

# SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE CHANGING SCENE

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A 17th century map showing what was known of Southeast Asia and part of China.



In January of this year, 1977, I was in Burma trying to recruit a Burmese archaeologist for the new Ford Foundation-University of Pennsylvania program designed to provide graduate training for Southeast Asian archaeologists; and I was also trying to assess the chances for a possible Burmese-University Museum excavation at some more future date. The predictions were pessimistic: Burma was a closed country, they would not allow one of their archaeologists to study in the United States, they had consistently turned down excavation and training programs from their East German, Czech, etc. friends. Why expect anything to be different now?

Apparently there was a difference, and the Burmese officials recognized it. They read the *Expedition* article by Pisit and Gorman on the Ban Chiang program, studied the Thai and Malaysian contracts, and said, very directly, "This is the way to do it."

The first step in what we hope will be a sound relationship of cooperation between the University Museum and the Burmese Archaeological Service will begin in September with the arrival in Philadelphia of U Nyunt Han from Rangoon who will join a Malaysian, Adi Taha, in the new M.Sc. program set up by the Department of Anthropology of the University of Pennsylvania.

It was the friendly and open Burmese reaction to the project that made me take a look at history, and inspired this very informal report on the stages of American interest in Asia, and what changes in attitude have led to the present phase now involving the University Museum.

It is quite possible that it all started with the Chinese tea that was dumped into Boston harbor by angry New Englanders who said, "We won't pay those taxes; we'll go and get it ourselves!" And from Independence through the 1840's the American ships went to the Asian marketplaces taking out furs, iron nails, ginseng, rhubarb, and bringing back tea, spices, silk, porcelain and souvenirs. (Much of the latter was the airport art of its day and several examples can be seen in the Museum's storage.)

The first American ship to reach Canton was a Philadelphia one, the "Empress of China." She was a converted sea raider whose major sponsor was Robert Morris, and she arrived in China sometime in July, 1784 with a cargo of ginseng, woolen garments, cotton, lead and 2600 fur skins.

Philadelphia and its shipyards were heavily involved in the China trade and, in fact, until after the war of 1812, controlled a third of the whole Far Eastern business. One well-known merchant was Stephen Girard who sent his ships to south Atlantic ports for cotton and rice which he sold in Europe for silver to buy tea and silk from China, spices and sugar from the Dutch and French islands. This cargo he sold in Europe and brought the cash home to establish the Girard bank, whose Walnut and 36th Streets branch is used by the University staff today.

It was not easy in the Philadelphia area to pick up merchandise for a country which felt that with rice, tea and silk it already had the best of food, drink and textiles, and wanted only a few luxury or curious items from the West. Seal fur and sandalwood came in this category, and in those days of the wide open spaces, before any concern was felt for environmental control, the sandalwood trees in Hawaii and Fiji were quickly chopped down, and cargoes of 10,000 (one of 30,000!) sealskins, quickly depleted that supply.

Philadelphia can hang its head over one answer it found for the cargo problem in 1804. The brig "Pennsylvania" discovered a source of opium in Turkey and loaded fifty chests of it which was sold at high profit in Batavia, Indonesia. At least, not all Philadelphians rushed into the drug trade; the Nathan Dunn Co. refused from the beginning to deal with it, and Girard, after two voyages, banned it from his ships. It was not the kind of cargo he wanted to carry in his vessels proudly named "Voltaire," "Rousseau," "Montesquieu," and "Helvetius."

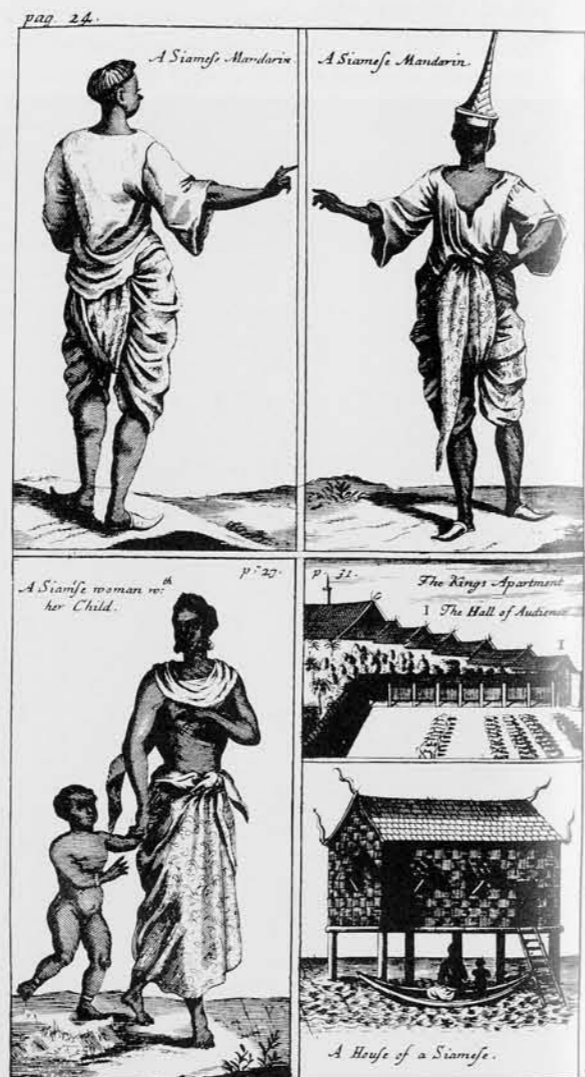
Sometime after the first decade of the 19th century, the outbound cargo of American ships frequently included a missionary family. One New York firm founded by Daniel Washington Cincinnatus Olyphant supported so many missionary expeditions that it was known as "Zion's Corner." These dedicated people with their Bibles, medicine kits and schoolbooks made their way to the remotest villages of Asia determined to lead the inhabitants to a better way of life. The number of religious converts was never large in the Far East and Southeast Asia, but the hospitals and schools the missionaries founded had a lasting impact. And the stubborn conviction that every man has the right to a decent way of life remains a strong element in the American character even if it sometimes leads us into trouble with those we intend to befriend.

As the foreign colonies in Asia expanded throughout the 19th century, small businessmen, European and American, found it profitable to supply their needs and open new markets for western medicines, false teeth, printing presses, textiles, metal hardware, etc. Some of the companies they founded seem to

have as much longevity as Stephen Girard's banks. For anyone who saw "The King and I" it can come as a bit of a surprise to see the trucks of "Louie Leonowens and Co.," on the streets of Bangkok and to realize that the son of King Mongkut's Anna actually did exist, and that he also left his mark on the kingdom.

Late in the century, a new type of Westerner appeared. This was the foreign adviser, not a colonial administrator, but an expert in international law, science, architecture, who worked for the local government or business interests of the country. Many of them were truly impartial and independent men like the series of lawyers, mainly from Harvard, who helped keep Thailand independent while the Dutch, English and French divided the rest of Southeast Asia among themselves.

Closer to our particular interests are the early scholars who came to Asia. They were a very mixed lot, and no doubt, for many of them the title of scholar should be a courtesy one, rather like the honorary degree given to a popular writer. True, a few of them were genuine linguists who did pioneer work in



2 From *Description du Royaume de Siam*, by Simon de la Loubère, Paris, 1691. This profusely illustrated book created much interest in Europe. An English edition was published in London in 1693.

3 Mural in Wat Phumin in Nan, Thailand, probably showing the arrival of missionaries at this small village. Mid 19th century. The women are wearing costumes of the time of Empress Eugénie, copied by the Thai artist from earlier pattern books.

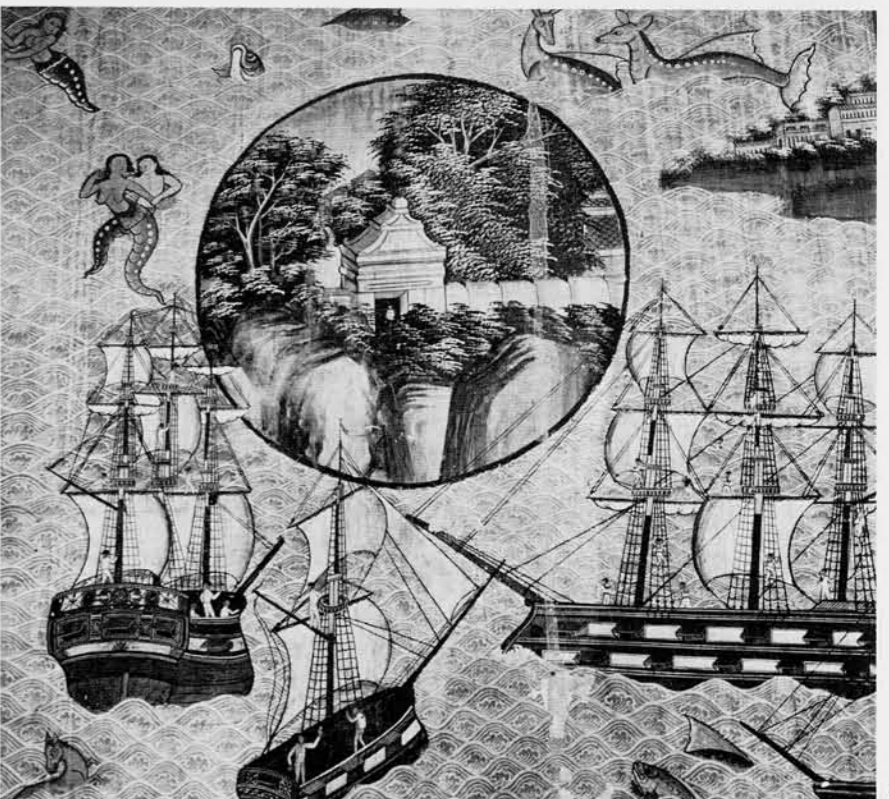
ของยายไปรวมตย ในสภา  
(คือ กองวิทยา ศาสตราจารย์)

ทมอปรตเลย  
คิตทำพ่นซุ่ของฝั้งนี้ใน  
เมืองไทย เมื่อ พ.ศ. ๒๓๘  
โดยไปทของจากพู่ป่วย  
ปลุกแก่โตแต่ไม่เป็นพ  
สำเรจ

translating works of importance, but more were gentleman amateurs who wrote travel reports of varying perception about the exotic sights they saw. Outside of natural history specimens, they and their friends were not, at first, interested in collecting anything except a few manuscripts. The art was much too strange for someone brought up with the western ideal of beauty, the line from the sweet Hellenistic to Victorian romantic realism. They saw the Asian lack of perspective as a simple inability to draw, and felt the sculpture was either too stiff, or too embarrassingly developed. Of course, this attitude did not last, and from the 1890's to the present, the art collectors have pursued their treasures.

From the first western landing in Asia to World War II the traders, missionaries, adventurers, businessmen, scholars, collectors, found this far side of the world a great ripe orchard of opportunity. Whatever the reason for their presence, altruism, adventure, profit, avidity, curiosity, their vision and their operations were one-sided. There were souls to be saved for a western heaven, profits to be made and sent home, art objects to stock western museums, people of curious customs to be studied and put into books.

However, this picture of the colonial attitude is not totally accurate. When colonialism vanished, the colonized countries were left with a good parcel of decent laws, roads, schools, and so forth, as well as an elite who knew an international language. It gave them a base on which to build, and from which they could quickly join the modern community of nations.



4 Anna's King Mongkut learned Latin from a French priest and English from two American missionaries, Dr. Bradley and Dr. Caswell. Mongkut referred to Caswell, who died in 1848, as his "revered teacher," erected a monument over his grave and twice sent funds to his widow in the United States.

5 Wat Sutat, Bangkok: Thai artist's version of western sailing ships.

American scholarly interest in Asia was predominantly directed toward China and Japan until WW II when thousands of young men rather forcibly discovered the South Pacific countries. GI's were trained in India and Ceylon, fought in Burma, the Philippines, the South Sea islands, directed information operations in Thailand, etc. After the war, many went back as anthropologists, social scientists, historians, geographers, etc. They were better trained and more scientific than the amateurs of the colonial civil service who wrote on the flora of Kelantan or the rites of the Rhadé, and they were far less patronizing. Most of them lived in the villages they were studying, and they lived in local, not raj, style. They were usually accepted with warm friendliness, sometimes adopted as members of the family, yet their attitude was not essentially different from that of their predecessors. They put their subject under microscopic scrutiny, analyzed and checked it with the help of the locals, and then went home with their notes, films, recordings. The villagers rarely saw the results, but next year they would have a new researcher and must explain things all over again.

Throughout the 50's and 60's, Southeast Asia was an area of unlimited academic opportunity for the American scholar. Grant money was relatively easy to get; it was, after all, a drop in the bucket compared to the amount of foreign aid pouring in for development projects, and for the Vietnam war. Also, the number of scholars was insignificant among the crowd of technical experts advising the newly independent nations on agriculture, irrigation, business management. No one paid much attention to the academic researchers, and, by and large, they were free to wander around, choose their subject and, assisted by local contacts, compile their material for their graduate degrees.

In the mid 1960's a Stanford consultant wrote a report for the Fulbright Commission entitled, "Some Possible Studies for American Graduate Students Interested in the Arts of Thailand." It said that all divisions of the Thai Fine Arts Department would offer their facilities to the American student, and then warned, "Still one must be cautious that the American student does not simply become involved with a project that might be of more importance to the division in which he is involved than to himself or to his particular University."

This was the same old business-as-usual tradition. Apparently no one realized that times and tempers were changing, that little brothers were growing up, that numbers of well educated Southeast Asians were beginning to feel that they had been selfishly used in the past, and were still not given academic recognition. Foreign researchers rarely gave credit for any assistance received, and almost



6 Chinese export porcelain platter decorated in Fitzhugh pattern with the American eagle and shield in the center. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; gift of the Winfield Foundation, 1951.



7 Young and old inhabitants of a Lao village frequently studied by anthropologists.

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never gave copies of their work, films, tapes, to the local, poorly stocked archives.

When, about five years ago, a group of American scholars raised a vehement outcry about CIA direct or indirect support to some research programs the Southeast Asian academic community was more amused than angry at the disclosure. One Thai social scientist said, "I wish they'd pay me, I have to spend so much time telling them what to do."

Southeast Asians are much too polite to say "Give or go" but that is the mood. The orchard is being fenced by the owners, no one can walk in now without permission. Research proposals from foreigners are carefully scrutinized and sometimes rejected. Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia have their own rules for the researcher; he must be attached to or under the supervision of a local University, or have a local partner, or be working on something that no local is interested in, and in most cases he must deposit copies of his research. There are differences in interpretation, and degrees of enforcement, but the message is clear. If we don't heed it, anthropological and archaeological field work outside of our own borders will be severely curtailed.

It was with some realization of the new atmosphere that the Ford Foundation started an experimental program for the support of Southeast Asian art and archaeology in 1971. The program was intended to strengthen the capacity of Southeast Asian nations to protect and conserve their own national heritage, and was administered through a series of grants in the fields of archaeology, museums, conservation and traditional arts. The Foundation would not initiate the projects, nor manage them; this was the proper business of the Southeast Asians. It would only try to choose for funding those projects which promised to have some wide and lasting value.

The program was slow to start functioning in an effective way. Archaeologists, conservation technicians, museum curators, cultural anthropologists, all existed, but they had long lived at the bottom of the budget line in countries who felt that all funds were needed for economic development. Each thought of his own individual needs of the moment—some books, film, a ticket to an overseas meeting. It was difficult to tie anything together into a project that might have some impact beyond the individual. We didn't want them to come to Uncle for a nickle; we wanted to set them up in business for themselves. But that was not the tradition, not the way it had ever been.

The Ban Chiang operation was among those that finally broke the pattern. The Expedition article (Vol. 18, No. 4) tells the story of how it started, but the exciting discoveries perhaps overshadow other important

facts. For example, the University Museum might not have been able to work at Ban Chiang if there had not been the earlier excavation at Chansen under George Dales and Bennet Bronsen, a small-scale dig for two short summer seasons in 1967 and 1968. Evidently it was satisfactory to the Thais because when Dr. Rainey and I went to meet the Fine Arts officials and begin negotiations, which we expected would be long and difficult as several other countries had already asked to excavate Ban Chiang, the Deputy Director said with surprising bluntness, "We don't want them; you're all right. You respect our people."

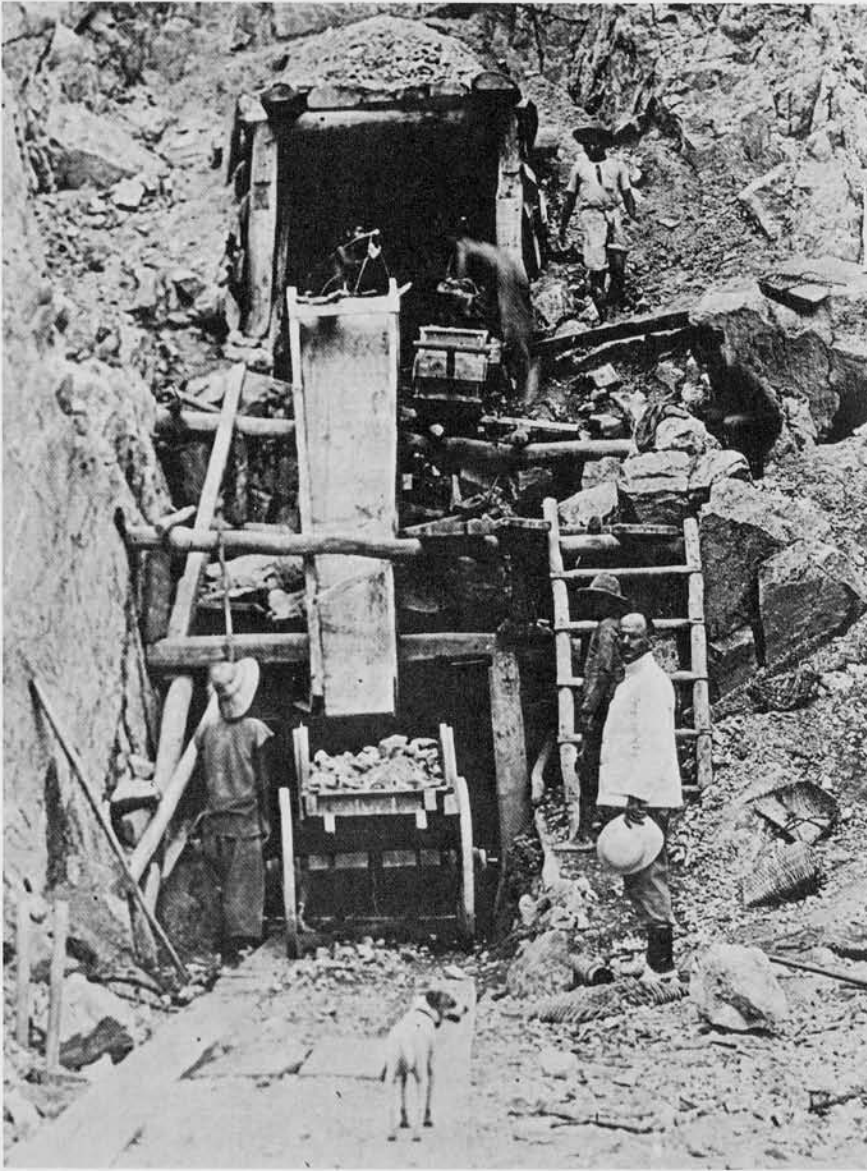
This can be translated to mean that they were tired of the usual foreign expedition which gave little training or credit to the local archaeologists. Dales and Bronson, living with and working closely with the Thai team, had brought fresh ideas. Also both institutions had learned a few lessons from the relationship. The Thais could teach newcomers how to excavate their hard clay or muddy soil; on the other hand, left to publish the results as per contract, they had insufficient experience in producing something of international standard. Except for an article by Bronson and his Ph.D. thesis, and my article on some figurines, Chansen has never been published.

This was in our minds when we worked out the Ban Chiang contract providing for co-directors, co-publication, a division of expenses, and a year of graduate study at the University of Pennsylvania for at least one

8 Wat Phumin; the Thai artist has faithfully copied the foreigner's strange costume.



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**Elizabeth Lyons**, recently returned to the Museum as Research Associate, has spent the last four and a half years as Project Specialist for Art and Archaeology for the Ford Foundation in Southeast Asia. Since 1955, she has had several State Department assignments in the area, and has been able to watch the changing attitudes of both western and Asian scholars.



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Westerners began building the railroads of Thailand in the late 19th century. Photo courtesy of Mrs. Irmgard Eisenhofer, Bangkok.

Thai. We hoped the latter would guarantee a good publication.

Once work had started, the Ford Foundation came in with a multi-level program providing both experience and training from the undergraduate to the specialist category, and also giving a small number of archaeologists from other Southeast Asian countries a chance to spend some time at Ban Chiang and discover how it related to their own areas. This has been followed up by a Foundation grant of \$220,000 to the University Museum for the training of Southeast Asian archaeologists to the M.Sc. degree.

These are days of exacerbated nationalism, especially in ex-colonial countries. Years of being exploited and sometimes looted have caused explosions of resentment, and locked many doors to westerners. There are restrictions on trade, difficulties with import and export permits, entry visas, the demand for the return of art objects, etc. Nevertheless, we all make sincere speeches about one world and continue, hopefully, to support the U.N. Only genuine professionalism and expertise seem to override these national restrictions. For a great pianist or physicist, his country of origin is of little interest compared to his performance and, by and large, he can work wherever he wishes.

It looks as though that might be the future scene for anthropologists and archaeologists. For the time being, we have an edge with scientific techniques, and the advantage of richly stocked libraries, but the gap is closing. India, for example, has two Carbon-14 labs and will start thermoluminescent dating this year. Indonesia has a very heavy enrollment in its national Departments of Archaeology and Anthropology, and when the quality of instruction catches up with the level of interest, the country will have no need of foreign teachers or researchers. Perhaps, when no actual need exists, then free and equal co-operation begins.

Foreign students, of course, are an old story to the University Museum, and we have worked for many years in the Mediterranean and the Near East, as well as in the Americas, but with this M.Sc. program for students from across the Pacific, and a new director from the other side of the Atlantic, we may be starting a new chapter which will emphasize our world-wide character.

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