

# Mission, Diaspora, and Indigenous Agency: Chinese Christianity in Cold War Southern Thailand<sup>1</sup>

**Joseph Tse-Hei LEE**

Pace University, New York, USA

## Abstract

This article examines the development of Chinese Christianity in southern Thailand during the mid-twentieth century through a case study of American Presbyterian missionary Carl E. Blanford's ministry in Hat Yai between 1951 and 1963. Drawing on Blanford's correspondence housed at the Payap University Archives, the study traces a transition from itinerant evangelism and church planting to a more institutionalized model centered on lay leadership and community outreach. It analyzes how Chinese and Sino-Thai Christians localized the gospel within their ethnic and cultural frameworks, while reconfiguring religious authority and devotional practices in a frontier environment shaped by social hybridity and Cold War politics. By foregrounding indigenous agency and transnational networks, this research contributes to the growing literature on Chinese Christianity as a polycentric and adaptive religious movement among diaspora communities in Southeast Asia.

## Keywords

Bangkok, Carl E. Blanford, China, Church of Christ in Thailand, Cold War, diaspora, Hat Yai, Siam, Thailand

---

1 I am deeply grateful to the Rev. Dr. Chananporn "Oan" Jaisaodee of the McGilvary College of Divinity, Payap University, for facilitating access to archival materials, and to the Rev. Songsak Jaisaodee for his generous hospitality during my visit to Chiang Mai in July 2017. For an overview of the archival holdings, see Herbert R. Swanson, "A Brief Description of Holdings of the Manuscript Division, Payap College," *Journal of the Siam Society* 68, no. 2 (July 1980): 83–90. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewer for the insightful and constructive feedback.

**Corresponding author**

Joseph Tse-Hei LEE: [jlee@pace.edu](mailto:jlee@pace.edu)

## INTRODUCTION

Christianity has long flourished among Chinese migrants who have woven the gospel into their linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identities. Across Southeast Asia, Chinese diasporic churches developed through close collaboration between missionaries and local converts, fostering lay leadership and adapting religious practices to diverse postcolonial contexts.<sup>2</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, this landscape shifted from a China-centered missionary paradigm to a polycentric model that embraced revivalist Protestant visions and localized expressions of faith.<sup>3</sup> This article uses missionary correspondence from the Payap University Archives in Chiang Mai to examine the continuity and transformation of Chinese Protestantism in southern Thailand. It focuses on the ministry of American Presbyterian missionary Carl E. Blanford (1922–2012), who documented the opportunities and challenges of evangelizing among overseas Chinese in Hat Yai (Hatyai or Haadyai 合艾), a commercial hub in Songkhla Province near the Malaysian border, from 1951 to 1963. Situated at the intersection of transnational church networks, denominational rivalries, and diasporic formation, Blanford's story illustrates the complexities of Christian adaptation in a frontier society. He skillfully navigated liturgical disputes, crossed ecclesiastical boundaries, and ministered to a diverse congregation whose theological affiliations included Presbyterian, Baptist, Disciples of Christ, True Jesus Church, and Little Flock traditions.

While Blanford's reports highlight evangelistic successes, they offer limited insight into the postbaptismal lives of converts. To address this gap, the study incorporates some Chinese accounts that foreground the agency of local believers. These sources reveal a strategic shift from itinerant proselytism and church planting toward institutional models that prioritize lay leadership and community outreach. Yet, this transition was neither linear nor uniform. The encounters between Christianity—understood here as scripture, worldview, institution, and liturgy—and diasporic

---

2 Joshua Daowei Sim, "Making Chinese Evangelicalism Global: Transnational Chinese Evangelical Careers in a Global World, 1920s to 1960s," PhD diss., National University of Singapore, 2020.

3 Joshua Daowei Sim, "Bringing Chinese Christianity to Southeast Asia: Constructing Transnational Chinese Evangelicalism across China and Southeast Asia, 1930s to 1960s," *Religions* 13, no. 9 (2022): 773. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090773>.

contexts highlight the multiplicity of Chinese Christian experiences, the integration of faith into kinship structures and migratory livelihoods, and the changing church-state relations in Thailand.

Methodologically, the term “overseas Chinese” (*huaqiao*) requires clarification. Historian Wang Gungwu traces its genealogy to the assimilationist and integrationist policies of emergent Southeast Asian nation-states.<sup>4</sup> While nineteenth-century Chinese migration to the region evolved from *huashang* (sojourning merchants) to *huagong* (contract laborers), Christianity took root among these mobile populations. Revolutionary movements in the early twentieth century further politicized diasporic identities, culminating in Cold War pressures to declare allegiance either to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) or the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> Given the fluidity of these affiliations, “overseas Chinese” and “Chinese migrants” are employed as broad analytical categories without distinguishing between PRC and ROC loyalties.

This article begins by situating Thailand as a key transit point in the formation of Chinese diasporic churches. It then discusses Blanford’s ministry to assess the opportunities and constraints of evangelizing among Chinese migrants in southern Thailand. His success depended not only on support from American and Thai Presbyterian institutions but also on robust partnerships with Chinese believers. By embedding himself in a far-flung network of Chinese evangelists and integrating their congregations into the Thai ecclesiastical structure, Blanford helped cultivate a resilient and adaptive Christian community. His work underscores the agency of the laity and the flexibility of church life in transnational contexts.

### CHINESE CHRISTIAN NETWORKS IN THAILAND

Although Thai Chinese, also known as Sino-Thais or Chinese Thais, constitute only about 13 percent of Thailand’s population (roughly 9.5 to 10 million out of 71.6 million in 2024), they remain culturally conscious of their Chinese heritage despite deep assimilation. Christianity, a minority faith among both Thai Chinese and the larger Thai population, accounts for

---

4 Wang Gungwu, “Sojourning: The Chinese Experience in Southeast Asia,” *Asian Culture* 18 (June 1994): 52.

5 Wang, “Sojourning”: 54–55.

just 1.4 percent of the national demographic. Nevertheless, its sociocultural influence has long exceeded its numerical representation. Mission schools and hospitals, in particular, emerged as influential civic institutions that introduced Christian values to the public and contributed significantly to Thailand's modernization.

While these formal institutions only appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, the earliest foundations of Chinese Protestant Christianity in Thailand were laid through informal evangelistic networks. These networks connected Chinese sojourners in Bangkok to coastal regions of South China. In the 1830s, American Baptist missionaries preaching to Chinese sojourners in Bangkok discovered an unexpected gateway for reintroducing the gospel into China, where Christianity had been banned as a heterodox religion since 1724. Encouraging overseas Chinese converts to evangelize through peer and native-place networks, the Baptists operated across the Siam-China maritime corridor. Functioning beyond imperial Chinese jurisdiction, these transnational Christian networks created a safe conduit for Baptist expansion from Bangkok to China's southern coastal regions. Even after the missionaries relocated from Bangkok to Shantou, many diasporic converts retained their faith and continued worship in and around Bangkok. These enduring ties reveal the importance of established Chinese maritime circuits in shaping missionary outreach before the advent of the unequal treaty system—a series of coercive agreements through which European powers such as Britain and France secured political and legal privileges in China.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas Protestant missions benefitted from Chinese diasporic networks to sustain their presence, Catholicism followed a different trajectory, gaining traction primarily among Chinese migrants rather than ethnic Thais.<sup>7</sup> It remained closely associated with foreign identities—either through the French origins of missionaries from the Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris (MEP) or in the Chinese heritage of its congregants. Despite the later arrival of other missionary orders such as the Redemptorists, Salesians, and Jesuits, Catholicism attracted few Thai

---

6 Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "The Overseas Chinese Networks and Early Baptist Missionary Movement across the South China Sea," *The Historian* 63, no. 4 (2001): 752–768.

7 John R. Fleming, "South East Asia," in M. Searle Bates and Wilhelm Pauck, eds., *The Prospects of Christianity throughout the World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 265.

converts, and the Thai state maintained an ambivalent attitude toward it.<sup>8</sup> In 1952, the Catholic population was estimated to be between 50,000 and 100,000, with only 77 of 171 priests being Thai. By 1958, thirty-eight Thai Catholic seminarians were in training.

In contrast to Catholicism's ties to foreign missions, Protestantism gradually localized through ecumenical partnership and lay participation. A milestone in this process was the formation of the Church of Christ in Siam (now the Church of Christ in Thailand) in 1934. This shift toward Thai leadership reflected "a greater sense of national consciousness among Thai Christians that was in line with the government's national integration efforts."<sup>9</sup> Before World War II (WWII), the Protestant population in Thailand numbered approximately 7,000. Wartime conditions catalyzed "a strong lay movement of witness and evangelism," and by the postwar period, the number had grown to 20,000, of whom 15 percent were Chinese migrants. By 1963, the Church of Christ in Thailand had forty pastors serving 135 congregations, though only fifteen had formal theological training. Thai and Chinese laypersons played a crucial role in sustaining rural congregations and advancing the church's reach.<sup>10</sup> Missionary John R. Fleming offered an optimistic assessment, observing that Thailand presented "open doors, no strong political pressure, and a fairly friendly Buddhism—not easily converted, but tolerant of Christianity as a cultural enrichment, despite its being spiritually heterogeneous and divergent from Thai traditional culture and the demands of Thai [Buddhist] nationhood."<sup>11</sup>

However, this atmosphere of religious tolerance varied by region. Southern Thailand, marked by ethnic diversity and its strategic proximity to British Malaya, presented challenges and opportunities for Christian missions. On the island of Phuket, economic and ethnic dynamics influenced the development of local churches. In the late nineteenth century, the Kingdom of Siam extended administrative control over Phuket and the southern peninsula. Following the annexation of the Patani

---

8 Michel Chambon, "The Missionary and the Pea: An Anthropological Study of the French MEP Economy," *Journal of Global Catholicism* 8, no. 2 (2024): 113.

9 Karl Dahlfred, "A Bumpy Road to Indigenization: The American Presbyterian Mission and the Church of Christ in Thailand," *Journal of Presbyterian History* (2021): 40.

10 Fleming, "South East Asia," 266.

11 Fleming, "South East Asia," 267.

Kingdom around the turn of the twentieth century, local Malays resisted Siamese assimilation policies. In a maneuver reminiscent of the 1893 Pak Nam Incident—when French gunboats confronted Siamese forces at the Chao Phraya River—King Chulalongkorn dispatched a naval vessel to the Patani River in southern Thailand to compel local ruler Raja Abdul Kadir to submit to Siamese sovereignty. This shift in political authority created new openings for Chinese migrants to align themselves with Siamese rulers. By the early twentieth century, Hat Yai had emerged as a Chinese-majority, non-Muslim corridor town within Songkhla Province, surrounded by Malay Muslim provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat (historically known as the Patani region).<sup>12</sup> Chinese merchants, enriched by the transpeninsular trade with British Malaya, cultivated ties with the Siamese state and financed the construction of Buddhist temples in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—demonstrating their integration into Thai society and their influence on the local religious landscape.<sup>13</sup>

The economy of southern Thailand experienced a dramatic upswing during the Korean War (1950–1953), as soaring global rubber prices fueled widespread prosperity. Simultaneously, the booming tin mining industry attracted waves of Chinese and Indian contract laborers to the peninsula, creating fertile ground for proselytization. In Phuket, a Seventh-day Adventist clinic benefited from the philanthropy of Tan Ching Ho, a Peranakan Chinese tin mine owner and prominent member of the merchant elite. Deeply impressed by Adventist medical facilities in Bangkok and Penang, Tan donated land for a new clinic to serve the mining community.<sup>14</sup> Edward and Miriam Lim, an Adventist couple, supported

---

12 Around 80 percent of the population in these three border provinces are Malay Muslims. In earlier times, Patani was the center of the Brahman-Buddhist kingdom of Langkasuka (sixth–thirteenth centuries), connecting transpeninsular Chinese and Indian trading routes. It later served as the base of the Malay Muslim Sultanate of Patani or Patani Darussalam (fifteenth–eighteenth centuries) before falling under Siamese political patronage and Thai rule. Marte Nilsen, *Negotiating Thainess: Religious and National Identities in Thailand's Southern Conflict* (Lund, Sweden: Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University, 2012), 29.

13 Nilsen, *Negotiating Thainess*, 90; John Goodman, *The Minority Muslim Experience in Mainland Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 42, 54, and 56.

14 Khoo Salma Nasution, "Hokkien Chinese on the Phuket Mining Frontier: The Penang Connection and the Emergence of the Phuket Baba Community," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 82, no. 2 (2009): 81–112.

American medical staff at the clinic. Fluent in Chinese dialects, they translated English sermons and engaged directly with migrant laborers. Their success exemplified how Chinese entrepreneurs and bilingual layworkers advanced Christian influence through healthcare, philanthropy, and linguistic mediation.<sup>15</sup>

### CARL E. BLANFORD AND THE HAT YAI CHURCH

#### Early Church Growth

After the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950, and the expulsion of missionaries from China, international missions redirected their efforts toward Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Chinese diaspora communities across Southeast Asia. In January 1951, American Presbyterian missionary Carl E. Blanford left Hainan Island for Thailand, where he was assigned to pastor a congregation in Hat Yai under the Seventh District (Chinese) of the Church of Christ in Thailand. Hat Yai was home to approximately 50,000 Chinese migrants.<sup>16</sup> In the early twentieth century, the construction of new rail and road infrastructure connecting Bangkok to the Malayan border transformed Hat Yai into a gateway, facilitating the cross-border movement of people and goods between Thailand and British Malaya.

Upon arrival, Blanford found a vibrant congregation with around one hundred attendees at morning services and fifty at evening services.<sup>17</sup> Between 1951 and 1963, he oversaw steady growth, with membership rising from 157 in 1957 to 200 in 1964. The Hat Yai Church became the third-largest Chinese or Sino-Thai congregation within the Church of Christ in Thailand.<sup>18</sup> Its institutional expansion included the construction of a community hall and ministerial housing in 1961, the addition of a school in 1966, and the launch of a nursery and kindergarten serving 110 children

15 Florence Ione Howlett and Sandy Zagg, *Lotus Blossom Returns: The Remarkable Life of Florence Nagel-Longway-Howlett* (Nampo, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 106 and 111.

16 Carl E. Blanford, *Chinese Churches in Thailand* (Bangkok: Suriyaban Publishers, 1974), 53.

17 Carl E. Blanford, "Report on Survey of Chinese Churches in South Thailand," June 7–17, 1951, American Presbyterian Mission, RG 001/78, RG 001/78, Box 25, Carl E. Blanford, 1951–1963, Folder 12, Payap University Archives, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

18 Kenneth E. Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand* (Bangkok: Church of Christ in Thailand, 1958), 182.

by 1976. The church also sponsored theological education for congregants at regional Bible colleges.<sup>19</sup> In 1963, Blanford moved to Bangkok to serve the Sapan Lung Chinese Church and head the Bangkok Institute of Theology. He remained in Bangkok until 1977, when he relocated to Singapore to become the senior pastor of the English-speaking Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church.<sup>20</sup>

The origins of the Hat Yai Church trace back to 1945, when Lim Pei-Yin (Lim Pui Ngi), a Chaozhou-speaking evangelist and brother of Singaporean preacher Lim Puay Hian, founded the congregation. Its early membership included Chinese Presbyterians from Shantou and adherents of the Disciples of Christ. Lim Pei-Yin, who had lived in Hat Yai during WWII, left in 1948 to serve at the Maitrichit Chinese Baptist Church (United in Heart Church 心聯禮拜堂) in Bangkok's Chinatown.<sup>21</sup> Lim's transnational vision led him to collaborate with the Evangelize China Fellowship in Hong Kong, supporting the establishment of the Mandarin-speaking Bethel Church and the Bethel Bible Institute in Bangkok.<sup>22</sup> After Lim's departure, lay leaders managed the Hat Yai congregation. In 1949, the church joined the Seventh District of the Church of Christ in Thailand and petitioned for the appointment of a Chinese-speaking pastor. Pastor Chen was appointed but soon resigned amid internal schisms—especially generational disagreements—that prompted several families to leave. Blanford focused on reconciliation, though he acknowledged that “the breach is not completely healed.”<sup>23</sup>

Blanford considered Hat Yai a favorable location for a traditional mission residence. He and his wife, Muriel Ausink, lived above a Chinese storefront

19 Blanford, *Chinese Churches in Thailand*, 53.

20 “In Memory of Rev. Carl Edwin Blanford 白輔德牧師 June 17, 1922—April 13, 2012.” <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/22249449/in-memory-of-rev-carl-edwin-blanford-herbswansoncom>

21 Samuel Kho, *A History of the Maitrichit Chinese Baptist Church: 150 Years of Thankfulness, 1837–1987* (Bangkok: Maitrichit Chinese Baptist Church, 1987), 12–13.

22 Kho, *A History of the Maitrichit Chinese Baptist Church*, 63; Annoymous, *From Mustard Seed to Tree: A Commemorative Volume for the Twentieth Anniversary of the Evangelize China Fellowship* [芥菜成樹：中國佈道會成立二十周年紀念特刊] (Hong Kong: Shengdao chubanshe, 1968), 102.

23 Carl E. Blanford, “Two Years in Thailand: Evaluation Report,” May 1953, American Presbyterian Mission, RG 001/78, RG 001/78, Box 25, Carl E. Blanford, 1951–1963, Folder 12.

near the market. Their visibility drew curious crowds, making them “an open book to neighbors.”<sup>24</sup> They embraced local customs and adopted a Chinese diet to foster community trust. Muriel led children’s ministry, teaching Bible stories and songs to forty children each evening. A turning point came in August 1952, when a young member attended a Chinese Christian Youth Conference and experienced what Edwin Zehner calls a “cyclical conversion”—people journeying into, out of, and then back into churches with renewed commitment following spiritual awakening.<sup>25</sup> He founded a Christian Endeavor group with twenty-nine members in October 1953, and three of its members later enrolled at the Chinese Bible Training Center in Bangkok. These Thai-born Chinese youths revitalized the church, organizing evangelistic events and hosting revivalists from Penang, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Their efforts culminated in a record-breaking Christmas celebration in 1952, with over three hundred attendees across services. Blanford described this period as one of “real Christian fellowship and a vision of fruitful Christian service,” noting the emergence of youth leadership and reconciliation within the congregation.<sup>26</sup>

### Regional Outreach

Chinese migrants were widely dispersed across southern Thailand, and some had joined Protestant missions before WWII. After the war, the Church of Christ in Thailand assumed responsibility for these scattered evangelistic outposts. Blanford actively sought out these worshippers, visiting “four or five Chinese communities with small groups of Christians.” In Kan Tang, he met a lay leader named Chen, who led twenty converts in worship on the second floor of a market storehouse. In Na Bon, he encountered a congregation of sixty affiliated with Watchman Nee’s Little Flock, housed in a well-constructed church that seated eighty. Another Little Flock group in Tsen Di had fifty members and was similarly “well-organized and well-instructed in the Christian doctrines.” In Thung Sung, a

24 Blanford, “Two Years in Thailand: Evaluation Report.”

25 Edwin Zehner, “Conversion to Christianity among the Thai and Sino-Thai of Modern Thailand: Growth, Experimentation, and Networking in the Contemporary Context,” in Richard Fox Young and Jonathan A. Seitz, eds., *Asia in the Making of Christianity: Conversion, Agency, and Indigeneity, 1600s to the Present* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2013), 421.

26 Carl E. Blanford, “Two Years in Thailand: Evaluation Report,” May 1953.

small group gathered for “a breaking of bread service in one of the homes,” though they were discouraged by the lack of pastoral support. In response, Blanford began residing in these communities for extended periods—“a month or two”—holding daily prayer meetings and Bible classes for Christians, alongside evangelistic gatherings for the Chinese community.<sup>27</sup> Proselytizing opportunities were abundant. Mandarin Chinese served as the lingua franca, with each community having someone who could interpret into local dialects. Interdenominational cooperation among Chinese reflected a pragmatic pastoral approach rooted in shared missional realities. In the liminal frontier of southern Thailand, Chinese believers—operating on the margins of society and ecclesiastical structures—viewed collaboration as a necessity, not a compromise.

Blanford built upon the foundations laid by earlier evangelists and encountered minimal resistance from non-Christians. In 1951, he traveled with William Chow (Dr. William Chau Chuwej), a bilingual leader of the Thai-speaking Chinese church in Trang. There, Blanford administered baptisms and communion in March 1952.<sup>28</sup> Later that year, in November, he held a three-day Bible class for elected elders and deacons, praising Chow’s church as “the strongest and best organized of all the [Presbyterian] churches in south Thailand.”<sup>29</sup> In January 1953, Blanford and fellow missionary Al Newport led a street evangelism team composed of Thai-born Chinese youth in Nakorn Sritamarat. They sold Scripture in the mornings, taught children songs in the afternoons, and screened Christian films in the evenings. A month later, Blanford baptized four men and three teenagers. In March, he initiated a weekly family service in Tung Lwen market fifteen miles west of Hat Yai, where three Christians hosted gatherings for sixty children and forty adults, despite local opposition attributed to “Communist influence or just ignorance about Christianity.”<sup>30</sup> In Bang Kaeo, a market two hours north of Hat Yai by train, thirty-five Christians met weekly under the leadership of two lay preachers. The Bang Kaeo Christians elected two elders and formally aligned with the Seventh

---

27 Blanford, “Report on Survey of Chinese Churches in South Thailand.”

28 Kho, *A History of the Maitrichit Chinese Baptist Church*, 61.

29 Blanford, “Report on Survey of Chinese Churches in South Thailand.”

30 Blanford, “Two Years in Thailand: Evaluation Report.”

District.<sup>31</sup> These collegial relationships between missionaries and Chinese lay leaders empowered diasporic churches and fostered sustainable growth.

### Youth Initiatives

Youth evangelism and leadership development became central pillars of church expansion. In August 1952, ninety Thai-born Chinese youths from mission schools attended a summer conference in Nong Khae. “With forenoons scheduled for Bible classes and discussions about the Christian faith and the afternoons given over to recreation,” the event resulted in over twenty conversions and a widespread recommitment to “all-out Christian living.” Blanford regarded the conference as “one of the most effective ways of influencing young people for the Christian faith,” affirming that “this type of faith and life cannot be matched by anything else in the world.” To sustain this momentum, Blanford proposed several new initiatives: an adult evening school offering Thai, Chinese, and English classes for non-Christians; a Christian elementary school with official recognition; a refuge for “widows and Christian women without private means of support”; and a hostel for male migrants.<sup>32</sup> These proposals revealed his vision for a holistic ministry embedded within Hat Yai’s social fabric, combining spiritual formation with educational and welfare outreach.

### Cross-Denominational Engagement

Proselytizing work among Chinese migrants led Blanford to cultivate ecumenical ties across denominations. He once visited a Chinese storefront church in Phuket, where the thirty worshippers were evenly divided between Mandarin and Fujianese speakers. His dialect interpreter was likely Edward Lim, an Adventist. Founded by the English Brethren, this church exemplified the denominational fluidity characteristic of frontier mission. Initially, a Brethren family rented the shop for weekday business and Sunday worship; after their departure, the congregation took over the premises. By the time of Blanford’s visit, most original Brethren “converts had nearly all died or returned to China before the outbreak of

---

31 Blanford, “Two Years in Thailand: Evaluation Report.”

32 Blanford, “Two Years in Thailand: Evaluation Report.”

the Japanese hostilities.”<sup>33</sup> The wartime expansion of tin mining had drawn Chinese laborers to Phuket, including two evangelists from the Church of Christ in Thailand. Blanford and his colleague Marvin adopted a “tea-shop” evangelism model—meeting locals who gathered each afternoon to socialize. They played Thai and Chinese hymns on a phonograph, displayed picture rolls depicting the life of Jesus, and distributed religious tracts. Blanford baptized seven adults in Phuket, raising the Christian population to forty-five. From there, he and Marvin embarked on a ten-day journey through Phang-nga Province, where they converted several miners, including the director of the Provincial Bureau of Mines.

Education emerged as a fruitful domain for interdenominational cooperation. Seventh-day Adventists had been proselytizing among Chinese migrants in Bangkok since 1918, and their mission expanded to Phuket and Hat Yai after WWII. In Hat Yai, they established a church compound that included a clinic and a school. In 1962, W. Milton Lee (1915–1997), a former China-based Adventist missionary and radio broadcaster, traveled from Taiwan to lead a revival meeting, attracting more Chinese to the Adventist church.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, Muriel operated a small English-language homeschool for her son Billy and several children, including Winnie and Lydia Hoek (daughters of the Dutch manager of the Hat Yai branch of the Rotterdam Trading Company), Kathy Gregory (daughter of an American Adventist doctor), and John Chen (son of a Presbyterian elder). To expand access to English instruction, Muriel partnered with the Adventists, who provided a spacious classroom and playground in their newly constructed church compound.<sup>35</sup>

Despite these collaborative efforts, Cold War tensions shaped how non-Christian Chinese perceived missionary activities. Muriel observed that some young people in Hat Yai, sympathetic to the Maoist regime, attempted “to draw away Christian young people from the church.” Viewing “no place for missionaries in communist China,” these pro-Beijing activists accused missionaries of being agents of American imperialism,

33 Blanford, “Report on Survey of Chinese Churches in South Thailand.”

34 Chen Shaowen [陳紹文], “Prospects on Ministry in Hat Yai [合艾華人聖工的展望],” *The Last Day Shepherd’s Call* [末世牧聲] 53, no.12 (December 1975): 11; Blanford, *Chinese Churches in Thailand*, 59.

35 Mrs. Carl E. Blanford, “Personal Report: 1957,” 1958, American Presbyterian Mission, RG 001/78, RG 001/78, Box 25, Carl E. Blanford, 1951–1963, Folder 12.

spies, and anti-revolutionary elements, using what Muriel called “typical Communist labels.” They urged “patriotic Chinese” abroad to boycott Christian institutions.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the church-run English classes remained popular among teenagers who saw English proficiency as a pathway to social mobility. These educational initiatives reflected genuine people-to-people engagement, challenging Cold War narratives of cultural imperialism.

### CHURCHES NAVIGATING THE COLD WAR LANDSCAPE

Throughout the twentieth century, Chinese migrants in Thailand often found themselves entangled in the crosscurrents of political conflict. Thai rulers were wary of anti-monarchist and republican ideologies spreading from China. In the early 1900s, King Vajiravudh denounced Chinese revolutionaries as “money-making scams of secret societies,” fearing their potential to destabilize the monarchy. Authorities weaponized anti-secret society rhetoric to discredit local Chinese political organizations, portraying Chinese communities primarily as economic actors.<sup>37</sup> This not only marginalized their political influence but also subjected them to suspicion and resentment from the ruling elites.<sup>38</sup>

Such distrust also seeped into the educational sphere. Phraya Ratsadanupradit (Kaw Simbee Na Ranong), governor of Phuket, criticized the teaching of Sun Yat-Sen’s “Three Principles of the People” (*Sanmin zhuyi*) in private Chinese schools, warning that exposure to “republican ideals and values” would place the Thai-born Chinese youth “on a collision course with core elements of Thai society: culture, tradition, and government.” He mandated that schools teach only business Chinese.<sup>39</sup>

36 Mrs. Carl E. Blanford, “Personal Report: 1957.”

37 Zhang Ying and Wasana Wongsurawat, “A Short History of the Transformation of Ethnic Chinese Organizations in Thailand: From Seditious Secret Societies to Patriotic Cultural NGOs,” *Asian Review* 32, no. 2 (2019): 50.

38 Amy Freedman and Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, “Southeast Asia as a Site of Imperial Contestation: An Introduction,” in Amy Freedman and Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, eds., *Empire Competition: Conference Proceedings on Southeast Asia as a Site of Imperial Contestation* (New York: Pace University Press, 2021), 10.

39 Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2019), 27.

These cautionary measures persisted into the Cold War.<sup>40</sup> Although the Thai state aligned itself with the United States' anti-Communist agenda, it closely monitored the Christian population, viewing them as potential conduits for Western ideological influence. Church-run schools were required to follow a state-mandated Thai curriculum, and many Chinese migrants, like Malay Muslims in southern Thailand, interpreted such policies as attempts to assimilate minorities and cultivate a Thai national identity.<sup>41</sup> This ideological landscape complicated evangelistic efforts, forcing missionaries and Chinese church leaders to navigate a delicate balance between religious outreach and political discretion.

The climate of surveillance and suspicion sometimes led to wrongful accusations, as illustrated by the story of Choke Kae Sae Tsang, a victim of anti-Communist hysteria. A Chaozhou native and graduate of the Presbyterian-run school in Shantou, Tsang arrived in Hat Yai in October 1951. Supporting his family as a pushcart bookseller, he sold Chinese-language textbooks, novels, and pictorial periodicals, many of which were imported from pro-Beijing publishers in Hong Kong. The Thai government initially tolerated the circulation of Chinese print materials.<sup>42</sup> Tsang earned a meager income of 5 to 10 baht per day, while his wife hauled water to support their seven children. Despite their economic hardship, Tsang remained a devoted Christian and active lay leader. In 1955, he helped Blanford organize house worship in Klong Ngae, and by January 1956, he was serving as a deacon. His dedication was evident: he and Elder Dr. Wen Pi-Yin once represented the Hat Yai congregation in welcoming Dr. Ted Romig, personal secretary of the United Presbyterian Church in the

---

40 Robert Cummings, "Examining the Continuity of Chinese Cultural Characteristics of the Thai-Chinese Community in Hat Yai Through the Chinese New Year Festivals," *Rian Thai: International Journal of Thai Studies* 9 (2016): 192. For a comprehensive account, see Robert Cummings, "Understanding the Thai-Chinese Community in Hat Yai Through the Role of Ethnic-Chinese-Affiliated Organizations," PhD diss., Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand, 2014.

41 Nathan Porath, "Muslim Schools (Pondok) in the South of Thailand: Balancing Piety on a Tightrope of National Civility, Prejudice, and Violence," *South East Asia Research* 22, no. 3 (2014): 308.

42 Michael J. Montesano, "Capital, State, and Society in the History of Chinese-Sponsored Education in Trang," in Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory, (eds.), *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on a Plural Peninsula* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2008), 231–272, at 241.

U.S.A., and Rev. Leck Taiyong, general secretary of the Church of Christ in Thailand. However, trouble arose when Tsang's eldest son returned to Shantou in late 1956. Thai authorities accused Tsang of being a Communist sympathizer and imprisoned him for two years. The Hat Yai Church and Blanford petitioned for his early release and attempted to dispel official concerns about foreign infiltration. Yet, Blanford's correspondence contains no record of the outcome.<sup>43</sup> Tsang's story reveals the vulnerability of the Chinese Christian diaspora under Cold War surveillance.

### THE APPEAL OF PENTECOSTAL PRACTICES

Multicultural frontier towns in southern Thailand offered fertile ground for church revival, particularly as rural and overseas migrants settled in growing market hubs. Many new converts who had previously embraced supernaturalist worldviews began interpreting spiritual and miraculous experiences through a Christian lens.<sup>44</sup> This process of religious cross-fertilization had deep roots, stretching back to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when local believers adapted Christian teachings under the influence of the Anglo-Scottish Ultra-Ganges Mission and the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>45</sup>

In the postwar period, the convergence of denominational traditions and the development of both Chinese diasporic and Thai churches led to significant departures from foreign-established ecclesiastical structures and liturgies. Some evangelists embraced charismatic expressions of faith, positioning themselves as revivalists and healers. A salient example was the True Jesus Church, a Chinese homegrown movement that synthesized teachings from multiple traditions. It adopted "the observance of Saturday and soul sleep from the Seventh-day Adventists, loud playing, speaking in tongues, visions, clapping, and other strange things from the Pentecostals," and "belief in transubstantiation from the Roman church."

43 Carl E. Blanford, Haadyai to Trujitt Arthachinda, Bangkok, September 28, 1960, American Presbyterian Mission, RG 001/78, RG 001/78, Box 25, Carl E. Blanford, 1951–1963, Folder 12.

44 Edwin Zehner, "Thai Protestants and Local Supernaturalists: Changing Configurations," *Journal of Southeast Asia Studies* 27, no. 2 (1996): 239–319.

45 Lars Peter Laamann, "The Protestant Missions to South-East Asia: Experimental Laboratory of Missionary Concepts and of Human Relations (Circa 1780–1840)," *Exchange: Journal of Contemporary Christianities in Contexts* 51, no. 3 (2022): 266–286.

Blanford was critical of the True Jesus Church, particularly its claim to be “the only true church” that followed “the true Jesus,” and its tactic of “sheep stealing”—“disrupting [mission] churches, taking Christians from other groups and re-baptizing them into their group.” This exclusivist stance threatened church unity and revived memories of theological rifts sparked by John Sung’s revival meetings in 1938 and 1939, which had exposed divisions between fundamentalist-leaning and modernist-leaning missionaries and Thai church leaders.<sup>46</sup> Some saw Sung’s emotionally charged preaching and emphasis on spiritual anointing as undermining the authority of an educated clergy. His polarizing rhetoric intensified existing fractures within the Thai Protestant community, leaving little room for mediating between a Bible-centered piety and modern institutional commitments.<sup>47</sup>

Although Blanford’s reports prioritized church harmony and sought to avoid alienating home supporters, they also revealed internal dissent among Thai and Chinese congregants. The defection of two Hat Yai families caused “a lot of headaches.”<sup>48</sup> For many, however, the True Jesus Church provided a Spirit-filled, experiential faith grounded in tangible rituals and pneumatological encounters. What Blanford dismissed as disruptive mirrored the miraculous religious practices described by Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye in her study of the True Jesus Church and echoed Adam Yuet Chau’s ethnographic analysis of *ling* (the perceived efficacy of spiritual power) and *lingying* (the miraculous responses of deities to worshippers’ petitions).<sup>49</sup> Within this experimental mode of faith expression, believers sought to access divine power and expected visible behavioral transformation.<sup>50</sup> The

---

46 Karl Dahlfred, “Conservative in Theology, Liberal in Spirit: Modernism and the American Presbyterian Mission in Thailand, 1891–1941,” PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2020, 168–172.

47 Dahlfred, “Conservative in Theology, Liberal in Spirit,” 233–236.

48 Carl E. Blanford, “Annual Report: 1957,” 1958, American Presbyterian Mission, RG 001/78, RG 001/78, Box 25, Carl E. Blanford, 1951–1963, Folder 12.

49 Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, *China and the True Jesus: Charisma and Organization in a Chinese Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), and Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

50 Zehner, “Conversion to Christianity,” 421.

pursuit of signs and wonders was central to their perception of divine agency.

Pentecostal spirituality began influencing devotional practices within the Presbyterian tradition. Worshippers sought “extended prayer meetings” and spiritual gifts. Nai Subachai, a native of Trang and follower of female revivalist Khru Wan in Songkhla, hosted gatherings where participants reportedly “received the gifts of tongues and healing.” Reactions were mixed. In the Trang Church, William Chow dismissed these experiences, lamenting that those claiming to be “filled with the Holy Spirit” exhibited less Christlike characteristics. Schisms escalated when Chow forbade glossolalia during services, and those unwilling to abide by the ban eventually left. Under Khru Wan’s leadership, revivalist activities intensified. Songkla congregants held hours-long prayer meetings “to seek manifestations of the filling of the Spirit.” In early February 1957, Khru Wan announced that “the Holy Spirit came upon” her followers, causing many to weep uncontrollably, while a boy reportedly spoke in tongues and sang new songs. Blanford was skeptical, noting that participants “did not seem to know why they were crying” or whether they experienced “the true filling of the Holy Spirit.” When he voiced his doubts, Khru Wan warned him of a divine curse. The controversy deepened when local clergy sided with Khru Wan. Hai Bwo, a Thai preacher in Hat Yai, claimed during a Sunday service to have become “a great healer and evangelist” like Jesus, and demanded that Elder Dr. Wei Pi Yin kneel and pray. Blanford sensed trouble and engaged Hai Bwo in a discussion about biblical prophecy. Hai Bwo admitted being torn between two conflicting voices and later consulted Khru Wan, who affirmed that Blanford opposed the Holy Spirit. By late February 1957, the Hat Yai Church disfellowshipped Nai Subachai, Khru Wan, and other dissenters.<sup>51</sup>

This debate over charismatic experiences resulted from internal competition between church factions. Pentecostal-influenced Chinese and Thai congregants absorbed and adapted new spiritual practices into their everyday lives, placing them at odds with Blanford, who regarded such practices as “a religious perversion” that disrupted church order.<sup>52</sup>

---

51 Muriel Blanford, Haadyai, to Horace W. Ryburn, Bangkok, March 4, 1957, American Presbyterian Mission, RG 001/78, Box 25, Carl E. Blanford, 1951–1963, Folder 10.

52 Horace W. Ryburn, Bangkok to Muriel E. Blanford, Haadyai, March 15, 1957.

Like contemporary Overseas Missionary Fellowship churches in central Thailand and Brethren congregations in Singapore, Hat Yai's Presbyterians were cautious about recognizing glossolalia, healing, and prophesying as legitimate expressions of conversion.<sup>53</sup> Yet, for ordinary worshippers, the efficacy of Christianity was as much about supernatural manifestations as it was about biblical knowledge and piety. These tensions over charismatic practices and liturgical uniformity underscored the experimental nature of missions during the Cold War era.

### DISAGREEMENTS OVER BAPTISMAL CONVERSION

Liturgical disputes over baptism strained denominational unity across Thailand's Protestant communities. Blanford openly criticized the True Jesus Church for its refusal to recognize baptisms administered by what it called "sinful mission churches." This group conducted mass immersion rites that redefined conversion through "new modes of symbolic expression," expecting believers to demonstrate visible signs of salvation.<sup>54</sup> A parallel controversy erupted in 1953 between the immersionist Maitrichit Baptist Church and the Presbyterian-rooted Sapan Luang Church, which practiced sprinkling. The Maitrichit Baptists upheld immersion as a public testimony of faith, while Elder Lau Hang Chiang of the Saphan Luang Church proposed that the Seventh District leadership review and approve all immersion baptisms. The Baptists interpreted this suggestion as denominational discrimination. In response, Maitrichit withdrew from the Seventh District in 1954 and, by 1959, spearheaded the formation of the

---

53 Patricia McLean, "Thai Protestant Christianity: A Study of Cultural and Theological Interactions between Western Missionaries (the American Presbyterian Mission and the Overseas Missionary Fellowship) and Indigenous Thai Churches (the Church of Christ in Thailand and the Associated Churches of Thailand-Central)," PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2002, 127; Jean DeBernardi, *Christian Circulations: Global Christianity and the Local Church in Penang and Singapore, 1819–2000* (Singapore: National University Press of Singapore, 2020), 321–322.

54 Andreas Heuser, "Imperial War-Zones and Frontiers of Conversion," in Afe Adogame, Roswith Gerloff, and Klaus Hock, eds., *Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Scattered Heritage* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 97–109, at 104.

Twelfth District—an immersionist coalition uniting Baptist congregations and churches affiliated with the Disciples of Christ.<sup>55</sup>

The baptismal controversy intensified in 1960 when the Executive Committee of the Church of Christ in Thailand formally addressed the issue. American missionaries from the Churches of Christ, working in the mountainous village of Bua in the Nan area—a historically Presbyterian mission field—insisted that “immersion was necessary for salvation.” They rebaptized individuals who had already undergone baptism, a practice that drew sharp criticism from Presbyterian circles. Presbyterians maintained that “once baptized, always baptized,” affirming the validity of any baptism performed “in the name of Jesus Christ or the name of the Trinity.” They welcomed transfers from other denominations without requiring rebaptism.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, many Chinese and Thai Presbyterians preferred rebaptism when joining new congregations, reflecting a grassroots ecumenism that often diverged from official doctrine.

Blanford’s baptismal practices in Hat Yai drew scrutiny from colleagues. Although a Presbyterian, he baptized children and occasionally practiced immersion rebaptisms. Horace Ryburn, the influential American Presbyterian Field Representative to the Church of Christ in Thailand, warned that such actions “could only result in the crudest and grossest superstition.” Ryburn argued that children should not be baptized solely at their parents’ request unless the minister was assured of their understanding.<sup>57</sup> Blanford defended his approach by highlighting the theological diversity within his congregation, which included “people of English Presbyterian background in China, some of American Baptist background, and some of Disciples of Christ background from Nakorn Pathom” as well as two Little Flock families. To accommodate this diversity, he offered both sprinkling and immersion as needed—immersing the Little Flock believers in Bang Kaeo—and asserted that church unity should take precedence over liturgical uniformity. Citing 1 Corinthians 12:14–21, he wrote, “We do not have to insist on uniformity of belief and practice but allow freedom of differing points of view and different practices, so long

---

55 Kho, *A History of the Maitrichit Chinese Baptist Church*, 51, 58, 61 and 63; Blanford, *Chinese Churches in Thailand*, 52.

56 Horace W. Ryburn, Bangkok to Carl E. Blanford, New York, March 16, 1960.

57 Ryburn to Blanford, New York, March 16, 1960.

as our central unity in Christ is maintained. I am a Presbyterian today, not because I have the same ideas and outlook as others, but because Christ holds me in the Presbyterian Church, just as he holds others in.” His strategic pragmatism enabled him to overcome theological disagreements while fostering harmony within a diasporic congregation.

On the matter of infant baptism, Blanford respected parental requests, affirming, “I must baptize the children of Christian parents if they request it, and it is my responsibility as a Presbyterian minister to urge Christian parents to have their children baptized, based on our covenant beliefs.” At the same time, he honored the Baptist tradition of infant dedication “without the use of water.” Refusing immersion baptism, however, risked alienating believers and pushing them toward the Southern Baptists and the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, both of which had established a visible presence in southern Thailand.<sup>58</sup> To meet this need, the Hat Yai Church installed “a tank for baptism.” Even Chinese pastor Tseng supported this ecumenical stance, remarking, “Why bring all this trouble into our church? The members are working together harmoniously. All baptized individuals are received into our fellowship, regardless of their mode of baptism. Let us not raise the issue.”<sup>59</sup> Though criticized by church headquarters, Blanford’s liturgical flexibility helped defuse tensions and preserve unity within a congregation marked by ecclesiastical plurality.

## CONCLUSION

Carl E. Blanford’s missionary career in Hat Yai provides three key insights into the evolving landscape of Chinese Christianity during the Cold War. First, his ministry reflects the American Presbyterian Mission’s efforts to accommodate the expectations of Chinese diasporic congregations amid a period of fluid missiological experimentation. Blanford navigated denominational boundaries with pastoral creativity, adapting to the shifting contours of Chinese Christian identity in Southeast Asia. His liturgical pragmatism—offering both sprinkling and immersion to accommodate diverse preferences while prioritizing congregational cohesion over doctrinal rigidity—proved crucial. This approach sustained stability

58 Carl E. Blanford, New York to Horace W. Ryburn, Bangkok, to March 29, 1960.

59 Muriel Blanford, Haadyai to Horace W. Ryburn and Charoon Wichaidist, Bangkok, March 9, 1963.

within the Seventh District of the Church of Christ in Thailand, even amid ongoing schisms and leadership conflicts following his departure in 1963.

Second, the agency of overseas Chinese Christians in southern Thailand emerges as a central theme. These believers leveraged transnational networks and resources to build resilient and adaptive church communities. A collective diasporic identity took shape in which church attendance and baptism were embraced as both personal decisions and filial obligations. Christian faith became embedded within kinship structures and migratory experiences, with Jesus Christ supplanting traditional deities as the focal point of worship for second- and third-generation believers.

Third, Blanford's work confirms the translatability of Christianity within contexts of sojourning and settlement. Overseas Chinese engaged Christianity both as a universal faith and a localized spiritual resource. Diasporic churches served as spaces of survival and self-assertion, providing institutional mechanisms through which congregants exercised religious agency in Thai society. Locally born, bilingual, and bicultural lay leaders played a vital role in fostering revival and community integration. Through this process, southern Thailand became a distinct religious frontier, challenging conventional understandings of denominational identity. The Hat Yai Church welcomed Chinese and Sino-Thai Christians from diverse ecclesial backgrounds and thus evolved into a site of liturgical adaptation. Read alongside local church records and missionary correspondence, Blanford's story invites us to reimagine global religious movements not as top-down transmissions but as dynamic, locally mediated processes shaped by the everyday choices and innovations of the Chinese diaspora.

### **About author**

Joseph Tse-Hei LEE (B.A., M.A., Ph.D., London) is professor of history and executive director of the Global Asia Institute at Pace University in New York, USA.