The Road to Ban Chiang
A Dialogue of Events Leading to The University Museum’s Participation in the Expedition

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 FOREWORD BY MISS LYONS

The Ban Chiang Project began in the late 1960s when Dr. Froelich Rainey was Director of The University Museum, and without his interest and support, particularly in the early days, the Museum would not have been involved in this important excavation. Since I had been in and out of Thailand long before the Museum entered the scene, Dr. Rainey asked me to write a brief explanation of the situation prior to our participation.

I had gone to Thailand in 1955 as a Fine Arts Consultant for two years under the Department of State Specialist Program, and I returned several times after that for various periods of time. Sometime in 1960, I vaguely remember being shown a handful of sherds that were unlike any Thai pottery known at that time. They came from an obscure village in the Northeast, that we now realize was Ban Chiang, but they were too small to show the distinctive designs, and we all considered them unimportant.

Probably that ignorance was fortunate because, at the time, the Thais had little interest in the prehistoric, or pre-Buddhist period, and had no experience with the special demands of a prehistoric excavation. That came in the next couple of years with the Thai/Danish expedition at Ban Kao and other sites in Kanchanaburi beyond the River Kwai, and with the arrival of Bill Solheim and his two students from the University of Hawaii, the first Americans to specialize in Southeast Asian archaeology. Thus, in 1966 when Steve Young, then a sociology student, brought to Bangkok the fragments of the now famous Ban Chiang painted pottery we were ready to pay attention, and when a three-week excavation of the Fine Arts Department discovered that the Ban Chiang site contained also stone tools and bronze, we realized it was most probably important.

In early 1967, a number of small finds—seals, figurines, ornaments—that seemed to be related to early Funan material of the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. turned up at Chansen, about seventy miles northwest of Bangkok. Bill Kohler, Philadelphia lawyer, superb photographer and friend of the Museum, was visiting Bangkok at that time and he offered to take a report on Chansen along with some Ban Chiang sherds back to Philadelphia. Here, Fro enters the story.
For some time, I had realized that there would be increasing problems in working in the Near East and that we should investigate the possibilities in either South America or Asia. When Bill Kohler returned from a visit to Bangkok in 1967 and reported on the friendly atmosphere in Thailand and said that Lisa would probably be able to help in any negotiations, I cabled George Dales to stop in Bangkok on his way back from Afghanistan and look at the scene. He reported favorably on the Chansem site and the attitude of the Thai officials and we worked out a project for two seasons' excavations, 1968 and 1969. George Dales and Bennett Bronson directed this excavation and were even able to take some of our graduate students with them, thanks to the Ford Foundation Training Grant.

Lisa: The above is not really a digression from the subject of Ban Chiang. Chansem is going to turn out to be very important in our future negotiations with the Thais. During Bill Kohler's visit in Bangkok, the Thai Fine Arts Department had done a small excavation at Ban Chiang under the direction of Vidya Intonsai. Bill took three sherds from there back to MASCA for TL testing.

Frø: Both Ralph and Mark Han of MASCA along with Bill Stevens of the Physics Department had put in several years of research on developing the thermoluminescence method of dating fired pottery, and had announced successful tests in Nature in 1966. I turned the Thai samples over to them, but testing was delayed for some time because the lab was preoccupied with correlating TL results with Iranian pottery of known date. Eventually Mark brought me the dates on the Thai sherds. 5000-3000 B.C.!

Archaeology has many surprises and this was one that my first reaction was to disbelieve. Lisa had brought back photographs of incised black pottery, handsome painted pottery and interesting small bronze pieces said to be from the bottom layers. We knew there was a large quantity of metal at the site, but I found the few reports we could get very vague on the precise distribution of bronze and iron. Still, at the time I was writing the annual report on Archaeology for the Encyclopaedia Britannica and had been following the work of Selvén and others in Thailand. I knew there were indications of early metal at Nuek Nok Tha and probably very early plant domestication at Spirit Cave. Also, I remembered that a few years ago Carl Sauer had argued that Southeast Asia was the source of some of the most ancient domesticated plants and animals—rice, pigs, chickens, etc. All this added up to the possibility that the region might be an area of innovation in very ancient times. We reported the dates to the Fine Arts Department in Bangkok and asked for more information on stratigraphy.

Lisa: When I returned to Thailand in the summer of 1971 as Southeast Asia Art and Archaeology Specialist for the Ford Foundation, the MASCA dates had spread to the public, and all Ban Chiang pottery, no matter the type, was considered to be 6,000 years old.

Yet, the collecting mania didn't start until the end of the year when some construction work in Ban Chiang uncovered a large number of striking, intricately painted pots. Some of them reached Bangkok and immediately the rush was on.

Princess Chumphon, often blamed for making acquisition fashionable, actually began the Suand Pakkad collection in her house with the idea of saving as many examples as possible from the souvenir hunters' run on Ban Chiang. "They will ship them all out of the country before the Fine Arts Department does anything!" she fumed.

I didn't really think an old clay pot was a G.L.'s idea of a souvenir, but I went with her to see for myself.

She was right. The whole village acted like bargain Day at Gimbel's. Some houses had the merchandise set up on tables beside the house, or on the ladder-like steps. Fresh pots under and around every house showed where the stock had come from, and here and there were clusters of Thai and American soldiers bargaining and buying. We were invited into the town's largest house and in ten minutes it was crowded with sellers and the wares spread out all over the floor. I went back to Bangkok very much disturbed, and determined to campaign for protection and excavation.

Frø: Lisa extended the campaign to Philadelphia, but in spite of my growing interest, there was little I could do at the time. George Dales was leaving us for...
The villagers not only sold the pottery they had collected from pits dug underneath their houses but also made copies. This fake pot is only half painted with the prehistoric design. Photograph by William Schafflter.

probable importance to early Thai history, requested that a suitable site for excavation be found. The officials of the local temple (temple) offered their grounds and early in 1972, two Fine Arts archaeologists, Poet Gebsam and Nkham Suthrattong, began to excavate.

In the same year there was some success in protecting the area from looting. On July 28, 1972, the National Executive Council passed a law making it illegal to buy, sell, or export the Ban Chiang artifacts and ordering registration of those already in private hands. 4000 pots were registered in a month, 8000 by the end of the year. Those numbers give some idea of what lay or had lain beneath the earth of the region.

By summer and the end of the digging season, the excavation in the wet grounds had produced a large quantity of material: stone tools, at least four separate types of pottery, bronze and iron tools, bracelets, ornaments, etc., and several human skeletons. The understaffed Fine Arts Department was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of material. It was evident to everyone that help with modern scientific techniques was badly needed to analyze and define what now looked like a hitherto unsuspected prehistoric civilization.

In September, just before I went on home leave, I had a letter from Balthin Arthaug, the Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Education, asking me if I would explore the possibility of collaboration "with some university museum in the United States" for a joint venture with Thai archaeologists at Ban Chiang and related areas.

From: When Lisa described what was being found in the excavation around the temple, and then, with a big smile, gave me the letter from the high Thai official, I immediately called our Expedition Committee together and told them I thought we had an invitation to form an expedition for Thail

land. They agreed that my inspection tour that winter should include Ban Chiang.

In February 1973, I stopped in Bangkok and Lisa made arrangements with the Fine Arts Department for Marina and me to visit the site. With Nkham, who had been one of the excavators, we took a night train to Udorn and then drove to Ban Chiang. Nkham seemed very popular with the villagers and we had a very friendly welcome. At house after house we climbed up ladders to the verandas and living room, were given tea and then shown the collection they had dug up under the chicken coop under the house. (Judging from the freshness of the holes all around the village, they were still digging in spite of the law.) The bronze and iron objects, mostly tools, knives or weapons and bracelets had little value in their eyes. When we showed our interest, they simply offered them to us as presents to guests. And when we explained that we did not buy antiques, they tried to present us with the valuable pots as well. [Nkham must have given us quite an introduction!]

Not only at Ban Chiang but at four or five other villages in the vicinity, we found the same profitable mining going on beneath the pile-supported houses. Marina was shocked at the sight of chickens eating or drinking from only slightly broken ancient painted pottery.

Within the compound of the Buddhist wot, the Thai archaeologists had made extensive exploratory cuts into undisturbed and deep deposits filled with graves. The cuts had been left open with the skeletons and goods left in place and intact as a public display. This was a tremendous help in getting an idea of the site.

The village of closely packed houses, most of them raised above the ground on piles, stood on a low mound surrounded by rice paddies. [Digging from the digging throughout the entire place, I thought the whole village must be a vast cemetery with thousands of graves. Some of the skeletons left in the open excavation seemed to me to be extraordinarily large and well-formed people for early Southeast Asia. Who in the world were they? Why did they settle here and not in some more fertile area? Or had there been great climatic changes?]

I was convinced we really must excavate here, and soon, or all the pottery would be in private hands or in antique shops, and all the other evidence of that civilization tossed into the local rubbish pit. Months ago, Lisa had sent us the whole forearms of a skeleton ringed with eight or ten bronze bracelets, the first picture we had of the actual use of ornament.
I went back to Philadelphia to present the Ban Chiang Project, and Chet as our choice candidate for a staff appointment. Just after I returned, we received the TL dates done by the Japanese on material from the wet excavation. There were fifteen tests; one date was given as A.D. 750, probably when the site was abandoned; the other fourteen ran from 4000 to 2000 B.C., and the oldest four were consistent with our own TL dates. That looked like good corroboration for the probable date of the site.

Lisa: Back in Bangkok, Fro had left me with the job of getting a formal agreement underway. That proceeded with the usual bureaucratic delays. The University was slow to confirm Chet’s appointment and without it he couldn’t be named as a co-director. Meanwhile, Chai Yon-di, semi-retired chief archaeologist, and I searched old contracts and devised one that we and our advisers considered simple and fair, and with reasonable speed, the Thai Cabinet approved the draft on September 15. There were no changes but it was not until January 9, 1974 that it was signed by Capt. Sanpob Pimonta for the Thai government, by me for the Museum, as authorized by Fro in his absence, and by Chester Gorman and Piist Chaoesuwongse as co-directors. We were launched.

Fro: I had been given a great deal of encouragement by the New York Caltex office for long-term funding for excavations in Southeast Asia and Indonesia, but final approval rested with the Jakarta manager and the Indonesian chief of the oil consortium. Negotiations with them gave me a chance to visit Chet and Piist shortly after they had opened the site. They had only uncovered the first stratum and had found the first artifact—an early 20th century toilet bowl!

Both Chet and Piist were seriously trying to educate the villagers on the reasons for preservation and the antiquities law. Marina’s comment was that they had succeeded to the extent that she was now offering pottery surreptitiously instead of openly.

The first season’s excavation yielded early material; however, the renowned painted pottery was poorly represented. When I returned during the second season, Chet and Piist had moved to the only non-looted spot in the village—directly under a main road! Traffic was detoured and between the houses forming the street a thatched roof was built so the work could continue into the rainy season. The Thais were certainly living up to their part of the commitment: there was now a dormitory and rest house for groups of students and extra helpers; as well as a pot-cleaning and laboratory shed; ground was being broken for a museum. Chet had brought in a number of well-known specialists and I saw a constant program of teaching and demonstrations.

Lisa: The Ford Foundation was now providing funds for the service of experts on paleoentology, soils, metals, pollen, etc. and for the participation of archaeology students, including some from other countries of Southeast Asia. They called it “Ban Chiang University.”
Fro: I could see it was a difficult site for stratigraphy because beetles had worked through the soil, blurring definitions between strata. And, as it was basically a cemetery, they were finding very little charcoal large enough for dependable C-14 dating. Nevertheless, those samples we had tended to confirm the early dates.

Sometime after the first season, William Honan of the New York Times called to say he was intrigued by the Thai pottery he had seen and was writing a story about Ban Chiang for their Sunday Magazine section. I thought the article should be as accurate as possible and I discussed it with him, giving him the dates we had and also data from Non Nok Tha and the Spirit Cave.

The article appeared on June 8, 1975 and created something of a flap. It quoted me as predicting that Southeast Asia would turn out to be the place of origin for metallurgy, thus downgrading the Near East as the center for the origin of all the major elements of civilization. Even our own people at the Museum and the University got excited about it. Jim Muhly wrote a letter to the New York Times damning the whole thing, and Bob Maddin was quoted as saying that Fro was wrecking the reputation of the Museum. Later, when we had more C-14 dates they both accepted Southeast Asia as at least one of the earliest regions for the manufacture of metals.

Later, Joe Alsop wrote a feature about Ban Chiang for the Washington Post (November 8, 1975). He told me that he received more letters as a result of that story than from any of his political pieces—probably because he upset so many traditional beliefs about the Far East.

On my retirement, I left Chet and a group of volunteers and students unpacking eighteen tons of material from Ban Chiang and determinedly finding places to put it. Lisa had returned to the Museum and PIsit had arrived to take up a two-year graduate scholarship. We could confidently expect the work in Southeast Asia to add yet another chapter to the history of our search for man—a happy final chapter to the record of my years as director of The University Museum.

Chet’s tragic death in 1981 was a great loss to all of us, friends, colleagues, the Museum, and to his students who benefited from his wide knowledge and who will continue, as he wished, with their own discoveries of Southeast Asia’s ancient civilization.