

Gillian Bickley (1997). *The Golden Needle: The Biography of Frederick Stewart (1836-1889)*. Hong Kong: Baptist University.

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The current academic year sees the first stage in the implementation of a government-initiated policy which will bring about a significant shift in the roles of the English and Chinese languages in Hong Kong's education system at secondary level. The SAR government's new language policy, which requires that 'most schools should adopt Chinese for teaching all academic subjects', represents a fundamental change in the nature of language education in Hong Kong, since for the past three decades the official medium of instruction of the overwhelming majority of schools has been English. The announcement of the new policy in September 1997, and the publication of the list of schools which are allowed to retain English as the instructional medium, caused a storm of controversy among parents, teachers and students, who argued that the policy was high-handed, discriminatory and socially divisive. The controversy over the new policy reinvigorated the perennial debate about language policy and language standards in Hong Kong schools.

Although debate invariably centred on the merits of the policy, the controversy has underlined the importance of viewing current issues in language in education from a historical perspective. Although it is not widely acknowledged in the media, there is an increasing realisation that the language-related problems which have confronted policy makers and educators in the last two decades of the twentieth century owe their origins to, and thus can only be fully explained by, the unique set of historical forces which have shaped the development of education and society in Hong Kong since the mid-nineteenth century. It is highly appropriate, then, that in late 1997, at the height of the storm over the new language policy, Gillian Bickley's excellent biography of Frederick Stewart should appear. Dr Bickley's account of Stewart's policies as Headmaster of the Central School, Hong Kong's first government Anglo-Chinese school, and his instrumental role in the establishment of the colony's government education system as Inspector of Schools, provides not only fascinating insight into education and language in Victorian Hong Kong, but also establishes and clarifies the link between present problems and past developments.

Frederick Stewart was born on 17 October 1836 in Rathen in Aberdeenshire. Stewart's parents, who provided him with a home 'rich in the old Scottish peasant virtues of hard work and humble piety' (p. 9), set great store on education, and to this end endured years of careful economy to pay his fees to attend Rathen Parish School (1841-1851), Aberdeen Grammar School (1851-1854), and King's College, Aberdeen (1854-1859), from which he graduated top of his class in Intellectual and Moral Sciences and as a first prizeman in Moral Philosophy. After graduation, Stewart entered Divinity Hall in Aberdeen with a view to becoming a Minister of the Church of Scotland. At the end of his second year of theological studies, Stewart took a holiday job at Stubbington House School near Fareham, on the south coast of England. It was here, in August 1861, that his interest was aroused by an advertisement for the post of Headmaster and Inspector of Schools in Hong Kong, a position which would require the successful candidate to 'teach the English Language and the general subjects of English education to Native youths, and to superintend the Native Schoolmasters throughout the Island' (p. 47). Aided by a glowing letter of recommendation from the Principal of Aberdeen University, Stewart's application for the post was accepted by the colony's newly instituted Board of Education, and in December 1861 he set sail from Southampton on the first leg of his 58-day journey to Hong Kong.

Stewart arrived in Hong Kong on 15 February 1862, and some weeks later commenced his duties at the newly opened Central School. The proposal to establish the school had originated with the scholar-missionary, James Legge, who believed that the teaching and learning of English in the government schools would be more effective if instruction in the language was concentrated in one institution and was under the supervision of a competent European master. Although the plan to establish the Central School had been inspired by Legge, the implementation of the policy was largely in Stewart's hands. In the light of the current debate in Hong Kong over the medium of instruction and standards of English, it is interesting to read Dr Bickley's account of Stewart's policies, practices and experiences in relation to these issues.

The emphasis on English and relative neglect of Chinese in Hong Kong's education system, particularly in the post-war period, is often viewed as the outcome of some kind of colonialist conspiracy. As the colonial government's first initiative in English-medium education, the establishment of the Central School might be interpreted as the first step in the development of an English-dominant system. However, as Dr Bickley reveals, in Stewart's time as

Headmaster (1862-1881) equal emphasis was placed on English and Chinese studies at the Central School. Stewart's education reports during this period make frequent reference to the need for his students to have a solid grounding in Chinese language and culture before proceeding to study Western subjects through the medium of English. For example, in his 1878 report he noted, 'I know of no more humiliating spectacle than to see, as we frequently do in Hong Kong, boys who know English much better than they do Chinese, who entirely neglect their own language when they begin to learn the other' (p. 105). Stewart's belief in the inherent value of Chinese education, his view that a firm foundation in Chinese was a necessary basis for the study of a foreign language, and his complaint that many local students tended to fall between two stools, both linguistically and culturally, have been echoed by policy makers and educators in Hong Kong throughout the post-war years.

One of the reasons why it has proved difficult to achieve an equal balance between the study of two cultures and languages in Hong Kong education is that a knowledge of English has always been perceived to offer greater opportunities for socio-economic mobility than Chinese. In this respect, Dr Bickley provides evidence from Stewart's reports that the primary motivation of many Central School students was to acquire a basic knowledge of English (rather than, as Stewart hoped, the content of a Western education), which would enable them to obtain well-paid positions in government and business. In his 1865 report, Stewart noted of the students that 'Nothing seems to find favor with them which does not bear a market value. Hence the comparative success of the Central School, English being convertible into *dollars*; hence, also, the neglect of the vernacular schools, Chinese being *unsaleable*' (p. 90). Although Dr Bickley does not mention this, the problem of students dropping out of Anglo-Chinese mission schools after acquiring a smattering of English for employment purposes pre-dated the establishment of the Central School; in fact, James Legge's first-hand experience of the problem as headmaster of the Anglo-Chinese College appears to have been a significant factor in the formulation of his scheme to 'centralise' the teaching of English in the colony.

One of the consequences of this pragmatic attitude to the study of English was that language standards at the Central School were not always as high as might have been expected given its status as the colonial government's flagship English-medium institution. The following extract from his 1868 report suggests that Stewart was forced to defend and justify his language policies and practices even in the early years of his headmastership:

‘English conversation’ is a subject of great difficulty to the boys, and I am sorry to find people so exacting on this matter. Several have been rejected, without trial, on account of this defect. It is very easily accounted for. The boys have no possible opportunity of speaking English except to their teachers at school. It cannot, therefore, be expected that immediately on leaving school they could be very proficient in it (p. 112-3).

However, it was not until the arrival of Governor Hennessy in the late 1870s that the issue of English standards at the Central School came to a head. In a speech at the Central School Prize Day on 25 January 1878, Hennessy asked Stewart a simple and direct question, ‘How many pupils speak English?’, to which Stewart gave a characteristically honest and direct answer: ‘fifty or sixty, and very imperfectly.’ (At the time, six hundred and ten students were enrolled at the school.) Two days later, Hennessy sent a despatch to the Colonial Office expressing his dissatisfaction with the system of education at the Central School:

After Hong Kong has enjoyed thirty years of colonial government and large annual grants for education, I expected to find the new generation with something like a knowledge of English. The system unfortunately is that after learning perhaps only a smattering of our language, a few of the pupils leave the school and go at once into native business houses, whilst nine tenths leave the government school entirely ignorant of the English language (p. 146).

The immediate consequence of Hennessy’s visit to the Central School was the calling of an Education Conference in February 1878, which resolved that the ‘primary object to be borne in view by the government should be the teaching of English’ (p. 159), a decision which resulted in a significant increase in the amount of time devoted to English in the curriculum (to the inevitable detriment of Chinese studies). Although Stewart’s educational work was highly valued by the European and Chinese communities in Hong Kong, and officials in the Colonial Office in London, Hennessy (who did not enjoy the same degree of esteem and respect) used the controversy over English standards to ease Stewart out from the Inspectorship and the Headship of the Central School. From 1881 until his death eight years later, Stewart occupied a number of senior positions in the Hong Kong government, including on several occasions that of Acting Governor.

There are two points I would like to make about Dr Bickley’s use of sources in her study. A fundamental problem which confronts any biographer

of Stewart is that hardly any primary sources of a personal nature (letters to family and friends, diaries, private papers, etc.) appear to have survived. Without such sources, the biographer has little choice but to attempt to reconstruct incidents and experiences from Stewart's life from primary and secondary sources which have no direct relevance to Stewart, or from official documents such as government reports and despatches which, because they were intended for public consumption, do not necessarily reveal his true feelings, beliefs or motivations. For example, although Dr Bickley has meticulously reconstructed from Colonial Office records the circumstances surrounding Stewart's appointment, she is unable satisfactorily to explain the precise reasons why an earnest, scholarly young man like Stewart, who had hitherto spent all of his life in Aberdeenshire, and with his career goals apparently already established, should wish to seek and accept a teaching post in Hong Kong, a crime-ridden frontier settlement whose long-term prospects were far from certain.

In the first chapter, Dr Bickley observes that Stewart's story is 'a window into the whole life of the Hong Kong community at that time'. While it is true that Dr Bickley's account of Stewart's work provides a wealth of information about the workings of the colonial government in the mid-Victorian period, particularly in the area of language and education, she is unable, through Stewart, to reveal very much about the social and cultural life of the colony during this period. This would not matter very much if the focus of her study was education policy and practice in the government schools in the nineteenth century. However, since this is primarily intended as a work of biography, we have every reason to expect a complete portrait of the man, not just his public persona. Although we learn (mainly from obituaries and newspaper reports) that Stewart was a quiet, modest man with scholarly interests and a high sense of duty, Dr Bickley's study provides few insights into his day-to-day life, his friends, his relationship with his family in Scotland, his interests, and so on. The lack of information about such essential biographical topics is a reflection not only of Stewart's somewhat retiring and solitary character, but also the apparent lack of primary sources which reveal the private man.

The second point about sources concerns the system of referencing used in the book. The reconstruction of Stewart's life in Scotland and Hong Kong from a wide range of primary and secondary sources has obviously been a long and difficult process. Although Dr Bickley provides a select bibliography at the end of her book (together with an extensive list of acknowledgements), she does not always indicate her sources in the text. Information about

Stewart's educational work in Hong Kong appears to be derived mainly from Colonial Office records (Series 129), government reports about education published in the *Blue Books* and the *Hong Kong Government Gazette*, and Hong Kong newspapers such as the *China Mail*. Given the enormous time and effort that must have been involved in reconstructing Stewart's life, it is somewhat surprising that Dr Bickley has chosen not to provide precise details about her sources (particularly page numbers), either in the form of footnotes or end notes. The omission of this information may prove frustrating for students and researchers who wish to study various aspects of the book in more detail. However, this should not detract from a study which makes a significant contribution to our knowledge and understanding of language in education in Hong Kong.