

Jim Thompson Uncovered



Colonial Life in Asia - graphic generated by AI Stable Diffusion

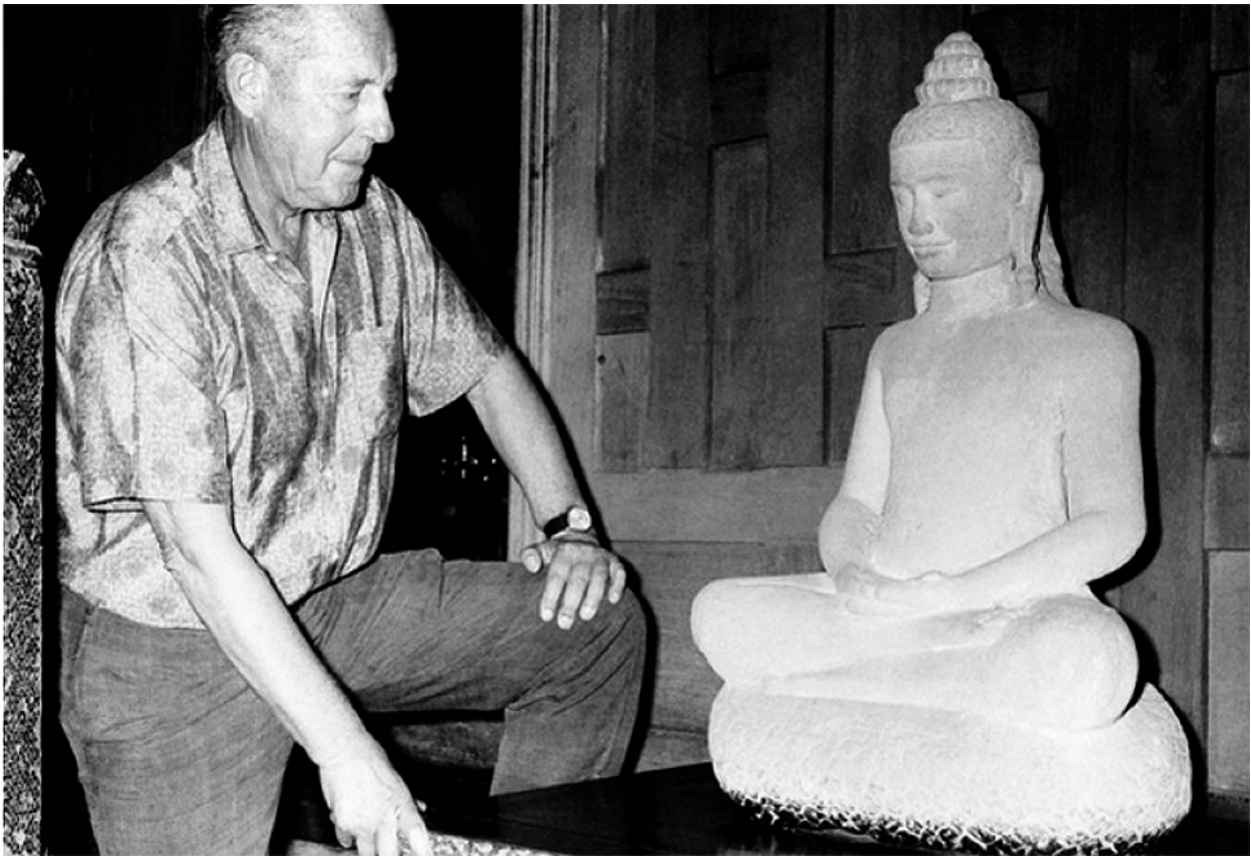
The fate and faces of Jim Thompson In Bangkok

James Harrison Wilson Thompson (March 1906 to March 1967) is remembered as founder of the Thai Silk Company in Bangkok. When he mysteriously vanished, in 1967, he was one of the most famous Americans living in Asia, according to Time Magazine. [Time Magazine](#) even claimed he "singlehandedly saved Thailand's silk industry from extinction."

The fate of Jim Thompson in Malaysia

Jim Thompson is remembered as an American entrepreneur and former intelligence operative who went missing during a walk in the Malaysian highlands on Easter Sunday 1967. Despite an intensive search and investigation, no remains of Thompson were ever found and his fate continues to be an unsolved puzzle. Several theories have been aired, including the obvious foul play, animal attack, and voluntary disappearance, but none have been based on any physical proof. It is a possible murder without a body and lives on as a subject for cold case chatter in

Southeast Asia. In brief, Jim Thompson is famous for being famous and a figure of mystery.



This Bangkok Post photo shows Jim Thompson in 1966, at his house in Bangkok, examining a Cambodian statuette. His former Bangkok home, now called The Jim Thompson House, is a museum displaying a collection of Asian art and antiques. It can be visited by timed excursion.

link: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1346691/jim-thompson-mystery-solved->

Mystery Solved?

The Bangkok Post article refers to another third-hand solution - this one claimed to be based on a death-bed confession. Two communist rebels waylaid Thompson on his afternoon ramble, killed him silently, threw his body into a pickup truck then dumped it in a lake. Not impossible or improbable you may think and say. It is a variation on sensational suggestions of kidnapping and killing by spy agencies and business or personal rivals. These theories are much-repeated and unsubstantiated.

The Past is a Foreign Country

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there. Jim Thompson arrived in Bangkok on 12 September 1945, shortly after the end of the Second World War in Asia. He came from a wealthy New England family, attended Princeton University, and dabbled in architecture and design for over a decade. He never qualified as an architect but knew a great deal about art and all the right people. He improved his knowledge of French while serving as a board member of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. This proved useful in June 1942 when President Roosevelt decreed the foundation of a new intelligence service called the [Office of Strategic Services](#). The OSS sent Thompson to North Africa in aid of Free French forces when, in November 1942, the US and its allies invaded Morocco and Algeria under the codename Operation Torch.

At the end of the war in Europe, Thompson transferred to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) where the OSS prepared for the liberation of countries that had been under Japanese occupation. Thailand had declared war on the United States in February 1942 and allied with the Empire of Japan - assisting, for example, in the invasion of Burma. Thailand counted as an enemy country. However, there were mitigations and the US government wished to keep Thailand on side in the post-war world. The military dictator Plaek PibhunSongkram retired to Japan and Thailand became a democracy with a civilian government - for a short time. Plaek PibhunSongkram, however, came back to maintain order and act as a bulwark against the dreaded spread of Communism.



Field Marshal Plaek PibhunSongkram

In Office: 16 December 1938 - 1 August 1944 and 8 April 1948 - 16 September 1957

So, Jim Thompson arrived in Bangkok with the task of establishing an OSS Office in the Thai capital; but this did not happen. On 20 September 1945, President Truman signed Executive Order 9621 abolishing the OSS. Wiki gives a full account [here](#).

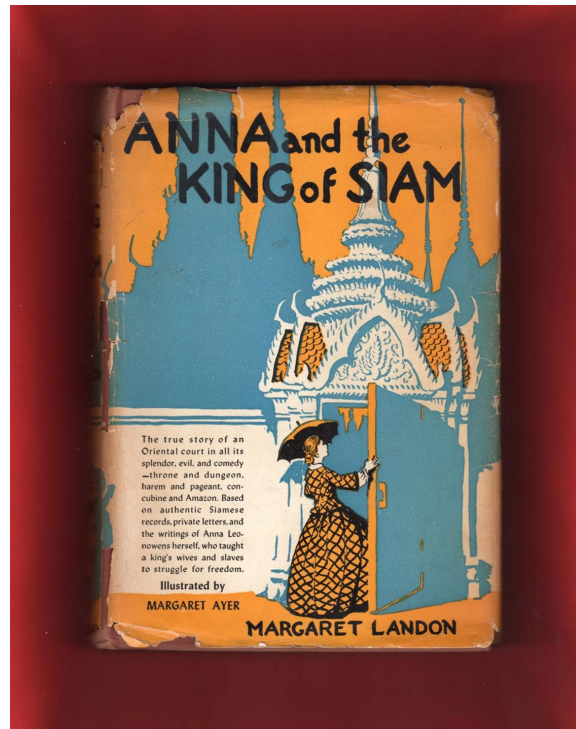
Thompson became a member of the US State Department and moved into an embassy building, but he soon resigned his post in 1946. A few months earlier, in 1945, he met two people who greatly assisted him in his later Silk enterprise. The first was a bilingual translator named Constance Mangskau (1907-1990), known as 'Connie,' who had a British father and Thai mother. She also maintained connections in Laos and Cambodia which aided the Thompson collection of *Asiatic objets d'art*.



In the following twenty years, 1946-1967, Connie became Jim Thompson's companion. She accepted the invitation to Moonlight Cottage, in the Cameron Highlands, at Easter 1967, on Jim Thompson's behalf and accompanied him. More on this later.

The second person of consequence was a missionary who worked for the OSS - his name was Kenneth Landon. Kenneth and his wife Margaret served as American Presbyterian missionaries for ten years in Siam, based at Trang, from 1927. The Dictator Pibhunsongkram changed the name of the country to Thailand in 1939.

The Landons knew the country and the language. The OSS wanted Landon as an expert on South-East Asia. Meanwhile, Margaret returned to the US and wrote a book entitled *Anna and the King of Siam*, which came out in 1944. Hollywood took note and made a movie in 1946, but **not** the one you probably know; do you remember the film with Rex Harrison as King Mongkut? More later.



So, in latter 1945, Jim Thompson found himself working for the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the US Legation in Bangkok. It was a dull desk job which he disliked. Now, what else could he do with himself? He knew influential people and possessed social skills long-practiced on the club and cocktail circuit. Jim Thompson was on the market for a career change.

First, he needed to make a break from his old way of life; so, in early 1946, he returned to the United States where he was still enlisted as an army officer. He requested and received his discharge papers before devoting himself to business.

He also dissolved his marriage of convenience to Patricia Thraves whom he barely knew and rarely saw.

Back in Bangkok, in 1946, he attached himself to the proposed Oriental Hotel Project which sought to rebuild the Bangkok flagship hotel. Before the Second World War, the Peninsula in Hong Kong and the Oriental in Bangkok were two of the world's most famous hotels. During the war, the Oriental served as the Japanese Officers' Club. However, by the end of 1945, the hotel had become dilapidated and virtually abandoned. Jim Thompson was one of the six investors who purchased the derelict hotel for US \$500 (five hundred dollars) together with Germaine Krull who became General Manager for the next twenty years.

Jim Thompson withdrew from the Oriental Project following a dispute with his fellow investors; though the exact nature of their disagreement is not clear: it is possible that Thompson wanted to be in charge, so he resigned his partnership and looked for a company where he himself had complete control. He then went into partnership with George Barrie to found the Thai Silk Company in 1948.

JIM THOMPSON

The Thai Silk Company

What did Thompson know about the Thai Silk cottage industry? Well, his father had made a fortune in textiles, so, in a sense, he was cut from the cloth and had an interest in textiles and designs. He was persistent, energetic, and lucky.

His big break came after two years at Thai Silk, when, in 1950, musical and theatrical movers and shakers in New York City decided that Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II would create a Broadway musical based on Margaret Landon's book. It took more than a year of writing, rehearsing and costume designing before *The King and I* went on stage in March 1951. And it never came off.

Kenneth Landon convinced the producers that authenticity required real Siamese costumes and that Jim Thompson in Bangkok could provide them. The stage musical made the name of Jim Thompson and the little-known Russian actor Yulius (Julius) Brynner who shortened his name to Yul and shaved his head.



Jim Thompson promised more silk than he could easily deliver, but a promise was a promise. To meet his obligations, he worked 18-hour days, seven days a week, for a year and almost wrecked himself. He drove others the way he drove himself and gained a reputation as a deeply unpleasant man to work for. But he succeeded.

Greater success and fame and fortune followed in 1956 when 20th Century-Fox turned *The King and I* into a musical movie with Deborah Kerr and Yul Brynner. The film proved to be a critical and commercial success, and was nominated for

9 Oscars, winning 5, including Best Actor for Brynner. The film remains banned in Thailand.



Thompson used his proceeds from the Thai Silk Company to build an impressive collection of Asian art objects. He was a man of delicate refinement. Call him a *connoisseur*. He intended to leave his Thai and Cambodian art works to the Siam Society whom he regarded as worthy keepers of his trove. He made a last will and testament naming the Society as his principal beneficiary.

By the mid-60s, Thompson himself had become an institution. He constructed his Bangkok House on the Khlong from half a dozen village houses which he dismantled and shipped down the river from Ayutthaya. The Bangkok house was spacious and gracious and resembled a museum more than a home. It is built from teak wood and has a large garden where he threw parties for well-to-do members of Bangkok Society. He held court but remained increasingly aloof.



This is where accounts of Thompson and his manner and behaviour were recollected and repeated later, but these remain gossip. Was there *'something wrong'* with Thompson? Did he really begin to look old and unsteady? Was he on medication? Yes, it is claimed he left his medication behind along with his cigarettes, wallet, and watch in Moonlight Cottage when he took his final walk in the Cameron Highlands. What was that medication?

Gossips further claimed that Thompson could seem distracted or inattentive in his final months; but he remained Prince Charming when he wanted something. At other times he could appear cold and effete or simply 'lost in space.' He was 60 years old and too young to be senile - or so it was thought. Yet, in modern parlance, could he have exhibited symptoms of onset dementia? Such matters of mental health were not discussed at that time any more than the suspicion of Jim Thompson being gay.

The Siam Society



His final dispute occurred with the prestigious Siam Society. The Society welcomed the proposed legacy of Thai and Cambodian art objects but wished to inspect them and determine their provenance. Of course, the Siam Society were honoured and grateful; however, they wished to inspect the collection and question the origins of certain objects.

Where had Jim Thompson acquired such an impressive hoard? It was possible that several items had been looted from Cambodian temples - in the finest French tradition of André Malraux. Thompson threw a tantrum over ingratitude and about looking gift horses in the mouth etc. He tore up his will, stating that the Siam Society should receive nothing.

Thai Silk Final Resting Place

On 12 March 1967, that is two weeks before his disappearance, Jim Thompson officially relocated his company to 9 Surawong Road, Bangkok (you may see the older spelling '*Surawongse*'). This location remains the flagship store of The Thai Silk Company Limited to this day. So, who owned the store after Jim Thompson disappeared? Answer: Jim Thompson - for seven years, and seven months, and seven days. A Thai court declared Jim Thompson to be legally dead in November 1974. Thai Silk continues as the parent company of the Jim Thompson brand.

Finale

Now, what is the setting for the last Act of the Jim Thompson Story? The date was Easter weekend 1967. The place was Moonlight Cottage in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia. (Formerly called Malaya until September 1963).

The Cameron Highlands were regarded as a British retreat from the oppressive heat and humidity of Malaya - especially from the sweat experienced in Singapore at the southern tip of the country, situated 100 km above the Equator. It served in the manner of a hill station where colonials could relax, drink tea, eat scones, and play a round of golf before downing gin and tonics and taking dinner served by white-coated servants. However, with the murder of three plantation managers in nearby Sungai Siput in 1948, a state of emergency was declared in Malaya, and soon the Cameron Highlands changed from a quaint resort into a dangerous communist hideout. Here colonialists put sandbags on their doors and travelled only in convoys with armed escorts. The so-called Malayan Emergency lasted officially from 1948 to 1960.

There were a number of residences in the vicinity of the golf course near Moonlight Cottage. At the far end of the course, golfers could see a pair of cottages known jointly as Starlight Cottage. Further along, by a kilometer or two, on a separate road and raised on a small hill, lay Moonlight Cottage which stood apart, though close to a main road at the bottom of the hill.

Look at the background in the following photograph of Moonlight Cottage. The surrounding area is covered with tropical overgrowth where bushes and plants and trees grow rapidly. Trails through such a wilderness need to be cleared regularly to keep the paths open. You can easily become lost in such an area.

Moonlight Cottage



Moonlight Cottage belonged to Dr T. G. Ling, who was Singapore Chinese, and his American wife. T. G. Ling was not a medical doctor: he held a PhD in chemistry and ran a successful company which produced pharmaceuticals and dyestuffs used in the silk industry. The couple stayed at their Moonlight Cottage irregularly and left its upkeep to houseboys and maids who lived in the servants' quarters at the rear of the house.

Connie Mangskau acted as both secretary and companion to Jim Thompson. She styled herself *Mrs* Mangskau, having previously been married to a Norwegian. This served the propriety of the time. She arranged or accepted the invitation from Dr Ling to spend Easter at Moonlight Cottage. Thompson had celebrated his 61st birthday with friends in Bangkok on 21 March and wanted a break and change of scene. He may have told a few people of his plans but it seemed rather spur-of-the-moment.

Thompson and Connie took the train to Penang on 22/23 March and spent a day on the island before continuing to the Cameron Highlands where they arrived on Friday 24 March. A minor incident apparently occurred next day on Saturday 25 March when Thompson suggested to Dr Ling that they take a walk to the golf club that afternoon. The distance to the golf club was 3 kilometers in a straight line but 4 km or more by road. A compromise was to take a cut through the bush at the back of the cottage. It was not a straightforward short cut. The pair of them became lost for four hours. Dr Ling never went into the 'jungle' as he might have called it and Thompson became disorientated. This did not bode well for his Sunday afternoon walk.

On Sunday 26 March, the Lings, Thompson, and Connie Mangskau, attended Easter Service at the Anglican church from 11 to 12 o'clock. Returning to Moonlight Cottage, they ate lunch; then, as was the custom, they prepared to retire for an afternoon nap.

Thompson, however, went out for a walk at about 2 pm and did not return. Dr Ling informed the police at sundown. The details of sighting and suppositions about what became of him are summarised in Wiki:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disappearance_of_Jim_Thompson



There are longer works on the matter and much confusion. The supposed search over many miles and days appears to have been uncoordinated. A lot of police and army fellers beat about the bush and found nothing. Jim Thompson disappeared and that's that.



Graft and Gossip

Where does that leave us? Nowhere? Well, this article began on the basis of diary notes jotted by a lady living in Bangkok during the disappearance. She sent them, not long before she died, when she reviewed her old letters and journals.

In the End, as the article began, let GOSSIP and rumour give tongue. Ask in the Oldies' Pub. The ancients may not go back fifty years but they have memories of tales from the old old lags of those days.

Forget the fantastical theories. Killed by communists and sunk in a lake is plausible. No one, happily, has come up with Alien Abduction. Even more simply, he may have wandered in front of a local truck and the driver and mate concealed his corpse in a barely penetrable thicket. They did not need to bury him because insects and predatory critters would have reduced and scattered the remains within days.

One Barfly mind, not utterly befuddled by drink, recalled a couple of points that chime with the above account. 'Frail!' Thompson looked 'frail' for a 60-year-old and might have passed for ten years older. He occasionally shambled unsteadily and took hold of furniture to steady himself.

Ill?

If he was Ill, what was wrong with him? Apart from surmised mental impairment, possibly dementia, he suffered from an old colonial and rough traveller's complaint for years - bad bowels. Amoebic dysentery? Bilious attacks? This is rarely discussed in the annals of travel writers, though Kipling mentions it in India. Kipling's remedy for pains in the guts and diarrhoea was opium. Thompson kept opium tablets. Also, in a moment of braggadocio regarding his deeds of desktop derring-do, he claimed to have retained two cyanide capsules issued to him by the OSS.

What if Thompson had had enough? On that Sunday afternoon, could he have returned to the 'jungle' where he and Dr Ling became lost the day before? Finding a closeted den, out of sight, he covered himself with camouflage brush and branches. Then he swallowed his handful of opium tablets and chased them down with two cyanide capsules.

No one looked behind the house of Moonlight Cottage, and, as suggested above, voracious local fauna disposed of Jim Thompson and burgeoning flora smothered the scene.



Steve Mongkut, May 2023