

# Christian Evangelism and the Creation of a Thai Ethnology

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This research aims to examine the creation of ethnic groups and races in Siam and Burma. In particular, it will examine the issue of for whom, and for what purpose, these ethnic groups were created.

It will look at the role that the Presbyterian Laos Mission and the American Baptist Burma Mission had in creating local ethnologies on the Thai-Burma border, and nearby areas, in the final years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. It was these ethnologies that led to the ethnogenesis of the “Tai race” and the construction of its history. In fact, the ethnologies were created by the missions as an attempt to justify their right to evangelize in Kengtung and the surrounding area, in present day northeastern Myanmar, and then in southern China. The missionaries were the bringers of a change in the traditional consciousness of the people of the former Lanna kingdom. The Siamese government, based in Bangkok, was then able to build on this new consciousness to fulfill their own desire to change the mindset of the people in northern Siam from “Lanna” to “Siamese.” Subsequently, in the 1930s, the Thai government continued this process, by using the data published in *The Tai Race* as an educational tool, as it spread nationalism and created a national consciousness.

My research methods will rely on primary sources, consisting of the letters of correspondence between William Marcus Young and William Clifton Dodd. I was able to collect the letters by Dodd during my fieldwork in Chiang Mai. My research will also make extensive use of Dodd’s posthumously published book, *The Tai Race: Elder Brother of the Chinese*, which details his ideas on ethnicity and race. I will compare the two missionaries’ ideas concerning the races of the people they wished to evangelize. In particular, I will argue that the formations of the racial groups that are described in their various letters, and in *The Tai Race*, were created from a desire to justify their respective church’s expansion into territories that were contested by the other. Indeed, this ultimately manifested in the publishing of a book that would go on to be used by the Thai government as one of the methods it used to establish a unified national consciousness.



Figure 1. Horses at Mae Ngon, Chiang Mai Province



Figure 2. Entrance to Wat Jed Yod, Chiang Mai



Figure 3. The Three Kings Monument at Chiang Mai