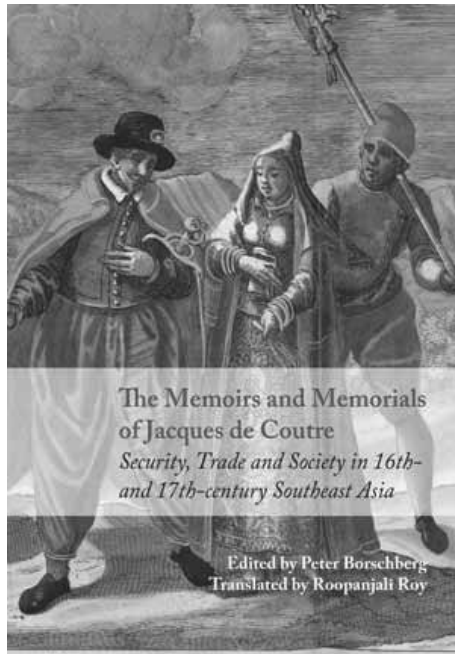


*The Memoirs and Memorials of Jacques de Coutre: Security, Trade and Society in 16th- and 17th-century Southeast Asia* translated by Roopanjali Roy, edited with an introduction by Peter Borschberg (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014). ISBN: 978-9971-69-528-6 (soft)



This fine book is a major addition to the early accounts of European visitors to Siam. It has relevance also for the history of Singapore, Asian trade, and many other topics, but in this review I shall concentrate on the passages concerning Siam.

Jacques de Coutre (1572?-1640) was an adventurer, born in Bruges in present-day Belgium, who spent most of the years between 1593 and 1623 in Asia, including eight months in Siam from May to December 1695 as well as visits to Ligor, Pattani, and Tenasserim. His memoirs contain the earliest eye-witness account of Siam other than Pinto's problematic work, and the only known first-person description of King Naresuan.

The book contains English translations of De Coutre's memoirs along with four memorials he wrote to the King of Spain and Portugal and some ancillary documents. The memoirs appear to have been written for publication, but were never printed and lay in the National Library of Spain in Madrid until discovered by scholars in the 1960s. An edition in the original Spanish was printed in 1991. Soon after, an English translation of the chapters on Siam, done by the late Philippe Annez, circulated among some Thai historians. It is infinitely better now to have a more polished translation by Roopanjali Roy along with copious notes and glossaries by Peter Borschberg of the University of Singapore, who also contributes a long introduction on the man, the manuscripts, their historical context, and their significance.

In Asia, De Coutre made his living as a gem trader and eventually settled in Goa. He travelled to Ayutthaya from Melaka in the company of a Portuguese friar, Jorge de Mota, who was officially sent by the Portuguese governor of Melaka to promote trade with the Siamese capital and to find out about some Portuguese nationals who King Naresuan had hauled away from Cambodia. In De Coutre's account, however, De Mota is a rogue. He manufactures a false translation of his diplomatic missive, turning himself into a relative of and envoy from the King of Spain and Portugal. King Naresuan is suitably flattered and is preparing to send De Mota off to Lisbon in a ship groaning with presents for the king when De Coutre, fearing that this could all

end very badly, exposes the hoax to a Siamese royal consort. Soon after, De Coutre leaves Siam. The tale does not quite add up as King Naresuan does not visit his wrath on De Mota, and De Mota does not take revenge on De Coutre.

Whatever the exact truth of this caper, it keeps De Coutre in Siam for eight months and gives him several fascinating experiences to recount. He attends three audiences with King Naresuan. The second, with the presentation of the fake letter, is a full-dress affair with many similarities to the famous French embassy seventy years later. At the third, there is a tiger tethered at the foot of the throne to make sure De Coutre is suitably terrified. De Coutre trails after the king on an elephant-hunting expedition in the western hills, allowing him to describe Suphanburi and the fierceness of its mosquitoes. After the narrative he adds two chapters on the striking things he has seen: floating rice, penis bells, cremations, elephants, the royal audience halls, some temples, the funeral of an important royal elephant, and the king's cruel punishment of offenders.

His visit to Pattani is brief, but he confirms other accounts that the Pattani queen is a great merchant, and describes the port as a concentration point for pepper from the archipelago. One of the appendices mentions a massacre of the entire thousand-strong Portuguese community at the port.

The memorials to the Iberian king present an overview of Asian trade, including descriptions of the main exports from Ayutthaya, Pattani and Tenasserim.

De Coutre eventually married and settled in Goa, but with growing rivalry between European states in Asia, he was accused of spying for the Dutch and repatriated to Europe in 1623. Both the memoirs and the memorials were probably written to refute these accusations by showing himself a loyal friend of Spain and its king. He was exonerated in 1632 and died eight years later in Trinidad.

As Borschberg notes, De Coutre wrote his memoirs in the style of the picaresque tales popular in his day. Time after time, he gets into unlikely scrapes (like his experience in Siam), but escapes on each occasion like a matinee hero. Time and time again, he makes and loses a fortune, shrugging off the experience with nonchalance.

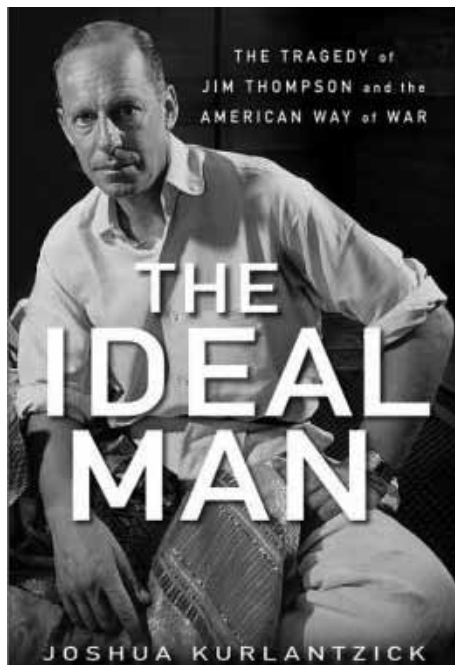
Herein lies the difficulty of assessing his memoirs. They were probably written around thirty years after his time in Siam. There is little chance that he kept any sort of journal that would have survived his escapades, so he was composing from memory. He was a gem-trader, not a profession that requires skill in recording and writing. He was writing to please an audience. He is a storyteller in the style of Elmore Leonard, who does not like to pause the plot too long while describing the scenery. Some of his descriptions (e.g., of audience halls and temples) make sense up to a point, but then become difficult to imagine or to reconcile with other information – perhaps a result of De Coutre's faulty memory or his clumsy expression. For example, the Buddha statues in temple cloisters include sitting and standing figures but also “others ... mounted on horseback with little flags in their hands”.

These factors make it especially difficult to evaluate his fascinating passages on King Naresuan. He claims to have witnessed the king ordering punishments for some Siamese nobles involved in De Mota's deception, for some young palace women accused of robbery, and for a woman accused of adultery. He also claims to have seen convicts executed by wild buffaloes, gladiator-style, and elephant keepers disfigured for dereliction of duty. He recounts other examples of "barbarity" which he presumably heard from others. Some of these stories are not so surprising. Punishments of their sort are detailed in the Ayutthaya laws, and were not very different from punishments enforced in parts of Europe at the time. But some examples, such as the animal-assisted execution of the adulterous woman, have no support in the Ayutthaya laws. Was De Coutre pandering to a taste for exotic sadism?

This publication makes available a fascinating early European source on Southeast Asia. The editor provides a long introduction, detailed annotations, very full glossaries of places and things, a timeline, and many old maps and prints. What historians ought to make of De Coutre's memories is another matter, but it is great to have this source in clear sight.

Chris Baker

*The Ideal Man: The Tragedy of Jim Thompson and the American Way of War* by Joshua Kurlantzick (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011). ISBN 978-0-470-08621-6 (hard)



Ask anyone, in Thailand at random, "What do you remember of Jim Thompson?" Typical answers will doubtless include: "He disappeared"; "He is an American"; "He was the Silk King of Thailand"; "He was a CIA agent". Each one of these answers alone is not particularly relevant to the make-up of the man.

Jim Thompson disappeared in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia in 1967. This was a shocking event, but many white men have disappeared in Asia. They did not become famous.

Jim Thompson was indeed an American. So what? Americans are everywhere, often in places they should not be. Still, America being the most powerful country in the world,