


ARTICLE

Sino-Portuguese Trafficking of Children during the Ming Dynasty

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Abstract

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Portuguese purchased large numbers of people in China as slaves. Many of those people were children. This article considers where those children came from and why they were sold to the Portuguese. During the late Ming period, as social inequality intensified, poor farmers increasingly had to sell themselves and their offspring to rich landowners as bonded labourers. However, some farmers chose to break the law and sell to foreigners instead. Other farmers became bandits, and kidnapped other people's children to sell into bondage. Both of these criminal trends provided the Portuguese with young slaves.

Keywords: child trafficking; slavery; peasants; Portugal; Ming dynasty

Introduction

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Portuguese merchants who sailed to Macau purchased large numbers of Chinese children as slaves. Such merchants are often seen as predators, intruding into another country in order to steal away the weakest and most helpless—and not without good reason. And yet the tragic reality was that they were not committing such atrocities unaided: the trafficking was in fact collaborative. Many people from within China, including the parents themselves, were offering the children to the Portuguese. Sino-Portuguese child trafficking was two-sided.

This two-sidedness has left a gap in current scholarship. Previous research has focused either on the European side of the equation or on the Chinese side: one or the other. In Western scholarship, many excellent studies have appeared on the structure of the Portuguese slave trade in Asia.¹ Other studies have shown the global scale of this business, which took Chinese children across the entire globe, to Europe and even to the Americas.² Fascinating research has also been conducted on the social and emotional lives of these slaves in colonial society.³ All of this research focuses on the Western sphere. In contrast, within Chinese and Japanese scholarship, excellent studies have appeared on the ballooning problem of bondage in the Ming Empire, and the domestic factors that were causing

¹ For example, Lúcio de Sousa, *The Portuguese Slave Trade in Early Modern Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

² See, for example, Nancy E. Van Deusen, *Global Indios: The Indigenous Struggle for Justice in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015).

³ For example, Patrícia Souza de Faria, “Cruzando fronteiras: conversão e mobilidades culturais de escravos no império asiático português (séculos XVI e XVII)” [Crossing frontiers: Conversion and cultural mobilities of slaves in the Portuguese Asian empire (16th and 17th centuries)], *PERIODICIDADE Anual* (2016).

the poorest classes to sell their children.⁴ All of this research, in contrast, focuses on the Chinese sphere. No study has yet brought the two sides together. That is the goal of this article.

In the following pages, I will seek to explain how socioeconomic changes within the Ming Empire drove Portuguese child trafficking. There were two general types of trafficking: parents selling their own children, and criminals kidnapping and selling other people's children. Both grew out of the same fundamental cause: the dramatic changes in the rural economy. The rise of Sino-Portuguese child trafficking was closely related to the desperation of the poor farming class.

Context: The Plight of Poor Farmers

Let us first examine the context behind the child trafficking: the crisis of the small farmers. Slowly, incrementally, big plantation owners had taken over the arable land. In the late Tang dynasty, powerful families began to privately accumulate fields.⁵ They organised their land in a sharecropping system. In this arrangement, landowners lent plots, tools, and seed to their tenants, and in return, the tenants paid rent to them out of their harvest.⁶ In this article, I will refer to the tenant sharecroppers as peasants (佃戶, *tianhu*), and to the landholding gentry as landlords (地主, *dizhu*). At this early stage, farming was mainly for subsistence. It was not until the Song dynasty that powerful families began to expand their estates to grow cash crops.⁷ In the Ming dynasty, commercialising accelerated.⁸ New land was developed; new labourers were brought in; new agricultural methods were employed.⁹ Starting in the early sixteenth century, even larger estates began to develop, as nobility, eunuchs, and high officials used and abused their power to accumulate property.¹⁰

The expansion of the great estates came at the expense of small farmers. Over time, with each successive drought or flood, more and more people fell into debt and lost their property.¹¹ In order to live, they had to become peasants of landlords. It is also said that some farmers voluntarily chose to become peasants in order to avoid heavy

⁴ The classic study is Niu Jianqiang 牛建強, “Ming dai nu pu yu she hui 明代奴僕與社會” [Bonded servants and society during the Ming era], 《史學月刊》 [Monthly journal of historical studies], April 2002. Other studies will be cited over the course of this article.

⁵ On the rise of the private estates in the Tang dynasty, see Mark Edward Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 123–9.

⁶ On the rise of the sharecropping system during this period, see Zhang Ming 張明, “Tang zhong ye dao Song dai zu tian qi yue si xiang yan jiu 唐中叶至宋代租佃契約思想研究” [Research on the mentality behind tenant sharecropper contracts from the mid-Tang to the Song era], 《天府新論》 [New articles from Sichuan] 3 (2015), 88–94.

⁷ On the growth of commercial agriculture during the Song dynasty, see Gao Liying 高立迎, “Shi xi Song dai nong cun jing ji de shang pin hua 試析宋代農村經濟的商品化” [Preliminary analysis of the commercialisation of the rural village economy in the Song era], 《山西農業大學學報: 社會科學版》 [Academic journal of the Shanxi Agricultural University] 7:2 (2008), 151–5.

⁸ On the commercialisation of the Ming economy, see Wang Yuquan 王毓銓, ed., *Zhong guo jing ji tong shi. Ming dai jing ji juan* 《中國經濟通史. 明代經濟卷》 [General economic history of China: The Ming-era economy] (Beijing: Jing ji ri bao chu ban she, 2000).

⁹ For example, on the commercialisation of the farmlands of Fujian, see Xu Hong 徐泓, “Ming dai Fu jian she hui feng qi de bian qian 明代福建社會風氣的變遷” [The transformation of the societal ethos of Fujian during the Ming era], 《東吳歷史學報》 [Soochow journal of history] 15 (June 2006), 145–71.

¹⁰ Liu Yongcheng 劉永成, *Zhong guo zu dian zhi du shi* 《中國租佃制度》 [The Chinese system of tenant sharecroppers] (Taipei: Wen jin chu ban she, 1997), 171–3.

¹¹ Liu Kexiang 劉克祥, *Zhong guo yong dian zhi du yan jiu* 《中國永佃制度研究》 [Research on the Chinese system of tenant sharecroppers with permanent land rights] (Beijing: She hui ke xue wen xian chu ban she, 2017), 20–9.

government taxes (from which landlords were often exempt).¹² Furthermore, even after becoming peasants, people still struggled. They continued to face the challenges of floods and droughts. To make matters worse, some landlords were unfair. They tried to cheat their own peasants by various means, including arbitrarily seizing land, raising rent, or manipulating the prices of crops.¹³ Thus, many found themselves unable to pay rent. At that point, they generally had to sell themselves or their children into bondage to their landlords. In 1448, a regional official from the eastern coastline reported to the Court with alarm, describing this problem:

Everywhere, the rich citizens use private debt to greatly increase their profits from interest. It is to the point that some of them subjugate (奴, *nu*) the people's children, occupy their lands. The local officials do not dare denounce them.¹⁴

The poor peasants had to sell their children under unfavourable sales terms. We know this because there are extant sales contracts.¹⁵ These contracts show that in general, there was a fixed, standard price: three taels and five coins for a male child.¹⁶ The contracts also show that the sale was permanent: "His children and grandchildren will forever obey the household master's calls to service."¹⁷ The sale was also absolute: the biological parent ceded all rights over the child. The child even took on the family name of the landlord and was removed from the family registry of the biological parents.¹⁸ Some contracts required the parents to stop communicating with the child.¹⁹

It goes without saying that the children's lives changed after being sold into bondage. Henceforth, they were raised within the landlord's household, to become bonded peasants (佃僕, *dianpu*).²⁰ As bonded peasants, they had the same duties and rental obligations as

¹² On this practice, known as 投靠 (*toukao*), see Nishimura Kazuyo 西村かずよ, 「Mindai no doboku 明代の奴僕」 [Bonded servants in the Ming era], 『東洋史研究』 [Journal of oriental researches] 38:1 (1979), 24–50.

¹³ See Bian Li 卞利, "Ming Qing tu di zu tian guan xi yu zu tian qi yue yan jiu 明清土地租佃关系与租佃契约研究" [Research on the relationship between land and tenant sharecroppers and on the tenant contracts in the Ming and Qing eras], 《原生态民族文化学刊》 [Journal of ethnic culture] 7:4 (2015), 17–31.

¹⁴ *Ying zong shi lu* 《英宗實錄》 [Veritable records of Emperor Yingzong] (Taipei: Zhong yang yan jiu yuan, 1962), 卷167, 正統十三年六月甲申 (30 July 1448). The reporter in this passage is the regional inspector (按察使, *anchashi*) of Zhejiang province, named Xuan Ni 軒輓. All translations are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁵ All major business transactions needed to be formalised in a contract. The contract was signed by both parties and certified by the local government. Peasants, who were illiterate, generally signed with their handprint. The only collection of contracts which has been published are from Anhui province. This article uses two editions of those contracts: *Ming Qing Hui zhou she hui jing ji zi liao cong bian* 《明清徽州社會經濟資料叢編》 [Collection of sources on the society and economy of Huizhou in the Ming and Qing eras] (Beijing: Zhong guo she hui ke xue chu ban she, 1988); and Zhang Chuanxi 张传玺 et al., eds., *Zhong guo li dai qi yue hui bian kao shi* 《中国历代契约会编考释》 [Research on and compilation of Chinese historical contracts] (Beijing: Beijing da xue chu ban she, 1995).

¹⁶ See the contract "She xian Wang Wenjin mai zhi hun shu 歙縣王文錦賣侄婚書" [Familial contract of Wang Wenjin, of She County, selling his nephew] in *Ming qing Hui zhou*, 555–6. See also the contract "Hu Yinshi mai nan hun shu 胡音十賣男婚書" [Familial contract of Hu Yinshi selling his son] in *ibid.*, 551. I have only given the price of male children, because the Huizhou collection does not contain any Ming-era sales contracts for women.

¹⁷ Contract "Hu Yinshi," 551.

¹⁸ On a legal level, the transaction was considered to be offering a child for adoption to a landlord. This was a legal fiction, due to the fact that private citizens were technically not allowed to own slaves. See Hao Feng 蒿峰, "Ming dai de yi nan mai mai yu gu gong ren 明代的义男买卖与雇工人" [The selling of adopted sons and contract labourers in the Ming era], 《山东大学学报》 [Journal of Shandong University] (1988), 107–109.

¹⁹ Koyama Masaaki 小山正明, *Minshin shakai keizai-shi kenkyu* 『明清社会経済史研究』 [Research on Ming and Qing social and economic history] (Tokyo: Tokyo University, 1992), 348–56.

²⁰ On bonded peasants (佃僕, *dianpu*), see Nishimura Kazuyo 西村かずよ, 「Minshin jidai no doboku wo megutte 明清時代の奴僕をめぐって」 [On the bonded servants of the Ming and Qing eras], 『東洋史研究』 [Journal of oriental researches] 36:4 (1978), 127–8.

free peasants, and they also had some additional burdens. For example, they often had to tend to the landlord's ancestral graves or accompany him in his public duties. Some scholars have argued that bonded peasants also had to farm their landlord's personal land without pay.²¹ On a social level, they dropped from the status of decent citizens (良民, *liangmin*) down to that of indecent, subclass society (賤民, *jianmin*).²² This loss of status affected many things, including what kind of education they received, what jobs they could practice, and whom they could marry.

Exactly how severe were these trends? There is simply no hard data. On an anecdotal level, many sources complain that the trend was worsening, but do not give precise numbers.²³ At best, we hear reports that in the fertile region of the lower Yangtze river, the great estates had absorbed four-fifths of the available farmland.²⁴ Let us also note the words of the scholar He Liangjun 何良俊, writing in the 1560s:

Prior to the Zhengde 正德 era (1505–21), one-tenth of the common people worked for the government, and nine-tenths worked in the fields. [. . .] But for the last forty or fifty years, every day taxes have increased, every day corvée labour has grown more burdensome. The people cannot endure it! And thus they all have left their work. In the past, household servants (家人, *jiaren*) for the countryside gentry were not numerous. Today, people have left the fields, and servants of the countryside gentry are ten times more than before. [. . .] In sum, among the aforementioned common folks, six or seven out of ten have already left their fields.²⁵

He Liangjun thus estimates that the number of free farmers who owned their own land had dropped by around 65 percent. He suggests that many of those people had become bonded to the gentry. These numbers should be taken with caution, since he is clearly seeking dramatic effect. But even so, it is safe to say that the trend was large-scale and significant.

Context: Illegal Alternatives for the Farmers

Faced with this challenging situation, poor farmers made increasingly desperate decisions. As mentioned, the traditional choice of a peasant who could not pay his rent was to sell his children to his own landlord. However, many farmers and peasants avoided that path, instead choosing less traditional, and less legal, options. Let us now examine three such alternatives.

A first alternative was to flee. Peasants often abandoned the land to which they were legally bound and secretly migrated, searching for new opportunities.²⁶ While there are no precise statistics, anecdotal sources suggest that many of these vagrants eventually found a new landlord and continued in the peasant's life.²⁷ It seems that many great estates must have recruited any newcomer, without inquiring deeply into their pasts. Occasionally, such vagrants were tracked down by their old masters, but most often it seems that they were never recovered.²⁸

²¹ Koyama, *Minshin*, 389–95.

²² On the indecent class (賤民, *jianmin*) of bonded labourers, see Niu, “Ming dai,” 4.

²³ On such complaints by increasing numbers of bonded labourers, see Niu, “Ming dai,” 4.

²⁴ Liu Yongcheng, *Zhong guo*, 174.

²⁵ He Liangjun 何良俊, *Si you zhai cong shuo* 《四友齋叢說》 [Collection of writings from the Four Friends Library], 卷 13 史 9, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=400035>.

²⁶ On the accelerating migration of farmers, see Liu Kexiang, *Zhong guo*, 11–12.

²⁷ Koyama, *Minshin*, 318–26.

²⁸ For a case where the absconding slaves were rediscovered, see Claude Chevalyere, “Acting as Master and Bondservant: Considerations on Status, Identities and the Nature of ‘Bond-Servitude’ in Late Ming China,” in *Labour, Coercion, and Economic Growth in Eurasia, 17th–20th Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 265–9.

A second alternative was to turn towards banditry. The later Ming period was constantly troubled by revolts. Many criminal gangs consisted of former peasants who had no other way to feed themselves. The Jiajing Emperor described the situation in his enthronement speech of 1521:

The bandits of each region, many of them spring from this cause: in famine, cold, and hardship, they had departed [from their lands] and wandered without work, and were coerced and strong-armed to join up with gangs.²⁹

A Portuguese prisoner in Guangdong, Cristóvão Vieira, mentioned this problem also in a 1532 letter:

The people have no love for the king and his officials, and every day they keep rebelling and becoming thieves. Because those people who are robbed [by the officials] have no fields nor any way to eat, it is necessary that they become thieves. There are thousands of such rebellions.³⁰

Within the traditional farming villages, such rebellions and uprisings were increasing.³¹ The revolts culminated in the massive “farmers’ uprising” that raged across the Jiangnan region for the last years of the Ming dynasty. This revolt has often been called a “slave’s revolt,” but it in fact included all of poor rural society, including free farmers, free peasants, bonded peasants, artisans, and day labourers.³²

A third alternative was to sell one’s children, but not to sell them to the local landlords. Instead, some farmers sold their children on the black market. For our purposes, it is particularly important to note that some sold them to foreigners. This, of course, was completely illegal.³³ For example, in 1466, local officials in northeastern China reported with urgency to the Court:

Today, the people [. . .] are selling off their sons and daughters, whole crowds along the roadside. Their selling price is so cheap that even barbarians, foreign priests, come to purchase them.³⁴

Similarly, in 1481, another such scandal broke out. The Court received another report:

When the envoys from the two countries of Siam and Samudera were returning home after coming to the Court to offer tribute, along the way, their boat-men showed them how to purchase the sons and daughters of impoverished people,

²⁹ *Shi zong shi lu* 《世宗實錄》 [Veritable records of Emperor Shizong] (Taipei: Zhong Yang Yan Jiu Yuan, 1962), 卷 1, 正德十六年四月二十二日 (27 May 1521).

³⁰ Cristóvão Vieira, *Cartas dos cativos de Cantão: Cristóvão Vieira e Vasco Calvo (1524?)* [Letters from the captives of Canton], ed. Rui Loureiro (Macau: Instituto Cultural de Macau, 1992), 44.

³¹ On the increasing rural uprisings, see Liu Kexiang, *Zhong guo*, 20–53.

³² This point has been developed in regards to the great rural “slave” revolts at the end of the Ming dynasty. See Mori Masao 森正夫, *Nuhen to kōso: Min-matsu Shin-sho o chūshin to suru, Kachū, Kanan no chiiki shakai ni okeru minshū no teikō undō* 『奴変と抗租：明末清初を中心とする、華中・華南の地域社会における民衆の抵抗運動』 [Slave revolts and protests against rent: The resistance movements of the masses in Kachu and Kanan regional society, with focus on the late Ming and early Qing periods] (Nagoya: Nagoya University, 1981), 75–110.

³³ In regards to the illegality of selling to foreigners, see Gaspar da Cruz, *Tratado em que se contam muito por extenso as cousas da China* [Treatise in which matters of China are recounted at great length] (Macau: Museu Marítimo de Macau, 1996), 92.

³⁴ *Xian zong shi lu* 《憲宗實錄》 [Veritable records of Emperor Xianzong] (Taipei: Zhong yang yan jiu yuan, 1962), 卷 29, 成化二年夏四月甲辰 (17 May 1466).

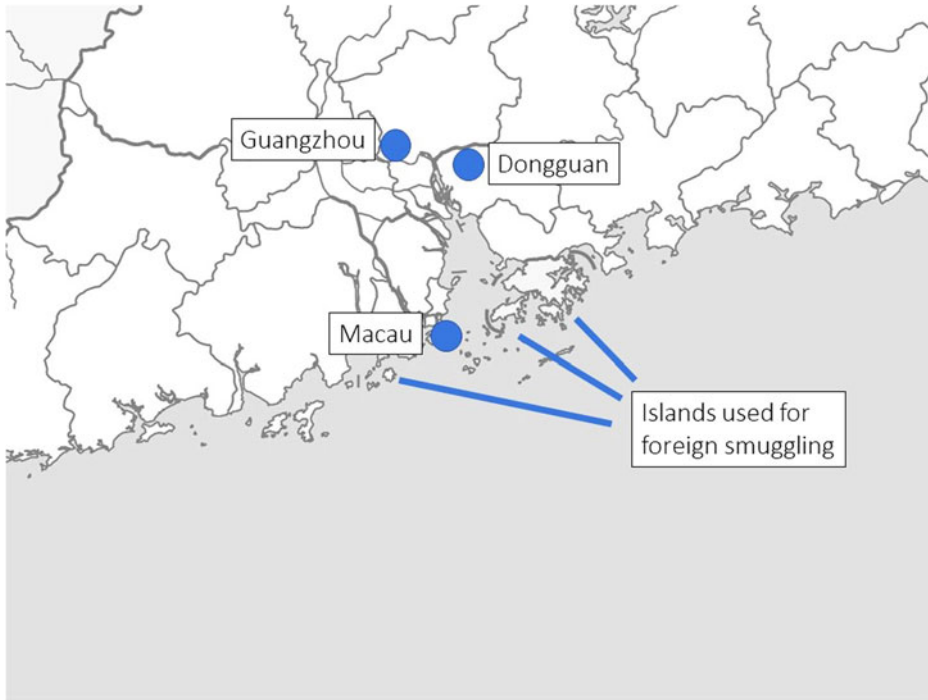


Figure 1. Pearl River delta.

Source: Adapted from NordNordWest. *China Guangdong location map*. 2010. Accessed 13 December 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pearl_River_Delta#/media/File:China_Guangdong_location_map.svg [map annotations added by the author].

how to obtain large quantities of private salt, and how to engage in various other illegal activities.³⁵

The foreign market for children must have thrived in the Pearl River delta, where most of the foreign ships gathered to smuggle, including ships from Siam and Samudera (Sumatra) (Figure 1).

Various Portuguese-related sources hint at this. For example, let us note the formal ban on human trafficking which the local Ming authorities issued to Portuguese Macau in 1605:

Ban on buying people: All foreign merchants, new and old, are not permitted to buy Chinese women or children.³⁶

The Portuguese were presumably the “new” merchants, since this was slightly before the Dutch arrived. That means that the “old” merchants presumably included the Malays, Siamese, and Javanese.. The implication is that before the Portuguese arrived, these other groups had already been purchasing bonded Chinese in the Pearl River delta. And even after the Portuguese arrived, these other groups continued to engage in

³⁵ Ibid., 卷 217, 成化十七年秋七月丁酉 (19 August 1481). This translation is from Geoff Wade, trans., *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: An Open Access Resource* (Singapore: Asia Research Institute and the Singapore E-Press, National University of Singapore), <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/cheng-hua/year-17-month-7-day-24>.

³⁶ Wang Wenbing 汪文炳, “Wai zhi 外志” [Description of foreign countries], *Xiang shan xian zhi* 《香山縣志》 [Gazetteer of Xiangshan county], 1923.

trafficking. For example, in his discussion on the morality of purchasing children, written in the 1570s, Father Francisco Rodrigues says the following: “Even when the Portuguese do not buy them [i.e., the children], the bandits sell them to other foreigners who are in that area.”³⁷

In summary, we can see that many bankrupt farmers refused to follow the traditional, legal response to insolvency: to sell one’s children to the landlords. Instead, they chose to flee, or to pillage and loot, or even to sell their children on the black market. One can sense their enormous anger and hopelessness.

Parents Selling Their Own Children to the Portuguese

Clearly, Sino-Portuguese child trafficking developed out of trends that were already present within the Ming domestic space. The phenomenon of parents selling their children to Portuguese merchants was intimately related to the trends discussed in the previous section. In this section then I would like to consider what it meant for peasants to sell their children to the Portuguese. Why did they choose to do this, rather than sell to a local landlord?

The first point to note is that peasants had to make a very intentional choice to sell to the Portuguese. It was not a casual decision. It meant taking significant legal, financial, and even physical risks. Under Ming law, private Chinese citizens were not allowed to speak with foreigners, let alone trade with them. The punishment was death.³⁸ In order to sequester the Portuguese from the local population, the Guangdong administration tried to seal off Macau. A gate was built across the only land bridge to the city, and a naval officer was assigned to patrol the waters.³⁹ Poor farmers could not sneak through such defences alone.

No source says precisely how the peasants managed to reach the Portuguese, but it is safe to assume that they must have used middlemen (媒人, *meiren*). Middlemen were basically recruiters, travelling around the local villages, connecting sellers with buyers: that is to say, connecting poor peasants selling children with rich landlords who needed labour. Their signatures appear on the sales contracts alongside those of the buyers and sellers.⁴⁰ Apparently, some middlemen specialised in working with foreign buyers. They must have either owned their own ships or arranged transportation with a local smuggler in order to transport the parents and their child across the waters to Macau. All of this doubtless cost money.

So why did peasants take such risks? The answer, of course, lies in the terms of sale. When selling to Chinese landlords, there was a standard price. In contrast, with the Portuguese there was no such standard. Everything passed through negotiations, and price depended upon how eager the buyer was, how healthy the child was, how savvy

³⁷ Francisco Rodrigues, “Comentários do Padre Francisco Rodrigues da Companhia de Jesus sobre os casos verificados na Índia e suas partes . . .” [Commentaries of Father Francisco Rodrigues of the Company of Jesus on cases examined in India and its regions], in *Manuscritos da livraria* [Manuscripts from the library], Codex 805, PT/TT/MSLIV/0805, Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, digitised page 119, <https://digitalq.arquivos.pt/details?id=4248690>.

³⁸ Danjo Hiroshi 檀上寛, 「Mingdai kaikin gainen no seiritsu to sono haikai 明代海禁概念の成立とその背景」 [The establishment and context of the Ming-era notion of the Maritime Ban], 『東洋史研究』 [Journal of oriental researches] 63:3 (2004), 421–55.

³⁹ On the administration that the Ming set up around Portuguese Macau, see Tang Kaijian 汤开建, “Ming dai zai Ao men she li de you guan zhi guan kao zheng 明代在澳门设立的有关职官考证” [Research about the establishment of officials at Macau in the Ming era], 《明代澳门史论稿》 [Collection of articles on Ming-era Macau] (Harbin: Heilongjiang Jiaoyu, 2012), 275–310.

⁴⁰ See, for example, the language in the contract “She xian Wang Wenjin,” 555–6: “[Wang] asked middlemen to negotiate with Li Sun (his nephew), such that the nephew willingly allows the middlemen to speak with the landlord.”

a negotiator the parent was, and so on. The European sources indicate that prices could vary significantly; some mention prices of “30, 40, 50 taels”⁴¹ while others mention “2 or 4 royals of eight a piece.”⁴² It is difficult to compare these prices to the domestic prices listed in the contracts, due both to currency conversion issues and to the significant problem of inflation in the later Ming period. But it is probably safe to assume that these prices are higher than those offered by landlords. Many parents doubtless went to great lengths to sell to the Portuguese because they thought that they could make more money.

In addition, selling to the Portuguese meant that the future of the child was uncertain. The Portuguese did not draw up a contract (perhaps because the sailors who purchased slaves were usually illiterate), and they usually transported the child thousands of kilometres away. Nobody knew what exactly would happen to the child. For some parents, this uncertainty was probably a strong motivating factor: it offered the possibility of a new life. Many peasants hated the sales contract because it was the physical proof of bondage. Accordingly, during uprisings, rebels often sought to find the contract in their master’s home in order to burn it.⁴³ If the Portuguese did not force them to sign a contract, then perhaps the child’s bondage would be less permanent. Similarly, while a parent might find comfort in having the child living nearby, such an arrangement also had a downside: it meant that the child would be looked down on as an “indecent person” for life. In contrast, if the child went far away to a place where nobody knew her or him, and where no documents could prove the bondage status, then starting a new life might be possible.

Accordingly, some sources report very optimistic behaviour among the Chinese parents. Some tried to negotiate with the Portuguese, trying to secure a future emancipated life for the child. For example, the Englishman Peter Mundy wrote:

The poorer sort of Chinese sells their children to pay their debts or maintain themselves (which, it seems, is somewhat tolerated here), but with this condition, as letting them to hire or binding them servants for 30, 40, 50 taels, and after to be freed.⁴⁴

It is particularly interesting to note that some parents tried to push the Portuguese buyers to accept a fixed limit to the period of bondage. This highlights a disparity between the Chinese and Portuguese systems. In the Portuguese colonies, it was not unusual for slaves to purchase their own freedom, though it took many years. In contrast, in China, bondage contracts had no term limit, and permanently downgraded the social status of the child to the lowest class, that of “indecent folks.” Fixed-term contracts and debt contracts did exist, but this was not legally considered to be bondage, and the labourer still retained the social status of “decent citizen.”⁴⁵ In other words, in the eyes of the Chinese parents, the Portuguese style of slavery might resemble a free, fixed-term arrangement rather than a permanent bondage contract. Perhaps the parents who demanded that the Portuguese give a fixed term to their children might have believed that they were offering their child as a debt labourer rather than as a bonded one. Perhaps they believed that the child could still be a decent citizen.

Similarly, Father Francisco Rodrigues seems to suggest that some parents thought they could eventually purchase their children back:

⁴¹ Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1919), 263.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ See Mori, *Nuhen*, 80 and 96.

⁴⁴ Mundy, *Travels*, 263.

⁴⁵ On contract labourers, see Hao, “Ming dai,” 107–13.

In regards to the Chinese slaves who sell themselves or are sold by their parents, one can deal with them as one deals with others: that is to say, that all the necessary conditions for being sold are kept. [. . .] In regards to the children whom their parents sell, it must be known that a father cannot sell his son except in extreme necessity, and even then with the condition that if the father, or the son himself, or any other person who might wish to free him, gives for him [i.e., the son] what he is worth, then at the time of redemption, the master is obligated to free him.⁴⁶

But not all parents had such a rosy view of the Portuguese. To some, selling to such foreigners was akin to tossing the child into an abyss. There was no legally binding contract, no way to track where the Portuguese buyer went. The child disappeared forever, as if dead. It should also be remembered that common rumour whispered that the Portuguese were cannibals who skinned children and then ate their tender flesh.⁴⁷ Thus some Europeans reported dark behaviour among the selling parents. The Englishman Peter Mundy, who visited Macau in 1637, wrote:

Some sell them outright without any condition at all, bringing them wrapped up in a bag secretly by night, and so part with them for 2 or 4 royals of eight a piece.⁴⁸

This attitude disgusted the Dutchman Johan Nieuhof, who visited Macau in the early 1650s:

[The poor Chinese man] will sell his sons and daughters for two or three crowns a piece, not caring what becomes of them afterwards, nor taking notice though he knows they are made slaves forever, and may be put to what employment the purchaser thinks good.⁴⁹

Such parental attitudes might seem cynical, yet sadly, it was perhaps a recognition of the very real helplessness of their situation.

Broadly, one can see that to parents, selling to the Portuguese meant selling to the unknown. Different parents attached different fantasies to this unknown: some held nightmarish visions of Portuguese cannibalism, while others clung to utopian fantasies of a free Portuguese society.

Kidnappers Selling Children to the Portuguese

The other group of people selling children to the Portuguese were kidnappers: Chinese criminals who stole children in order to sell them. I argue that this trend also arose out of the crisis of the poor farmers. The kidnappers were basically one variant of the peasant bandit gangs mentioned earlier: they were peasants who had gone bankrupt and were seeking to make a living off crime. Let us examine the evidence for this.

First of all, the geography of kidnappings suggests that the criminals were former farmers. It seems that the crimes did not occur in the major cities or ports, but rather in the agricultural villages. The Frenchman Jean Mocquet, who visited Portuguese Asia in the 1630s, wrote that the kidnappers worked “within the country, three or four leagues

⁴⁶ Rodrigues, *Comentários*, 118.

⁴⁷ On this legend, see Jin Guoping and Wu Zhiliang, “A (des)cannibalização dos Portugueses” [The (de)cannibalisation of the Portuguese], *Revista de Cultura: International edition* 16 (October 2005), 94–104.

⁴⁸ Mundy, *Travels*, 263.

⁴⁹ Johan Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces to the Grand Tartar Cham Emperor of China*, trans. John Ogilet (London: John Macock, 1669), 214.

from the coast, in the settlements [*habitations*] and villages.”⁵⁰ João de Escobar, a member of the 1563 Portuguese embassy to China, wrote that the kidnappers were “robbing slaves [*escravos*] in the villages [*aldeias*].”⁵¹ The kidnappers were rural criminals rather than urban ones.

Next, the kidnappers were poor. They were not bandit kings or treasure-laden pirates. The Ming scholar-official Li Wenfeng 李文風 wrote that, “the petty thugs of Guangdong steal small children, and compete to get them.”⁵² The word “petty” (少, *shao*) emphasises the low class of these criminals. Let us also note Mocquet’s description of the kidnappers’ methods:

When they see some pretty little boy or girl who pleases them, they flatter them and draw them on with little treats, always promising more to them, and then when they see them a little isolated, they seize them by force and hide them in certain places while waiting for night. Then they come to the seaside, where they know that there are certain traffickers, to whom they sell them for twelve or fifteen taels each, which is about twenty-five crowns.⁵³

The Franciscan priest Gaspar da Cruz, who visited Macau in the 1550s, confirms that this was the usual method of kidnapping:

All those [children] who are usually sold to the Portuguese are kidnapped. They [the kidnappers] bring them [the children], deceived and hidden away, to the Portuguese, and thus sell them to them.⁵⁴

These kidnapping methods are strikingly humble and low cost. The kidnappers did not own any special weaponry, equipment, or facilities. Their only tools were a hand full of sweets and a mouth full of lies. It seems that many of them did not even own a boat. They (like the poor parents) had to rely on middlemen or coastal smugglers to sail the children out to Macau.

The humble status of the kidnappers is also attested to by João de Escobar. He actually saw a group of these kidnappers. The Ming army had captured them and dragged them to Macau. After showing them to the Portuguese, an official was “ordered to break their shins and whip them, from which they later died.”⁵⁵ The brutality of the punishment is telling. The fact that the official did not hesitate to cane them to death, without giving them a trial or writing a report, indicates that they had low social standing.

The kidnappings were perhaps a perverse form of social protest—not unlike the peasant revolts. It seems that the kidnappers often targeted the children of the rich. Let us note Mocquet’s story. He says that the kidnappers scouted for “some pretty little boy or girl who pleases them.” That is to say, they wanted to kidnap a strong, healthy

⁵⁰ Jean Mocquet, *Voyages en Afrique, Asie, Indes orientales et occidentales faits par Jean Mocquet* [Voyages to Africa, Asia, the East and West Indies, made by Jean Mocquet] (Paris: Migneret, 1830), 284, <https://books.google.com/books?id=GU14H50kbsAC&dq>.

⁵¹ João de Escobar, *Comentários*, in *Em busca das origens de Macau: Antologia documental* [In search of the origins of Macau: A documentary anthology] (Lisbon: Grupo de Trabalho do Ministério da Educação, 1996), 146.

⁵² Li Wenfeng 李文風, *Yue shan cong tan* 《月山叢談》 [Compilation of writings from Yue shan]. The complete work is no longer extant. The passage quoted is an excerpt from Gu Yanwu 顧炎武, *Tian xia jun guo li bing shu* 《天下郡國利病書》 [Book on the strengths and weaknesses of the countries of the world] (Shanghai: Shanghai ke xue ji shu wen xian chu ban she, 2002), 第 2812 册.

⁵³ Mocquet, *Voyages*, 284.

⁵⁴ Cruz, *Tratado*, 92.

⁵⁵ Escobar, *Comentários*, 146.

child, who could be sold for much greater profit than a scrawny, sickly one. That meant targeting children of well-to-do families. The Portuguese sources describe this problem in an episode involving the infamous Simão de Andrade, whose trafficking activities in China contributed to the failure of the 1517 embassy. The Renaissance historian João de Barros recorded that when Andrade returned to India:

There were discovered many boys and girls from Guangdong, children of honourable folks, whom Simão de Andrade, and those of his armada, had bought, without it seeming to them to be offending the city in doing so. For they knew that in all those eastern regions, parents were generally accustomed to sell their children and to give them as payment or as pawns. And it seemed to them [i.e., Andrade et al] that those [children] who had been sold to them were of that sort [i.e., sold by parents], and not kidnapped by thieves.⁵⁶

Andrade thought that he had purchased the children of poor farmers, but he had in fact purchased the children of “honourable folks.”

Conclusions

In this paper, I have tried to show that Portuguese child trafficking fed off of trends within Ming society itself. It was one more symptom of the struggles of the poor farmers.

From an ethical perspective, we have seen that poor farmers had a complicated role. On the one hand, they were the victims: losing their lands, forced into poverty, unable to find other ways to survive other than bondage. On the other hand, they were the villains: the heartless parents who sold off their children to cannibals in exchange for cash, the kidnappers who preyed on innocents. Doubtless there were also other poor farmers, and many, who made choices that were more just and compassionate. But such individuals did not cause trouble, and consequently, they do not appear in our sources. They toiled, starved, and suffered in relative silence, neglected by all.

I would like to close this article by considering the perspective of the children themselves. After all, throughout this article, we have taken the perspective of the adults: the parents, the kidnappers, the Portuguese merchants. The children may have seemed like voiceless pawns. And sadly, that is how they generally appear in our extant sources. I can thus offer only a few tentative comments.

It seems that many children, and especially older ones, tried to flee. Many must have run back to their homes. The sales contracts for children always include a clause making the parents responsible if their child fled from the new owner, forcing them to denounce their own children if they returned home.⁵⁷ This suggests that some children did not understand that their parents had intentionally sold them.

The younger children were completely lost and disoriented. Although it is a slightly different context, let us note the testimony of the great Joseon admiral, Yi Sun-sin. He recovered a number of children whom the Japanese armies had taken captive as slaves during Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea in 1592. He described one particularly young child: “One Korean girl recaptured by Yu Sop was only four or five years old, unable to tell what her family name was or where she lived.”⁵⁸ Such youth had no hope of ever

⁵⁶ João de Barros, *Da Ásia* [About Asia] (Lisbon: Regia Officina Typografica, 1787), III.6.ii, 16–18.

⁵⁷ See, for example, “Dian gu nan zi shu shi 典僱男子書式” [Format for a standard contract for hiring boys], in Zhang, *Zhong guo*, 1068.

⁵⁸ Yi Sun-sin, *Imjin changch'o: Admiral Yi Sun-sin's Memorials to Court*, trans. Ha Tae-hung, ed. Lee Chong-young (Seoul: Yonsei, 1981), 35.

finding their home again. The scholar Ye Quan, who visited Macau in the later 1560s, tells the following story:

One day I was in a foreigner's house. I saw a six- or seven-year-old child weeping out loud. I asked the interpreter, "Was the child born in the foreigner's house?" He said, "No. He was kidnapped, sold, and brought over this year from Dongguan. He thinks of his parents and weeps."⁵⁹

The child seems completely helpless, stuck in a strange mansion, far away from home. The sales contracts always contain a clause saying that the new adoptive father is not responsible if the child dies.⁶⁰ Presumably, early death, or even suicide, must have happened sometimes.

Those children who survived the initial shock slowly took on a new identity. They were given a new name (often that of their Portuguese owner), and a new social identity (that of slave). They also faced an enormous cultural adaptation. They were immediately spoken to in Portuguese, given European food and dress. They had left Ming society, and were entering the world of Portuguese colonialism, which had its own types of inequality and injustice. It is at this point that our study leaves off, and that other excellent studies pick up the narrative: studies which describe the later lives of these people as they flowed into the European labour market.

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⁵⁹ Ye Quan 葉權, *Xian bo bian* 《賢博編》 [Collection of wisdom and erudition] (Beijing: Zhong hua shu ju, 1987).

⁶⁰ As an example, let us note the language in the template contract for bonded boys: "Dian gu," 1068: "Henceforth, if there should occur anything unforeseen, may it all be considered Heaven-given destiny, and may nobody say otherwise."

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