

The Printing Press as an Agent of Change?



Early missionary printing in Thailand

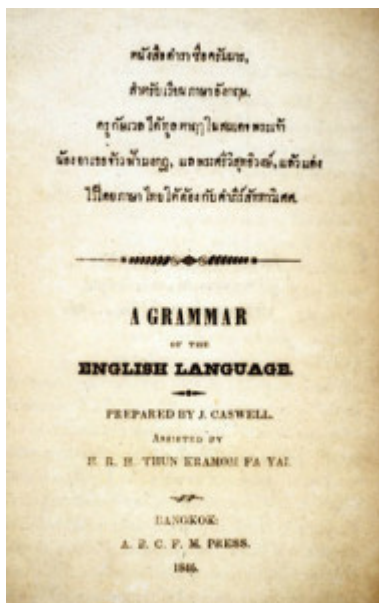
Imagine what it feels like to find yourself in the backseat of a black limousine, speeding through congested Bangkok traffic as part of an armed convoy! This is exactly where I found myself in December 1982. At least the car was air conditioned, but that seemed small consolation at the time. I didn't feel much better when we were waved through a checkpoint into a large compound protected by coils of barbed wire. I was not sure what I had done to deserve this treatment, but from all appearances it hadn't been good.

Let me explain. In early 1980, my partner, later to become my wife, had enlisted in the Peace Corps and had been assigned to Thailand to work as a field worker in malaria prevention. At the time, I was employed by the Bibliographical Society of America as an editor to complete the final volumes of its long-term project, *Bibliography of American Literature*, based in an office at the Houghton Library at Harvard College. I had also become interested in and, more and more involved with, what was then an emerging discipline in the United States, the history of the book. This new discipline, which was inspired by work of French scholars in what they termed *histoire du livre*, had been introduced in America by two influential books of the 1970s: Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979) and Robert Darnton's *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of*

the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800 (1979).

In 1980, when my partner left Cambridge, Massachusetts, for Thailand, it seemed that it might be a good idea if I were to find a topic for research that would justify occasional trips to Thailand, so that we could visit. What about the history of Thailand's introduction to printing? One of the major arguments of Eisenstein's book was that the introduction of the printing press and the subsequent rise of "print culture" had profoundly affected European society during the Renaissance and Reformation, though this thesis was being hotly contested by other scholars. Perhaps a similar study of the introduction of printing into Thailand, a Buddhist society that was certainly literate without the benefit of printing, would provide a useful test case.

Preliminary investigations proved promising. The introduction of printing into Thailand, then Siam, had been chiefly the work of Western missionaries: preliminary efforts were made by French Roman Catholic missionaries at the end of the eighteenth century but more permanently by American Protestant missionaries from the 1830s. Furthermore, the archives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), one of the leading missionary societies that had played a role in early Thai printing, were right there in the Houghton Library, and thus I would have ready access to important primary materials. The archives of other American missionary societies were available on microfilm, and their work was also documented in published reports and periodicals, which were also at hand. So I set to work with my investigations, evenings and weekends, and compiled a checklist of early Thai imprints and gathered evidence of its impact. Looking back, I suppose I imagined that my investigations might end up in a decisive graph that would map the number of pages printed against the number of Buddhist converts to Christianity and that that data would thus support or undermine Eisenstein's thesis.



One of the first tracts printed by American missionaries in Bangkok. By

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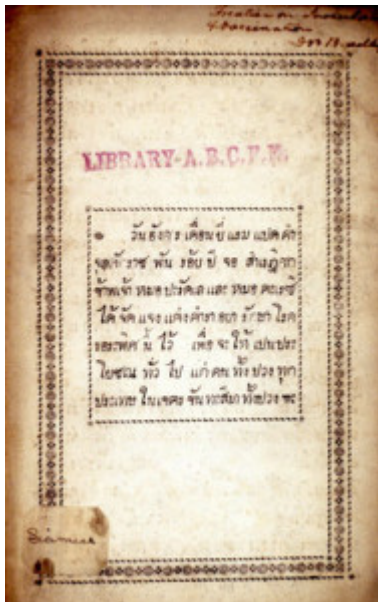
Here is what I discovered. Regular contact between Thailand and Europe dates from the early sixteenth century. The first Roman Catholic missionaries settled at Ayutthaya (then the capital of Thailand) in 1554 and in 1674 wrote to France requesting printing equipment. No evidence survives that this early request was granted, and the honor of being the first printer of Thai belongs to another French missionary. In 1788, Arnaud-Antoine Garnault wrote from Pondicherry in India, reporting that he had had a catechism and a primer printed in romanized Thai. In 1796, with Garnault now settled in Thailand, the first press arrived there, sent from France, and over the next few years it was used to produce a few small books and pamphlets, also in romanized Thai.

If the early efforts of the Roman Catholic missionaries were limited, both in scope and intended audience, this was not the case of the American Protestant mission presses that were established in Bangkok in the 1830s. During the final decades of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, an outburst of evangelical religious enthusiasm swept both England and the United States. This revival, in part a reaction against the rationalism and deism of the Enlightenment, led to the founding of various societies dedicated to distributing tracts, translating the scriptures, and funding missionary activities at home and abroad. As with their Roman Catholic predecessors, Protestant missionaries in Asia followed in the footsteps of merchants. The lucrative trade of England and the United States with India, China, and Southeast Asia inevitably drew Protestant evangelicals to these areas, and early in the nineteenth century a number of missions and missionary presses were established there, most famously at Serampore, a Danish trading center just upriver from Calcutta. The Serampore press became a veritable factory for scriptures in Asian languages.

The first printing in Thai characters was accomplished at Serampore in 1819: a *Catechism of Religion* that had been prepared by the American Baptist missionary Ann Hasseltine Judson for distribution to a small community of Thai prisoners of war in Burma. In 1823, this Thai font was shipped to Singapore, where the London Missionary Society (LMS) had established a press late the preceding year. Plans to establish a printing center foundered, however, and it was not until the end of the decade that the type was put to use, a direct result of the first visit by Protestant missionaries to Thailand in 1828 and 1829. The primary goal of this visit was to distribute Chinese tracts among the junks that regularly traded between Thailand and southern China, but the missionaries recognized the opportunities for missionary work among the Thais as well. Accordingly, they had six thousand copies of a tract and seven hundred copies of the Gospel of Luke and the first six chapters of the Gospel of John printed at the LMS press, and when one of the missionaries returned to Bangkok in 1831, he carried the tract with him—the first printing from moveable type in Thai characters to find its way to Thailand.

The LMS missionaries also wrote to several American organizations asking for

help with this new missionary opportunity, and as a result in 1833 American Baptists sent a missionary to Bangkok from Burma to establish a permanent mission there. The following year the missionary arm of the Congregational Church of America, the ABCFM, established its own mission in Bangkok. The ABCFM took possession of the LMS printing establishment in Singapore, and in July 1835 brought it and an old-fashioned press to Bangkok from Singapore. In July 1836, the Baptist Board sent a trained printer, together with a proper press and equipment, to Thailand. The Baptists had not, however, been able to acquire Thai type for their press; the Congregationalists were willing to share their type, and with this combination of resources and expertise, a dozen or so tracts were prepared over the next eighteen months. When the Congregationalists received two new presses and other equipment in 1837, these too were shared with the Baptists. This cooperation came to an end in May 1838, and from then on the Protestant missionaries in Bangkok maintained two separate printing establishments, the Baptist "Mission Press" and the "ABCFM Press."



Another early tract on inoculation and vaccination. By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Miss 721.8.

Over the next decades, the American missionary presses printed tracts and books at a prodigious rate—hundreds of thousands of pages were produced! Most of this material was of a religious nature, intended to aid in the project of Christianizing the local population; by far the greatest achievement of the Baptist Mission Press was the publication of the New Testament in Thai, completed in 1843. But the press also produced nonreligious publications, including textbooks, two works intended to aid in the study of the Thai language, and from 1847 to 1851 an English-language almanac entitled the *Bangkok Calendar*. The output of the ABCFM Press was also largely religious in nature, mostly tracts that explained the message of the scriptures and Christianity in simple language. Other works included a series of almanacs in Thai, produced annually from 1843, and the *Bangkok Recorder*, the first

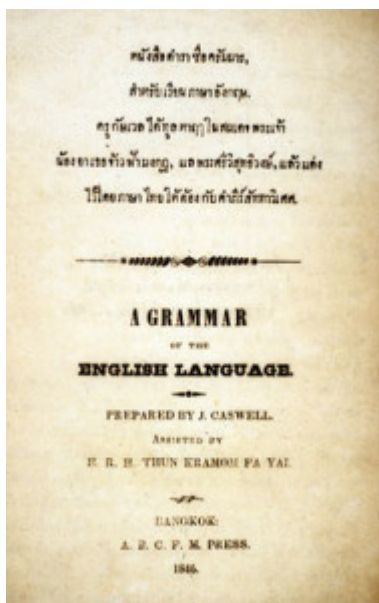
periodical produced in Thailand, which appeared monthly for eighteen issues from July 1844. It contained summaries of foreign news and tables of prices current, as well as more general educational material—such as discussions of chemistry and the human circulatory system—and entertaining stories and fables. This press also produced several works on Western medical practices (including treatises on vaccination and midwifery), a work on Western astronomy, and a series of woodcut maps with the place names given in Thai. English-language promotional and informational material was also printed for friends and supporters in the United States. Both presses also produced some Chinese-language material, aimed at the local Chinese community as well as China itself.

There is some evidence of experimentation with printing by Thais themselves before the arrival of the American missionaries, but clearly the Protestant tracts and the technology that produced them spurred renewed curiosity. Experiments continued but were, with a single exception, of little success. In several instances, Thais collaborated with the mission presses, most notably in the production at the ABCFM Press of 10,700 copies of a broadside version of King Rama III's May 1839 proclamation against the sale and use of opium. This was the Thai government's first official printed document. In 1850, the Baptist press began printing, at the expense of a Thai nobleman named Kh'un Mote, 125 copies of a two-volume edition of the laws of Thailand, but the work was suppressed by order of King Rama III and was only issued in incomplete form under the more enlightened regime of his successor, King Rama IV. This person, who as *chau fa yai* (crown prince) served as the head priest of an important Buddhist monastery in Bangkok, was the first Thai to establish a true press. In 1841, the ABCFM missionaries, with whom he collaborated, reported that he had acquired a printing press and type and type-casting equipment from England with the intention of printing the Buddhist scriptures in romanized Pali. Early in 1843, the ABCFM Press presented him with some of the new Thai type it had produced, but in 1848 he is reported to have invented a new script, called *ariyaka*, for use in printing the Pali language. This new script required only forty-one matrices for a full font rather than the nearly one thousand required for the Khmer script, which had traditionally been used for the Pali scriptures in Thailand. In late 1849, the *chau fa yai* ordered a lithographic press from the United States, which he then used to produce several works, mostly in the Pali language using his *ariyaka* script.

All very interesting, but most of this information was well documented in the outstanding collections at Harvard University. In addition, I had discovered that Harvard possessed what turned out to be the most important surviving collection of early Thai imprints, largely hidden on the shelves of the Widener Library and the Harvard Divinity School library, which had earlier incorporated the library of the Andover Theological Seminary. Among many things, I discovered a copy of that 1839 royal proclamation on opium. But to complete my research, I was eager to discover what evidence of the impact of printing remained in Asian collections.

And this brings me back to that armed convoy in 1982. During a visit to Bangkok the preceding year, I had consulted the collections in the research library at Chulalongkorn University, to little avail, but the librarian had provided me with an introduction to Kamthon Sathrikul, who was not only the owner of the largest textbook publishing firm in Thailand but also an expert on the history of Thai printing. Earlier in 1982, during a business trip to the United States, Mr. Kamthon had called on me at the Houghton Library, where I showed him the fruits of my research. He was clearly interested and enjoyed seeing actual copies of books that had been printed in Thailand nearly a century and a half earlier, but when I brought out the copy of the royal proclamation, his excitement was palpable. Its existence and text were well known in Thailand, he explained, but no other copy was known to exist. This was a treasure, indeed!

Accordingly, I arranged to have the proclamation properly conserved and to have high-quality photographs made for presentation to the National Library of Thailand. When I returned to Bangkok in 1982, I carried these with me when I visited the library. As I registered in the reading room, I explained to the staff that I would like to make an appointment to see the national librarian, as I had a gift to the library from Harvard University. I then settled down to examine material from the library's collections; their holdings of early Thai imprints were unfortunately limited but included the first copy that I had found of the treatise on midwifery, which turned out to be illustrated with simple anatomical woodcuts that must have been prepared locally. As I worked away, I was interrupted and introduced to a serious-looking, middle-aged woman. Communication was difficult, as her knowledge of English was as limited as mine of Thai, so we proceeded with the usual exchange of greetings that polite etiquette in Thailand required. Only gradually did I realize that this was, indeed, the national librarian herself!



A Grammar of the English Language, prepared with the assistance of the Thai crown prince, later Rama IV. By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard

University. KF 7665.

I had expected that any appointment with the librarian would be scheduled for some future date, if at all, but I now suppose that the Harvard name had worked its familiar magic. Once I understood the situation, I explained to her, as best I could, the purpose of my visit and showed her the photographs that I carried with me. If anything, her reaction was even more excited than Mr. Kamthon's had been. After carefully taking possession of the photographs, she immediately invited me to her office, where she proceeded with the standard sign of hospitality in Thailand and ordered two bottles of ice-cold Coke. But before the drinks arrived, I found myself whisked away and sitting with her and the photographs in the back seat of a car, part of an armed convoy, sirens screeching, careening through the streets of Bangkok.

As it turned out, I was being delivered to the Ministry of Culture in order to be introduced to the minister himself. Once he arrived, there was considerable conversation, which I only vaguely followed, but he was also clearly interested in the photographs. The Coke finally arrived. Our meeting was brief, and I was soon returned to the National Library, where I continued my work, but every year since then, I have received an elaborately illustrated desk calendar, together with a form letter of thanks, from the Ministry of Culture. Unfortunately, the calendar does not reach me until March, as it is sent by surface mail, but it still reminds me of that unexpected meeting many years ago.

This was just the most extraordinary of my experiences while researching the history of early Thai printing. During my trip to Southeast Asia in 1982, I also managed to visit the National Library of Burma in Rangoon, where I hoped to discover evidence of Adinoram Judson and his wife's missionary activities among Thai prisoners of war. Alas, the collections of the library were meager and scarcely historical, and access to them was limited, especially as the humidity had swollen shut many of the drawers in the card catalog. I had better luck in Calcutta; at the National Library of India—now housed in the residence of the last viceroy of the British Empire—bibliographers arranged for me to visit the collections of Serampore College, which occupies the buildings of the Serampore mission. The college's collections, which incorporated those of the mission, were spotty but rich in historical material, especially as the missionaries had adopted the practice of infusing the paper they used with arsenic in order to discourage insect infestation.

But all in all, my research in Asian collections proved disappointing. In retrospect, that result is understandable, given that the climate and politics in these countries have not been conducive to the preservation of documents from that period. Furthermore, I had followed those early Western missionaries in believing in the effectiveness of the printing press as a means of proselytizing. In 1835, the American Baptist Board of Missions had expressed its faith that the printing press was "the great instrument of enlightening the world" and its belief that the board's "chief reliance must be placed on this,

among the means of saving mankind." In 1859, however, a Congregationalist missionary in Bangkok was forced to admit that, despite the many hundreds of thousands of pages that had been produced and distributed, only eight or ten Thai and little short of one hundred Chinese souls had been saved over the previous thirty years. It is hardly surprising that the best documentation of early Thai printing survives in the great collections in the West.



An example of the decorated paper used for binding early Thai tracts. By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Miss 719.

I do not consider my project a failure, though I eventually abandoned it, for it did give me a reason to visit a number of interesting collections and to meet many fascinating people. Nor do I reject Eisenstein's thesis that the printing press acts as an agent for change, though my project did make me recognize that the press's impact may be more subtle, but perhaps more far-reaching, than I had first understood. If it proved to be an ineffective tool for Christianizing the Thai people, it must have played an important part—in ways that neither I nor the Western missionaries had imagined—in the great transformation of Thailand into a modern nation.

Further Reading:

A full account of the results of my investigations into early printing in Thailand is printed as "L'Imprimerie thaïlandaise: des origines à 1851" (trans., Douglas Gallagher), *Revue française d'histoire du livre*, n. s. 43 (1985): 315-29 and "Early Thai Printing: The Beginnings to 1851," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 3 (1986): 45-61. Early Roman Catholic printing in Thai is documented in Gerald Duverdier, "La Transmission de l'imprimerie en Thaïlande: du catechisme de 1796 aux impression Bouddhiques sur feuilles de latinier," *Bulletin de l'école française d'Extrême-*

Orient 68 (1980): 209-59. A fascinating discussion of the implications of missionary printing in general is D. F. McKenzie, "The Sociology of a Text: Oral Culture, Literacy, and Print in Early New Zealand," *The Library* 6:6 (1984): 333-65.

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