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REPORTING ANGKOR

Chou Ta-Kuan in Cambodia

1296-1297

by

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Introduction

In 1296 an embassy was sent by Emperor Temur, the grandson of Kubalai Khan, to Angkor, the capital of the Khmer Empire. With the ambassador went an assistant, Chou Ta-Kuan, who made notes on the visit.

Chou Ta-Kuan's observations were first translated into a European language in 1789 as a result of the efforts of French Jesuit missionaries based in the Chinese capital. Thirty years later, after the convulsions of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, the more comprehensive translation of J.P. Abel Remusat was issued and this was reprinted in 1829 and 1833. In 1902 the text used by most contemporary writers who refer to Chou Ta-Kuan's work was published in the *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient.* The eminent sinologist Paul Pelliot was responsible for this translation and in 1951 the *Library d'Amerique et d'Orient* issued a revised edition of the 1902 work with a commentary.

The core of *Reporting Angkor* is based on the 1951 edition of Pelliot's work which was translated from French into English for me by Madeleine Bender of Lionheart Books, London.

I would like to thank Barry Jones and Patricia Herrington for the help they have given me in the production of this book.

Robert Philpotts March 1996

Khmer military planning for, in his opinion, Indravarman's army had, as a general rule, neither tactics or strategy. It must be remembered that Chou Ta-Kuan was comparing Cambodian forces with the sophisticated machine deployed by the Mongols. When Kubalai Khan invaded southern China his generals developed techniques which enabled them to reduce formidable Sung fortifications and went so far as to bring engineers from Persia to help construct effective siege artillery. The Sung themselves had maintained a considerable defensive capability with, for example, naval units which could deploy rockets, flamethrowers and fragmentation bombs. By comparison any army mustered to defend Angkor must have seemed to have been in a very inferior league until, of course, it was remembered what had happened to Marshal Sogatu's grand plans at the hands of the Chams.

Staying well away from the danger zone but curious about life far from Angkor, perhaps Chou Ta-Kuan rested for a few days in a provincial town. He may have expected to find disparities in the use of language in outlying towns and villages for the pattern was similar in China, as were the stylised forms of speech used by educated men and officials. What seems to have taken him aback, however, was the different attitude shown towards someone like himself when well away from the capital. In the cosmopolitan markets of Angkor Chinese visitors would not merit a second glance but in a rural village people might prostrate themselves before a foreigner, addressing them with the respectful term 'Buddha'.

A more rural area would have also been a good place from which to observe Khmer flora and fauna and see how it was exploited for the export trade. Many of the birds which Chou Ta-Kuan saw in Cambodia, such as peacocks and parrots, were not native to China although he noted that the two countries had ravens, cranes, storks, egrets, cormorants, canaries and sparrows in common. Of particular interest was

the kingfisher, since the colourful feathers of this little bird were in great demand across the South China Sea and were classed alongside elephant tusks, rhinoceros horns and beeswax as being a most valuable Khmer export. Kingfishers were not easy to catch and needed tempting by subterfuge. Deep in the forests were pools where these birds sought food and where the hunter would hide close to the water's edge with a net and a cage containing a female kingfisher. When a male bird was attracted by the call of a potential mate then the hunter would strike, throwing the net to prevent a fluttering escape. If fortune smiled on the hunter then the male would be caught but if not then a dash of vivid green would be quickly swallowed by the shadows. A kingfisher hunter needed to be very patient, Chou Ta-Kuan recording that on some days the hunters might wait all day and still catch no birds at all.

Apart from the odd peck the bird hunter had nothing to fear from his prey so, from that point of view, his work was not in the same danger league as that done by those who went in search of elephant's tusks. To get the very best material for ivory traders the elephant hunters had to trap and kill elephants themselves. Coming across an elephant which had recently died of natural causes would have been a rare event and, anyway, the tusks from such animals were regarded as being second rate whilst those taken from a long dead animal were thought of as being very much inferior. Before he went to Cambodia Chou Ta-Kuan seems to have been as ignorant of elephants as he was of crocodiles and it appears to have come as something of a surprise to him that they had two tusks which were not grown anew each year. Once exported to China ivory found its way into the hands of physicians as well as carvers for it was regarded as having curative properties in the treatment of various ailments including epilepsy, osteomyelitis and smallpox.

If anything the rhinocerous hunter was probably in more danger than those in pursuit of elephants for, despite its bulk, this animal had a surprising turn of speed and if it scented hunters it might turn from the bamboo on which it was grazing and charge. The unlucky would be trampled or gored and there was a Chinese belief (recalled by Marco Polo not Chou Ta-Kuan) that the rhino might kneel on a victim and then rasp them to death using its tongue which, it was held, was covered in large, straight prickles. Despite the hazards many rhino horns did find their way to China. They were carefully graded (the veined white being more sought after than the black) and physicians sold them on in various forms as, amongst other things, an antidote to poison, a cure for typhoid and carbuncles and a good general tonic.

Beeswax was the fourth most valuable export and Chou Ta-Kuan noted that boats were often seen carrying two to three thousand honeycombs. Sources of this bountiful supply were found in hollow trees where bees with corselets as thin as that of an ant set up home. Wax gatherers probably drove these bees out with smoke before making off with the honeycomb. Given the vast numbers of honeycombs which were collected for export there must have been a considerable quantity of surplus honey and this, perhaps, goes some way to explain why honey wine was the most popular alcoholic drink in the Khmer Empire at that time.

Where practicable boats would also have been used for the movement of other raw materials drawn from the more remote forested regions and which were produced in quantity. Laka wood was a sought after aromatic wood, the sap of which was often used in China to manufacture 'imitation dragon's blood'. The needs of Chinese lacquer workshops made the trade in gambodge and shellac profitable. Even though there had long been moral opposition in China to the production of fine lacquer (on the basis that it exemplified

wasted skill and extravagance), the southeastern provinces of China were so affluent at the turn of the 13th century that commercial production was well worthwhile. A ready market was thus ensured for Cambodian resins.

Chou Ta-Kuan seems to have observed the winning of resins closely. Lac, from which shellac is made, is secreted from a tiny insect which may swarm on several types of tree found in the Cambodian forest. When the twigs of the tree were sufficiently encrusted then the collectors would remove them and begin the process of purification. Those in search of gambodge tapped the trees a full year ahead of collection and so closely was this product (which could be used both as a pigment and a drastic purgative) linked with the country that its name was derived from the word Cambodia. It is more than likely that cardamom, a spice which also had a ready market across the South China Sea, was associated with the Cardamom Mountains which lay to the south of the Tonle Sap. According to Chou Ta-Kuan all the cardamom was grown by non-Khmer Cambodians in the mountains.

It is possible that the rice growers of the plain or the fisher folk of the placid Tonle Sap sometimes envied those who worked the forests imagining the cool glades or the thrill of the hunt. Yet many of those who made their living amongst the trees must have known at least one heart stopping moment when they were unexpectedly faced with a mortal threat from either animals or people who owed no allegiance to Angkor and who had good reason to fear the Khmer and those who worked for them. Many kingfisher hunters, hiding quietly by a pool, must have seen the timid approach of deer or have watched with more care the arrival of a wild boar or bear. Much more alarming would have been the soft pad of the tiger or panther and if a free kingfisher arrived at the same time then the hunter would have had to let a golden opportunity pass since the sharp movement of a net and