

# ASIA'S

## FRENCH CONNECTION

Ann Nugent profiles  
George Cœdès: his work,  
his influence and his  
remarkable collection at  
the National Library

In 1910 a young French man was seated at his desk in Paris writing about the connections between Greek and Latin texts and the civilisations of the Far East. That man was George Cœdès. His first published book, *Textes d'auteurs relatifs à l'Extrême-Orient depuis le IV<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J-C, jusqu'au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, demonstrated the prodigious breadth of his linguistic and historical scholarship.

Cœdès was to spend his adult life filling in the spaces in Western knowledge of classical Southeast Asia. His early career was spent at the prestigious French research school situated in Hanoi, L'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, where he was a *pensionnaire* and later a member of staff. In 1918, at 32 years of age, he took up the directorship of the National Library of Thailand in Bangkok. He worked there for 11 years—during which time he translated inscriptions from ancient steles and monuments throughout Southeast Asia—before returning to Hanoi to become the Director of L'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient. In 1946, after 17 years in this position and at a politically turbulent time in Vietnam, Cœdès left Hanoi for Paris where he was appointed Professor of Southeast Asian History at L'Ecole des Langues Orientales. There he stayed and retained the position of curator of the Musée d'Ennery, Avenue Foch, Paris, from 1946 until his death in 1969.



Why should this be of any interest to the National Library? Because in 1970, not long after Cœdès' death, the Library was interested in acquiring formed collections for its Asian collection and Dr Loofs-Wissowa, of the Faculty of Asian Studies at the Australian National University, alerted it to the availability of the Cœdès Collection. At that time German-born Dr Loofs-Wissowa—a former student of Cœdès in Paris in the late 1950s—was based in Canberra and was keen to build up Southeast Asian and particularly Cambodian resources. The Cœdès Collection seemed made to order and so after some competition from American libraries the National Library purchased the entire collection for A\$72 000.

The Cœdès Collection consists of 6000 items including books, serials, maps and manuscripts. At the time of purchase, items were available in other places; however, the conflict in Cambodia and the consequent destruction of Cambodian source material has meant that the collection has appreciated both in its cultural significance and commercial value. The Khmer-language Tripitaka is the rarest edition of the Buddhist Scriptures held by the National Library.

Among the monographs in the Cœdès Collection are books on philosophy, art, sociology, archaeology, religion and ethnography, as well as dictionaries and grammars of languages of the region. Many of the publications are in French and quite a few are in English. Some of Cœdès' papers and

George Cœdès, Director of L'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 1930  
Originally published in *BEFEO*, Vol. XXX, 1930

typescripts accompanied the collection and they are preserved in the Library's Manuscript section. Several titles published before 1801 are held in the Rare Books collection.

What makes the Cœdès Collection unique is the man who assembled it: a French academic wedded to his field. As Dr Loofs-Wissowa remarks 'Cœdès was an amazing man'. His particular genius was that he penetrated the data, and wrote about the people, the history, the culture and above all, the ideas. Gathered over a lifetime, the collection traces Cœdès' research. Indeed there is little in the collection that cannot be directly traced in some way to his academic interests. Grammars, ancient monuments, classical languages, all these are fields of rarefied knowledge, of specialist expertise. Interestingly, only a couple of French novels have infiltrated the collection.

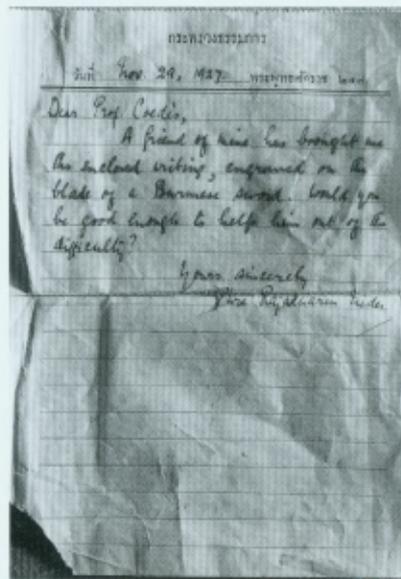
Cœdès was heir to the great enthusiasm for studying the 'Extreme-Orient' that developed in France in the late nineteenth century, and culminated in the foundation of L'Ecole française d'Extreme-Orient in 1900. Cœdès bestrode the field of Southeast Asian study for over half a century. His great legacy to scholars is his documentation of the cultural influence of India in most parts of Southeast Asia. That influence brought Hindu and Buddhist religious ideas, the Indian concept of kingship, the use of Sanskrit as an official and ceremonial language, as well as Indian artistic traditions to the peoples of Southeast Asia.

During his period as Director of L'Ecole française d'Extreme-Orient, Cœdès collected and created many sources for study of Southeast Asian civilisations. He followed in the footsteps of late nineteenth-century French scholars Abel Bergaigne and

Auguste Barth, and those of the early twentieth century, Sylvain Lévi, Alfred Foucher and Louis Finot. Cœdès was influenced particularly by Finot, whom he succeeded as Director of L'Ecole française d'Extreme-Orient, and who emphasised the Indochinese Peninsula as a research field. Academician Jean Filliozat in his notice on the life and works of George Cœdès acknowledges that Cœdès became the 'undisputed master' in the field of Indochinese inscriptions.

A survey of the collection leaves no doubt of Cœdès' extraordinary influence on contemporary understanding of Southeast Asian history, not only in the French-speaking world. Dr Loofs-Wissowa states with some pride that two generations of Australian National University Asian Studies students have been nurtured on Cœdès' foundational texts, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (1968, 1975) and *The Making of South East Asia* (1966). In these books Cœdès directs his readers' attention to 'the origins and prehistory of the peoples of

Indochina and Indonesia and to the nature of their contacts with the two great Asian civilisations—the Indian and the Chinese'. In his introduction to *The Making of South East Asia*, Cœdès laments that in most specialised histories of Indochina 'the first fifteen centuries' were 'dismissed in a few chapters, or even a few pages'. Cœdès makes good that lack. In *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* he clears the jungle from Angkor, the Borobudur, the Cham towers in South Vietnam, the ruins of Pagan in Burma and Sukhothai in Thailand, and many other sites. On the basis of his translations of inscriptions Cœdès has constructed 'a beautifully clear and coherent history of the Indianized states of Southeast Asia during the first millennium and a half A.D.' His is a work of unaging intellect drawing on over a thousand inscriptions in Sanskrit, Pali, Old Khmer, Old Malay, Mon, Thai, Cham and other languages from an area extending from Burma to Indonesia. Cœdès' histories of Southeast Asia are not simply a collection of exotica, the names and dates of ancient kings, rather in his



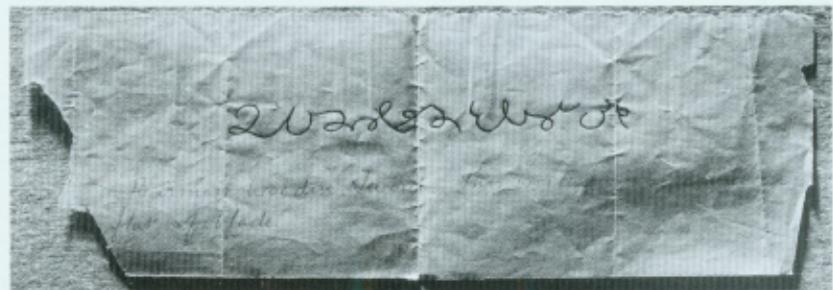
(above right) A letter to Cœdès asking for a translation of an inscription on a Burmese sword

From George Cœdès papers, Manuscript collection

(right) The inscription on a Burmese sword enclosed in the letter above

From George Cœdès papers, Manuscript collection

(above far right) Dr Loofs-Wissowa working on excavated material from Thailand, 1992  
Photograph courtesy of Dr Loofs-Wissowa





**1995 TDK  
AUSTRALIAN  
AUDIO BOOK  
AWARD**

The National Library of Australia  
congratulates the winner of  
the prestigious  
TDK Australian Audio Book Award:

**Louis Braille Books**  
for production of *Dark Places*  
by Kate Grenville,  
narrated by James Condon

Category prize winners were:

**UNABRIDGED FICTION**  
*Dark Places* by Kate Grenville,  
narrated by James Condon  
Producer: Louis Braille Books

**ABRIDGED FICTION**  
*Beastie Stories* by Mark Dumbleton,  
Linda Allen, Tony Ross,  
Jenny Wagner and Sarah Pakenham,  
narrated by Mark Mitchell  
Producer: ABC Enterprises

**UNABRIDGED NON-FICTION**  
*Goodbye Girlie* by Patsy Adam-Smith,  
narrated by Beverley Dunn  
Producer: Louis Braille Books

**ABRIDGED NON-FICTION**  
*Kings in Grass Castles*  
by Mary Durack,  
narrated by  
Judy Dick and others  
Producer: ABC Enterprises

The **Trish Trinick Prize** for  
the best-selling audio book  
in Australia went to  
Reed for Kids  
for production of *The Lion King*  
by Walt Disney



hands they become an integral part of the human story.

At the personal level, the collection reveals connections between people and people, and people and places, from Paris to Vietnam to Canberra. As Director of L'Ecole française d'Extreme-Orient, Coèdes was pre-eminently a scholar and researcher but he also inspired others to conduct their own research and to write their own books. A large number of titles in the collection have handwritten dedications by their authors to Professor Coèdes. He also kept up correspondence with scholars and former students working in Southeast Asian studies. Just a few months before his death he wrote a detailed letter to Dr Loofs-Wissowa, the last in a long correspondence. M. Philippe Baude, former French Ambassador to Australia, had also been a student of Coèdes.

Despite his ability to inspire others with his enthusiasm for research, Coèdes had the reputation for giving dry lectures with the genealogy of the kings of Cambodia being his most tedious topic. Tedious lectures aside there is little doubt that Coèdes was a man of flair and individuality. He was born in Paris on 10 August 1886, the son of a stockbroker. His Jewish grandfather had come to Paris from Hungary bearing the name Kados. Once in France the family decided to change the name, rejecting the simple Cados for the French-sounding and more mysterious and distinctive

(left) The National Library of Thailand in Bangkok, 1968

Photograph courtesy of Dr Loofs-Wissowa

(right) The National History Museum in Hanoi where the headquarters of L'Ecole française d'Extreme-Orient was located, 1978

Photograph courtesy of Dr Loofs-Wissowa

Coèdes. George was very particular about the ligature of the 'oe' in his family name. It had style, and the hint of leaving the old behind and setting out on something new.

George Coèdes certainly left the old behind. He spent 35 years of his life working and writing in Southeast Asia. Seven years after his arrival in Hanoi he married Mlle Neang Yap, a Cambodian, some 11 years his junior. They had six children one of whom—Pierre—became the admiral of the Cambodian Navy.

In the decades that George Coèdes transcribed inscriptions two world wars took place, but nothing, it seems, interrupted his research—not military service, not wars, not the burden of his administrative responsibilities. In Paris on 2 October 1969, aged 84 years, George Coèdes died. His legacy is a specialised library which not only represents a doorway to the origins of his ideas, but is a fecund resource for scholars of Indochinese history.

ANN NUGENT is a Canberra-based freelance writer and theatre critic