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Exit the silkmaker

The CIA and Jim Thompson

Nick Cullather

One of Bangkok's finer museums is a modest wooden house on the Kong Maha Nag, one block from the national stadium and far from the clusters of sandal-clad Germans plodding among the wats on Chulalongkorn Road or the buzz of Japanese dealmaking around the Oriental Hotel. Agency officials on TDY are drawn to the Jim Thompson House by its stunning Thai architecture and the collection of ancient Siamese and Chinese artifacts. They are drawn, too, by the legend of the place, because as tour guides tell all visitors, Jim Thompson was an American spy, and it was perhaps because of his work for the CIA that he vanished without a trace on Easter Sunday 1967.

Thompson, former OSS agent, founder of the Thai Silk Company, a renowned raconteur who entertained Somerset Maugham, Katherine Hepburn, and Robert Kennedy at his home, disappeared while staying with friends in the Cameron Highlands, a former British hill station in Malaysia. He had visited the resort before and often walked the jungle paths surrounding its Victorian cottages. After lunch, he told his hosts he would go for a short walk and, strolling away, vanished forever.

The largest manhunt in Southeast Asian history, involving British and American troops, aircraft, native scouts, witch doctors, and psychics failed to find a clue. His whereabouts are still hotly debated by Bangkok's foreign correspondents at their annual "Jim Thompson night" dinners. Most agree that Thompson's ties to CIA could account for his disappearance. The Agency, at the height of the Vietnam War, might have called on its old friend one last time.¹

OSS files on Thompson are now public, but the Agency has neither confirmed nor denied a relationship or divulged what it knows about his disappearance. Agency employees are themselves curious, and returnees from Southeast Asia often stop at the

Headquarters library to look at William Warren's biography, *The Legendary American*.

Warren, a close friend of Thompson, places his subject in the setting of a remembered Bangkok all but lost amid the sprawl and glitter of today's metropolis. Thompson's was a deeply traditional city of saffron-robed monks, artisans, and merchants disrupted by the nearby wars in Indochina and the influx of farangs, European and American expatriates, whose business was often both lucrative and mysterious. It was a place where a man could invent a past for himself and be believed. It is in this context that Thompson's relationship with the Agency, as revealed in his 201 file, can be understood.²

Early Years

James Harrison Wilson Thompson was born to wealth. The son of a rayon manufacturer from Greenville, Delaware, he graduated from St. Paul's and then from Princeton (Class of '28), where he studied architecture. After a brief spell in graduate school, he went into practice, designing homes for an affluent clientele. In the late 1930s, he became interested in the theater, and he designed sets for a ballet company in New York. Handsome and easy-going, he seemed at home in Philadelphia and New York society, fox hunting, dating heiresses, and theater-going, but on the few occasions afterward when he spoke of those days, his memories were tinged with ennui.

In 1942, Thompson's life suddenly changed when he was drafted into the Army and recruited by Captain Edwin Black for duty in the OSS. Black introduced him to a fashion model named Pat Thraves, and with a decisiveness uncharacteristic of his prewar self, Thompson married her after only a brief courtship. A few months later he shipped out.³

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Jim Thompson

Military Experiences

Fluent in French, Thompson was assigned to work with Free French forces in North Africa, and he later followed US troops into Italy and France. In June 1945, he was dispatched to Trincomalee, Ceylon, to prepare for an operation to support Thai guerrillas fighting the Japanese. Alone among the nations of Southeast Asia, Thailand had never been colonized by a European power.

When Japanese troops drove the French and British from Indochina, Malaya, and Burma, the Thai regime allied itself with Japan and declared war on the US. A Free Thai movement, led by Pridi Phanomyong, had risen to resist its government's collaboration with Japan. Thompson was preparing to join the rebellion in August 1945 when Japan surrendered and Pridi's forces seized power.⁴

Postwar Activity

Thompson arrived in Bangkok with a large OSS detachment a few days after the war ended. He met Pridi and was impressed by his cultured intellect. He was even more charmed by the city, its canals, exotic temples, and gentle people. He spent hours buying Thai and Chinese lacquer, porcelain, and silk, which, he said, his wife would love.

When a US Consulate replaced the OSS Station in early 1946, Thompson arranged to stay on, overtly as an assistant military attaché, covertly as Chief of Station for the Central Intelligence Group.⁵ It is at this point that CIA files pick up his trail, beginning with a mysterious incident that, years later, some claimed was connected to Thompson's disappearance.

On 9 June 1946, Ananda, the young Thai King, died in his bedroom from a bullet wound to the head. It looked—or was made to look—like suicide. Two days later, Thompson reported his suspicions that Ananda was the victim of a conspiracy involving British intelligence, the King's sister, and Pridi, the prime minister.⁶ Public suspicion also fell heavily on Pridi. He stepped down as prime minister, and the following year a coup returned many of the wartime

collaborators to power. Pridi fled to China, and with the help of Mao's government continued to lead subversive movements in Thailand until the late 1960s.

Thompson's other reports, in 1946 and 1947, concerned battles between French forces and Viet Minh insurgents along the Mekong River border between Indochina and Thailand. He developed a keen understanding of the relationships among nationalist movements in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Sympathetic to their anticolonial aspirations, he befriended many Indochinese leaders. His superiors praised his firsthand accounts of local reactions to the French reoccupation of Laos. He earned a commendation, and he acquired a reputation among Thai, Indochinese, French, and British officials as an able and aggressive intelligence officer.⁷ In his spare time, he continued to collect antiques and joined a partnership to purchase and refurbish the Oriental Hotel.

A New Life

In early 1947, Thompson returned to Washington to resign from the Army and the CIG, find investors for the hotel project, and persuade his wife to return with him to Bangkok. He accomplished all but one objective. Pat Thompson refused to go to Thailand and sued for divorce. He returned to Bangkok in November, freed of all obligations and personal ties, free from his past.

Selling Silk

The hotel business proved a passing fancy, and Thompson soon returned to his old pursuits, collecting art and making friends with Indochinese and Thai nationalists. In 1948, he found a way to combine his interests. Some 4,000 to 5,000 Laotian and Cambodian insurgents took refuge in Thailand between forays against the French. During their sojourns, they ran shops and sold crafts to raise money for their cause. Many were skilled silk weavers, who sold brilliant clothes for \$2 to \$3 a yard. Thompson began buying the silks and marketing them in New York.⁸ That same year he founded the Thai Silk Company, raising the initial capital by selling 500 shares at \$50 each.

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Jim Thompson with Thai silk samples.

Although the CIA Station regarded the silk business as "rather small scale," Thompson recognized its tremendous potential. He introduced the weavers to Swiss dyes and the latest fabric patterns. He taught them to weave long bolts of cloth, instead of the small squares used to make traditional garments. His big break on the marketing end came in 1949, when he agreed to supply the costume fabrics for the Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway musical, *The King and I*.¹⁰ By the end of the year his business was established, and he told the Chief of Station that he intended to remain in Bangkok for the rest of his life.¹⁰

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Bangkok seduced many of the Americans assigned there after the war, and Thompson was not alone in his decision to stay on as an expatriate. Alexander MacDonald, an OSS colleague, founded the *Bangkok Post*.¹¹ Another OSS officer, Willis Bird, became an adviser to the Thai police and the "most powerful American in Thailand," according to the Station.¹²

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CIA Connection

Thompson's relations with the Agency began with his separation from the CIG. Before he left Bangkok, CIG officers offered him a contract to provide information on Vietnamese exiles. Thompson refused,

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Jim Thompson

noting that his sympathy for the Viet Minh would prejudice his reporting. He planned, he said, to sever all his ties to intelligence and begin again as a private citizen.

Two of Thompson's former colleagues, Emmett McCarthy and 25X1 [redacted] warned him that, with or without a contract, he was obliged by his status as an American citizen and former intelligence officer not to reveal information about the Group's activities. His attempts to sever ties to the world of intelligence, they told him, would prove futile. "Regardless of the actual absence of intelligence connections, and despite the genuine business interests which brought him to Siam," he would never "dissuade any interested persons from the belief that his intelligence connections were still intact."¹¹ They persuaded him to provide information on an occasional basis, and assigned him the pseudonym Harris T. Clayton.

Shortly after his return, Thompson again rebuffed overtures from the Agency, maintaining he was trying to "bury his past connection with intelligence work." The best way to do that, he thought, was to show he had nothing to hide. He spoke openly about his activities to any of his acquaintances, withholding nothing. Case officers were exasperated by his candor. Thompson "is felt to have access to an accumulation of considerable information on the Viet and other Free movements," one officer reported. "However, while he is perfectly willing to give this to our representatives, he is equally free in passing it out to almost anyone else. He apparently is unwilling to withhold information for our special benefit."¹⁴

The Station continued to solicit his views, directly or through cutouts. Thompson traveled frequently in Laos and Cambodia. He knew officials in Thai banks, businesses, and government offices. 25X1 [redacted]

Access to Viet Minh

Agency officials became increasingly interested in Thompson's ties to the Viet Minh. In mid-1948, he traveled to the Viet Minh-controlled portion of

Indochina. Case officers were simultaneously anxious to learn what he discovered and apprehensive that he would be arrested as an American spy by either the French or the Vietnamese.¹⁵ He returned without incident, but his enthusiasm for the Vietnamese continued to place him in situations where he was mistaken for an intelligence officer.

In November, a Viet Minh official, thinking Thompson was a spy, handed him a sheaf of papers to pass on to US officials. Thompson protested that he was only a businessman, but he received only a smile and a wink in return. He refused the offer, and, when Agency officials learned of it, they were furious. "Clayton could, and should, be a valuable informant," the division chief lectured Station officers. "Please see what you can do to straighten him out."¹⁶

Subject of Rumors

For Thompson, espionage was the one part of his past he could not expunge. The more he tried, the more his reputation grew. Bangkok Station received frequent reports from its agents on Thompson's activities, most of them contradictory, some of them fantastic.

In June 1948, the Station received word that Thompson was "actively engaged in arming Viet Minh and Free Thai guerrillas." In October, another source said Thompson was "engineering a big opium deal" in the Netherlands East Indies. In March 1949, a source claimed to have seen Thompson in a Free Thai uniform leading a raid against government troops. Agency sources among the Viet Minh refugees described him as "the most important and most clever of American spies in Siam." Despite the "proved incorrectness" of these reports, Bangkok officers passed the best ones back to Headquarters "as a sample of the rumors which are taking place regarding Mr. T."¹⁷

Political Differences

With the fall of China in 1949, the Truman administration began to take a more serious look at

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revolutionary movements in Southeast Asia and particularly at the Viet Minh. 25X1

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25X1 They were less interested in recruiting Thompson as an informer, partly owing to his reputation, but mostly because of his politics. "While Clayton is in many ways a well informed and interesting individual, I find him on the subject of Indochina—our primary interest—completely exasperating," the Station Chief reported. "His simplicity on this question is that of a nine-year-old child. In the face of all other evidence, he still insists that the Viets are a nationalist organization and claims that we have driven them into Communist hands."

While case officers found "no indication" that Thompson wanted to "reenter our business," they recognized that the silk company could provide valuable cover for agents moving around Southeast Asia. 25X1

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Agents,

however, were admonished to keep contact with Thompson to a minimum.

When the US decided to provide substantial aid to French forces fighting the Viet Minh in the wake of the outbreak of the Korean War in mid-1950, the chasm between Thompson's views and US policy widened. Bangkok Station became increasingly distressed by Thompson's efforts to gain a hearing for his Indochinese friends. 25X1

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In 1950, Thompson met in Washington with State Department officials to ask for official US support for non-Communist Laotian and Cambodian independence movements. Unknown to Thompson, the Agency already provided covert support to these groups, and the publicity aroused by his visit "nearly wrecked two highly sensitive operations."²⁰

Security Concerns

These incidents disturbed case officers less than the persistent security problem caused by Thompson's reputation as the number-one US spy in Thailand. Officers often discovered that their agents believed they were working for Thompson. Sometimes the

discovery occurred when the agent grew frustrated in his relations with his case officer and decided to go to the top. Thai and Laotian agents would find Thompson in his home or office and spell out the details of Agency operations. During most of the mid-1950s, Thompson was privy to "most" of the Agency's activities, but felt himself under no obligation to remain silent about them. Station officers grumbled that Thompson cultivated his reputation and coaxed information from agents.

At some point in the middle to late 1950s, headquarters decided "to crack down on Clayton in most serious fashion." He was instructed "to desist from all further similar activities as contrary to the best interests and policies of this government, with a suggestion of severe punishment if he again represented himself to be associated with Bangkok Station or again meddled in what he knew to be matters of high security."²¹

A Quiet Time

Far Eastern Division noted in 1958 that Thompson's behavior had improved and that he had ceased his activities on behalf of nationalist movements and distanced himself from Agency activities. The silk business had, by this time, made Thompson a millionaire, and he devoted himself to art collecting and socializing. In 1959, he built his famous house and stocked it with Thai and Chinese antiquities. He became a consultant to other countries interested in developing export industries using native craftsmanship. Agency officials debriefed him after his trips to Burma as part of a UN economic mission. Bangkok Station gradually lost interest in Thompson, and between 1961 and 1967 there are no entries in his 201 file.

Vanished

On 27 March 1967, the US Embassy at Kuala Lumpur cabled that Malaysian authorities had announced Thompson's disappearance. "We have no indication of what might have happened to Thompson," the reporting officer admitted.²² Over the following weeks, British and Malaysian troops engaged in a massive manhunt, and Edwin Black, now a brigadier general and commander of the US Army advisory group in Thailand, brought in his own troops.

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Jim Thompson

Headquarters hounded Bangkok Station for information, and officers dutifully passed on the rumors that were beginning to circulate about the missing silk king. Princess Pantip Chumpote told an officer in early April that Thompson had been involved in the assassination of King Ananda. ^{25X1} intelligence speculated that Communist guerrillas had got Thompson. There was the chance, too, that a leopard had carried him off. "Unlike tigers," an officer reported, "leopards habitually dispose of their victims completely." Others remembered that "this was not the first time that Thompson had disappeared." He might have vanished on purpose "in order to contact Ho Chi Minh with the hope of seeking peace in Vietnam."²³

Sister's Murder

The strange murder of Thompson's sister, Katherine Wood, in her Pennsylvania home in August 1967 fueled further rumors. She was beaten to death with a heavy instrument while sleeping in her bedroom at her isolated estate. Nothing was taken. The dogs did not bark. Police found no weapon, no fingerprints, no motive, no murderer.

The case has never been solved. Newspaper reporters naturally connected it to Thompson's disappearance, but they could not discern what the link might be. All that could be said for sure was that something mysterious was happening to the Thompson family.²⁴

Speculations

Bangkok Station continued to follow rumors about Thompson for the next five years. Over time, the stories attained a certain coherence. Most proceeded from the premise that Thompson was alive and that his disappearance was somehow connected to his old friendship with Pridi Phanomyong. The Station tracked various "sightings" of Thompson, alone or with Pridi, in Hong Kong, Tahiti, Singapore, and Hainan. When Thompson failed to return after several years, the rumor changed slightly. People remembered that Pridi's Free Thai forces had been active in 1967 along the Thai-Malaysia border.

Thompson had probably been kidnapped and was being held against his will.

Eventually, inevitably, the CIA was implicated in the disappearance. A onetime friend of Thompson's, a formidable Chinese woman named Felice Leon-Soh, began collecting rumors about Thompson's disappearance and discovered a "Norwegian lady" who ran a brothel on Orchard Road in Singapore who claimed to have seen Thompson alive a few days after his disappearance.

Soh claimed that the lady had known him from his visits to her establishment in the early 1960s. "At around 4 p.m. on the 27th of March, four men who spoke Malay and who were members of the Singapore criminal community came in carrying Thompson, who was obviously in a drugged condition. The four men paid her \$1,000 in return for her letting them hold Jim in her place until 7 p.m. when arrangements had been made to move him on. From what the four men said, she gathered Jim was going to be taken to the vicinity of Changi, an RAF base in Singapore for further transport on to the US."²⁵

From this story, Soh developed the theory that Thompson had been abducted by the CIA. She gained the ear of Thompson's relatives, who came to Bangkok looking for clues. When the Agency denied the family's requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act, Soh and the family felt their suspicions had been confirmed. Some of the Agency officials handling the request thought that the files should be released, just to show that the Agency was as confused as anyone else, but it was decided that disclosure would set a bad precedent. Thus was born the story retold annually at correspondents' dinners.

Mystery and Legend

Agency files on Thompson contain no clues to his disappearance. If the deaths of Ananda or Katherine Wood were solved, they would cease to be mysteries and become merely an assassination and a homicide that happened long ago. Thompson deserves to remain an enigma. His mystery, like his house, keeps alive the bygone Thailand he loved. Just as his col-

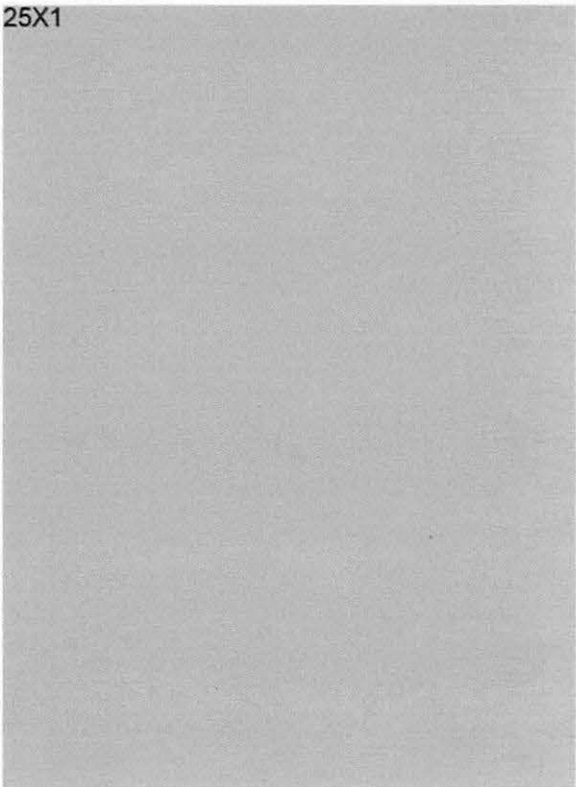

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lection evokes a Bangkok that thrived before the BMW assembly plants and Union Carbide refineries arrived, his legend preserves in story a Thailand where secret agents mingled with revolutionaries and princes, where a man with pluck could make a fortune, and where leopards stalked the forests around Victorian resorts.

NOTES

1. For details of the search, see "Air of Intrigue," *Time*, 5 May 1967, p. 32; "A U.S. Millionaire Missing in Malaysia," *New York Times*, 28 March 1967, p. 1. Robert Sam Anson gives the mystery's current status in "Tea Without Mr. Thompson," *Conde Nast Traveler*, July 1992, pp. 72-127, and "Mystery of the Thai Silk King," *Life*, May 1984, pp. 78-80.
 2. William Warren, *The Legendary American: The Remarkable Career and Strange Disappearance of Jim Thompson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970).
 3. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-37.
 4. Thompson's OSS years are covered in Richard Harris Smith, *OSS* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 310-315.
 5. OSS was disbanded in late 1945. The Stations were placed under the US Army's Strategic Services Unit before being taken over by CIG in late 1946.
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8. Robert Trumbull, "Bangkok is 'Home' for Exiled Rebels," *New York Times*, 26 January 1949, p. 15.
 9. Warren, pp. 67-80.
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11. Alexander MacDonald, *Bangkok Editor* (New York: MacMillan, 1950).
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. Amembassy Kuala Lumpur to Secretary of State, 27 March 1967.
 23. Conrad W. Galidas to T.P. Schreyer, "Disappearance of Jim Thompson," 31 May 1967.
 24. "Society Matron Beaten to Death," *New York Times*, 31 August 1967, p. 22.
 25. Unsigned letter to James H. Douglas, 8 July 1968.

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