Child Slavery, Sex Trafficking or Domestic Work?
The League of Nations and Its Analysis of the
Mui Tsai System

Magaly Rodríguez García

This chapter analyses the efforts of the League of Nations to abolish the mui tsai system, a custom in existence in China, Hong Kong and Malaya until the first half of the twentieth century. Mui tsai, which means “little younger sister” in Cantonese, describes the process of transferring girls from poor homes to do domestic work in the houses of rich families, in exchange for financial compensation to the girls’ parents, plus board, lodging and clothing for the girls. Inspired by British activists and international organizations calling for the abolition of the practice, various bodies and committees of the League took an interest in the matter but they approached it from differing angles.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) viewed the mui tsai system as a matter of working conditions. The League’s Advisory Committee on Traffic in Women and Children wished to protect girls from trafficking and recruitment into prostitution; whilst the anti-slavery committees2 saw the system as child slavery. Chinese elites and colonial authorities in Hong Kong for their part insisted that the mui tsai system did not constitute slavery but was in fact a special system under which girls could be fostered in welcoming families, similar to adoption. A detailed reading of archive materials and publications by the relevant organizations will be used to clarify debates, initiatives, limitations and interactions between the various League’s bodies and between the League and international non-governmental organizations interested in the mui tsai system.

---

1 My thanks go to Jacques Oberson and Lee Robertson of the League of Nations Archives (hereinafter referred to as LNA) at the United Nations Office in Geneva for their friendly and professional assistance in consulting the primary sources used for this study. I am grateful to Silke Neunsinger as well for her useful comments and to Marcus Ferley for his language corrections.

2 The Temporary Slavery Commission (1924–1926), and the Committee of Experts on Slavery (1931–1934) preceded the Advisory Committee of Experts on Slavery (1934–1939).
Although the theme has been extensively studied by historians, anthropologists, political scientists and legal experts, to date there has been no study focused on the League of Nations. This paper is not at all intended to discredit the valuable results of expert authors on colonial and Chinese history, on slavery, on female and child labour, and so on but rather seeks to complement them and to establish a fruitful conversation about the difficulties inherent in studying the mui tsai system. What is new about this article is that it places mui tsai girls within the study of child domestic labour – it is interesting to note, for instance, that the practice of transferring and employing girls in domestic work was mentioned only once in a recent study on child labor in China. More broadly, this article can be situated within the body of literature that analyses the circulation of children, their involvement in domestic work and the creation of pseudo-family relationships. The narrative is subdivided into three parts: first, a summary of the mui tsai system and arguments for and

---

