

# Disenchanted: Thailand's indigenisation of the American Cold War, seen through the experience of Gordon Young

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*Oliver Gordon Young was a third-generation American Baptist missionary who served with the Central Intelligence Agency during the 1950s and the United States Agency for International Development during the 1960s. He left Southeast Asia in 1974 disenchanted with his missions in the border areas of Thailand, Burma, and Laos. His 'disenchantments' with these two preeminent American Cold War agencies illustrated what the United States had increasingly failed to grasp, which was the 'indigenising' nature of the Cold War in Thailand. This essay examines Young's career in Thailand and bordering regions to better understand the limitations of American foreign policymaking establishments and their Cold War policies.*

Throughout my eight-day interview with Oliver Gordon Young (1927–2016) in California in March 2012, he repeatedly used the word 'disenchanted' when explaining his experiences in Southeast Asia before and during the Vietnam War. For ethnographers and anthropologists studying Thailand, he is known as the author of *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand*, one of the first general accounts on the highland minority communities and demographics. This report is one of the offsprings of his family's decades-long involvement with the highland minorities in Mainland Southeast Asia. Gordon was a third-generation American Baptist from a missionary family who had been stationed in the borderlands of Burma/Myanmar and China since the end of the nineteenth century. He was called in by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to take up an undercover mission in the Thailand–Burma border areas in the 1950s, and later

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served as a Public Safety Division Advisor in the United States Operations Missions (USOM) to Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos between 1961 and 1974.

I was uncertain if I could meet him in person when I sent an email to the publishers of Gordon's autobiography, *Journey from Banna*. In our very first email exchange in November 2011, Gordon said he would like to meet me because I was writing a dissertation on the history of the Border Patrol Police of Thailand, the paramilitary police unit he had worked with while serving as a public safety advisor. My interview with Gordon was more like an informal conversation. We did not set the time or limit our topics to the questionnaire I had prepared. He talked and I listened, intervening from time to time to double-check the years and names of places and people. In a couple of days, the boundary-less conversation extended to his family background. I learnt that after decades of being a Baptist missionary, Gordon's father Harold Mason Young had terminated his relationship with the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (ABFMS) in the early 1950s, and was soon after hired by the CIA. It was Harold who recommended Gordon to the CIA in 1953. Gordon's younger brother, William (Bill) Young would also join his father and Gordon in the CIA and work in Thailand and Laos. I had known about Bill Young's work in Laos, but was unaware of Harold's complicated relationship with the mission society, which eventually led me to conduct archival research in the ABFMS Archives in Atlanta, Georgia.

In the broader sweep of the twentieth century, the Young family's experiences in Asia resonate with those of many other American Protestant missionaries and their descendants, as detailed in David Hollinger's *Protestants Abroad*. With growing efforts to decolonise European imperial dominance in Asia and Africa during the interwar years and extend its influence into these regions, the United States came to highly regard the missionaries' pioneering role and their cultural experience and language proficiency. Missionaries and their descendants played a major role in shaping and directing US foreign policymaking establishments since the Second World War, mostly acting in the Foreign Service, universities, foundations, churches, military, and other governmental and nongovernmental organisations.<sup>1</sup>

The US government, however, did not pay much attention to the lessons learnt by these Christian missionaries in Southeast Asia. As Julius Bautista argues, most Western Christian missionaries had experiences of dealing with local elites, with their 'pragmatic and calculated reception' of Christianity for 'the potential benefits of association with European colonial regimes'. The elites not only indigenised Christianity, but also used it as a tool for promoting their own goals of nationhood instead of God's kingdom.<sup>2</sup> The missionaries themselves should have known only too well that American Cold War policies and programmes in Southeast Asia, their old mission fields, would not emerge intact and fully realised as planned. Some foreign policymakers with missionary backgrounds may also have ignored the lessons they themselves had learnt from their mission work and family experience. Some

1 David A. Hollinger, *Protestants abroad: How missionaries tried to change the world but changed America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 1, 19.

2 Julius Bautista, 'Christianity in Southeast Asia: Colonialism, nationalism and the caveats to conversion', in *The Oxford handbook of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Felix Wilfred (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 227.

may have wished to have a second chance at influencing local communities and were to become ‘disenchanted’, like Gordon Young.

After years of communication with him before and after the interviews in 2012, I came to realise that Gordon identified his career in the US governmental organisations during the Cold War as a continuation of his family’s mission of promoting American Christian modernity. He carried out his work with a missionary zeal and in the missionary tradition, like many other American Protestant evangelists and their descendants. He encountered difficulties caused by the local elites’ indigenisation of American Cold War policies and resistance to foreign intervention, just as many Christian missionaries had experienced before him. Nevertheless, what ‘disenchanted’ him most of all was the US policymakers’ lack of understanding of their agencies’ missions in Asia. This article thus examines Gordon Young’s disenchantment with the American foreign policy establishment to see how the latter failed to see the indigenisation of the American Cold War by both local ruling elites and American field officers alike in Southeast Asia.

This failure to understand what was happening on the ground arose for two main reasons: first, the ‘American idea of mission’, pivoted on its role as ‘the custodian of future humanity’ and its self-designated mission of spreading anticommunist modernisation in Southeast Asia, prevented US policymakers from assessing how the unfolding of Cold War policies among the indigenous ruling elites transformed into the politics and rhetoric of their own nation-building.<sup>3</sup> Second, American collaboration with diverse groups of Southeast Asian ruling elites to carry out its counter-insurgency projects increased internal political discord and rivalry, both within the American agencies in situ and with local factions over time, which in turn undermined effective implementation of US foreign policy or resulted in unintended consequences.

Gordon Young’s disenchantment with his country’s Cold War missions to contain the spread of communism and bring liberal democracy and modernity in Southeast Asia provides a useful analytical lens for the parallel development of indigenisation by the Americans stationed in Thailand and the Thai ruling elites on the one hand, and the historical continuity of Washington’s negligence of their foreign missions on the other. Indigenisation requires collaboration between two parties—in this case, the US and Thai governments. Gordon was not a mere observer from Washington, but was himself an American indigeniser in this collaborative project in Thailand. He was knowledgeable about local conditions and fluent in several regional languages, which allowed him to candidly observe the grievances of local people as well as their responses to the Americans where he worked. His views on US foreign policy were shaped by the dynamic interaction between the Americans and the locals. In this way, Gordon’s story opens a new dialogue on the role of ‘foreign communities’ such as the missionaries, immigrant workers, businesspeople, volunteers, foreign service officials, and academics in the region, especially those who had close contact with locals and influenced the latter’s views either towards favouring the United States, or their own countries or communities.

3 Edward McNall Burns, *The American idea of mission: Concepts of national purpose and destiny* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1957), pp. 3–32.

Most Cold War histories have focused heavily on the diplomatic relations and political calculations between the US and Southeast Asian elites and policymakers. As such, Heonik Kwon argues that conventional Cold War studies do not include much of the experience of Asians who lived through the era.<sup>4</sup> Recent publications on the Asian Cold War have attempted to overcome this lack of people-centred histories from below and broadened the field of the social, cultural as well as international histories of the period.<sup>5</sup> Gordon's experiences and views as well as those of the local counterparts of the American field officers discussed in this article can augment knowledge of the region's particularities during the Cold War by showing how individual interests and goals led the various actors to indigenise the War to further their respective causes.

The first section introduces the Young family's mission in Southeast Asia, with particular attention to Gordon Young's life from his birth in southern China in 1927 up to his departure for Thailand in 1953. This brief introduction to the Young family's history is to help readers better understand the missionary zeal and tradition Gordon inherited and applied to his subsequent career in Southeast Asia. In the second section, I will delve into Gordon's disenchantment with his missions in Thailand as a CIA agent and public safety advisor under USOM between 1954 and 1974, to reflect on how the US foreign policy establishment viewed their efforts at indigenising the Cold War in mainland Southeast Asia. While reminiscing about his time in the CIA and USOM in Thailand, Gordon plainly told me one of the most important lessons he had learnt was that 'Americans never understood Asia'. This point forms the last part of this study, focusing on how the Thai ruling elites successfully indigenised aspects of the American Cold War system while US efforts at 'saving' Asia from communism and political and economic instability stumbled.

### Spreading the gospel in Asia, 1892–1953

Since the founding of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in 1810, American Protestant missionaries had actively sought to spread the gospel to the world through translating the Bible into local languages, building mission stations, and baptising local converts in their mission fields. The American Protestant mission in Southeast Asia began as a way to find a place for liberal evangelists to spread Christianity within and outside the British Empire, which had already begun dominating the Indian subcontinent.<sup>6</sup> Adoniram Judson Jr and his wife, Ann Haseltine Judson, embarked upon their journey to India in 1812 only to find themselves restrained by British colonialists who were resentful of Americans as the War of 1812 began. After fleeing British authority, the Judsons went to Burma, initiating the American Baptist missionaries' work in Southeast Asia.<sup>7</sup>

4 Heonik Kwon, *The other Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 6–9.

5 Matthew Phillips, *Thailand in the Cold War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Masuda Hajimu, *Cold War crucible: The Korean conflict and the postwar world* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Cheng Guan Ang, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An interpretative history* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018).

6 Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian imperialism: Converting the world in the early American Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 51–73.

7 Dana L. Robert, 'The mother of modern missions', *Christian History and Biography* 90 (2006): 22–4; Richard V. Pierard, 'The man who gave the Bible to the Burmese', *Christian History and Biography* 90 (2006): 12–17; Conroy-Krutz, *Christian imperialism*, pp. 61–2.

Gordon's grandfather William Marcus Young embarked on his first mission to Rangoon in Burma on 15 October 1892 with his wife Lilla Ethel Fulton.<sup>8</sup> William Marcus was appointed as a foreign missionary by the ABFMS three months before their departure and assigned to establish a mission station in the Shan State of Burma.<sup>9</sup> Despite her zeal for saving the people she called 'heathens' of the Christian empire, Lilla fell gravely ill. The family returned to the United States and Lilla passed away in 1898.<sup>10</sup> Leaving his daughter behind, William Marcus embarked on his second journey to Burma in October 1900 to open a new mission in Kengtung in Shan State. On the ship to Burma, William Marcus met Alta Dell Mason who was also a Baptist missionary, and married her as soon as they arrived in Rangoon. After a two-month-long journey, the couple finally arrived in Kengtung and built a new mission station in 1901.

The turn of the century witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of American Protestant missionaries in Southeast Asia, with the Spanish–American War ceding the Philippines to the United States in 1899. The Philippines soon became another outpost for American evangelism in Southeast Asia.<sup>11</sup> The number of American Protestant missionaries abroad increased steadily in the first half of the twentieth century, especially since the embracing of the slogan 'The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation' at the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh.<sup>12</sup> The enlarging American political and economic empire and subsequent extension of the missionaries' 'helping hand' to underdeveloped countries in Asia in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries created various predicaments among many American Protestant missionaries abroad, who struggled with missionisation and indigenisation.<sup>13</sup> With the 'cross and sword', the Spanish and Portuguese efforts at conquering Central and South America since the fifteenth century had brought 'Christian civilisation' to the New World.<sup>14</sup> Missionisation derived from the work and practices of Christian evangelists bringing local converts under their mission's influence or control. As such, the term 'missionisation' is often identified as the beginning of the Western colonial empires and their 'civilising missions' or 'cultural imposition'.<sup>15</sup>

Against this trend, there arose voices exhorting the reversal of the civilising emphasis of missions and instead, the promotion of autonomous, self-supporting indigenous churches.<sup>16</sup> Quite a number of missionaries began embracing the target

8 Dates and names of mission stations are gathered from the individual biographies of the Young family members in the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society's archives (ABFMS Archives) in Atlanta, Georgia; ABFMS' *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, Payap University Archives; Gordon Young's publications; and the author's interviews and correspondence with Gordon in 2011–15.

9 The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was founded in 1810 and the ABFMS was founded as the American Baptist Board of Foreign Missions in 1814.

10 ABFMS, 'Abstract of proceedings of Executive Committee: The meeting of April', *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 79, 8, Apr. 1899, p. 452.

11 Elmer A. Fridell, *Baptists in Thailand and the Philippines* (Philadelphia, PA: Judson, 1956), pp. 45–9.

12 Hollinger, *Protestants abroad*, p. 24.

13 *Helping Hand* was also the title of the Woman's Baptist Foreign Missionary Society's magazine, which was incorporated into ABFMS' magazine *Missions* in 1910.

14 Pablo A. Deiros, 'Cross & sword', *Christian History* 11, 3 (1992): 31.

15 William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the world: American Protestant thought and foreign missions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 62–90.

16 Hutchison, *Errand to the world*, pp. 77–8; William A. Smalley, 'What are indigenous churches like?', *Practical Anthropology* os-6, 3 (1959): 135–9.

population's customs and beliefs in translating and preaching the gospel through inculturation or indigenisation to make it more attractive to the local population.<sup>17</sup> It did not take long for the American Protestant missionaries who had joined the colonial enterprise in the early nineteenth century to understand that they could not follow the conventional European missionary model, which already bore the stigma of imperialism. The pursuit of strict mission goals did not help the Protestants to deal with not only the overwhelming demand for the presence of clerical authority, but also the resistance of local rulers to the spread of Christianity. One good historical example of the earlier conflicts between missionisation and indigenisation was the Chinese Rites Controversy, which ended with Pope Clement XI's decree in 1704 against the Jesuits' toleration of Chinese ancestor worship practices. In response, the Kangxi Emperor of the Qing dynasty expelled missionaries who did not respect Confucian ancestor worship rites in 1706. In the mid-nineteenth century, Emperor Minh Mang of Vietnam's Nguyen dynasty also unleashed measures against the Catholic Church and its missionaries for their interventions against Confucian ancestor worship rites.<sup>18</sup>

With the delightful news from all over the world of increasing numbers of conversions in the late nineteenth century, the ABCFM continued seeking more progressive, if not aggressive, strategies to solidify their place among the so-called 'heathens'. The explosion of foreign missions in a way prompted American Protestant missionaries abroad to embrace the indigenisation of their mission work, supposedly set against the Western imperialist concept of the 'civilising mission' and emphasising local 'self-rule' in areas where Christianity had been introduced.<sup>19</sup> However, their indigenisation efforts soon met with somewhat unintended consequences which entailed a divergence of the meaning and role of the term indigenisation. Ruy O. Costa states that indigenisation, 'the translation into "native" cultures of a *Missio Dei* previously adopted by the missionary' often involves the 'conscious power struggles between foreign missionaries and national leaders'.<sup>20</sup> To increase the number of conversions among the natives, missionaries in the field had to display respect for local culture and cultural sensitivities.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the local people in the mission fields now proactively claimed their right to be free from imperial aggression as well as the authority to transform God's words in their own terms. The kingdom of God had to be reimaged in the indigenous vernacular and terms.<sup>22</sup> This is what William and his two sons encountered in the borders between the Chinese and British empires in the early twentieth century.

17 David J. Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), pp. 294–5, 450.

18 Bautista, 'Christianity in Southeast Asia', p. 223.

19 Hutchison, *Errand to the world*, pp. 15–42; Conroy-Krutz, *Christian imperialism*, pp. 205–13.

20 Ruy O. Costa, 'Introduction: Inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization', in *One faith, many cultures: Inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization*, ed. Ruy O. Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; Boston Theological Institute, 1988), pp. xii–iv.

21 Hollinger, *Protestants abroad*, pp. 59–93; Hutchison, *Errand to the world*, pp. 71–124; Conroy-Krutz, *Christian imperialism*, pp. 151–204.

22 Regarding the impacts of vernacularisation on localisation, see O.W. Wolters, *History, culture, and region in Southeast Asian perspectives* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell

Alta Dell Mason gave birth to the two Youngs, Harold Mason and Marcus Vincent in 1901 and 1903, respectively, in the Kengtung mission house. After their two sons were born, William Marcus began travelling to the Burma–China border areas in 1905. Indeed American Protestant missionaries had been pioneer evangelists among the ethnic minority communities of what the British called the ‘frontier areas’ of Burma and southern China since the early nineteenth century. When William Marcus and his new wife arrived in Rangoon in 1900, Presbyterian and Baptist missionaries were competing with each other to expand mission boundaries in the frontier lands where non-Burmese highland minorities predominated, a territory that ‘had yet to be occupied by missionaries’, thereby offering a plethora of opportunities for conversion.<sup>23</sup> After the dispute between the Presbyterian and Baptist missions ended in mid-1913, both groups agreed to expand their missions to the adjunct territory of Yunnan in southern China.<sup>24</sup> There, American Protestant missionaries focused on proselytising to ethnic minority groups seen as a guaranteed harvest of conversions.

The outbreak of the First World War, however, caused the Young family to return to the United States in 1916. At the end of the War, ABFMS finally gave permission to William Marcus’ proposal of opening a new mission in Yunnan. In 1920, William Marcus, with the help of his son Harold, opened a mission station in Banna village in the Moeng Laem region of Shan State, where a majority of the populace consisted of Lahu and Wa near today’s Lancang Lahu Autonomous County in southwestern Yunnan, China.<sup>25</sup> William and his two sons, Harold and Vincent, enthusiastically promoted indigenisation in the Shan State of Burma and in southern China, where loose control by both the British and Chinese and frequent power struggles gave the missionaries more space and freedom to incorporate local traditions and customs into the gospel.<sup>26</sup> The number of local conversions by the Youngs increased accordingly, a development which sparked the ABFMS’ suspicion and concerns regarding aspects of the family’s mission work.<sup>27</sup>

Six years later, Harold Young finished his training at the Bible Institute of Los Angeles and got married to his classmate, Ruth Saada Pinkerton. The newly-wed missionary couple was sent to Banna station in August 1926 with the ABFMS endorsement. Gordon Young was born in the Banna mission house on 16 August 1927. Harold and Ruth continued William Marcus’ mission in Banna station until early 1934. After an eighteen-months furlough in California where Gordon’s youngest

University Press, 1999), pp. 41–67; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 37–46.

23 Herbert R. Swanson, ‘The Kengtung question: Presbyterian mission and comity in eastern Burma, 1896–1913’, *Journal of Presbyterian History* 60, 1 (1982): 59. The ‘comity’ problem between the Presbyterian and the Baptist missions was taking place in other areas where these American Protestant missionaries were sent.

24 Swanson, ‘The Kengtung question’, pp. 67–8.

25 Harold Mason Young, ‘Letter to Foreign Secretary Dr. Joseph C. Robbins, 18 Jan. 1926’, ABFMS Archives. See also, Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State: From its origins to 1962* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2009).

26 Anthony R. Walker, ‘Karen and Lahu: Ethnic affiliation or Baptists’ imagination?’, *Journal of the Siam Society* 96 (2008): 222.

27 Ruth Saada Young, ‘Interview by Herbert Swanson’, Chiang Mai, Feb.–Mar. 1980, Payap University Archives.

brother William Marcus Young was born in 1934, Harold and Ruth returned to Burma with their three children, this time to a new station at Lashio in 1935. In 1936, Harold opened a new mission at Pangyang in the Manglon region of Burma near the border with China. Harold Young proved to be an avid missionary who proactively engaged with the local communities and continuously pioneered new villages and communities in the frontiers of the British empire to build new mission stations.

Their seemingly quiet missionary lives were abruptly interrupted by the Japanese invasion of Burma in early 1942. In the spring of that year, Ruth and her children escaped to India to avoid Japanese attack while Harold was hired in late 1942 by the British Army to be a labour supervisor on the building of Ledo Road (later renamed Stilwell Road), which was to run from Ledo in India to Kunming in China.<sup>28</sup> Gordon attended boarding school in India, and upon completing his secondary education in 1945, he returned to the United States. By the end of the War, Harold had travelled further away from his missionary work while his wife Ruth continued her mission at their old Pangyang station.<sup>29</sup> When Burma gained independence from the British in January 1948, Gordon was serving in the US Army stationed in the Korean peninsula. Gordon entered the California State Polytechnic College in January 1950, and the rest of his family bid farewell to Burma and returned to California in March.<sup>30</sup> The Executive Committee of the Burma Mission of the ABFMS voted not to recommend the return of Harold Young to the field on 13 November 1950 due to disputes around local conversions and questions about his patriotism.<sup>31</sup> Harold thus ceased working as a Baptist missionary.<sup>32</sup>

At the California State Polytechnic College in San Luis Obispo, Gordon studied Agriculture and Animal Science. There he met his life partner, Peggy Karoleski, and they were married in June 1950. After graduating in December 1952, Gordon attended seminary school in Covina, Los Angeles. He told me that he was not particularly interested in becoming a missionary, but he thought he could follow the family tradition that the two previous generations had built and become a technical missionary using his agricultural and husbandry degree.<sup>33</sup> Gordon, however, did not complete the seminary programme. He struggled to earn a living while attending the seminary and waited to receive the promised financial help from the local Baptist church and ABFMS. When the pastor from San Luis Obispo and the ABFMS secretary came to admonish him for dropping out of the seminary, telling Gordon that he had disregarded God's will for him, Gordon announced he would not become an ABFMS

28 Randolph L. Howard, 'Letter to Harold Young, 30 Sept. 1943', ABFMS Archives.

29 Ruth Saada Young, 'Letter to the ABFMS, 13 Mar. 1947', ABFMS Archives.

30 Harold Mason Young, 'Letter to Minister John E. Skoglund, 29 Mar. 1950', ABFMS Archives.

31 The US Department of State sent a letter to the ABFMS on 11 Dec. 1946 concerning Harold Young's potential violation of the Nationality Act of 1940 after the *Government of Burma Gazette* announced his pending appointment as the Assistant Resident of the Shan State. Harold Young and his family's citizenship and national loyalty issues became the main topic of concern between the State Department and ABFMS until Ruth Saada Young confirmed that Harold would not accept the offer from the British government in her letter to the Mission Family in Rangoon, dated 25 Oct. 1949.

32 John E. Skoglund, 'Letter to Dr. J.R. Wilson, 26 Nov. 1951', ABFMS Archives.

33 Interview with Oliver Gordon Young, 9 Mar. 2012. See also, Oliver Gordon Young, *Journey from Banna: My life, times, and adventures* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2011), p. 173.



missionary.<sup>34</sup> His struggle to earn a living for his family, now with a newborn baby, continued another month.

One day in late 1953 when he and his wife Peggy were left with only a couple of dollars in their hands, Gordon received a job offer letter from the CIA. Gordon realised the CIA had been watching him since his father Harold had started working with them in late 1952. After training in New York and Washington DC, Gordon, Peggy, and their child departed in December 1953 for Thailand where they would reside for the next twenty years.

### CIA burns the bridge

Gordon reunited with Harold and Bill Young in Bangkok on 12 January 1954. When he arrived in Bangkok, he learnt that the legendary William ‘Wild Bill’ Donovan, then the American ambassador to Thailand, was their CIA liaison officer.<sup>35</sup> One day, Donovan invited them for an informal meeting in a zoo and assigned them a special, deep-cover mission.<sup>36</sup> Donovan assigned Gordon to survey the ‘stay behind areas’ where the American and local special forces could battle with the enemy in case of a ‘shooting war’ in the adjacent areas of Thailand–Burma–China. They were also to build a ‘bridge’ with the potential local militias. At the same time, Donovan instructed Gordon that his assignment should be kept secret from his other CIA–SEA Supply colleagues.<sup>37</sup> As such, they became animal collectors for museums and zoos, which in fact resulted in the opening of the Chiang Mai Zoo in 1957.<sup>38</sup>

Gordon began to recruit Lahu men whom he was familiar with and relied upon since he had begun travelling widely in the Thai–Burma–Lao border areas with his Lahu aides in the latter half of 1950s.<sup>39</sup> In the meantime, his father Harold Young was assigned to work with the Shan, with whom Harold himself felt comfortable.<sup>40</sup> The original objectives of the CIA in mobilising the highland minorities in the remote Thai border areas through the two Youngs’ deep-cover missions were to obtain

34 Young, *Journey from Banna*, pp. 174–5.

35 William J. Donovan was head of the Office of Strategic Services during the Second World War and has been regarded as a founding father of the CIA. He was US ambassador to Thailand from Aug. 1953 to Sept. 1954.

36 Young, *Journey from Banna*, pp. 183–4.

37 Interview, Oliver Gordon Young, 9 Mar. 2012. SEA Supply was a CIA cover organisation in Bangkok. Gordon characterised his mission as ‘covert’ while that of the SEA Supply as ‘overt’ CIA operations.

38 Interview, Oliver Gordon Young, 10 Mar. 2012. There are several accounts that confirm Harold Young was the person who created the zoo. For instance, ‘About us, History’, *Chiang Mai Zoo*, [http://www.chiangmai.zoothailand.org/en/ewt\\_news.php?nid=183](http://www.chiangmai.zoothailand.org/en/ewt_news.php?nid=183) (last accessed 3 Jan. 2022); Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Country and Subject Reader Series, ‘Thailand’, <https://adst.org/Readers/Thailand.pdf> (last accessed 3 Jan. 2022). These accounts do not say that Harold was a CIA agent.

39 Oliver Gordon Young, ‘Thailand’s Mussuh Daeng’, *Explorers Journal* 40, 2 (1962): 58–65; Oliver Gordon Young, *Tracks of an intruder* (London: Souvenir, 1967). Gordon wrote numerous accounts of the Lahu people he had worked with without explicitly revealing his CIA work. ‘Mussuh’ is a Thai term for the Lahu.

40 In a document reporting on the Border Security Volunteer Team project published in 1971, Harold Young appeared as a ‘Former USOM Hilltribe Consultant’. John L. Champagne, ‘The Border Security Volunteer Team Program: An appraisal’ (Bangkok: USOM, 1971).

intelligence about Chinese communist infiltration as well as spotting areas for future covert and overt operations behind Chinese enemy lines, at least until the end of the 1950s. The ethnic minorities with whom Harold and Gordon were familiar and worked with were viewed as the most valuable sources to enable CIA intelligence gathering as well as potential reserve forces for future operations.

Gordon's first disenchantment with US Cold War policies in Southeast Asia started when, in his words, the CIA 'burnt the bridge' with the ethnic minority peoples whom Gordon and Harold had strived hard to recruit and include in their local informant network.<sup>41</sup> His frustration with the CIA's abandonment of the ethnic minorities warrants further scrutiny. As mentioned earlier, the American Protestant missionaries strived hard to proselytise among the minorities instead of the intractable majority Buddhist populations of Mainland Southeast Asia, and they were well aware of the tensions between the highland minorities and national majorities like the Burmese, the Thais, and the Chinese. During their mission work in the border areas both William Marcus and his son Harold had a number of conflicts with the officials of the new Republic of China and local bandits.<sup>42</sup> In a letter to the ABFMS in 1934, Harold Young writes:

The Chinese have tried to make out that that is their territory and the ignorance of the local Chinese is shown when using the term 'Kala' or whiteman, is [*sic*] not trying to distinguish different nationalities. They tried to work up an anti-foreign feeling and for a while there everything in connection with a 'Kala' was a target for their violence, and the Christians were branded as the friends and followers of the foreigners.<sup>43</sup>

Gordon did share his father and grandfather's perceptions of the Chinese as untrustworthy, xenophobic, and corrupt, and this view directed his favour toward the ethnic minority over the majority Chinese. Through memories of his Lahu-Lisu friend Chanu Hkeh, Gordon explains how ethnic minority people thought of the Chinese as opium-growers and traders, 'no-good Yunnan Chinese opium-addicts' or cunning, unreliable people from the early 1930s.<sup>44</sup> In a report completed in 1963 titled 'The Civic Action Program of the Border Patrol Police and the USOM Public Safety Division', Gordon explained: 'There was a distinct threat that the masses of uneducated remote peoples would succumb to *Chinese Communist* propaganda just as had occurred in Vietnam, Laos and Malaya.'<sup>45</sup> Throughout the years he was undertaking CIA and USOM missions, the communist agents instigating anti-government subversion among the highland minorities in northern Thailand whom Gordon kept his eyes on were Chinese. Thus when the CIA dismissed the ethnic minority

41 Interview, Oliver Gordon Young, 9 Mar. 2012.

42 Chester Holcombe, 'The missionary enterprise in China', *Atlantic*, Sept. 1906, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1906/09/the-missionary-enterprise-in-china/306000/> (last accessed 3 Jan. 2022).

43 Harold Mason Young, 'Letter to Dr. Robbins, 25 Jun. 1934', ABFMS Archives.

44 Gordon Young, *Run for the mountains* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2011), p. 34.

45 Public Safety Division (PSD), USOM to Thailand, 'The Civic Action Program of the Border Patrol Police and the USOM Public Safety Division' (Bangkok: PSD, USOM to Thailand, 1963), p. 2. My emphasis. Most of the internal documents USOM and USAID documents cited in this article are from the Thailand and ASEAN Information Center, Chulalongkorn University Central Library, Bangkok, and the USAID Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC) online archives.

intelligence project and ‘burnt the bridge’ with the highland minority agents whom Gordon and his father Harold had nurtured for their deep-cover mission, Gordon felt that it was not only his mission but also the people his family had worked with that were discarded.

Gordon’s negative assessment of the CIA’s local operations also derived from his own inadvertent comparison between the CIA and the missionaries.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the missionaries who learnt local languages and resided inside an indigenous community for extended periods, CIA members operated on an individual basis and a tour system, which rotates an agent on a yearly or biannual basis from one field of operation to another. They did not share information with other members, just as William Donovan had instructed Harold and Gordon in 1954. In addition, the CIA agents collected information conforming to the American purpose for being there, and the CIA’s directives in Washington. In another CIA agent’s words: ‘the CIA often ends up distorting reality, creating out of whole cloth “intelligence” to justify policies that have already been decided upon’.<sup>47</sup> They did not consider the local people’s reasons for needing to collaborate with the foreign power, ignoring the importance of mutual understanding in their collective operations. In this way, the CIA came to have an increasingly limited picture about ongoing political and social developments in its areas of operation. Gordon reflected that: ‘so much of what I was directed to do represented little more than charades and wasted efforts directed by armchair bureaucrats, who often lacked farsightedness and care for their own foreign assets in the field’.<sup>48</sup> In a similar context, renowned China expert John K. Fairbank remarked in 1968 that the United States’ rush into the Vietnam quagmire to compensate for the so-called ‘loss’ of China came out of its negligence of the American Protestant missionaries’ centuries-long endeavours to expand the Christian empire in Asia.<sup>49</sup>

Broadly speaking, it was not only the CIA’s shortsightedness that presented a new predicament for Gordon’s mission, but the United States’ changing views of its involvement in Southeast Asia to stop the spread of communism. In the early 1960s, the Cold War in Southeast Asia and Thailand was at a crossroads. In a geopolitical sense, the United States began to focus increasingly on Indochina—Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia—as it came to get more involved in the Lao and Vietnamese civil wars from the early 1960s. The population of interest had changed, along with the target area. In the 1950s, US government agencies including the CIA had focused more on developing the highland minorities who were seen as a rich source of information, and at the same time, a proper target of modernisation as their ignorance of the modern state was believed to make them vulnerable to communism. From the early 1960s, the United States came to see the spread of communist activities into the majority population in the lowlands as a huge threat, especially in the border areas of Laos and Cambodia. If the 1950s anticommunist campaigns had been focused on winning the hearts and minds of the ethnic minorities in northern Thailand and other borderlands of Mainland Southeast Asia who had not identified themselves with

46 John Ranelagh, *The Agency: The rise and decline of the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), pp. 17–19.

47 Ralph W. McGehee, *Deadly deceptions: My 25 years in the CIA* (New York: Sheridan Square, 1983), p. xi.

48 Young, *Journey from Banna*, p. 194.

49 John K. Fairbank, ‘Assignment for the ‘70’s’, *American Historical Review* 74, 3 (1969): 874.

established regimes, the American anticommunist campaigns in the 1960s now came to be directed by myopic decisions extending to larger populations at the expense of former collaborators and informants.<sup>50</sup>

Sometime in 1960, Gordon met with officials from the International Cooperation Administration (ICA) to discuss the ‘hill tribes’ problems’ pertaining to deforestation and water conservation in northern Thailand.<sup>51</sup> The meeting turned into a job interview, and the ICA in Bangkok commissioned him to conduct research on the ethnic minority groups in the highlands. Between August and December in 1960, Gordon travelled through the mountainous border areas of northern Thailand to collect information and submitted a report to the commissioner, which was published as *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand: A Socio-Ethnological Report* in 1961.<sup>52</sup> After the research project was completed, Gordon accepted a formal contract with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

In a sense, the writing of this first report in 1961 was a benchmark for Gordon to affirm his expertise in the ethnic minority peoples and areas he had known since birth. The reason why he was recruited first by the CIA and later the USOM was mainly because of this first-hand experience of living among the highland minorities and his language proficiency. The preface written by a USOM director Thomas E. Naughten mentions that Gordon had lived with the Thai ‘hill tribes’ most of his life and ‘probably has more intimate, first-hand knowledge about them than any other living person’.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Gordon’s perceptions about the highland minorities were friendlier than those of many others, even most Thais. Gordon shared one anecdote with me. When he was preparing for the research trip to the border, one Thai official told him there were only ‘monkeys and squirrels in the mountains’, which made Gordon grimace.<sup>54</sup> In a way, the United States’ shift of area and target population away from the ethnic minorities in northern Thailand gave Gordon room to breathe without thinking about the intelligence work that he never wanted to look back on even when I interviewed him in 2012. He felt that he could at last utilise his real expertise in agriculture and husbandry for developing a source of cash income for the highland minorities in the remote areas, and become a cultural broker between the minorities and the modernised world and enhance the former’s living standard—very much part of the original mission of the American Protestants who intended to bring about Christian modernity to the land of ‘heathens’. At least, he believed so when he was hired by USAID in early 1961.

50 Michael D. Shafer, *Deadly paradigms: The failure of US counterinsurgency policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 104–14.

51 The English term ‘hill tribes’ is a literal translation of the Thai term *chao khao* or *chao khao chao pa* (people of the mountains and jungles). The Thai term came to be used since the 1880s. Scholarly debates around the term have increased since the 1960s and most recently, many use the term ‘highland minority’ instead of ‘hill tribes’ to diffuse the negative connotations of the original lowland Thai term.

52 Oliver Gordon Young, ‘The hill tribes of northern Thailand: A socio-ethnological report’ (Bangkok: USOM, 1961). The Siam Society published the report in a 2nd edition in 1962, with subsequent editions in 1966, 1969 and 1974. The author’s preface in the 5th edition (1974) is slightly shorter than those in the previous editions and omitted his narrative about an Akha headman who had never met a Thai.

53 Young, *The hill tribes of northern Thailand*.

54 Interview, Oliver Gordon Young, 15 Mar. 2012.

President John F. Kennedy's executive order to replace ICA with USAID after passing the Foreign Assistance Act of September 1961 signalled the change in American approaches to the growing communist movement in Asia and Latin America. USAID was to broaden the role of American foreign aid to anticommunist allies in the new nation-states, especially in tumultuous Asia, to take advantage of the resumption of the Sino–Soviet split in the late 1950s.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, the new Office of Public Safety of USAID inaugurated in 1962, which had overseen the setting up of Public Safety Divisions (PSDs) under the United States Operations Missions in various countries, would concentrate on training local police forces as frontline counterinsurgency agents so that the US government could avoid criticism of its military involvement in these foreign countries.<sup>56</sup>

In early 1962, Gordon was transferred to become a PSD advisor to the Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP) operations in Chiang Mai. This was the time when as Gordon recalled, 'changes began,' adding, 'I did know that things were changing fast, that we were rapidly going into a pre-war phase; policymakers accepted the "Domino Theory" in Washington.' Quickly but quietly, several positions in USOM's Public Safety Division began to be filled with clandestine CIA agents, who soon dominated the PSD's activities. For Gordon, who had just left the CIA and moved to USOM, it was apparent that the CIA was using USOM as a cover to continue preparing for 'their own private war' against the Vietnamese and Lao communists in Thailand's northern and northeastern border areas.<sup>57</sup> Already in 1958, Gordon's younger brother Bill was recruited by the CIA and began carrying out a special mission in Laos with a band of multiethnic agents.<sup>58</sup> The foreign minister of Thailand Thanat Khoman and the US secretary of state Dean Rusk issued a joint statement on 6 March 1962 in Washington, promising more direct US military involvement in Thailand to provide better security from the aggressions in Laos and Vietnam.<sup>59</sup> In May 1962, the US dispatched combat troops to Thailand.

At a press conference on 17 May 1962, President Kennedy stated, 'As I have already indicated, the great hazard is of a *shooting war in Asia—in the jungles of Asia* [*sic*]—and it is our object to bring about a diplomatic solution which will make the chances of such war far less likely.'<sup>60</sup> The growing sense of insecurity about communist aggression in Thailand's neighbours like Laos and Vietnam, and the simultaneous growing suspicion of the ethnic minorities in the mountainous border areas who freely travelled across international borders, persuaded both the Thai and US governments to view the hill tribes more as a threat to national security

55 Jian Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 49–84.

56 Thomas David Lobe, 'US police assistance for the Third World' (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1975), pp. 52–4.

57 Young, *Journey from Banna*, p. 229.

58 Alfred W. McCoy, *The politics of heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2003), pp. 305–86. Thomas Fuller, 'William Young, who helped U.S. organize Secret War in Laos, is dead at 76', *New York Times*, 3 Apr. 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/world/asia/04young.html> (last accessed 15 Dec. 2020).

59 US Department of State, Historical Division, *American foreign policy current documents, 1962* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1962), pp. 1091–3.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 1095.

than as a 'simple primitive' people.<sup>61</sup> In his report on the Thai Border Patrol Police 'civic actions' in 1963, Gordon reckoned, 'From this period onward, the masses of remote area peoples, including over 200,000 hill tribes, became very important in terms of national security.'<sup>62</sup> Where the highland minorities had been seen as a source of intelligence and a reserve force for fighting the remnants of the Chinese nationalist rebels and rising communists in the 1950s, the same population transformed into a potential threat to national security in the 1960s for the very same reason—their lack of a sense of belonging to an established nation or government and their seemingly 'uncivilised' lifestyle.

Soon, the US foreign policymaking establishment indigenised its anticommunist counterinsurgency policy by increasing the Thai government's participation in the highland development projects, funded and assisted by USOM. The United States may have believed that by having the Thai government handle its own problematic border population, these highland minority groups would be saved from the communist threat. The US government's indigenisation of its anticommunist counterinsurgency in the early 1960s not only resulted in 'burning the bridge' with the highland minorities, but also left the latter vulnerable to ill treatment, with their autonomy and livelihoods threatened by Thai agencies as well as the Chinese communists, in Gordon's view. Eventually, the Thai government's mistreatment and forced relocation of highland groups to the lowlands led to the explosion of the latter's resistance against the government in the late 1960s.<sup>63</sup>

In sum, Gordon's missions of building a bridge with the highland minority and furthermore transplanting American modernity in the borderlands of Southeast Asia to fight communism fell short of achieving their original goals. He was unable to save 'his people' either from communism and the Thai government's suspicions and consequent repression as well as failed in his own mission to spread American Christian modernity, which was essentially rooted in his family heritage. The highland minorities of Thailand along its borders with Laos and North Vietnam, which had promised 'great harvests of precious souls' for the Young family and the American Protestant missionaries, would continue to be regarded as a threat to national security and unity throughout and beyond the Cold War era.<sup>64</sup> Gordon was expected to persevere in his role with the USOM as the public safety advisor to the Border Patrol Police because this paramilitary unit was undertaking a 'civilising mission' for the ethnic minorities on behalf of the Thai and US governments.<sup>65</sup> His perseverance would see an end soon though.

### Thai 'missionaries' carry out his calling

Gordon's second source of disenchantment stems from his frustration with the uncoordinated, disruptive American counterinsurgency efforts in Southeast Asia

61 Young, *Tracks of an intruder*, p. 11.

62 Public Safety Division, 'The Civic Action Program of the Border Patrol Police and the USOM Public Safety Division' (Bangkok: PSD, USOM to Thailand, 1963), p. 2.

63 Robert M. Hearn, *Thai government programs in refugee relocation and resettlement in northern Thailand* (Auburn, NY: Thailand Books, 1974); Ralph Thaxton, 'Modernization and counter-revolution in Thailand', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 5, 4 (1973): 28–38; Jeffrey Race, 'The war in northern Thailand', *Modern Asian Studies* 8, 1 (1974): 85–112; McGehee, *Deadly deceits*, pp. 79–80.

64 Harold Mason Young, 'Letter to friends in the ABFMS, 15 Jan. 1939', ABFMS Archives.

65 Young, *Journey from Banna*, pp. 228–32.

and the consequent neglect of the impact of indigenised Cold War politics in Thailand, a country that the United States had designated as its ‘anticommunist bastion’ for the region from the early 1950s.<sup>66</sup> American counterinsurgency efforts were well exemplified by the work he did with his Thai counterparts in the Border Patrol Police.

The Thai BPP was formed by the CIA and Phibun Songkhram’s government in 1951 as a paramilitary and intelligence-gathering force in Thailand’s border areas. As its mission statement reads, the organisation was to play the combined role of police, military, and civilian authority. What made the BPP stand out was its ‘civic actions’ in these remote areas. The programme was born out of the CIA’s interest in aiding development projects for the highland minorities to utilise them to expand covert infiltration behind Chinese enemy lines—which was the first mission that Gordon had taken up in the 1950s. In 1957, the BPP was on the verge of disbandment when its Thai founder, Police General Phao Siyanon, went into exile after Army General Sarit Thanarat staged a coup in 1957. The CIA lost its full control over the BPP and its actions because Sarit suspected the BPP as the bridge between Phao and the CIA. CIA operations thus went underground by using the cover of Civil Police Administration under the ICA, and managed to secure about half of the funds allocated for training the Thai police for the BPP until the USOM-PSD assumed the mandate in 1962.<sup>67</sup> From the late 1960s after Sarit demoted the BPP under the Provincial Police, the CIA was no longer an attractive patron to the BPP because the unit had to show its distance from foreign political organisations and clandestine operations.

In this sense, the USOM-PSD’s support for the BPP’s civic actions from 1962 came at just the right time and in a suitable format for the sake of both the Thai ruling elites and the BPP. In the eyes of the BPP, the PSD looked rather innocuous, civilian-oriented, and thus apolitical compared to the CIA. Most of the USOM members who had been transferred from ICA were well aware of the BPP’s activities in remote areas with the highland peoples.<sup>68</sup> In the first year, the PSD sponsored more development-oriented projects such as agriculture and husbandry by providing pigs, chickens, and high-yielding crop seeds.<sup>69</sup> The official work plan between the USOM-PSD and BPP was developed in early 1962. The PSD appointed full-time civic action advisors like Gordon, while the BPP Headquarters designated a senior officer as a counterpart to these advisors to jointly implement these activities with the PSD. Before long, the CIA resumed its operations in Thailand, with the agents working under the guise of PSD advisors.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, when the USOM began sponsoring the BPP’s civic actions in the border areas under the Remote

66 Psychological Strategy Board, ‘U.S. psychological strategy with respect to the Thai peoples of Southeast Asia, 2 July 1953’, p. 5.

67 Lobe, ‘U.S. police assistance’, pp. 170–71.

68 Marvin J. Jones and Philip D. Batson, ‘A brief history of USOM support to the Thai National Police Department’ (Bangkok: Public Safety Division, USOM, 1969); United States Agency for International Development (USAID), ‘USOM in perspective’ (Bangkok: USOM, 1971); Rey M. Hill, ‘An overview of USAID participation in the Thailand programs of development and security, 1951 to 1973’ (Bangkok: USOM, 1973); USAID, ‘Aid Program in Thailand’ (Bangkok, 1968); Lobe, ‘U.S. police assistance’, pp. 330–31.

69 Public Safety Division, ‘The Civic Action Program of the Border Patrol Police’, p. 15.

70 Lobe, ‘U.S. police assistance’, pp. 334–5.

Area Security Development (RASD) project in 1962, the mother of then reigning King Bhumibol, Her Royal Highness Princess Sinakharintra, joined the BPP's development projects.<sup>71</sup>

What Gordon correctly recognised as a 'pre-war' phase in 1962 eventually turned into 'war' by 1965. The so-called 'Gun Firing Day', which signalled the beginning of the overt Thai counterinsurgency era in August 1965, changed the Thai military government's approach to fighting communists from an imaginary to a tangible war. Before communist insurgents attacked a Thai police station in a northeastern province in August 1965, the Thai military had perceived communists as an external threat rather than an internal enemy.<sup>72</sup> The Communist Party of Thailand's proclamation of armed struggle in 1965, together with the incident, greatly alarmed the Thai military. After declaring it would take control of the counterinsurgency programme, the Thai government under Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn organised the Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC) in November 1965.<sup>73</sup> In the same year, USOM-PSD decided to participate and fund the entire BPP civic action project and created a separate budget for the programme from the fiscal year 1966, a practice which lasted until 1971.<sup>74</sup> Accordingly, the level of US foreign aid and assistance to Thailand skyrocketed throughout the rest of the 1960s. As the aid budget grew, tensions between the USOM-PSD advisors and CIA members to the RASD programme also grew visibly because the increased aid meant a higher stake in the competition for assuming control of the counterinsurgency programmes as well as the local agency—the BPP.<sup>75</sup>

As such, there were conflicts among the USOM-PSD, CIA and BPP, especially between the USOM-PSD and the CIA, in coordinating their joint civic action programmes. The coexistence of the CIA and USOM-PSD in the same office room, often located either in the American embassy or consulate, hindered the execution of the PSD's programmes due to the 'traditional hostility' between the two agencies, especially when 'one tried to horn in on the other's territory'.<sup>76</sup> Gordon, who had started his last contract with the USOM to Thailand, was working with the Thai

71 Sinae Hyun, 'Mae Fah Luang: Princess Mother's Royal Project with the Thai Border Patrol Police during the Cold War', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 48, 2 (2017): 262–82.

72 Chai-anan Samudavanija, Kusuma Sanitwong Na Ayutthaya and Suchit Bunbongkarn, *From armed suppression to political offensive* (Bangkok: Institute of Security and International Studies, 1990), p. 49.

73 Edward B. Hanrahan, 'An overview of insurgency and counterinsurgency in Thailand through 1973: A background survey for perspective and a guide to the literature' (CHECO/CORONA Harvest Division, Operations Analysis Office: HQ PACAF, 1975), p. 57; Saiyud Kerdphol, *The struggle for Thailand: Counter-insurgency, 1965–1985* (Bangkok: S. Research Center, 1986), pp. 29–33.

74 Raymond Coffey, 'Thailand: Public Safety/ Border Patrol Police Remote Area Security Development: An Approach to Counterinsurgency by the Border Patrol Police' (Bangkok: USOM, 1971), p. 4; Hill, 'An overview of USAID participation in the Thailand Programs', p. 6; Theodore J. Curtis, 'A brief history of USOM support to the Thai National Police Department' (Bangkok: USOM, 1973), p. 26. Hill reported the RASD lasted until 1971, but Curtis marked that the programme was terminated in the fiscal year 1970.

75 Curtis, 'A brief history', p. 4; USAID, Office of Public Safety, 'Termination phase-out study, Public Safety Project, Thailand' (Washington, DC: USAID, 1974), pp. 1, 104; Office of Program, USOM to Thailand, 'Summary of U.S. economic AID to Thailand and selected statistical data' (Bangkok: USOM, 1969); Research and Evaluation Staff, Program Office, USOM to Thailand, 'RTG/USOM Economic and technical project summary FY 1951–1972' (Bangkok: USOM, 1973).

76 McGehee, *Deadly deceptions*, p. 95. See also, Lobe, 'U.S. police assistance'; Thomas David Lobe, *United States national security policy and aid to the Thailand Police* (Denver: University of Denver, Graduate School of International Studies, 1977); Interview, Oliver Gordon Young, 10 Mar. 2012.



BPP as an advisor while visiting various provincial and marine police stations where no regular advisors were available or where no other advisors spoke local languages. By then, he was feeling even more bitter about the domination of the CIA ‘goons’ and ‘the patronizing, all-knowing young CIA experts’ inside and outside the USOM’s Public Safety Division who discredited his expertise and field experience.<sup>77</sup> The confusions and conflicts between the USOM-PSD and CIA advisors essentially offered a chance for enlarging the role of BPP officers and other members of the Thai elite, especially the royal family, which came to dominate the programme in due course.

Following the deployment of the first American combat troops in South Vietnam in March 1965, Thailand’s counterinsurgency policies present a textbook example of Cold War indigenisation. As noted previously, the military government finally grasped the imminent expansion of communism within Thailand, and hurriedly adapted the civilian and military counterinsurgency measures recommended by various US organisations like USOM and the Joint US Military Advisory Group. Thailand became a laboratory where numerous American academic institutions and NGOs under US government contract tested new counterinsurgency strategies and tactics, and propagated anticommunist modernisation to defeat communism.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, the Thai monarchy, thanks to the influx of aid money and development projects by US governmental and other organisations, extended its political grip. King Bhumibol, the ‘father of the nation’, and his family were soon leading numerous royal development projects all over the country. Indeed, Thailand was becoming a bastion of anticommunism in Southeast Asia under the guidance of a staunchly anti-communist monarchy.

By contrast, overall US foreign policy seemed to be far more disorganised as if it was taking the stance which Gordon described as: ‘Let it happen, and we’ll purchase the mistakes.’<sup>79</sup> With ever-expanding US involvement in the Indochina, individual organisations like the CIA and USAID began fighting for their share, resulting in a hodgepodge of counterinsurgency projects by those whom Gordon called ‘the self-promoting bureaucrats’.<sup>80</sup> Rey M. Hill, director of USOM to Thailand (1968–73) presented a similar view on the USOM’s activities in Thailand upon his departure: ‘The trend ... shows that priority is still being given to emergency operations (SDA) rather than to longer-term developments (DSA).’<sup>81</sup> He added his personal concern over how the United States’ prioritising of ‘emergency operations’ in Thailand resulted in ‘the wrong impression which prevails in much of Thailand’s private and public community, and in USOM itself’. Hill lamented that ‘Unfortunately, USOM has become identified with dollars, with commodities, and with foreign contractual services, rather than with the deliberate development of human resources, which is USOM’s

77 Young, *Journey from Banna*, pp. 234, 238.

78 Alfred McCoy, ‘Subcontracting counterinsurgency: Academics in Thailand 1954–1970’, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 3, 2 (1971): 56–70.

79 Young, *Journey from Banna*, p. 239.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 282.

81 Hill categorised the twofold nature of USOM assistance to Thailand into Security, with Development Aspects (SDA), and Development, with Security Aspects (DSA), and pointed out the gradual domination of the SDA over the DSA in his report. Hill, ‘An overview of USAID participation in the Thailand programs’, p. 20.

best role, the most desirable one, and the one which will do Thailand the most good.<sup>82</sup>

Sickened by the CIA's 'goons' and the unpredictable future of his own projects, Gordon began reconsidering his PSD assignments. When a former USAID officer offered him a temporary job conducting a village security research project with the Stanford Research Institute and the US Army in 1967, Gordon left USOM. His new work at the Stanford Research Institute, however, did not last long as the research project that hired him was phased out two years after it began. Then, with the help of the director of the Office of Public Safety Byron Engle, Gordon got a new job in the USOM in Vietnam, arriving in Saigon in May 1970.<sup>83</sup> He was assigned to assist the Corrections and Detentions advisory section at the PSD Saigon headquarters, helping to quell the aftermath of a riot in the prison camps on Con Son Island.<sup>84</sup> After about two years in Vietnam, he was given a new mission in early 1972 in Ban Huai Sai, Laos, again with the PSD, but this time focusing on the massive scale of narcotics addiction among American soldiers in Vietnam. Gordon was already well aware of the reason why the CIA did not fully support the idea of striking the opium growers in Laos, especially the Hmong, who were recruited as foot soldiers for the CIA's covert operations against the communist Pathet Lao. However, most of his frustrations over the American antinarcotics programme in Laos came from what he described as the 'American bureaucratic ineptitude and inability when different departments tried to pull together'. As before, the CIA acted as a threat to cooperation between departments.<sup>85</sup> Gordon left Laos in 1974 when his contract with the USOM ended. The Laos mission became his last 'tour' as an American Foreign Service official in Southeast Asia.

Gordon's short-term positions from the time he left the USOM in Thailand in 1967 to his last PSD advisory work in Laos in 1974 exemplify how US foreign policy, preoccupied with the developments in Vietnam, was further beleaguered first by bureaucratic limitations and vagaries, and second, by the negligence of local allies who pursued their own 'indigenisation' programmes. To begin with, Gordon was hired by USAID on a contract basis and was never given a permanent position with the organisation. This was the same for most of his colleagues in various foreign service positions. Regardless of their knowledge and firsthand experience in the region, most American foreign service officials or USAID personnel were on short-term contracts and did not have sufficient time to grasp the local conditions and grievances. Worse yet, their expertise and awareness of local demands were often not heard or reflected in the programmes that they were to carry out. These limitations were attributed to their indifference, if not ignorance, to local conditions or accommodation of local demands. They saw what they wanted to see. In the meantime, the Thai ruling elite was winning their own Cold War, centred on building an anticommunist, royalist nation. The rise of royalist nationalism in Thailand would soon define how the Thais

82 Ibid., pp. 20–22.

83 Young, *Journey from Banna*, p. 258.

84 Ibid., p. 262; 'Members of a congressional committee visit a South Vietnamese island for political prisoners: The tiger cages of Con Son', *LIFE Magazine*, 17 July 1970, pp. 26–9; Sylvan Fox, '4 South Vietnamese describe torture in prison "tiger cage"', *New York Times*, 3 Mar. 1973.

85 Young, *Journey from Banna*, pp. 282–3.

should view communism—as an enemy of the nation, religion, and the monarchy, as vividly demonstrated in the October 6 Massacre in 1976.<sup>86</sup>

Everyone was fighting their own war. As Gordon had noted in 1962, the CIA was privatising the Second Indochina War by creating additional clandestine operations, well exemplified by its so-called Secret War in Laos in which Gordon's younger brother Bill Young had been deeply involved.<sup>87</sup> USAID was fighting its own war, especially over the survival of the Office of Public Safety, which had overseen the foreign police training programme and extrajudicial activities related to counterinsurgency.<sup>88</sup> Likewise, the Thais were fighting their own Cold War to ensure their American counterparts understood that it was the Thais, not the Americans, who would set the direction for a future Thailand. Harvey E. Gutman, assistant director of the USOM to Thailand (1968–70) expressed this well by saying that 'The Thai had their own agenda.' He added:

The Thai hated the term 'advisor' as they felt it put them on an inferior student level. The police were especially sensitive. The colonel in charge of liaison with USAID ... complained that he was being 'advised' by a former [American] police sergeant, 'a high school graduate', he said with contempt.<sup>89</sup>

In less than a year after Gordon completed his last mission in the USOM-PSD and left Laos in 1974, communist regimes came to power in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The USOM-PSD also withdrew from Thailand and its neighbouring countries in the same year. The Office of Public Safety nominally under USAID was scrapped in 1974 after the US Congress banned the US provision of training or assistance to foreign police.<sup>90</sup> The Thai Border Patrol Police, on the other hand, is still in operation, while their royal patrons have become allegedly the most powerful authority that protects and promotes the progress and unity of the Thai nation.

### Disenchantment

Perhaps the first moment of disenchantment that Gordon had felt about the United States, his mother country, came from the moment when he declared his withdrawal from the Baptist seminary in California in 1952. Certainly, a lack of funding was not the only or central reason why he withdrew from the ABFMS. He was after all protesting against the ABFMS' neglect of the role of Protestant missionaries in expanding the American Christian empire, envisioned to be egalitarian, just, and modern, into the most remote parts of the world. Even before 1952, the US government's suspicion of his father Harold Young's loyalty and the consequent decision made by the ABFMS to terminate his mission in the late 1940s would have been

86 Thongchai Winichakul, *Moments of silence: The unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, massacre in Bangkok* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020).

87 Alfred W. McCoy, 'America's secret war in Laos, 1955–1975', in *A companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 283–313.

88 United States, 94th Congress, 2d Session, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Foreign and Military Intelligence, Book I: Final Report, Senate Report No. 94–755* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1976).

89 Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 'Thailand', p. 318.

90 Lobe, 'U.S. police assistance', p. 9.

rather humiliating to the Young family, who had prided themselves for safeguarding the American Christian empire in Asia.

The CIA and USOM were in fact just another version of ABFMS to Gordon. Gordon's frustration over the indigenisation of the Cold War by the Americans and the Thais stemmed from the fact that the US government had not learnt from the Protestant missionaries' experience in Asia since the early nineteenth century. The first generation of American Protestant missionaries in Asia all struggled to get due recognition back home for their role in expanding the American Christian empire.<sup>91</sup> Harold Young expressed the very same feeling in his letter to the ABFMS in 1926:

I know the field, but in a different way from anyone who has only visited it; for there is a distinction to be made between a man who has been on the field for only a short time, and a man who was born and brought up under the peculiar conditions of the country, knowing not only the language and customs (for that is something one can acquire) but being able to feel and think as the natives do. This is only possible with a native born.<sup>92</sup>

More often than not, the missionaries adapted indigenous customs and traditions so that they could attract more local people and have them listen to the gospel. Like Gordon, they faced a dilemma of favouring their local converts due to an affinity and sense of attachment to them, even as the converts advocated for their own autonomy instead of embracing a Christian empire centred in the United States.<sup>93</sup> During the Cold War, the dilemmas that the Christian missionaries, as well as the US foreign service officials, experienced while undertaking their missions on the other hand tell us the key agenda of the indigenous ruling elites was not the ideological war between communism and capitalism or realpolitik but their own nation-building. The Cold War that the Thais and perhaps most of the American allies in Southeast Asia experienced in the second half of the twentieth century involved the building of anti-communist nations, financially and technologically funded by the United States to various degrees, but fundamentally imbued with the sovereignty of each nation-state.

What then was the nature of collaboration between the Americans, who had come to Thailand with their missions of repelling communism and spreading modernity, and the Thai 'national leaders'? One evident lesson that we can glean from the several stages of disenchantment that Gordon Young went through is well summarised in his own words: 'Americans never understood Asia'. From the beginning, knowing that the United States would need an outpost and loyal ally for the implementation of its anticommunist campaign in Mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand's ruling elites were never in a powerless position in their negotiations with the United States. Albeit hegemonic, the global Cold War system was not like direct colonial rule. The US government could influence decision-making processes by manipulating or wooing their Thai collaborators, but the latter did not submit to American demands and commands at all times. It was the American presumption of

91 Hollinger, *Protestants abroad*, p. 99.

92 Harold Mason Young, 'Letter to Foreign Secretary Dr. Joseph C. Robbins, 28 Apr. 1926'.

93 Hollinger, *Protestants abroad*, pp. 63–86; Conroy-Krutz, *Christian imperialism*, p. 20; Daniel J. Adams, 'From colonialism to world citizen: Changing patterns of Presbyterian mission', *American Presbyterians* 65, 2 (1987): 147–56.

superpower status based upon military, economic, and even cultural superiority that blinded their foreign policymakers and agencies from perceiving the reasons why their collaborative counterinsurgency programmes often backfired or had unintended consequences.

The Thai elites' indigenisation of the American Cold War did broadly share the same goal, to suppress communism. The US had no reason to be suspicious of what the Thai government and the BPP were doing with American dollars and expertise. Yet, the power struggles and consequent chaos within the rival US organisations in Thailand during the Vietnam War, along with their Thai counterparts' growing domination of joint counterinsurgency campaigns, affected the Thai-US relationship. As Hill stated in 1973, 'It is likely that there are more mistakes made by USOM and by the RTG [Royal Thai Government] by extending the cooperative relationship too long than by terminating it too soon.'<sup>94</sup> In short, the confusion and disorganisation in Washington and among their 'helping hands' in Southeast Asia created more opportunities for the local elites to appropriate US foreign policy to their own ends.

Although Gordon was not a Protestant missionary, his mission background and missionary family as well as his work in the two key vehicles of US Cold War policy permit us to reflect on the building of an American Christian and anticommunist empire in twentieth-century Asia.<sup>95</sup> Gordon's career in mainland Southeast Asia reveals that even after more than a century-long effort of bringing Christian civilisation and American modernisation to Asians, be they heathens, hill tribes, or communists, both the Protestant and political missionaries of the American empire had surprisingly little impact on changing the dynamics of local politics, societies, or their indigenous collaborators who survived the collapse of Western colonialism and America's Vietnam quagmire. The American agencies, on the other hand, failed to recognise the danger of internal confusion and rivalries among the Americans in foreign lands. Gordon's disillusionment with US foreign policy during the Cold War resonates with that of most of the American Protestant missionaries in Asia throughout the twentieth century.<sup>96</sup> When their voices were not heard, many left their work like Gordon, or left America, like Gordon's father and younger brother, neither of whom ever returned to the United States and died in Thailand in 1975 and 2011, respectively.

Although Gordon was disillusioned and did not return to the land where three generations of his family had devoted their lives to the American missions of spreading Christian modernity and anticommunism throughout the twentieth century, Gordon could not detach himself from the land and people that made him who he was, just like the United States' rise as a global superpower was deeply implicated with Asia. Since the end of the Second Indochina War, many Americans who carried

94 Hill, 'An overview of USAID', p. 19.

95 Although Gordon was not officially a Baptist missionary, he kept in touch with American Baptist missionaries and missionary circles in Thailand between 1950s and 1960s. For example, the American Baptist missionary newsletter *Thailand Tattler* reported on Gordon's lecture on the hill tribes in Nov. 1960, Gordon's and his father Harold's new positions in USOM in Sept. 1962; and Gordon and his family's resettlement in Chiang Mai in Jan. 1966. An almost complete series of *Thailand Tattler* is available in the Payap University Archives.

96 Hollinger, *Protestants abroad*, pp. 24–58, 187–213.

out their 'missions' during the Cold War have revisited their experiences through memoirs and documentaries.<sup>97</sup> Some eulogise the beauty of Thailand, the country they moved back to and now call home. Some, like Gordon, still bitterly recount lost opportunities during the Cold War; all offer a vivid glimpse of the afterlife of the American missions of saving Asia from paganism and communism throughout the twentieth century.

97 See Jim Algie, Denis Gray, Nicholas Grossman, Jeff Hodson, Robert Horn and Wesley Hsu, *Americans in Thailand* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2014).