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# A Survey of Education of Early Colonial Hong Kong

Hugo Wai Hoo Chan[1], Noble Po Kan Lo[2], Anna Wing Bo Tso[3], Beatrice Kuen Fong Ma[4]

***Abstract***

*This paper explores the evolution of education during the early colonial period in Hong Kong, focusing on the coexistence and influence of traditional Chinese and Western educational philosophies. It examines two key institutions: the Kun Ting Study Hall, a traditional village school preparing students for the Qing Dynasty's Imperial Civil Service Exam, and St. Paul's College, a Christian school established to instill Western values and Christian principles. The study highlights their contrasting purposes, with Kun Ting preserving ancestral traditions and St. Paul's promoting Western ideologies. Over time, both institutions evolved to serve as platforms for elite education and cultural interaction, bridging gaps between the British and local Chinese communities. The paper discusses the role of education in fostering social harmony and shaping colonial Hong Kong's society. It underscores the enduring significance of these institutions in promoting cross-cultural understanding and influencing Hong Kong's educational development.*

***Keywords:*** *Early Colonial Hong Kong, Education History, Kun Ting Study Hall, St. Paul's College, Cross-Cultural Interaction.*

Education has had a long history intertwined with human development. In China, there is evidence that schools are operating as early as 1045 BC in Zhou Dynasty (Lockard, 1970). There was no fixed curriculum in the earliest days, but it gradually developed to teach ancient China's "six skills": archery, rite, music, horsemanship, calligraphy and arithmetic (Kendall & Knapp, 1996). Over in the British Isles, the oldest school is traced back to the establishment of the King's School, Canterbury with its foundation in 597 AD (Watson, 1916). The school originally started as an Abbey school, where Augustinian monks performed teachings (Meyers, 2004). It became a grammar school when the school was re-founded by King Henry VIII in 1541 (Watson, 1916). By mid-19th century, China was under the rule of the Qing Dynasty while Queen Victoria ruled Great Britain. When Hong Kong was ceded to Great Britain following the signage of the *Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Commerce between Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland and the Emperor of China* or commonly known as *The Treaty of Nanking* in 1841 after the end of the First Opium War, one of the issues faced would naturally be the need of education. It would be a difficult question for the government to tackle at the time, as Hong Kong was only a fishing village composed of 7,450 predominantly Tanka fishermen and Hakka charcoal burners.

There was evidence that British colonists observed the existence of numerous village schools in Hong Kong in 1843 (Bridgman, 1843). They probably would have come across the Chou Wong Wi Kung Study Hall, which was built in 1685. Another example of a classic village school in Hong Kong is Kun Ting Study Hall as illustrated in Figures 1 to 4. The Study Hall was built in

[1] The University of Cambridge
[2] The Hong Kong Polytechnic University CPCE
[3] The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong
[4] The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong

1870 and doubled as a school and ancestral hall. Its main goal was to prepare students for the Imperial Civil Service Exam of the Qing Dynasty and to pay respect to the village's ancestor, Tang Kun-ting (Ren, 2010). Figure 1 illustrates the front entrance of the study hall. The study hall was built in the style of a Chinese temple. By merely looking at the front, one can easily mistake the study hall as a temple, and it conforms with the study hall's second usage as an ancestral hall to pay respect to ancestors. On top of the main entrance, four Chinese characters "觀廷書室" can be seen inscribed from right to left (the traditional direction of Chinese writing), which denotes the name of the study hall. Besides the main entrance, two red boards were hung, inscribed with the couplet (a Chinese form of poetry) "崇山毓秀，德澤流芳", which means the study is located inside a beautiful mountain, and because of its prime location, the virtue of the ancestor and its students will be praised for years to come.




Figure 1. The Front of Kun Ting Study Hall.

In Figure 2, a major corridor inside the Study Hall can be observed. At both sides of this corridor, there are many red plaques lining up against the wall. The plaques inscribed the names of the Study Hall's students who achieved officially ranked scholarly honours under the Imperial Civil Service Exam of Qing Dynasty. It showcased the emphasis and pride that the Study Hall placed in educating its students to sit for examination. The two plaques farthest from the moon gate indicated that students were awarded the rank "Township Scholars" in the examination. At the end of the corridor is the moon gate, which is a form of traditional Chinese architecture. The moon gate is symbolic, as Chinese believe that the circle is both a symbol of heaven and perfection (Keswick & Jencks, 1978). It is also styled after ancient bronze mirrors (Keswick & Jencks, 1978). Because of the construction of the gate, only one person can pass through each time, as the middle part is the only part that has enough room to pass through (Keswick & Jencks, 1978). Thus, the moon gate at the end of the corridor full of officially ranked scholarly honours plaques demanded its students to conduct themselves perfectly and have high moral grounds. The mirror's symbolic meaning came from the legend that the first emperor of China-Qin Shi

Huang had a mirror that could reflect one's moral and heart (Wood, 2007). Thus, the moon gate also reminded its students to act perspicaciously and impartial in judgment. The construct of the singular person pass through can also be reflective of the competition under the Imperial Civil Service Exam. As the average province can send around 10,000 exam takers to sit for each exam (Ji & Dalle, 2003), very limited number of students can eventually achieve any sort of official rank. Thus, the architect aimed at reminding students to work hard and hopefully they can be the person passing through the corridor with a plaque earned for the study hall and the village.




Figure 2. A Major Corridor Inside Kun Ting Study Hall.

Besides being a school, another major function of the Kun Ting Study Hall is to pay respect to ancestors. Figure 3 illustrates the main ancestral hall "Shun Tak Tong". Shun Tak Tong is particularly tall compared to other structures of the Study Hall, which signifies its importance. It is also reinforced by two large granite columns to provide needed support and to prevent it from collapse. In the middle of Shun Tak Tong is the ancestral altar, where the spirit tablets are installed in the middle to accept prayers and offerings from villagers. According to traditional Chinese beliefs, each man has three different souls. Upon his death, one soul would follow attach with the body and be buried in the grave, the second soul would go through the 10 Courts of Judgment and be eventually reborn, and the third soul would stay close to the spirit tablet in the family alter (Smith, 2015). Right in front of the spirit tablets is an incense burner on a decorated table, so villagers can burn incense as an offering to their ancestors. While the two sides of Shun Tak Tong actually lead into two rooms for meetings or important village functions.



Figure 3. Shun Tak Tong – The Ancestral Hall Inside Kun Ting Study Hall.

Study tables and chairs can still be found inside Kun Ting Study Hall as shown in Figure 4, although the study hall ceased to offer education function after the Second World War. The chair was a typical 1800s style without any sort of back support, and it was made of wood. The table has a drawer inside for storage of books, and it can be locked by a metal hinge. A set of couplets can also be seen hanging on the wall of the classroom. After *The Convention between the United Kingdom and China, Respecting an Extension of Hong Kong Territory* was signed in 1898, New Territories (including the village where the Study Hall is located) became a part of the British colony. It was said that the British army occupied the Study Hall when they first entered the New Territories area and used it as a command post (Liu et al., 1997). After chaos between Chinese villagers and British officials were suppressed, the government sent one English teacher and one Chinese teacher to provide education to village children (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2016).



Figure 4. Study Table and Chair inside Kun Ting Study Hall.

Besides the existing Chinese villages schools, when Hong Kong became a British colony, there were attempts to set up schools in Hong Kong by foreigners. In the early days, education was the responsibility of Protestants and Catholics social services in the city. By 1843, Italian missionaries had begun to provide education to Chinese and British boys (Bray & Koo, 2005). Vincent John Stanton, the first colonial Chaplain, was very much interested in education (Chu, 2005). He established a school in Hong Kong by the year 1847, and with significant funding brought over by the first Bishop of Victoria-Reverend George Smith, a school aiming at providing education for boys was formally established in 1851 (Cheng & Brown, 2006). The college was named St. Paul's College, and it would become one of the most prestigious boys' schools in Hong Kong (Cheng & Brown, 2006). The mission of the school was governed by its statutes when established by the Church of England. The school was founded to provide education for clergy and Christian Teachers. However, it was also stated that the school should provide service to both native and European children who would like to get educated under the Christian principles (The Colonial Church Chronicle and Missionary Journal, 1850). The school had 34 students (after 7 students being transferred from The Morrison Education Society School upon its closure) (Sweeting, 1990) within the first few years of its operation.

Figure 5 below is an illustration of the school badge of St. Paul's College. From studying the school badge, it would not be hard to deduce the mission of the school since its foundation. The base of the badge is a cross, which indicated that the school is organised based on Christian principles. Inside the circle, the name of the school "Saint Paul's College" is written against a white background, which represents purity and righteousness (Quiggle, 2007). The red circle in the middle represents the blood of Jesus Christ when he sacrificed himself on the cross and Christian martyrs (Flancher & Erdey, 2008). The crown in the middle had been interpreted in different ways, it could be interpreted as the crown of life that God has promised those who could resist temptation (Kohlenberger, 2003). The book, that is opened in the middle, is a representation of the Bible, while the scallop shell below the book is the symbol of St. James

The Great, the patron saint of pilgrimage (Murray, 2009). The addition of the scallop shell could symbolise the establishment of a new school by those who travelled far from the other end of the world, it could also symbolise the spreading the gospel far by its students when reading together with the book above. The Shepherd's Staff has the meaning of guidance (Whittick, 1971), which conforms to the school's mission to guide students under Christian principles. The key has always been symbolic in Christian teachings, and it can symbolise the key to the Kingdom of Heaven (Norden, 1985), which can be seen as by studying in this school and learning Christian principles, its pupil will be granted the key to enter heaven. Lastly, the school motto "The Fear the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom" is written in Chinese at the bottom, which symbolise that the school is opened to native youths, and conforms with its mission to bring Christian teachings to native youths.




Figure 5: School Badge of St. Paul's College, Hong Kong

The design of the school badge is a complete illustration of the school's mission. Given consideration to the special political environment at the time, it would be wise for the British to install Western and Christian value in the minds of Chinese youth as fast and effective as possible. With the invasion of another country's land, policy to calm the conflict is necessary. Although force is one of the methods, it is not a method that could be effective in the long run. It is education that can be the bridge of culture and ensure prolonged prosperity. A prime example is the resistance from natives that the British government faced when the New Territories area was let to them. Immediately upon crushing the resistance by military force, the government sent its own teacher to Kun Ting Study Hall to induce British values to villagers.

Although St. Paul's College and Kun Ting Study Hall were founded merely 20 years apart, their missions were completely different at first. While both schools were aimed at providing education, one was focused on teaching Chinese youth Western values and the other was focused on preparing students to be a civil servant in Imperial China. However, with the passage of time, the schools have more similarities than differences. However, it was well-noted that both schools were considered elite establishments at the time. Only children from wealthy families can afford to send their children to be educated. Also, due to racial segregation policies (Wiltshire, 2003), schools would be one of the platforms that provided interactions between British and local

Chinese. Thus, these early colonial schools did not only serve as a platform to provide education, but they also served as a platform to promote racial understandings and interactions.

It is also worthy to note that St. Paul's College and Kun Ting Study Hall were both private schools. It was not until 1862, when the first school "The Government Central College" was established by the government. The establishment of the new school also brought over Frederick Stewart to become its first principal (Bickley, 1998). Stewart was widely credited as a reformer of Hong Kong's education system. In 1865, he would go on to become the first department head of Hong Kong's Government Education Department (Bickley, 1998).

St. Paul's College and Kun Ting Study Hall represented both worlds perfectly in their time. On one side of the world, new technology, discoveries and religious values were taught to curious minds that continued to seek and absorb knowledge at St. Paul's College. On the other hand, tradition and knowledge accumulated from thousands of years were taught to Chinese youths at Kun Ting Study Hall. Although they were run by minds with complete difference in education philosophy, mission, and religious beliefs, both schools served as important grounds to bring young minds brighter futures. In many instances, receiving education was seen as a pathway to change one's destiny, and both schools were utilised in this mean.

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