

GEORGE CÔEDÈS: A LIFE IN SERVICE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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ABSTRACT—This article offers a comprehensive biographical study of George Cœdès (1886–1969), the pioneering French scholar who helped define the historical contours of ancient Southeast Asia. Tracing his intellectual formation, career in Siam and Indochina, leadership of the École française d’Extrême-Orient, and enduring influence in Thai and Khmer scholarship, the article reassesses Cœdès’s contributions, methods, and legacy. Drawing on unpublished correspondence, Thai-language sources, and posthumous tributes, it highlights both his personal modesty and the authoritative role he came to occupy in shaping the historiography of the region.

KEYWORDS: George Cœdès; École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO); Siam; South-east Asian History; Thai Scholarship

Introduction

At the 1999 symposium on George Cœdès held in Bangkok, I remarked that his biography had scarcely advanced beyond brief notices and obituaries and that such a towering figure in Southeast Asian studies certainly deserved more sustained attention (Baffie 1999). This article offers a revised and updated version of the paper I presented on that occasion. In recent years, the situation has changed. Bernard Cros, a grandson of Professor Cœdès, has begun publishing studies and giving lectures on his grandfather’s life (Cros 2007; 2017). These renewed biographical efforts have been greatly enriched by access to family archives, facilitated at the time by George’s eldest son, the late Pierre Cœdès (1914–2015)—documents to which I had previously had only partial access.

George Cœdès’s intellectual longevity was remarkable, spanning no less than 65 years (Filliozat 1970: 9). His work *Les États hindouisés d’Indochine et d’Indonésie*, first published in 1944 under a different title, is arguably the synthesis that has had the greatest influence on subsequent Southeast Asian scholarship. Few researchers have contributed original insights to as many national histories—Siam (Thailand), Cambodia, Campā (Vietnam), Indonesia, and others—as did Cœdès. He became an emblematic figure in French Orientalist scholarship. As Prince Damrong Rajanubhab once remarked, the advancement of knowledge does not depend on the nationality of researchers; it is universal.

Prof. Cœdès was a model scholar. Though not infallible, he opened new lines of inquiry and embodied the ideals of modern scholarship: a readiness to

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question himself and a tireless eagerness to learn. Much that was once considered progress in his time has since been reassessed or challenged. Doubtless the object of envy during his career, he endured numerous critiques—some unduly personal and insidious—that at times went far. Yet such criticism is often salutary and Cœdès himself would have been the first to acknowledge advances in archeology and epigraphy, revise his conclusions, and offer new interpretations of these “ancient” texts.

Family Background

While spending a year in Berlin in 1906, the young George Cœdès took an active interest in tracing his ancestry in Eastern Europe [FIGURE 1]. According to a handwritten note found in his personal papers, the name “Cœdès” is a Latinized form of Szödi, meaning “inhabitant of Szöd”, a very old village in Hungary located about 30 kilometers from Budapest. In Old Hungarian, szöd may have meant “white” or “blond”. The name is not Jewish in origin, although Hungary historically had a large Jewish population. Pierre Cœdès—our principal contact following the sudden death of his brother Louis in October 1998—believed that the high number of financiers in the Hungarian and French branches of the Cœdès family suggests a possible Jewish ancestry. Some of Cœdès’s colleagues at the École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO), as well as several of his students, seem to have been aware of this heritage, although it remains difficult to confirm with certainty.

The first ancestor for whom precise records exist is Joseph Ignace Cœdès

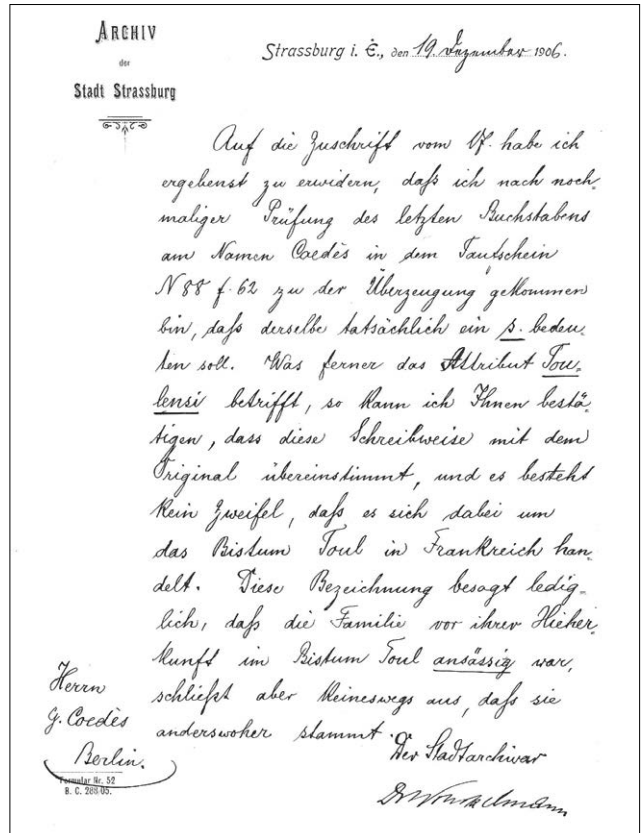


FIGURE 1: Cœdès researching his ancestry during his stay in Berlin, 1906
© Stadtarchiv Strassburg

(1740–1820),² born in Strasbourg on 2 April 1740 to François Ignace Cœdej and Marie Madeleine Bende.³ According to the *Almanach Royal*, Joseph Ignace held the post of *Premier commis au Trésor* at the end of Louis XVI’s reign (1774–1792). Family archives indicate that he was

² Ann Nugent (1996: 8), who seems to have obtained her information from the late Helmut Loofs-Wissowa, writes that Cœdès’s grandfather was Jewish, having come from Hungary under the name Kados. We do not know when the family converted to Christianity. The family vault is in Montmartre Cemetery in Paris.

³ The reference document—a copy of which was given to me by Pierre Cœdès—is written in Latin and after the name of Coedej an exclamation mark has been placed in parentheses, perhaps placed there by George Cœdès himself (A.P. Stadtarchiv Strassburg i. Els. = City Archives of Strasbourg in Alsace).

also a Freemason. He married Marie-Elisabeth Lechantre des Brunetières and had four children. One of them, Joseph Louis Jean Stanislas Cœdès (1779–1858), was also a finance official and Freemason. He married Françoise Eugénie Deschamps (or Desacres) and had two children, including Louis Eugène.

Louis Eugène Cœdès (1810–1905) was a relatively well-known painter and lithographer, exhibiting at the *Salon* almost every year between 1831 and 1882. On 2 March 1837, he married Alexandrine Thérèse Adélaïde Carette. They had three children, including Hippolyte (1845–1917), the father of George Cœdès. A bank clerk, Hippolyte married Marie Carette in October 1877 and they had four children. George was born on 10 August 1886. One of his older brothers was killed in the First World War. It is also known that one of George's sisters, Jeanne, raised George's two sons, Pierre and Louis, from 1920 onward, so that they could grow up in a "metropolitan atmosphere" and study at the Lycée Carnot in Paris, as their father had.

It may be noted that the Cœdès family had been settled in France since at least the 17th century and, in most cases, had established matrimonial ties with families bearing characteristically French names. If George Cœdès did indeed have Jewish ancestry, it does not appear to have played a significant role in his self-perception or scholarly life (Cœdès's Family Archives; Filliozat 1970; Pott 1971).

The Young Orientalist

George Cœdès was born on 10 August 1886 at 88 rue de la Pompe in the 16th

arrondissement of Paris and attended the Lycée Carnot in the 17th arrondissement from 1895 to 1903. In 1901, he won second prize in Latin translation at the Concours Général. He later joked that he had thought of entering the École des Chartres "before things went awry" (Cœdès 1960: 424).⁴

He went on to pursue advanced studies at the Faculté des Lettres of the Université de Paris and then at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) in the 5th section on Religious Studies. In 1905, at the age of 19, he obtained a degree in German and, the following year, a Diplôme d'études supérieures in this language. He spent the 1906–1907 academic year as a student at the University of Berlin. From 1908 to 1909, he taught German at the Lycée Condorcet in Paris.

Yet his vocation for Asia had already begun. He later recounted that it was "in the darkened halls of the former Musée des Religions [now Musée Guimet] that my [his] vocation as an Orientalist was awakened" (Cœdès 1959: 7). In 1903, at the age of 17, when he was still a high school student, he was granted special privileges to come and read works from the museum's library on Thursdays and is said to have been "smitten by the sight of the Khmer steles" (Piat 1971: 304). However, his vocation for Asia was truly sparked by a visit in September 1902—shortly after his 16th birthday—to an exhibition at the Jardin des Plantes on the peoples of the Malabar Coast in India, an event advertised in a flyer preserved in his family archives.

⁴ Here and below, all translations from the original French are mine unless otherwise stated.

In 1904, aged just 18, he made his first scholarly contribution to the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* (BEFEO) with a French translation of K. 79, a bilingual inscription of Bhavavarman II, King of Zhenla (Cœdès 1904). Signed as “M. George Cœdès, élève de l'École des Hautes-Études”, he translated only the six lines of Sanskrit, largely leaving out the 18 lines of “Khmer prose” on this stele. Yet he already demonstrated a thorough grasp of the bibliography—no doubt still limited at the time—on classical Cambodia. His style is straightforward, opening the article with a description of the stele (“flat stele in slate schist, 0m06[cm] thick [...]”). The tone becomes more personal in note 5, where he thanks M. Barth, M. Aymonier, his mentors Messrs. Lévi & Foucher, and M. Finot for allowing this first publication in the BEFEO (Ibid.: 696).

In 1909, while still a German teacher, he already had signed his 10th contribution to Asian studies—a bibliography of works relating to archeology in Cambodia and Campā published in the *Bulletin de la Commission archéologique de l'Indochine* (Cœdès 1909). From 1909 to 1911, he completed his military service in the library of the third Régiment du Génie school in Arras, which gave him ample time to prepare his thesis from the EPHE. On 18 November 1911, once his military service was over, he obtained his Diploma with a study on *Les bas-reliefs d'Angkor Vat* (Cœdès 1911) [FIGURE 2].

Everything happened very quickly for the young man of 25. At its meeting of 9 June 1911, the Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres (AIBL) decided to accept him as a boarder. A decree dated 10 October 1911 stated that Mr George

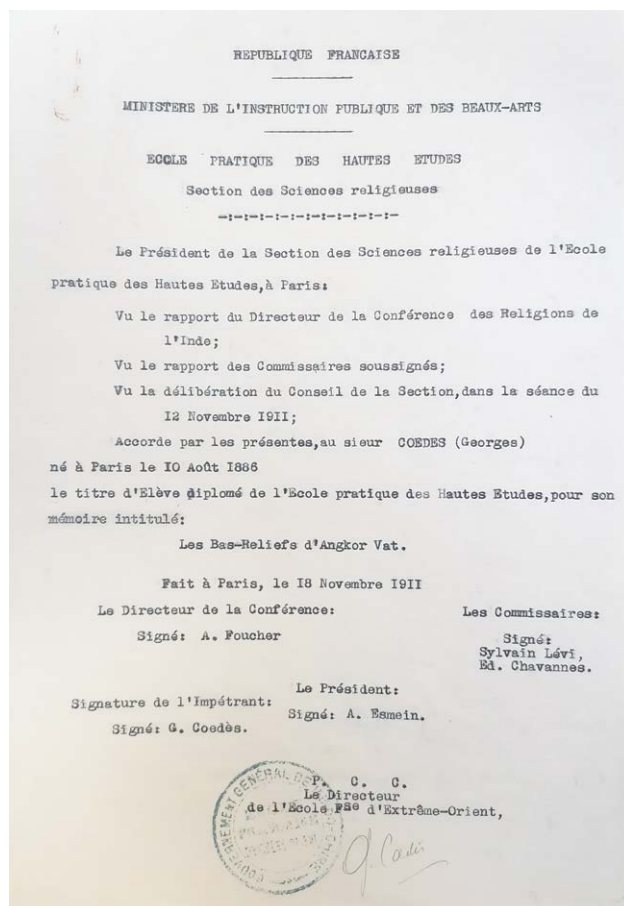


FIGURE 2: Copy of the EPHE Diploma, Paris, 18 Nov. 1911 © AEFEO

Cœdès, licencié ès lettres, had been appointed boarder at the EFEO, replacing Mr Maspéro who had been called to other duties (Article 1), and that his annual allowance of 6,000 francs would begin the day before his departure.

In 1912, he traveled to Angkor for the first time⁵ and, in 1914, he was promoted to the rank of “Professeur de philologie indochinoise” to replace the late Édouard Huber; however, as Jean Filliozat pointed out in his obituary, his job was to conduct research rather than teach. George Cœdès’s area of specialization was archeology, epigraphy, and

⁵ See Thissana, this Special Edition—Editor’s note.

the literature of ancient Cambodia, as Louis Finot indicated to the Governor General of Indochina in his proposal for promotion.⁶

The Siamese Years

George Cœdès stayed in Siam for the first time, probably from November 1914 to January 1915, “to pursue various works of history and archeology”.⁷ His mission orders provided for an advance of 500 piastres “for the purchase of books, documents, and collectors’ items”. According to HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943), he accompanied a high-ranking dignitary of the Cambodian Buddhist Sangha, the director of the École de Pali in Phnom Penh, who wished to obtain texts of the Tipiṭaka (Subhadradis 2513).⁸ Having been summoned to appear before a military reform commission in Saigon while the war raged in Europe, Cœdès returned to Siam two years later, probably in 1917. Prince Damrong recounted that this time he could converse directly with Cœdès without an interpreter, as the latter had made progress in English.

Since 1905, the chief librarian of Bangkok’s Watchirayan Library had been Dr Oskar Frankfurter (1852–1922), a German scholar. Following Siam’s declaration of war on Germany in 1917,

Frankfurter had to leave the country to avoid internment,⁹ after which Prince Damrong invited Cœdès to succeed him [FIGURE 3]. The French ambassador in Bangkok, Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis, supported the nomination in a letter to Albert Sarraut, the Governor General of Indochina: “I am convinced that Mr Cœdès, whose competence is particular in matters of Pali, Khmer and Thai erudition, will quickly find his rightful place in the scientific circles of Siam”. Subsequently, Cœdès signed his contract with the Siamese government on 16 December 1917.

From 1918 to 1929, George Cœdès was no longer an official member of the EFEO but served as a Siamese civil servant. From 1 January 1918 to 31 December 1926, he was Curator of the Watchirayan Library¹⁰ in Bangkok. From 1 January 1927 to 31 December 1929, he served as General Secretary of the Royal Society. He received a salary of 1,000 baht per month¹¹ and a pension entitlement calculated according to the rules of

⁶ These details are recorded in the archives of the Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer (CAOM), specifically in files GGI C.2 (12)/1496 and GGI C.2 (12)/1027.

⁷ CAOM, GGI F.24.2, 41.245.

⁸ The mission order mentions that he was accompanied by “Sieur Thong, a lecturer at the EFEO, who will be entitled to free transportation” (CAOM, GGI, Service des affaires administratives et contentieuses. Missions Cœdès. 16862. Arrêté no. 3083 du 4 novembre 1904).

⁹ Born in Hamburg, Dr Frankfurter first joined the Siamese government in 1884 as foreign affairs advisor to the General Councillor. He became President of the Siam Society in 1906 (Grabowsky 2024).

¹⁰ Created in 1882–1883 by the children of King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851–1868) in honor of their father, this library—named after Prince Mongkut’s monastic title (Vajirāṇā)—remained a private institution until 1904. Crown Prince Vajiravudh (later King Rama VI, r. 1910–1925) served as its first president and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab became president in 1915. See Cœdès 1924.

¹¹ In a letter sent from Paris to Prince Damrong dated 9 June 1925, Cœdès incidentally points out that with the modest income he received in Siam, it was nearly impossible for him to save money (Hennequin 1999). Mr Perapol Songnuy, who defended a thesis on foreign civil servants in the service of the Siamese government between 1900 and 1940, notes that the salaries of European employees at the time ranged from 400 baht to 2,000 baht a month (1997: 217).



FIGURE 3: Telegram from the Governor-General in Saigon to the EFEO in Hanoi, 27 August 1917, offering Cœdès the post of head of the Royal Library in Bangkok © AEFE0

the Pension Act RS 120 (= 1901 CE). Like other foreign experts, he was entitled to two months' leave per year, which could be accumulated to six or nine months to enable those wishing to return to Europe to do so. Cœdès took his first leave in 1920, when he took a cure in Vichy, and his second in 1925, a full year he spent almost entirely outside Asia (Cœdès's Family Archives). Cœdès's official English title at the Wat-chirayan Library was "Chief Librarian, also in charge of European literature" [FIGURE 4].¹² He was responsible for enriching the collection with European-language works and archives related to Siam. During his leaves in France in 1920 and 1925, he carried out research at the Archives nationales de France and at the Ministère des affaires étrangères, where he obtained copies of documents essential to our knowledge of Franco-Siamese relations in the 17th century (Hennequin 1999). He also helped

modernize the library by replacing continuous catalog lists with index cards (FAD 1985: 39). Above all, he was expected to conduct original research in his field of epigraphy.

In 1921, likely at his initiative, provincial officials were asked to send lists of inscriptions found within their jurisdictions. The first significant result was the publication of the first tome of *Recueil des inscriptions du Siam*. This bilingual (Thai-French) volume followed a rigorous format used to this day with photographic reproductions, transcriptions in modern Thai, romanized transcriptions, and a translation. At the time, most translated works on the subject were published in French (Cœdès 1924: 4–5).

Prof. Cœdès also trained local specialists. Mr Cham Thongkhamwan, who had previously studied Khmer and Pali in Battambang (in present-day Cambodia), moved into Cœdès's house in 1921 and worked with him at the National Library. In 1930, Prince Damrong selected Cham to succeed Cœdès in deciphering local inscriptions

¹² The accountant, Luang Chen Chin Aksor, was responsible for the Chinese-language section; there were also designated managers for Thai, Pali, and Mon literature (*Bangkok Times* 1919: 134).

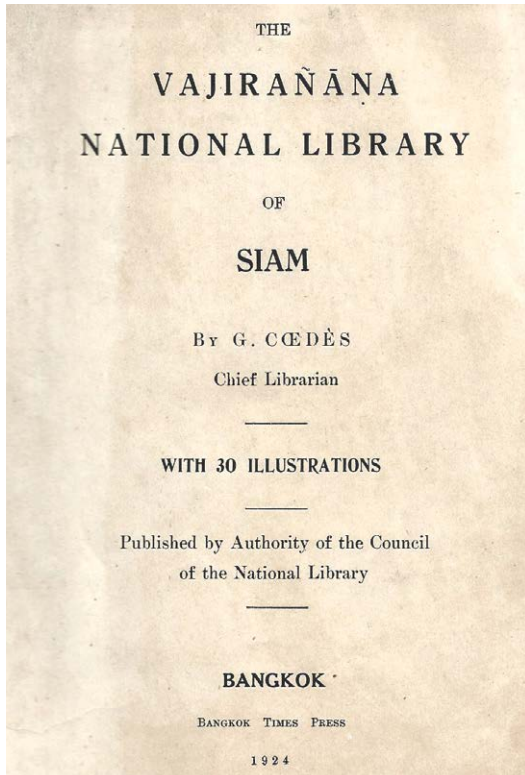


FIGURE 4: Cover of the National Library catalog compiled by George Cœdès as Chief Librarian, 1924. Public Domain

(Cham 2512). In the field of art history, Luang Boribal Buribhand, the newly appointed curator of the National Museum of Bangkok, maintained a correspondence with George Cœdès (Hennequin 1999) after the latter moved to Hanoi to continue his career with the EFEO (see below).

On 17 January 1924, King Rama VI established, by royal proclamation, an Archeological Service under the Watchirayan Library. Cœdès was nominally appointed as its head and conducted fieldwork throughout the kingdom [FIGURE 5]. His research was consistently encouraged by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, for whom Cœdès maintained deep respect. According to MC Subhadradis Diskul (2513: 13), Damrong's

son, the relationship was both jovial and intellectual. Toward the end of his life, Cœdès still recalled meeting Prince Damrong every day at the library during his working days in Siam, as they were the only two readers interested in deciphering the inscriptions on the steles (Suphakiat 2510: 6).

Prof. Cœdès believed in making scholarly work accessible beyond academic journals. As early as 1919, he contributed letters to the *Bangkok Times* and even engaged in public debates with fellow researchers in its pages on 10, 11, 14, and 15 September. He was also very active in the Siam Society, becoming a Council member at the General Assembly on 24 February 1919. On 23 January 1923, he was placed in charge of the *Journal of the Siam Society*, particularly the "History, Archeology, and Philology" section. From March 1926 to February 1930, he served as President of the Society and is even said to have contributed to the design of its emblem.

Though his command of Thai and English improved rapidly, Cœdès was still giving lectures in French as late as 1922. On 2 October that year, he presented a talk at the Siam Society on so-called "votive tablets"—later published in English and Thai (Cœdès 1927). In 1927, Reginald Le May proposed a trilingual Siamese-English-French dictionary project. A committee was established under Cœdès's chairmanship, with eminent members including Prince Dhani Nivat, Phraya Indra Montri (Francis Giles), Jean Burnay, Major Erik Seidenfaden, and Reginald Le May. The project eventually stalled after Cœdès's departure from Siam.

Before leaving for Hanoi in 1929 to become director of the EFEO, the Siam



FIGURE 5: Field visit in Wat Mahathat, Lopburi, with Siamese Governor Phraya Kamchatsonthucharit (far left), Italian architect E. Manfredi (left), Prince Damrong and his two daughters (center-left), two French Chargés d'affaires (center-right), and G. Cœdès (far right), 1926 © Cœdès's Family Archives

Society honored Cœdès with a banquet at the Palace Phaya Thai Hotel. Francis Giles replaced him at the General Meeting on 9 February 1930. Cœdès maintained strong ties with the Society over the years, visiting its new headquarters on Asoke road in 1934 and in January 1942—even during wartime—delivering a lecture (in English this time) on “The Empire of the South Seas”, i.e. Śrīvijaya,¹³ which was later translated and published in Thai.

Cœdès was also a member of the Royal Bangkok Sports Club, as noted in the membership list dated 31 August

1926. While his son Pierre recalled no particular athletic pursuits beyond fishing during family vacations in Belle-Île-en-Mer, George lived in close proximity to the Club—first at 478 Saprathum Road in 1919–1920, and later on Ratchadamri Road, as recorded in the *Directory for Bangkok and Siam* (Bangkok Times 1929). He was also active in French community affairs. In 1919, he served as Secretary of the Alliance française committee in Siam as well as of the Assistance française aux œuvres de Guerre.¹⁴

¹³ See Manguin, this Special Edition, for a review of Cœdès's contributions to the discovery and study of Śrīvijaya—Editor's note.

¹⁴ This was also a time of personal grief, as his brother Paul had just died at the front in 1918 during the First World War.

His numerous decorations included, from Siam, the Order of the Crown and the Order of the White Elephant and the Dushdi Mala medal for Arts and Sciences; from France, the Légion d'Honneur; and, from Cambodia, the Order of the Kingdom [FIGURE 6]. In 1929, just before leaving Siam for Hanoi, he was appointed Commander in the Order of the White Elephant by King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, r. 1925–1935).

Head of the EFEO

On 2 September 1929, George Cœdès accepted the appointment as Director of the EFEO, headquartered in Hanoi. He succeeded his teacher Louis Finot, who had served in an interim capacity and recommended him for the post. Although his promotion was considerable, he left Siam with some regret. He took up his new post in Hanoi at the beginning of January 1930, a position he held until 30 June 1947 [FIGURE 7]. Coincidentally, one of his first major diplomatic tasks as the Head of the EFEO was to escort King Prajadhipok around Angkor on 5 May 1930, during the monarch's official visit to French Indochina (Wibunsawatdiwong 2495: 132). As an official directly attached to the services of the Governor General of Indochina, George Cœdès was entitled to many honors, which the various BEFEO issues of the 1930s dutifully recorded in their *Chronique* section. Having left Hanoi on 24 June 1939, for a ten-month administrative leave, Cœdès was caught off guard by the outbreak of war and was recalled to Indochina, to which he returned on 4 November.

George Cœdès was careful to avoid political entanglements during the war



FIGURE 6: George Cœdès in Siamese uniform with medals, 1927
© Cœdès's Family Archives

years. It is possible that he also sought to distance himself from his distant Jewish ancestry. He did not openly oppose the Vichy regime, which in Indochina was represented by Vice-Admiral Decoux, but there is no evidence that he held any official or police-related responsibilities under this administration. Some claims to the contrary—such as those by Sood Sangvichien (2524: 109, 120), based on a posthumous account by a member of the *Seri Thai* (“Free Thai”) movement—appear to stem from misunderstandings. The Thai term *huana naksuep* (หัวหน้านักสืบ), used in the original source, was misinterpreted as “chief of detectives” or even “head of the secret police” (Sood 2524: 110, 114), whereas it is more accurately rendered as “chief of researchers”, a role consistent with

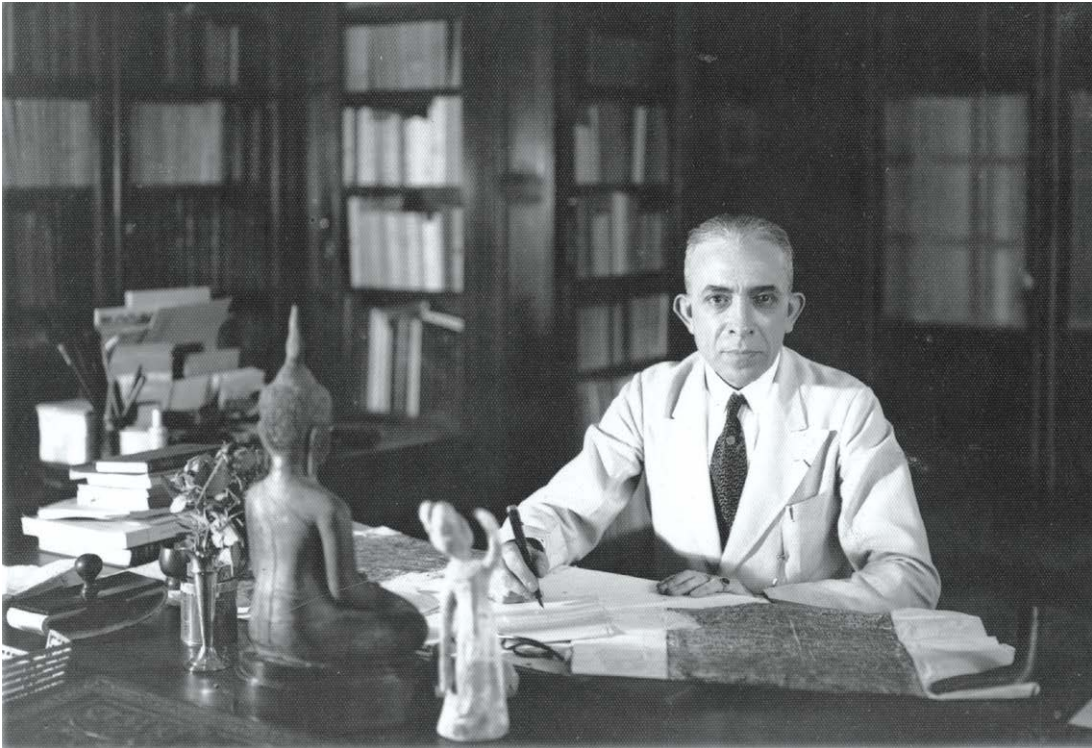


FIGURE 7: Cœdès as Director of the EFEO in Hanoi, 1940s, photo CAM19999 © EFEO

Cœdès's scholarly position. An article in *The Nation* even referred to him as a "spy" (Sunit 1999), though this claim lacks substantiating evidence.¹⁵

In 1939, Cœdès founded the Institut Indochinois pour l'Étude de l'Homme, whose members met twice monthly under his presidency. In November 1940, he offered the honorary presidency to Decoux, Governor General of Indochina, and made Émile Grandjean, Resident Superior of Cambodia, an honorary member. His position as head of the EFEO in Hanoi gave him some influence,

which he occasionally used to discreetly support the Free Thai movement.¹⁶

In October 1948, during a speech welcoming George Cœdès to the Académie des sciences coloniales, René Grousset evoked this difficult period of the Vichy rule with admiration and empathy:

Through everything, you have maintained a tenacity your friends could measure in stoicism. While you were safeguarding the institutions and prestige of French science, your eldest sons had been mobilized in Europe. One, an

¹⁵ Rumor has it that Cœdès also had strained relations with some French colleagues, notably Suzanne Karpelès—who was of Jewish origin—and Jean Burnay who entered the French Resistance in 1940. However, these reports lack firm documentation and should be treated with caution—*Editor's note*.

¹⁶ Malai Chuphinit, writing under the pen name Nai Chanthana (2507: 86–87), addresses this likely unique case—where Cœdès intervened to facilitate the passage to China of royalist Free Thais recommended by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and Prince Dhani Nivat—in a less polemical manner.

officer, was now a prisoner in a camp where, with the help of books sent with difficulty by your sister, he was pursuing his studies in Orientalism with, Pelliot told me, “the hard work of a Cœdès”. The other was sailing under our colors, in the midst of what perils! You, over there [...] cut from your friends, practically cut off from the metropole, at a time when everything was left open, you doubted neither your mobilized sons, nor (I knew it from your rare correspondence) the future of the country. You were working (Grousset 1948: 594).

It can be tempting to contrast George Cœdès with Paul Mus, who was also a member of the EFEO from 1927 to 1946. Mus was a committed researcher mobilized at the outbreak of war in 1939, decorated with the Croix de Guerre, and later served as General de Gaulle’s envoy to the Indochinese resistance. By comparison, Cœdès was more of a cautious observer than an active supporter of Vichy. However, as Cœdès himself recalled, the weekly review *Indochine*—published between 1940 and 1945—escaped censorship, allowing them to occasionally “slip in information on the progress of the Allied armies that we couldn’t find in the daily press” (Cœdès 1950: 215).

At 54 years old in 1940, George Cœdès was in the most intense phase of his administrative and intellectual career, culminating in his masterpiece *Histoire ancienne des États hindouisés d’Extrême-Orient*, published in 1944 before the end of the Second World War in Asia, and

later reissued under a different title, *Les États hindouisés d’Indochine et d’Indonésie* (Cœdès 1948). When awarded the sword of Membre de l’Institut in 1959, he spoke of the care with which he had, throughout his career, steered clear of politics (Cœdès 1959: 6). Yet, in retrospect, it is clear that during those turbulent times, such neutrality often amounted to a tacit acceptance of the Vichy regime and its collaborationist policies with Germany and Japan.

Father of Orientalism in Indochina

Back in France after the war, George Cœdès remained active. In 1946, he was appointed Honorary Director of the EFEO and, from 1 January 1947, served as Curator of the Musée d’Ennery—a small, little-visited museum in Paris—a post he held until his death in 1969.¹⁷

Between 1947 and 1948, Cœdès was appointed Professor of Ethnography at the École Supérieure of Anthropobiology in Paris. From 1947 to 1951—the year he turned 65—he lectured at the École nationale supérieure des langues orientales vivantes or “Langues’O” (modern INALCO).¹⁸ During these years in Paris, he received numerous academic honors and distinctions. A correspondent of the Académie des inscriptions et belles-

¹⁷ Housed in the mansion of Adolphe d’Ennery (1811–1899), a prolific French playwright and novelist, this museum contains about 7,000 ceramics, bronzes, lacquers, and jades from Japan and China collected by d’Ennery’s wife, Clémence. This residence had one major drawback. The first two floors housed the Musée d’Ennery and, from 1953, the Armenian Museum of France, while Cœdès and his family occupied the third floor, for which there was no elevator. In May 1949, it was estimated that the museum had less than 20 visitors per day (Dardenne 1949).

¹⁸ In 1928–1929, he briefly served as a lecturer at Langues’O for a single term.

lettres since 1934, he was elected a full member in 1958 [FIGURE 8].¹⁹ He was also admitted to the Académie des sciences d'Outre-mer on 1 October 1948, actively participating in its sessions. In 1959, he was inducted as a member of the prestigious Institut de France. Further confirming his eminent stature, he was elected President of the Société asiatique in 1964—the very society that had accepted him as a member nearly six decades earlier, on 30 April 1905—and presided over its general assemblies and meetings until 10 May 1968.

Until his death on 2 October 1969, George Coédès was widely celebrated as the first Grand Master in the field of Southeast Asian studies. Prior to him, this region had received scant official recognition in major academies and institutes, which traditionally reserved prestige for scholars of the great civilizations of China and India. With Coédès, Southeast Asia—particularly Siam and Cambodia—secured its rightful place in the academic pantheon. Scholars working on this region sought his endorsement as a mark of distinction.

For example, Milton Osborne (b. 1936), in the introduction to *Before Kampuchea* (1979: 67), recalls that Coédès summarized for him in Paris in 1966 the Cambodian conception of history. Similarly, Christopher Pym (1929–2001), author of a study on Angkor, expressed his indebtedness to Coédès, who generously read an early draft of his manuscript (Pym 1968: 192). Coédès was known for his readiness to respond to letters from scholars seeking his advice or critique.

¹⁹ See Kourilsky, this Special Edition, fig. 10, for the design of the pommel of his academicien's sword by Jean-Yves Claeys—Editor's note.

Yet, despite his towering reputation, George Coédès never became a leading public intellectual who would have been frequently sought by the media of his day. He preferred to avoid taking strong positions on political issues. Nevertheless, after his return from Indochina, he did not hesitate to use his pen to express solidarity with the Cambodian and Lao peoples, often through short articles published in the monthly *France-Asie*. In 1953, during the French Indochina War, he reviewed General Sabatier's book *Le Destin de l'Indochine*, acknowledging the definitive end of the colonial era and expressing doubt that military engagement offered a viable solution (Coédès 1953: 191).

Teaching and Mentorship

The title of “Professor” was granted to George Coédès upon his arrival in Siam in 1917 and remained closely associated with him throughout his life as Sattrachan Yot Sede (ศาสตราจารย์ ยอร์ช เซเดส์). However, it is important to note that he engaged in little formal teaching over the course of his career. In Siam, Cambodia, and Vietnam, Coédès primarily served as a researcher or administrator of scholarly institutions rather than as a university lecturer. He gave numerous public lectures, notably at the Siam Society in Bangkok and at the Louis Finot Museum in Hanoi, where he delivered the series later compiled as *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor* (Coédès 1947). A clear instance of his scholarly rigor appears in Chapter 2, titled “Some Erroneous Opinions” (pp. 21–43), in which he critiques the writings of non-specialist travelers rather than those of established scholars.

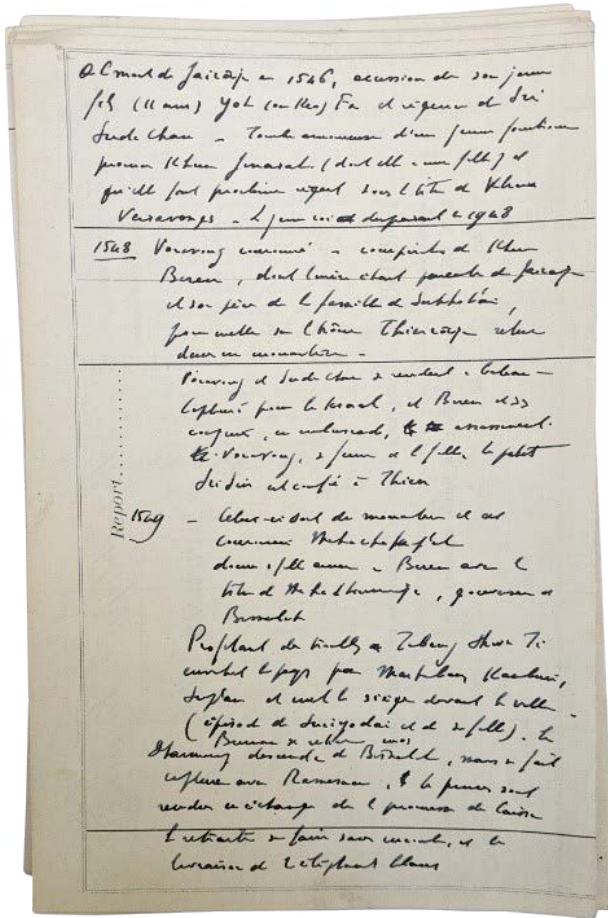


FIGURE 8: George Coédès, elected member of the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 14 February 1958 © AIBL

Upon returning to France in 1947, Coédès officially took up a position teaching Thai—later also Southeast Asian history—at Langues'O, a post he held for 13 years until 1960 [FIGURE 9]. Nonetheless, he was never formally awarded the title of university professor. Around 1955, he appears to have handed over Thai-language instruction to the jurist Robert Lingat (1892–1972),

newly returned from Hanoi after 17 years in Thailand. Gilles Delouche, who later taught Thai at INALCO, recorded accounts from two of Coédès's former students describing him as exacting, even harsh, yet intellectually honest (Delouche 1999).

It is unclear whether Coédès regularly participated in thesis juries. Nonetheless, his keen critical sense is



**FIGURE 9: Cœdès's notes for his course
on Siamese history at the Langues'O,
Paris, 1950s © AEFE**

unmistakable in his detailed review of H.G. Quaritch Wales's *Siamese State Ceremonies*—a work originally submitted as a doctoral thesis in England and still widely cited today. While his critique is extensive, Cœdès clarifies that this rigor reflects his esteem for the book (Cœdès 1932). As a result, the work is now frequently read alongside Cœdès's corrections, which have become integral to its interpretation. Similarly, he offered a critical yet respectful review of Reginald Le May's thesis, published in 1938 as *A Concise History of Buddhist Art in Siam*, in the *Journal of the Siam Society*

(Cœdès 1939). While he praised it as “one of the best works that have been devoted to Siamese art” and “a milestone in the history of Siamese art” (Ibid.: 192, 197), he also dedicated several pages to pointed yet constructive criticism, in a tone reminiscent of a thesis defense.

In addition to Langues'O, Cœdès also taught at the *Centre des hautes études administratives sur l'Afrique et l'Asie modernes*, established in 1936 and dissolved in 2000. A number of researchers and public figures have described themselves as his former students. The German-born Australian scholar Helmut Loofs-Wissowa (1927–2018), for instance, is said to have attended Cœdès's courses at Langues'O between 1955 and 1957 (Crocker 2021: 313). Among Thai scholars who studied under or were advised by George Cœdès were Uraisi Varasarin (1939–2002), professor at Silpakorn University (Bernon 2002: 9), and, notably, MC Subhadradis Diskul (1923–2003), son of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, who ended his career as rector of Silpakorn University.

Certain claims about Cœdès's mentorship, however, are ambiguous or overstated. For instance, the Wikipedia biography of Indian epigraphist Sachchidanand Sahai states that he “did research under the guidance of George Cœdès in the University of Paris, Sorbonne”.²⁰ While Cœdès did welcome and advise many young scholars specializing in Southeast Asian history and ethnology, it is likely that some may have exaggerated the

²⁰ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sachchidanand_Sahai#cite_note-South_East_Asian_Review-4 (accessed 15 July 2025).

closeness of their relationship with the master of ancient Southeast Asian studies. Today, Cœdès's private library is housed at the National Library of Australia in Canberra.²¹

Scholarly Legacy and Reception

In a private correspondence, Professor Pierre-Bernard Lafont (1926–2008), an anthropologist and historian of Laos and Campā at the EPHE—whom George Cœdès had recruited to the EFEO in 1953—cautioned me to be wary of those who too readily claimed to be heirs of Cœdès. Lafont maintained that the only true interlocutor Cœdès genuinely enjoyed meeting during his final 15 years was Charles Archaimbault (1921–2001). The late Georges Condominas (1921–2001) also emphasized Archaimbault as both a student and a “great heir to Cœdès’s method of working” (Condominas 1999).

The commemorative volume of *Artibus Asiae*, marking George Cœdès’s 75th birthday [FIGURE 10], brought together 33 distinguished scholars engaged in the study of regions and subjects close to his own (Griswold & Boisselier 1961). While some might be viewed as part of his intellectual circle, none can be said to have continued his work in a direct line. Several, including François Martini, Robert Heine-Geldern, Paul Mus, Louis Malleret, Robert Lingat and so on were more accurately his contemporaries or junior colleagues in related disciplines. Charles Archaimbault, though praised by some as an heir to Cœdès’s working

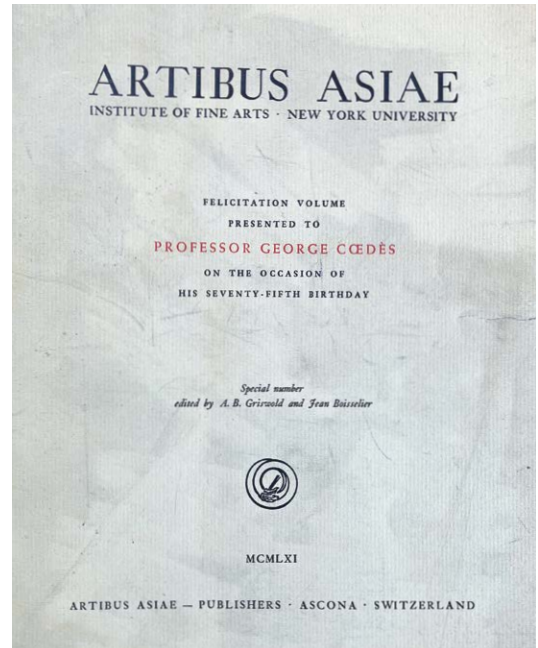


FIGURE 10: Cover of Cœdès’s Festschrift, 1961. Public Domain

methods, remained focused primarily on Laos and never returned to France.

Similarly, Claude Jacques’s (1929–2018) later scholarly contributions in Southeast Asian studies, while important, were largely confined to Khmer epigraphy and ancient history. He notably published a supplement to the eighth volume of the *Inscriptions du Cambodge* (Jacques 1971), continuing the foundational series begun by Cœdès. Though Jacques sometimes presented himself as a scholarly heir—famously recalling Cœdès’s words “now it is your turn!” (Jacques 1999)—his work, once again, represents more a continuation in a specific field than a direct succession. Their relationship is best understood as one of disciplinary continuity rather than that of mentor and disciple.²²

²¹ For an overview of the collection, see: <https://www.library.gov.au/research/guides-and-resources/guides-selected-collections/coedes-collection>.

²² According to Dominique Jacques, Cœdès once told her husband Claude Jacques, “Don’t hesitate—every thing I’ve done needs to be done again” (Marazzi

In the domain of pre-modern Khmer studies, the most significant intellectual heir to Coédès was arguably Saveros Pou (1929–2020), often cited as a student of both Jean Filliozat and Coédès. Her major contribution includes three volumes of *Nouvelles inscriptions du Cambodge* (Pou 1989–2001). Other notable figures closely linked to Coédès include Robert Lingat (1892–1972) and Jean Burnay (1899–1982), both of whom succeeded him in teaching Thai at Langues'O (future INALCO). Given their age and stature, however, they were more peers than protégés. Burnay, notably, became the first French lawyer to join the Resistance in 1940 before turning to a political career as a State Councillor.

In Thailand, tributes to Coédès have continued into the modern era. Titles such as “We miss Prof. George Coédès” (คิดถึง ศ. ยอร์ช เซเดส์) and “Remembering the Western scholar George Coédès” (ระลึกปราชญ์ตะวันตก ยอร์ช เซเดส์) appeared in the daily *Matichon* (2542a, 2542b) as well as in the weekly edition of the same newspaper in 2015. A thorough survey of the Thai-language press would likely reveal further mentions. Two of his major books have been translated into Thai—though from their English editions: *Les Peuples de la Péninsule indochinoise* was translated in 1978 by Panya Borisut as *ชนชาติต่าง ๆ ในคาบสมุทรอินโดจีน* and *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor* was translated by Pranee Wongthet in 2003 as *เมืองพระนคร นครวัด นครธม*. Many of his key articles were translated into Thai, especially by MC Subhadradis Diskul, in the 1950s–1960s and published in

the Fine Arts Department's *Sinlapakon* magazine (ศิลปากร). Some were collected and published in 1964 (reissued in 1983) by Khurusapha, a publisher specializing in classical texts, with copies widely available in Thai schools and university libraries.

Notably, some of these articles, translated into Thai, are familiar to ordinary Thais as they frequently appear in cremation books. For example, *Tamnan Phra Phim* (ตำนานพระพิมพ์; “History of Votive Tablets”) and *Tamnan akson thai* (ตำนานอักษรไทย; “History of Thai Scripts”) are especially well known. Madame Bannakitsophon's cremation book, distributed on 21 February 1972, at Wat Makut Kasattriyaram in Bangkok, notes that this was the 25th printing of *Tamnan Phra Phim* (Bannakitsophon 2515: 4)—likely a unique case for a Western author.

In some Thai bibliographies, Coédès's works appear only in the section on Thai references, causing some readers not to realize he was a foreigner. It is conceivable that, had he remained in Siamese service for a few more years, Coédès might have been granted a local noble title and Siamese citizenship, as happened with the Englishman Francis Giles (1869–1951), who became Phraya Indra Montri Sri Shandra Kumar (พระยาอินทรมนตรีศรีจันทระกุมาร), or the French jurist René Guyon (1876–1963), who became Mr Phichan Bunyong (พิชาน บุญยง).

A Life Beyond Scholarship

George Coédès was a man of medium height, endowed with a good sense of humor, even if he rarely smiled in photographs. In his inaugural speech to

Sassoon 2018), a remark that underscores the provisional and evolving nature of Coédès's scholarly work.

the Institut de France (Coédès 1959: 7), delivered at the Musée Guimet, Coédès recounted—perhaps with a touch of mischief—that within those very walls he had once witnessed the famous Dutch dancer Mata Hari (1876–1917) perform her striptease-like routine for the first time in Paris. Always kind and approachable, Coédès nonetheless possessed a strong sense of organization. Until the end of his life his days followed a strict routine: work in the mornings, a nap after lunch, and afternoon walks. Precise and meticulous, he had a sharp eye for language and would catch even the most obvious spelling errors. Methodical to a fault, he preserved in his personal archives everything from his student notebooks to invitation cards for official ceremonies received during his years in Bangkok and Hanoi.

His marked opposition to Paul Mus (1902–1969), the other major figure in Southeast Asian studies at the time, extended beyond intellectual disagreements to a fundamental contrast in their working methods. Coédès himself once underscored the contrast between two of his predecessors: Louis Finot—“a child of the Champagne region, a chartist with measured gestures, reserved and silent, hiding his feelings with a kind of modesty, shunning the noise and agitation of the public square”—and Sylvain Lévi, whom he described as “the son of the wandering race [i.e., the Jews], expressing his emotions with an exuberance of gesture and speech that age did not soften, working and devoting himself to the most diverse works amidst hectic and perpetual agitation” (Coédès 1935: 457). By his own admission Coédès had “no talent for improvisation” (1959: 6)

and those who attended his lectures did not recall him as a particularly brilliant orator. Perhaps to reduce stress, he habitually smoked or at least held a cigarette in his hand or mouth, even in the most formal photographs (Pott 1971: 208).

In his funeral eulogy, Mr Lejeune, President of the AIBL, summed up the impression Coédès made on visitors: “This master of Orientalism was the most modest, the most discreet man, but from the first contact, he attached and seduced by his openness to others, by his attentive and always benevolent availability, and by a radiance of quiet kindness” (Lejeune 1969: 439).

In 1912, at the age of 26, Coédès met Miss Yap, ten years his junior, daughter of a Cambodian merchant and the niece of Samdac Cakrei Pich Ponn (សម្តេច ច័ន្ទី ពេជ្រ ប៊ុន្តុន; 1867–1932), a key figure in the Cambodian government who served as Minister of War and Public Works and later Minister of Public Instruction during the Protectorate (Coédès 1933; Khing 2014). He had been ennobled by King Sisowath Monivong (r. 1927–1941). George and Yap were first married according to Cambodian custom before officially registering their marriage in Bangkok at the French Consulate in 1918. This connection to the Cambodian aristocracy greatly eased Coédès’s integration into Cambodian and Siamese society, as Yap Coédès was also related to one of Prince Damrong’s wives (Subhadradis 2513: 13).

Their first child, Pierre, was born in September 1914. In total, they had three sons and six daughters, but only two sons—both born in Cambodia—and four daughters—born in Siam between 1917 and 1922—survived infancy. The

two eldest boys were entrusted to the care of Aunt Jeanne in France; the family reunited only during vacations every four to six years. George Cœdès returned to France several times during his early years in Indochina: in 1920, 1925, 1929, 1933, and finally in 1939, when he was caught by the outbreak of war.

When in Paris, the family lived successively at 83 boulevard de Courcelles, then rue de Tilsitt near the Arc de Triomphe, and, finally, rue Debrousse in the 16th arrondissement. They also took planned retreats outside the capital, usually in Brittany—Belle-Île-en-Mer (Morbihan), Concarneau (Finistère)—and, in 1933, in Châtel-Guyon, a renowned spa in Auvergne. When I interviewed Pierre Cœdès in 1999, he fondly recalled their times in Belle-Île-en-Mer, where George would wake his sons at dawn for fishing excursions. Steering clear of tourists, they faithfully followed the advice of local Breton fishermen who had come to regard them as adopted family. Pierre, who became the first chief of the Cambodian Royal Navy in 1954, traced his lifelong passion for the sea and boats back to these formative experiences.

The researcher-administrator role at EFEO never brought financial gain. In June 1967, a Thai journalist who met George Cœdès at the Ennery Museum—where he paid no rent—expressed surprise at the scholar's modest means (Suphakit 2510: 11). Though not of

robust constitution, Cœdès appears not to have suffered serious health issues during most of his career. MC Subhadradis Diskul noted only that, in the 1950s and 1960s, stomach troubles prevented him from eating very spicy food (2513: 62).

However, George Cœdès's health declined sharply in 1968. He suffered a stroke in September that year, which left him unable to use his legs. "Many friends and younger colleagues were lost to him", wrote Dutch scholar P.H. Pott, a former student of the renowned F.D.K. Bosch (1887–1967) and honorary EFEO member (Pott 1971: 214). Despite this, Cœdès apparently still presided over the Société asiatique session on 13 December 1968, at rue Mazarine in Paris, when young linguist Mrs Lewitz (also known as Saveros Pou) presented a paper on "the names of the cardinal points in Khmer". When MC Subhadradis Diskul last saw him in June 1969, Cœdès had difficulty walking and his memory was failing (2513: 63, 68). Madame Cœdès died early in 1969. George Cœdès passed away on Thursday, 2 October 1969, at the age of 83.²³

Through his meticulous scholarship, tireless dedication, and measured approach to both academic and personal life, George Cœdès laid the foundational stones of Southeast Asian studies in many respects, leaving a legacy that continues to inspire and challenge scholars today.

²³ Pierre Cœdès, my main informant for personal and family memories, passed away on 28 October 2015, at the age of 101. See also **APPENDIX**.

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I also wish to thank those colleagues, all now deceased, who spoke of their meetings with George Coëdès: Georges Condominas, Claude Jacques, and Pierre-Bernard Lafont. Finally, I am grateful to Nicolas Revire for inviting me to revise and submit this article for publication, and for his guidance with the manuscript and selection of figures.

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APPENDIX: TIMELINE AND KEY PUBLICATIONS OF GEORGE CÔDÈS

- **1886, 10 August** – Born in Paris, 88 rue de la Pompe, 16th arrondissement
- **1892** – Visit to the *Caravane indienne* of Carl Hagenbeck, promoter of “human zoos”, at the Jardin d’Acclimatation in Paris. This experience is considered one of the origins of Cœdès’s vocation as an Orientalist
- **1895–1903** – High school at Lycée Carnot, Paris, 17th arrondissement
- **1904, September** – Stay in Heidelberg, Germany
- **1904** – First publication: “Inscription de Bhavavarman I, roi du Cambodge” in BEFEO 4(3)
- **1905, April** – Becomes a member of the Société asiatique
- **1905–1906** – B.A. (Licence) and Higher Education Diploma (Diplôme d’Études Supérieures) in German language
- **1906** – Signs his second article (translation of the Sanskrit inscription on the Ta Prohm stele, BEFEO 6) as “Student at the École des Hautes Études”
- **1906, October–1907, August** – Studies at the University of Berlin
- **1908–1909** – Teacher of German language at Petit Lycée Condorcet, Paris, 8th arrondissement
- **1909–1911** – Military service with the 3rd Engineering Regiment in Arras. Prepares the EPHE Diploma (Religious Studies section) during this time
- **1910** – *Textes d’auteurs grecs et latins relatifs à l’Extrême-Orient depuis le IV^e s. av. J.-C. jusqu’au XIV^e siècle*, Paris, Ernest Leroux
- **1911** – Substitute member (membre suppléant) of the EFEO; becomes a permanent member in 1914
- **1911–1956** – Publishes article series “Études cambodgiennes” in BEFEO 11–48
- **1912, 3 January** – Arrival in Hanoi
- **1912, March–December** – Mission to Cambodia, including a six-week tour of Angkor
- **1913, 7 March** – Birth of Paul Cœdès in Phnom Penh
- **1914** – First mission to Siam for the EFEO
- **1914, 13 September** – Birth of Pierre Cœdès in Phnom Penh
- **1915, 30 November** – Birth of Louis Cœdès in Phnom Penh
- **1917–1926** – Head librarian, Watchirayan Library of Siam, Bangkok
- **1917, 22 March** – Birth of Jeanne Cœdès in Bangkok
- **1918, 21 August** – Birth of Yvonne Cœdès in Bangkok
- **1918, 5 October** – Registers marriage to Mrs Yap at the French consulate in Bangkok
- **1918** – Publication of “Le royaume de Çrivijaya” in BEFEO 18(6)
- **1921, 5 May** – Birth of Suzanne Cœdès in Bangkok
- **1921, 30 December** – Awarded the Dushdi Mala Medal by King Vajiravudh
- **1922, 19 April** – Birth of Simone Cœdès in Bangkok
- **1923** – Editor of the *Journal of the Siam Society*
- **1924** – Publication of *Recueil des inscriptions du Siam. Première partie : inscriptions de Sukhodaya*

- **1925** – Publication of “Documents sur l’histoire politique et religieuse du Laos occidental” in BEFEO 25(1–2)
- **1926, March–1930, February** – President of the Siam Society
- **1927–1929** – General Secretary of the Royal Society of Siam, Bangkok
- **1928–1929** – One-year leave in France; teaches at the French Institute of Oriental Languages
- **1929** – Appointed Commander of the Royal Order of the White Elephant by King Prajadhipok
- **1929–1947** – Director of the EFEO, Hanoi
- **1937–1966** – Publication of *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, 8 vols
- **1943–1946** – Publication with Pierre Dupont, “Les stèles de Sdok Kok Thom, Phnom Sandak et Prah Vihar”, in BEFEO 43
- **1943** – Publication of *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor*
- **1944** – Publication of *Histoire ancienne des États hindouisés d’Extrême-Orient* [Reissued under the title *Les États hindouisés d’Indochine et d’Indonésie* in 1948; Reedited in 1964 and translated in English in 1968]
- **1947–1948** – Teacher at the École supérieure d’anthropo-biologie and at the École nationale de la France d’Outre-mer
- **1947–1969** – Curator of the Musée d’Ennery, Paris
- **1948** – Member of the Académie des sciences coloniales
- **1951** – Retires at the age of 65
- **1958** – Member of the AIBL
- **1961** – On his 75th birthday, *Artibus Asiae* (vol. 24, no. 3–4) publishes a special volume in his honor
- **1962** – Publication of *Les Peuples de la Péninsule indochinoise*
- **1964** – President of the Société asiatique
- **1968** – Publication of his last article (written in March 1966): “Une vie indochinoise du Buddha : la Paṭhamasambodhi”, in *Mélanges d’indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou*
- **1969, February** – Death of Mrs Yap Cœdès in Paris at the age of 72
- **1969, 2 October** – Death of George Cœdès in Paris at the age of 83