

REVISITING THE DATING OF THE FIRST AND OLDEST PROTESTANT CHURCH IN SIAM

Herbert R. Swanson¹

ABSTRACT—This article reconsiders one of the key dates in Asian Christian history, the supposed 1837 founding of today's Maitrichit Church, Bangkok, usually considered the first and oldest Protestant church in Siam. It examines three potential dates: (1) the founding of the first Baptist Chinese immigrant de facto church in 1833; (2) the formal establishment of that church led by a visiting representative of the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society in 1837; and (3) the apparent withdrawal of the Chinese members from the 1830s church to form a new, separate church in 1861. The article concludes that Maitrichit Church began in 1833 and is, indeed, the first and oldest Protestant church in Siam.

KEYWORDS: Baptist Missions; Chinese Immigrants in Siam; Chinese Protestantism; Maitrichit Church; Thai Christianity

Contested Origins

Protestantism in Siam began in 1828 with the arrival in Bangkok of the first two Protestant missionaries, making that date the single-most important benchmark in the study of the nation's 19th-century Protestant movement. From then on Protestant missionaries began importing into Siam not only their religion, but also a range of Western technologies and practices including, most notably, medicine, education, and printing. By the same token, the second key benchmark in the history of 19th-century Protestantism is the founding of Siam's first Protestant church, a Teochew-speaking Chinese migrant

church in Bangkok, universally understood as today's Maitrichit Church (คริสตจักร ไมตรีจิต), a member congregation of the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT).² As the story is generally told, Maitrichit Church was founded in Bangkok on 2 July 1837, making it the first as well as the oldest Protestant church in Siam. The date of 1837 is universally assumed as a solid, incontrovertible historical fact.³

² Officially named the Maitrichit Chinese Baptist Church: 591 Maitri Chit Road, Pom Prap, Pom Prap Sattru Phai, Bangkok 10100, Thailand. See: <https://www.maitrichitchurch.org>.

³ Standard histories for Thai Protestantism include McFarland 1928, and Wells 1958; see also Trakulhun 2024. For the missionary role in Thai modernization, see Auraiwan 1981; see also Lord 1969, Popp 1985, and Trakulhun 2013.

¹ Independent scholar, Chiang Mai.
Email: herbswanson1946@gmail.com.

Primary records of the 19th-century Baptist missionaries, however, tell a more complicated and nuanced story. Those records suggest three possible dates that can be claimed as Maitrichit Church's founding date. They are: (1) 1833, when the first Baptist group of three Chinese migrant converts formed as a *de facto* church; (2) 1837, when a series of events "regularized" the status of that Chinese congregation as a church; and (3) 1861, when the 1830s church was reconstituted by the Baptist Mission as a Siamese church and the Chinese members of the original church became established as a new church or congregation. If correct, this third date would invalidate the claim that Maitrichit Church is the oldest Protestant church in Siam. Twelve years prior to that year, in 1849, the Presbyterian Mission in Bangkok established its first church, the Samray Church (คริสตจักรสำราญ),⁴ also a CCT member church today, thus making it Siam's oldest Protestant church.

The purpose of this article is to address this confusion of dates. A basic historiographical principle holds that an accurate, reliable chronology based on original sources is the bedrock of historical narrative. Conversely, an inaccurate, confused, or contested timeline based on hearsay almost inevitably leads to misrepresentations and misinterpretations of events and their causes and consequences. This principle is important for at least three reasons: first, the status of Maitrichit Church in the Protestant timeline in and of itself matters; second, wrestling with this perplexity regarding dates

highlights key moments in the church's history; and third, discerning the founding date of Maitrichit Church subjects the Baptists to a scrutiny that has long been lacking in the study of 19th-century Siamese Protestant history. Indeed, the history of the Baptist Mission and its churches more generally has received almost no critical study and its primary materials have long gone unused by the scholarly community.⁵ This is true even though the Baptist's Chinese converts emerged in the 1840s and 1850s as Siam's first viable Protestant community. Thus this article sheds light on the putative status of the Maitrichit Church as the oldest Protestant church in Siam while also encouraging scholars to use the Baptist Mission's long ignored historical records as an important resource for the study of 19th-century Siam.

Commencing the Church (1833)

The Baptists' first congregation in Siam began to emerge after the first two Protestant missionaries arrived in Bangkok in 1828; Rev. Jacob Tomlin (1793–1880) and Rev. Dr Karl Gutzlaff (1803–1851) were missionaries from the London Missionary Society (LMS). They did not stay long, but during the time they were in Bangkok, Gutzlaff baptized a single Chinese immigrant convert, Bunti (บุนตี) who, by December 1831, had become the leading member of a small group of four to six prospective Chinese male converts. The group was formed by another missionary, the Rev. David Abeel (1804–1846). Abeel was a

⁴ The church is located at 37 Soi Charoen Nakhon, 59 Alley, Thonburi, Bangkok 10600, Thailand.

⁵ The one exception to this oversight is Trakulhun 2013 and 2024.



FIGURE 1: Portrait of Rev. John Taylor Jones, *The Missionary Magazine*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, January 1853 © American Baptist Missionary Union

representative of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) who temporarily worked in Bangkok in 1831–1832 (Abeel 1834: 248). After Abeel left, the Rev. John Taylor Jones (1802–1851) and his wife Eliza Grew Jones (1803–1838), American Baptists working in British Burma, moved to Bangkok in late March 1833 to initiate Baptist work in Siam [FIGURE 1].

The Joneses represented the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society (ABFMS), which in 1846 was renamed the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU). The remnant of Abeel's small group contacted the Jones' shortly after they arrived and immediately affiliated themselves with the Baptist

Mission.⁶ As the only baptized member of the group, Bunti acted as its first leader and throughout 1833 the group continued to meet and pray together with the Joneses. By November, two other regular members of the group asked to be baptized; John Taylor Jones consented to their request and baptized both men, Chek Peng and Seng-Seah, on Sunday, 8 December 1833. He also rebaptized Bunti by immersion, considered by most Baptists to be the only correct form of baptism. After the baptisms, the Joneses joined with the

⁶ J.T. Jones to L. Bolles, 7 April 1833. Baptist Mission Records (hereafter abbreviated as BMR) FM 110–5. Here and after, the originals of these records are housed at the American Baptist Historical Society, located at Mercer University, Atlanta, in the USA.

three Chinese converts in celebrating communion.⁷ In his subsequent report of these events, Jones wrote to the Baptist home office in Boston that this small group of converts plus the Joneses themselves together comprised “*a little Bap Church*”.⁸

At no point does Jones explain what he meant by “church”, but it is clear from his journal entry that he believed that the small group of three converts including himself and Eliza comprised a *de facto* church irrespective of the lack of a formal declaration or ceremony to that affect. Jones’s sense that he was leading a church despite the lack of formalities reflected the American Baptist understanding of what constitutes a “church”. Historically, Baptists have espoused a form of church polity called “congregationalism” which affirms the institutional autonomy of local churches. David Allen states, “The concept of autonomy is vital to Baptist theology and is in fact part of the warp and woof of what it means to be Baptist” (Allen 2010: 59). Congregational autonomy means that in Baptist ecclesiastical structures there is no higher governing body that establishes churches. If a group of Baptists consider themselves a church, they are a church, and no higher agency can tell them otherwise. In the case of dating the beginning of Maitrichit Church, we must therefore pay attention to what those on the field and in the Baptist home offices thought about the ecclesiastical status of their congregation—since no objective, external

measure is available to determine whether that small Baptist group of converts plus the Joneses was or was not a church. In fact, Jones’s early correspondence with and reports to the ABFMS from time to time referred to the small band of Baptists in Bangkok as “our little church” in a variety of formulations; later colleagues as well as the ABFMS functionaries in Boston echoed his assertion that there was in fact a Chinese Baptist church in Bangkok.⁹

Thus, it seems logical to conclude that 8 December 1833 is the date of the beginning of Maitrichit Church. However, as we shall see below, later chroniclers did not embrace this date. At the time, Jones and others thought the church began that year, but they did not overtly state that 1833 was its founding date. Later references supporting the 1833 date are of two kinds: first, two later sources refer to 1833 as the year of the church’s “commencement”; second, a few others offer it as the first date in the history of the church and pass over any other dates in silence, implying that it was founded in 1833 without claiming that such was the case.

The first of the two sources that record 1833 as the “commencement” of the church appears in the Baptist Mission’s annual report for 1848 and states simply that the church “was commenced in 1833 with the baptism of three persons”. There is no mention of the competing date of 1837.¹⁰ The

⁷ See Jones to Bolles, 31 December 1834, BMR (FM 110-5); Jones to Bolles, 18 January 1835, BMR (FM 110-5); Jones to Bolles, 15 February 1834, BMR (FM 110-5); and Bolles to Jones & William Dean, n.d., BMR (FM 110-6).

⁸ *Ibid.* Italics in the original.

¹⁰ Mission to Siam. *Baptist Missionary Magazine* (hereafter cited as *BMM*) 29, 7 (July 1849): 254–256.

second source was published in 1909 by the Rev. Samuel J. Smith (1820–1909), a former Baptist missionary in Siam who went to Bangkok as a boy of twelve with the Jones family. He writes, “In the latter part of 1833 Dr. Jones baptized three Chinamen. This was the first baptism by immersion ever performed in the river Menam. This was the commencement of the now flourishing Chinese Baptist Church of Bangkok [i.e., Maitrichit Church]” (S.J. Smith 1909: 4).

The use of the word “commence” in these two sources is ambiguous and feels somewhat tentative; there are several other words that might have been used that would more clearly designate 1833 as the beginning date of a new church—words such as “established”, “founded”, or “organized”. The use of the term “commence” seems to imply a vague process of beginning rather than a precise, dateable event. Smith’s usage of it is particularly notable in that he was a youthful witness to the events of 1833, a participant in the events of 1861, and surely knew about those of 1837, although he was not in Bangkok at the time. If he believed that the church was established in 1833, why not say so directly? The fact that he did not refer to 1837 at all does throw doubt on that year as the foundational date, but his use of the word “commence” for 1833 leaves us with the suspicion that he hesitated to claim that today’s Maitrichit Church was unequivocally founded in that year. His ambivalence on this point matters because Smith is the one later source most knowledgeable concerning the events of 1833; we will return to his ambiguity on this matter in our evaluation of the third date, 1861, as he

was a key protagonist in the events of that year.

Five other relevant sources only reinforce the somewhat ambiguous sense that Maitrichit Church can mark 1833 as its birth date. First, Eliza Jones in her memoirs (1842: 76–79, 92–98), describes the baptism of the three Chinese converts in 1833 and goes on to discuss the early years of the church without reference to the 1837 date. The impression is that the church began in 1833. Second, in his standard history of Baptist world missions, published in 1890, Edmund F. Merriam writes that three Chinese men were baptized in December 1833 and then goes on to briefly describe the history of the Bangkok Mission including “the Chinese Baptist Church in Siam” without reference to either 1837 or 1861. As with Eliza Jones, he leaves the impression that the church was founded in 1833 without stating so directly (Merriam 1900: 154–155). Third, the aforementioned Smith wrote, upon his return to Bangkok in 1849 after an absence of fourteen years, that there had been great changes in that period. He especially recalled that the Chinese church Jones had organized in the 1830s had by 1849 about 27 members and a chapel.¹¹ There is no mention of a date, but the fact that Smith remembers that Jones founded the church can only refer to the events of 1833 because after 1835 Jones was seldom involved with the church; much of his attention was focused on the translation of the Bible into Siamese. Thus, yet again the 1837 date is passed over in silence.

¹¹ Siam. Letter of Mr Smith. *Missionary Magazine* 30, 2 (February 1850): 41–43.

Fourth, in late 1836, Bunti became disgruntled and pulled away from the missionaries. During the resulting crisis, the Rev. William Dean (1807–1895), a recently appointed member of the Baptist Mission, wrote that, “[...] the present appearances look much like a speedy extinction of the visible church here”.¹² To be sure, Dean does not here mean to assert that the small Chinese migrant group in Bangkok was a church as such. By “the visible church”, he means, rather, that the converts belonged to the overt global body of Christians as opposed to the “invisible church” of those who are truly converted believers (Komonchak 1976: 112ff). Still, Dean comfortably uses the term “church” in passing to refer to the group of converts in Bangkok. Finally, fifth, in an undated letter from 1835, the Rev. Lucius Bolles (1779–1844), the ABFMS Corresponding Secretary, headquartered in Boston, wrote to the Bangkok missionaries that, “The little Chinese Church you will not cease to cherish, and if Bun Ty can be made useful, it will doubtless be best to keep him fully employed”.¹³ Prior to the events of 1837 described below, in sum, the missionaries in Bangkok and Baptist officials in the United States explicitly and repeatedly referred to a small Chinese Baptist church in Bangkok. They clearly assumed that it could be a church despite the lack of any formalities, which assumption makes perfect sense given their Baptist notion of congregational autonomy.

¹² Journal of Mr Dean at Bangkok. *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 18, 2 (February 1838): 38–41.

¹³ L. Bolles to J.T. Jones and William Dean, n.d. [1835], BMR (FM 110–6).

Over twenty years later, in 1859, Dean offers an alternative version of the founding of the church that does not reflect with actual events but does confirm the sense that Maitrichit was already a church prior to 1837. According to Dean, by 1835 the first group of three converts had broken up with the defection of Bunti and the death of the other two. Dean claims that after he arrived in 1835, the Baptist Mission gained three new Chinese converts that same year, which were then organized into a church with himself as the organizing pastor. He writes, “So far as we know, this was the first Protestant church composed of Chinese converts. Others were afterward added to them of such as afforded evidence of being born again” (Dean 1859: 115). Dean does not mention 1837 and clearly believed that the church began in 1835. His memory, however, was faulty as Bunti defected in late 1836 and the other two original converts were still alive when the events of 1837 took place. In fact, Dean himself, as we will see, reported on those events at the time and somewhat tentatively acknowledged that the church was first organized as a “regular” church in 1837. Dean’s later recollection, faulty as it was, is still important because it lends weight to the sense that the Baptist church in Bangkok was founded prior to 1837 and that the events of that supposedly pivotal year were not as momentous as later generations believed.

Regularizing the Church (1837)

The Baptist presence continues in June 1837 when the Rev. Howard Malcolm (1799–1879), a representative of the ABFMS, visited its fledgling mission

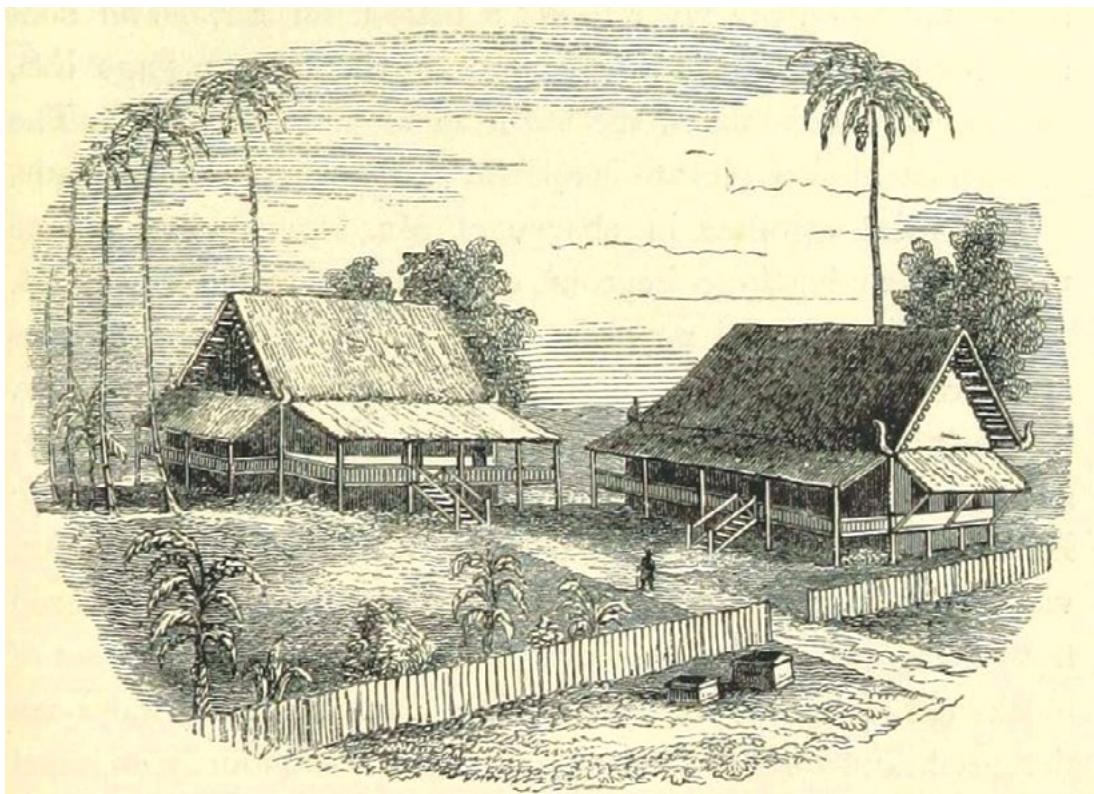


FIGURE 2: Baptist Mission Premises, Bangkok, 1837 © Malcolm 1839: II, 157

in Bangkok. He was on a tour of the Baptist missions in East and South Asia and spent seven weeks with the Siam Mission during which time he took note of the fact that the *de facto* church in Bangkok had never been formally constituted. At his behest, the small Baptist congregation, composed of converts and missionaries, declared itself an official congregation on Sunday, 2 July 1837 after having met previously to prepare for the event [FIGURE 2]. Malcolm later wrote,

Deeming it important to form the brothers and sisters of this station into a regular church of our Lord Jesus Christ, I convened them in council, and, after full

consideration, it was unanimously resolved upon. After devoting a day to fasting and prayer, and drawing out, in full, the platform of doctrine and discipline, I proceeded on the following Sabbath, to preach and perform the appropriate solemnities. Nine persons of whom two were the China men already mentioned, formed the material of the church (Malcolm 1839: 138).

Malcolm was aware of the potential historical significance of the official founding of this small, foreign-dominated congregation, observing that, “The first Lord’s Day in July, 1837,

was, by this solemn event, rendered memorable in the history of Siam, as the birth-day of the first Protestant church of Christ in the kingdom". He went on, "It was indeed a small room, and a small company; but an occasion full of present benediction and future promise". He avowed, "Hereafter centennial jubilees will celebrate the event, sacred orators dwell on it with glowing tongue, and unborn generations bless the auspicious hour". And he concluded, "The 'little one will become a thousand' and the day of small things give place to periods of power, extension, and triumph" (Malcolm 1839: 139). It is compelling rhetoric designed to fix the date of 1837 as a crucial moment in time and to attach Malcolm's own name to it.

The missionary event held on that Sunday was attended by only one of the Chinese members of the fledgling church. Malcolm, furthermore, had no official mandate, and the event was not entered into the official minutes or reports of an authoritative ecclesiastical body other than the local mission itself, of which he was not a member. As best as we can tell, the whole matter was Malcolm's idea and did not reflect any felt need by the mission or its converts. Still, more to the point, the actual historical situation of the church did not change in the least as a result. The ambivalence surrounding the event was reflected in Dean's report of it published in the *Baptist Missionary Magazine* (BMM) where he refers to the church prior to July 1837 as in an "unorganized state" and observes that, "We before celebrated the communion, and considered ourselves virtually bound by a Christian compact,

not till now regularly organized into a church".¹⁴ While Malcolm clearly believed he was establishing a new church, Dean's perspective was more nuanced and ambiguous. He seems to have felt that the events of 1837 "regularized" the church's status as a church and confirmed and solidified that status even though it had previously already shared a common congregational bond generally considered to be that of a church by those on the field and in the home office alike.

In the years after 1837, however, Baptist chroniclers took up Malcolm's ceremonial "regularization" of the church; this date has become the generally accepted date for the church's founding. It may well be that his soaring rhetoric as much as anything else transformed 1837 into a foundational event. Thus, William Gammell's standard history of American Baptist missions, published just twelve years later in 1849, recorded that, "In the summer of 1837 the mission at Bangkok was visited by Rev. Mr Malcolm, in his official tour in the East, and while he was there its several members, together with the three Chinese converts who still remained faithful, were formed into a Christian church" (Gammell 1849: 192). Gammell's word implies and assumes that there had not been a church in Bangkok prior to 1837. In succeeding years, this implicit assumption became fact.

In 1884, G. Winfred Hervey thus dated the organization of the Baptist Chinese church in Bangkok as 1837 and noted that it was "the first Protestant

¹⁴ Journal of Mr Dean, n.d., BMM 18, 7 (July 1838): 179.

church in Siam", solidifying the significance of the date as a key event in the history of Siamese Protestantism as well as a notable event in the history of Baptist foreign missions (Hervey 1884: 469). In subsequent years other Baptist sources locked 1837 into its chronological niche. Helen Barrett Montgomery (1913: 149), not only dated the founding of today's Maitrichit Church as 1837 but also incorrectly named William Dean its founder.¹⁵ That is a mistake other sources also sometimes make including, for example, Margaret Landon, the well-known author of *Anna and the King of Siam* (1944), who claimed in a 1948 foreword that Dean organized the church in 1837 (Goddard 1948: 7). Meanwhile, the 1837 date also became a staple in general histories of Protestantism in Siam or Thailand including the two standard sources, George B. McFarland's *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam 1828–1928* (1928) and Kenneth E. Wells' *History of Protestant Work in Thailand 1828–1958* (1958: 18). McFarland (1928: 29) also mistakenly credited Dean with founding the church. Finally, Maitrichit Church celebrates 1837 as the birth date of the church and Protestant churches in Siam more generally recognize it as the founding date of the nation's first Protestant church.¹⁶

In this way, common knowledge holds that Siam's first Protestant church was a Chinese immigrant congregation

founded by Baptist missionaries in 1837 and that this is today's Maitrichit Church. The events of that year had all the trappings of a foundational event including planning meetings, worship services, a statement of faith, and a duly appointed pastor, William Dean [FIGURE 3]; the involvement of Howard Malcolm as an official of the ABFMS lent it further credibility. However, all of this does not alter the fact that the Baptists in Bangkok and Boston considered their "little Chinese church" as a church virtually from the beginning. It does not change the reality that the supposedly foundational events of 1837 did not respond to a felt need in Bangkok nor did it change the fact that the congregation was before and after a tiny group composed largely of a handful of Chinese male converts led by a missionary pastor.

In the years after 1837, the small Baptist church in Bangkok slowly grew in numbers as its missionary patrons faced a number of daunting challenges to their work in Siam including the climate, health issues, slow communications and travel, limited financial resources, an unstable Chinese migrant community, Roman Catholic competition, cultural and social incompatibilities, and a Baptist evangelical ideology that was of little or no interest to the vast majority of either the Chinese or Siamese in the Bangkok region. By 1860, the church still numbered only 20 "native" members including three then in China. Most of the members were Chinese males, older than fifty, with some single and others married to local women.

¹⁵ See also, Merriam 1900: 154; Blanford 1977: 33; and A.G. Smith 1980: 32.

¹⁶ See Anonymous 2530: 13; also "คริสจักรไมตรีจิตฉลองครบรอบ 150 ปี" [Maitrichit Church Celebrates Its 150th Year]. ข่าวคริสตจักร [Church News], Aug. 1987: 45.



FIGURE 3: William Dean Portrait © Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity

Reinventing the Church (1861)

The final chapter in the saga of Maitrichit Church's origins opened in 1854 when the Rev. Robert Telford (1826–1898) arrived in Bangkok from Boston to begin work with the Chinese Department of the Baptist Mission. At the time he joined a colleague in that work, the Rev. William Ashmore (1824–1909), but Ashmore was reassigned to the Baptists' Hong Kong Mission in 1858 leaving Telford in charge of Chinese work in Siam including the Bangkok

church. Unlike Ashmore and his other predecessors in that work, including William Dean, Telford proved to be a largely ineffectual leader of the church who by early 1860 had fallen into an intense personal conflict with the Rev. Samuel J. Smith, introduced above. Smith was in charge of the mission's Siamese Department and the only other Baptist missionary left on the field.¹⁷ Smith originally came to Bangkok

¹⁷ See Telford to J.G. Warren, 11 February 1860, BMR, FM 111-8; Telford, Copy of Rejoinder to Rev. S.J.

in 1833 at the age of twelve with the Joneses, having been adopted by them in India. Smith subsequently studied in the United States for fourteen years before returning to Bangkok in 1849 as a Baptist missionary. He was tasked with expanding the mission's outreach to the Siamese and soon allied himself with Mr John H. Chandler, a somewhat testy Baptist lay missionary responsible for the mission's printing establishment until he withdrew from the mission in 1856. After he resigned from the mission, Chandler remained in Bangkok and maintained a close if unofficial connection to the mission through Smith.

By 1860, Telford and Smith were engaged in an acrimonious dispute between the mission's Chinese and Siamese Departments, especially over control of certain properties in Bangkok. It was a feud also marked by personality clashes between the two with Chandler lending his support to Smith. The feud caused a flurry of counter-punching missives sent by each missionary to the ABMU that led the Executive Committee in 1861 to suggest to Telford and Smith that the two departments be reconstituted as two separate, autonomous missions, one working with the Chinese and one with the Siamese. Publicly, the committee justified this action as the implementation of a policy to strengthen Baptist evangelistic outreach to the Siamese while still maintaining its ongoing work with Chinese immigrants.¹⁸

Smith, 17 April 1860, BMR, FM 111-8; and S.J. Smith to Telford, 24 April 1860, BMR, FM 111-8.

¹⁸ R. Telford, Annual Report of the Siamese Baptist Miss. for 1860/61, n.d., BMR (FM 111-9); and W. Dean, Report of the Committee on the Siam and China Missions, n.d. *Missionary Magazine* [originally BMM] 42, 7

However, clearly the Executive Committee took this step primarily hoping that removing Telford and Smith each to their own independent mission would tamp down the embarrassing fiasco their feud had created.

The chief obstacle to separating Baptist work in Bangkok into two missions was the congregation. In a later report, the ABMU Executive Committee affirmed in principle that outreach to the Siamese and not Chinese migrants should be its chief goal in Siam, but the actual transition to such a policy was "delicate & led to unexpected difficulties" because the existing church had always been a Chinese congregation and, since 1835, had always been supervised by the mission's Chinese Department. By 1860, it had only a few Siamese and mixed-race members. Acknowledging Chinese priority in the church, the Executive Committee report states that the church, "[...] enshrined memories of the most sacred character, and treasured up interests, personal to the missionaries and to the church members, which could not lightly be set aside". It acknowledged that logically "the Siamese portion would have been allowed to take the initiative in forming a new church", but it was felt that the larger and stronger Chinese membership could better weather the challenges of functioning as an independent congregation than could the Siamese minority. The report concludes, "[...] it was decided that the Chinese members, under the supervision of Mr Telford, should go forth and associate as a Chinese church—the other [original] organization to be known

(July 1862): 208–209.

hereafter as the Siamese [church]".¹⁹ The impetus for these changes was thus taken by the ABMU Executive Committee and was aimed primarily at patching over the Telford-Smith feud. The founding of a new congregation, in sum, did not arise out of a felt need in Bangkok but, rather, out of Boston's need to deal with difficult missionary staffing issues.

Telford apparently felt that this move was the only way he could protect the integrity of the Chinese congregation and retain his role as its pastor. In any event, he went along with the ABMU's plans and subsequently informed the Executive Committee that he met with the Chinese members on Saturday, 6 April 1861, and they willingly agreed to form a new church. The official ceremonial founding of the congregation then took place in a worship service held at the Baptist missionary compound in Bangkok on the following Monday, 8 April 1861. Telford took pains to explain that the Chinese members themselves made the final decision to form their own church and held a "simple ceremony" to that end. They also elected their own officers, including appointing Telford as their pastor.²⁰ These events, however, only served to intensify the feud between Telford and Smith as each claimed that their church controlled the disputed properties with Smith arguing that the ownership of them remained in the hands of the original, now Siamese church. Telford left Bangkok two years

later in 1863, ostensibly because of his wife's health but also because the situation there was no longer tenable for him and his family.

If Telford's report to Boston is correct, the Chinese members of the original 1830s church held a simple ceremony on 8 April 1861 organizing a new Chinese church with its own set of officers. The actions of that day should put the whole matter of the founding date of Maitrichit Church to rest. It was clearly understood by all parties involved that the events surrounding the removal of the Chinese majority from the mission's original congregation and the reorganization of that majority as a new church was as much an official action as were the events of 1837. In fact, it was still more "official" because it grew directly out of policy decisions made in Boston. In this scenario, then, Maitrichit Church was originally organized as a Chinese church in 1837 and then the Chinese members of the 1837 church became reconstituted as a new congregation in 1861. In this reckoning, the church of 1837 was shorn of its original identity so that it could become a Siamese congregation. The official story, thus, seems to be that Maitrichit Church was founded on 8 April 1861. If one embraces 1837 as the date of the official founding of the original church, it then seems only correct to affirm 1861 as the date on which today's Maitrichit Church was founded. The original 1837 church, meanwhile, died a slow death in the aftermath of 1861 and eventually ceased to exist.

When Telford left Siam, the Chinese Mission in Bangkok and its Chinese

¹⁹ Siam Mission, n.d., *Missionary Magazine* 42, 7 (July 1862): 276–280.

²⁰ Telford to Warren, 9 April 1861, BMR, FM 111–8; and Telford to Warren, 11 April 1861, BMR, FM 111–8.

church needed a new missionary and the ABMU asked William Dean to return to Siam and take charge of both. He enthusiastically agreed and arrived back in Bangkok with his family on Christmas Day 1864; the situation was immediately transformed. In the intervening years, Dean had become a widely known, highly respected, and influential figure in American Baptist foreign mission circles. In Siam, Dean was well-remembered and highly regarded in government circles. He was thus influential both in Bangkok and in Boston. Smith and Chandler were simply not in his league, thus a continuation of the disputes between the two Baptist missions in Bangkok was not going to go well for them. Dean, indeed, soon reported back to Boston that Smith's so-called Siamese church had no ethnic Thai members left, it was dwindling in size, and Smith himself was doing almost no outreach work among the Siamese.²¹

Dean's assessment of the Baptist ecclesiastical situation in Bangkok, furthermore, was that the Chinese members felt bitter about how they had been tricked by Smith and Chandler into appearing to give up their rights to property they believed was theirs. Dean wrote, "The Chinese brethren with us conscientiously regard themselves still members of the old-first Baptist Chinese Church of Bangkok, never having asked or received letters of dismission from it & never having organized themselves into a new '2nd church' as the 'pastor' of the Siamese church [Smith] chooses to style us". Dean was not correct in

his assertion that the Chinese members had not organized themselves into a new church four years previously, as we have seen above, but he was almost certainly right in his claim that they felt they were the same church as they had been before 1861 and that they felt bitter about their treatment at Smith's hands. Dean thus considered the division of the original Chinese church in 1861 to be a regrettable act taken for self-seeking and unspiritual reasons and sought to reclaim ownership of the original church for the Chinese congregation he inherited in late 1864. In his eyes, it was the original church because the members who were supposedly removed to the so-called second church had never been properly dismissed and therefore remained members of the original church. Dean summarized his feelings by writing, "This church has passed through many changes, but the Master holds it still as a light in his hand amid the darkness of this heathen people".²² By "this church" he meant today's Maitrichit Church. Considering Dean's reports and Smith's failures, meanwhile, the ABMU decided to suspend the work of the Siam Mission in Bangkok as of 1869. Smith by that time had gone into private business and was no longer employed by the ABMU; the ground in Bangkok was left entirely to Dean's Chinese Mission and its Chinese church.²³

²² Dean to Warren, 22 February 1865, BMR FM 108-26; Dean to Warren, 7 June 1865, BMR FM 108-26; and Dean to Warren, 25 August 1865, BMR, FM 108-26.

²³ Siam. Chinese Mission of Bangkok. Letter from Dr Dean, 22 January 1868. *Missionary Magazine* 48, 8 (August 1868): 326-330.

²¹ Dean to Warren, 25 April 1865, BMR FM 108-26.

As best as we can tell, Dean was convinced that the church he began to serve in December 1864 was in fact the same church that he had pastored two decades earlier. There had never been an actual Siamese church, and the original Chinese church had successfully navigated the shoals of missionary controversy regardless of any apparently official measures. This version of events, shared by the Chinese members, quietly became the accepted, semi-official narrative of events. It privileged 1837 at the expense of 1833 while nullifying the unpalatable events of the 1860s, ultimately banishing them from the living memory of the church. In 1879, thus, an ABMU report on the Bangkok Mission to the Chinese cited a list provided by Dean of the six organized Chinese churches in Siam at that time along with the founding date for each church. At the head of the list is Bangkok's Wat Ko Church (คริสตจักรวัดเก่า), as today's Maitrichit came to be known in the later 19th century, which according to Dean's list was "organized in 1837".²⁴ It was as if the events of the early 1860s had never happened.

Even Smith eventually seems to have accepted the nullification of 1861. As we saw earlier, in 1909 at the end of his life he published a book, *Brief Sketches of Siam*, that included a passing reference stating that the Baptist Chinese church in Bangkok "was commenced" in 1833. We noted above that the choice of the word "commence" was curious when other more direct terms could have been used. Considering events in the early 1860s, the choice takes on added

significance. Smith could not have forgotten the interpersonal turmoil of the eventful years that led to his withdrawal from missionary work and he surely remembered that the Chinese members of the original 1830s church had been intentionally removed from that church and formed into a new church in 1861. Yet, as the years passed and the immediacy of those events faded into distant memories, Smith too came to accept that the Wat Ko Church of 1909 was the church that "commenced" in 1833. He accepted, somewhat ambiguously to be sure, that from the beginning there had always been the one Baptist Chinese immigrant church in Bangkok, that is the Wat Ko Church, which in 1935 was renamed as Maitrichit Church [FIGURE 4].

Our two key witnesses for the events after 1861, Dean and Smith, thus each in their own way believed that the founding of a second Baptist Chinese church in 1861 did not affect the *de facto* identity of the original Chinese congregation, which remained intact despite having been officially excised from the original church because of a missionary feud. Although Smith maintained a shadowy Siamese church and mission for several years after he left the Baptist Mission in 1869²⁵, his mission and its church survived for just a few years and only the original Chinese congregation under the Chinese Mission in Bangkok carried on. In the decades after 1865, then, Dean and Smith in a sense colluded in the process of making 1837 a seemingly rock-solid, unchallenged moment in Thai Protestant church history.

²⁴ Missions to the Chinese. Bangkok—(Siam). Rev. W. Dean, D.D., and wife. BMM 59, 7 (July 1879): 246.

²⁵ See Smith to Rev. J.N. Murdock, 7 August 1875, BMR FM 111-4.

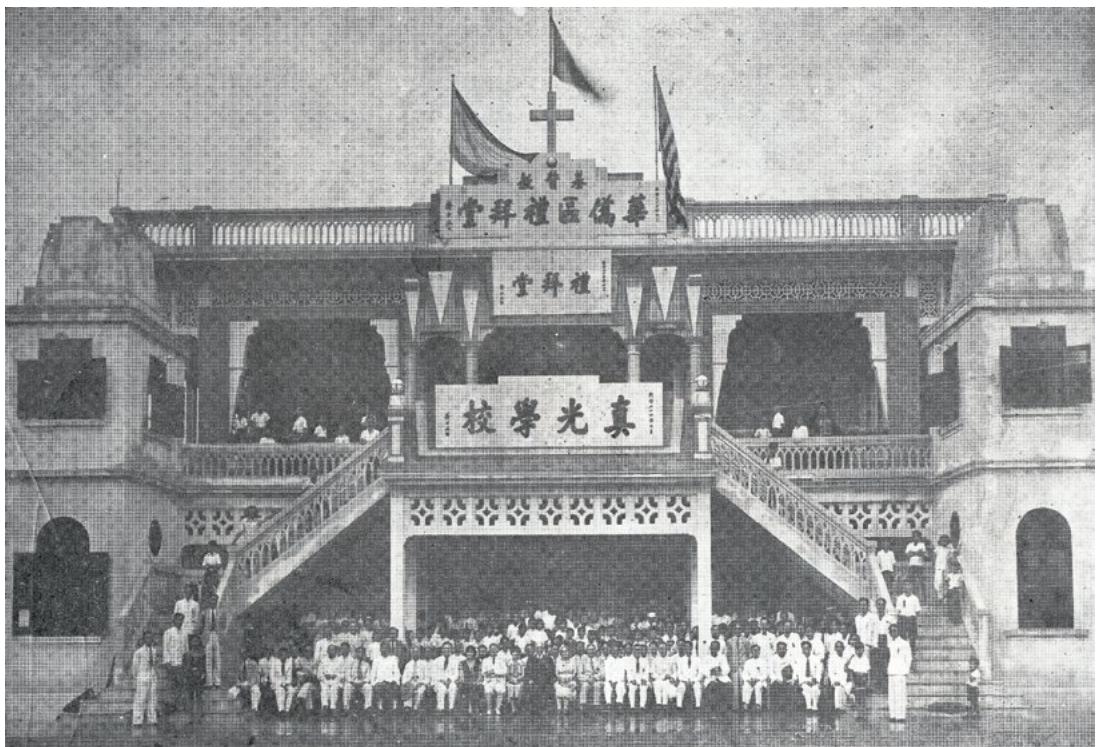


FIGURE 4: Wat Ko (Maitrichit) Church, 1935 © Church of Christ in Thailand Archives

I have used the phrase “in fact” repeatedly at key junctures in recounting the story of the founding of Maitrichit Church, most notably regarding the events in the early 1830s and again of the 1860s. In 1833, when the first small Baptist group began, it was “in fact” a church despite not having been officially declared such. In 1864, when Dean returned to Bangkok, the church he led was “in fact” the same church as the church of the 1830s despite the events of 1861. This usage brings us full circle to the Baptist notion of “church” which, during the first years of the mission, left it to the missionaries on the field to discern whether their band of Chinese converts constituted a church or not. There was no other

agency, local or international, that had the authority to decide the matter and the Chinese converts themselves necessarily deferred to the missionaries in such matters. To establish a single, definitive date for the founding of Siam’s oldest Protestant church, in short, we must decide if we will embrace the Baptist missionary habit shared by their headquarters in Boston of referring to their small Chinese group of converts prior to July 1837 as a church. If we do, then the matter is settled: Maitrichit Church began on Sunday, 8 December 1833, when its first three converts were baptized and first took communion together under the pastoral leadership of Jones.

However, if we decide that a church does not become a church in the full sense of the word until it has some form of official declaration, usually including a worship service and other celebratory events, then the small Baptist group of converts in Bangkok and their missionaries were established as a church on Sunday, 2 July 1837. Later chroniclers, as we have seen, have accepted this viewpoint and designated 1837 as the date of the founding of Maitrichit Church. If this latter position is accepted, however, the troubling question raised in the Introduction concerning the events of 1861 must be addressed. According to Telford, the Chinese members of the 1830s congregation willingly and intentionally withdrew from the 1837 church and started a new church on Monday, 8 April 1861, which event they celebrated with the requisite worship service and other formalities. If such formalities are necessary for starting a church, on what legitimate historical grounds does one affirm the celebrations of 1837, but nullify those of 1861? Dean justified doing so by denying that there had been any official actions taken in 1861, which contradicts the contemporaneous record of events. The two Baptist missionaries present in 1861, Telford and Smith, as well as the Chinese members in Bangkok and the Baptist authorities in Boston all understood that a new Chinese church had been properly established in that year. If we privilege officially declared acts and officially held ceremonies, in short, the virtually inescapable conclusion is that Maitrichit Church is not the oldest Protestant church in Thailand today nor was it even the first church. In this scenario,

the Presbyterian Samray Church, as noted in the Introduction, is the oldest Protestant church in Thailand today, but it was not the first Protestant church. The earliest church was supposedly established by the Baptists in 1837 and died a largely silent, pathetic death sometime in the 1860s. Maitrichit Church took its place beginning with its founding under Telford in 1861.

But this second scenario ignores the fundamental reality that, beginning in December 1833, only one Chinese immigrant Baptist congregation existed in Bangkok. There was no break in its story despite the events of 1837 and 1861; from the beginning all concerned called the original congregation a church. Dean may have been incorrect in his claim that the events of 1861 were null and void because the requisite formalities were not held, but in the later 1860s he and the Chinese members of the church were not wrong when they insisted that they “in fact” still belonged to the original church and that he was pastor of the same church then as he had been two decades earlier. Perhaps, most important of all, the *de facto* church of 1833 was the only one initiated by the Chinese members themselves; it was they who approached the Joneses with a request to affiliate as a group with the Baptist mission. In stark contrast, an agent of the ABFMS initiated and implemented the so-called “regularization” of the church in 1837 and the Executive Committee of the renamed ABMU initiated the events of 1861.

In sum, the weight of the evidence argues for the conclusion that Maitrichit Church, later known as the Wat Ko Church,

was founded in 1833: first, the missionaries who established the first small group of converts as a church were Baptist missionaries who assumed that the group was indeed a church, thus reflecting the Baptist principle of congregational autonomy which affirms the sovereign right of a church to determine its own ecclesiastical status. In 1833, the converts were unable to decide for themselves if they were a “church” while their missionary patrons were equipped to decide; those patrons and their superiors in Boston repeatedly affirmed the congregation was a church

that worshipped together, fellowshipped together, celebrated baptism and communion, and had their own pastor. Second, this congregation maintained an unbroken identity from its founding in 1833 through all the events of 1837, 1861, to the present. Given this history, we conclude that Maitrichit Church began on Sunday, 8 December 1833, when three Chinese converts received baptism in the Chao Praya River and then celebrated communion with John Taylor and Eliza Jones. It is indeed the first and oldest Protestant church in Siam.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the staff at the Church of Christ in Thailand Archives, Payap University for their kind, professional assistance and the Rev. David H. Johnson for his advice on the article itself.

REFERENCES

Archive Centers

- Church of Christ in Thailand Archives, Payap University, Chiang Mai.
- American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society/American Baptist Missionary Union. Records of the American Baptist Missions in Siam, 1833–1893.

Primary Sources

- Abeel, David. 1834. *Journal of a Residence in China, and the Neighboring Countries, from 1820 to 1833*. New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co.
- *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 1830–1850, 1871–1880.
- ข่าวคริสตจักร [Church News], 2530 BE/1987 CE.

- Dean, William. 1859. *The China Mission*. New York: Sheldon & Co.
- Jones, Eliza G. 1842. *Memoir of Mrs. Eliza G. Jones, Missionary to Burmah and Siam*. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication & Sunday School Society.
- Malcolm, Howard. 1839. *Travels in South-Eastern Asia Embracing Hindustan, Malaya, Siam, and China*, Vol. 2. Boston: Gould, Kendall & Lincoln.
- *Missionary Magazine* 1851–1870.
- Smith, Samuel J. 1909. *Brief Sketches of Siam from 1833 to 1909*. Bangkok: Bangkolem Press.

Secondary Sources

- Allen, David. 2010. Autonomy of the Local Church: Crucial Baptist Distinctive. In *Upon This Rock: A Baptist Understanding of the Church*, ed. by Jason G. Duesing et al., 57–83. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group.
- Anonymous. 2530 BE [1987 CE]. อนุสรณ์ครบรอบ 150 ปีคริสตจักรไมตรีจิต ค.ศ. 1837–1987 [Memorial Volume]

Commemorating Maitrichit Church's 150th Anniversary 1837–1987]. Bangkok: Maitrichit Church Press.

- Blanford, Carl. 1977. *Chinese Churches in Thailand*. Bangkok: Suriyaban Publishers.
- Gammell, William. 1849. *History of American Baptist Missions*. Boston: Gould, Kendall & Lincoln.
- Goddard, Francis R. 1948. *Called to Cathay*. New York: Baptist Literature Bureau.
- Hervey, G. Winfred. 1884. *The Story of Baptist Missions in Foreign Lands*. St. Louis: Chancy R. Barns.
- Komonchak, Joseph A. 1976. *John Henry Newman's Discovery of the Visible Church (1816 to 1828)*. Th.D. Dissertation. Union Theological Seminary New York.
- Lord, Donald C. 1969. *Mo Bradley and Thailand*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- McFarland, George Bradley, ed. 1928. *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam 1828–1928*. Bangkok: Bangkok Times Press.
- Merriam, Edmund F. 1900. *A History of American Baptist Missions*. Philadelphia:

American Baptist Publication Society.

- Montgomery, Helen Barrett. 1913. *Following the Sunrise: A Century of Baptist Missions, 1813–1913*. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society.
- Popp, Richard L. 1985. Introduction of Western Science and Medicine in Thailand, 1830–1900. *Missiology* 13(2): 147–157.
- Smith, Alexander Garnett. 1980. A History of Baptist Missions in Thailand. Unpublished Paper, Western Evangelical Seminary.
- Trakulhun, Sven. 2013. Among a People of Unclean Lips: Eliza and John Taylor in Siam (1833–1851). *Asiatische Studien–Études Asiatiques* 67(4): 1205–1235.
- . 2024. *Confronting Christianity: The Protestant Mission and the Buddhist Reform Movement in Nineteenth-Century Thailand*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Wells, Kenneth E. 1958. *History of Protestant Work in Thailand 1828–1958*. Bangkok: Church of Christ in Thailand.