

Imagining the 'Laos Mission': On the Usage of 'Lao' in Northern Siam and Beyond

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Abstract

The wide application and flexibility of the term 'Lao' in inland mainland Southeast Asia is well-known. The ethnonym has been applied to groups in countries neighboring modern Laos, and especially in Thailand's northeast. The term was widely applied in Thailand's north as well, however, until an abrupt change in the early twentieth century, after which the term fell out of favor among local and expatriate elites in the region. This essay examines the complex life of the term 'Lao' in northern Thailand/Siam. The American Presbyterian Mission (APM) in Siam's north was founded as the 'Laos Mission,' using the term in contradistinction to the 'Siam Mission' based in Bangkok. As the mission expanded its presence to Phrae and Nan, cities with a close connection to Lao states such as Luang Phrabang, key missionaries also promoted the term 'Lao' to fuel aspirations for a regionwide mass conversion. However, Bangkok began to see the term 'Lao' as an obstacle to Thai nationalism, and so the APM gradually shifted away from promoting a distinct 'Lao' identity, and toward the policies of Bangkok, aimed at making 'Lao' into 'Siamese.' Though the APM in northern Thailand/Siam eventually aided and abetted the extension of Siamese power in mainland Southeast Asia, there was a historical moment in which the American missionaries envisioned and promoted a very different notion of 'Lao' in Southeast Asia.

Introduction

Many scholars have noted the ephemeral, constructed nature of nations. Whether as an imagined community or a colonially contested space, Laos certainly fits this bill. So what constitutes the space and population of Laos? In the conclusion to *Siam Mapped*, Thongchai Winichakul argues that, rather than searching for the supposed ancient origins of the nation, scholars should instead focus on the "obvious components" of a nation to see its "ephemeral conjuncture." He concludes with a seemingly radical thought: "It is as simple as saying that the birth of 'Siam' locates in the composition of the characters S, I, A, and M" (Winichakul 1994: 174). This essay seeks to examine the concept of 'Laos' in a similar way. Rather than follow the political lines of colonialism and nationalism that produced the modern Lao state, or trace the ethno-cultural distribution of a broadly defined Lao population and culture, either across the border into northeastern Thailand, or 'Isan,' or abroad as a refugee diaspora, this essay examines the construction of a Lao space and people through the combination of the letters L, A, O and (sometimes) S. In turn of the century America or Britain, 'Laos' could

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just as easily have been applied to Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai or Phrae as to Luang Phrabang, Vientiane or Champassak. The provinces that later became Siam's northern periphery were known to much of the outside world as 'Laos,' and their people were referred to as 'Lao' by both government officials and western observers well into the twentieth century. Thus, the provinces and populations of northern Siam were initially drawn into and later excised from the ephemeral creation that is Laos. What does this history mean for our understanding of the idea of a Lao space and Lao people? Conversely, what does the 'Laos-ness' of Siam's northern periphery tell us about the formation of both the modern Siamese state and northern Thai identity?²

This article begins by briefly considering the idea of 'Lao' in Thai history and historiography, and the view from the Siamese state, which sought to deconstruct and erase the idea of 'Laos' within its borders as it was coming to terms with the new creation of French Laos. The core of the essay examines the views of American missionaries operating in northern Siam at the turn of the twentieth century who, along with other western observers, continued to identify the land and people of Siam's north as 'Laos' well into the twentieth century. The conflicted meanings of 'Laos' erupted into a bitter dispute between Baptists and Presbyterians over evangelical jurisdiction—a fight that helped to produce an idea of a Lao space limited by the shifting ethno-racial discourse of the Thai state and of French Laos. In short, I argue that these missionaries promoted a vision of 'Laos' quite distinct from the French, British, Siamese and most—but not all—of those in the region referred to as Lao. If nothing else, the former 'Laos-ness' of northern Thailand highlights the conflicted, twisted road that led to the concept of 'Laos' as we know it today. By highlighting these alternate paths, which are so often pushed aside in historical narratives that privilege a homogenous, unified nation-state, this essay hopes to show the possibility of alternate conceptions of the northern, inland realms of mainland Southeast Asia.

The region formerly known as 'Lao'

The term 'Lao' has a very long history in mainland Southeast Asia. There are many historical debates over the local origin of the term, most of which are outside the scope of this essay. However, as Søren Ivarsson has noted, the term 'Laos' has been used since at least the middle of the sixteenth century to describe areas north and northeast of the core of Siam in the Chao Phraya basin (Ivarsson 2008: 24). A mid-sixteenth century usage of the term by a Portuguese geographer, for example, encompasses the areas of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Lan Xang; essentially, the two core areas of Lanna and the heart of Lan Xang were all 'Lao.'³ This perspective reflects the view from Ayutthaya, where Portuguese and other western visitors came to trade and collect information, and whose chronicles referred to the region of Lanna as "the country of the

² For the purposes of this essay, 'Siam' refers to the modern, territorially defined nation-state that existed until 1939, when the name of the country was changed to 'Thailand.'

³ Lanna and Lan Xang were two important inland kingdoms that shared cultural, political and economic ties with one another, and that often fought with Ayutthaya. Lanna covered much of present-day northern Thailand, and included, at times, areas of adjacent Myanmar and Laos. Lan Xang extended its power through much of present-day Laos and maintained close relations with Lanna.

Lao" (McDaniel 2008: 93). Thus, in western knowledge as well, 'Lao' began its career as a term of identification by signifying primarily social and spatial distance from Siam.

If in the sixteenth century 'Lao' referred to the lowland peoples of inland Buddhist kingdoms beyond the easily accessible Chao Phraya basin, by the late nineteenth century, the term came to clearly signify racial and ethnic difference; this period also saw the "ethnographic construction" in Siam of what Thongchai Winichakul (2000) calls the "others within." The two categories of internal 'others,' according to Thongchai, are *chao pa*, or the wild and 'savage' people of the forest, and the *chao bannok*, the "multi-ethnic villagers under the supremacy of Bangkok" (Winichakul 2000: 41). In Siamese eyes, the Lao belonged not to the *chao pa*, but rather to the *chao bannok*. Lao were upcountry, lowland-dwelling speakers of closely related Tai languages, but lacked the access to civilization and global modernity that favored Siam. No longer simply outside the reach of Siamese control, by the late nineteenth century they became outside the reach of modernity.

In this process, a distinction between a *spatial* and an *ethno-cultural* construction of 'Lao' must be made. In Bangkok's eyes the external kingdoms of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Lan Xang became 'within' by becoming spatially part of the Siamese kingdom and territory—the space ceased to be Lao and became, instead, Siamese. Ethno-culturally, however, the people remained different and apart from the Siamese people and culture—hence, they remained 'others.' In this formulation, 'Lao' populated not only the territories that make up the modern nation-state of Laos, but also the northern vassal states that were formerly part of the Lanna kingdom. In the dominant master-narrative of Thai history, Siam 'lost' the provinces of modern Laos to France at the turn of the century, while the Lao-ness of the people of what became Siam's northern provinces was erased from memory. Before 1893, however, the Lao came not only from places like Lan Xang, but from Lanna as well—in other words, there were both *lao lan xang* and *lao lanna*. As Grant Evans notes, "the people of what is today northern Thailand were formerly known as Lao, and were only formally integrated politically into the Thai state a year before the French asserted their control over Laos in 1893" (Evans 1999: 21). What does it mean to consider the population of Thailand's north as 'formerly Lao'?

It was not only the people who were formerly known as Lao—the region as a whole was referred to as Lao. In the 1890s, Bangkok began to assume direct control over the north, at least on paper, grouping outlying areas of the kingdom into regional administrative zones, or *monthon* (following the Sanskrit *mandala*). Several of these were identified as Lao, including *monthon lao phuan* and *monthon lao kao*, in what is today Thailand's lower northeast, while the provinces of the northern region were called *monthon lao chiang*. Once the French took control over the territories east of the Mekong in 1893, the fate of the term 'Lao' in Siam's north began to rapidly change. Between 1894 and 1900, Siamese officials embarked on a more thorough reorganization of the country's administration by implementing the *thesaphiban* system (Bunnag 1977). In the process, many of the country's *monthon* were given directional names indicating their position relative to Bangkok; *monthon lao chiang* became *monthon phayap*, or the 'northwest mandala' (Keyes 1995: 154–56). In other words, the formerly Lao provinces of Lanna were no longer identified by the ethnicity, culture or language of its population, but instead by their location in a Bangkok-centered national

space. These administrative changes sought to remove Laos-ness from the space of the nation, even while the majority of its people would continue to be referred to as Lao.

This presented a serious problem: an identifiably Lao population within Siam's borders could serve as pretext for continued difficulties with the French. In part to address this problem, Bangkok embarked on a project of racial homogenization described by David Streckfuss as the historical, ethnic and demographic erasure of the Lao from Siam (Ivarsson 2008: 70). Siamese elites began to replace the term 'Siam' with 'Thai' in diplomatic correspondence and treaty negotiations in the early twentieth century, well before the official name change in 1939. Textbooks began to explain 'Lao' identity to students in the new education system as simply another form of 'Thai,' an ethnic subset of a larger group. In the northeast, official policy toward language and education sought to transform the Lao into *khon isan* (Keyes 1995); in the north, similar policies erased the Lao in favor of *thai neua*, or *khon muang*. Moreover, these policies aimed at more than just transforming Lao people into Thai citizens; the goal was also to make people realize that they had, in fact, always been Thai. As Justin McDaniel has put it, "Lao and Thai became natural, eternal, and, therefore, real divisions, even though there is little evidence that they existed in precisely this way historically" (McDaniel 2008: 93).

This policy, while simple to declare, met with friction and frustration on the ground in Siam's northern provinces. Take, for example, a report filed by the Chief of Staff of the Royal Thai Army in 1916:

I saw one strange thing. It seems as though the people in Monthon Phayap are afraid of the people who come from Bangkok. Some even run away. This is all because those who come from Bangkok still look at the locals here as primitive and uncivilized [*khon pa / khon thuen*], as a bad race [*chat lew*], not like other Thais. They see themselves as higher, more special than them, and thus they act in a way that at the very least bothers and irritates the locals, and at times, much worse. (*Raingan kantruat ratchakan ...* 2458)

His description evokes the language of *chao bannok* and *chao pa*, as discussed above. This abuse is linked, he argues, to the use of the term 'Lao' in the north, a practice that clearly needs to be abolished. He goes on to explain that the purpose of the official policy to stop using the word 'Lao' in the north is:

to persuade people in M. Phayap to feel as though they are part of a single Thai nation, and no longer part of a colony [*prathētsarāt*] just like foreign colonies [*colonī*]. This is the best policy. High-level officials understand this well, and act accordingly. However, I feel that lower-level officials have yet to try and understand it clearly, and continue to think of themselves as superior to the locals. (*Raingan kantruat ratchakan ...* 2458)

What bothered this official was not only that low-ranking officials continued to use 'Lao' to describe the locals, but that they did so out of a sense of superiority. Initially a term

signifying social and spatial distance from the capital, when deployed by young soldiers sent from Bangkok to control the north, the term 'Lao' had become a derogatory term of internal colonial subjugation. Prince Damrong Rachanuphap even referred to the older system of administration, in which the population of the border provinces distant from Bangkok were called 'Lao,' as essentially an 'empire' (Keyes 1995: 155).⁴ Thus, to use 'Lao' to describe someone from Nan, Phrae, or Chiang Mai was not only dangerous because it opened up potential conflicts with the French colony of Laos to the east, but also because such language could implicate Bangkok in the colonial and imperial project itself.

The disentangling of Lao and Siamese was thus fraught with difficulty. The same report later mentions that Siamese officials in Monthon Phayap have taken to calling the locals *thai nuea*, or 'Northern Thai,' and those from Bangkok and the surrounding provinces *thai tai*, or 'Southern Thai.' This is problematic, he argues, as it duplicates the existing divisions that label those in the north as backward and different, and the Siamese as superior. At this point in the report, the author suggests a wonderful alternative to the problems of identification: rather than referring to everyone as Thai, people should be referred to by the city or province of their birth. So, instead of 'northern Thai,' he suggests we would have 'Chiang Mai people,' 'Nan people,' 'Lampang people' and 'Bangkok people' (*Raingan kantruat ratchakan ...* 2458).

By the 1910s, then, the term 'Lao' had become a dangerous word in Siam, not only because it referred to the newly created Laos state next door, but because it reinforced a sense of oppression at the hands of Bangkok officials. In short order, the formerly Lao peoples of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Phrae, Nan, and Lampang became simply Siamese, and later, Thai. They became, in fact, always-already Thai.

The 'Laos Mission'

While official Siamese policy led to the demographic and spatial erasure of 'Laos' within Siam, certain groups, especially Western observers, held on to the idea of the north-as-Lao longer than most. Foremost among these groups was the American Presbyterian Mission. The missionary presence in Siam's north began in 1867 with the arrival of the Rev. Daniel McGilvary and his wife in Chiang Mai to establish a Presbyterian mission (McGilvary 1912). By 1900, the Presbyterian mission had grown in both stature and extent, sprouting up stations throughout Siam's northern provinces. Since American missionaries had already established a mission in Bangkok earlier in the nineteenth century, the new mission came to be known as the "Laos Mission." Perhaps unsurprisingly, these enthusiastic American missionaries in Chiang Mai saw themselves operating in a Lao space and, in McGilvary's words, 'among the Lao' people (McGilvary 1912). In an early letter written to a friend in America, in fact, McGilvary wrote at the top, "Chiengmai, Laos capital" (McGilvary 1868). The Presbyterian mission became 'Laos' rather than 'Chiang Mai' or 'northern' in this way for several reasons. First, since the intellectual path of the missionaries, like their physical route, passed through Bangkok into the upcountry realm of the Lao, American contact with and

⁴ Keyes points out that Damrong uses the English term 'empire' directly rather than the Thai equivalent, *prathet rachathirat*.

knowledge of the interior was filtered through the prism of Bangkok elites. This was not always the case for other outsiders visiting or living in Chiang Mai. Foreigners arriving by different routes often used different vocabulary to describe the ethno-racial character of the region. Americans or British coming from Moulmein in Burma often saw the region and its dominant ethnic groups in Shan rather than Lao terms. For example, writing in 1890 about a trip through the region in 1876, Holt S. Hallet refers to the “Siamese Shan state of Zimmé”; he also makes a distinction between the “Ping Shans” and the “Lao provinces of Siam,” the rough equivalent of Isan today (2000: 32, 321). Second, even after Siam began to reimagine the region as northern as opposed to Lao, the focus of mission work remained the people, who continued to be identified as Lao, as illustrated by the frustrated government report discussed above. Therefore, even as space and place ceased to be Lao, the emphasis remained on the conversion of the Lao people; the logic and hope of conversion thus operated along ethno-cultural rather than spatial lines.

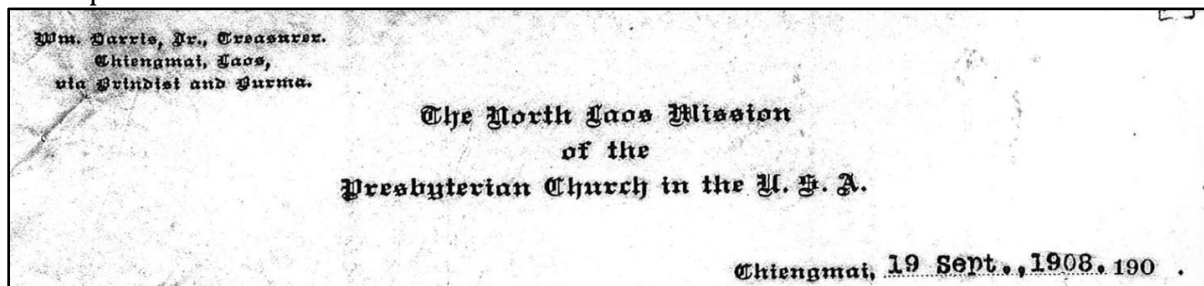


Figure 1: Letterhead from the treasurer of the Laos Mission, William Harris. Note the complex spatiality of the address in the upper left corner: “Chiangmai, Laos, via Brindisi and Burma” (Harris 1908).

Initially, then, the mission was clearly ‘Laos.’ This slowly began to change, mostly in response to Siamese government policy. While most missionaries continued to think of their mission as working in ‘Laos’ and among the ‘Lao people,’ a few turned away from this term early on. One of the most important was Dr. William Clifton Dodd, who wrote the influential book *The Tai Race* (1923), in which he acknowledged this policy and its impact on the history of the American Presbyterian Mission: “The name ‘Laos’ as applied to the people of North Siam was a mistake, both in pronunciation and application;” furthermore, the term Lao “was never used by the people” (Dodd 1923: 250). Dodd concludes that the ‘Laos Mission’ changed its name to the North Siam Mission as a result of Siamese government policy, clearly reflecting the preferred racial scheme of the Siamese state.

By 1920, the administrative realities of modern Siam, underscored by the impending extension of the railroad from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, led to the merger of the Laos and Siam Missions to form the ‘American Presbyterian Mission in Siam.’ For a brief period several missionaries referred to the mission as the ‘North Laos Mission,’ a sort of hybrid between ‘North Siam’ and ‘Laos’ (Figure 1). The name of the mission neatly reflected the conceptual break between ‘Laos’ as an imagined space on one hand, and an ethno-cultural construct on the other.

The “Struggle for Laos Expansion”

The fullest expression of this imagined Laos space came, ironically enough, with a foray into Burma. The Presbyterians were not the only game in town in the inland reaches of mainland Southeast Asia, and in nearby Burma, Baptist missionaries had begun to have some success in converting various groups, especially the Karen, by the late nineteenth century. By the turn of the century, Baptist and Presbyterian ambition came into conflict in a way that brought forward a very different conception of Laos in the region. By this time, the Baptist missionaries working among the Karen in Burma wanted to expand their operations into Kengtung (Chiang Tung), a move that many Presbyterians saw as impinging on their territory. This relatively minor episode in the history of the Laos Mission highlights the conflict between Laos as a space and Lao as a people. This dispute, known as the ‘Kengtung Question,’ simmered in the late 1890s before erupting into conflict and confusion in 1907 and once again before its final resolution in 1913. Before its resolution, however, this conflict demonstrated the extent of the missionary field, both in a Lao space and among a Lao people.

The ‘Kengtung Question’ was essentially this: who had the right to conduct missionary work in Kengtung, the Presbyterians or the Baptists? Though located in British Burma, Kengtung was a city with extensive cultural and historical connections to the Lanna city-states of northern Siam. Presbyterian interest in expanding the mission to Kengtung began in the 1890s, when Robert Irwin and McGilvary went on an exploratory mission to the city. A few years later, Irwin wrote to McGilvary explaining that “the Presbyterian Church had a special responsibility in Kengtung because the people there were ‘Laos’ similar to the people in northern Siam” (Swanson 1982: 60). The authority to establish a mission rested ultimately with the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the Board), which was based in New York City. The Board had to consider multiple obstacles: not only was Kengtung a remote location for a new mission, but financial constraints also made expansion difficult at the time, and by 1901 the Baptists had established a presence in the city (Swanson 1982: 61). In spite of these obstacles, the Board agreed to establish a mission in Kengtung in 1903; one year later two families, including Dr. Dodd and his family, arrived in Kengtung to set up the mission (Swanson 1982: 61). Though things started off amicably, conflict erupted when the mission physician, Dr. Cornell, left to work for the Baptists and began to argue along with them that the Presbyterians should leave Kengtung altogether.⁵

⁵ Swanson reports that the “points of conflict between Dodd and Cornell were petty, being related to Cornell’s unstable and explosive temperament” (1982: 62).

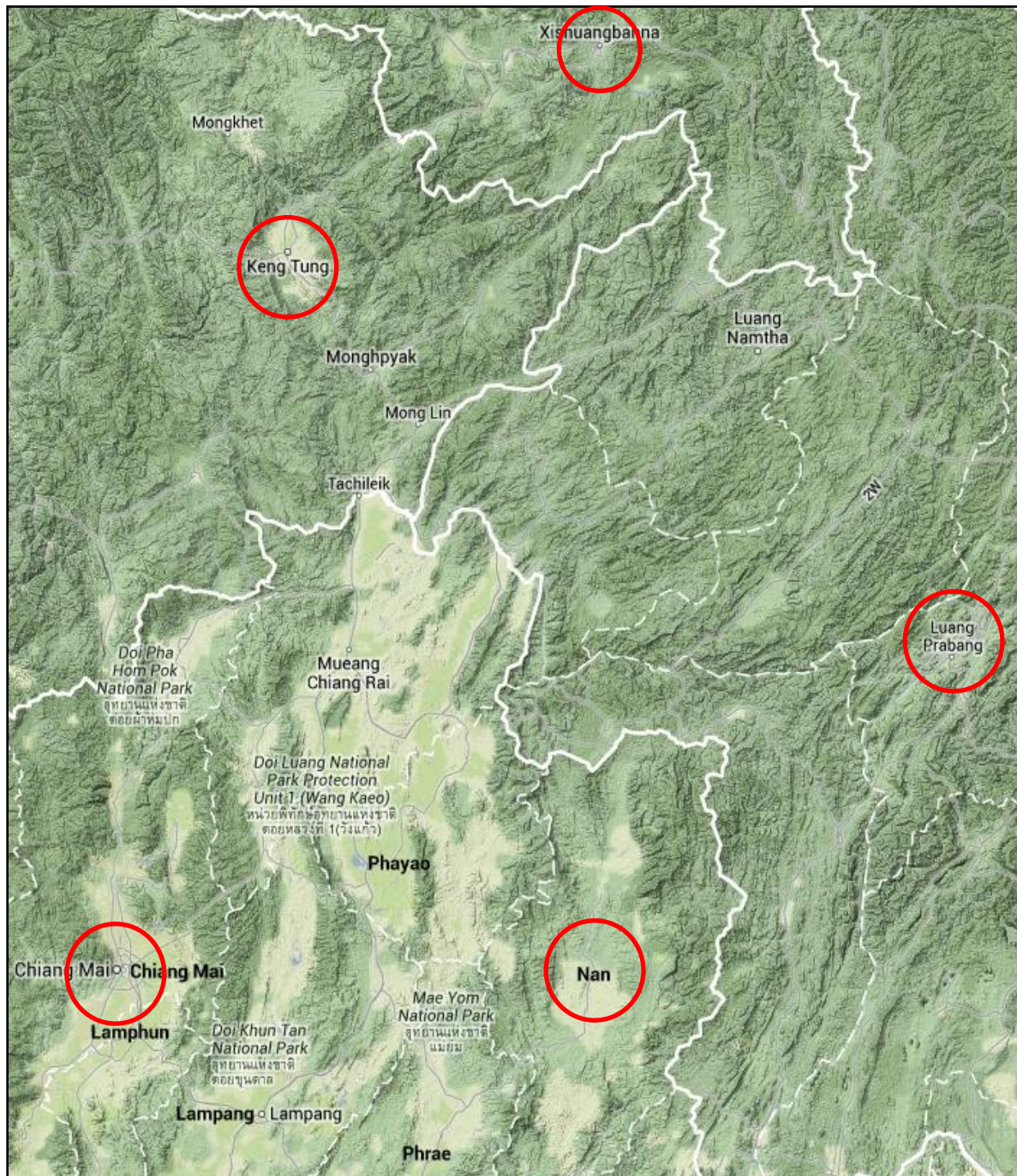


Figure 2: Upper mainland Southeast Asia, showing the cities mentioned in this essay: Chiang Mai, Nan, Luang Prabang, Kengtung and Jinghong.

At this point, the arguments on both sides became more forceful and clear in terms of ‘Lao’ ethnicity, religion and language. The Presbyterian missionaries in the field wrote to the Board arguing that responsibility for Kengtung fell to the Laos Mission because “the people in Kengtung were much more closely related to the ‘Laos’ of northern Siam than to the so-called Shans, the people the Baptists worked with in their Shan Mission south of Kengtung” (Swanson 1982: 62). Furthermore, they argued that

the Buddhism practiced by the people in Kengtung was closer to that practiced in Chiang Mai than to what was practiced in the rest of Burma. Finally, they argued that only the Laos Mission was capable of reaching the population of Kengtung because of their facility with the language and the mission press, which was the only press capable of printing in *kam muang*, the regional script used throughout the former Lanna kingdom. Debate continued throughout 1905, and although the Board allowed the Presbyterian station in Kengtung city to continue operating, which it did with moderate success in 1906, the controversy and conflict between the Presbyterians and Baptists continued. Missionaries on the ground, as well as the Board, viewed joint occupation as impossible, which pitted two views of Kengtung against each other—Kengtung as politically Burmese, or Kengtung as culturally, linguistically and ethnically 'Laos.'

A joint commission comprising members of both missions met in 1907 to attempt once again to resolve the 'Kengtung Question,' but they ultimately failed (Swanson 1982: 63).⁶ The commission had to deal with the political realities of the border between British Burma and Siam, and that the Baptists had entered the field by working through the British colonial government. In short, the Baptists were already there, better funded and eager to take responsibility for the whole of Kengtung. Moreover, since joint occupation was out of the question, there was no option for the Board to continue the mission there and it decided to close the station.

This should have marked the end of the Kengtung Question. In 1910, however, Dr. Dodd, the former head of the Kengtung mission, undertook a journey that would bring Kengtung—and an expansive Laos space—back to the missionary imagination. Dr. Dodd's travels through Yunnan and southern China via Kengtung would become the basis of his oft-cited book *The Tai Race*; moreover, both his travels and his book had the effect of transforming Kengtung from a Lao space to a gateway to an extensive Tai-speaking population (Swanson 1982: 66). Now the stakes seemed higher—a mission station in Kengtung was about more than the existing population there; it was about reaching millions of Lao souls in an untouched mission field. By 1911, the Kengtung Question was very much on the minds of Presbyterian missionaries in the north.

Though many missionaries voiced their opinion in these matters, one of the most vocal was Dr. Samuel C. Peoples, the head of the Laos Mission station in Nan. Dr. Peoples began his missionary career in Chiang Mai and Lampang. In Chiang Mai he is perhaps best known for having secured, sometime around 1890, the first typeface in the aforementioned local 'Lao language' of *kam muang*, which then enabled the Mission Press in Chiang Mai to print bible tracts and religious pamphlets for distribution throughout the region (Swanson 1982: 5).⁷ In 1894, Dr. Peoples was transferred to the easternmost station of the Laos Mission in Nan, near the present-day border with Laos. He was a strong advocate of the Presbyterian presence in Kengtung and served on the 1907 commission that tried, but ultimately failed, to save the station.

⁶ The Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions and the Baptist Union agreed to form the joint commission in 1905, but there was much conflict within the Laos Mission over whom to appoint. Pro-Kengtung forces initially blocked any appointments to the commission over fears of working together with the Baptists, but eventually the Board forced the missionaries to make appointments to the commission.

⁷ This language was not Lao, of course, but rather the local script found throughout northern Thailand called *kham muang*.

Dr. Peoples wrote often to his friends in the United States to raise awareness and solicit funds for the mission station in Nan. He often started by simply explaining what ‘Laos’ and ‘Nan’ were. In a personal letter to a friend in California, for example, he began by noting that “‘Laos’ is not the name of a country at all but of a tribe of people. ‘Nan’ is the name of a small inland City [*sic*] of a few score thousands people, probably not generally known” (Peoples 1914f). Regardless, he remained keen to promote his work among the Lao, even as they were becoming Siamese. Figure 3, for example, shows a photograph taken around 1914 that he used to promote the mission to the faithful back in America; however, this image also provides, in a sense, a snapshot of the transition from ‘Lao’ to ‘Siamese’ mentioned above. While he sent the photograph out ostensibly to raise funds for the *Laos* Mission, the caption—added to the picture later—described his class as *Siamese* evangelists. The subjects of this photograph were caught between two shifting identities, and depending on one’s perspective, could be seen as Lao or Siamese.



Figure 3: “Dr. Peoples and Siamese Evangelists” This photo, taken sometime around 1914, shows Dr. Samuel C. Peoples and his evangelical staff, referred to in the caption as “Siamese Evangelists.” By this time, Nan was considered part of Siam, even though Dr. Peoples saw his mission as focused on the Lao people. The caption was added later when the photograph was printed for distribution to churches in the United States in order to solicit funds for the “Laos Mission” (Peoples 1914a).

This shift was taking place as the Presbyterians were once again considering Kengtung, this time as a gateway to a broad field of Lao souls. Unsurprisingly, Dr. Peoples avidly opposed the Baptist presence in Kengtung, which he saw as the rightful space of the Presbyterian Laos Mission.⁸ His arguments after 1911 mirrored the earlier ones discussed above—the Presbyterians alone worked among the Lao, and so

⁸ His descriptions of the Baptists were often quite colorful: “Those Baptists!! [*sic*] There is no possibility of satisfying them. They open their mouths so wide that there is not room left to open their eyes to see what they are howling for” (Peoples 1914c).

considerations of ethnicity, language and culture should trump the inconvenient facts that a) Kengtung was politically part of Burma and b) already occupied by the Baptists. After Dodd's sensational journey through southern China, however, Dr. Peoples saw this as, in his words, "a struggle for Laos Expansion" (Peoples 1913).

The protests of missionaries like Dr. Peoples failed to sway the Board in New York, which simply wanted to avoid further conflict with the Baptists in what was from its perspective a tiny corner of the overall evangelistic field in Asia. Even when it became clear that Kengtung would be given over to the Baptists, Dr. Peoples maintained that the Laos Mission was "responsible for the Evangelistic Interests of all the literate or Bhooddistic Peoples [*sic*]" in the rest of Kengtung province, based primarily on their written script and religious practice (Peoples 1914d). The Kengtung boosters proposed a compromise—cede Kengtung to the Baptists, but open a new station in Chiang Rung (*Jinghong*), a city populated largely by ethnic Lue or Tai-Lue peoples with close cultural and political ties to the Lanna city-states where the Presbyterian Laos Mission operated. Through this compromise, the struggle for 'Laos expansion' would take precedence over the Laos of Kengtung.

Viewed another way, the Laos Mission was experiencing its own version of 'lost territories,' a phenomenon that continues to plague modern Thai politics (Kasetsiri et. al. 2013). Having been forced to concede Kengtung to the Baptists, the mission endeavored to make a claim for a more extensive evangelical space, based on a racialized notion of 'Laos peoples.' This sentiment did not, of course, begin or end with Dr. Dodd or Dr. Peoples, nor was this a new dream for the Presbyterians; the founder of the Presbyterian Mission in Chiang Mai, Daniel McGilvary, noted that missionaries had for some time envisioned extending the Laos Mission to "Tai-speaking peoples [...] under English and French and Chinese rule," or to what he called "regions beyond" (McGilvary 1912: 418, 422). Thus, even as the Kengtung question was answered, a new one was asked: just how far could the Laos Mission expand among Lao People?



Figure 4: "Dr. Peoples and his Siamese Evangelists." Note the map in the background. (Peoples 1914b)

The photo in Figure 4 shows this concept clearly. Produced in an effort to promote the mission and to help solicit funds (Peoples 1914e), the image shows Dr. Peoples surrounded by his 'Siamese Evangelists,' similar to the image in Figure 3. The most remarkable feature of the photograph, however, is the map behind Dr. Peoples, which shows a huge area marked 'LAO PEOPLE,' stretching from eastern Burma, through northern Thailand into Laos, northwest Vietnam and deep into Southern China. In short, this was the dream of the missionaries after losing Kengtung—to expand the Laos Mission into this newly discovered 'Lao' space.

This Lao space was imagined, however, at a time when the ontological basis of a Laos Mission was being called into question. In short, the extension into 'regions beyond' was being imagined just as the Lao were being discursively erased from Siam, and as a new discourse built around the Thai people and the Tai race was rising to prominence. Once again, returning to Dodd:

Mission policy in the past has been influenced by the prevailing tendency to deal with peoples according to civil boundaries. The partition of mission fields according to comity agreements among the various Boards has usually followed national or provincial lines. But in the case of our Tai task, we anticipate the broadening effects of the War by following up a people, regardless of civil boundaries (Dodd 1923: 340).

Dodd argues that in the wake of World War I, with the decreasing importance of borders, the mission needs to follow people, not state lines (Ivarsson 2008: 75). Where Peoples envisioned an expansive field based on 'Lao Peoples,' Dodd's formulation was centered on the Tai race. This new formulation became popular in Bangkok, where Thai officials began to see in Dodd's work an argument for burgeoning irredentist claims (Ivarsson 2008: 75).

The close of World War I brought a brief wrinkle to the struggle for Lao expansion as well—expansion into Luang Phrabang. Unsurprisingly, it was Dr. Peoples, whose station was closest to Luang Phrabang, who raised this point, which was for a time discussed among mission leadership in Chiang Mai (Peoples 1919a). The logic was based on overly optimistic reports in missionary media immediately after the war that the time was ripe for French cooperation with British and American missions (e.g., Callender 1919). By this time, however, the door had already begun to close on the possibility of eastward expansion, as the racial ground continued to change. The Laos Mission had become the North Siam Mission, and by 1921, north and south had merged to become simply the Siam Mission. At the same time, the tide of nationalist and racialized thought was sweeping across the Thai political landscape, pushing local identities off the mental map and replacing them with a unified 'Thai' identity. The mission field was increasingly defined by both the geo-body and racial space of the Thai, as distinct from that of French Laos.

Nevertheless, there were moments of possibility, historical moments lost in the teleological story of the creation of Siam and Laos that show alternate ways of thinking about local and regional identities and regional and national spaces. One such possibility was suggested by the government report cited above: rather than call people Lao (which was used by lower-level Thai officials in a derogatory sense), or Thai (which was simply too much of a stretch for most residents outside central Siam), why not refer to people by their local *muang* or province? Deconstructing the Laos-ness of Siam's north brings to the fore alternatives that could have been constructed in its place—alternatives to a homogenous Thai identity, perhaps something more attuned to local identities.

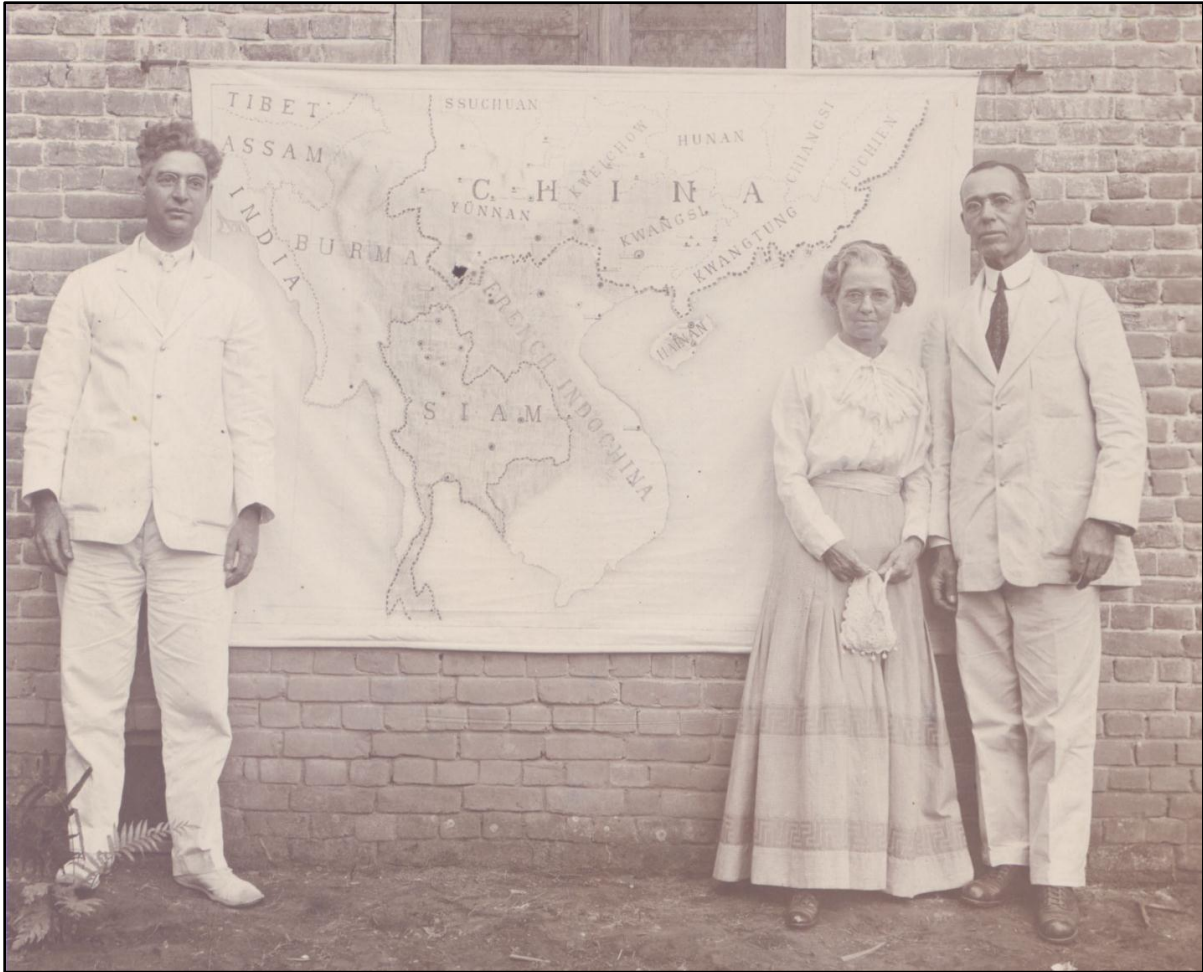


Figure 5: Dr. Claude W. Mason, Mrs. Belle Ruth Dodd, and Dr. William C. Dodd, in front of a map showing the location of the Chieng Rung station. According to Dr. Peoples, the shaded area indicates “the area of Lao population in Siam, Burma, China and Indochina” (see Peoples 1918 and 1919b).

This is not to suggest that this was in any way likely, or even widespread. However, these ideas do appear in the archival record and suggest a diversity of opinion, even at the moment when the identities were being formed, that could in some small way inform present efforts to re-formulate local identity politics in Thailand’s north or in modern Laos. But regional and national identity has a purpose, a use and a reason for being. What this story shows is that those purposes are not always self-evident and can be taken up in surprising ways by unexpected people. That Bangkok officials sought to construct a unified Thai nation out of an ethnically diverse empire in order to confront the challenge of western colonialism is clear; that American missionaries would seek to deploy a contrasting Lao identity as part of an interdenominational turf war is somewhat less obvious.

Though prominent Lao nationalists such as Katay Don Sasorith shied away from any notion of Lao identity that led to irredentism—which, after all, was becoming a popular sentiment in Bangkok, as well as a political problem for Laos—other Lao nationalists did promote a version of such an idea (Ivarsson 2008: 208–218). In this case, certain American missionaries were happy to imagine a Lao space, based on a

racialized sense of Lao identity that began with the Presbyterian experience in the former city-states of Lanna, but that extended beyond Siam's modern borders into modern Laos, Burma, Vietnam and China. Can we read this as an Evangelical reflection of an imagined Lao irredentism? Later Lao nationalists would imagine such an expansive Lao space, one that would encompass areas, to repeat Grant Evans' phrase, "formerly known as Lao" (Evans 1999: 21). Prince Phetsarath's vision of an expansive Laos was particularly bold. For him, a post-war Laos would include territories on the right bank of the Mekong up to the Dangrek Mountains in the south, the watershed between the Chaophraya and Mekong Rivers in the west, Chiang Mai in the northwest, and Burma in the north (Ivarsson 2008: 210–11). Textbooks in the 1980s continued to include, along with Isan, the provinces of Chiang Rai, Phayao, Lampang, Phrae and Nan as the "lost Lao territories" (Grabowsky 1995: 125). Though it is unlikely this irredentism was directly related to missionary discourse, the 'Laos Mission' certainly did much to reinforce the idea of the northern provinces of modern Siam—and beyond—as Lao. In short, there were multiple struggles for Lao expansion.

Conclusions

What are the implications of these imagined Lao spaces for regional identity in Siam's formerly Lao north? While the nation-state of Laos exists in its current shape (and not in the form imagined by Prince Phetsarath) largely as a result of French colonial expansion, rule and policy, it nevertheless provided an alternative basis of cultural identity, especially for the Lao in Isan, if less so for the population of Chiang Mai or the Lanna states to the east. There are, of course, strong historical and cultural bonds across the border and beyond, throughout the Lao diaspora, that shape the idea of 'Lao-ness.' But what about the lines drawn between northern Laos and northern Thailand? Ideas about 'Lao-ness' have more frequently been considered in relation to the northeast or Isan (Baird 2013; 2014; Draper 2013), but there were certainly important historical connections of trade and pilgrimage between states like Nan and Phrae on the one hand and Luang Phrabang on the other. While we both remember and reify the Lao identity of Luang Phrabang, Vientiane, and other spaces within the borders of modern Laos, as well as the 'Lao-ness' of Isan, what do we lose in our historical analysis by 'forgetting' the former 'Lao-ness' of the north? Before the twentieth century, the Siamese considered the populations of both Lanna and Isan to be Lao. Likewise, most from these regions would have considered themselves as "[belonging] to the same stock distinct from the Siamese" (Grabowsky 1995: 125). The incorporation of Chiang Mai into the Siamese state helped to erase the Laos-ness of the north from historical memory. Elites in Chiang Mai and Siam forged political alliances, both on the battlefield and through intermarriage, while Rama III's response to Chao Anou's revolt devastated Vientiane. For the *khon muang* of Chiang Mai, Siam was an ally that helped them gain independence from Burma; for the Lao in Isan, Siam was an imperial power that took their independence from them (Grabowsky 1995: 125). Laos remained as a potent source of cultural and linguistic identity for many in Isan, while the centers of *khon muang* identity were integrated into modern Siam.

If we seek to complicate the story of alliance and cooperation between Bangkok and the north, a different possibility emerges. Activists and scholars seeking increased

local autonomy and political control in the north have often couched their arguments in the vernacular of local *khon muang* identity. Many actively link the problems of the present, such as pollution, unplanned urban sprawl and a perceived loss of culture, to the colonization of the north by Bangkok (Charoenmuang 1995; 1999). This story should not neglect the former Laos-ness of the north, and what that means in terms of power relations between Bangkok and the periphery, and for the potential historical connections across the upper mainland region of Southeast Asia. In short, if we allow for friction and conflict alongside alliance and cooperation in the north, we should open the door not only to local identity and history, but also to the various meanings of the region's status as formerly Lao.

What this 'Laos-ness' actually entails is another question entirely. Many have suggested possible ways of seeing the continuity and coherence of this inland realm. Hans Penth, for example, spoke of a common culture, encompassing much of the former Lanna and Lan Xang kingdoms, which he called "the region of the *dhamma* letters," meaning the areas where a particular script had come to dominate monastic writing (Penth 2004: 117). More recently, Leslie Woodhouse has referred to this region as an 'inland constellation' of city-states aligning and re-aligning in a distinct intermontane environment, with both frequency and political expedience (Woodhouse 2009: 17, 26–27). A comprehensive definition of 'Laos-ness' is, however, outside the scope of this essay; the point here is that it is worth asking about the continuities across the historical lines that divide Lanna and Lan Xang, or across the modern border that separates Nan from Luang Phrabang.

The missionary discourse discussed in this essay represents one strand out of many that have come together to form a picture of ethnic and racial identity in mainland Southeast Asia. Though the vocal opinions of missionaries like Samuel Peoples have largely been relegated to the footnotes of history, other figures, such as Daniel McGilvary and William C. Dodd, have been more influential, both in their actions and in their published works. Siamese and French officials had to contend with a variety of opinionated actors within their borders, including some who stubbornly held on to distinct notions of identity, so some influence, however slight, is likely. Even so, American missionaries held on to a distinct notion of Lao identity that enabled them to advocate improbable-sounding causes, such as the expansion of the *Laos* Mission out of *Siam* into *Burma*.

As for Laos, the history of the nation can be imagined in a number of ways. It can be the history of the modern nation-state, specifically the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), or it can be a history of the Lao people more broadly conceived, including origin myths and early kings and kingdoms. In another sense, the history of Laos can be quite literal—the history of L, A, O and sometimes S. Though northern Thailand has been largely excised from Lao history, and Laos-ness from the north, this essay has shown that wherever that term goes, including to Chiang Mai and Nan, and even further afield to Kengtung and Jinghong, so goes Lao history.

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