

TRUE LIGHT OLD GIRLS The old school of Ho Wai-On (Ann-Kay)

True Light was founded by the American missionary Harriet Newell Noyes in 1872, pioneering Chinese women's education. It was the first women's school in Guangdong Province, China. Women came for lessons carrying their babies and toddlers! It later moved to Hong Kong and branched into several schools called True Light. The one I went to is called True Light Middle School of Hong Kong where I stayed for nearly six years. Before that I went to at least ten different schools, plus not going to school at all for about a year.

It's a Girl's school. The morning started with an assembly in the hall. Girls sang hymns, prayed, learned Bible verses and listened to a brief sermon by a teacher. Then we went back to our respective classroom to listen to our class teacher talk about what's good for us for about 40 minutes before school lessons began. The Head Mistress at the time was formidable and a devout Christian. Teachers had to check our already unflattering school uniform was not showing too much of our legs or the shape of our bodies, and that our hair was styled to what was acceptable by the school. We all had a handbook like a diary. Daily we wrote self-criticism in our handbooks and the

class teacher would read them from time to time. At the end of term, each girl was given a “Behaviour” grading – A was very good; B plus was good; B was average; B minus not good; and a grade C girl would be expelled. I was graded B minus during all the years I was there and befriended B minus girls – perhaps I found grade A girls somewhat awesome, and B minus girls lively and fun. I sometimes wondered how come a school with strong American links should be more like the regime in the North. However, the school advocated Christianity and that all girls were family members of True Light. I heard that after the death of the formidable Head Mistress, her successor abandoned many rigid rules. At the time I was a student, every subject was taught in Cantonese (the language most Hongkongers speak) except English. It then changed to every subject to be taught in English except Chinese. Now with the North advocating Putonghua, quite likely more changes are expected.

At the time I studied at True Light, one could see crowded shacks ("wooden-hut area" in Cantonese) on the hillside opposite the school, of appalling living conditions. Many children who lived there came to True Light to attend Sunday school – we gave them food and clothing to take home after school. I volunteered to teach at the Sunday School for a year or so. The Hong Kong I

remember was not perfect, but the people at that time said whatever they liked, expressing their opinions freely with no worries that someone might report them behind their back to cause them harm. I think attempting to control and change by force an adult who already has his own personality, belief and way of life, imposes a feeling of oppression that might be more claustrophobic and unbearable than living in a wooden-hut area. I worry that it might lead to people being impoverished intellectually.

<https://www.howaion.co.uk/hongkongandme/index.html>

Many True Light old girls keep in touch with each other (like a family). In this Display, I have featured old girls such as myself, Kitty, May-Chu, Toby (also mentioning Kam briefly). Perhaps due to the rigidity of how the school advocated Christianity at the time, girls either become devout Christians or have antipathy for the religion. Amongst all the old girls featured I am the only believer, and I believed before entering True Light (that's another story). Because of True Light's American connections, many old girls live in the US. When I revisited Stanford University, I met up with many True Light old girls now living in the Bay Area. The old photo below which was taken in the True Light school dorm during the small hours, one can see when there were too many controlling rules, it became fun to break them.