led to concern, discussion, agitation, the formation of societies and finally in 1923 an Ordinance in the Hong Kong Legislature to abolish the system.

The case concerned a man who had met two girls aged ten and thirteen on a street in Wanchai. They had gone out to buy sweets and had become lost. The stranger took them on a tram to the Yaumati ferry. They crossed to Kowloon and then returned. He left them for a few minutes to buy something in Wing On Store on Connaught Road Central. The girls came to the notice of the police and the man was arrested when he returned to where he had left them.

Mr. Alabaster claimed the two women who owned the girls did not have lawful care of them because 'they were bought to serve, and they were sold as slaves and slavery has been abolished (in Britain and its colonies) and it is not lawful'.

On being examined by the Chief Justice one of the mistresses gave evidence that one of the girls had been sold by her elder brother as she had no parents. The Chief Justice asked, "Then as put by the learned Counsel for the defence, she is your slave?"

The witness replied, "I do not know what you mean by slave. Once the girl is sold to me she is my property. It is the custom among the Chinese to buy servants."

Mr. Alabaster thanked the Chief Justice that the answer to his question had made it so clear the girl was a slave.

His Lordship then asked Mr. Alabaster, "What is a slave?"

He replied, "I contend that a person who is bought by a master and may be sold by a master, who receives no wages, except clothes and food in exchange for work is a slave."

Mr. Alabaster admitted that sale of a child might be legal in China, but once it was brought to the Colony, it had the right to freedom.<sup>1</sup>

The Chief Justice referred to the Proclamation of Captain Eliot to the Chinese of Hong Kong in 1841 that stated Britain would respect the religious rites, ceremonies and social customs of the Chinese. The Supreme Court usually took into account the question of Chinese custom. If the point in law raised by Mr. Alabaster were to be sustained by a Full Court it would have most serious consequences.

The question was not settled by the court but it provoked public

discussion as to whether the *mui tsai* system was a form of slavery.

The case awakened the conscience of several expatriates. Among these were Colonel John Ward and Lieutenant Commander Haselwood and his wife. Col. Ward on his return to England was elected a Member of Parliament. He used his position to bring the question before the House of Commons. The matter roused the interest of liberal groups in England. Not satisfied with the answer given by the Government spokesman that there was no slavery in Hong Kong, the question continued to be raised in 1920 and 1921.

### *Parliamentary Questions and Answers*

In November 1920, Sir Alfred Yeo and Mr. Myers raised the question in the House of Commons. In reply, Col. Amery, the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies stated,

Slavery does not exist in Hong Kong. The Colony's law does not recognise the custom whereby girls are transferred on payment from parents and guardians to another household, usually for purposes of domestic service, as conferring any right or title on the employer against the girl. There was evidence that girls were frequently illtreated, in which event, they would be protected by the law in the same way as children living with their parents.

He said he thought it best to aim at gradual reform in cooperation with enlightened Chinese. It was suggested that the Hong Kong Governor "should persuade prominent Chinese to form a Society for the protection and improvement of the condition of these girl domestics". This was considered a much better way to deal with the problem than introducing a system of compulsory registration. The Hong Kong Government had advised the Colonial Office that it regarded registration as impracticable.<sup>2</sup>

In January 1921 a question was again raised regarding "this nefarious traffic in human beings". The questioner was referred to the answer given in the previous discussion in November that "there is no slavery in Hong Kong". Another Member then asked, "Is the honourable Government aware that answer given on November 4th was very unsatisfactory to those people who have information on this matter, and would he make inquiry into the allegation that slavery is carried on under British rule?"

The Under Secretary was adamant, "I have made full inquiry.

**There is no slavery carried on."**

In commenting on the questions raised in Parliament the editor of the *South China Morning Post* said there could not be much harm in the traditional Chinese custom when throughout the eighty years of the Colony's history no steps had been taken to abolish it. The children in domestic service had the full protection of the law and there was no evidence that they were frequently ill-treated. What few cases are brought before the courts are sharply dealt with. He did admit that some reform might be needed, "to guarantee the child's rights and those of its parents", but any changes should only be introduced gradually and with the co-operation of the leading Chinese, "whose services have never been withheld in any case having for its aim the uplifting and enlightenment of the people".<sup>3</sup>

*Reaction in Hong Kong – Mass Meeting at Tai Ping Theatre – July 1921*

The Chinese elite "establishment" in Hong Kong was disturbed by the discussion in Britain of one of their long established customs. They and the Hong Kong Government were also annoyed by a letter published in the correspondence column of all four English newspaper written by Mrs. Haselwood, the wife of a Commander in the Naval Dockyard. Her husband was officially warned that unless he stopped his wife from airing the question, he would be superseded and sent home. He refused to submit and was shortly sent home where he retired on half-pay. The Haselwoods, however, continued their campaign in Britain. When the Hong Kong Government was asked to explain Commander Haselwood's early termination of service in Hong Kong, it replied that the activities of his wife was "causing annoyance to the Chinese community".<sup>4</sup>

The leadership of the Chinese community was sufficiently aroused by the statements being made in the English press concerning the practice that it called a mass meeting to be held at the Tai Ping Theatre in July, 1921. The meeting was convened by the two Chinese representatives on the Legislative Council, the Hon. Ho Fook, brother of Sir Robert Hotung and one-time compradore of Jardine, Matheson and Co., and the Hon. Mr. Lau Chu-pak, compradore of Messrs. A. S. Watson and Co. Also particularly mentioned were S. W. Tso, a solicitor, Chow Shou-son, a Hong Kong born former official of the Chinese Government who had extensive business interests in Hong Kong, and Chau Siu-ki, shipping and insurance magnate.

The theatre was crowded with about three hundred including a

large number of coolies and members of local labour guilds. An unusual feature was a group of interested Chinese ladies.

The Chairman, Mr. Lau, listed a number of questions that had been put by various individuals. He and Mr. Ho Fook put the following before the meeting:

1. Is it a fact that servant girls are brought up for prostitution?
2. Are servant girls slaves?
3. Are servant girls kept for the sexual purposes of their masters, who, when tired of them, sell them?
4. Has the Chinese Government passed any law to abolish the practice of keeping servant girls?
5. Can owners of servant girls ill-treat them as they please?

The Chairman proceeded to comment on the questions. The first concerned purchase of girls, to be trained as prostitutes. A distinction should be made between two kinds of purchasers of girls; one bought them for domestic service, the other for prostitution. The first group are respectable people who are jealous of their good name and do not wish to be linked with those who purchase girls for prostitution. As to *mui tsai* being slaves, slavery does not exist in China, furthermore these girls have never been regarded as slaves by the Chinese.

The speaker put forth the thesis that there are safeguards in the system to prevent the girls being sexually exploited. Parents are allowed to visit them periodically and thus would know if the child had been misused. If a master wishes to take his servant girl as concubine he must obtain the consent of his wife, the girl and her parents. If the girl had been seduced by her master and then married out, and the husband of the girl finds out her virginity has been taken by her former master, the old master would lose face before his relatives and friends, to say nothing of the views of his wife and concubines. Some masters secretly took on a servant girl as a concubine setting her up in her own establishment and later recognizing any children she bore as legal heirs. In other cases when the wife discovered what had happened, she often made it so miserable for her husband that he was forced to return the girl to her parents accompanied by a liberal bribe for silence.

The only attempt of the Chinese Government to abolish the system was an effort by the Canton Commissioner of Police Chan King-wa soon after the establishment of the Republic. The girls were ordered to be handed over and were placed in a large hostel especially built for the purpose. Mr. Lau Chu-pak said the scheme failed because the

girls asked for the same kind of food and clothing they had had in their former homes, the authorities were pestered by girls asking them to arrange marriages, and, in addition, poor parents wanted to hand over their daughters to the care of the Commissioner.

The speaker answered the question of ill-treatment as follows: Girls sold to wealthy families are usually well off, doing little work, of those sold to the middle class some have to work fairly hard and some do little work, it is more or less a question of luck. In wealthy families the girls act as companions to their master's children, wait on their mistresses, go on errands, do a little serving and attend to the wants of female visitors. In middle class families, they help in cooking, sewing, washing, cleansing and sweeping, carry light loads, marketing and such general work as the master's daughters would have to do. The percentage of cases in which the mistresses are exacting, bad-tempered or cruel-hearted is infinitesimal. These would treat their own daughters no better if daughters were as naughty, lazy and disobedient as some of the servant girls are . . . Parents are in constant touch with the girl, who can report bad treatment . . . Masters usually check mistresses' and concubines' bad treatment of girls, as they care too much for their good name. Neighbours and other servants are bound to learn of harsh treatment. Cruelty when reported is investigated by local authorities [in China] and punished.

The girls were generally bought between the ages of four to thirteen. They cannot be expected to do anything but odds and ends until they are ten or twelve. Their actual period of service is from twelve to eighteen. After eighteen they begin to assert their rights and so arrangements must be taken for their marriage.

Mr. Lau Chu-pak went on at some length to comment on other aspects of the system. His remarks suggest that he viewed it in a favourable light and was not in favour of its abolition, even though he expressly said, "It is of no material importance to me whether the system be abolished or not." What was to be considered was "how far will its abolition affect the welfare of the poor, and whether its abolition alone will improve the conditions of the girls and their parents."

The Hon. Mr. Ho Fook began his remarks by suggesting that Mrs. Haselwood, as chief critic of the system, was not in a good position to judge the manner in which it worked. If the system was so rife with



abuses, why, he asked, had the question never been raised by officials of the Government Cadet system who had studied Chinese language, manners and customs in Canton. "Surely these men's experience and knowledge of the system is not inferior to those of Mrs. Haselwood."

Mr. Ho suggested the Chinese organize a society among themselves to deal with any problems there might be in the system, "why cannot we Chinese take up the matter ourselves by forming a society with a strong committee of management for purpose of enlightening and educating the masses in their duty towards the servant girls, and securing proper power to prosecute the cases of cruel treatment of these girls?"

Some passion was injected into the meeting when after Mr. Pun Yat-ki vividly described three cases in which cruel punishment was inflicted on servant girls, Mr. Ho Kom-tong, the brother of Ho Fook and Ho Tung, excitedly shouted that Mr. Pun and his informant should be charged with accessory to the crime for not reporting the offending master to the authorities.

His remarks brought both loud applause and vehement cries of protest. Mr. Chung Wen-sang arose to appeal to the meeting "to stop these unpleasant disputes".

Dr. Yeung Shiu-chuen was the main speaker for those who advocated abolition of the *mui tsai* system. He contended that persons who commiserated with the girls who came into their households were "rare mortals". Girls were always badly treated, and the Po Leung Kuk and Secretary for Chinese Affairs had little influence in alleviating their condition. To claim that there were no complaints was a failure to understand the pressures under which the girls lived, for "many had been wronged by their masters but had not the courage to lodge complaints with the authorities, under the impression that if this were discovered, their lives would be made even more unpleasant."

Rather than attempt to counteract the accusation the English had brought against the system and regard them as a slur on the Chinese people, the problem should be honestly faced. It should be admitted that it would cause the degeneration of the Chinese as a race, for "how could servant girls be expected to train their children properly since they had been denied education and proper treatment."

Dr. Yeung pleaded "in the interest of humanity, the prestige of China and posterity, and also to keep pace with the advancement of civilization" that the meeting take steps to secure the emancipation of servant girls and to put them on an equal footing with others.

A resolution was proposed and seconded that the *mui tsai* system be abolished. The Chairman ruled it out of order as the meeting had been called to consider the advisability of establishing a society for the protection of servant girls. At the conclusion of the meeting a resolution to form such a society was passed. It was duly organised as the Society for the Protection of the *Mui Tsai*.<sup>5</sup>

*Formation of the Anti-Mui Tsai Society – September 1921*

The group that had proposed a resolution for abolition regarded the new society as the vehicle of the elite establishment composed of past and present Directors of Tung Wah Hospital, members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Kaifong leaders. The abolition group was made up of members of the churches, the YMCA, the YWCA and labour unions. They believed the Protection Society would advocate palliative measures only and not get at the root of the problem, therefore they were determined to organize another group to be called the Anti *Mui Tsai* Society. An organization meeting was held in September 1921 and a public manifesto was published a month later under the names of the Society's Provisional Executive Committee.

This document was divided into sections dealing with (I) the inherent evils of the system, (II) reasons for abolition, (III) the system not being charity, (IV) the futility of reform by persuasion, and (V) tentative proposals to effect abolition.

The document argued that the basic evil of the system was that the treatment and status of the servant girls were similar to that of slaves. Like slaves 'they were bought with money, . . . exploited without reserve, not paid for labour and can be resold'. The only difference between a slave and a *mui tsai* was that a slave served for life and his descendants inherited his status, while the servant girl received her freedom on reaching the usual age for marriage.

As reasons for its abolition the manifesto declared the system to be injurious to public morality, subversive of righteousness, and injurious to national prestige. On the last point reference was made to the fact that the 1918 Peace Treaty included the International Labour Convention in which the contracting nations agreed to endeavour to secure fair and humane conditions of labour for men, women and children.

One of the principal arguments used by those who wished to continue the practice was that it was charity. It benefited a child who

might otherwise starve or live in extreme poverty by providing it with food, shelter and clothing. It benefited the parent of the child by providing him with money so he could sustain the other members of his family. The manifesto claimed, however, that this was not charity, because "in charity the dispenser must show sacrifice and the character of the recipient must be preserved". The parent who sells his daughter is devoid of charity, and anyone who buys is helping to destroy one of the most sacred of human bonds. To call the system charity is in the opinion of the manifesto "hypocritical and absurd".

The proponents of abolition were very sceptical that propaganda would convince owners of the girls to improve their situation, "To promote a society of *mui tsai* owners for prevention of cruelty without assisting those liable to ill treatment to liberate themselves is like formation of a league of cats in the interest of the mouse". The Anti's, as we shall see, had no hesitation, however, about using a barrage of propaganda to promote their own cause.

They were firmly convinced that the only way to prevent ill-treatment of *mui tsai* was by the abolition of the system, not through a society for their protection. They set forth several proposals to bring this about. All documents of sale should be cancelled. The purchase price previously paid would be regarded as an advance to the parents of the girl and she should continue to work for a period to be determined by a commission appointed by Government.

A temporary industrial home should be established to train the girls in self-support. Into this home could be admitted young children whose former owners may have found them troublesome to keep or difficult to manage. It would also be a home for those self-supporting girls who were temporarily out of work. Gradually former *mui tsais* would become hired servants or factory workers. To aid them in finding suitable jobs an employment agency should be established.

When the documents of sale are cancelled the *mui tsai* should be informed they are now "*yung mui*", that is servant girls. Until the girls had served out the time determined by the commission they should be under the supervision of inspectors, "preferably of the gentler sex".

In conclusion the manifesto made an appeal to the better nature of its readers,

It is the duty of a civilized community to raise its fellow citizens out of a state of degradation and oppression. When those who have a claim to our sympathy happen to be helpless

little girls of tender age living amongst strangers and in where to them is a strange country, no denial of succor is possible without outraging our feelings of humanity.<sup>6</sup>

*Instructions from Colonial Office to Hong Kong Government*

In March 1922 it was announced in the House of Commons by Mr. Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for the Colonies, that the Government of Hong Kong had been instructed by the Colonial Office to consult with both the Prevention Society and the Anti *Mui Tsai* Society in order to draw up a scheme for abolition.

Already the Secretary for Chinese Affairs in Hong Kong had been in consultation with the Secretaries of the two societies and both groups were in the process of selecting seven of their members to consult with him.

Canton had forged ahead of Hong Kong, for the same issue of the paper<sup>7</sup> which carried Mr. Churchill's remarks reported an item from the *Canton Times* that the President of the Southern Government had issued a proclamation abolishing the *mui tsai* system. The Women's Union of Kwangtung were ready to establish an industrial institution to train them.

News of progress toward abolition both in Hong Kong and Canton produced an air of elation at the first annual general meeting of the Anti *Mui tsai* Society held on March 26, 1922<sup>8</sup> at the Chinese YMCA. Mr. J. M. (Joseph Mau-lam) Wong, an Anglican and compradore of Messrs A. S. Watson and Co., presided. On the platform were members of the Executive Committee. These included Mrs. Ma Ying-piu (1872 - 1957), wife of the founder of the Sincere Co., member of St. Stephen's Anglican Church and a founder of the YWCA.

The Society had invited Mr. Hui Chien, the President of the Supreme Court of Canton and a member<sup>9</sup> of the Society, to address the meeting. At the last minute he was unable to attend but sent to represent him two associates from Canton. One of them read the remarks he had intended to give to the meeting. In these he observed that the Southern Government at Canton had taken steps to abolish the system, but it would find it much easier to do so if Hong Kong also moved in this direction.

Since its formation the Society had vigorously promoted its cause both in Hong Kong, China and in Great Britain. It had the active assistance of Commander and Mrs. Hazelwood, who after retirement

to England had continued the campaign to bring the Hong Kong situation to the attention of the British public. The Haselwoods and other interested people had enlisted the support of the Anti-Slavery and the Aborigine Protection Society, the Industrial Committee of the National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland, the Women's Committee of the Fabian Society, the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, the League of Nations Union, as well as Members of Parliament.

In Hong Kong a team of volunteer lecturers had spoken in churches, schools, the YMCA, the YWCA, and labour unions. One of the members had paid for the services of a professional lecturer to address passengers on boats travelling between Hong Kong and Canton.

Literature was produced both in English and Chinese. All the Parliamentary questions and answers were translated and sent to the Chinese press, along with original articles and correspondence with Members of Parliament, philanthropists and societies abroad. Locally, a literary competition had been held. The winning entry, a ballad, had been published and distributed both in Hong Kong and throughout China. The cost was underwritten by two wealthy contractors, Mr. Li Ping (probably a Roman Catholic) and Mr. Lam Woo (1869 – 1932) a founding member of St. Paul's Anglican Church and an Executive Committee member of the Society. A magazine of some 400 pages published by the Society contained articles treating the question in various literary forms.

At the time of the meeting 1,370 members had enrolled in the Society.

On instructions from the Colonial Office the Governor of Hong Kong issued a proclamation on April 14, 1922 stating:

Slavery is not allowed to exist in the British Empire, and therefore it must be understood that *mui tsai* are not the property of their employers. Those of them who wish to leave their employers and who have reached the age of discretion must be allowed to apply to the Secretary for Chinese Affairs who will consider their cases.

Girls are warned that they must not leave their present employment until they have some employment to go to for fear they should fall into the hands of procuresses.

Masters and mistresses are specially warned against any attempt

to prevent *mui tsai* from seeing the Secretary for Chinese Affairs.<sup>9</sup>

The fourteen member committee composed equally of members from the Protection Society and the Anti *Mui Tsai* Society met with the Secretary for Chinese Affairs, Mr. Hallifax, to formulate suggestions for drafting a Bill for the abolition of the *mui tsai* system. In June 1922 their report was sent to London with a comment by the Governor that he did not think the suggestions were an altogether satisfactory solution.

The members of the Committee representing the Anti *Mui Tsai* Society were:

Mr. Joseph Mau-lam Wong (1897 – 1869), compradore of Messrs. A. S. Watson and Co.

Mr. Charles Graham Anderson (1889 – 1949), a Eurasian, manager of the International Savings Society of Hong Kong, also newspaper reporter.

Ngan Kwan-yu, Government vernacular teacher of the Gap Road School – later Head-master, Congregational Church Primary School, Ladder Street.

Hung To-fei

Rev. Wong Oi Tong (1888 – 1941), for forty years pastor of the Rhenish Church, Bonham Road.

Dr. T.P. Woo (1878 – 1941), medical practitioner.

Dr. Yeung Shiu-chuen (1878 – 1950), dentist.

All were members of Protestant Churches.

The members of the committee representing the Society for the Protection of the *Mui Tsai* were:

Mr. M. K. Lo (later Sir Man-kam Lo) (1893 – 1959), son of a compradore of Jardine, Matheson and Co. and son-in-law of Sir Robert Ho Tung. He was a solicitor.

Mr. Tsun-nin Chau (1893 – 1971), son of a shipping and insurance magnate, Chau Shiu-ki. A cousin of Sir Sik-nin Chau. By profession a barrister.

Mr. Wong Kwong-tin (1879 – 1936), son of a wealthy Chinese merchant. He was a Supreme Court Interpreter when young, later Manager and Director of Kai Tack Land Investment Co, Manager of China Specie Bank, Manager of Chinese Stock Exchange, etc. A Roman Catholic.

Ip Lan-chuen (1865 – ), one of founders of Chinese

Chamber of Commerce, Secretary of Chamber for many years.  
Managing Director of Kwong Man Loong Firecracker Co.

Tse Ka-po, also known as Simon Tse Yan ( — 1966), son  
of compradore of Banco Ultramarino, Macao. Established Po  
Kee Shipping Co. Compradore for Nippon Yusen Kaisha. A  
Roman Catholic. Son-in-law of Mr. Ho Kom-tong, a brother  
of Sir Robert Ho Tung.

Wong Ping-suen (1873 — 1942), member of a wealthy land-  
owning, merchant-compradore Hong Kong family. Compradore  
of Mackintosh, Mackenzie and Co., and P. & O. Stship Co.

Tong Shau Shan, manager of the San Tak Hing Lok firm on  
Des Voeux Road.

After much hedging for a number of years, the Colonial Office determined to push the Hong Kong Government into drafting a bill for the abolition of the *mui tsai* system. The concerted efforts of concerned groups in England and the Anti *Mui Tsai* Society in Hong Kong were producing results. The Secretary of State minuted a despatch on March 21, 1922 instructing his under secretary that in writing to the Governor of Hong Kong, "A fairly full answer should be drafted explaining the difficulties, but making it clear that the abolition is going to be carried into effect. There is to be no nonsense about it and no sham. One year would be a reasonable time to allow".<sup>10</sup>

The Governor was not happy with these instructions, particularly after the Chinese he depended on for advice raised strong objections to passage of the Bill. He felt himself threatened. The Colonial Office had not been altogether satisfied with his handling of the Seamen's strike earlier in the year, and now it appeared they were repudiating the position he had promoted that it was not wise to radically change the *mui tsai* system. The best policy, in his opinion, was to advocate the correction of certain abuses and this could well be left in the hands of the elite Chinese establishment in Hong Kong.

Governor Stubbs took a very serious view of the implications of the opposition to the Ordinance. In a letter to a Colonial Office official in September 1922, while on leave, he said:

It means that the Chinese for the first time are setting themselves against the Government. That is the beginning of the end. I told you the other day I believed we should hold Hong Kong for another fifty. I put it now at twenty at the most."

His trusted allies had turned against him.

In his communications with the Colonial Office he was strangely silent about the support for the Bill by the Anti *Mui Tsai* Society and the labour unions. It seemed to be on the opinion that the only views of Chinese to be taken seriously were those of his long time advisers, and now they were deserting him. One of the Colonial Office administrations minuted a letter from Governor Stubbs:

It seems to me the advice we have received on the general question of *mui tsai* has been throughout faulty and incorrect and in certain respects misleading. It seems also the Hong Kong Government does not desire to press the Secretary of State's reform on the Chinese.<sup>12</sup>

On December 23, 1922 the *Mui Tsai* Bill was gazetted, and on December 28 it received its first reading in the Legislative Council as "An Ordinance to regulate certain forms of domestic service".

The Editor of the *Daily Press*, a strong advocate of abolition, felt the remarks of the Attorney General in introducing the Bill reflected the reluctance of the Hong Kong Government to implement the instructions of the Colonial Office:

The Attorney General in introducing the *Mui Tsai* Bill can hardly be said to have shown . . . fully sympathy with the object of the Bill . . . The attitude of the local Government to agitation for abolition has been hostile all along.<sup>13</sup>

### *Chinese Chamber of Commerce Meeting – January 1923*

The members of the Protection Society had second thoughts about the approval given by four of their representatives on the joint committee to assist in drafting a bill (three did not sign the agreement). An extraordinary meeting of the Chamber of Commerce was held early in January to air reservations about the proposed Ordinance. Mr. Li Po-kwai (1871 – 1963), a wealthy property owner, presided. Among the members in attendance the following were named:

The two Chinese Unofficial Members of the Legislative Council, the Hon. Mr. Chow Shou-son and the Hon. Mr. Ng Hon-tsz  
Mr. Ho Fook, a former member of the Legislative Council  
Lo Chueng-shiu, a compradore of Jardines and brother-in-law of Ho Fook  
His son Mr. M. K. Lo (later Sir Man-kam Lo), a solicitor and



son-in-law of Ho Tung

T. N. Chau, a barrister

Li Wing-tin

Simon Tse Yan, also known as Tse Ka Po

Fung Ping-shan, donor of the Fung Ping Shan Library building  
at Hong Kong University

Chau Yu-ting, a wealthy import-export merchant

Yung Tse-ming, compradore of the Chartered Bank

Ho Wing, son of Ho Fook, adopted son of Ho Tung and com-  
pradore of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank

Wong Ping-shuen, and

Ip Lan-chuen

Wong Ping-shuen advocated a slow approach, "The time was not yet ripe for drastic action. Conditions in China had to be radically changed before it would serve any useful purpose to legislate on the question".

The Secretary of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Ip Lan-chuen, contended that Hong Kong was too close to China to attempt abolition at this time.

Li Po-kwai, the Chairman, vividly portrayed the dangers to the *mui tsai* if she were released from servitude at the age of eighteen. She would do "mad and silly things" which would lead to her downfall.

Chow Shou-son spoke out as "being dead against the Bill". If left alone the custom would die out in time as had the practice of foot-binding. After making his speech in Chinese, for some reason he shifted to English to conclude it, saying, "It is the opinion of the Chinese community and the Chinese people generally that the system should not be abolished".

Mr. M. K. Lo interjected a moderating tone into the discussion when he reminded the meeting that it would have been better if the Chamber had expressed opposition to abolition sooner and more clearly, instead of keeping relatively silent until the Government had drafted and introduced a Bill.

Mr. Wong Kwong-tin objected to the Ordinance because it did not provide protection to the owners of *mui tsai* and was therefore grossly unfair. He gave a warning to the British Government they should be very careful in interfering with an old Chinese custom which had become an unwritten law.

Mr. Chow Shou-son came to the floor again to chide the Protection Society for not being as aggressive in placing its views before the public as had the Anti *Mui Tsai* Society.

At the conclusion of the meeting a resolution was passed that the Chamber of Commerce was not in favour of the proposed Bill at its second reading.

In a letter Mr. M. K. Lo wrote to the *Daily Press* after the meeting, he expressed dissatisfaction with the tone of the meeting. As one of the persons appointed by the Protection Society with full powers to forge out with the Secretary of Chinese Affairs and representatives of the Anti *Mui Tsai* Society draft terms to be submitted to Government for the abolition of the system, he felt he had been placed in an invidious position. Now that the majority of the representatives of the Society on the committee had signed the agreement, the meeting of the Chamber with nearly all the members of the Protection Society present had passed a resolution that the system should continue. They should have been fully aware of this position when he was appointed to the committee for he had clearly stated it in a letter to the Secretary of the Protection Society. He mentioned that the news account, which stated the resolution at the recent meeting was passed unanimously, was in error; he had voted against it.

The meeting came in for further attack when the editor of the *Daily Press* asked why a commercial organization like the Chamber of Commerce was discussing a social question. He described the meeting as one of employers of *mui tsai* who cannot be regarded as disinterested parties.

A European correspondent to the paper said the well-to-do opponents of abolition were so aroused not because the Bill will put an end to an old custom but because it would deprive a group of pampered women of servants over whom they had complete control. Any inconvenience the change may bring to their mode of life will be taken out on their husbands.

### *The Kai Fong Meeting at Tung Wah Hospital*

Several days after the Chamber of Commerce meeting, the Kai Fong called a meeting at the Tung Wah Hospital to rally opposition to the Bill. They did not count, however, on the organizational and political strategy of those in favour of the Bill. The group packed the meeting by rallying the members of the Chinese churches, the YMCA,

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the YWCA, the Seamen's Union and a large representation from other unions. The unions were again expressing themselves after the 1921 seamen's strike.

Twenty speakers secured the floor to present their views. All but three were in favour of the Bill. One of the speakers in favour was Mrs. Ma Ying-piu, representing the YWCA. For a woman to address a mixed public meeting of Chinese was an unusual event in conservative Hong Kong.

As soon as the meeting opened under the Chairmanship of Mr. Lo Chung-kiu, the Chairman of the Tung Wah Hospital Directors, there were signs the meeting might not be as smooth as its organizers had planned. A question of procedure was raised regarding the Chairmanship: why should not the meeting elect its own Chairman as it had been convened by the Kai Fong and not by Tung Wah? The Chairman replied it was invariably the practice for Tung Wah to appoint the Chairman for meetings held on its premises. The matter was not pushed.

Then began a succession of speakers supporting the Bill. Their remarks were frequently punctuated by applause initiated by the large section representing the Seamen's Union. They particularly acclaimed the speech of Mrs. Ma. She put forth the thesis that it was women who were principally responsible for the system. They did most of the buying and selling and were responsible for the mistreatment of the girls.

Mr. M. K. Lo spoke in favour of the Bill. Although the Hon. Mr. Chow Shou-son and Mr. T. N. Chau were present, they remained silent.

A speaker from the YMCA attacked the rich, instructing them that they should use their wealth to develop industry to provide employment for the poor instead of selfishly hoarding their wealth and using labour in their homes they need not give wages to.

Things began to get out of order when a speaker against the Bill asked why everything was being done for women when men coolies were being sold daily. Voices were raised demanding the Chairman rule the speaker out of order. But he was allowed to continue though he could hardly be heard above the uproar of protests. He eventually had to stop. At this point there was a stamping of feet and repeated cries of "vote".

The Chairman seeing that the meeting was getting beyond his control announced that there would be no further discussion and declared the meeting closed. Pandemonium broke out. The meeting began to take on an angry tone. Some, fearing trouble, slipped out. The crowd was standing on its feet shouting for a vote and began to press forward in a threatening manner toward the long table at which the Chairman and his supporters sat.

At this point Mr. M. K. Lo arose and eventually quieted the crowd sufficiently for his voice to be heard. He asked permission of the Chairman for the use of the hall for a few minutes. He pointed out the irregularity of closing a meeting without taking a vote to ascertain the sense of the meeting on the issue under discussion. He suggested that as the Chairman had closed the meeting, a new Chairman should be elected who could then take a vote. His idea was warmly approved. Backing down, the original Chairman, after some hesitation, then reopened the meeting and asked for a vote. By a show of hands the meeting overwhelmingly expressed its support for the Bill. The organiser skulked away chagrined and shaken.

#### *Meetings of Anti Mui Tsai Society and of Labour Unions*

In a spirit of jubilation the Anti *Mui Tsai* Society convened a delayed general meeting on January 15, 1923 to follow up the success in thwarting the hopes of the merchants who had called the Kai Fong meeting at Tung Wah. It unanimously passed a resolution supporting the Bill, though it noted that the Ordinance had excluded suggestions for an employment bureau and an industrial home. It expressed surprise that at the recent Chinese Chamber of Commerce meeting three of the representatives of the Protection Society on the joint draft committee for the Bill had spoken in opposition to it. These were Messrs Wong Kwong-tin, Ip Lan-chuen and Wong Ping-suen.

The meeting of the Anti *Mui Tsai* Society was followed a few days later by a meeting of three hundred delegates from 154 labour guilds of Hong Kong at the Chinese YMCA. Mr. So Chui-chung, the Chairman of the Chinese Seamen's Union, was elected Chairman. In his remarks to the meeting he reminded his listeners that they had methods to bring their grievances before their employers, but servant girls had no such opportunity. It was therefore, he said "the duty of Labour to second efforts of people interested in abolition."

Dr. Yeung Shiu-chuen as a representative of the Anti *Mui Tsai*

Society was asked to address the meeting. He presented a review of the efforts of the Society to induce the Government to abolish the system. In concluding, he congratulated the men for having called the meeting as it showed that labour unions in Hong Kong were interested in questions other than those of strikes and increases of pay.

One of the labour speakers was Miss Wong Wai-chu, a teacher. She, like Mrs. Ma, was interested in the part women had in maintaining the system:

Owing to weakness of the weaker sex, the system had become a permanency. The owner of a *mui tsai* was usually a pampered woman, one who beat the girl on the slightest provocation. Confucius said, "Do unto others as you would be done by". It was an inadvisable state of affairs to be dependent on others for the performance of any duty which one was capable of performing oneself and this appeared to be a failing of the weaker sex, who used *mui tsai* for tasks which they could do themselves. If Chinese women wish to raise their status to the same plane as men, they should not allow their children to be employed as *mui tsai*".

In the end of the meeting a resolution was passed supporting the passage of the Ordinance. A committee was appointed to consider and suggest any amendments to the Bill that might be desirable.<sup>14</sup>

### *Passage of the Bill*

At the second reading of the Bill on February 8, 1923. The Hon. Mr. Chow Shou-son referred to those in favour of the Bill as having been undoubtedly "actuated by generous motives and lofty ideals, but I am afraid that their burning zeal has not permitted them to study the problem with calmness and impartiality which the importance of the subject demands." He saw no wisdom in haste, "I do not keep, and have never kept, any *mui tsai*, but this does not blind me to the unwisdom of trying to sweep away in a day the custom with its good points."<sup>15</sup>

His Excellency the Governor wished to disassociate himself from "the venomous attacks which have been made on the whole Chinese population of the Colony by ignorant persons at home who seem to assume that because a system is liable to abuse it is therefore essentially bad." He informed the Council, however, there was no turning back, "I have definite instructions from the British Government that the

system must be abolished. On this there can be no compromise."

At the third reading of the Bill the Hon. Mr. P. H. Holyoak, elected representative of the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce on the Legislative Council, also deplored the image of Hong Kong created by the discussion of the *mui tsai* question. He referred to the "gross misrepresentations of fact made throughout the press at Home". He described it as "a malicious campaign that should not remain unchallenged in defence of the fair name of the Colony and the good Government which it represents."

The Hon. Mr. E. V. D. Parr referred to the united action of Christians and the labour unions:

The support of the Bill came from a most extraordinary combination of bodies . . . Anyone who knows anything of the inside history of the Colony could say perfectly well that support of the Bill is — I hesitate to describe it — perhaps it is best to describe it as a fake. There can be nothing in common or in sympathy between the labour unions and the YMCA and they join together on this occasion for reasons far different from any consideration for the welfare of the *mui tsai*.

What these reasons were he did not state.<sup>16</sup>

The *Daily Press* viewed these remarks in the Legislative Council as attempts to defend the Council and the Hong Kong Government for allowing the system to prevail so many years without taking any action either to ameliorate the practice or to abolish it. The speeches also clearly showed the real position of the Government to the Bill:

If we had ever entertained any doubts of the Government's real attitude toward the Bill which it has been obliged to father, it would certainly have been dissipated by the wonderful unanimity shown by Unofficial Members in attacking the measure and scoffing at its sponsors. The speakers imputed unworthy motives — including a desire for cheap advertisement, political intrigue and even malice — to those who, without any hope of reward, sacrificed time, energy, money and even position, in order to help those who could not help themselves.<sup>17</sup>

The editor concluded that the views expressed by Chinese Christians and union members, rather than those of the elite establishment,

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represented the majority view of the Chinese community toward the *mui tsai* system.

Whatever the truth of this conclusion their efforts supported by concerned groups in Britain had finally moved a reluctant Colonial Office to instruct the Hong Kong Government to abolish the system.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Daily Press*, August 23, 1917.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* November 9, 1920.

<sup>3</sup> *South China Morning Post*, November 9, 1920.

<sup>4</sup> *Daily Press*, January 25, 1921.

<sup>5</sup> *South China Morning Post*, August 1, 1921.

<sup>6</sup> Text of manifesto published in *ibid.* October 13, 1921.

<sup>7</sup> *Daily Press*, March 22, 1922.

<sup>8</sup> Reported in *ibid.* March 27, 1922.

<sup>9</sup> *Mui Tsai in Hong Kong and Malaysia – Report of Commission*, issued by Colonial Office. H. M. Stationery Office, London, 1937.

<sup>10</sup> Microfilm Colonial Office Records in Public Records Office, London: CO 129/474, p. 211ff.

<sup>11</sup> CO 129/478, p. 759, September 16, 1922.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Daily Press*, December 30, 1922.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* January 20, 1923.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* February 9, 1923.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* February 16, 1923.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* February 19, 1923.