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# THE PAST IN SOUTHEAST ASIA'S PRESENT

Gordon P. Means, Editor

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## BAN CHIENG:

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL PAST AND ENTREPRENEURIAL PRESENT

Penny Van Esterik

Introduction

The discovery of a new archaeological site is generally considered an exciting event in North America. But any one site has a different meaning to the archaeologist who will excavate and analyze the material remains, to the cultural anthropologist who must incorporate potential new knowledge into pre-existing models of cultural development, and to the general public who may be curious about objects from another time period. But the impact of a site on the foreign, academic community and audience, is very different from the impact a site may have on the local and national community in which the excavation is conducted. Discovery and excavation of a site may have unforeseen consequences, or at least, consequences which are seldom examined by anthropologists. Such a site is *Ban Chieng* in northeast Thailand, discovered in the early 1960s and presently undergoing excavation by the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania and the Thai Fine Arts Department. In this paper, I will briefly describe what is known about the site, and the activities leading up to the present intensive excavation. I will then contrast the impact the site has had on the western academic community and their public, with the impact the site has had in Thailand, and the consequences for the local and national Thai community.

Description of the Site

Excavations are still in progress at Ban Chieng under the joint auspices of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania and the Thai Fine Arts Department. Since site reports are not yet available for the fieldwork done over the last three years, the background information on the site given for this paper must be regarded as tentative. It is based on Thai sources written before the present extensive excavations began (Charoenwongsa 1973), brief news reports from the excavators in *Newsweek* (May 31, 1975), and my own research on the painted pottery associated with that site. From Sept. 1973 to Aug. 1974, I photographed and analyzed the painted pottery in private and museum collections in order to have a record of the artifacts removed from the site before the official excavations began (c.f. Van Esterik 1976).

Drawing a composite picture of the site from these sources, an unusual cultural pattern emerges which has important implications

for cultural history in mainland Southeast Asia. Occupation of the site spanned a period from 3600 B.C. to 250 B.C., based on carbon 14, thermoluminescence, and fluorine content tests. (Gorman and Charoenwongsa 1976). The type site is named after the village of Ban Chieng, Udorn province, northeast Thailand where the red on buff painted pottery was first encountered. It is a large cemetery mound which can be divided into six funerary phases. More recent surveys indicate the extent of nearby habitation sites as well.

The initial occupants of Ban Chieng were settled village rice farmers, skilled hunters, and superb craftsmen. Evidence for this statement comes from the 126 human burials excavated by 1975. Considerable ritual activity was probably associated with each burial. With both the flexed burials and jar burials of the earliest phases and the extended burials of the later phases, an assortment of pottery, metal, bone, and ivory tools and ornaments accompanied the bodies.

The excavators found a wide range of decorative techniques used on the pottery. These techniques change in popularity through time. The earliest phase is associated with black incised and burnished pottery, followed by cord-marked, incised and painted, painted red on buff, and finally a cruder red slipped and burnished ware (Gorman and Charoenwongsa 1976:26).

Evidence from the site suggests that the techniques of cast bronze metallurgy, iron smelting and forging were developed indigenously in northeast Thailand at dates significantly earlier than previously thought. Furthermore, there is good reason to think that these techniques are different from those used in Mesopotamia and China for the manufacture of bronze.

It was the red on buff painted pottery that revealed the existence of the site in the mid sixties, and the red on buff pottery that almost caused the destruction of all evidence concerning this important site. For during road construction in Ban Chieng in 1966, an American student in the area observed the red on buff pottery protruding from the fresh cuts made for the road construction and took the pottery to Bangkok for evaluation. Through a complex set of circumstances, the sherds were tested at the University of Pennsylvania Museum and were dated in the fourth millennium B.C. When this became public knowledge, it became a race between the archaeologists and the pot hunters. I will elaborate on this later.

Pot hunters and collectors had an edge, for they were often extraordinarily wealthy and determined. In comparison, the Thai Fine Arts Department could provide only limited funds for excavation of the site in 1967.

In the next four years, a total of fourteen test pits were dug in Ban Chieng and the surrounding areas by official excavators. But hundreds of pits were dug by unofficial excavators and pot hunters. Fortunately, with support from the Ford Foundation, the Thai Fine Arts Department and the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania began the extensive excavations in 1974 that are still continuing today. This extensive interdisciplinary operation brought in experts in fauna, pollen, and metals to extract the maximum information from this extraordinary site.

### Impact of the Site on the Foreign Academic Community

Ban Chieng has had considerable impact on anthropologists interested in Southeast Asia. The possible 4th millennium B.C. evidence for rice farming communities in northeast Thailand utilizing local bronze technology and elaborate pottery, disputes the widely held belief that prehistoric Southeast Asia was a "cultural backwater" until extensive contacts with India in the first centuries A.D. Recent textbooks in introductory anthropology now include sites in Thailand as examples of the early domestication of plants, or the early development of bronze technology. For example, Marvin Harris, in his popular introductory text, *Culture, People, Nature*, refers to the possible domestication of plants at Spirit Cove, Thailand, and wet-rice farming at 5500 B.P. at Ban Chieng (Harris 1975: 206-7). Pfeiffer discusses the importance of Ban Chieng in his new book on *The Emergence of Society* (Pfeiffer 1976: 233). Minimally, then, Thailand has contributed a new set of "firsts" which predate traditional centres such as Mesopotamia or China. These questions of where and when certain traits first appeared are of minimal theoretical interest to anthropologists.

More importantly, cultural anthropologists who have incorporated Ban Chieng into their new interpretations of Southeast Asian prehistory, are utilizing explanations emphasizing indigenous development and local adaptation rather than theories of migration or diffusion of cultural traits, primarily from the Huang Ho valley. This view of mainland Southeast Asia as innovative rather than a passive receiver of traits from the "outside" will call for a new interpretation of Indianization, the process by which mainland Southeast Asian societies adopted Hindu-Buddhist traits from India. Clearly, Indian traits must have been borrowed selectively rather than imposed on technologically simple tribal groups (c.f. Mabbett 1977).

### Impact of the Site on the General Public in the West

But knowledge of this site has not been contained in academic circles. Brief and often sensational reports have appeared in popular magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. As a result of this publicity, wealthy collectors, and museum curators wanted to obtain objects from Ban Chieng for display. Several American and European museums now display Ban Chieng bronze and the red on buff painted vessels. Leading art auctions in London and New York have printed catalogues advertising the painted pottery. Sotheby Parke-Bernet of New York, for example, auctioned off 43 vessels two years ago for prices up to \$1900 each (Honan 1975: 62). A final and unique aspect of this site on the general public in the west, the Metropolitan Museum has sold the right to reproduce patterns from the painted pottery to a prominent linen manufacturer who wants to use the designs on sheets and bedspreads.

### Impact of the Site on the Local Thai Community

The impact of the site on the Thai local community is not unrelated to the interest of the general public in the west. Located about four kilometers from a paved highway connecting the provincial capitals of Udorn and Sakon Nakorn, the village of Ban Chieng is relatively accessible by road. The present population of rice

farmers identify themselves as Thai Phuan, descendants of four families who migrated from Laos about 180 years ago (Krairikh 1973: 146). Their descendants found themselves literally sitting on a gold mine.

It is difficult to piece together the progress of the illegal excavations in the village, but by 1972, the only unexcavated piece of land where Thai university students in archaeology could drop a trench in a neighbouring village was in the centre of the one road into town. Illegal excavations began under farmers' houses, and then continued in their rice fields.

The official excavations carried out by the Fine Arts Department in the sixties provided the training ground for local village entrepreneurs who used the trenches as a basis for their own pot-hunting, or copied the excavation techniques in other parts of the village. Pots found by the "official" excavators by day disappeared by night. With the purchase of co-operation from the local police, several farmers who formerly lived close to subsistence level were able to purchase Toyota trucks with the profits made from selling pottery and bronze. The primary purpose of the trucks was to transport the large burial urns to the town of Udorn, or to the American air base near Udorn, where they could be sold to middlemen. A secondary effect of the trucks was the alteration of the marketing patterns of the village women. Formerly utilizing the small village market, with the purchase of the trucks, they could buy and sell conveniently at the larger provincial capital market in Udorn.

The painted vessels, kept first because they were beautiful and brought good luck, soon attracted the attention of antiquities collectors in Udorn, the American air base, and eventually Bangkok. Wealthy businessmen and the aristocracy made frequent trips to Ban Chieng, buying up in job lots all the painted pottery that the farmers could provide. Some conducted their own field expeditions in the tradition of the "gentlemen antiquarians" of Europe. Others offered to fund professional excavations in return for half the recovered artifacts. (The offer, I hear, was regretfully declined). Vessels that sold for fifty cents in the village could be resold in provincial towns for \$50, in Bangkok for several hundred, and in art dealers' shops in London, Tokyo, and New York for over a thousand dollars apiece. The ensuing intrigue and corruption surrounding the illegal sale of antiquities can best be left for a detective story. *The New York Times Magazine* confirms this impression, titling their report, "The Case of the Hot Pots" (Honan 1975). Similar stories have been reported for other old and new world sites that have produced artifacts of potential value (c.f. Meyer 1973).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the pottery and bronze artifacts were readily available in the village, and attracted a good number of tourists. The tourist trade brought even more money into the community from the sale of snacks and locally woven cloth. But the tourist trade had a more lasting effect on the community. As the supply of vessels dwindled, and as stricter antiquities laws began to be enforced in Thailand, villagers with a good knowledge of the designs on the vessels began making and selling imitation vessels. Designs were repainted on old vessels where the paint had

worn off, and some artists became experts at reconstructing the designs. Since broken vessels receive a much lower price, vessels were reconstructed to appear complete, albeit altered in form. The commonest physical reconstructions include cutting the top half from vessels to form perfect unrestricted vessels, joining two pedestals together to form a bowl on a stand, and filing the broken rims off vessels. Some vessels are so pieced together that they are almost created from a mosaic of spare sherds.

Modern village potters also copy the vessel shapes of Ban Chieng urns using the same coiling technique used by the original "Ban Chieng" potters. Generally the designs are incised or painted by villagers very familiar with the original designs. These products are only moderately profitable since they are not sold as antiquities and there is no intention on the part of the artist to deceive the buyer. However, unknowing tourists in Bangkok may have been duped by this ware.

Other vessels made recently are clearly intended to deceive the buyer. Artists make exact copies of the vessel shapes of the red on buff ware, and paint them almost exactly to match the designs of the ancient artists.

The best work is done in Bangkok, often by art students, and is exceptionally beautiful. I am happy to report that many of these fakes have appeared in museums and antiquities shops to be auctioned off for several thousand dollars.

Plates 1 and 2 illustrate a sample of original Ban Chieng vessels, modern reproductions, clever forgeries, and clothing printed with Ban Chieng designs. In the first plate, the first three vessels are original, while the remaining vessels are modern reproductions by the same artist who designed the dresses. The clothing illustrated in plate two was also done by the same Bangkok artist. The large urns in plate two demonstrate the sophistication and complexity of the painted red on buff ware. The modern forgeries (4 and 5) cannot begin to reproduce the subtlety and appeal of the original designs. The third plate shows an artist's assistant mass producing simpler Ban Chieng pottery to be sold as tourist souvenirs.

In addition to the notoriety and cash flowing into the village in the last few years, Ban Chieng villagers have gained a new perspective on the past. Even though the makers of the Ban Chieng bronze and pottery artifacts in the fourth millennium B.C. were not ethnically Thai or Lao, the present day occupants of Ban Chieng are aware that their predecessors were rice farmers like themselves, very skilled artisans, and concerned with "correct burial rituals". As the schoolmaster said, "after the King visited the excavations, we understood that the pottery was not just a curio to sell to rich foreigners. When His Majesty visited, we know what was in our soil held great meaning for our country." (*Los Angeles Times* 1973:2).

#### Impact of the Site on the Thai National Community

Thanks to the generous support of the Ford Foundation, the excavations at Ban Chieng have involved large numbers of Thai students of archaeology. The students were given firsthand experience working on a complex site. Thai professional archaeologists shared the most up-to-date techniques of excavation and analysis with their American counterparts, and Vietnamese and Cambodian archaeologists

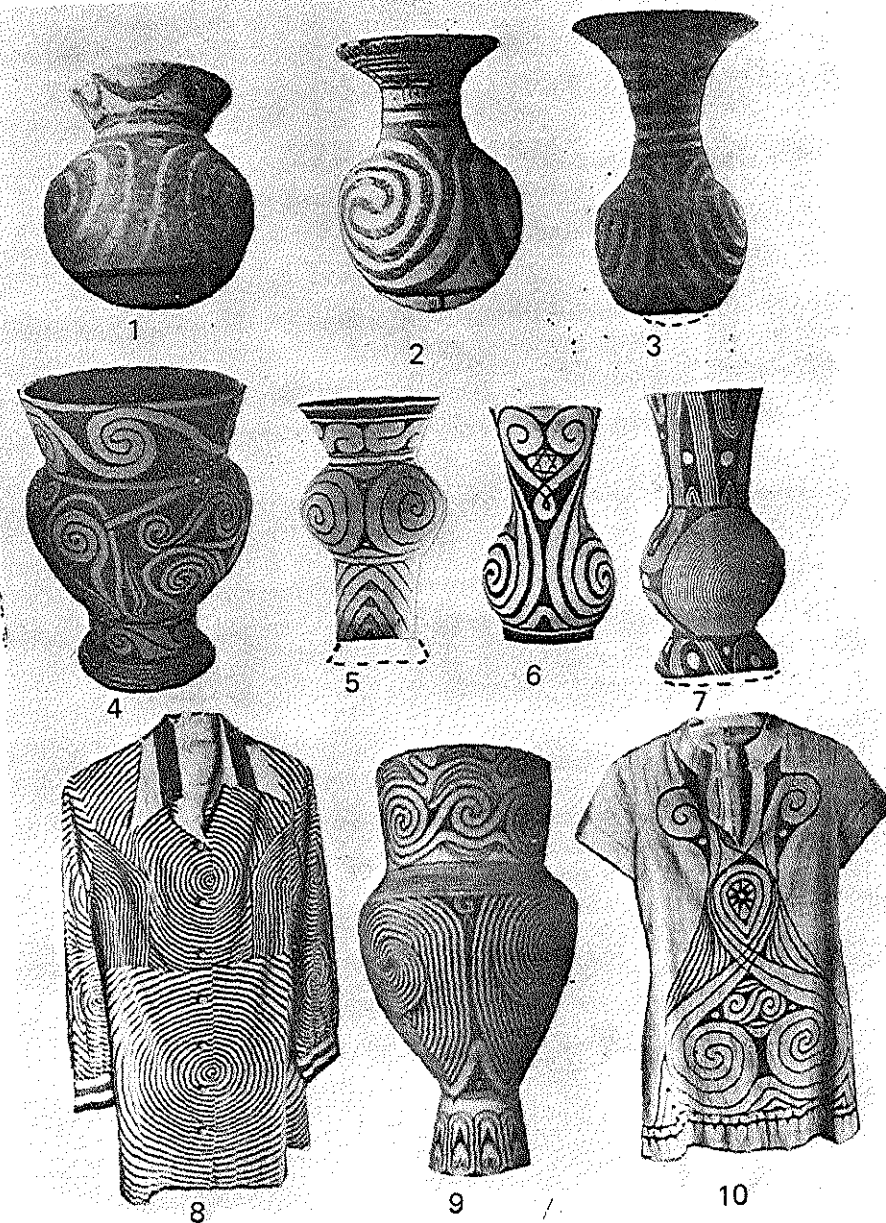


Plate 1. Ban Chieng painted pottery (1, 2, 3), Ban Chieng reproductions (4, 5, 6, 7), and clothing decorated with Ban Chieng designs (8, 9, 10).

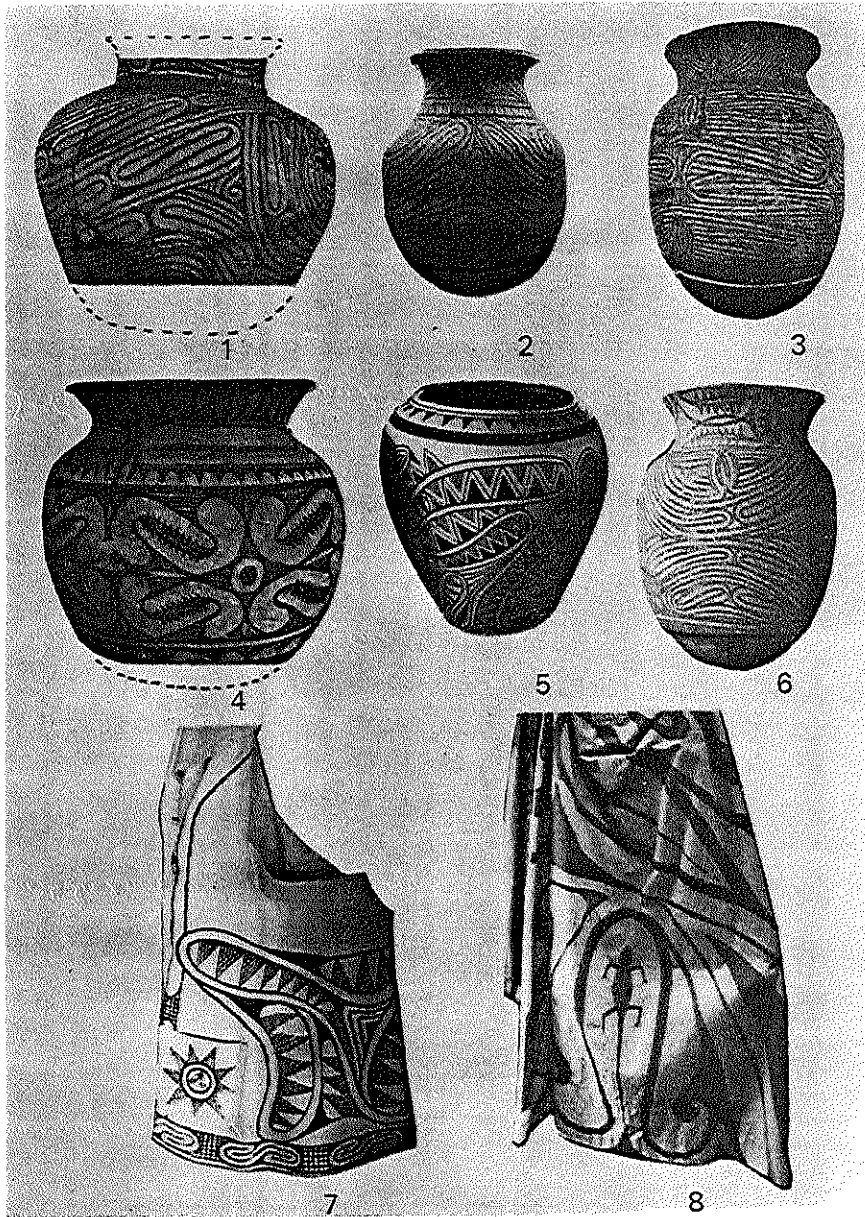


Plate 2. Ban Chieng painted pottery (1, 2, 3, 6), repainted vessel (4), Ban Chieng reproduction (5), and clothing decorated with Ban Chieng designs (7, 8).

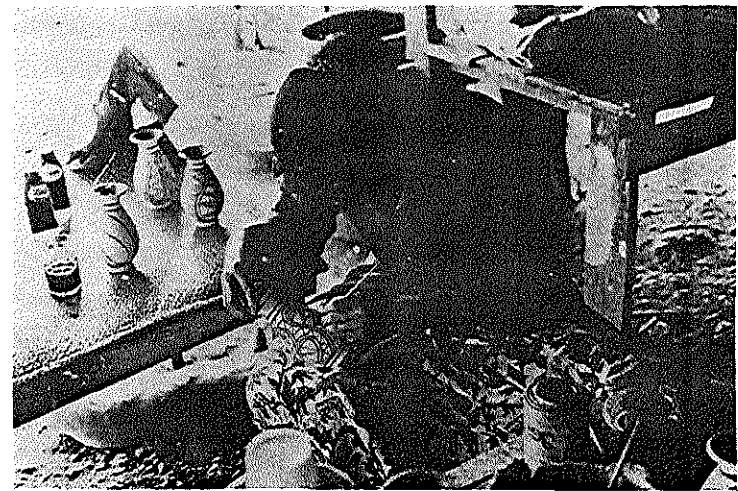
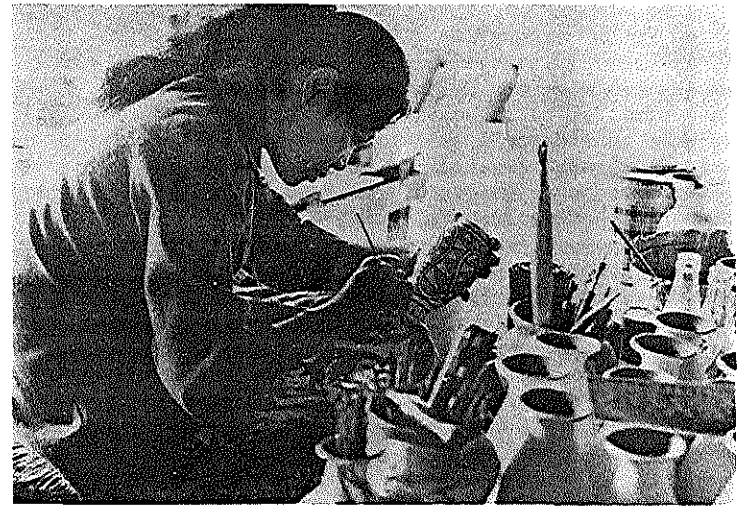


Plate 3. Artist reproducing Ban Chieng designs.

also participated in the excavation (Gorman and Charoenwongsa 1976: 25). In fact, archaeology as a discipline was "upgraded" to some extent, and it is unlikely that any similar projects would be attempted on an unrealistically small budget. Formally, pre-Buddhist sites were considered less noteworthy archaeologically. As one of the Thai excavators remarked, it is like digging up your own identity. The importance of Thailand's prehistoric past has become fuel for contemporary nationalism, although, like many developing nations, Thailand cannot afford to invest extensively in prehistory.

A more tangible affect of the discovery of Ban Chieng has been the enforcement of antiquities laws. Although formally "on the books", they were most carefully enforced for the exportation of Buddha images. In 1972, a decree expressly forbade the digging, selling or transferring of any artifacts from Ban Chieng and surrounding areas. Further, collectors were required to register their collections with the National Museum, or pay a fine. Theoretically, the illegal exportation of antiquities to Europe and North America has slowed or ceased, and the precedent is there for preventing a re-occurrence in other sites in Thailand.

#### Conclusions

The impact of this one site in Thailand, and overseas is clearly different, but the two processes are not unrelated. Much of the looting that went on in Ban Chieng must be regarded as a response to the demand for antiquities in the international art market. Even museum purchases must be considered here, although many museums have voluntarily agreed not to purchase items without legal bill of sale, and provenience information from authorized excavations.

The activities at Ban Chieng illustrate another alternative, however. It may be possible and profitable to develop substitute art objects of equal appeal to collectors. The development of "imitation" Ban Chieng red on buff vessels, may protect the original vessels to a certain extent, by flooding the antiquities market with reasonable substitutes, and lowering the selling price of the vessels. For the original vessels are of value to professional archaeologists only in the context of the excavation itself, or for limited technical experiments such as thin sectioning of pottery, or thermoluminescence dating.

The development of imitation Ban Chieng designs by modern Thai artists suggests important theoretical questions that have not been developed here. Briefly, consider how little anthropologists know about the cultural process of imitation. How do you distinguish between "imitation of" and "in the style of" ethnographically or archaeologically? If an imitator recreates a Ban Chieng design in 1975, is it any less "grammatical" or culturally appropriate than the designs created by Ban Chieng artists 3000 years ago? These and related questions can best be treated within the paradigm of cognitive anthropology.

A final lesson to be learned from Ban Chieng is that the archaeologist excavating in Southeast Asia has a double responsibility--to the academic community supporting his research and to the people his excavation may affect. In addition to the ethical standards that archaeologists impose on themselves as a group, archaeologists must be prepared to meet the same ethical responsibilities expected

of ethnographers; that is, they must be prepared to predict the possible consequences of their research, and take appropriate steps to insure that research on the past does not interfere with and damage lives in the present.

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