SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE CHANGING SCENE

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 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.
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Philadelphia and its ships 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 G. Clapp, 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 city, 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 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!) seal skins, quickly depleted that supply.

Philadelphia can hang its head over one answer it found for the cargo problem in 1694. The brig "Pennsylvania" discovered a source of opium in Turkey and loaded fifty chests of it which was sold at high profit in Bataan, Indonesia. At least, not all Philadelphia ships rushed into this drug trade; the Nathan Dunn Co. refused from the beginning to deal in opium, and Gerard, after two voyages, banned it from its ships. It was not the kind of cargo he wanted to carry in his vessels prudently named "Voltaire," "Rousseau," "Montesquieu," and "Vielvetta.

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 "Zeno'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 "Louis Leonovens and Co." on the streets of Bangkok and to realize that the sons of King Mongkut's Anna actually did exist, and that he also left his mark on the kingdom.

Late in the century, a new sort 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 degrees given to a popular writer. True, a few of them were genuine linguists who did pioneer work in translating works of importance, but more were gentlemen amateurs who wrote travel reports of varying perception about the exotic sights they saw. Outside of natural history specimens, their and their friends work were 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 Helenistic 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.
American scholarly interest in Asia was predominantly directed toward China and Japan until WW II when thousands of young men rather facetiously 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 Raja, 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 might 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-1950'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 temperaments 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 never gave copies of their work, films, tapes, to the local, poorly stocked archives.

When, about five years ago, a group of American scholars initiated 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 me or go" but that is the mood. The orthodox of the academic community, when pressured by the owners, no one can walk in now without permission. Research proposals from foreigners are carefully scrutinized and sometimes sent back with a note. 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 need 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 architectural program in the Southeast Asian art and archaeology in 1971. The program was intended to strengthen the capacities of the ASEAN countries 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 wider and lasting value.

The Ford Foundation did start functioning in an effective way. Archaeologists, conservation technicians, museum curators, ethnologists, all emerged as we had long lived at the bottom of the budget line in countries that felt that all funds were needed elsewhere. We, in Thailand, did not have a great many of our own individual needs of the moment—some books, films, a ticket to an overseas conference. Each of us was struggling against the weight of the mountains of work that came day by day, and we were all aware that we had a lot more to do. But we kept the doors open, and the Ford Foundation helped us to save some of the most interesting of our people, and encouraged some of the brightest and hardest working of our younger people.

The Thai Fine Arts Department were among those that finally broke the pattern. The final report, The Thai Fine Arts Act (Vol. 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 Brian Bronson, a small-scale dig for two short summer sessions 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, 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. Just respect our people."

This can be translated to mean that they were tired of all the usual foreign excavations 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 figures, 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
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.