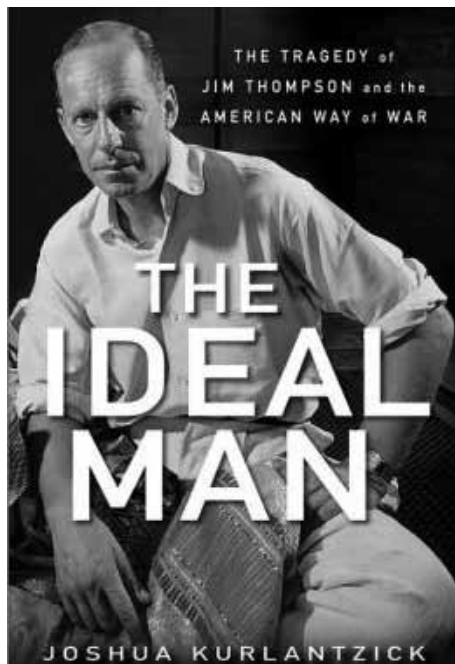


These factors make it especially difficult to evaluate his fascinating passages on King Naresuan. He claims to have witnessed the king ordering punishments for some Siamese nobles involved in De Mota's deception, for some young palace women accused of robbery, and for a woman accused of adultery. He 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,

the disappearance of an American citizen could, and in this case did, create a lot of media attention.

Jim Thompson also made a great fortune in Thailand. He became “The Silk King” and left behind a lasting commercial legacy in the form of his Jim Thompson Company. This company still has its beautiful flagship store at the corner of Surawong Road and Rama IV Road in central Bangkok and operates the Jim Thompson Thai House museum. The latter is undoubtedly one of the landmark tourist attractions in Bangkok. There have actually been many “Built To Last” companies in Thailand founded by Occidentals, including B. Grimm, T. Leonowens, East Asiatic Co., etc. None of the founders of these enterprises became a “legend” like Jim Thompson.

So, Jim Thompson was a CIA agent. Really! There were so many CIA agents in Thailand and Southeast Asia, especially in the wake of the Vietnam War. Most of them are not famous. Actually, they try hard not to attract too much attention. Moreover, Thompson was certainly not a distinguished spy like Philby, Burgess or even Matahari. So why should he be famous?

Yet Jim Thompson is famous! Could it be that he owed his fame not to any one particular reason or event? Rather, each of these individual innocuous responses, lumped together, has created a cacophony of sound that greatly magnified the Jim Thompson myth.

The *Ideal Man* is actually a book about a famous man. The misplaced title suggests that the glamorous life of Jim Thompson embodies the humanist ideal of “the life well-lived”, worthy of emulation wherever possible. The author appears to stand in awe of the fame achieved by his subject. Indeed, any biographer would be immediately confronted by the enormous legacy of Jim Thompson, for better or for worse. The aura of fame - like a pleasant mist - colours the author’s perception of Jim Thompson throughout. Wearing tinted spectacles can assist a biographer in certain ways by casting light on key aspects of their subject’s life. But they can also obscure other areas of interest.

Nevertheless, Joshua Kurlantzick has written a very informative book on the life and times of Jim Thompson, which is clear, readable and interesting. The book portrays a very human, but sad, story of a man engaged in an unrequited love affair with Thailand, caught between two cultures. As might be expected of a writer who usually focuses on politics, Kurlantzick provides a vivid background of the political context of the Vietnam War and its impact on Thailand. For readers who are interested in a clear snapshot account of Thailand’s modern history and the country’s role prior to and during the Vietnam War, the book serves as a welcome primer.

The author also makes Jim Thompson’s house come alive with a constant parade of celebrity guests, including members of the Kennedy and Eisenhower families, Barbara Hutton, Doris Duke, Truman Capote, Benny Goodman, and nearly every prominent European royal or heiress passing through its cultured corridors and dining rooms. If they did not exactly eat out of his hand, they all basked in his

hospitality and hung on his words, as Thompson pontificated about Thai culture, the Vietnam War and world geopolitics.

As a result, Kurlantzick's book is likely to become the definitive work on Jim Thompson. Only U.S. Government files that have not yet been declassified might shed more light on this topic. Otherwise, one would be hard put to find more information in one volume about Thompson's background and career.

Having praised the author for doing a thorough job in documenting the life of Jim Thompson, let me venture to offer some reservations. It seems that the author started writing a book based on the assumption that Thompson is an important historical figure. Since he is so famous, he must be historically important. Moreover, many important historical political figures - like the Kennedys - appear to be his friends. The author did not assess the basis of Thompson's fame. He did not set out to exorcise Thompson's ghost. He wholeheartedly accepted Thompson's fame at face value.

But is that fame justified? Is there much substance to Jim Thompson's famous political ambiguity? I think the book fails to determine whether Thompson is historically an important figure. The author cannot even establish whether Thompson was spying for the CIA. He merely reports that Thompson used to work in the OSS (the CIA's precursor). His definitive claim comprises the fact that Thompson's CIA file has not yet been declassified. Moreover, despite the author's best efforts to cast new light on Thompson's disappearance in the Cameron Highlands, his attempt to prove a conspiracy behind the disappearance also meets a dead end. After reading this book, we are no wiser as to why Thompson disappeared, who might have killed him or whether he arranged his own disappearance. There have been so many hypotheses over the years, but American historian Dr. Edward van Roy is probably spot on when he said, "The attempt to prove a conspiracy theory behind the disappearance of Jim Thompson is just a storm in a teacup. Jim Thompson probably fell into a hole in the jungle floor at the Cameron Highlands and was eaten by wild animals."

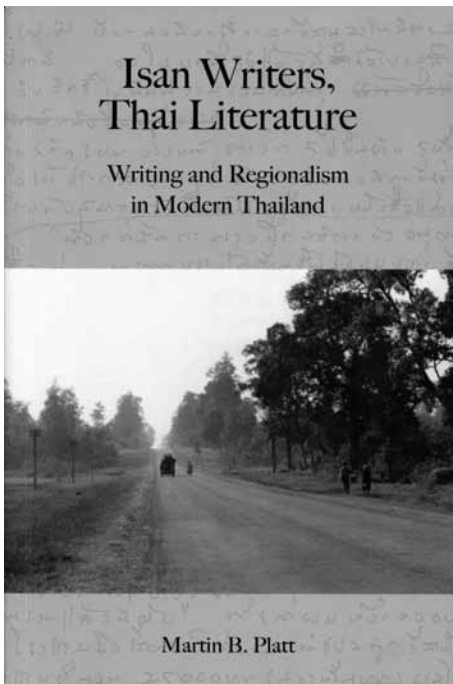
Yet, the legend that has become Jim Thompson remains an entrepreneurial success story. Thanks to his famed house-cum-museum, and the enormous success of the silk company he founded, there is considerably more substance to Thompson the creative entrepreneur than to Thompson the ambiguous political man and glamorous spy. He discovered the beautiful Thai silk produced by the Muslim Cham weavers of Baan Krua by Bangkok's Khlong Saen Sap. He started a silk production company and got the Cham weavers and dyers at Baan Krua to supply him with silk textiles. He began to promote internationally Thai silk with novel patterns, bright pigments and exotic designs. By the end of the 1950s, Thompson had made Thai silk globally popular and he fully deserved the title of Thailand's "Silk King." His career as an entrepreneur and founder of a "Built to Last" company, which has become a global brand, is highly commendable.

Joshua Kurlantzick is a serious political writer whose analysis of contemporary

events in Southeast Asia is well written and thought provoking. In this case, these events overshadow the book's subject. Unfortunately, the author's search for Jim Thompson the political, or "ideal" man, turns out to be a chase after a mirage.

Jeffery Sng

*Isan Writers, Thai Literature: Writing and Regionalism in Modern Thailand* by Martin B. Platt (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press; and Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2013). ISBN: 978-9971-69-697-9.



In Thailand today everyone knows that Isan refers to northeastern Thailand, but the term is understood by urban people differently from those who live, or have their roots, in the region. For most urban middle and upper class people, Isan is assumed to mean a place of uneducated and unsophisticated country people who speak an unrefined language (primarily Lao). In the political rhetoric of the 21st century, the *khon isan* (คนอีสาน), the northeastern people, are often symbolized as stupid water buffaloes. What Platt succeeds in doing in this pioneering work is demonstrating that for at least half a century there have been a number of men and a few women who write from their own experience of a mainly rural world where most people speak as their native language a dialect of Lao or, in some cases, of

Khmer, but who write in the national language and whose contributions are to the national literature of Thailand.

What makes a writer an "Isan" writer? This is a question that Platt pursues throughout his book in which he examines some two dozen writers whose published work appeared in the second half of the 20th century. First, a modern Isan writer is not one whose education was gained as it was traditionally, in a monastic school, and who learned to write in Lao, Khmer or what is called *tuatham* (ตัวธรรม) (literally 'dhammic script'), an orthography once used for Buddhist texts not only in northeastern and northern Thailand, but also in Laos. Rather, a modern Isan writer writes in standard Thai, the language he or she learned in a government school. Secondly, although a modern Isan writer may draw on the traditional literature of the region – legends incorporated into sermons given by monks or used as the basis for performances of