

## Ban Chiang in Retrospect

What the Expedition Means to  
Archaeologists and the Thai Public

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The village store in Ban Chiang. Business has increased with the growing numbers of tourists that come to the village.



Without the accidental discoveries in 1957 by a local villager and the subsequent archaeological work (beginning in 1967), Ban Chiang would have remained an ordinary village like thousands of others in dusty, impoverished northeast Thailand. There would be no T-shirts bearing the now familiar painted pottery motif; there would be no replicas of ancient urns for sale in the shops; there would be no tourists either from within Thailand or from distant parts of the world: it is possible there would have been no looting and therefore no decimation of the archaeological treasures which once lay beneath the town.

Ban Chiang with a population around 4,000 people is a growing tourist attraction; even local industries such as traditional weaving have benefited financially from the influx of visitors. Other changes include improvement of streets and the establishment of the first national museum to be built in a Thai village (all other national museums maintained by the Fine Arts Department of Thailand are in major cities).

Some of the changes occurring in Ban Chiang within the last fifteen years demonstrate the impact of archaeology on everyday life as well as within the academic community. The experience of Ban Chiang clearly shows that archaeologists today cannot function as isolated scholars, that they must plan to educate and to cooperate with the local population.

### OF PRIDE AND SHAME

At the time of the visit to Ban Chiang of Their Majesties the King and Queen of Thailand in March 1972, much publicity had been given to the intensified competition between scholars and spoilers who were anxious to extract as many artifacts for their own personal advantage as possible before they would become the property of the nation.

Their Majesties visited Ban Chiang to see for themselves what was really happening. After a brief presentation by the Fine

Arts Department Director-General, the King raised a number of questions. He was interested in some specific issues, such as the type of shells found in the excavations, whether the sites were habitation or cemetery locations, whether the pottery was painted before or after firing, etc. His Majesty pursued the question of reliable scientific dating of the artifacts and was told that the process was very expensive.

The King said: "It appears to me that this kind of discovery and information would be important to people all over the world and not merely to the people of Thailand. Many institutions may be interested in these materials and be willing to aid in obtaining chronological dating." He was also interested in any possible relationship between the ancient peoples and those who had settled in Ban Chiang only two hundred years ago, and wondered whether we could learn the reasons for the settlement and abandonment of the site at various times.

The King urged the archaeologists to work closely with the local residents, to win their confidence and thus, perhaps, reduce the indiscriminate looting of buried artifacts.

He added: "If the local people understand the significance of our task we may anticipate greater cooperation and further support from other sources." He cited the late Princess Vibhavati Raugsit as an interested person who had given some financial assistance to supplement the funds of the Fine Arts Department.

### THE ORGANIZATION

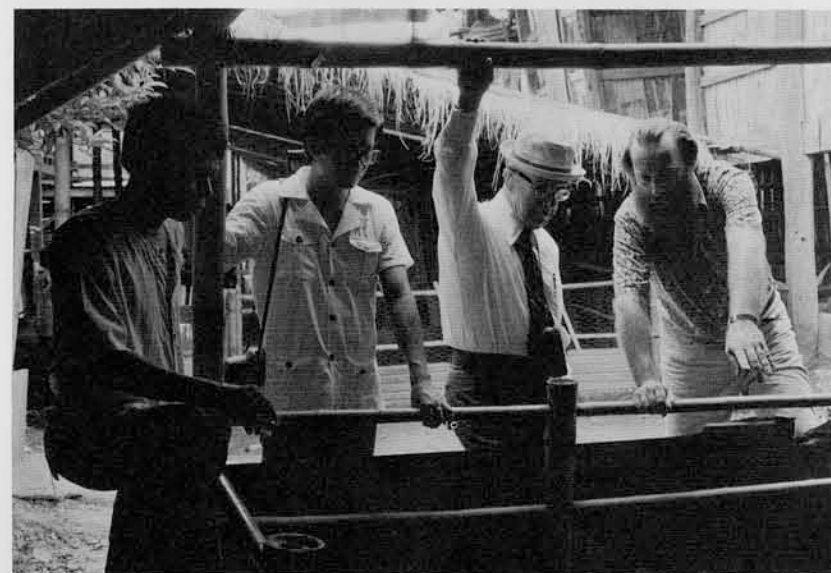
When I was a first year undergraduate at Silpakorn University in Bangkok it was my privilege to participate in the first systematic research into archaeology in Thailand with the Thai/Danish Expedition team. In other words, the development of the scientific study of archaeology in my country coincides with my own 21-year involvement with the discipline. At first, Thai members of the various expeditions acted primarily as interpreters and aides to the foreign experts; it was not until the work at Ban Chiang began that Thai archaeologists were prepared to function as equal partners with their foreign colleagues.

In response to the invitation of the Thai Ministry of Education, The University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania sent Chester Gorman to work with members of the Fine Arts Department in developing a systematic excavation of the site at



2 Gary Cariveau, metallurgy specialist, lecturing in the field to students participating in the excavation.

3 Chet and Pisit showing the site to visitors. The excavators always took the time to explain the archaeological processes at work during the excavation. Photograph by Surin Pookajorn.



4 Lionel Chiong, from the Philippines, excavating during the 1975 season. He was one of the Southeast Asian trainees at the site. Photograph by Chet Gorman.

5 Chet Gorman with Southeast Asian students in the lab at the museum. These students are some of those who participated in the Archaeological Training Program at the University of Pennsylvania. Here they are examining pottery sherds from the site. From left to right: Dr. Gorman, Surin Pookajorn from Thailand, Philippus Subroto from Indonesia, Rachanie Thosarat from Thailand, and Willi Ronquillo from the Philippines.



Ban Chiang. Gorman was not a stranger to his Thai colleagues; his findings in the excavation of Spirit Cave in northwest Thailand had raised some questions regarding the origins of plant domestication in eastern Asia.

I had worked with Chet earlier in Kanchanaburi where construction of a new dam threatened the destruction of archaeological sites. In fact, he was my first really close *farang* friend. He successfully talked the Thais into accepting that it was proper to work closely with a team of qualified experts at the start. Even if we lost the site

to the looters, we still had enough to represent it substantially in all respects. The overall aim should not be merely to rescue the site, but also to understand the everyday life of prehistoric people, and the way in which that life was affected through time and space by such developments as plant and animal domestication, and metallurgy. Such organization is quite common these days in the West, but I have to give Chet full credit for instituting a multi-disciplinary approach to the development of the site of Ban Chiang in Thailand.

A large and ever-growing organization inevitably resulted in the disorganization of its organizers. Quite often we became lost in our own setup; people came and went; there were training of students, guided tours, immediate journalism, book-keeping, correspondence with scholars and the bureaucracy of institutions involved in Thailand, etc. The multinational team made Ban Chiang quite a community with fun, and, of course, confusion on the part of the locals too. We share a common scientific tradition; yet, we do differ in our own interests. We collect different impressions and perhaps develop different theories. In fact it is almost impossible to find two experts to agree with each other. To get around the problems with villagers I found it astonishing at how fast those *farang* (western colleagues) took to the way of life of the local community; they could



even drink rice whiskey in the morning at the weddings before a day's work! In short, we were very tactful with each other throughout those unforgettable two years (1974-1975).

### THE OUTCOME

The impact the Ban Chiang Project has so far made on the archaeology of Southeast Asia is undeniably appreciable. The first phase (1974-1979) has been effectively completed. The first two years at Ban Chiang resulted in the excavation of two hundred square meters to a depth of 4-5 meters in a stratigraphic sequence dated by C-14 from the fourth millennium B.C. Later surveys have also turned up a great number of sites related to Ban Chiang, some of which have been or are being excavated. However, the death of Gorman inevitably caused delays in certain laboratory analyses, particularly the pottery, of which there is about six thousand kilograms. Eventually, a series of publications constituting a final site report may have to be postponed for a year or two. Analyses to date have nevertheless established northeast Thailand as a major center of innovative cultural development in its own right. During this phase of our work and overlapping with the second, training programs for Southeast Asian and American students have also been set up both at the site and at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Otago in New Zealand, under the sponsorship of the Ford Foundation and the JDR 3rd Fund. Southeast Asian students in the programs include those from Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Burma; (there were some Vietnamese and Cambodians trained at the site).

The controversy over the dating of the earliest bronzes remains unresolved at present. But it cannot be emphasized too strongly that this question is only one of many to which the Ban Chiang excavations have contributed: the importance of the site does not rest only on the chronology of



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Surapol Natapintu, a Thai student, and Vince Pigott at the microscope in the MASCA lab. They analyzed the metals found at Ban Chiang. Photograph by David Gladstone.

its metal artifacts but on the broad range of evidence it provides for East Asian prehistoric development. Moreover, direct scholarly questions aside, the Ban Chiang Project has been of immense importance in accelerating the development of archaeological research in the whole of Southeast Asia. In the very near future we hope and expect to see trainees of this project helping to put the archaeology of Southeast Asia on a firm professional footing, the equal of archaeology anywhere in the world.



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Thailand, including the Ban Chiang Project, of which he was co-director with the late Chester Gorman of The University Museum. His extensive publications include books and articles reflecting his research interests in archaeology, anthropology and the history of Thailand and Southeast Asia.