CHAPTER THREE

COLONIAL POLICY AND CULTURAL EVALUATION: CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION IN POSTWAR HONG KONG

In its early years, it was the American NGOs that gave New Asia the recognition and support that were critical to its existence. By the college’s tenth anniversary in 1959, however, the Hong Kong British colonial government had become its principal source of funding, as well as the external authority under which New Asia would function and define itself. When the 1950s began, the government was ambivalent as to the value of New Asia specifically and Chinese higher education generally; however, by decade’s end, it had committed itself to establishing a new Chinese-medium university. This university would be formed by joining New Asia with two other Chinese postsecondary colleges. The choice of New Asia as one of the founding colleges of the new Chinese university marked its formal recognition as an institution worthy of university status and a permanent component of the Hong Kong educational landscape.

The process by which the British colonial government in Hong Kong came to acknowledge New Asia entailed the consideration of many factors beyond those specific to that institution. The government’s evaluation of New Asia was situated within its broader interpretation of the merits and meaning of a Chinese higher education relative to a British English-based one. In the midst of a decolonizing world, the British wished to show the extent of their benevolent rule through culturally sensitive educational policies; at the same time, they also aimed to underline the virtues of Western learning in order to secure their educational legacy in the Asian world. Balancing these goals was particularly complicated in Hong Kong, for the colony’s future seemed highly uncertain and yet demanding of long-term consideration. While it was not headed toward independence as were most remaining colonies, its precarious position neighboring two unsettled and acrimonious Chinas meant that the possibility of instability was ever-present. The practical, political, and ideological problems imposed onto Hong Kong due to these embattled neighbors meant that the British were
increasingly motivated to create in Hong Kong an intellectual free-haven for Chinese education in order to forestall undue influence from either China through educational means. Amid these complex and interwoven issues of postwar colonialism and Cold War tensions, the government’s increasing support of New Asia and the decision to create a Chinese-medium university were meant simultaneously to secure British educational authority and influence, to acknowledge the growing demands of the Chinese population for higher education in its own tradition and language, and to position Hong Kong educationally relative to the two Chinas in the most neutral and stable way possible.

This chapter examines how the British colonial government in Hong Kong, over the course of the 1950s, came to change its perception of and policy toward New Asia, and how this process brought to the surface many complex cultural, educational, and political factors that, together, shaped the colonial context in which New Asia was operating. The chapter first evaluates the investigations and debates of the early 1950s regarding the circumstances of postsecondary education in Hong Kong. The ambivalent perspectives and stalled policy resulting from this first period reveal the ambiguities that could emerge when interpreting the intersection of language, culture, and higher education. The second section analyzes the mounting political tensions of the mid-1950s, which reopened consideration of the colony’s educational issues. This stage of discussion increasingly drew attention to the convergence of problems resulting from a divided China, a population of refugees who were becoming residents, and the growth of local cultural pride. Finally, the chapter traces the public debate and new policy decisions of the late 1950s. In spurring the British colonial government to remake its policy on higher education in Hong Kong, this debate revealed the difficulty of determining objective educational standards and the problem of cultural interpretation in assigning meaning to the educational enterprise. In moving from a position of limited endorsement of Chinese-medium higher education to the decision to establish a new Chinese-medium university, the British colonial government aimed to establish in Hong Kong a nonpolitical Chinese education and, through this, create a positive colonial legacy. The process of creating and executing higher education policy in 1950s Hong Kong thus revealed the complexities of cultural meaning and its political implications.