

Advocate and Partner: Missionaries and Modernization in Nan Province, Siam, 1895-1934

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John Fairbank wrote of China that "the missionary movement ... was a profound stimulus to China's modernization", and he cited missionary medical, educational, and humanitarian work, including extensive rural contacts, as the basis for his conclusion.¹ And George Antonius in his classic study of Arab nationalism noted that in the Arab revival of the last century, the American Presbyterian Mission in Syria played an important role in the rebirth of Arab literature and education. The Presbyterian missionaries were one important source of the emergence of the Arabs into the modern world.² A reading of Thai³ history suggests that the missionaries in Siam might well have had a similarly important impact. However, the role of the missionaries after the decades of the 1830s to the 1850s has been little studied and is hardly understood. This has been especially true because the historical study of Thai modernization⁴ has focused primarily on national policies and strategies where the missionaries had less influence after the reign of King Mongkut (1851-68).

In this article, I propose to shift the focus of the historical study of Siamese modernization away from the national level and direct it towards a non-governmental modernizing elite. The purpose of this article is to describe the modernizing activities and role of the American Presbyterian Mission station in Nan Province, Siam, in the period 1895 to 1934, that is, from the founding of the station until the retirement of its premier modernizer, the Rev. Hugh Taylor.

Nan Province is located in the northern region of present-day Thailand. In 1895 Nan was still a semi-autonomous state owing allegiance to Siam. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the *chao muang* (local ruler) of Nan was rapidly losing power as Siam carried out a policy of centralization that turned the state into a province. As early as 1906, the *chao muang* had already lost most of his effective ruling power, though the hereditary office of *chao muang* was to survive until 1931.⁵ In the years from 1895 to 1934, Nan was one of the most remote and least touched by modernization of all of

¹John King Fairbank, *The United States and China*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 178.

²George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (New York, 1946), pp. 37-51.

³In this article, the noun "Siam" and the adjective "Thai" will be used throughout to refer to Thailand and its inhabitants during the period covered in the article.

⁴"Modernization" is used here to describe the processes of social change in which a traditional society is confronted with new ideas and technologies, primarily Western in origin, and changes as a result of that confrontation.

⁵See Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam 1892-1915* (Kuala Lumpur, 1977); James Ansil Ramsay, "Modernization and Centralization in Northern Thailand, 1875-1910", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* VII, 1 (Mar. 1976): 16-32; Michael Vickery, "Thai Regional Elites and the Reforms of King Chulalongkorn", *Journal of Asian Studies* XXIX, 4 (Aug. 1970): 876.

Siam's provinces. Sociological studies of the province even in the late 1950s still portrayed a relatively isolated populace only beginning to emerge in the modern world.⁶ Because the province was so isolated, the early missionaries found it to be both very conservative culturally and very poor economically.⁷

American missionary contact with Nan first began in 1872 when the Rev. Daniel McGilvary, pioneer missionary of northern Siam, visited the city. A second trip in 1890 resulted in his proposing that a mission station be established at Nan.⁸ In 1893, the old *chao muang*, a man of strong anti-foreign feelings, died, and the missionaries took what they felt to be a good opportunity to open the Nan Station.⁹ Dr. and Mrs. S.C. Peoples founded the new station in 1895. It was quickly discovered that the station faced three serious limitations: first of all, the station would be continually underfinanced and understaffed; secondly, because of its isolation, travel to and from the station would entail considerable time and energy; and, finally, the American missionaries found Nan to be a physically and mentally difficult place in which to live.¹⁰ It was not until some twenty years after 1895 that the small Nan Station, usually staffed by two to six missionaries, became stable. The heyday of the station came in the short period of 1915 to 1921 when its staff generally numbered nine missionaries for five of those seven years. By 1922 the station was in decline both staff-wise and financially, and the Great Depression further weakened its position.¹¹

In considering the modernizing influence of the Nan Station, we must keep in mind the fact that the missionaries in Nan were always few in number, slim on financial resources, and working under conditions in which health was precarious and loneliness often acute. The station experienced frequent shifts of personnel and furloughs from Nan came sooner and were longer than was often expected. Under these conditions it was difficult for the station to maintain a consistent, effective programme.

I

In developing the thesis that the American missionaries in Nan played a significant part in provincial modernization, we will fix attention on three facets of their work: medical, educational, and technological. In these three areas we find the missionaries having impact beyond the immediate circle of the incipient Christian community, impact that in one form or another reached nearly every corner of the province.

⁶Laurence C. Judd, *Chao Rai Thai: Dry Rice Farmers in Northern Thailand* (Bangkok, 1977).

⁷See Lillian Johnson Curtis, *The Laos of North Siam* (New York, 1903), p. 324; and "Report for Boys' School of Nan 1910-1911", photocopy, Research Papers of Maen Pongudom, RG 026/79 (f) at the Manuscript Division, Payap College (hereafter cited as Maen Research); the original is at the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, USA.

⁸Hugh Taylor, "The Narrative of Nan", *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam 1828-1928*, ed. George Bradley McFarland (Bangkok, 1928), p. 146; Lucy Starling, *Dawn Over Temple Roofs* (New York, 1960), p. 75.

⁹Dr. S.C. Peoples to Robert E. Speer, 29 Aug. 1896, microfilm, Records of the Board of Foreign Missions, Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (hereafter cited as Board), 13. At the Manuscript Division, Payap College; the original is at the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, USA.

¹⁰Peoples to Speer, 15 May 1894, Board, 11; John H. Freeman, Report, 29 Aug. 1896, Board, 13; Robert Irwin to Dear Friends, 28 July 1899, Board, 15; *Laos News* VI, 3 (Aug. 1909): 61.

¹¹Hugh Taylor, "A Missionary in Siam", unpublished manuscript (San Francisco, 1947), p. 281. The Papers of Paul A. Eakin, RG 017/80 at the Manuscript Division, Payap College.

Medical Modernization

Even before beginning work at Nan, Dr. Peoples, founder of the station, predicted that "medicine will be a very important feature of the work there".¹² So it was. Normally the station was staffed with one doctor although there were a number of periods of several months duration when no doctor was present.¹³ Available statistics suggest that the growth of station medical work was rapid and persistent. In 1896 roughly 1,000 people were treated or came for medicines. By 1899 the figure rose to 1,800, and in 1911 it climbed to the unusually high figure of 4,500. In 1923 some 3,000 people were treated and/or received drugs. In 1926 the mission doctor was on the field only eight months but still treated or distributed drugs to about 1,000 people. In 1932 the number was 3,650, and the 1933 count was 2,770 for only seven months.¹⁴

The Nan Station was the primary agent in bringing both Western medicines and health practices into the province. The sale and distribution of drugs was one of the most important elements of its work. In the first full year of the station, one missionary was kept busy full-time dispensing drugs six days a week.¹⁵ From those early days, the drug dispensary became so essential that by 1914 a small branch dispensary was set up in the city market.¹⁶ One major reason for the success of medicine distribution was that the station charged little or nothing for their drugs in cases where people could not afford to pay. Thus, the medicines were available to even the poorest segments of the population.¹⁷

The station doctors were working with a population infested with a multitude of debilitating diseases. As late as 1929 nearly all of the patients that came in had malaria, hookworm, or other ailments as well as the particular disease that finally brought them to the doctor.¹⁸ The mission doctors found that hookworm alone infested over 90 per cent of the population.¹⁹ In order to deal with the vast health problems of a large, widely scattered population, the mission doctors introduced a varied range of medicines and treatments, and one of their continuing priorities was combating the serious, always-present diseases of smallpox, malaria, and hookworm, as well as malnutrition. They distributed medicines, trained rural vaccination teams, conducted investigative research, and cooperated with local and provincial authorities.²⁰

Both the extent and the creativity of missionary medicine may be seen by the work done in the treatment of hookworm in the province. Dr. Beach of the Nan Station conducted what may have been the earliest research into hookworm carried out in Siam. Certainly his research was among the earliest done. In 1914, he began to investigate why Nan schoolboys seemed so lazy. He discovered the cause to be hookworm and labelled it as a "pernicious, devitalizing malady" that was "Siam's greatest enemy". Dr. Beach and other members of the station began to carry out extensive treatments that included

¹²Peoples to Speer, 16 Aug. 1894, Board, 11.

¹³See Nan Folder, Papers of Paul A. Eakin, RG 017/80 at the Manuscript Division, Payap College.

¹⁴These figures taken from annual reports published in *Laos News* and *Siam Outlook*.

¹⁵Robert Irwin to Speer, 14 Feb. 1896, Board, 13; and "Annual Report of Muang Nan Station for the year ending Oct. 31, 1896", Board, 22.

¹⁶*Laos News* XI, 3 (July 1914): 107.

¹⁷Taylor, "A Missionary", p. 164.

¹⁸*Siam Outlook* VI, 10 (Apr. 1929): 332.

¹⁹W.H. Beach, "Hookworm in Nan Province", *Laos News* XI, 2 (Apr. 1914): 59-61.

²⁰Taylor, "A Missionary", pp. 83-84; *Laos News* VI, 1 (Feb. 1909): 11; Carle C. Zimmerman, *Siam Rural Economic Survey 1930-1931* (Bangkok, 1931), pp. 235-36; "Nan Station Report 1910-1911", Maen Research; and *Siam Outlook*, Annual Reports Issue (Jan. 1926): 101.

schoolchildren and local military units. As late as 1929 the station was still working to eradicate hookworm.²¹ Two facts stand out: first of all, the Rockefeller Institute began its very extensive hookworm programme only in 1917, some three years after Beach's research in Nan; and, secondly, Dr. Beach is reported to have had contacts with the Rockefeller Institute about his 1914 investigations.²² It may be speculated that Dr. Beach of Nan played a role in implementing hookworm research and treatment in the whole nation. At the very least, we may say that Nan Province received significant hookworm treatment several years before a national programme was begun. Evidence regarding smallpox was a measure of the station's medical work. In 1909 Dr. Peoples and six vaccinators vaccinated some 1,500 children in a period of seven weeks. In 1913 and again in 1928, Dr. Beach led vaccinating teams into rural areas to overcome smallpox epidemics. These high points punctuated a continuing programme of vaccination carried out both in Nan and in the rural areas.²³

In addition to constant efforts in the areas of hookworm, smallpox, malaria, and malnutrition, the station also worked with leprosy victims, taught general and personal hygiene, and trained rural medical-evangelist teams.²⁴ The work of Dr. Peoples in 1910 summarizes the variety and extent of station medical work. Even though he was absent from the station for almost six months, he performed seven major operations, assisted a newly arrived team of government doctors in suppressing a cholera epidemic, and cared for a total of 32 inpatients and 4,654 outpatients.²⁵

Although medical work centred on Nan city itself, the doctors engaged in rural itineration and supported other activities that helped to spread station medical work into rural areas. All of the missionaries had some rudimentary medical skills and carried drugs with them. The reach of mission medicine was further extended through the employment of evangelists with some basic medical training, who travelled the countryside in teams. In some cases, rural Christian leaders were trained by the medical evangelists and provided with simpler drugs and remedies for their villages.²⁶

Educational Modernization

During the first 15 years of the station, several attempts were made to open a school, but as Lucy Starling, herself a teacher at Nan, commented, some new missionary would come to Nan, open a school, and then within a few months become ill and have to leave. The school would be suspended until someone new came to start the process again. A somewhat permanent school was established in 1907, but it did not really take root until the arrival of the Rev. and Mrs. M.B. Palmer in 1910. The following year Eula Van Vranken, a trained educator like Palmer, moved to Nan and opened the Girls' School.²⁷

²¹W.H. Beach, "Hookworm"; W.H. Beach, "Siam's Greatest Enemy", *Laos News* XIV, 3 (July 1917): 92-97; *Siam Outlook* VI, 10 (Apr. 1929): 332.

²²Virginia Thompson, *Thailand: The New Siam* (New York, 1941), p. 708; W.H. Beach, "Hookworm", pp. 60-61.

²³*Laos News* VI, 1 (Feb. 1909): 1; Taylor, "A Missionary", pp. 83-84; "Annual Report of the Laos Mission for the Year ending Sept. 30, 1913", Records of the American Presbyterian Mission, RG 001/78(a) at the Manuscript Division, Payap College.

²⁴Taylor, "A Missionary", p. 93.

²⁵Dr. S.C. Peoples, "Nan Station", *Laos News* VIII, 1 (Jan. 1911): 19-20.

²⁶See *Siam Outlook* VI, 3 (Jan. 1927): 48-49; "Station Reports of the Laos Mission for the Year Closing Nov. 30th, 1899", Board, 16; *Laos News* X, 3 (Apr. 1913): 54; and Hugh Taylor, "Reaping where others have sown", *Laos News* VI, 4 (Nov. 1909): 117.

²⁷Starling, *Dawn*, p. 99; and *Laos News* VI, 1 (Feb. 1909): 18-19.

The two Christian schools began the school year in 1911 with a total of just over 100 students and quickly established themselves as the quality schools in town. A higher percentage of their students passed government examinations than the local government schools themselves.²⁸ The two schools flourished under the leadership of Van Vranken and the Palmers and under the guidance of several successors. The school buildings were improved over the years as was the quality of teaching staff and equipment. By 1931 the two schools numbered 215 students in ten grades.²⁹ In the meantime, two village Christian schools were opened after 1917, and by 1926 these schools had 51 students.³⁰

The nature of education in the Christian schools differed from either the numerically predominant local schools or the central government schools. The two schools in Nan were overwhelmingly Christian in make-up and strongly emphasized religious and moral education even while using the government curriculum.³¹ The teaching methods used by the missionaries were quite different, and their aim of education was to encourage the children "to think", the concept being strongly oriented to the virtues of thrift, industriousness, and initiative.³² This differing aim led to educational innovations that came to government schools only later if at all. Of first importance in this regard was women's education. At a time when, aside from missionary schools, it was extremely unusual to find girls in school, the Nan Station introduced formal girls' education into the province. Girls' School graduates, thus, were the best educated group of women in Nan and soon became a source of teachers for other schools.³³ The concern for women's education was also extended to include older Christian women who could not read, and women's literacy became a major goal of the station.³⁴ Vocational education was another innovation. At various times both schools had active programmes that included gardening, domestic arts, husbandry, and mechanical arts.³⁵

As in medicine, so in education the missionaries sought to extend their work into rural areas. In the first instance, graduates of the Christian schools became teachers and headmasters in rural areas. At one point, three of the major government schools in the northern part of the province were headed by Boys' School graduates.³⁶ The station also engaged in the distribution of both northern Thai (Thai Yuan) dialect and central Thai dialect literature that included Bibles, Scripture portions, tracts, and even periodicals. Although methods and frequency of delivery varied, the literature did reach a large audience and was even used by local non-Christians to teach reading in village situations. Rural work also included an effort forcefully sponsored by Dr. Peoples to spread literacy

²⁸ *Laos News* VIII, 2 (Apr. 1911): 33; "Report for Boys' School of Nan 1910-1911", Maen Research.

²⁹ Starling, *Dawn*, p. 99; *Siam Outlook* Annual Reports Issue (Jan. 1929): 2-3; *Siam Outlook* VIII, 1 (Jan. 1932): 35-36.

³⁰ *Laos News* XIV, 2 (May 1917): 39; *Siam Outlook* VI, 3 (Jan. 1927): 41-50.

³¹ "Report for Boys' School of Nan 1910-1911", Maen Research; "Report Nan Girls' School 1910-1911", Maen Research.

³² See M.B. Palmer, "Nan Boys' School", *Laos News* VIII, 4 (Oct. 1911): 136-38, Kenneth Parry Landon, *Thailand in Transition* (Chicago, 1939), pp. 125, 251; "Report Nan Girls' School 1910-1911", Maen Research.

³³ Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and The Development of Thai Nationalism* (Honolulu, 1978), pp. 158-59; *Laos News* IX, 3 (July 1912): 79-80.

³⁴ Taylor, "A Missionary", p. 366; *Laos News* XIII, 4 (Oct. 1916): 87.

³⁵ *Siam Outlook* III, 3 (Jan. 1924): 63; VIII, 1 (Jan. 1932): 35; and IX, 1 (Jan. 1933): 40. D. Irene Taylor, "The Law of the Jungle Changes", *Siam Outlook* III, 1 (July 1923): 267.

³⁶ Taylor, "A Missionary", p. 379.

among hilltribe peoples in the Nan area including even the sending of a few tribal children to the Nan Christian schools.³⁷

The educational influences of the station extended into language and culture as well. Because the missionaries were native English language speakers they were able to provide instruction in that language, instruction that was sought after by the local political elite. English was for them a means by which to gain access to Western knowledge.³⁸ The missionaries introduced not only Western language but also Western music into the province. Music, particularly religious music, was a regular part of the schools' curriculum. Western instruments were imported and instructions in their use were given. Numerous musical programmes were put on, one such event being attended by over 1,500 people.³⁹ The influence of this music was such that on the death of the *chao muang* in 1918 when the Nan Christian community representatives went to pay their respects, they were asked to sing a hymn before the coffin, assembled priests, and family. This was seen as a great honour, and it is significant that its vehicle was musical.⁴⁰

Technological Modernization

The Nan Station missionaries were so oriented to the use of Western technology that they frequently saw the solutions to their problems in terms of technology, and while they did not see their primary task as being in the realm of technological innovations they quite readily used such innovations as the means to an end. The list of Western technological devices and techniques introduced by the station was long and impressive. Most of those items or skills were first picked up during furloughs in the United States where missionaries like the Rev. Hugh Taylor were always looking for and receptive to new ideas.⁴¹ After introducing such new ideas, they sought to train local people in their use.⁴²

In the development of a permanent station, a number of buildings were required, all of which were constructed along Western lines using Western building techniques and materials. Thus, such things as stained glass windows, fireplaces, dining rooms, and full-length mirrors were introduced to the occasional amusement of the people who generally had never seen such things.⁴³ In the process of all of this construction, Taylor introduced a complete brick-making yard, which included the second successful brick-making machine in northern Siam.⁴⁴ Taylor was also the one who devised a successful technique for digging clear-water wells in an area where such was considered impossible. He solved the lighting problems of the schools and station homes with the first acetylene gas plant and lighting system in the north. And he also introduced refrigeration into the province with the use of an ammonia gas device called an "icy ball" that effectively made ice and kept food fresh.⁴⁵

³⁷ *Laos News* IV, 4 (Oct. 1907): 107-8; *Siam Outlook* VIII, 1 (Jan. 1932): 36; "Nan Station Report 1911-1912" and "Out-District Evangelistic Work — Nan Province, Sept. 1916", Maen Research.

³⁸ See David K. Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn* (New Haven, 1969), p. 270; *Laos News* IV, 2 (Apr. 1907): 35.

³⁹ See Satien Thamornpak, *tan acharn em. bee. palmer kab krungtheb khristian withayalai kaw. saw. 1920-1938* (*Acharn M.B. Palmer and Bangkok Christian College 1920-1938*) (Bangkok, n.d.), p. 37; Taylor, "A Missionary", pp. 382, 441-42; and *Laos News* IX, 1 (Jan. 1912): 14.

⁴⁰ *Laos News* XV, 1 (Jan. 1918): 42-43; Starling, *Dawn*, pp. 103-4.

⁴¹ Taylor, "A Missionary", pp. 370-71, 295-96.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 259ff; *Laos News* X, 3 (July 1913): 50.

⁴³ Starling, *Dawn*, pp. 77, 107; Taylor, "A Missionary", pp. 263-64; *Siam Outlook* I, 1 (July 1921): 20.

⁴⁴ *Laos News* XI, 1 (Jan. 1914): 8; Taylor, "A Missionary", pp. 295-96.

⁴⁵ Taylor, "A Missionary", pp. 264-66, 298-301, 419-20; *Laos News* XI, 3 (July 1914): 105.