



## Processing The Ban Chiang Finds

With Particular Reference to Volunteer and Student Work at The University Museum

JOYCE C. WHITE

Following the completion of the 1975 excavation at Ban Chiang, all the material recovered from the two seasons of excavation by The University Museum/Thai Fine Arts Department joint project was shipped to various parts of the world for analysis by appropriate experts. Thus, the human skeletons went to Dr. Michael Pietrusewsky of the University of Hawaii; faunal remains went to New Zealand to be studied by Charles Higham at the University of Otago. Douglas Yen took sherd specimens to the Australia National University for examination with their Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM). However, the bulk of the artifactual material was shipped to The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania.

The arrival at The University Museum of 18 tons of artifacts (over a million and a quarter sherds) from northeast Thailand one January day in 1976 sent tremors of nervous excitement through the handful of Southeast Asian archaeologists in residence. Who, after all, was going to unload, sort, glue, label, code, catalogue, and otherwise perform all of the labor-intensive tasks on this massive inventory that would enable the archaeologists ultimately to describe and interpret the site? Conventional archaeological wisdom knows that every year of field work may require six years of lab analysis.

Hoping to tap a community of latent archaeologists in the Philadelphia area, Chet instigated calls through various media for student and lay volunteers. A grant from the National Science Foundation was applied for and received to equip the lab and fund graduate students William Schauffler, myself, and others to organize and supervise the work. During the next

1 Unloading the artifacts from Ban Chiang at The University Museum.

2 A poster hung in the lab by one of the workers. The pottery from Burial 40 was particularly difficult to reconstruct.

### Credits

Figures 1 and 7, photographs by Chet Gorman; Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8, photographs by David Gladstone.

four years this effort, one of the largest volunteer efforts ever undertaken at The University Museum, enabled not only the processing of a massive amount of archaeological data, but also gave a diverse array of individuals first-hand experience with archaeological research.

At one time or another over 250 volunteers and students put in over 17,000 man hours working for the Project, each according to his/her schedule and each with an individual assignment. The major efforts of the laboratory work were aimed at reconstructing and documenting the burial assemblages, and coding the artifacts for data storage and analysis. Thus a lab crew member might be assigned to pottery reconstruction, artifact coding, drawing or



photographing of objects, or other organizational tasks, depending on that person's interests, talents, and previous experience. The lab with its constant flux of diverse people took on its own character and sense of humor best illustrated by the posters that would anonymously appear from time to time. My favorite is shown in Fig. 2.

Four of the members of the lab crew have commented on some of the frustrations endured, questions raised, and rewards gained in their experience with the Ban Chiang archaeological lab: Lois Kratz, Cheryl Applebaum, and Deborah Wong here, and John Hastings in a discussion of the use of the computer (pp. 37-41).

On behalf of the Project and myself, I wish to extend sincere thanks to all of the persons who have given freely of their time and energy. The volunteer contribution will have been a crucial element in the successful completion of the Ban Chiang Project.

## From Sherds to Graceful Vessels

LOIS KRATZ



**Lois Kratz** served as a volunteer at the Ban Chiang Lab for two years where she was involved in the reconstruction of much of the pottery. She is the Associate Director of Development for the Girl Scouts of Greater Philadelphia. Born in Baghdad, her interest in archaeology was cultivated as she grew up in Iraq. She took part in the excavation of the Williamson Site (American Indian) in Frenchtown, New Jersey for several seasons.



**3** There were thousands of bags of sherds in the basement and our only hope of unlocking their secrets lay in the reconstruction lab. There trays of sand supported joined sherds while the glue dried and balsa strips splinted unwieldy pot skeletons as they grew. But it was often frustrating. How could that key piece of rim be missing? The bag numbers carefully inked onto each sherd suggested additional bags that might be checked, but a quick sorting of their contents often told me they had nothing in common with 'my' pot and I would never know just how that rim fit.

**4** The pots had a graceful beauty you could feel in your fingertips. Week after week of turning the sherds in my hands produced a sensitivity to the different tempers, slips and firing intensities. I found myself drawn into their mysteries in a way I never had been when I viewed museum displays in glass cases; and the mysteries kept rearranging themselves into questions. Who were these potters? This lovely shape—was it just to please the potter's eye or did it serve some function?

## Coding the Small Finds

CHERYL APPLEBAUM

**5** The elite among the small finds for me were the bronzes. I was particularly in awe of a spearhead, the oldest bronze artifact found at the site. I really wanted to touch the ancient bronze itself, to actually feel its surface, but I knew that contact with the salts from my skin could cause further corrosion. Pulling on plastic gloves, I lifted the spearhead and turned it slowly around. It was not beautiful like the delicate bronze bell, not mysterious like some of the carved bone objects, but somehow it was very special.

**6** The objects we called small finds included axes, bangles, beads, crucibles, figurines, pellets, pestles, rollers, spindle whorls, etc. It was exciting to work with so many different types of artifacts. Each had to be fully described by numbers pencilled on computer sheets. Sometimes an object had been separated from its provenience information; I would then have to go on a sort of scavenger hunt through the field notes, site drawings, registers, and photographs to retrieve that data. As I handled these records the daily routine at the site began to take shape in my mind and eventually I came to understand the meaning of square, layer, depth below datum, and other measurements used by the excavators.



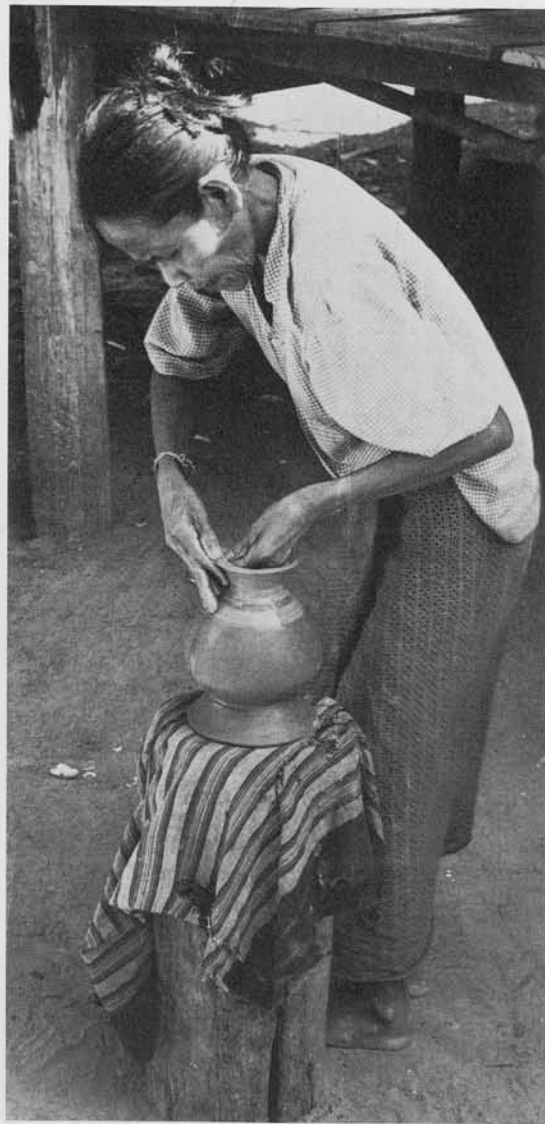
**Cheryl Applebaum** was a work-study student for the Ban Chiang Project during her freshman and sophomore years (1978-1980) at Penn. She was involved primarily in the computer coding of small finds. During this past summer she worked as a research assistant at the Project and is acting now as assistant co-ordinator for this number of Expedition. She has excavated at the Mitchell Site (prehistoric American Indian) in South Dakota. This fall she will begin study at law school.

## The Potter's Craft

DEBORAH WONG

**Deborah Wong** was involved with the Ban Chiang Project as a work-study student during her four years at the University of Pennsylvania. She will spend 1982-1983 at The University Museum as an Intern in Collections Management, and will then attend the University of Michigan as a graduate student in ethnomusicology.

**7** Before we began to enter the ceramics as computer data, Chet showed me his photographs of a potter at work near the contemporary village of Ban Chiang. Since small rural communities tend to change very slowly, and since the Ban Chiang of today is in many ways quite similar to the Ban Chiang of 6000 years ago, we knew that it was important to look for clues in the present as well as in the past. Chet's pictures showed an elderly female potter making a vessel from start to finish, beginning with river clay and ending up with a cooking pot. Like the prehistoric Thais, she did not use a wheel. She simply set the lump of clay on a post and walked around it, using such tools as a wooden paddle and a baked clay anvil which she held against the inside wall of the vessel. The finished pot was strikingly similar to the prehistoric pots—even to the clouded surface which is the result of open-air firing.



**8** As I became familiar with the ceramic assemblage, I became as aware of the hands *behind* the pots as of the pots themselves. I knew where I could expect to find fingermarks on the interiors of the pot walls, and where to find the imprints of the anvils. I began to see the pots as far more than beautiful objects—they came alive for me. Whenever I found something new in a pot, I began to ask myself: why did the potter do it this way? And as the pots brought me closer to the minds of the people who made them, I began to realize that culture must be a pretty remarkable thing if it guides even the hands of a potter. The pots were simply a complex set of clues towards understanding a complex group of human beings.