CHAPTER ONE

CHINESE IDENTITY IN EXILE: CONSTRUCTING CULTURAL EDUCATION AT NEW ASIA

Cultural education is a social cause, is the life of the history and culture of a nation and race.... Chinese people must truly understand Chinese culture, and must nurture talent that is suitable for us to use to build ourselves.... One must possess knowledge of Chinese culture, and at the same time must understand the different cultures of the world. One must foster Chinese culture, and also must connect the cultures of China and the West.¹

With this speech, given at the opening ceremony of New Asia College on October 10, 1949, college president Qian Mu articulated the school’s mission.² The cultural education New Asia would provide was to serve as a base from which China could rebuild and grow, while also allowing it to forge stronger connections with other cultures. To fulfill this goal, the founders of New Asia established a collection of cultural education institutions: a college, a research institute, a night school for children, and a public lecture series. Though each of these targeted a different sector of Hong Kong Chinese and had different institutional structures, together they communicated a common message of Chinese cultural promotion through Chinese humanities studies. As a group, these institutions made cultural commitment and Chinese scholarly pursuit the components of a cultural education program that New Asia believed would meet the deepest needs of both China and the Chinese in Hong Kong.

This chapter first explains New Asia’s interpretation of China’s cultural crisis and the nature of its educational solution. It then shows

¹ Qian Mu, “Yazhou wenshang xuexuan kaixue dianli jiangci zhaiyao [Summary of the Speech Given at the Opening Ceremony of the Asia School of Humanities and Commerce]” (October 10, 1949), in Xinya yiduo 新亚遗铎 [Inherited Teachings of New Asia] (Taibei: Lianjing chuban shiye gongsi, 1998): 1–2. Quotations from New Asia publications are translated by the author unless otherwise indicated.
² At this point, the name of the school was Asia School of Humanities and Commerce. See Introduction, note 4.
how the college—the first of the New Asia family of institutions and subsequently its core—established a system that featured Chinese and humanities studies but also included Western and scientific learning. Finally, it explains how the research institute, night school, and public lecture series extended the work and reach of the college by engaging students and attendees both in advanced Chinese studies and in community activities. Altogether, these institutions revealed a precise vision for Chinese cultural revival that combined and balanced various goals and areas of learning in order to create a cultural education for China’s future.

The Mission of Cultural Education

The need for cultural education within a context of cultural crisis was neither new nor unique to New Asia. Since the late nineteenth century and China’s devastating defeat at the hands of the Japanese, Chinese intellectuals had been forced to comprehensively rethink the nature and value of China’s culture in light of the challenge posed by technologically superior foreign powers. Though the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century were certainly humiliating, China had not felt its cultural values and self-sufficiency to be fundamentally threatened. The famous adage, “Learn from the barbarians in order to beat the barbarians,” while conceding Western technological prowess, nevertheless implied cultural condescension. The Sino-Japanese War and the subsequent turmoil of reform and revolution, however, made a mockery of this attitude and brought to light the piercing question of whether and how Chinese culture and learning were to face the problems brought by external threats.

In this context, the *ti-yong* (体用) formula—“Chinese learning for essence, Western learning for function” (中学为体, 西学为用)—was meant to bring some sense of order to the relationship between culture and education. By preserving Chinese learning as the essential *ti* (体) while permitting Western learning for the functional *yong* (用), both Chinese culture and Chinese learning would be protected at their most fundamental level. In this way, the Chinese cultural essence would

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3 This concept was articulated by scholar-statesman Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837–1909).