

Penny Van Esterik

# Designs on Pots

## Ban Chiang and the Politics of Heritage in Thailand

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Asian Studies

## Designs on Pots



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# Designs on Pots

*Ban Chiang and the Politics of Heritage in Thailand*

*Penny Van Esterik*

Amsterdam University Press

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# Preface

Hollowed out,  
Clay makes a pot.  
Where the pot's not  
Is where the pot's useful.  
Tao Te Ching, p. 11 (Le Guin 2011)<sup>1</sup>

Why this book? The time to ask this question is before it is written. In my case, I am still waiting to see exactly what it becomes. It is part memoir, part aide-mémoire, part archive, and partly an effort to record an imperfect recollection of personal experiences. It makes few truth claims, except when citing professional archaeologists who excavated and analyzed results from the site of Ban Chiang in Northeast Thailand. The recent Thai Archaeology Monographs (TAM) from the Ban Chiang project at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology have contributed the most complete and valuable stories about the site. But since they focus more on the human remains and the metallurgy, there are clearly more stories to be told.

Fifty years ago, I was mesmerized by the designs on an old pot. Fifty years later, I realize that the pots are implicated in many interesting stories. I put these partial stories in this book for others to follow up on. They are the stories of a non-specialist—an anthropologist who can't stay in her own lane, unlike specialists who tend to be very skilled in staying in their own lanes. Fortunately, anthropologists have very wide lanes.

This book began as a way to pass on some photographs of painted pots associated with Ban Chiang to someone who might be interested in them. I set out to share my archive of images along with some necessary commentary on my experiences with the pots. Along the way, it morphed into a set of additional partial stories that needed to be told about the pots, none of them complete. Some remain unfinished because COVID-19 prevented the travel needed to complete the research. How much further along is the Ban Chiang story than it was fifty years ago when I first saw the Ban Chiang pots in the antique markets of Bangkok? How many more stories have been added from 1969 to 2020, and how many more should be added?

<sup>1</sup> From Ursula K. Le Guin's English version: Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching. A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way* (Boston/London: Shambhala, 2011).

There are many paths that Ban Chiang painted pots have taken to reach their current locations. There are no guarantees that these will be their final destinations. Tourists purchase ceramic objects as souvenirs. Collectors acquire the pots from antique dealers. Donors then sell them to museums. At some point, museums de-access them. Meanwhile, their life histories are incomplete.

In my low moments, I fear it is the story of an aging academic looking back with regret for the path not taken, for not speaking out sooner, for not keeping up with an important regional topic. I hope it is about more than my unwillingness to throw out a piece of my academic past—clinging on to what should have been let go or destroyed years ago. But that fear also raises the important question of how aging academics can responsibly pass on the knowledge they have acquired through trial and error, error, error ... to the next generation. In an era without apprentices, it is difficult to share unpublished information that quickly becomes dated. How do seniors pass their stuff on respectfully in an ethical manner to the next generation of anthropologists? Is there a way to build on our experience over time as we deal with the trajectories of theoretical change in the discipline?

The title of this book, *Designs on Pots*, plays on the double meaning of design as a plan to make something artfully and artful scheming. Both meanings are evident in the chapters of the book as they present alternative frames from different time periods and contexts. In each chapter I explore some of the alternative paths taken by Ban Chiang painted pottery and the people who interact with it, and I tell other stories that exist alongside the evidence-based archaeological story.

The first chapter considers how my personal story intersects with painted pottery attributed to the prehistoric inhabitants of Ban Chiang by drawing on memories of events in my life and career, looking at the pots between 1969 and 1974 and later at texts about Ban Chiang from 2018 to 2020.

Chapter 2 provides the archaeological context of Ban Chiang—context that was not available to me in the seventies and context that has been lost forever because of looting at the site. I first consider the sequence of discoveries about the site, followed by the depositional context based on evidence collected during professional excavations at the site in the sixties and seventies and their interpretation in relation to a regional chronology of northeast Thailand. Of course, by its nature, this evidence, like all archaeological evidence, is always incomplete and always partial.

Chapter 3 is framed around the designs themselves and the set of symmetry operations derived from regularities first described in the fields of geometry and crystallography that could be applied to analyze them. This

chapter looks more generally at the aesthetic context of the decorative elements used by these prehistoric potter-artists that continues to attract forgers, viewers, and collectors (and me).

Chapters 4 and 5 bring in the modern Ban Chiang villagers as they uncover the treasure trove under their houses, repair and restore the pots they found there, and sell them. The looted material from Ban Chiang described in Chapter 4 is usually considered context-free and therefore of no use to professional archaeologists. But looted pots also have histories, as they move from a village to an antique dealer to a private home. The market for looted illegal antiquities provides an additional frame for examining Ban Chiang painted pottery. Chapter 5 explores the production of fakes and forgeries by talented and not-so-talented artists in the seventies and eighties, as they try to reproduce the designs made by Late Period Ban Chiang potter-artists.

The final chapter examines how Ban Chiang is framed in relation to Thai national identity and heritage production. Critical heritage studies remind us that heritage is always being constructed and invented in the present. How does Ban Chiang fit or not fit into the national historical narrative of the Thai state?

One motivation for taking up this project late in life was watching the destruction of the Buddha images in the Bamiyan Valley, Afghanistan, and the buildings of Palmyra, Syria. Much like the search for the last Komodo dragon, I do not intend to simply reproduce a discourse about a part of our human heritage that is rapidly disappearing before we even knew what it was. After all, Buddhists recognize the impermanence of all things and can probably let go of the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas more easily than heritage managers can.

I wish the book could be about the minds and memories of the people who lived in Ban Chiang in the first millennium BCE in what is now Thailand. Rationally, I cannot claim to make that connection, but some cognitive archaeologists might be able to take these stories farther in that direction. At the very least, it has been great to clear a few boxes out of the basement.



# Acknowledgements

When so much time has elapsed between research and publication, it is impossible to thank all the people who helped me in the late sixties and early seventies with my original work on Ban Chiang pottery; it is equally difficult to thank all those who helped and inspired me with this publication, although I am grateful to everyone—neighbours, relatives, and friends—too numerous to mention.

While writing this I became even more conscious of how much I owe my late teachers and mentors, Warren Peterson and Kris Lehman, Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois. Donn Bayard made my initial work possible by introducing me to the Thai police who intercepted many of the looters and allowed me to examine their collections. I also thank the many anonymous pottery owners in Thailand who gave me access to their collections, and in North America I thank Gloria Fitch and Maureen Cullingham for showing me their collections.

The references point to some of the academics whose work I found particularly useful. A few deserve special mention. For inspiring my work on symmetry, I thank Dorothy Washburn; for informing my work on all things Southeast Asian, I thank Richard O'Connor; for sharing her work on contemporary Ban Chiang, I thank Marie Nakamura; for her expertise on all things related to Ban Chiang, I thank Joyce White. And for modelling what an exceptional anthropologist can contribute to the discipline, I thank Michael Herzfeld.

At York University, the York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR) helped in innumerable ways, particularly Alicia Filipowich and Alex Felipe, who turned fifty-year-old photographs into digital images and is responsible for their presentation in this book.

At IIAS I am grateful to the book editors of the Asian Heritages Series, to Michael Herzfeld and Adèle Esposito for their support of this publication, and for the two anonymous reviewers whose suggestions did much to improve the manuscript. In addition, I want to thank Mary Lynn van Dijk who guided me through the review and publication process, finding and correcting many errors along the way.

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As always, I acknowledge the wonderful help and support I received from my husband, John, without whom I would not have been able to begin, let alone complete, this book.



# 1 The Personal Past: Designs on Pots

## Abstract

Chapter One of *Designs on Pots* considers how my personal story intersects with the story about the archaeological site of Ban Chiang, northeast Thailand, as I encountered painted pottery from Ban Chiang (1969–74) and later examined texts about Ban Chiang (2018–20). It discusses how I traced the looted pottery in public and private collections and photographed several hundred vessels discussed in the book. It reminds the reader how personal and chance experiences shape research agendas. The introductory chapter also includes a discussion of advocacy and ethics in anthropology, methods, and theoretical arguments.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, biography, graduate studies, Thai archaeology

The narrative of one life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives;  
it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals  
derive their identity.  
(Connerton 1989, 21)

I identify as an anthropologist, with a slight undercoating of archaeology, which was triggered fifty years ago by seeing pots with unusual designs in a Bangkok market. In a grade seven project on choosing a career, I wrote that I wanted to be an archaeologist; much later I learned that anthropology was the best route to that career. I received my BA in anthropology from the University of Toronto in 1967, with several summer seasons of archaeological fieldwork under my belt. But life does not always unfold in expected ways. Chapter 1 is much like a memoir in which I view a piece of my academic life retrospectively while envisioning it as somewhat integrated with an objective history (cf. Connerton 1989, 19)—in this case, the site reports from Ban Chiang, a prehistoric site in northeast Thailand. My life story is one rather trivial context (although not to me) for framing Ban Chiang



painted pottery. But that frame has influenced subsequent frames used in this book, and therefore, it becomes embedded in the Ban Chiang story.

After graduation, my husband John and I travelled to Thailand as CUSO volunteers (originally called Canadian University Service Overseas). How different our lives might have been if Thailand had not provided the formative experience for participating in and learning about another way of life. We worked in Thailand from 1967 to 1969, part of the first group of Canadian volunteers in the country. We were a dozen or so, meeting up with hundreds of American Peace Corps volunteers who had received wonderful language training from courses provided by the US military. Our training in Thai language was minimal and inadequate except to get us through the basics of ordering food from the market. We were first assigned to work at the Tribal Research Centre in Chiang Mai; the assignments were rapidly changed for some unknown reason. I was assigned to teach technical English for anthropology students at Thammasat University and archaeology students at Silpakorn University. ("I am matrilineal, he is bilateral, they are Paleolithic.") With an anthropology degree in hand, many of my male students aspired to become Border Patrol Police and some succeeded. The archaeology students were more resistant to English courses. I sometimes wonder if I failed some archaeology student in English who later in life became involved with excavations at Ban Chiang. Over the two years, we also participated in studies of rural Thailand, since John was assigned to assist Jacques Amyot at Chulalongkorn University in setting up a field school for ethnographic research and community studies.

Only in retrospect can I appreciate that the time we spent in Thailand coincided with the most active involvement of American troops stationed in Thailand during the Vietnam War. At least 50,000 troops, mostly Air Force, moved in and out of Thai military bases with little formal acknowledgement from the Thai government (Kislenko 2004). We met military wives teaching English language classes and soldiers on R&R (rest and recreation) in Bangkok and beach towns like Pattaya. Once, an officer took us to a supper club and show in a Bangkok military hotel. One Christmas we snagged a frozen turkey and a bottle of scotch from a friend of a friend who had a friend with access to the American PX (post exchange). More ominously, we were encouraged not to travel to the northeast of the country or to Laos because of rumoured communist insurgencies. While living in Bangkok, it was easy to forget that Americans were bombing North Vietnam from Thai bases.

In 1969 I had the honour of co-teaching an introductory archaeology course at Silpakorn University with Dr. Chin You-di, at that time the Director of the Thai Fine Arts Department (FAD). Our division of labour in the course

was unusual; he would do Thai prehistory, and I would do the rest of the world. The book he assigned me to teach from was VG Childe's 1956 book *A Short Introduction to Archaeology*. At the time, he was engaged in writing the first description of Ban Chiang painted pottery (published in Thai in 1972). He received a few pottery samples from Stephen Young, who is credited with re-discovering Ban Chiang in 1967 (see Chapter 2).

My weekly Thai language lesson included trying painfully to read his book in Thai and then translate it into English. He introduced me to Dr. Sud Sangvichien at Sirirat Hospital, Bangkok, who had a collection of human remains and artifacts from Ban Chiang that he displayed in a small museum at the hospital.

One day in 1969, I was poking around in an antique store in Bangkok and saw two ceramic jars decorated with curvilinear designs in dark red paint. I asked the shop owner where they were from, and he explained that they came from northeast Thailand and they were examples of the earliest painted pottery in Thailand. I took photographs of them and soon saw other examples in antique markets around Bangkok. Later I associated them with the samples that I had seen in the offices of Dr. Sud and Dr. Chin.

As our two-year volunteer adventure came to an end, we began to plan for graduate school. I recall taking our anthropology graduate entrance exams (GRE) in the International School of Bangkok along with several hundred Thai students taking their English-language qualifying exams, accompanied by several dogs running in and out during the exams. As a result of possible confusion with submitting our exam results, our admission to graduate school was delayed because the Foreign Student Office at the University of Illinois could not find our English test scores (for two students born in Toronto, Canada, with degrees from the University of Toronto?). Eventually, the problem was solved, and we began our PhD programs in anthropology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign the following January.

The timing could not have been worse. For my thesis research, I had been contemplating taking a broad regional approach to the relation between Buddhist and Brahman ritual, which would involve research in Cambodia. We arrived at the University of Illinois just as Nixon ordered the bombing of Cambodia. My plans were in flux, as we joined in protest against the Vietnam War. We were impressed with Jack Peltason, Chancellor of the University of Illinois, because he managed to keep the school open in the face of anti-war protests and the deployment of the National Guard on campus. One of my favorite memories was John walking past an armed National Guard who was blocking his access to campus to return his library books due that day. No one would stop him from returning library books on time.

While taking graduate seminars, I was a teaching assistant for introductory anthropology courses, usually holding tutorials in cultural anthropology. As I was one of the few graduate students studying both cultural anthropology and archaeology, I was occasionally a tutorial assistant for the introductory archaeology course. On the first day of class, I recall the lecturer directing the students to meet their teaching assistants, addressing them as the large, bearded men in the back row, and me—a harbinger of things to come.

We completed our coursework and began planning for doctoral research. I kept the image of those pots in the back of my mind as we returned to Thailand in 1971 to further our research projects. Once there, I continued to stalk antique shops, tourist shops and the weekend market at Jatujak looking for Ban Chiang painted pottery and Ban Chiang “souvenirs” now that I knew a little more about the site.

I was originally planning to continue work on Thai village religion, following up on a point that Stanley Tambiah raised (1970) about the relation between Buddhism and Brahmanism. My first published paper (1973) was on topknot ceremonies in Thailand. I saw them on children in the village in Uthong and later participated in a public topknot-cutting ceremony at the Brahman temple in Bangkok. In the 1970s Bangkok Thais insisted that topknots no longer existed in the country but were part of the distant past.<sup>1</sup>

To further complicate life, I found that I was pregnant, and I doubted my ability to continue research and carry out fieldwork in a Thai village with a baby in tow. I was expected and encouraged to drop out of the graduate program at the University of Illinois, but I would not consider that. This was also the era of feminist consciousness raising, dreams of joint appointments, and affirmative action for women. John and I figured that if our research interests were better differentiated, with less overlap in our research topics, we could one day share a joint appointment. With the American Southeast Asian experts moving up to Canada because they did not fancy going to war and blowing up the communities and countries they were studying, it turned out there were no jobs for Southeast Asian specialists in Canada anyway; it took us several more years to find academic positions in Canada.

The birth of my daughter influenced my future research directions in a number of ways. First, it motivated me to shift away from studying village

1 Social media from Thailand confirms the current popularity of topknots among young adults, particularly men. I wrote a paper on the subject (published in 1973) and was interested to see photographs of the traditional topknots as well as the new topknot fashions in the Bangkok Post of January 6, 2014.

religion to studying Ban Chiang painted pottery—a move that I expected would involve sitting safely in the museum in Bangkok. Second, it drew me to advocacy work on breastfeeding, a continuing commitment throughout my career, although I kept it out of my academic life for many years.

The decision to shift my thesis topic to study Ban Chiang painted pottery was made with some difficulty. I had no artistic ability, no photographic skills, and no technical expertise in ceramic analysis, although I had several summers of excavation experience while I was a student at the University of Toronto. My ignorance of the technical aspects of ceramic analysis became a greater problem as I began to be treated by local American antique collectors as an expert on the subject of Ban Chiang painted pottery simply because I had been systematic in my efforts to record information on the designs of the painted pottery that I saw in the markets of Bangkok in the late sixties and early seventies. One day, one of my course instructors brought in a box of artifacts from a university administrator.<sup>2</sup> It contained a number of Ban Chiang artifacts that he wanted someone to analyze. I was given the task, and I later published an article on my analysis in *Asian Perspectives* (1974). As I became more uncomfortable in my pregnancy and less confident that I could continue in my graduate program, I completed the paperwork to make the paper part of an MA degree, just in case I was unable to continue with the PhD.

I had been corresponding with Wilhelm Solheim of the University of Hawai'i about my interest in the pottery, and he encouraged me to study the painted pottery of northeastern Thailand for my PhD, perhaps with his student Chester Gorman, who was working in Thailand at the time. He told me that a single Ban Chiang painted pot was selling for \$5,000 in the US. One day, the correspondence from Solheim included a request to help the son of his friend who was in a Bangkok jail for drug offenses. Ironically, he sent the same request to Chester Gorman; when I met him later, I told him I was also trying to help Solheim's friend, hoping that this would provide somewhat of a connection between us.

Returning to Thailand in 1973 to do fieldwork, I turned to the pictures I took of Ban Chiang painted pottery in 1969. By then I knew that Ban Chiang was a mixed-use mortuary and occupation site in northeast Thailand located near Udorn Thani, occupied for over 2,000 years from about 2100 BCE to 200 CE. According to limited excavations carried out by the Thai Fine Arts

2 I have since learned that the collections probably belonged to Gloria Fitch and her sister, Capitola Porter, the wife of the Secretary of the University of Illinois Board of Trustees. I examined the materials at the request of the late Professor Donald Lathrap, also of the University of Illinois.

Department (FAD) in the late sixties and early seventies, burials contained pottery and bronze artifacts. I learned that the first FAD excavation was funded at 600 baht (about \$30) in 1967. I explore the history of the site's discovery in Chapter 2. Media reports described the mound site as occupied by settled village farmers cultivating yams and rice and raising domestic cattle, pigs, and dogs. In the early seventies, little was known about the context of the red on buff painted pottery since most of it had been looted from the site and was lodged in the illegal private collections of police, army, and powerful Thai elites, as well as in the American homes of the US military. I deal with this subject in Chapter 4. By the time the project between the FAD and the University of Pennsylvania began in 1974 (known as the Northeast Thailand Archaeological Project or NETAP), at least 30,000 looted pots had been shipped out of Thailand in five years in the early seventies; most of them became part of the billions of dollars' worth of looted art treasures sold on the world market every year.

My thesis supervisor who studied with Chester Gorman at the University of Hawai'i wrote to him after he was named the American co-director of the NETAP Ban Chiang excavation, introducing me and asking if I could be associated with the Ban Chiang project in order to work on the designs on the painted pottery. I am not sure if or how Gorman responded to his letter, as well as others sent by members of my doctoral committee. In early 1974 I took a bus from Bangkok up to Udorn and local transportation to the turnoff to Ban Chiang and walked the few kilometres to the site. On arrival, I was quite rudely dismissed by Chester Gorman in treatment that would be identifiable today as sexual harassment. He gave me restricted access to the site for two days and accused me of wanting to steal pre-publication data about the site; he made it clear that no one from a school other than the University of Pennsylvania could participate in the fieldwork. To the best of my recollection, he explained that his Thai counterpart did not like to work with *farang* (foreign) researchers. Gorman and his Thai counterparts disparaged my proposed methods of working on the designs on the painted pottery. My research interests in designs and cognition were too far removed from the priorities of the Ban Chiang project. That, combined with the fact that I was not a student at the University of Pennsylvania, ended my association with the project. Much later I learned about the rivalry between the University of Hawai'i and the University of Pennsylvania, mediated by Froelich Rainey, who appointed Gorman a professor at the University of Pennsylvania (cf. Honan 1975, 15). I was probably caught in the middle of that rivalry.

While unpacking the Ban Chiang boxes more than fifty years later, I found a carbon copy of a letter I wrote addressed to, and I think sent to,

Gorman to counter his accusations about me. In it I assured him I had no intention of doing anything to challenge or pre-empt the NEPAT project. I was interested in trying to help with the analysis of the pottery designs. But in my letter to him, I had to defend myself from being called a racist for repeating that his Thai counterpart did not like to work with foreign researchers.

At the time I interpreted my rejection from the site as outright sexism and a form of reverse racism. In hindsight, I can see that if there were too many foreigners on Thai archaeological sites, it would give the impression of questioning the competence of the Thai archaeologists. From past experience with foreign archaeologists, perhaps they expected colonial attitudes from foreigners who left the country with their data and did not share results with local scholars. But I was not the only one who found that the Thai archaeologists were not always welcoming to foreign students.<sup>3</sup> Glover, too, acknowledges that although there are “ethnocentric, anti-foreign tendencies within the Thai academic community,” many Thai archaeologists welcome the presence of foreigners working there (1993, 50). Only much later did I learn how much importance the Penn team placed on training young Southeast Asian archaeologists. Perhaps they thought that my interest in finding who was doing the looting was also suspect; in fact, it was Gorman who had powerful connections to the Thai elite, many of whom had excellent collections of Ban Chiang painted pottery. The taint of working with looted collections continues to make my work suspect to many in the field and resulted in my dropping the subject of Ban Chiang for many decades.

My visit to Ban Chiang would have been a disastrous, painful failure if it had not been for Donn Bayard. We had been corresponding since 1972, and he seemed to feel that I had been treated unfairly at the site. He thought that locating and working with looted collections before they left the country had some merit. Consequently, he assisted me in locating some of the looted collections stored in police stations around the towns of Udorn Thani and Khon Kaen. He was very helpful, writing to the police, the FAD, and the Bangkok National Museum on my behalf, even though his theoretical approach to archaeological theory was very different from mine. Because of his training in linguistics, he might have been interested in the use I was making of Chomsky’s new linguistic models. Whatever the reasons, his help was very valuable to me.

3 Many Thai archaeologists had unsatisfactory relationships with foreign archaeologists (cf. Rolnick 1975, 30).

Ironically, my doctoral exam included a question about challenging the “Three Age theory” of dating in Southeast Asia based on Solheim’s article on revising Southeast Asian prehistory (1969). This critique was developed further by Joyce White in the recently published reports on the site (Thai Archaeology Monograph [TAM] 2018a–b, 2019). That research held me in good stead when I found myself between arguments my adviser, Warren Peterson, had with his classmate Donn Bayard regarding the “New Archaeology.”<sup>4</sup>

I received Fine Arts Department approval to conduct my doctoral work on Ban Chiang painted pottery from Director General Sompop Pirom, no doubt because I had a letter of support from Dr. Chin You-di, my colleague from Silpakorn, as well as from Donn Bayard. In 1973 designs on pots were not considered subversive or ethically suspect, even though I was not prepared to identify the owners of the collections I photographed. I thought this was being ethically above board, but in retrospect I know now that the FAD already knew exactly where all the collections of looted pots were located.

With approval in hand, I set out to locate and photograph Ban Chiang pottery from markets and private collections looted from Ban Chiang and nearby sites in the late sixties and early seventies, in addition to looted artifacts confiscated by the police. While the dating of the pottery and associated bronze is still contested, the pottery I photographed was mostly from the Late Period 200 BCE to 200 CE.

My formal photographic work on various collections of Ban Chiang painted pottery began with the exhibition at the Bangkok National Museum in September 1973. The pottery displayed in the museum came from the FAD excavations. I was moving between the museum and nearby Thammasat University amid the student demonstrations and protests that successfully toppled the corrupt regime of Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn. Since the house we rented was owned by a high-ranking police officer, we were told every morning what areas of the city to avoid because of potential protests and counter-protests. In the following months, I photographed what collectors identified as Ban Chiang painted pots wherever I encountered them—in open markets, weekend markets, antique stores, and private collections. I located the collectors through introductions from other owners who felt that I was no threat to them and might even help them to authenticate their purchases. All I could do was admire and photograph the pots, not

4 In a letter I received from Warren Peterson while I was doing my fieldwork (January 1974), he pointed out that Bayard did not consider archaeology to be a science and he often spoofed the jargon of the new archaeology.

authenticate them. Nevertheless, their owners were usually happy to talk with me about their collections.

The conditions for photographing the pots were far from ideal. Sometimes the collections were housed in dark storerooms; other times the pots were brought out into the bright sun. On occasion, they were spread out as decor throughout elegant houses. Often the owner stood at my shoulder and handed me the next pot to photograph quickly, all the while reminding me of the consequences of dropping the pot.

I had never before handled a single lens reflex camera and had to learn the basics on the job. Hence, the quality of the photographs leaves something to be desired, particularly in the first few rolls of film. I sometimes had severe time constraints. Once I was given one hour in a room full of pots. On other occasions, I could stay all day and actually touch the pots. Sometimes I was shown only the painted pottery; other times I was shown a whole range of materials including bronze bangles with arm bones attached, suggesting to me that the material had been purchased as a job lot and might have all come from the same pit, or purchased from the same dealer. I gave my word that their collections would not be linked to their names, and they would remain anonymous in any publications. On the other hand, some collectors were well known and wanted their collections to be publicized; some collections had already been registered and declared national museums.

Most collectors seemed to appreciate the opportunity to talk about their acquisitions, often asking me what the designs meant or giving me their interpretations. Most often, they asked how old and how valuable the collection was and had I ever seen anything like this before. They wanted me to admire their collections. And I did.

I heard and read of stories about collectors who “meditated all night” while driving to the site to buy pots. More common were the stories of drivers taking *jaa baa* (Red Bull or other caffeinated drinks) to stay awake on the long night drive to Ban Chiang. They spoke of villagers and middlemen who met with them on the roads close to Ban Chiang in the middle of the night with their wares for sale.

Many of my Thai friends knew that members of the royal family had collections of Ban Chiang painted pottery and that King Bhumipol had visited the site in March 1972, but they were not interested in the pottery itself, only in the fact that the king thought that the site was important for Thailand. They preferred using the delicate Bencharong pottery or Thai celadon wares to decorate their houses. Some collectors had display cases made to house their collections; other collections were tucked away in storage rooms.



In the mid-seventies, Roxanna Brown, a well-known American expert on Southeast Asian ceramics, contacted me. As a professional art historian, she authenticated and dated antique ceramics, confirmed they were real, and assessed their value for tax purposes before they were sold. I valued her expertise and wanted her opinion on the painted pottery designs from an art history perspective. When she visited me in Bangkok, she asked me about the collections I had seen and what I had purchased. I am not sure that she believed me when I told her that I had never purchased any artifacts from Ban Chiang and had no connections with antiquities dealers. I never heard back from her after our initial conversations and visits. Much later I learned that she was implicated in an FBI investigation of art theft and tax fraud in California, discussed in Chapter 4.

For the record, I do not now own, nor have I ever owned, even a single Ban Chiang pot or any other artifact from the site. At some time in the 1970s, I was given a sherd that was said to be from Ban Chiang, which I tried to decline but later found stuffed in my purse. While John and I were living in a village near Uthong, rice farmers would occasionally find ceramic and bronze artifacts and beads washed up in the monsoon rains and put them on the bunds between the rice fields until they could find someone who might buy them. They brought them to show us, hoping we might buy them, but we told them to take them to the Uthong museum (which they never did).

Gradually over the years, I gained confidence in my ability to distinguish repainted designs from original designs. This did not involve any technical examination (except for noting when the paint was still wet!) but more of a growing intuition for the design structures and the feeling that the design was “wrong.” If time permitted, I noted this in my code book, writing notes to myself such as “wrong layout,” “sloppy spirals,” or “no design filler.” Looking back, I am curious about whether my “gut reaction” to some fake designs was based on recognition of symmetry classes. These observations were very useful when I began to work with symmetry operations and forgeries, discussed in Chapters 3 and 5.

Many of the discussions about fakes were initiated by the collectors who were sure they would not have purchased any fakes. I would freely give my opinion when asked about which pots had been repainted or were totally fake Ban Chiang painted pottery. There was no need to defend my opinions that were casual spontaneous comments, and I seldom had time to consider why or how I made that judgement.

By 1974, when we left Thailand to return to the University of Illinois, fewer pots were available for purchase directly from the site; the Thai press announced that looters were somewhat discouraged from looting after the

king's visit, and the new regulations against selling any material from Ban Chiang were more widely publicized. By that time, the looters had probably cleaned the area out. Meanwhile, local Ban Chiang artists had learned to copy the designs and sell fake "originals" and interesting souvenirs (what I call, reproductions; see Chapter 5 for definitions).

I completed my PhD dissertation *Cognition and Design Production in Ban Chiang Painted Pottery* at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana in 1976 and defended it while I was teaching at the University of Notre Dame. The defense was accompanied by the usual drama, complicated by the fact that my committee included archaeologists and cultural anthropologists, and no one agreed where my dissertation fit within the subfields of anthropology. I argued that my research addressed a contemporary theoretical problem in cultural anthropology, but I used photographs of old pots to develop my thesis argument. This approach seemed to work for the cultural anthropologists on my committee and in the department until tensions began to grow between some committee members. The other archaeologists in the department treated my work as suspect because I did not excavate the material I was writing about. If you did not excavate the material yourself, you could not be considered a "real archaeologist"; this was another reason for my dropping work on Ban Chiang and shifting to working more in a field like nutritional anthropology, where evidence can come from a variety of subfields of anthropology. The night before my defense, fellow students reported there were fisticuffs between the archaeologists and the cultural anthropologists on my committee at the local bar frequented by anthropologists. Perhaps I should have made the choice to become a field archaeologist or a cultural anthropologist, or perhaps my committee should have forced that decision. Instead, they encouraged me to forge my own way forward with an unconventional approach to a chance encounter with Ban Chiang painted pottery. At any rate, the matter of subfield designation was settled by University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, which saw the word "cognition" and placed the dissertation under the rubric of cognitive psychology.

I ended my dissertation (1976, 280) with the flippant hope that my analysis of Ban Chiang painted pottery would be of value to the forgers, a comment that further alienated me from field archaeologists in the region. But it proved accurate when I found copies of my dissertation in a few forgers' workshops.

After the defense, I returned to teaching at the University of Notre Dame. Archaeology was given short shrift in the department in the late seventies, and except for one colleague who expressed interest in my Ban Chiang

research, others encouraged me to redefine my focus in anthropology. Consequently, I began to shift attention to food and nutritional anthropology, a subfield of medical anthropology formed around 1976. Food was a topic that permitted a wide range of approaches. Rather than being “all over the map,” my ability to use evidence from all branches of anthropology was a benefit in the newly emerging field of food studies. Since food was of central interest to Thais and relevant to Buddhist practice, it felt like a continuation of my earlier research in rural villages. I used my dissertation research on Ban Chiang painted pottery more like a union card that permitted me to practice anthropology and packed away all photographs and notes on the Ban Chiang pots.

Ironically, it was my infant feeding advocacy work that eventually ended my teaching career at Notre Dame, where I debated Nestle regarding their promotion of infant formula in Thailand and Southeast Asia and initiated the boycott of Nestle products in the university and elsewhere (cf. Van Esterik 1985a). Nevertheless, this facilitated my appointment as a research assistant in international nutrition at Cornell University. There I had wonderful mentors in Tom Kirsch, whose ethnographic work in northeast Thailand was very helpful, and Michael Latham, head of international nutrition who furthered my interest in advocacy and child feeding.

In 1984 I joined the anthropology department at York University after a job talk on the development of nutritional anthropology with particular emphasis on the British social anthropologists who contributed to the field, including Audrey Richards and Raymond Firth. I had been warned ahead of my visit that a history of anthropology talk might be well received and help make up for the fact that my PhD was from an American school and was based on archaeological materials. I erased Ban Chiang from my resume and my mind. Despite the department’s devaluing of American degrees and disdain for archaeology, I got the job. Content to develop the ambidextrous specialty of nutritional anthropology, I kept an eye on what archaeologists had to say about food and enjoyed conversations with colleagues Elizabeth Graham and Kathryn Denning at York. By the eighties, the cognitive anthropology that I used in my dissertation was out of fashion in the heyday of postmodern theory.<sup>5</sup> Ban Chiang remained relegated to boxes in the basement—out of sight, out of mind, almost.

Occasionally I was drawn back in to Ban Chiang subjects. In 1989 one of my students reported that she had seen Ban Chiang pots at the Hyatt

5 In 1985 Dr. Janet Dougherty edited a book called *Directions in Cognitive Anthropology* and included my chapter on Ban Chiang called “Towards a Cognitive Theory of Replication.”

Regency Maui. I wrote to the hotel but received no reply. Later that year, I visited the hotel and saw wonderful display cases of the pots spread over several floors of the hotel. In 2004 I was asked to describe a Ban Chiang pot in the collection of the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Unfortunately, I never asked where they got the pot, although, looking back, it might well be connected to the small collection I was asked to analyze as a graduate student. I wrote to Nelson Graburn in 1978 to propose writing a monograph on imitation and forgeries. I do not have a copy of the letter he sent in response. Needless to say, this book—particularly Chapter 5—is as close as I came to writing that monograph.

Following a discussion with my colleague about the importance of breastfeeding and child spacing in Southeast Asia, Elizabeth Graham roped me into a panel on the origins of tropical urbanism for the American Anthropology Association (AAA) meetings in 1990. I presented a very speculative paper called *Nurturance and Urbanism: Speculations on Child Survival in the Tropics*. To write that paper, I returned to the available literature on Ban Chiang to learn more about infant and child burials from the region and from Ban Chiang. Much later I revised the paper and presented it at a conference panel in honour of my teacher, Kris Lehman, and published it with other papers on his work (2011). After more than a decade of work on infant feeding, I tried to rethink the logic around the social and economic context of child burial in Southeast Asia. I was able to begin bridging the gap between my work on infant nurture and Ban Chiang painted pottery by considering the importance of infant and young child burials at the site, work that I return to in Chapter 2.

Looking back, I am tempted to see my Ban Chiang research as totally separate from my other interests in anthropology. I kept my academic interests in separate silos. But in writing this book, I found many of the common threads leaked out. I have a long-standing interest in the concept of style and its relation to consumption and material culture, as well as the importance of nurture and feeding others. As I age, I am also increasingly interested in communication across the generations—in what gets transmitted and how it gets transmitted from one generation to the next. One piece of that story is a biocultural hybrid: how human milk carries information from one generation to the next and how nurturing practices facilitate or impede this transmission (Van Esterik and O'Connor 2017; Van Esterik 2020). I can see this question reappearing again as I unwind a prehistoric painted design on a pot destined to accompany an infant to the afterlife.

## Advocacy and Ethics

Advocacy has long been a part of my anthropological practice (cf.1985a), particularly regarding industrial food and infant feeding. As a breastfeeding advocate, I was active in the boycott of Nestle for their promotion of infant formula in countries such as Thailand and their extraction of public water for bottling around my new home in Guelph. But I never thought much about the looting of antiquities as a crime against humanity and thought that my ethical responsibility ended with my guarantee of anonymity for the Ban Chiang collectors (unless they requested otherwise).

During doctoral research in Thailand, we received copies of the American Anthropology Association survey on ethics from Margaret Mead. We were smugly pleased to confirm that we were funded by a Canadian government grant to John that also covered my expenses, and as Canadian students, we had no access to American military funding. At the time, some Southeast Asian anthropologists were being funded by the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) and later accused of participating in counter insurgency research that would be of use to the American military in their war against communism.

Our expertise in Southeast Asia was put to new uses when refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia entered North America. While at York I also worked on projects in Lao PDR. Once again, I purged my curriculum vitae—this time, of work with Lao refugees in New York state and later in Toronto, in order to work with the National University of Laos; to the Lao University, Lao refugees were traitors, or they did not exist.

## Unpacking the Ban Chiang Box

For me, Ban Chiang has spent a long time in the parking lot. Most people, in the years following their PhD research, milk their dissertations dry, writing books and articles based on the material before turning to new subject material. I did not follow this path, for some of the reasons hinted at in this chapter. Is it too late in my seventies to go back and re-examine my thinking from fifty years ago, in the tradition of ethnographic restudies? Or has Ban Chiang been in the parking lot too long?

When I retired from York University in 2014, I had to make the decision to move on—to pitch out or pass on the materials to others or move the boxes of notes and photographs of Ban Chiang pots to Guelph. My first choice was to pass the materials on to the next generation. But there was

no interest. I offered the photographs to the Ban Chiang project at the University of Pennsylvania, but there was no interest in the analysis of looted materials when they were weighted down with the task of analyzing excavated materials. In my defense, I tried to get others interested in my work, tried to give them the boxes of unfinished projects, but was rebuffed by those who wanted to do their own thing and not clean up my thing. Even libraries did not want to care for a bunch of old papers and photographs of old pots.

I opened the Ban Chiang box; it contained thirty-eight rolls of film recording 1,324 designs primarily from painted pots but a few on other objects, some colour slides (one, a box of slides from Rosie, of which I have absolutely no memory), drawings and field notes, as well as newspaper articles and academic papers about Ban Chiang from different people written over many years. A huge ledger recorded every pot I photographed, numbered sequentially without identification of the source or owner of the collection. I found two boxes of curling yellowed index cards with photographs and design sketches along with cardboard paste ups of pots and designs used in my dissertation. Also in the boxes, I found a few papers and books in Thai by Dr. Sud and Dr. Chin, painfully translated and corrected in pencil, along with my draft notes on designs. And under it all was a cotton jacket with a Ban Chiang pot design on the pocket.

While cleaning out drawers, I came across a child's housecoat purchased in Bangkok around 1986 and printed with my rendition of Ban Chiang designs copied from my thesis. It represented the journey taken by a few design sketches I made in the late sixties. It reminded me that after banishing Ban Chiang to an academic parking lot for nearly half a century, I was still unsure if I wanted to clear out or clear up life's leftovers. This book is a product of the decision to open the boxes of Ban Chiang materials one more time.

Having made the decision to keep the boxes and record this story, I began the task of catching up with fifty years of research on Thai prehistory. Without much thought, I googled Ban Chiang painted pottery and found (in addition to very old papers I published on the subject) fifty-plus pages of Ban Chiang artifacts offered for sale on eBay, ranging in price from \$20 for crude souvenirs to \$3,000 for intact jars. Sale items included stamps, mugs, T-shirts, harem pants, face masks, and bikinis printed with Ban Chiang designs and lamps made from two authentic old Ban Chiang pots. Sites such as Pinterest included many single pots for sale among other items of Asian decor, including cord-marked vessels for \$200 and very obviously new globular pots for \$150. The best items came from estate sales by world

art auctioneers and antiquities dealers in the UK and US, items acquired in the seventies and early eighties. A few exceptional painted pots were priced around \$500, often with a note that the product was no longer available for sale.

Returning to the literature in 2017, I was surprised to see the substantial development of ethical concerns in archaeology and the complexity of the issues raised by the antiquities market and by critical heritage studies. That was never a part of my training in the 1960s. I read that the best journals would not publish articles based on looted collections. Would this exclude my work from publication in an academic press? What were the ethics of my making this material public now? Was it necessary to continue to keep the names and locations of the collections I photographed confidential? (At least that posed no problem; I lost the code book.) Was I being unethical now or had I been unethical fifty years ago? I was well enough trained to know the importance of archaeological context—context that could never be retrieved from unprovenienced materials. But if the images of the looted pots also disappeared, was that also not another kind of context that would be lost if I pitched out the boxes of photographs and drawings? One goal of writing this book was to make these digital images available to future researchers in this publication through figshare.com.

Two events drew me back to the Ban Chiang material. First was the opportunity to review the recently published Thailand Archaeology Monographs (TAM) on the site (Van Esterik 2020). Because of the complexities caused by Chester Gorman's premature death, detailed site reports for the site had not been available until recently. And the second was a totally unexpected email from the relative of a woman whose collection I had examined in graduate school. She was writing for advice on how to repatriate her collection to Thailand and remembered my name as the graduate student who had been taxed with examining her collection in the early 1970s.

I view my career as that of an anthropologist not an archaeologist, with occasional wistful incursions into the path not taken. While I continued to think about designs on pots, I lost contact with the decades of archaeological theory that animates current professionals. I hope the exploration of the additional social contexts described in this book will add to the conversations about Ban Chiang and begin to compensate for the decades that I left the pots in an academic parking lot. Although this book argues that professional archaeology need not be the only frame of reference for understanding Ban Chiang, the evidence-based past is clearly the best place to start, and I do so in the next chapter.

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## 2 The Excavated Past: Grounded Evidence

### Abstract

Chapter 2 of *Designs on Pots* reviews the archaeological context of Ban Chiang based on recent monographs about the site. The chapter first outlines the history of the discovery and interpretation of the site from the mid-fifties to the present day, followed by summaries of the sequencing and dating of Ban Chiang in relation to other sites on the Khorat plateau from the second millennium BCE to 200 CE. Particular attention is placed on the analysis of metal and ceramic artifacts from the site in relation to the burials. It includes the debates around regional chronology and concludes with some speculations about the infant and young child burials from the site.

**Keywords:** archaeology of Thailand, bronze and iron metallurgy, ceramics, burial contexts, grave goods, infant and child burials

At a certain point in its life trajectory, a portable artefact becomes archaeological and may no longer legitimately circulate outside the space constituted by the archaeological discourse.  
(Byrne 1995, 277)

The disciplinary framework of archaeology provides theories and methods used to describe and interpret Ban Chiang's prehistoric past. It is the authorized discourse about material culture, past and present, although it has no single overarching theoretical framework. This chapter uses the framework of archaeology to place Ban Chiang in two contexts: the first lays out the history of the discovery and interpretation of the site of Ban Chiang from the mid-fifties to the present day, and the second summarizes the development and dating of Ban Chiang based on excavations carried out in the 1970s.

Where possible, the site is also placed in the context of other contemporary sites on the Khorat plateau, northeast Thailand.

Throughout this chapter, context is defined by archaeological standards. For example, the term “context” might reference a painted pot found with a burial, defining the pot as a grave good; or, indeed, the bag of items associated with a burial might define context, both providing the analyst with a “time capsule” of the pot’s depositional context (cf. Thai Archaeology Monographs [TAM] 2018a, 31). Generally, this is what archaeologists mean by context. This is the evidence accumulated through scientific excavation and recording. For archaeologists, this is the only context that matters. Although excavation also destroys evidence, looting destroys more than even poorly recorded excavations. This evidence is lost when artifacts are looted and removed from their depositional context. Fortunately, the 1974–75 excavation known as NETAP was meticulously recorded. But the analysts assume that “[f]or the prehistoric period, only analyses of archaeologically provenienced remains will be able to address questions involving societal context” (TAM 2018a, 97). In other chapters of this book, I am broadening the meaning and range of context to consider other stories of less use to archaeologists but relevant to understanding human pasts and presents. In this chapter I consider the archaeological context of Ban Chiang in some detail.

Archaeology in Thailand was, until the early 1960s, largely confined to art-historical studies of Buddhist sculpture, temples, painting, and fine arts and was mainly the prerogative of aristocratic, Western-educated Thais on the fringes of the royal clan (Higham 1989a, 25–27). Archaeology is still almost exclusively taught and studied at the Fine Arts University (Silpakorn) or at the Government Department of Fine Arts (FAD) (Glover 1993, 47). There is a long history of royal antiquarianism in Thailand, even before the creation of the Bangkok National Museum in 1926 (which contained a part of a much earlier royal collection) and the Siam Society in 1904. Maurizio Peleggi (2004) has documented the extent and impact of this royal antiquarianism in some detail.

## **The Rediscovery of Ban Chiang**

Bangkok Thais generally considered the northeast of Thailand a backward and dangerous place, filled with poor peasants farming poor agricultural land and communist insurgents. Much of the funding for development projects in Thailand in the fifties and sixties came from USAID and emphasized population control as part of the US Cold War strategy to contain

communism. Massive American military spending on development projects and road-building in the sixties was supposed to prevent expansion of communist insurgency in the underdeveloped northeast, home to Lao *Isaan*. Some of these projects included building dams that would flood low-lying areas and create reservoirs, prompting archaeological surveys of the region.

The story of the discovery and rediscovery of Ban Chiang has reached mythic proportions. In fact, Ban Chiang villagers and school children created a play documenting the story of the site's discovery and transformation into a heritage site, which they perform every year during the heritage festival held in February (Nakamura 2017, 11).

No doubt generations of Ban Chiang villagers knew something about the site that their houses were sitting on. They probably found pottery whenever they built new houses or dug in their rice fields. Although the existence of the site was officially known by locals since the 1950s, they did not know the value or age of the pots they uncovered until formal excavations of the site began much later. The villagers used the pots they found for storage and pig swill or to thicken the cement for house posts and toilets. They did not use them for food or water because they believed that they had been used by ghosts (Nakamura 2017, 5). In the nearby site of Ban Nadi, local villagers were afraid of the excavated burials until Donn Bayard (1968) informed them that they were pre-Buddhist; then they had no problem with the excavations.

The official discovery story begins in the 1950s when Khru Mon Tri, the local teacher, found pots when digging the foundations for his house. He said that he sent samples of the pottery to the Fine Arts Department (FAD) and the National Museum in Bangkok, but there was no immediate follow-up. The discovery of the painted pottery in Ban Chiang was not considered significant in the fifties. Although the site was inscribed in the FAD list of archaeological sites by 1960, the site aroused little interest locally or nationally (Peleggi 2016, 101).

Chance and serendipity played an extraordinarily large part in the story of Ban Chiang. The most recent accidental discovery of the site is attributed to an American student, Stephen Young, the son of the former American ambassador to Thailand Kenneth Young. He was well connected to the Thai elite and knowledgeable enough to know that the pottery he found in the village in 1966 was something new and important. If Stephen Young, who came across the painted pottery on a visit to Ban Chiang village—literally tripping over it—had not been hosted by Princess Chumbhot and if Princess Chumbhot had not been friends with Elizabeth Lyons (who was an art and archaeology specialist for the Ford Foundation in Bangkok), the story might have unfolded differently. The pottery sherds given to Elizabeth Lyons were

sent to the University of Pennsylvania, where MASCA (Museum Applied Science Center for Archaeology) pioneered thermoluminescence dating; the initial results dated the pottery at 4600 BCE with several dates earlier than 3000 BCE.<sup>1</sup> If the site had not been close to the Thai airbase housing the American military in Udorn Thani and if the early thermoluminescence dates from Ban Chiang had not been released and widely publicized, it is unlikely that the market for the painted pottery would have developed so quickly and the site looted so completely.

There was interest in the archaeology of the northeast before the discovery of Ban Chiang. William Solheim from the University of Hawai'i trained generations of archaeologists of Southeast Asia including Donn Bayard, Karl Hutterer, Chester Gorman, and my research supervisor, Warren Peterson. Solheim surveyed the areas to be flooded by dams and reservoirs as part of the Mekong dam project with Chester Gorman in 1963 and with Donn Bayard in 1966. The salvage archaeology project was funded in 1962 with assistance from Elizabeth Lyons and the American ambassador to Thailand, Kenneth Young. The archaeologists examined the highly valued collections of artifacts owned by villagers in the survey area, although it was likely that the villagers did not show the team their most valued pieces, fearing they would be confiscated (Solheim and Gorman 1966). They reported no painted pottery in the collections they examined.

The first FAD excavation in Ban Chiang in 1967 was underfunded. It was a three-week excavation with a budget of 600 baht (around USD 30), and the excavations were flooded by monsoon rains. Nevertheless, the digging unearthed burials with the dramatic Ban Chiang painted pottery (Intakosai 1972). Princess Chumbhot organized an expedition to Ban Chiang where she collected potsherds and sent them to Elizabeth Lyons for dating, bypassing the FAD (Honan 1975, 15).

Villagers recognized the expertise of the Thai FAD archaeologists on the site and imitated their techniques when conducting their own excavations (Nakamura 2017, 9). The villagers brought their finds to them for identification and evaluation before they decided on the sale prices of their finds. According to the villagers, the archaeologists gave them small finds like sherds and beads to keep because they were of no use to them (Nakamura 2017, 7). The schoolhouse became the first Ban Chiang Museum, as the villagers developed their own version of local heritage long before UNESCO designated the village as a World Heritage Site. There was substantial looting

1 Higham and others argue that thermoluminescence dating is an unreliable method in Thailand. Dates of 4420–3400 BCE were clearly too early.

and exporting of materials from the site by the late sixties. Movement of looted artifacts was facilitated by the convenient American-funded Friendship Highway through the northeast of Thailand to Nong Khai on the Thai-Lao border.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej made a visit to Ban Chiang in March 1972. More excavation pits were opened on the temple grounds of Wat Pho Sri Nai, which the king visited when the excavation was underway (Rolnick 1975, 30). After the king's visit, the government passed a new antiquity act and issued a decree explicitly forbidding illegal excavation and transportation of items from Ban Chiang, although the 1961 Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums of Thailand, if enforced, would have prevented the looting and export of Thai antiquities from Ban Chiang. All antiquities found in Thailand "belong to the Thai government," even if the FAD had insufficient funds to carry out excavations. The act also prohibits the export of antique objects of Thai origin without a license. The 1972 decree required existing private collections to be registered with the FAD. By August 1974, ninety-six collections had been registered, containing 8,504 vessels. Only four collections were registered by foreigners (cf. Byrne 2016).

At a seminar held in August 1972, some members of the Fine Arts Department were still convinced that they did not need outside help to study the Ban Chiang artifacts (letter, *Bangkok Post*, August 31, 1972). Nevertheless, the next year, following a visit to the site by Froelich Rainey, head of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the FAD agreed to a joint excavation with the University of Pennsylvania, and the Northeast Thailand Archaeological Project (NETAP) was approved. Following a coup in 1973, Thai politics were more open for a few years, facilitating the joint excavation and cooperation between Thailand and the United States.

The first joint excavation between the Thai FAD and the University of Pennsylvania at Ban Chiang was co-directed by Chester Gorman from the University of Pennsylvania and Piset Charoenwongsa from the Thai FAD. By 1974 there was almost no undisturbed land left in the village of Ban Chiang because of the looting. Thus, the first season's excavation was conducted in a house yard that the looters had missed. The following year the excavation was long and narrow because it was dug under a road, one of the few undisturbed spots in the village. The excavation reports refer to these two areas as BC (Ban Chiang) and BCES (Ban Chiang eastern *soi* or lane).

The area that was formally excavated was quite small. BC was composed of six squares and baulks and BCES of four squares and baulks; three nearby sites (Ban Tong, Ban Phak Top, and Don Klang) had only one test square

each (TAM 2018a, 22). Because the site of Ban Chiang was so meticulously excavated and analyzed, a great deal of useful information was obtained and made public in academic papers, conference proceedings, and a series of technical monographs (TAM 2002, 2018a, 2018b, and 2019).

The official joint excavation conducted in 1974–75 increased interest in the site; it also created a market for previously unknown artifacts. However, the official excavations exposed primarily sherds rather than whole vessels. The bagged pottery that was sent back to the University of Pennsylvania museum consisted of around 1,300,000 sherds. The sherds from the habitation area were returned to Thailand in 1983 (TAM 2018a, 22).

The death in 1981 of the principal excavator, Chester Gorman, slowed the analysis of the mammoth amounts of excavated materials. Around eighteen tons of material were sent to the University of Pennsylvania Museum for study. The delay in correcting the initial chronology from the thermoluminescence dating made it difficult to stop alternative narratives about the site from circulating in the popular press. Sensationalized reports in the global media drew attention to the site itself without putting the site in an accurate historical perspective or relating it to other sites in the region.

## Media Amplification

By the mid-1970s, speculations about Thailand's importance in the early development of civilization exploded. An article called "The Roots of Man" in *Newsweek* (May 31, 1976) begins by referring to Southeast Asia as a cultural backwater and then describes the race against looters to uncover "the remnants of one of the most ancient centers of civilization yet unearthed," more advanced than Mesopotamia with the remains of 15,000 individuals, although the project only excavated 142 burials. Chester Gorman fed into this narrative, explaining that the region was ready for urbanization, but no cities were found, and he was now looking for cities in the region. He is quoted as saying: "Together the bronze and the pottery could be the oldest in the world" (Kaylor 1974, 7). The *Newsweek* article ran beside another article on the possible Asian origin of mankind.

Bronze tools that the excavators found revealed metallurgical skills "unparalleled in the world at that time" along with the smelting of iron before 1500 BC (Gorman 1982, 5). Newspaper articles usually included a photograph of the most spectacular painted pottery, citing early dates from around 4000 BC, comparing the spiral pattern to Yangshao painted pottery from the Shang dynasty (Nash 1977). There was seldom any correction of

the erroneous early dates. When I first wrote about the painted pottery in 1974, I made similar comparisons to Yangshao pottery because, at that time, I knew of no local pottery traditions from Thailand or Laos that resembled the painted pottery from Ban Chiang.

The intellectual context at the time when Ban Chiang was first uncovered (cf. TAM 2018a, 12) framed Southeast Asia as a cultural backwater existing at a “neolithic stage” of development until Indianization and related processes brought metal and other advances of civilization from elsewhere. This intellectual context goes a long way to explaining how the discoveries associated with the site were first received. These media reports increased the pressure on local archaeologists to focus attention on being “the first,” “the earliest.”

Collectors and dealers were delighted by the media reports, even if academics questioned the implications of and evidence for these early dates and were not yet ready to confirm this level of development in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the market for Ban Chiang pottery and bronze objects exploded. The looting of materials from Ban Chiang is discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

The exhibition, *Ban Chiang: Discovery of a Lost Bronze Age*, began in 1982 at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and travelled to seven other American museums before ending up in the National Museum in Bangkok to be returned to a newly built museum in Ban Chiang. In 1985 there was an exhibition of Ban Chiang artifacts at the Bowers Museum, California. In 1992 the contemporary village of Ban Chiang, along with its open excavations and museum, became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Chapter 6 discusses Ban Chiang as a heritage site and how it fits into the Thai historical narrative.

The newly published Thai Archaeology Monographs on Ban Chiang (TAM 2018a–b, 2019c) provide detailed analysis of the evidence from the 1974–75 excavation, with particular emphasis on the metal finds. The Ban Chiang Project at the University of Pennsylvania Museum under the direction of Dr. Joyce White, who was Chester Gorman’s student at the time of his death, continues the work of analyzing and interpreting materials from the site.

While the first part of this chapter follows a well-known narrative about the discovery and rediscovery of the site, along with informed and uninformed speculation about its significance, the second part addresses what is known about the prehistoric society at Ban Chiang, primarily on the basis of evidence from the scientific excavation carried out in 1974–75 by the joint FAD/Penn project (NETAP) and published in the TAM reports.



## Excavating Ban Chiang

This overview is based on reports from the excavation of the site in 1974–75 and published in the Thai Archaeology Monograph Series on Ban Chiang and nearby sites, edited by Joyce White and Elizabeth Hamilton (TAM 2018a–b, 2019). The opportunity to review the TAM reports (Van Esterik 2020) brought me up to date on the results of the excavation.

The village of Ban Chiang in the province of Udon Thani, northeast Thailand, sits near the junction of three streams on a mound rising about seven metres above surrounding rice fields. The contour and height of the mound in the modern Ban Chiang village suggested that it was built on the remains of an ancient prehistoric village. Prehistoric Ban Chiang is referred to as a mixed mortuary/occupation site, with residential burials suggesting that the daily activities of life and death were closely connected in space and time (TAM 2018a, 28); 142 burials were excavated at Ban Chiang as discrete units.

*Dating and Sequences:* Details of the chronology of the site of Ban Chiang and the region are still under discussion, and the evidence is still debated. Even Joyce White, who is most knowledgeable about the site, is “skeptical of absolute dates and absolute chronology” in the region (TAM 2018a, xix) and does not provide final detailed absolute dating for the site. Disagreements around dating and dating controversies continually swirled around Ban Chiang from its first discovery and continue today, primarily coming from Charles Higham (cf. Higham et al. 2015, 2012a–b).

New dating techniques applied in the region all have their limitations, with the result that dates from radiocarbon, thermoluminescence, shell, bone/collagen, and other methods do not always cross-date harmoniously with each other (TAM 2018a, 32, 36). There are always contradictions and thus some “chronological fuzziness” about absolute dates from the site (White 2008, 101).

Pottery from Ban Chiang was first dated by thermoluminescence at an astounding 4600 BCE, fueling looting and sensationalized speculation about the age of the site and the early appearance of bronze and later iron. Among the many dating revisions is the shift from dating the earliest bronze at Ban Chiang from 3600 BCE (Gorman and Charoenwongsa 1976) to White’s correction of 2000 BCE; White revised the dating of iron from 1600 BCE to after 800 BCE (TAM 2018a, 2). These dates took Thailand out of the running for claiming to have the world’s earliest bronze and suggest that bronze and iron metallurgy was not independently invented in Southeast Asia but came from elsewhere. Arguments continue about the earliest dates for bronze and iron and exactly where that “elsewhere” might be.

The dates from an earlier excavation at nearby Non Nok Tha, a site excavated by Donn Bayard in 1968, supported the chronology of a third millennium BCE date for bronze in northeast Thailand, although Higham has also challenged these early dates and concludes that bronze at Non Nok Tha dates from the tenth century BCE (TAM 2018, 14). However, the differing dates for the earliest appearance of bronze are only about 500 years apart—around 2000 BCE for White and 1500 BCE for Higham (TAM 2018a, 15).

The working chronology for the site has been further refined in the recent monographs, with the lower Early Period starting date at 2100 BCE, the transition to the upper Early Period around 1500 BCE, the transition from Early Period to Middle Period around 900 BCE, and the transition from Middle Period to Late Period beginning about 300 BCE and ending around 200 CE, when the site was abandoned (TAM 2018a, 47). The authors of the reports on Ban Chiang assume that there is no final detailed absolute chronology for the site or for Thailand in general, but they defend the methods they use to determine the sequences defined above.

As a non-specialist without direct access to evidence, I cannot assess the strength of some of the arguments on dating. My experience, limited though it may be, concerns Ban Chiang; by focusing attention solely on that site, I avoid some of the debates regarding regional comparisons. Some of the debates seem to be about more than science.<sup>2</sup>

*Metal:* It is the metal artifacts from Ban Chiang that have been most thoroughly analyzed, with the evidence published in exhaustive detail for the benefit of foreign and regional archaeologists in the TAM (2018a–b, 2019c). It is extraordinary how much information can be gleaned from a single artifact class when it is carefully excavated and fully analyzed. The TAM authors argue that Southeast Asia had a sophisticated metal tradition by 2000 BCE, 1000 years before previously suspected, distributed in egalitarian villages rather than urban centres. Ban Chiang presents a case study of the development of metal production in a middle-range society (neither mobile bands nor states), with a wide range of copper-based bronze artifacts, mostly ornamental, found in the burial and non-burial features at the site. The lower Early Period, dated at 2100 BCE, marks the beginning of burials associated with metal. Higham disputes these dates, arguing that bronze first appears at Ban Chiang around 1000 BCE (Higham et al. 2015). Higham argues that White's chronology for the establishment of the Bronze Age at 2000–1800 BCE is based on erroneous dates from Ban Chiang and Non Nok

<sup>2</sup> Readers can examine more about the debates around dating in several recent publications, including Pryce et al. (2014) and other publications by Higham.

Tha. Instead, he claims the dates for the first appearance of bronze should be around 1200–1000 BCE, with the technology probably derived from the bronze tradition of the Shang dynasty of China.

The metal finds from the excavated areas of Ban Chiang and nearby sites include personal ornaments such as bangles, bells, and wires that might have been part of jewelry (possibly necklaces), adzes or axes, small blades and points, and socketed spear points used by individuals in their daily life. Both standard types and unique shapes were found (TAM 2018b, 58–59). Bells are all from the Late Period along with clay rollers and painted pottery, discussed later.

Bangles, the most plentiful artifact found at the site, were analyzed in some detail. In earlier periods, bangles with the same designs were found in both burial and non-burial contexts, while in the Late Period, the more elaborated bangle designs, rather than everyday bangle designs, were found on the bangles accompanying burials (TAM 2018b, 196–99).

Casting by-products and crucibles demonstrate on-site manufacturing of metal artifacts at Ban Chiang. Crucibles tempered with rice chaff, quartz, and grog (temper made from crushed ceramics) suggest widely distributed sophisticated crucible metallurgy around Ban Chiang. This could mean that villages had their own metalworkers or that itinerant metalworkers visited villages and made the crucibles locally on site (TAM 2018b, 124). Onsite copper-base casting and working occurred all through the bronze and iron period occupation of Ban Chiang (TAM 2018b, 192).

There are few metallic deposits on the Khorat plateau, but there are some deposits of gold, iron, tin, lead, copper, zinc, and antimony within 100–200 kilometres of Ban Chiang (TAMa, 156). Tin and copper found in Sepon, Lao PDR, Phu Lon, or other sites in Thailand may be the source for the metal used at Ban Chiang, but confirmation requires much more research (TAM 2018a, 160).

The most common metal artifacts found at the sites, bangles and wires, were for personal ornamentation and could not have been used for killing. Ban Chiang consumers used copper-base metal primarily for jewelry rather than tools, suggesting that the makers were more interested in the shape, shine, and colour of the metal than its hardness (TAM 2018b, 97, 99). Hardness, of course, would be critically important if people were making lethal weapons; however, weapons were “almost non-existent” at the site (TAM 2018b, 18). Although some points could have been used as weapons, they were more likely used for hunting and for rituals. The Ban Chiang artisans chose to use their considerable metal-making skills to make ornaments and implements primarily for individual use rather than items for group use,

such as bronze drums, for example (TAM 2018a, 60). The metal artifacts were probably made by part-time specialists in village settings. Yet metal use was not restricted to burial rituals or to displays of wealth, suggesting that metal was not overly valued as a luxury or prestige good by its makers or users (TAM 2018b, 166). The percentage of metal artifacts that were tools gradually increases through time from 3.5 percent in the Early Period to 15.4 percent in the Late/Protohistoric Period (TAM 2018b, 37).

There is no indication of iron casting in any prehistoric context in the region or in Southeast Asia generally (TAM 2018b, 188). Instead, forged iron appears slowly and unevenly in northeast Thailand (TAM 2019c, 142). Iron may be present in Ban Chiang from the beginning of the middle period (TAM 2018b, 185). In nearby Don Klang, considerable iron smelting and smithing occurred, evident in the amount of slag found at the site. Iron was initially used for both ornaments and tools, and later just for tools (TAM 2018b, 18). By Late Period Ban Chiang, there were few iron ornaments found.

Metal production at Ban Chiang was integrated with other activities of daily life and not segregated as a separate elite or ritual activity. Copper-based bangles appeared in burials in all time periods. Blades, adzes, and points were found in both burial and non-burial contexts. Surprisingly, over half of the burials with metal artifacts belonged to infants or young children, a point I speculated about long before these monographs confirmed the evidence (cf. Van Esterik 2011). The goods buried with each body appear to be unique to that person, suggesting that grave goods represented individual accumulation of valuables rather than prestige markers of elite class.

The authors of the TAM reports examined metals in all contexts. Broken artifacts from everyday life are as important as the better-preserved intact artifacts from burials. Similarly, tools are as important in non-burial as burial contexts. Most metal artifacts were not grave goods found with burials. Because the metal artifacts were analyzed from both burial and non-burial contexts, it is clear that metal was not reserved for burials, let alone elite burials (TAM 2018b, 126–28), and in fact may not have been considered all that precious.

Ban Chiang was primarily a metal consumer site where products were cast for local use rather than produced for export, although there may have been some specialization for local exchange or seasonal craft production. Both copper and iron artifacts appear in non-burial deposits before they appear as grave goods. The initial appearance of metal commonly consists of small ornaments, simple implements, and fragments (TAM 2018b, 179–81). Different steps in the metal-working process may have occurred at different sites, with some sites specializing in making certain items; this suggests

that metal working was decentralized in prehistoric northeast Thailand (TAM 2018b, 122–23).

White argues that metal will not always be recovered at identical points in time at every site when technology first appears in a region (TAM 2018b, 194) and that its use has no uniform effect on societies. It appears in northeast Thailand unevenly and in small quantities, beginning in so-called Neolithic contexts. Ban Chiang provides evidence that metal use is not limited to hierarchical societies controlled by centralized elites. Instead, the analysis of the Ban Chiang metal artifacts suggests independent craft production could promote social solidarity through exchange rather than elite control of luxury or prestige goods (TAM 2018a, 119). Prestige goods refer to goods produced for elite patrons or goods acquired by long-distance exchange to promote elite status in a stratified society, while valuables are not made for or controlled by elites but rather serve to integrate social groups through distribution at rites of passage or ritual gift exchanges (TAM 2018a, 125–26).

The metal evidence from Ban Chiang suggests that bronze technology arrived in the area well developed, made by part-time specialists in village settings in egalitarian and peaceful societies. The metal items do not appear to be vital for either subsistence or warfare (TAM 2018b, 102). This supports the picture of a society that invested more energy on ritual than war; violent conflicts would jeopardize regional trade and exchange systems (TAM 2018a, 135). Instead, these economic practices suggest what the authors call heterarchical systems with flexible hierarchies and lateral differentiation (TAM 2018a, 135) rather than elite classes.

The Iron period shows considerable continuity with the Bronze period in settlement systems, localized diverse social and economic behaviors, and residential mortuary practices, despite the adoption of first bronze and then iron technologies over the course of the second and first millennia BCE and the early first millennium CE. Ongoing research in northeast Thailand will no doubt uncover more information about where metals came from and where they were cast. As more sites are discovered and described, it may be possible to identify distinctly different communities of practice among metalworkers who shared common underlying cultural and technological metallurgical traditions.

*Ceramics:* Although 1,300,000 sherds of pottery from the 1974–75 excavation were sent to the Pennsylvania Museum for analysis; those from non-burial habitation contexts were returned to Thailand in 1983 (TAM 2018a, 22). There have been few detailed reports on the ceramics from the site, particularly the Late Period painted pottery that made up such a large proportion of the looted collections. Ceramic reports are more scattered

and less accessible than reports analyzing the metal artifacts. There is no entry in the index in the recently published TAM reports (2018a or b) for ceramics or pottery, although ceramics are considered briefly in TAM 2019c. As a result, we know a great deal more about the metal from the site of Ban Chiang than the ceramics—particularly the Late Period painted pottery, with a few exceptions (Sureeratana 2008; McGovern et al. 1985; White et al. 1991; White and Eyre 2011; McGovern 1989).

Most of what we do know about the pottery from Ban Chiang comes from the 1974–75 excavation; the Pennsylvania Museum Lab studied over 500 whole or reconstructed vessels (326 associated with burials),<sup>3</sup> classifying them based on shape, decoration, and other attributes. In addition to the pots, there were ceramic anvils, spoons, crucibles, ceramic rollers, pellets, and other assorted artifacts. More details about these items are available in the digital archives of the Ban Chiang project website.<sup>4</sup>

The analysis of the ceramic tradition at Ban Chiang revealed how the pots were produced; most were fired for a short period of time at low temperatures (500–700 degrees C) under reducing conditions, with wood or straw fuel piled up around the pots (McGovern et al. 1985). The red or buff slip on much of the Late Period pottery was almost the same composition as the interior material, with slightly more iron and less calcium in the mixture, while the red paint used to make the designs has even more iron and less calcium (McGovern et al. 1985, 110).

Temper also varied through time and included quartz, rice husk, or other plant material, as well as grog, rice-tempered clay balls also used as temper today in the region. There was more plant material temper in the middle period and less in the Late Period pottery (McGovern 1989, 75). The pots were formed from a combination of slabs, coils, or lumps shaped with a paddle and anvil. Both paddle and anvil and coil and slab techniques are used today in unspecialized household production of pottery and in larger workshops in northeast Thailand. Pottery made by hand and on the wheel still co-exist in the region today, each made from different clays using different production techniques (TAM 2018a, 59) (See illustration 15).

Analysts characterize the ceramic tradition at Ban Chiang as conservative, showing 3000 years of a stable tradition, with, for example, greater interest in carinated vessel shapes in the middle period and elaborate painted designs in the Late Period. White concludes that vessel form was the most conservative and least likely to change over time, while the decorative techniques were

3 Information on the number of pots comes from the website of the Ban Chiang project.

4 See [isearchaeology.org/ban-chiang-project](http://isearchaeology.org/ban-chiang-project).

the most likely to change (White 2017, 71). Decorative finish treatment was the most variable, demonstrating artistic efforts unrelated to or beyond function, such as incising, rocker stamping, or painting, and may define village or household identity. They certainly reveal localized creativity.

A number of analysts have proposed tentative sequences of pottery within this conservative ceramic tradition. In the Early Period at Ban Chiang (2100–900 BCE), pots often held infant burials while vessels of several different shapes, including footed cord-marked pots with incised shoulder designs, globular pots with incised and painted shoulder designs, and other shaped pots with densely incised designs (Sureeratana 2008, 15; White et al. 1991), accompanied adult and child burials. The Ban Chiang evidence supports the argument that incised and impressed pottery style signals Neolithic expansion in Southeast Asia and at some sites is contemporaneous with copper-base metallurgy (White 2008, 99; White 2015). Eyre defined the incised and impressed pottery style as the “time-specific ceramic attribute” of the Lower to Middle Bronze Age (2006, 338).

Middle Period (900–300 BCE) vessels were often carinated with incised and painted designs and were commonly found smashed over burials, although many intact carinated vessels show up in looted collections. The intense white slip on these vessels is most common in the Middle Period, suggesting that different clay sources were selected at different times.

Late Period at Ban Chiang (300 BCE–200 CE) saw the flourishing of design creativity in the striking red-on-buff painted pottery. The elaborately painted pottery common in the looted collections discussed in this book was interred intact with burials, close to the body, along with glass beads and clay rollers (TAM 2018a, 46). The burials from the FAD excavation at Wat Pho Sri Nai in Ban Chiang are clearly associated with the most elaborate painted pottery, but very few painted pots were found associated with burials in the 1974–75 excavation; most had been looted.<sup>5</sup>

The sites located across the Khorat plateau revealed a great deal of local variability in metal production and ceramic types during the prehistoric occupation of the region. Most bronze technological systems require knowledge of ceramic systems (TAM 2018a, 98). The ceramic crucibles and molds from Ban Chiang have been fully analyzed as they relate to metal manufacturing (cf. ch. 5 in TAM 2018b). But domestic and burial pottery is different from technical ceramics such as clay crucibles and is distributed differently. While domestic pottery is localized, the technical ceramics used

5 Higham and Thosarat (2012:221) illustrate a painted vessel associated with burial 11 from Ban Chiang.

in metal production spanned larger regions (TAM 2019, 141). For example, the source of the clay used for crucibles at the site of Ban Na Di differed from that used for domestic and funerary pottery, suggesting that metal workers and potters might well represent different communities of practice (TAM 2019, 79).

Distinctive pottery styles, including different temper composition, could be found only a few kilometres apart, as if pottery production and decoration might be associated with particular households, kin groups, workshops, or village communities. For example, pots from Ban Don Thong Chia, about 30 kilometres from Ban Chiang, were similar in form and style to ceramics from Ban Chiang and used the same tempering material—grog, quartz, and plant material (rice chaff) but in differing proportions over time, perhaps due to differences in local clays (Sureeratana 2008). Similarly, Ban Chiang and Ban Na Di, only 23 kilometres apart, have distinctly different ceramics and distinct grave treatments; vessels were deliberately broken at Ban Chiang but not at contemporaneous phases at Ban Na Di (White and Eyre 2011, 65). In addition, multiple decorative techniques coexisted in each prehistoric period. This ceramic variability might indicate that there were many potters working in the same community.

The pottery from the site of Non Nok Tha was divided into six functional classes—round-bottomed vessels for cooking or liquid storage, ring foot jars used for storing dry or paste foods, cups for serving, ring foot bowls for serving, flat bottom bowls for serving, and flat-bottomed jars for storage of dry or paste foods, some of which were used as grave goods (Bacus 2007, 328). Vessels from Ban Non Wat Bronze Period burials include food bowls and drinking cups, which could also have been used to display food offerings (Higham and Kijngam 2012, 524).

White and Eyre (2011, 66) identify thirteen ceramic sub-regions in metal-age Thailand, suggesting that ceramic production was decentralized in household or village production. For example, elephant hide pottery made when clay is pressed into a basket appears to be a highly localized decorative technique (White and Eyre 2011, 65), just as sites like Ban Chiang in the Sakhon Nakhon basin developed its idiosyncratic, flamboyant Late Period red-on-buff painted pottery—perhaps another unique localized technique. There are to date no examples of comparable design complexity found in the region. The Neolithic and Bronze Age pottery from the site of Ban Non Wat in the upper Mun Valley, northeast Thailand, comes closest. The ceramics from Ban Non Wat have been described in some detail (Higham and Kijngam 2011, 2012). As in most reports on ceramics in the region, the analysis describes vessel shapes and motifs, using idiosyncratic terms such



as one- or two-legged whales, sickles, and human forms, which are difficult to identify from the photographs and drawings.

In addition to the types and subtypes identified by White and Eyre, there were many unique shapes and sizes among the pottery found at all sites in the region. Eyre argues that ceramic sub-regions might represent regional economic systems of broad, decentralized, and fluid exchange networks that transcended site sizes, types, and locations of settlements and subsistence patterns. Highly individualized expressions of forms within villages might also suggest that pottery production was undertaken by many potters per village (Eyre 2010, 75). As Eyre (2010, 67) has demonstrated from a survey of sites in Central Thailand, pottery decorations appear to be randomly associated or “mixed and matched” with various types of surface treatment, location of decoration, rim type, or other decoration types. Potters chose from a shared repertoire of designs and decorations. White argues that “[w]hereas decorative styles can span cultural boundaries through trade and imitation, technological styles endure through transmission of technological know-how across space and time via socially constructed learning frameworks” (2011, 11). Individual motifs such as spirals might be easily shared across sites, but the complex symmetry rules discussed in the next chapter might be less easily shared across communities of potters.

Cylindrical clay rollers ranging from 3 to 10 centimetres in length were found in association with Late Period burials and elsewhere at Ban Chiang and nearby sites. The rollers were deeply carved with geometric and curvilinear designs with holes not always centered and not always cut all the way through. (See Illustration 1.) The excavators speculated that they could have been used for textile printing (Gorman and Charoenwongsa 1976, 24). Others have suggested that the rollers could have served as ideographic tokens, part of an accounting system for exchanges, tributes, or trade items (Folan and Hyde 1980).

In 1977 my student and I carved four duplicate “Ban Chiang” rollers made of wood to experiment with different techniques for textile printing on cloth: direct application of paint to roller, wax-relief method to produce batik-like designs, and a relief or stencil technique. (See Illustration 1.) While all three techniques produced designs, the latter two were most effective, particularly for producing continuous designs. A wax-like coating on the roller also facilitated direct printing and would explain the fact that paint pigments seldom adhered to the rollers and their edges were not worn down. At that time, we speculated that the rollers had a ritual function as amulets, part of a system of individual ranking that became particularly important at a person’s death (Van Esterik and Kress 1980).

In Chapter 3 I discuss the aesthetics and designs on the Late Period painted pottery in more detail. Here it is important to consider the evidence linking the ceramics and metal to the burial traditions at Ban Chiang.

*Burials:* With approval from the FAD, the skeletal remains from Ban Chiang were shipped to the University of Hawai'i following the 1974 and 1975 excavations. The skeletal materials were reanalyzed after the dating of the site was revised by White in 1986. Despite careful excavation, no complete buried skeletons were recovered from Ban Chiang. There were always missing bones or missing information. Thus, there were always questions about the total number of individuals that were buried together at the site. The report on the human remains estimates that the excavated area of Ban Chiang produced 142 burials excavated as discrete units, 57 from section BC and 85 from section BCES. These included 114 adults and 28 infants and children under five; of the infants, 12 were fetal, newborns or less than a year old (TAM 2002, 21). Primary, extended inhumation burial was the dominant mortuary practice at Ban Chiang (TAM 2002, 14). The prehistoric residents of Ban Chiang and nearby sites practiced residential burial rather than burial in separate cemeteries, according to the analysis made by White and Eyre (2011). The flexed burials at Ban Chiang were early and mostly male (TAM 2002, 178). They might have belonged to members of a hunting and gathering community who married local women. Similarly, Higham's research at Ban Non Wat suggests that the earliest burials at that site were interred in the flexed position characteristic of hunter-gatherer burials in Southeast Asia and with mortuary offerings that differ from any known in Neolithic contexts (2012a, 268).

Goods that accompany burials, grave goods, shed light on the lives of the deceased. Ceramics and other items found in burials could be specially made grave goods, goods owned by the deceased, offerings made by the mourners, or evidence of mortuary feasting, none of which necessarily equates to the social status of the deceased (cf. Smith and Lee 2008, 244). In Ban Chiang and comparable sites in the region, grave goods vary from poor to rich; there was evidence of wide variation in grave wealth in many sites. Metal grave goods are neither rare nor as common as pottery (TAM 2018b, 152). The burials at Ban Chiang are considered residential burials with the daily activities of life and death closely connected in space and time (TAM 2018a, 28). The depths of the burials vary, with some graves being very shallow. The sets of grave goods interred with the burials appeared to mark achievements unique to each individual (TAM 2b, 151) rather than ascriptive rank. Wealthy graves coexist with poor graves over time, suggesting a cyclical pattern of individual status differences rather than an evolution of

class-based hierarchies (White and Eyre 2011, 70). There is no evidence of elites controlling the trade of exotic goods that appear in graves but rather regional networks passing around exotic goods such as agate or copper (Eyre 2010, 72). The excavations at Ban Non Wat suggest that a similar mortuary pattern existed, with periods of dazzling wealth followed by a decline in mortuary display, including fewer opulent mortuary feasts and less use of exotic materials (Higham and Kijngam 2012, 526, 527).

There were changes in burial rituals over time at Ban Chiang. Complete pottery was interred with the adult burials in the Early and Late periods, often placed at the foot or head of the dead, but only broken pots and sherd sheets were used to cover the body during the Middle phase of the culture. Burial ritual may vary with ceramic styles, suggesting that grave goods such as ceramics may be an identity marker signaling social grouping at the regional level (White and Eyre 2011, 66), much as textiles function to identify many contemporary upland groups in Thailand today.

Animals played a part in the burial rituals of Ban Chiang and related populations. In the Early Period, animal offerings were rare and consisted mostly of pig bones. Jaws and parts of skulls of pigs, chickens, and dogs were most common in the later periods at Ban Chiang, in contrast to sites like Non Nok Tha and Ban Na Di, where whole articulated animal skeletons were common (TAM 2002, 187).

The discovery of some relatively wealthy pre-Metal Age burials at Khok Phanom Di and Bronze Age burials at Ban Non Wat and Non Nok Tha has encouraged the interpretation of the existence of some form of social ranking, with evidence that some individuals were exceptionally wealthy. Opulent mortuary displays lasted for about ten generations at Ban Non Wat (Higham and Thosarat 2012, 152). Generally, there was a lack of uniformity in burial practices in adults as well as infants at Ban Chiang and nearby sites (TAM 2002, 179).

*Child burials:* In a study of infant death in Southeast Asia, Halcrow and colleagues have noted that “burial rites given to the young are especially useful for gaining insights into social and cultural factors of the society from which they are drawn” (2008, 371). What is most striking about the burials at Ban Chiang is that throughout the occupation of the site, infant and child burials received the most grave goods and were as well endowed as (or better than) those of adults (White 1995, 110). White identifies well-furnished graves of infants and young children with metal grave goods at Ban Chiang: BC burial 14, BCES burial 12, BCES burial 26. Some child graves with metal, such as BCES burial 38, have ordinary furnishings (TAM 2019, 165). The graves of children contained metal artifacts but not points (TAM

2018b, 169). How can we explain the elaboration of infant and young child burials in trans-egalitarian societies such as Ban Chiang?

European visitors to Southeast Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries noted the attention lavished on both male and female children compared to the neglect the European poor showed their children. The lower child mortality in Southeast Asia may be due to longer birth spacing compared to the situation in Europe. At Ban Chiang, families clearly placed a high value on infants and young children, as some examples of infant burials show (White 1982, 1995, 2006; TAM 2002; Bacus 2007; O'Reilly 2003).

In the early Ban Chiang period (2100–900 BCE), eight of seventeen children of both sexes under five years of age were buried in mortuary jars (TAM 2002, 180), often decorated with curvilinear, impressed, and incised designs; a five-year-old was buried in bronze anklets, and another child burial was provided with a cup and food offerings. The burials of very young infants (fetuses, newborns, and up to a few weeks old) may have been treated separately by being buried in jars with applique encircling the upper body. Not every infant was buried in a pot. There was variability in the way infant burials were treated during this time period (TAM 2002, 179). Occasionally a family group was buried together (TAM 2002, 180).

In the Middle Period (800–400 BCE), the elaboration of infant and child burials continued. A one-year-old was buried under sherd sheets from seven pots, and unlike adult burials, which were laid out on the ground with mounds over them, this child was placed in a grave. A five-year-old was buried with both bronze and iron bangles under a sherd sheet of carinated vessels. The young were buried with the funerary style and grave goods commensurate with adult burials (White 1982, 26). In fact, more bronze jewelry was found with child burials than with adult burials.

The elaboration of infant and child burials continued in the Late Period (300 BCE–200 CE). The excavators nicknamed one 5-year-old child Bianca. Bianca was adorned with a multi-strand wire necklace made of a bronze of unusually high tin content, which would have had to be formed into wire while hot and quenched with water several times and then formed into a delicate necklace strung with glass beads. An eighteen-month-old child was buried with five burnished and painted vessels, four ceramic rollers, and the disarticulated skeleton of a dog—his skull in one bowl, vertebrae and ribs in a pot, and the remaining bones over the child's chest (White 1982, 73). Another child of about six years was adorned with orange-red glass-like beads. In Late Period burials, elaborate grave goods such as necklaces made from bronze wire and ceramic rollers with a wide variety of designs are

concentrated in the graves of fetuses, infants, and children under the age of six.

This attention to infant and young child burials is not limited to Ban Chiang. Elsewhere in the region, at the nearby site of Ban Na Di, a six-month-old infant was buried with six cattle figurines and a bracelet repaired with bronze, the only bronze found in the earliest graves, and nearby, a five-year-old was buried under a shroud of crocodile skin (Higham 1998, 105) and a three-year-old with grave furnishings (Higham 1998, 102–5). In total, nine lidded jar burials held infants from fetuses to toddlers (TAM 2002, 179).

At Non Nok Tha, another site close to Ban Chiang, an infant and a three-year-old were buried in jars, with substantial grave goods (TAM 2002, 179). The small size of bronze bracelets on adult skeletons indicates that they began to be worn when the individuals were young and could not have been easily removed in adulthood (Bacus 2007, 330).

At Ban Lum Khao in the upper Mun valley, neonates were buried with more goods than infants or children. Five children were buried with the only copper-based artifacts found at the site (TAM 2019, 100). Some infants were buried in large, lidded burial jars placed near the heads of women (O'Reilly 2003, 302–3). The initial settlement dates around 1400–1000 BCE. In Nong Nor, another bronze-using site dating from 1500 BCE, children had a similar range of burial goods as adults (Higham 2002).

Non Mak La, a Bronze and Iron Age site in central Thailand, was used for both burials and habitation, based on the presence of living surfaces, domestic ceramics, and faunal remains. Burials were found across most of the excavated area; fifty-six primary burials were identified, some of which were young children buried in pots (Piggott 2019, 44; Higham 2002, 81).

The burial of a newborn infant at Noen Din, another site in central Thailand, is of particular interest because of its elaborate personal ornaments including carnelian beads and a shell anklet, as well as the inclusion of ceramic bivalve molds that had been repaired or were no longer of practical use, appearing to be “exhausted” or broken. Ciarla (2008, 327) has suggested that “the funerary ritual [for a baby] was considered worth the disposal of items of symbolic memory, but of little use in this world.” Thus, the inclusion of metal objects and product manufacturing equipment in a child’s grave does not necessarily mark elite status but may reflect parental occupation and identity of the family.

At the Ban Non Wat cemetery site in the upper Mun valley, the Neolithic graves of infants included pots as grave goods. In Bronze Age 1 (1050–1000 BCE), there were many infant jar burials, in addition to a two-year-old with a socketed copper axe and an infant buried in a wooden coffin under

a layer of shellfish with ceramic jars at the head and feet (Higham 2011, 369). Bronze Age 2, dated 1000 to 850 BCE, contained fourteen infant burials—fetal, newborn, and children under five years old. Some were placed in lidded jars along with miniature pots. Another neonate was buried in a similar lidded jar: “The lid interior was painted in a complex design that might represent birth” (Higham 2011, 373).<sup>6</sup> Other infant jar burials were decorated with curvilinear designs and a “curvilinear applique band in the form of an encircling snake” that could refer to rebirth (Higham 2011, 373), much like similar pottery at Lao Pako (Kallen 2004). Higham also suggests that red ochre and bivalve shells might serve as symbols of rebirth in the burial rituals of infants and young children (Higham and Kijngam 2012, 516).

Other infant burials resembled adult burials with offerings of ceramic jars, pig bones, shell, and red ochre. Higham describes one infant burial in detail to demonstrate the energy expended on these burials:

The grave itself is four metres in length for the tiny body. The infant wore large tridacna shell bangles, and shell bead earrings. The skeleton was covered in shell beads. Two bivalve shells were carefully positioned over the left hand and the severed feet bones of two pigs lay among the pots beyond the feet. (Higham 2011, 375)

At Khok Phanom Di, a coastal site some distance from Ban Chiang, two infants (one about fifteen months old) were buried on either side of a very rich woman’s grave, accompanied by almost the same set of grave goods as adults, some in miniature (Higham 2002, 212). The high sub-adult mortality rate (based on a high proportion of juveniles to adults) at this site suggests increased fertility rates combined with endemic malaria (TAM 2002, 243). Elsewhere in the region, Kallen (2004, 194) argues that burials at Lao Pako, Lao PDR, especially infants buried in jars, are part of a larger ritual space that incorporated metal artifact production.

Further away, in the late Neolithic site of Ban Mac in Vietnam, all children younger than five years of age had grave goods; a few children were found in ceramic pots; a six-month infant was buried with two pots and pellets; and an eight-year-old child grasped shell knives, among the richest grave goods at the site. The analysts suggest that the high mortality of children under five years of age was linked to high fertility (Oxenham et al. 2008, 195).

6 The design on the bottom of the pot illustrated in Higham and Thosarat (2012, 142) is interpreted as a human face with penetrating eyes. The authors do not discuss the design symmetry, the subject addressed in the next chapter.

## Why Elaborate Infant Burials?

Potter-artists adapt to the totality of their surroundings. That includes the birth, feeding, and death of infants. In the absence of sufficient evidence and context for painted pottery claimed to be from Ban Chiang, speculation beckons. In 1990 I presented a model about what attention to infant and child burials might mean, long before the reports on the excavations were available, and later I published a paper on the subject (2011). My very speculative model assumed that social organization, ecological conditions, health status, and subsistence patterns were intimately related. Because of my past research experience, I was drawn to include infant feeding as part of health and nutrition modeling, a subject that is seldom included in discussions of contemporary food security, let alone prehistoric.

We have a few facts to build on. There is no evidence that male and female infants and children were treated differently, although it is often difficult to determine the sex of the youngest babies. It might be safe to say that gender categories were not strongly expressed materially at Non Nok Tha (Bacus 2007, 313), or indeed elsewhere in the region including Ban Chiang.

The evidence around infant and young child burials in the region does not suggest sampling errors or preservation issues. Nor does it point to child sacrifice, epidemics, warfare, or infanticide. Unwanted infants who were deliberately killed after birth were unlikely to be buried with such care. These examples of infant burials in prehistoric Thailand are noteworthy because of the energy and aesthetic efforts expended on them. Burial practices hint that the death of a preterm fetus, stillborn, newborn, infant, or toddler is more than a personal tragedy. Their ritual treatment suggests that infants have moral worth equivalent to adults. Communities placed enough importance on these deaths that they included some of their best technological and artistic creations in the graves of their children.

Infant and child death is both normal and abnormal; high infant mortality rates and accidental death rates were probably normal for children everywhere except in the last century in privileged industrialized communities; but from a life history perspective, it is abnormal for children to die before their parents. White and Eyre (2011, 69) consider funerals as integrative performance rituals that help to preserve social memory over time. Commemorative rituals like funerals require transgenerational transmission of knowledge in order to perform ritual activities correctly, strengthen group identity, and maintain or advance the community's position in relation to external groups (Cubitt 2007, 134). In the case of Ban Chiang, residential burials could contribute to "place-making," the imbuing of enduring

meaning and cultural identity to specific locations on landscapes over time, reinforcing the shared identity among the community of the living, dead, and yet-to-be-born—links in a chain (Cubitt 2007, 138), landscape as collective memory.

What kind of social organization might fit with a situation where infants and children have considerable structural importance—where their deaths reveal strains and asymmetries in the social system? White and Eyre apply the concept of house society, proposed by Levi Strauss to describe Amazonian society, to model the social organization of northeast Thailand. Carsten (1995) points out how well the term applies to Southeast Asian villages, with their focus on house and hearth. Rice-growing households cooperate to produce rice and eat cooked rice together. The functional pattern of commensality in house societies provides identity and a basis for relating to others and may be headed by a “big man” who gains his political power through achieved skills, such as manipulating exchange networks to better the house economy. House societies are not based on unilineal descent groups but have corporate attributes and continuity through time, with flexibility in house membership (White and Eyre 2011, 68). Lines of descent could be matrilineal or patrilineal or both, and marriage could be exogamous or endogamous, with fluidity of membership maintained through adoption or fosterage. Others have made arguments for matrilocality (based on shared isotopes, providing evidence suggesting that men grew up in areas distant from women) and patrilocality (based on the diversity of pottery designs distributed in northeast Thailand in the first millennium BCE [Bentley et al 2005]), assuming that women were the potters. A non-exclusive mode of tracing descent, through all descendants—male and female—from a founding ancestor might also provide these conditions. Cognatic descent, for example, might facilitate the exchange of valuables used as grave goods without dispersing wealth. We might expect tension or competition between matrilineal and patrilineal kin exhibited in grave goods. O’Reilly suggests possible evidence for two unequal lineage groups in nearby Ban Lum Khao (2003, 204). These would not need to be corporate clan groups but shallow lineages represented by immediate ancestors buried near the house.

Residential burials ritually anchor descendants and ancestors in particular landscapes and would be compatible with house societies with flexible social hierarchies and decentralized settlement systems (White and Eyre 2011, 59, 70). Cognatic systems could provide this flexibility, building from the practice of marrying in individuals (usually male) from nearby hunting and gathering groups. Recall the occasional flexed burial associated with hunting and gathering societies found at Ban Chiang and nearby sites. Rice



farmers who married out of the community would help account for the spread of rice farming throughout the region in both upland and lowland sites over the last millennium BCE.

Perhaps the burial rituals for infants, including valuable grave goods, reflect the status of both parents and the contribution their children might have made to the community should they have lived a normal life. The variety of grave goods in infant and child burials might reflect alliances between both maternal and paternal relatives and a mechanism for producing children of higher rank than their parents. As an analogy, Balinese solve the problem of producing high-ranking children through patrilineal parallel cousin marriage, resulting in the concentration of ancestral power from both maternal and paternal relatives, elevating the status of the child above that of its parents—the child as the sum of maternal and paternal power, not yet human but still god-like, still sacred. This would fit with a conceptual model that would have infants retaining spiritual power after death and cycling it back to enhance household fertility for future generations. Rituals around residential infant burial in house societies could transform dead infants into valuable ancestors. The death of an infant would be a personal and emotional loss for the whole house and would serve to emphasize to the living the importance of nurture in ensuring the fertility of rice and women. Could we also have hints here of the symbolic importance of and linkages between fertility and metal production? The relation is neither direct nor simple:

That the graves of sub-adults buried with metal artifacts may or may not be notable for their overall wealth of grave goods implies that their metal grave goods were not simply a reflection of a parent's wealth or elite status; metal grave goods with young children may have had other kinds of symbolic roles. Hayden (1995, 2001:260) discussed wealthy child burials as related to "child growth payments" (such as for initiations, first menstruation) and certain kinds of social investments and debts found in trans-egalitarian societies. (TAM 2019, 165)

Analysis of the skeletal remains provides important clues about the number of infants dying, but they cannot explain the ritual elaboration of infant burials. For some clues, we turn to the work of physical anthropologists who examined the bones from Ban Chiang for evidence. Pietrusky and Douglas (TAM 2002) analyzed the skeletal remains at Ban Chiang; they demonstrated the results of sedentism and intensification of agriculture on infant deaths in particular: "Less mobility may result in an increase in fertility and improved

weaning foods, as well as an increase in infant mortality resulting from more infectious diseases in densely inhabited villages” (TAM 2002). At Ban Chiang, there appears to be no dramatic population expansion. The skeletal evidence suggests a healthy lifestyle for adults, with a low dependency ratio (two workers for every dependent maintained through time). Females show strenuous use of legs, back, and feet, suggesting a rigorous lifestyle for both men and women but no obvious decline in health with the transition to a rice diet at Ban Chiang (TAM 2002, 258).

Researchers have argued that the earliest rice grown in Thailand was probably glutinous (Nguyen Xuan Hien 2001). The more glutinous varieties of rice need to be soaked and steamed, and the cooking process does not produce rice water, a product that could have been used as a breastmilk substitute, albeit inadequate. While the preparation of glutinous rice does not produce rice water, it does provide an appealing, easily grasped infant food. Today Lao toddlers given sticky rice are not closely supervised. As Lao mothers boast: “my child feeds itself,” with a handful of sticky rice—the original “fun food.”<sup>7</sup> Glutinous rice was until recently pre-chewed for use as a complementary food in northeast Thailand, Burma, and Lao PDR. National and international health authorities were disgusted at such unhygienic uncivilized practices and discouraged it. Peltó et al. (2010) have recently argued that pre-mastication may have benefits, including the pre-digestion of starches and lipids before the infant can chew and digest available household foods, as well as the transfer of immunity from mothers to infants.

In the diets of hunting and gathering communities and communities where hunting and gathering provided supplementary food such as in Ban Chiang, pre-mastication of foods would contribute to dietary diversity, particularly during the period of transition between an exclusive breastmilk diet and the household diet. Unlike populations transitioning to wheat or corn, intensification of rice agriculture did not lead to a decline in nutritional quality, increased sexual dimorphism, or a decrease in general health, because of the continuing use of a diversified subsistence strategy based on gathering and hunting as well as rice (Clark 2014). The nutrients in tubers, nuts, and meat (particularly when dried and smoked) would be available to infants only through pre-mastication. Nuts and meat would be a dangerous choking hazard if they were not pre-chewed.

Over time, increasingly intensive rice agriculture would suggest a greater consumption of carbohydrates and a decline in the use of other resources

7 This practice has implications for infant mortality rates in Lao PDR should exclusive breastfeeding rates decline because of the early introduction of sticky rice.

such as wild foods. White has confirmed the area as a rich source of collected plants, wild yam, bamboo, mushrooms, frogs, and ants (1982, 138). Eventually, less hunting may have reduced the dietary quality and complexity of the diet in the region (TAM 2002, 258). It certainly would have changed infant feeding options.

Although pre-masticated rice is generally not used as a breastmilk substitute, it could have been used to space out infant feedings when women were working away from their infants, perhaps in rice fields. Rice offers the possibility of new complementary foods such as rice-based gruels unavailable to more mobile hunting and gathering populations or to groups dependent on root crops. Settled agricultural communities like Ban Chiang had ceramic containers that could be used for boiling milk or water that could be substituted for mother's milk. If liquids or gruels were used as breastmilk substitutes in the first months of life, freeing women to increase their labour time in the rice fields, the result would likely be increased infant mortality and decreased space between births due to lactation amenorrhea. Every mother would likely have direct or indirect experience of infant and young child death in prehistoric communities like Ban Chiang.

The introduction of rice agriculture, particularly with iron tools and draught animals (both present in northeast Thai sites in the first millennium BCE), changed the tropical forest ecology radically to resemble a seasonal marsh or managed swamp, to the benefit of mosquitoes that now had access to standing water for breeding. Infants and young children exposed to malaria usually remain free of this disease as long as they are breastfed; exclusively breastfed babies are more resistant to malaria (Berg 1973, 97). In a more recent study in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Brazeau et al. (2016) found that exclusive breastfeeding was associated with a reduced risk of malaria. Exclusive breastfeeding was found to be protective against fevers including malaria, perhaps due to overall reduced disease burden of breastfed infants and their better ability to fight malaria due to their stronger immune systems. Any interruption to a pattern of infant feeding based on exclusive breastfeeding followed by pre-chewed complementary foods could have resulted in recurrent infant deaths.

In Ban Chiang, where yams and rice were both available, rice would have been the preferred infant food either in the form of rice water or rice gruel. Root crops such as yam and taro are less suitable for infant feeding because they are less nutritious and bulky. But if rice-based products interrupted exclusive breastfeeding, then the beneficial protection against malaria might have been lost, resulting in higher rates of infant mortality.

In Southeast Asia, women suffering from malaria late in their pregnancies experience high rates of abortion, stillbirth, and fetal death, particularly during their first pregnancies (cf. Fried et al. 1998), and pregnant women are twice as likely to be bitten by mosquitoes carrying pathogens (Winegard 2019, 9). Congenital malaria has also been reported in Southeast Asia (WHO 1990, 58). Were malaria and other mosquito-borne diseases a serious threat to infants in village farming communities like Ban Chiang in the first millennium BCE? To answer this question, we would need to know much more about the likelihood of malaria and its impact on prehistoric communities.

The time and energy spent on elaborating child burials at Ban Chiang and other sites in northeast Thailand suggests not a single epidemic but a constant, regular experience of infant and young child death in communities where children were highly valued but where women's labour was becoming increasingly important in rice production. Children would then become even more important as sibling caretakers, as well as in rice production. Sibling caretakers are also associated with high rates of infant and young child death (Engle and Ricciuti 1995).

In the context of endemic malaria where infants have passive immunity only when they are exclusively breastfed, the availability of either pre-chewed foods or easily diluted rice-based gruels could result in both a reduction in child spacing and an increase in malaria and other diseases. Communities like Ban Chiang may provide insight into a moment in human history where two trajectories collide, when women have an increasingly important role in rice production, and when they are increasingly valued as producers and nurturers of children.

### **The Limits of Archaeology**

I have clearly strayed far beyond the limits of evidence-based archaeology. It is the professional archaeologists who will provide evidence of what life was like in prehistoric Thailand. Nonetheless, there is room for different perspectives and different approaches to facts and knowledge production.

The brief picture of Ban Chiang and the archaeology of the region summarized in this chapter is changing constantly, as sites continue to be found and excavated. The site of Ban Chiang raises many new questions—questions that cannot be answered with materials that were looted from the site. White has drawn a picture of Ban Chiang as a middle-range society where there was a low level of conflict; almost half the traumatic injuries were on women (TAM 2002, 171) and were not compatible with war wounds.

What do we know about societies that mark the deaths of infants rather than the deaths of male warriors? How do infant burials contribute to “place-making” and cycles of sustainability in house societies? Were burial rituals meant to address the social stress caused by the death of infants? Did the death of infants create social stress beyond the immediate family? How were social networks maintained without the conflict that would make exchange networks less effective? Individual differences in the composition of exchange networks would explain some variability in wealth visible at Ban Chiang and other sites in the region. It will also be important to know how the community of practice and the social network of potters relate to that of metalworkers, or whether burial practice and rituals are more localized than technological processes. Will ceramics, metal, textiles, food, and burials each tell the same story about Ban Chiang? How will these analytically separate stories be integrated? These questions are raised for future researchers to answer.

Pietrusewsky (1982, 48) argued that the ancient inhabitants of Ban Chiang may represent some of the earliest ancestors of the Austronesian population that colonized the Pacific. At the same time, “[t]he skeletal evidence supports biological continuity throughout the temporal sequence at Ban Chiang” (TAM 2002, 259). Ban Chiang and related sites will have much to contribute to debates about population movements and language groups in prehistoric Thailand. These will not be simple linear stories about population replacements determined by excavating entire sequences that take us from prehistory to state systems, appealing though these might be.

The evidence from the Ban Chiang excavations documented in the TAM reports demonstrates the importance of detailed examination of a single class of artifacts such as metal. The Late Period painted pottery from Ban Chiang is an additional artifact class that might provide some insight into everyday life in prehistoric northeast Thailand. Just as the analysis of the metal provided new information, the painted pottery deserves closer scrutiny. But it is difficult to compare the ceramic traditions of Ban Chiang and Ban Non Wat, for example, by referring to painted designs as exhibiting “geometric symmetry.” Terms used to describe the designs on pottery from Ban Non Wat as stylized opposed human motifs and double human motifs (let alone one-legged whales) are vague and subjective (Higham and Kijngam 2011, 102–10). Much could be learned from establishing a common terminology and mode of analysis that would allow valuable comparison between Ban Chiang painted pottery and pottery from Ban Non Wat, for example. Symmetry analysis could provide this common terminology and analysis. Since much of the painted pottery from Ban Chiang was looted and lacks

provenience, the approach explored in the next chapter provides a way to make use of looted items that are of no use to archaeologists. Making some use of these looted items requires taking a new approach to the material, as I demonstrate in the next chapter.

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### 3 The Artistic Past: Aesthetic Preferences

#### Abstract

This chapter considers the aesthetic context of Ban Chiang artifacts by examining the decorative elements used by the prehistoric artists who decorated the Late Period painted pottery. Following a review of the basics of symmetry operations, I review and update my model of symmetry analysis based on a Chomskian linguistic analogy and apply it to the unprovenanced Late Period painted pottery photographed in the early seventies. The chapter also considers possible approaches to the symbolism and meaning of the designs themselves, including representational possibilities. Based on new approaches to symmetry and cultural processes, the chapter concludes with some future questions that could be asked even of unprovenanced material culture.

**Keywords:** painted pottery, designs, symmetry analysis, symbolism and meaning of designs, linguistic analogy

Most technological achievements of humanity ... had their origin in aesthetic curiosity, the desire to create beautiful and ingenious objects.  
(Killick and Fenn 2012, cited in TAM 2018a, 58).

The cover of the 1998 book by C. Higham and R. Thosarat *Prehistoric Thailand*, printed and bound in Thailand, displays six magnificent examples of Late Period Ban Chiang painted pottery in colour, with no comments or identifying details about the cover display; inside, the book provides only two paragraphs on the site of Ban Chiang—much of it in comparison with other sites in the region. Why no discussion of the painted pottery in the text? Perhaps the cover was designed without consultation with the authors. But the Thai book designer chose to display the Late Period Ban Chiang pottery

for its beauty to lend appeal to the book, a point not made by the authors. The Thai public generally appreciated the designs, although they were unlike other Thai ceramic traditions, and the Ban Chiang painted pottery lacked the smoothness of lustrous porcelain. Of course, appreciation of beauty is subjective, and we have no way of knowing the aesthetic categories or values of the Ban Chiang potter-artists. Nevertheless, the painted designs had a strange appeal.

Joyce White refers to the designs as idiosyncratic and flamboyant, noting that all the ceramics “exhibit an elegance, sophistication and attention to decorative detail” (1982, 29), and Charles Higham calls them “attractive” (2012b, 96).<sup>1</sup> The media describes the designs on the painted pottery as exquisite and fascinating: “Some artist who knows how to work with fabric should reproduce the best of these designs in the original colours on Thai silk and cotton” (Viravaidya 1972). As far as I know, no one took up this suggestion.<sup>2</sup>

Painted pottery is an aesthetic gift to the Late Period Ban Chiang community members—alive and dead—and to those of us who can look at them thousands of years later. It gives us a glimpse into the minds and souls of the potter-artists but few means for interpreting what we see there. Perhaps we marginalize aesthetics as less important than technology or function because we do not know what the designs mean. Of course, the designs themselves do not have to mean anything (cf. David, Sterner, and Guava 1988). When the painted pottery from northeast Thailand was first discovered, archaeologist Donn Bayard wrote, “I am far more interested in both culture process and culture content in northeast Thailand, than I am in waxing rhapsodic on the beauties of Ban Chiang painted pottery” (1978, 34), as if aesthetics is somehow excluded from culture. While agreeing with him about the importance of culture processes, I make no apology for addressing beautiful, aesthetically pleasing materials and regret that the aesthetic appeal of the designs has been ignored for the most part or consigned to a black box by analysts. While archaeologists have long been admonished not to try and retrieve “mind”—including aesthetics—current debates are not about “if” but “how” mind is recoverable (Crumley 1999, 270). Recovering mind is a necessary part of analyzing designs and cannot be left in a black box. In this chapter I open that black box and explore in some detail one approach to the artistic production of the Late Period potter-artists at Ban Chiang.

1 On the other hand, Higham describes pottery from Ban Non Wat as displaying “exquisite painted designs” (Higham and Kijngam 2012, 523).

2 I checked the past designs advertised online by Jim Thompson Silk in the seventies and found no Ban Chiang colours or designs.

In addition to the quantifiable evidence about the distribution of ornaments and weapons in burial and non-burial contexts of Ban Chiang and related sites, there is beauty in the artifacts themselves that merits attention and analysis. Ban Chiang provides some evidence about the aesthetic priorities of some members of Ban Chiang society, one small locality among many others in the region. In brief, there was great effort expended on non-essential technological innovations in both metal and ceramics. The metal artifacts reveal that their makers were more interested in shape, shine, and colour than hardness (Thailand Archaeology Monographs [TAM] 2018b, 99)—qualities ideal for personal ornaments, not for weapons or even tools. White and Hamilton consider pottery production as an additive and transformative process, fundamentally different from the thermochemically derived process of metal production (TAM 2018a, 49). Pots are just as useful if they are not decorated or painted.

Craft traditions such as painted pottery exhibit both utility and virtuoso skill worthy of aesthetic considerations. While both art and craft production require the application of skilled technique, craft products are considered useful objects (cf. Dutton 2005; Scott 2016). Objects crafted with the hands and soul of the artisan contain a special vitality not found in mass-produced goods. While such binary oppositions are not always helpful, they are even less useful for objects made thousands of years ago. Here I refer to the makers of the painted pots as potter-artists. The Late Period red-on-buff painted pottery associated with Ban Chiang reveals an aesthetic sensibility unrelated to utilitarian function—a fascination with intricate pattern that contrasts with the straight lines of modernity (cf. Ingold 2007, 152). The designs draw the observer in to the work of deciphering the pattern.

Further analysis of the pottery in relation to the burials from the site may shed light on their possible ritual function, which could ultimately be linked to the aesthetic preferences of the potter-artists and their lived experience of producing pottery in Ban Chiang. But this analysis is only possible if the pottery has a clear association with the burials. There is no provenience or defined context for the looted painted pottery removed from the site, and there is limited evidence of the painted pottery used as grave goods in the 1974–75 excavated materials. The early FAD excavations clearly show the painted pottery in association with burials (cf. You-di 1972; Intakosai 1972), and it is clearly associated with burials in other sites in the region such as Ban Non Wat (Higham and Kijngam 2011, 2012). The excavated burials provide a snapshot of only one ritual moment in what might have been a long process of turning a dead body into an ancestor.

Examining the aesthetic creativity of Ban Chiang potter-artists will entail more than materialist science-based analysis of artifacts. The examination might raise new questions about the part aesthetics plays in the development of social complexity. Appreciation of symmetry, for example, has much to do with the evolution of an aesthetic sense, and the aesthetic response to symmetry goes way back in human evolution, as I will discuss later in this chapter. The universal significance and appeal of symmetry is partly explained by the physiology and psychology of visual perception. If symmetry contributes to an appreciation of beauty, the preference for particular symmetry operations or for asymmetry is culturally conditioned.

At Ban Chiang we see hints of people who go beyond practicality to a place of creative imagination—a place where decorative crafts matter and infant burials are adorned with personal ornaments and beautiful pots. Analysis of these activities could provide additional insights into Ban Chiang society, including suggestions of how complex symbolic information could have been transmitted across households and communities over generations.

Not every painted pot exhibits the virtuoso skills of the maker. The painted pottery in the collections show some variation in the levels of artistic skill; the flowing lines of the most experienced artists are most apparent, as are the fumbles on some of the repainted vessels. (See Illustration 2, vessel 845, compared to Illustration 14, vessel 1330, for example.) Often rims and pedestals have been added to create the appearance of a complete pot. (See Illustration 13, vessel 643.)

Ironically, while the Western archaeologists were not distracted by the designs on the Late Period painted pottery, it was the intricacy and beauty of the designs on the painted pottery that fueled the looting at the site. Both looters and collectors had an aesthetic response to the designs on the painted pots. The designs elicited aesthetic appreciation for the technical skills of the potter-artists. Some collectors selected their purchases based on their preferred designs. “I like spirals best,” one collector reported. Beauty was certainly one among many criteria for the market value of the pots. The fact that painted pottery fetched a higher price fueled the repainting work that went on in the modern village of Ban Chiang and elsewhere. Occasionally, collectors organized their storage space based on design elements such as spirals, concentric units, and zoned designs (with striking outliers also visible on each shelf). (See Illustration 9c.) The organizational work of some of the collectors may well have influenced my original categorizations of designs or at least trained my eyes to recognize symmetry differences. Other collectors found the painted designs “too busy.”

What moves potters or metal workers to go beyond practicality and functionality? When did the activities of making these designs take on a life of their own? When and why did the potters, potter-artists, or artists invest in so much time-consuming aesthetic activity decorating these objects, particularly the objects linked to the burials of infants and children? No doubt such skilled crafts people lent prestige to their households and communities. Somehow, aesthetics must play a part in the individual prestige systems that analysts have linked to differences in grave goods displayed in sites across northeast Thailand, as the discussion of sites in Chapter 2 showed. Even big man theories that stress the emergence of informal leadership in transegalitarian societies in the region do not exclude valuing artistic excellence in craft production to enhance the prestige and power of leaders.<sup>3</sup> Artistic prowess may be personally cultivated but it is also passed down to the next generation. Men of prowess in Southeast Asia possessed powerful objects such as heirloom pots, textiles, and drums with aesthetic value. To this day there is evidence for the appeal of excess—beauty as bounty, bounty as beauty in contemporary Tai/Lao societies (cf. High 2014, 162).

In Chapter 2 I mentioned some of the ways that the pots were used in burial rituals—jar burials of infants, sherd sheets of broken pots, pots placed at the head and/or feet of the deceased, pots with food offerings, etc. But because of the looting, the association between burials and pottery designs has been lost. Additionally, it is not always possible to identify pots from collections that are known to have come from the Ban Chiang site itself, despite what the collectors claim. The looting also makes it impossible to understand the development of the design system over time. Analysis of well-provenienced material from elsewhere in the region suggests that the painted tradition emerged fully developed with few links to earlier decorative traditions at the site and disappeared just as quickly when Ban Chiang was abandoned in the early centuries of the Common Era (CE). The flourishing of creativity might be linked to shifts from household to community production, stimulated by external trade, in a manner similar to the Kalinga in the Philippines (Stark 1995). Perhaps future excavations will prove this to be incorrect, but for the moment, the painted pottery stands as another example of localized pottery decoration—albeit one of exceptional beauty.

This chapter reviews how I originally analyzed the designs on Late Period Ban Chiang painted pottery from collections claimed to have come from

3 Marshall Sahlins (1963) described these big men or men of influence in Melanesian communities, who hold some informal political power based on exemplary personal characteristics, including the ability to distribute and redistribute resources and settle disputes.



Ban Chiang and the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of that analysis. It expands the discussion of symmetry as a key element of design structure and speculates on further uses for symmetry as a tool for understanding human behavior at Ban Chiang and elsewhere in the region.

### Old Theory, Old Methods

I liked the designs on the Late Period painted pottery that I saw in the Bangkok markets. I enjoyed unwinding the designs in my head and hand drawing them in my notebook to get a feel for the line flows and layout, imagining how the artists arranged the patterns in their minds, before or while they painted them. I sensed how different it feels to repeat a series of single spirals compared to a pair of double spirals or especially a row of four interconnected double spirals drawn without raising the pencil from the paper. I wondered how they made such large, fine-line spirals without a jig and how they passed on their way of drawing spirals, for example, to their relatives and apprentices. The designs gave me aesthetic pleasure; but, of course, my appreciation is based on my Western cultural biases, and I can only speculate on what gave the Ban Chiang potter-artists aesthetic pleasure (cf. Washburn 1999, 551).

Looking back, I can see how my thinking reflected my graduate work in cognitive anthropology, popular in the sixties and seventies, linking ethnography, linguistics, and cognitive psychology. The theoretical climate in Anglo-American anthropology at the time was moving away from functionalism and beginning to toy with the structuralism of continental anthropology. Transformational-generative linguistics was rapidly replacing structural linguistics, driven by Chomsky's cognitive approach to language and mind (1968). Mathematical anthropology and the new ethnography pushed students to break out of behaviourist methods and adopt new ethnographic methods. Archaeology was defining new paradigms referred to as the new archaeology or processual archaeology. While material culture was still their expertise, stress was also on ecological adaptation, and post-modernism had not yet blunted the search for truth and human universals. Anglo-American anthropologists are not as enamored with universals as continental experts like Levi Strauss and his search for cultural symmetries, as I discovered when trying to use the concepts of competence and performance to analyze symmetry (cf. Washburn 1999, 548).

With this training guiding me, I proposed and developed a cognitive theory of design production based on Chomsky's theory of a universal

grammar, which distinguished between competence and performance of an ideal native speaker. This required treating a painted pot as analogous to a grammatical utterance in language, and a potter-artist as a competent speaker-listener of that language. The contrast between deep structures and surface structures allowed me to talk about perceptual universals.

Over the years, Chomsky also modified his approach to language and rule-governed creativity, particularly as it applied to second language learning. Just as there is no such thing as a closed well-defined speech community with a common language, there was probably no closed-off potting community of practice where potter-artists had no access to information about the incredible variation in surface decoration on pottery found throughout northeast Thailand.

A further modification, in hindsight, would have been to consider communicative competence, as proposed by Dell Hymes (1974), that would put more stress on situationally and socially acceptable utterances (or painted pots). In the case of Ban Chiang, this would require developing a model that would propose how a socially acceptable painted pot would fit into a socially acceptable burial ritual, for example.<sup>4</sup>

Also in fashion at the time was Information Theory, part of the emerging field of Communication Theory. Information Theory provides a statistical measure of the information content of a message independently of the meaning of the message. The approach appeared to be compatible with my focus on internal representations and design production. But Information Theory and the idea of knowledge as information is rarely used in anthropology today. Hanson (2004) makes use of redundancy and information in his analysis of the symmetry of Maori designs, designs that are organized using symmetry operations similar to those used by Ban Chiang potter-artists.

As a graduate student who refused to stay in her lane (or more accurately, had not yet found her lane), I found Boas's (1927) approach to skill development and artistic production very useful and fully compatible with Miller, Galanter, and Pribram's 1960 work on plans, Deetz's work on mental templates (1965), Piaget's genetic epistemology (1970), and Bateson's (1972) work on the tacit knowledge guiding motor activity. If critical heritage studies existed in the seventies, I had never heard of it.

More recent approaches to material culture studies (cf. Kuchler and Carroll 2021), including Ingold's work on lines (2007), appear compatible with my model, although they did not inform my original analysis; for example, I never considered whether a finished design existed in the head

4 This speculative work has already begun (cf. White and Eyre 2011; Kallen 2004).

of the potter-artist. Ingold's current critique of work on design (2013) would have been useful at the time.

Interest in cognitive anthropology rapidly diminished in the eighties, lost somewhere between materialism and post-modernism. It has re-emerged in the study of cognitive archaeology, developed by Tom Wynn and his colleagues. By chance, my classmate in anthropology at the University of Illinois Tom Wynn and I shared an interest in symmetry. Wynn was instrumental in developing the field of cognitive archaeology; the history of the field is explained in his blog, *Cognitive Archaeology*. Cognitive archaeologists look to fields like neural aesthetics to explore how aesthetic sensibilities might have evolved in humans. I never explored the neuro-cognitive basis of aesthetic and artistic experience, although perception of symmetry might be part of this evolved capacity in humans (cf. Wynn and Berlant 2019; Hodgson 2011).

My first publication about the Ban Chiang designs while I was a graduate student at the University of Illinois was an *Asian Perspectives* article (1974) solicited by Wilhelm Solheim. It was based on a few published photographs of Late Period painted pottery from Ban Chiang, photographs I had taken of pots in Bangkok markets and with access to a small private collection lent to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Illinois. My methods were crude; I glued photographs of each pot and a sketch of the design on index cards and used a primitive card sorting system with McBee cards, sorting design motifs with a wire needle into a few broad categories like spirals, concentrics, and sigmoids. But for the 1974 paper, I made no use of computer analysis or flowcharts based on symmetry class. No doubt my lack of knowledge of depositional context pushed me to consider other processes—both cognitive and aesthetic—when examining the Late Period painted pottery from Ban Chiang.

When I began my work, I had no idea initially how to sort the designs, since there was no provenience for the pots and no established typology for pottery from the region. I proposed design classes based on dominant motifs and then described them, making minimal reference to symmetry rules, except for distinguishing between asymmetrical and symmetrical design structures; this is the simplest meaning of symmetry and stresses beauty derived from balance, right proportion, harmony, or congruity. By the time I was ready to analyze a larger corpus, I had mastered the analytical system of recognizing one- and two-dimensional designs based on symmetry rules as defined in Anna Shepard's book *The Symmetry of Abstract Design with Special Reference to Ceramic Decoration* (1948). I found symmetry to be a productive way to talk about abstract design. I thought

that symmetry analysis could bypass the limitation of lack of provenience and help to define Ban Chiang style consistently.

Originally, I thought that the problem of analyzing Ban Chiang painted pottery designs would include how to distinguish the truly original and creative skilled work of a Ban Chiang potter-artist from the bizarre and sloppy work of forgers. My research supervisor, Warren Peterson, in a foreword to a shortened monograph based on my thesis, provided excuses for my falling short of reaching those goals. He wrote:

A number of problems emerged, most notably that cognitive saliency was difficult to establish and that a range of “grammaticality” existed at prehistoric Ban Chiang as well as today among copiers and forgers of the vessels. Two attempts at cognitive saliency were built into the research design. The first was to create the grammar and then make predictions of new grammatical utterances; that is, to predict Ban Chiang designs as yet unrecovered by excavation. This failed due to lack of access to excavation results. The second was to interview successful forgers of the painted vessels on the assumption that an excellent forger would have mastered the “grammar” of Ban Chiang vessels and would therefore constitute a reasonable substitute for a competent native speaker of the language of Ban Chiang designs. (Peterson 1981, ix)

That second objective was not realized, since I was never able to interview the best forgers; they were unwilling to acknowledge their work, let alone discuss their methods of design production with me. Instead, some of them used my published work to improve their products. I am embarrassed to admit that I was pleased that they found my work useful.

When I first read Dorothy Washburn’s ground-breaking work on symmetry, I knew that I had found a useful approach to understanding perceptual universals in design. I owe my approach to symmetry to her extensive work on the topic (Washburn 1986, 2018; Washburn and Crowe 1988). She was able to demonstrate change through time in southwest ceramic traditions using symmetry analysis. Because she had provenience and dates for the material she studied, she was able to measure the distance between sites in relation to pattern similarity and ultimately provide insights on how design systems changed over time. Although her terminological system is well described in *Symmetries of Culture* (Washburn and Crowe 1988), I had difficulty learning and using the classification and terminology elaborated in their book. Consequently, I retained the descriptive terminology I first used, following Shepard (1948). I realize that consistency of terminology

is necessary for comparison, but because there are no temporal or spatial generalizations possible from the unprovenienced looted materials from Ban Chiang, I can only hope that future experts in Southeast Asian archaeology will apply symmetry analysis and terminology to facilitate comparison in the region. Whenever possible, I make use of Washburn's terminological system as well as Shepard's terms to describe some Ban Chiang designs. But it takes time and training to recognize and describe symmetry operations consistently; below I provide a starting point for readers to begin the process.

## Symmetry Basics

For readers less familiar with symmetry analysis, here is a place to start; for a more detailed discussion of symmetry, see Washburn and Crowe (1988) or Shepard (1948).

Symmetry, a property of regular repeated patterns, is a useful means by which the visual world can be encoded for the purpose of efficient recognition; it is a rapid means of extracting information from the world (Hodgson 2011, 38, 39), as it is common in the natural world. Perfect symmetry is rare in nature. Most biologically important objects such as living creatures are symmetrical. Mirror symmetry or bilateral reflection, especially along the vertical axis (as in human bodies) is perceived more quickly, effortlessly, and spontaneously than other kinds of symmetry. Second is reflection across the horizontal axis. Some symmetries are easier to see than others. For example, translation takes precedence over reflection (Kubovy and Strother 2004, 23). Other symmetries require mental rotation before the four motions are easily recognized. While perception of symmetry is hard-wired into the neural structures of the human brain, the production of symmetry is not (Washburn 2018, 125). Preference for different classes of symmetry is learned.

Hodgson summarized how the symmetry of paleolithic Acheulian hand axes came to transcend functional constraints in human evolution:

- (1) Positive affect deriving from the incidental production of symmetrical handaxes resulting in perceptual fluency that led to, (2) increased synchronization in neural responses that gave rise to, (3) sensory exploitation of symmetry that engendered, (4) a rudimentary aesthetic sense that was, (5) integrated into social signaling. The very beginning of visual culture, which formed the basis for much later "art", therefore appears to have deep roots, and began with an interest in symmetry that went beyond

mere functional considerations as is testified by the detached concern for the shape of Acheulean handaxes. (2011, 47)

Symmetry is a holistic property of form that gives a pattern a redundant character. Thus, symmetry could be considered a cognitive perceptual universal; the universal property of symmetry is part of how art communicates. Symmetry is a mathematical principle or measure first used to describe and analyze the formation and structure of crystals in nature. “Mathematics uncovers and systematizes the many kinds of symmetrical patterns in nature and culture” (Washburn 1999, 549). First defined by crystallographers to describe the geometry of crystals, designers have also compiled descriptions and illustrations of ornamental design with particular attention to Islamic pattern makers (cf. Jones 1856; Critchlow 1976).

Symmetry analysis has since been used to investigate the patterns that artists use in their creations. That does not mean that artists are always aware of the symmetry rules they use. Except for Escher, “pattern makers are not consciously conversant with the geometries that structure the patterns they create” (Washburn 2018, 123). The results of the hands-on application of symmetry rules are particularly apparent in the work of Byzantine and Islamic artisans, as well as artists such as Escher. For example, Escher might have altered the sides of a hexagon and rotated them around an endpoint to make his 1939 ink drawing *Reptiles*. But there is no way to confirm the methods that Escher used to create his masterpiece; it is only possible to speculate on the techniques that he might have used—the techniques that worked for him. For example, the duck pattern in his famous woodcut *Day and Night* could have been built up in several different ways, but one technique was used in a number of drawings (Ranucci and Teeters 1977, 123–26). In the case of Escher, the term “plane tessellation” might be used to describe the layout of the complex designs he created.

Similarly, Ban Chiang potter-artists did not have to know about symmetry rules to use them effectively; their visual perception, preference for certain symmetry motions, and their motor skills would shape the pattern they produced. I refer to this as the potter-artists’ theory of design production—not *the* theory, but one of a possible set of theories that they might have used to decorate their pottery and one we can access through symmetry analysis.

Symmetry analysis is concerned with how designs are generated: their structure. The first task is to determine the design unit or motif and then the first symmetry motion of the basic structure, followed by the symmetry of the complete design plus embellishments. In studies of the symmetry of

Maori designs on house rafters, analysts were able to confirm that Maori artists created a mental image of the design and traced the outline first following symmetry operations, followed by colour application to create antisymmetry or counterchange (Donnay and Donnay 1985, 24). Ban Chiang designs did not use colour counterchange, simplifying my task somewhat. I paid particular attention to the order of symmetry motions and the design fields they created in my analysis. My scheme arbitrarily determined the order of the symmetry motions. Each motion created secondary design fields and tertiary fields.<sup>5</sup> Some operations were nested inside other operations, with the product from one level becoming the design unit at another level.

As a mathematical tool, symmetry rules efficiently and objectively describe the structure of repeated geometric decoration and the layout of design fields. Symmetry is only one among many possible systems of order that describes how a design is organized. Symmetry analysis does not replace typologies or material analysis; it just adds another tool to the tool kit. It is a particularly useful approach when so many designs appear to be unique. But it has advantages over typological classification, which uses multiple attributes, because it focuses on only one attribute or property (Washburn and Crowe 1988, 35). Symmetry analysis has the added benefit of steering the analyst away from diffusionist notions of cultural contact and change, making comparison more useful.


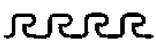

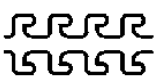







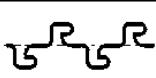
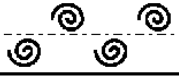
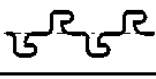
In the analysis of Ban Chiang painted pottery designs, we are primarily concerned with one-dimensional plane symmetry finite designs as they occur on a flat surface or as a band design wrapped around a pot. These are one-dimensional designs whose motifs (like spirals) repeat along a single line axis in seven ways. For plane pattern symmetries, there are seven pattern classes of one-dimensional symmetry (infinite band designs) and seventeen pattern classes of two-dimensional symmetry (infinite designs), composed of combinations of four basic motions: translation (linear shift along a plane), rotation (turning a figure around a point of rotation), mirror reflection (flipping a unit around a line of reflection), and glide or slide reflection (translation followed by reflection) (Washburn and Crowe 1988, 20). Finite designs also include figures that are not translated, including representational figures and circle designs found at the bottom of pots (cf. Washburn and Crowe 1988, 247).

Below I illustrate the seven classes of one-dimensional designs used to describe the band designs on Ban Chiang painted pottery (after Shepard

5 Washburn and Crowe argue that the order of application of symmetry rules does not matter. I tried to place the rules in procedural order starting with the most basic. The mathematical description of symmetry operations may not describe how people perceive patterns; some symmetry rules may be more salient than others (cf. Kubovy and Strother 2004, 20).

1948; Washburn 1999; Van Esterik 1976), along with the crystallographic nomenclature.

**Figure 1** Classes of One-Dimensional Band Designs

1			$p111$ = translation
2			$p1m1$ = longitudinal reflection
3			$pm11$ = transverse reflection
4			$p112$ = bifold rotation
5			$pmm2$ = longitudinal and transverse reflection
6			$p1a1$ = slide or glide reflection
7			$pma2$ = alternate rotation and transverse reflection

To summarize:

Class 1. Translation: regularly shifts a design segment along an axis to create a band design ( $p111$ )

Class 2. Longitudinal reflection: flips the unit around the line of reflection on a horizontal axis, or mirror symmetry ( $p1m1$ )

Class 3. Vertical or transverse reflection: mirror reflection on a vertical axis, like a human body ( $pm11$ )

Class 4. Bifold rotation: rotates a figure 180 degrees around its centre ( $p112$ )

Class 5. Longitudinal and transverse reflection, combined ( $pmm2$ )

Class 6. Glide or slide reflection: translation followed by reflection, like footprints ( $p1a1$ )

Class 7. Alternate rotation and transverse reflection, combined ( $pma2$ )

With symmetry, the pattern is discernable even when not every element is identical. Many complex designs only use translation; the embellishments can obscure the initial layout (Washburn and Crowe 1988, 95). In order not to get bogged down by the terminology, consider some common examples: the human body exhibits vertical reflection; a swastika has four-fold rotational symmetry but no reflection symmetry; a cross has rotational and reflection symmetry; human footprints illustrate glide reflection; a two-dimensional



pattern is created if a shift is made in two or more directions (think of bricks in a wall); a yin-yang figure is an example of a finite two-colour design.

With an explanation of these symmetry basics, I turn to a consideration of how these principles can be applied to the designs on Ban Chiang painted pottery.

### **Symmetry Analysis of Late Period Ban Chiang Painted Pottery**

Ban Chiang painted pottery was made at a time when survival did not depend solely on the perceptual ability to recognize symmetry in nature—to recognize dangerous prey, for example. It was also made at a time when the skills of ceramic production were well developed. Something about symmetry motions was perceptually important to members of Late Period Ban Chiang society. Using symmetry rules to organize designs on pots was a choice made by the potter-artists and one that we can recognize and appreciate today. It is only one of many features of style, but one that potter-artists needed to learn in order to create suitable painted pottery. This is one feature that we can access today by using symmetry analysis or at least by attending to symmetry. Future researchers with well-provenienced pottery might be able to use symmetry analysis to recognize regional variation or changes and consistencies over time, some of which might have had a communicative or symbolic function (Washburn and Crowe 1988, 268).

To make a culturally appropriate painted pot suitable for burial ritual, for example, a potter-artist would need to have acquired the skills of painting and know a great deal more than how to move an abstract design around the body of a pot. They would also need technological knowledge about clays, tempers, paints, brushes or paint applicators, and firing. He or she would also have knowledge about suitable designs based on the social identity of self and others, including the deceased, as well as ritual knowledge. If they did not know the information themselves, then the potter-artist would know whom to ask about designs appropriate for a pot destined for an infant burial, for example.

First, let us review what we know of the material surface that the designs were painted on. In an early publication, I proposed from the small sample of pots and sherds that I handled that the pots had been smoothed with paddle and anvil on coil slab or ring construction, with some evidence of unobliterated coils inside some vessels. The dark red metallic oxide paint was applied over a buff slip before firing (Van Esterik 1974, 175). More detailed analysis done later by ceramic specialists confirmed these techniques (see discussion of ceramics in Chapter 2). Experts describe the evidence for a

conservative ceramic tradition from the first appearance of pottery by 2100 BCE at Ban Chiang, stressing the remarkable continuity of the techniques of pottery production accompanied by a wide variation in decorative designs used around the region. The remarkable continuity in ceramic manufacturing techniques based on paddle and anvil construction or coil/lump and slab continue to the present day in northeast Thailand (White et al. 1991).

The surfaces of the finished pots were quite smooth. Often, black clouds cover parts of the designs because of the firing techniques, suggesting that the potters were more interested in painting the designs than insuring they were clearly visible for others to see. (See Illustration 8, vessel 946.) It is possible that the ritual of painting the design was the significant ritual focus, not the finished product, which might have been only meant for the deceased, or they simply could not control the firing temperature. These are two radically different hypotheses, both of which may apply. If the round-bottomed urns used as grave goods were standing upright in the grave, they would have to have been supported.

Ban Chiang painted pottery designs are primarily one-dimensional plane band designs. There are no two-dimensional designs and no plane tessellations—that is, the complete covering of a plane by figures in a repeating pattern with no overlap, as in the work of Escher (cf. Ranucci and Teeters 1977, 1). In vessels judged to be original painted vessels, there is no evidence of crowding or stretching to fit the design unit around the vessel. It is rare to be able to detect where a design element such as a spiral begins or ends, except in fakes or repainted vessels. As a contemporary potter-artist noticed about these designs, the paint strokes on the vessels that have not been repainted are exceptionally even with no signs of the applicator having too much or too little paint on it. (See Illustration 7, vessel 857.)

One collector displayed two pots together. (See Illustration 6, vessels 610 and 611.) Vessel 610 was repainted using many of the faint lines remaining on the vessel, while vessel 611 is an attempt to imitate concentric units, but the lines are uneven and quite sloppy.

The designs applied by Ban Chiang potter-artists are not constrained by vessel shape; that is, the symmetry of a design is not distorted by the need to work the design around a sharp carination. Colour does not enter the symmetry operations of Ban Chiang painted pottery, except for the occasional ambiguity of figure/ground spirals (See illustration 8, vessel 868.) The background is usually a buff slip with red painted designs; occasionally, pots have a red slip but no comparable buff painting, except for reproductions. (See Illustration 8, vessel 1322.) As a result, there is not much likelihood of the background dominating the design pattern. The

colours are not interchangeable and seldom create figure/ground ambiguity, particularly when the design only covers half the vessel. This reconfigured pot with the top portion cut off to create an open bowl has the design in red the same thickness as the negative space in buff. The uneven quality of the line suggests that it has also been repainted. (See Illustration 5, vessel 438.)

There are few finite designs, except the occasional representational figure of deer, lizard, and stylized human; these are so rare that the figures might have been added by a modern artist. In vessel 1028 (Illustration 3), the human is positioned in the most suitable design field. In vessel 1319 (Illustration 4), the human figure occupies a similar design field but is simplified and probably repainted by a modern artist familiar with the design layout of the other human figure. Vessel 1020 (Illustration 3) shows a possible animal figure. Several pots with possible representational designs come from the same collection.<sup>6</sup>

The potter-artists always used one or more symmetry motions to extend the design around the pot. Thus, it may be possible to define Late Period Ban Chiang painted pottery style by noting what particular symmetry rules the potter-artists chose to apply. Sometimes the axis of symmetry is emphasized by the artist; other times it is obscured. Continuous band designs are self-enclosed, a by-product of the primary symmetry operation. It is structurally redundant to add an enclosure line under the primary design unit. When enclosure lines bound the decorative field of the body, they might have been added by those who repainted the pots, as one maker of souvenir pots explained to me, "to make the designs neat." Vessel 138 (Illustration 8) has a neatly painted line under the spirals. Motif elaboration can enhance, obscure, or break symmetry.

## Explaining Variation

Formal designs rules based on symmetry operations cannot account for all variation in designs, such as those resulting from social context or changes in the condition of tools, for example. Pottery decoration "shows the trials of the beginner, the work of the expert, the efforts of the copyist, and the expression of the creator" (Shepard 1971, 256). We might add to this list the innovations or alternative designs of the stranger/visitor, the unique individual work of an exceptional local potter-artist, the errors and innovations

6 The drawings of the representational figures are easier to see or more obvious than in the photographs of the designs on the pottery.

of the student or copyist, and even the mental state of the artist—boredom, competitiveness, need for achievement, desire for profit, religious fervour, possession, or intoxication.

What symmetry motions generate Late Period Ban Chiang painted pottery designs? Not all possible motions were selected by these potter-artists. In a 1979 publication, I summarized the use of symmetry in this sample of Ban Chiang one-dimensional band designs using the symmetry classes described and illustrated by Shepard (1948):

Class One, translation, is used on pedestal and neck motifs, and to extend radial figures and spirals in a band. Class Two, longitudinal reflection, is rarely used alone. It can be identified in multiple line designs where it is a reduced form of radial symmetry. Similarly, Class Three, transverse reflection, is seldom used alone. It too occurs in multiple line designs as a reduced form of radial symmetry. Class Four, bifold rotation, produces meanders and zigzags, continuous line designs occurring on neck and pedestal bases. Bifold rotation is the internal symmetry of double spirals, a common design element in Southeast Asia. Class Five, a combination of longitudinal and transverse reflection producing a radial figure, is the symmetry motion most utilized by these artists. Radial figures may then be translated. Note that Class Two and Three designs may be a deliberate or accidental reduction of Class Five symmetry. Class Six, slide or glide reflection is absent in these painted designs, or used extremely rarely in combination with other classes. Class Seven, alternate rotation and transverse reflection is the second most popular symmetry motion in Ban Chiang painted pottery. It is the basis of the complex sigmoid designs, and it is also used on pedestal and neck designs, since it forms a continuous band. (Van Esterik 1979, 500)

Other publications provide more detail about the analysis of the Late Period painted pottery from Ban Chiang (Van Esterik 1974, 1976, 1979). Below I highlight a few details about individual pots from the collections I photographed.

Single spirals translated four times is the most redundant standardized design, with elaboration most common in the centre of the spiral and the triangular design field created between the spirals. (See Illustration 5, vessel 481, and Illustration 6, vessel 798.) Longitudinal and transverse reflection (pmm2) and alternate rotation and transverse reflection (pma2) are used on both body and pedestal base bands. Translation (p111) and bifold rotation (p112) were used to move asymmetric spirals around the body of the pot. Spirals were often made to look like concentric units or multiple line

designs, and pseudo-spirals were often difficult to categorize. In vessel 603 (Illustration 6), the concentric units also created triangularly shaped design fields above and below the primary motif.

The potter-artists made pseudo-spirals by adding linking lines to give the impression of a continuous line of spirals. A single spiral can be made to look like a double spiral by playing with the centre point, often in a way that emphasizes potential for sexual interpretation. Illusions of depth are common in the designs on the large urns (see Illustration 7, vessel 847).

A meandering line formed by bifold rotation is a common neck design and often repeats the pedestal design. (See Illustration 6, vessels 798 and 820.) The addition of “hooks” above and below the meander gives the appearance of a design based on bifold rotation and transverse reflection. In fact, they are simply translated with the “hooks,” creating the appearance of the use of higher symmetry—more playing with symmetry rules. Vessel 210 (Illustration 4) demonstrates intertwined spirals created by bifold rotation and transverse reflection.

Concentric units—usually three or four—are translated along repeated vertical axes separated by elaborations of small elements, sometimes identical to those used in spiral designs to fill in a secondary triangular design field. The pedestal designs found on these vessels often apply the same symmetry rules as on the body but invert the line segment entering into the symmetry operation.

Like spirals, concentric units themselves are quite repetitive; the differences lie in the elaboration of two design fields, one in the centre of the unit and the other between contiguous units. Vessel 466 (Illustration 5) illustrates two of the fillers elaborated in the centre of the design unit, fine line figures that reappear as small fillers in the decoration of other vessels (see Illustration 10, vessel 401). Several collectors chose vessels with concentric designs and displayed shelves of them in their storage area.

Concentric designs would be symmetrical, created by longitudinal reflection, except that the symmetry is always broken by asymmetrical linking lines over and above the concentric units. Often spiral design units are made to look like a concentric design unit by obscuring the centre point of the spiral. (See Illustration 4, vessels 434 and 429.) These examples show the relation between concentric designs and multiple line designs as an aesthetic problem played with by the potter-artists. Potter-artists could make some of these designs without lifting the paint applicator from the vessel.

Sigmoid designs are structurally simpler than spirals and concentrics despite their appearance of great complexity. Most design fields are created by longitudinal reflection or alternate reflection and bifold rotation to create

a continuous band around the body of the pot. These lozenge-like sigmoid figures or volutes create a design unit that is then translated to form two units, as in vessel 553 (see Illustration 5). Similar sigmoid figures can also be created by alternate rotation and transverse reflection to move the design around the vessel in a continuous band. All design classes suggest the importance of playing with design rules. But it is sigmoid designs that most encourage play and ambiguity, suggesting the potential for representational or symbolic meaning. See vessel 1203 (Illustration 3) and the large sigmoid urns (Illustration 6, vessel 814; Illustration 7, vessels 845 and 856; and Illustration 5, vessel 553).

Vessel 1315 (Illustration 4) is exceptionally well drawn. The painting on this urn includes all the design rules necessary to produce any sigmoid design. It is an encapsulation of all design information for this class of designs and many elements of other design classes as well. Perhaps only the most skilled of the potter-artists undertook the task of painting these large urns.

In my original analysis (1976), I considered two additional design systems, zoned designs and multiple line designs, as derivative because they made use of the same symmetry operations and many of the same motifs as the first three design systems. The inter-connection between the systems suggests to me that the Late Period potters who made the zoned and multiple line designs were familiar with the design structure and motifs associated with spirals, concentrics, and sigmoids. Zoned designs are quite standardized; multiple line designs are more variable. If I were a forger, I would try to copy more multiple line designs rather than the more standardized zoned designs. To my eye and hand, the variable multiple line designs require more skill to reproduce. (See Illustration 7, vessel 847.) The modern copies are often quite sloppy.

Multiple line designs are made by very skilled potter-artists who “knew” but broke the symmetry rules used to create spiral and concentric designs. That is, spirals were often made to look like multiple line designs as their convolutions increased in number. (Compare vessels 847 and 862, Illustration 7.) Vessel 814 (Illustration 6) with its complex multiple line design also builds on the structure of concentric designs. Vessel 870 (Illustration 8) shares a similar design structure.

## Symbolism and Meaning

To consider the meaning of the designs on Late Period painted pottery from Ban Chiang today is “to eavesdrop on past conversations that we can

no longer fully understand” (Ingold 2013, 79). But the question I was most often asked about Ban Chiang painted pottery designs was: What do they mean? Designs on pots do not have to mean anything. But they may encode significant social values. “Designs on pottery, far from being ‘mere decoration’, art for art’s sake, or messages consciously emblematic of ethnicity, are low-technology channels through which society implants its values in the individual-every day at mealtimes” (David, Sterner, and Guava 1988, 379). The desire to equate motif with symbolic meaning was ubiquitous. It is likely that spirals, concentrics, and sigmoids operated as part of widely understood symbolic communication systems across northeast Thailand. But their meanings remain elusive.

Dr. Chin You-di produced charts of pottery forms and design elements and made some of the earliest descriptions of the painted designs (1972, 25) using the following terms; “geometric triangular patterns, lozenges, concentric circles, semi-circles, spiral mazes, chevrons, sweeping curvilinear scrolls, motifs imitating whorls of fingerprints, vertical and oblique lines, stars, criss-cross lines, rows of dots and dashes, horizontal arches, vertical arrangements of wavy lines, fine line dentate,” in addition to stylized animals and men. Other Thai archaeologists offered explanations for the meaning of individual Ban Chiang design elements, identifying tree rings, finger whorls, flowers, and leaves, and speculated further on their meanings: happiness, fire, and movement of the moon and stars (Charoenwongsa 1973, 104–6). I never produced a listing of all motifs or design elements, except for designs on pedestals. In my first attempt to make sense of the designs, I followed the leads of the Thai archaeologists and attempted to find meaning in the design elements themselves (1974, 185). Only single and double spirals were easily named and described using English words; other motifs were hard to describe or name, and it made sense to try and find analogies for descriptive purposes.

It was also exciting to try and connect Ban Chiang designs to other motifs found in the region and beyond. There were clearly diffusionist traces in my thinking, as I made comparisons between Ban Chiang designs and the spirals, circle-tangent motifs, and squatting figures on Dongson bronzes. Heine-Geldern (1966) dated Dongson bronze drums to around 800 BCE based on the similarity of the double spirals to late Chou dynasty art; the motifs were considered to have come from the Caucasus region in a diffusion of culture traits (TAM 2018a, 10). Nong Non Hor, another site in northeast Thailand, produced Dongson-type kettle drums (TAM 2019, 94).

The search for the meaning of individual design motifs is appealing to diffusionists. The large urns with sigmoid designs arranged in longitudinal

and transverse reflection resemble squatting or hocker figures. (See Illustration 5, vessel 553.) Schuster (1951) identified the circles between flexed elbows and knees as the joint marks of squatting figures, linking into a larger Southeast Asian design repertoire based on fertility.

Klyosov and Mironova (2013) take the diffusionist argument much further, connecting Ban Chiang to prehistoric Aryan migrations on the basis of common ceramic design elements shared with Yangshao (China), Anasazi/Mogollon (southwest US), and Cucuteni (East European) cultures. They all use the swastika as a common symbol. Other symbols are linked to discrete meanings, such as triangles (clouds), the trinity; spirals as continuous development; double spiral with an eye sign; and a disc filled with dots, the seeded soil sign of sustainable harvests associated with early agricultural societies. These elements symbolize birth, life, and death, and/or seeding and the agricultural cycle (Klyosov and Mironova 2013, 165). Of particular interest to them is the great goddess figure, an icon of childbirth that links back to Schuster's hocker or squatting figures.

The authors account for these cross-cultural similarities by positing either random accidents or a common source; they propose that the similarities are due to migrations from Central Asia occurring 20,000 years ago. Further migrations brought the makers of these designs to the shores of the New World, along with the sacred symbols known in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, including the swastika (Klyosov and Mironova 2013, 170). The swastika is a simple line design that is produced by four-fold rotational symmetry with no reflection. Its meaning and symbolism have become so overwhelmingly repulsive since the 1930s that today the simple design is consciously avoided. In my opinion, the Ban Chiang vessel the authors illustrate in their publication has been repainted, and the triglav sign (trinity), a triangle with a dotted disc, is one of the recently added repainted elements (Klyosov and Mironova 2013, 166).

Diffusionist explanations seldom consider underlying structural similarities of design motifs based on symmetry rules. A more interesting and relevant comparison might be to Maori designs from New Zealand. Washburn and Crowe (1988) use Maori designs, often from house rafters to illustrate symmetry and breaking symmetry (see illustrations on pp. 78, 89, 90, 99, 109, 111, 112, 115, 122, 123, 125). These parallels in the work of Maori artists are attributable to the artists expressing similar symmetry preferences as the potter-artists in Late Period Ban Chiang society, but without the colour counterchange. In many examples, edge curls or hook elements are used to break symmetry. An example from San Ildefonso Pueblo illustrates a hook element that may be a deliberate embellishment common in both



Ban Chiang and Pueblo design traditions (Washburn and Crowe 1988, 94), or an easy-to-make byproduct of a fluid drawing motion, perhaps related to muscle memory.

Recall in Chapter 2 the discussion of the cylindrical ceramic rollers that were found with Late Period burials at Ban Chiang. Often the holes in the rollers were off-centre or did not pass all the way through the roller, making it difficult to string them as beads or amulets. But the cylinders could be unrolled to create band designs. The designs on the rollers are often asymmetric, but the band produced by rolling out the design is symmetrical, produced by simple translation (p111).

Chin You-di postulated that the occupants of Ban Chiang might have been the first people to idolize phallic symbols through an interpretation of a clay phallus between the legs of a female skeleton, noting that “similar practices exist today” (1972, 14). Chin You-di traced these sexual images of penetration and envelopment, phallus and womb, to their origins in India. Phallus and womb cover most key meanings around fertility. Other Thai interpreters also identified Ban Chiang as creating the world’s first phallic images (Charoenwongsa 1973, 24). Most volutes and meanders encourage the interpretation of sexual imagery; many could be interpreted as exposed genitals or snakes. Closer to Ban Chiang, consider the snake-like applique on Lao pottery and the screw-top designs from Lao Pako interpreted as possible female genitals (Kallen 2004). The snake-like applique with the screw-top design is not common in the Ban Chiang collections, but there is a photograph of one in a shop in Ban Chiang taken around 1970 and an additional one from a Thai collection (see Illustration 8, vessel 962). Vessels 597 (Illustration 2) and 1203 (Illustration 3) illustrate this possible sexual imagery. If volutes do suggest male and female genitals, these interpretations reinforce the idea that fertility was an important theme in Ban Chiang society.

A more theoretically sophisticated approach to meaning examines pottery jars as metaphors for the human body. Southeast Asian prehistory and ethnography is filled with evidence of the symbolic importance of ceramic jars in funerary and other ritual contexts. Containers are powerful metaphors for bodies and wombs; jars of rice wine are critically important in Southeast Asian rituals, as I explored in a speculative paper on symbolism (1984). From a materials perspective, water and earth are the basis of pottery (Ingold 2013). In addition, ceramic pots as bodies provide a powerful analogy and an additional source of meanings. Pot surfaces may be decorated much as body surfaces are decorated with painting or tattoos, for example. Urns that represent the human figure are found all over the world. Ceramic jars

have necks, shoulders, bodies, and feet, and, like bodies, pots leak. Bodies and pots both act as containers, but they are imperfect and impermanent; they both crumble and disintegrate. "It takes effort and vigilance to hold things together, whether pots or people" (Ingold 2013, 94). Pots can be killed and broken over bodies. In addition, pots can have their lives extended by being ground up to become temper for new pots in the form of grog temper, as happened in Ban Chiang. These body-pots are also analogous to wombs, places where a growing baby is nurtured or cooked until it is ready to be born. In jar burial sites, the afterbirth may also be buried in pots (Kallen 2004, 190). Once again, there are links to fertility.

In 1979 I argued that symmetry provides an additional approach to meaning. Although symmetry is a universally perceived system of order, it is not universally thought about, nor is it easy to discuss. A phrase like "alternate rotation and transverse reflection" does not trip off the tongue, nor does *plal* as in the chart on page 79 conjure up an immediate artistic vision (for most people). I combined symmetry analysis with communication theory in my original analysis of Ban Chiang painted pottery. This approach to communication concerns the sending and receiving of information and provides a measure of the information content of a message independently of the meaning of the message. I suggested *how* information could have been communicated but not *what* was communicated. With regard to the designs on the Late Period painted pottery from Ban Chiang, I wrote:

Asymmetric designs, since they contain the greatest amount of new and unpredictable elements, and are the least redundant, may be characterized as containing the highest amount of information. But a message with maximum information is essentially random and without form and is virtually unintelligible. Conversely, symmetrical designs displaying low-level symmetry contain the least amount of new information and are almost totally predictable and redundant; but a message with too much redundancy is trite or banal, even though it has the greatest potential intelligibility. (Van Esterik 1979, 504)

Patterns perceived as midway between simple and complex tend to be regarded as more aesthetically pleasing, according to the previous level of complexity towards which a person has already become accustomed (Hodgson 2011, 44). In the Late Period Ban Chiang painted pottery, asymmetric designs such as spirals containing the greatest amount of new and unpredictable information are the least redundant. By contrast, designs such as concentrics displaying low-level symmetry contain the least

amount of new information and consequently are almost totally predictable and redundant. This creates an aesthetic problem: how to create designs that were recognizable and intelligible but capable of carrying symbolic information—a system midway between random and predictable. Maori artists solve the problem by using elements like edge curls to break symmetry and challenge the observer trying to decipher the pattern (Donnay and Donnay 1985, 38). Ban Chiang potter-artists solved the problem by choosing a system midway between random and predictable by using higher-level symmetry to provide order while avoiding predictability. Ban Chiang Late Period potters favoured the use of Class 5 (longitudinal and transverse reflection, *pmm2*) and Class 7 (alternate rotation and transverse reflection, *pma2*) symmetry. I argued that these were deliberate choices; these two classes offer the greatest potential for alternative interpretations by potter-artists and their audiences, including ambiguous readings with representational possibilities.

These representational possibilities derive from playing with symmetry rules and not from drawing a figure such as a lizard or a deer. Representation may or may not have been the conscious intention of the artists; some Ban Chiang artists may have played with symmetry to create visual punning, enhancing design elements to become more “face-like” or “snake-like,” as appropriate. On the other hand, “restorers” and forgers often exaggerated the representational potential with no subtlety. The repainted pots and other creations featured simple translation and placed representational elements anywhere on the vessel. For example, sigmoid designs arranged in bilaterally reflected pairs have the potential to be interpreted as smiling or frowning faces, depending on the orientation of the viewer. (See Illustration 7, vessel 856, and Illustration 5, vessel 537.)

Vessel 1203 (Illustration 3) provides an example of playing with the design that could be interpreted by reference to a squatting goddess or a figure with exposed genitals. Of course, all concentric designs could be interpreted as genital-like. Another advantage of these classes is that they allow the artist to “reduce” the higher-level symmetry (Class 5 or 7) back to a lower-level class (Class 1, 2, or 3) without losing the overall impression of symmetry (Van Esterik 1979, 501).

Large vessels such as vessel 553 (see Illustration 5) with complex sigmoid designs carry information sufficient to generate the designs on all pots with sigmoid designs. Recall my argument that a single vessel such as vessel 1315 (Illustration 4) encapsulates so much design information that it suggests the pots were made by a single workshop or lineage that shared the same preference for certain symmetry operations. In this way, the painted pots

could act as public symbols, summarizing ideas about fertility or human development most appropriately expressed at funerals, most particularly following the death of an infant.

## Taking Symmetry Further

How has symmetry analysis changed since the seventies? Although Dorothy Washburn has provided substantial evidence for its value, few anthropologists have picked up on the full implications of the methods of symmetry analysis. Symmetries have been used in the past to describe patterning in human activity, such as in settlement layouts and architectural forms (e.g., Cunningham 1973; Arnold 1983) or in a wide range of textile and ceramic designs (Washburn 2018, 122), but no one else to my knowledge has used symmetry analysis on archaeological materials as systematically and effectively as Washburn.

Washburn's more recent work explores deeper approaches to understanding past cultures. She has demonstrated the cultural salience of symmetry using material culture from the American Southwest (1977, 1986, 1999, 2010, 2018). Her analyses benefit from access to over 1,000 years of ethnohistorical and ethnographic evidence in the region—evidence that is not available from this Ban Chiang sample. In addition, the archaeological materials she used were properly excavated and well provenienced and not from looted collections. This has allowed her to consider how symmetries change through time and encode more general concepts, such as Pueblo values and world view: “The symmetries that structure the social institutions of a culture are mirrored in the symmetries that structure the artistic output of that same culture” (Washburn 2018, 127). For example, she demonstrates that the linear bands of motifs in p112 as in chart on page 79 symmetry (bifold rotation) are a structural metaphor for joining the multiple reciprocities that structure extended family living units, clan groups, and ritual institutions needed to integrate the larger social groups living in these unit pueblos (Washburn 2018, 139). Bifold rotation signifies the interlocking of partners in marriage, the rotational nature of motives, and the cycle of life (Washburn 1999, 556, 557). In general, mirror symmetries describe socially equivalent entities in balanced equilibrium, as in the exogamous exchange of marriage partners between two moieties. Rotational symmetries describe complementary reciprocal relationships. Glide reflections describe relationships that rebalance over time, such as gift exchange in the *kula ring* (Washburn 2018, 129). In the case of the Pueblo designs, these contemporary relationships are not

derived from the mind of the analyst but confirmed by the contemporary creators of the designs themselves. Nevertheless, she argues that symmetry analysis should not be used to provide simple reductionist associations. It is not that egalitarian societies produce symmetric designs and hierarchical societies produce asymmetric art; hierarchical societies are structured by both symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships (Washburn 2018, 149).

Washburn has demonstrated that symmetry analysis is sensitive to problems of group identity, exchange, and interaction (1988, 41), all subjects important to understanding Ban Chiang society. Symmetry motions are only one feature of the style of Late Period painted pottery from Ban Chiang, but they may show how some artists structured their depictions of the world; perhaps they are more than purely decorative ornament (Washburn and Crowe 1988, 269).

If symmetry had cognitive salience for the Ban Chiang potter-artists, what could their use of symmetry rules suggest about life in the Late Period of Ban Chiang society? Once again, I consider Washburn's analysis of Pueblo social organization and material culture, where fundamental concepts about social behavior are continually visible in material culture decoration and transmitted from generation to generation (2018, 127). She hypothesizes that in periods of cultural stability, design systems will have a consistent structural organization, although the design elements may change. Conversely, during periods of rapid cultural change, there will be discontinuities in the design structure (1984, 81). Washburn's ground-breaking research suggests that symmetry analysis can be used to identify these moments of rapid change in societies. For example, symmetry breaking marks disruption or radical change in Pueblo society around 900 and 1300 CE (Washburn, Crowe, and Ahlstrom 2010).

Washburn (1991) also makes use of Fiske's (1991) four "grammars" of social relationships based on communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing. Communities based on communal sharing, disrupted by internal and external factors, restructure into new symmetrical arrangements, such as societies organized by authority ranking, and ultimately into states based on market pricing. Social systems may also be upset by drought, invasion, epidemics, or changes in subsistence systems caused by climate change, forcing populations to move and/or new people to arrive on the scene (Washburn 2018, 128). Did the Late Period iron users at Ban Chiang experience such changes? Were there new patterns of contact and trade in the region in the first century of the Common Era?

Washburn also utilized the concept of symmetry breaking to describe how social systems change by breaking symmetry as they transition to

greater complexity. Based on both ethnographic and archaeological evidence on the Hopi, Washburn noted that the stages of the life cycle can also be perceived as symmetries, punctuated by movement to a new stage. These asymmetries may be marked by ritual, as she explains: "These periods of change are noted and ritually observed by many cultures precisely because they represent potentially unstable periods in the trajectory of the entire cultural group as one generation succeeds another" (2018, 129).

The death of infants and children at Ban Chiang disrupts this trajectory across the generations. Excessive deaths might account for the attention lavished on infant and young child burials as dead infants return to the womb-jar. Writing of Lao Pako, Kallen (2004) reminds us that ancestral, mortuary, and fertility rituals cannot be easily separated. Kallen notes another potential metaphor for human growth manifested at Lao Pako, and that is metal production and technology, linking iron smelting, human procreation, and the cycle of life and death (2004, 194). But there is also a potential analogy with rice. Humans develop much as rice plants grow, if and only if they are nurtured. Generation replacement and fertility of rice and people might well represent the dominant concerns of Late Period Ban Chiang society members, reflected perhaps in burial rituals and their use of complex symmetry rules to produce decorated painted pottery as grave goods.

The aesthetic appeal of symmetry rules remains in the eye of the contemporary beholder, including the looters as well as the collectors, but it eluded most forgers who used only simple translation, even in adding details to a repainted pot. Occasionally, these corrections are visible as *pentimenti*, the faint reappearance of designs that have been painted over.

Symmetry analysis raises many significant questions about Late Period Ban Chiang society, including questions about world view and identity. But since the critical information about the depositional context is missing, these important questions cannot be addressed. Without knowing more about the relation between the pots and burials, for example, we cannot capture the different ritual function of decorated pots. Was the pot created for a special purpose, such as a jar for an infant burial? The links to possible ritual uses are missing. And so the interesting questions around the ritual meaning of pots and their possible links to the fertility of crops and women cannot be answered. The best the symmetry analysis of unprovenienced material can provide is consistent descriptive terminology and informed speculation. We will never know what Ban Chiang residents believed or practiced ritually, but symmetry provides one possible code through which the beliefs and rituals of their makers could have been expressed.

The Ban Chiang potter-artists designed as they drew. Perhaps the act of painting is itself the ritual. Ingold identifies designing as a process of work, not a project of the mind (2013, 56). “And whether or not the artisan has an idea in mind of the final form of the artifact [he] is making, the actual form emerges from the pattern of rhythmic movement, not from the idea” (Ingold 2013, 115). Did the creator of a Ban Chiang painted pot have a purpose in mind for his or her pot? Did they have a plan in mind in advance of its material realization? Those questions about design underscore the importance of workmanship, skilled vision, and manual dexterity, all of which suggest anticipatory foresight about the end product (cf. Ingold 2013, 69). “In the case of the artifact, to draw a line between making and using means marking a point in the career of a thing at which it can be said to be finished, and moreover that this point of completion can only be determined in relation to a totality that already exists, in virtual form, at the outset—that is, in relation to a design” (Ingold 2013, 47).

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) uses the term “design” in two senses: first as a mental plan, scheme or purpose, a plan of attack, and second as artistic or literary preparation or groundwork, the output of intentionally fashioning something with artistic skill. This chapter utilizes both meanings of design. But there is a subtle, more negative third meaning implied in the title of this book, *Designs on Pots*: to plan or contrive, referring to one who cherishes evil designs for selfish purposes or ulterior motives by plotting or calculating—a plotter or artful schemer. This trickery is the meaning that is fleshed out in the next two chapters on looting (Chapter 4) and forgery (Chapter 5), two additional contexts for exploring Late Period Ban Chiang painted pottery.

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## 4 The Looted Past: On Stealing Pots

### Abstract

The looted material from Ban Chiang is described in Chapter 4 of *Designs on Pots*. Artifacts with no provenience are generally considered of no interest to archaeologists. Nevertheless, the artifacts that were looted from Ban Chiang have complex histories, as they move from a subsistence village to an antique dealer to a private home or a museum. The market for looted illegal antiquities provides an additional lens for examining Ban Chiang painted pottery. This chapter considers the extent of the illegal trade in antiquities from the site and the attempts to regulate and control the antiquity trade, the place of looted antiquities in the shadow economy, and the ethical complexity of donations to museums for tax breaks.

**Keywords:** looted antiquities, art and antiquities market, legal regulations, subsistence looting

An artifact's history does not end when it goes in the ground.  
(Childs 2010, 225)

The last two chapters drew attention to what we know about painted pottery from northeast Thailand in the prehistoric past. This chapter brings us back to the present to confront the painted pottery that was looted from Ban Chiang and neighbouring sites. Looting from the buried past is nothing new. The problem that looting presents to archaeologists is that looted antiquities have either no provenience or fake provenance, or both, and therefore cannot be used for the interpretation of archaeological sites. In addition, looters often damage the objects they are digging up. (See Illustration 10, vessel 543.) To archaeologists, it is the context that gives the object its value. Looted artifacts cannot be linked back to their original temporal and spatial contexts. As a result, looting destroys information that could be used to understand the past. This argument was most effectively

communicated by the director of the Ban Chiang project, Dr. Joyce White, who pointed out during a public lecture that while the NETAP excavation in 1974–75 uncovered one adze in context, at least 250 could be found in looted collections warehoused in California.<sup>1</sup>

There is, of course, a difference between looting antiquities and collecting antiquities, but the processes are interconnected. Not all looters are collectors, and not all collectors are looters; but both actions destroy archaeological evidence and take artifacts out of the public domain (Hart and Chilton 2015, 320), reducing people's access to material evidence of the past. This chapter examines how both looting and collecting became part of the Ban Chiang story.

Looted artifacts themselves do have contexts—often more than one. Those contexts are just not of use for archaeological purposes. Holtorf calls for “investigation of the life history of things as they unfold in the present and extend both into the past and the future” (2004, 55). The looted items discussed in this chapter have complex life histories. Any example of the Late Period painted pottery discussed in the last chapters might have been moved from a burial made around 100 BCE to a location under the house of a rice farmer living in Ban Chiang in the seventies, and through the hands of a hired looter selecting pieces for a Thai collector or a Japanese buyer. The Ban Chiang pot that decorated a movie set for *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) might have come from an antique dealer in Singapore. From there it might have found its way to a wealthy American collector who then donated it to a museum in California; following the FBI raids in 2008, it might now be languishing in a government warehouse until it can be repatriated back to the National Museum in Bangkok or to the Ban Chiang Museum, which is hopefully its last stop. I could have photographed a pot at any one or more than one of these locations. I could have photographed the *same* pot at any one or more than one of these locations. While a museum is most likely the pot's final resting place, some museums prefer to keep Ban Chiang artifacts stored out of sight because of their association with illegal activities (cf. Rod-ari 2021). No doubt some of the looted Ban Chiang pottery will remain in motion long after I write this.

It is not unusual for archaeological sites to be looted, both before they are formally excavated and during or after excavation. But the looting at Ban Chiang and neighboring sites was unusually thorough. Looting is defined as the illegal removal of artifacts and objects from their source location; in effect, it involves taking things that you have no right to or have not

1 See [iseaarchaeology.org/ban-chiang-project/operation-antiquity](http://iseaarchaeology.org/ban-chiang-project/operation-antiquity).

paid for. Usually, looting is done for profit through an advantageous sale: “Antiquities as a cash crop” (Byrne 2016, 347).

Looting originally referred to the seizure of enemy goods during war (Byrne 2016), literally the “spoils of war.” There is a long history of the links between war and looting antiquities, with soldiers as the looters or paid with the proceeds of war booty. Certainly, many “curiosities” were brought back from the colonies to the imperial west with no thought of immediately selling the items. Napoleon was particularly fond of pillaging art from military conquests. The French justified this plunder by claiming that these art treasures would now belong to the people rather than to foreign despots. After the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, many countries wanted to reclaim their stolen cultural patrimony but did not have the funds to finance repatriation (Muhlstein 2017, 33–34). Ban Chiang painted pottery was and is considered state property, but it was never considered art that belonged to the people, as in France after the French Revolution. Much later, in the 1920s, the French authorized the sale of “leftover” Khmer artifacts to collectors and museums abroad to promote Khmer art (Abbe 2021). The Vietnam War saw the destruction and looting of sites in the sixties, while the trade and export of looted Khmer antiquities followed the Civil War in the nineties (Tythacott and Andiyansya 2021, 13), with the Khmer Rouge involved in the looting rings.

There was also a military connection to the looting of Ban Chiang. Ban Chiang is only 30 miles from the town of Udorn Thani, where American facilities for the US 13th Air Force were located. While there is little evidence that it was American soldiers themselves who were the looters, they visited the village and made purchases there. American military officers and diplomatic officers in Thailand were often gifted with Ban Chiang pottery and bronzes, which then made their way into American museums (Rod-ari 2021, 94). Thailand and the US were at war with Vietnam—an undeclared war at that. While the 1954 Hague Convention deals explicitly with protection of cultural property during wartime, it is unclear if the Convention would apply to antiquities leaving the country in military aircraft (cf. Vitale 2008, 1839). The US only ratified the 1954 Hague Convention in 2009, long after Ban Chiang artifacts had left the country.

Facilities for the American Air Force were housed in six Thai military bases during the Vietnam War. In total, 50,000 American airmen were based in Thailand, and they were encouraged to get away from the bars and get to know the Thai people and take advantage of the opportunity to visit unique sites in the country, including archaeological sites (Glasser 1995, 173). Ban Chiang was among those unique sites visited by the off-duty soldiers.

Air America (the CIA “civilian” airline) was also based in Udorn Thani, only an hour from Vientiane, Laos. From there, goods could leave without close inspection from customs, either in the US, Laos, or Thailand. The American military presence in Thailand presented a unique opportunity to get heavy, breakable objects out of the country easily, bypassing potential problems at customs by using carriers such as Air America. The American military connection to looting at Ban Chiang is poorly documented (cf. Peleggi 2017), and there are only hints of the stories that have yet to be told about that period.

To prevent smuggling of artifacts from Ban Chiang through the Udorn Thani airport, there would need to be cooperation with the authorities. Letters in the July 13, 1972, *Bangkok World* pointed out that Thamnoon Ladpli (who owned one of the collections I studied) was a National War College classmate of the governor of Udorn Thani Province (Sanborn 1974). The May 29, 1974, *Bangkok Post* reported that the trafficking of Ban Chiang painted pottery and related artifacts was “believed to be carried out through diplomatic channels.” Many pots were packed and shipped from the APO (Army Post Office) in Vientiane to private collectors. Antiquities that go through private shipping companies could be stored in warehouses in Hong Kong and Singapore until ready to be sold (Sanborn 1974). As Peleggi points out, “the international dispersion of artifacts also reflected Thailand’s subaltern status vis-à-vis the United States” (2016, 106).

Wartime looting and financial gain are well-known motivations for looting sites. Other moral justifications for looting involve claims that it helps poor peasant farmers escape poverty. But in the case of Ban Chiang, there are additional motivations for looting, such as saving artifacts from destruction or preserving a national patrimony by keeping objects from going to foreigners and leaving the country. Ban Chiang artifacts are considered cultural property, not cultural patrimony. The difference between cultural property and cultural patrimony is the difference between “all old bells” and “the Liberty bell” (Vitale 2008, 1845).

Looting has been presented as a colonial construction whereby colonial powers stole the cultural patrimony of the countries they controlled. Asia, for example, is depicted as the source and victim for western looters (Byrne 2016, 345). Many discussions of looting at Ban Chiang and elsewhere in Southeast Asia are mired in good intentions that perpetuate a colonial legacy by promoting the patronizing view that the locals, often the colonized, are not capable of protecting their own heritage. Colonizers have convinced themselves that they have both the right and the responsibility to remove

antiquities for safekeeping “before it is too late.” The same is true for the crypto-colonized.<sup>2</sup>

## Global Efforts to Control Looting

There have been many multilateral initiatives to control looting. The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property obligates states to employ export and import restrictions on cultural property using export certificates (Vitale 2008, 1841). The UNESCO conventions apply equally to both former colonies and nations like Thailand that were never colonized, although restitution may be more complicated in the former (cf. Tythacott and Ardiyansyah 2021). Thailand’s 1961 Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiquities, Objects of Art and National Museums is both a patrimony law and a restriction on exports. Ban Chiang artifacts were already protected and considered state property under the 1961 law. Thailand is not a state party to the 1970 UNESCO Convention, although they have bilateral agreements with several countries to address repatriation of artifacts. But the United States and Thailand do not have a bilateral agreement in place for import restrictions (Vitale 2008, 1865). If a nation does not sign a UN convention, it is not legally bound by the terms of the convention, but it is expected to act in ways consistent with the purpose of the convention or at least make a good faith effort to comply (Gerstenblith 2010, 237). Blanket enforcement of foreign laws in the United States may drive items of cultural property into the black market, thus endangering the cultural heritage that the 1970 UNESCO Convention seeks to protect (Vitale 2008, 1847).

Much is made of the importance of knowing exactly when Ban Chiang pots left the country; was it before or after 1972, when new Thai laws referring specifically to Ban Chiang were passed? In practice, the date is irrelevant because looting was already illegal before the new laws came into effect, and legislation already existed that would prohibit individuals from owning or exporting Ban Chiang artifacts. The 1961 Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiquities, Objects of Art, and National Museums (amended in 1992) would have made such practices illegal, but enforcement was lax (Byrne 2016, 346) and widely known to be lax. In comparison, while Vietnam ratified the

<sup>2</sup> Michael Herzfeld (2002, 901) referred to Thailand as a crypto-colonized country, one that occupied a buffer zone between colonies and maintained its independence by fashioning a national culture after foreign models.



UNESCO Convention in 2005, France had already removed Cham antiquities before 1970. Thus, there is no legal basis for Vietnam to ask for their return (Nguyen 2021, 153). A declaration of national ownership is necessary before illegal exportation of an article can be considered theft and the exported article can be considered stolen (Vitale 2008, 1860). But prosecutions are costly and time consuming, particularly if they cross jurisdictions. In many countries, they would exceed resources available for heritage protection. Dealers may simply prefer to trade in countries where their activities do not violate any laws (Gruber 2014).

### **The Antiquities Trade**

The antiquities trade functions in licit and illicit markets, and both markets encourage looting. The appeal of antiquities includes their high return on financial investments, decreasing supply, and the continuing public demand for cultural artifacts (Kersel 2012, 188). Antiquities are commodities that can be exchanged for money or drugs. Childs documents drug runners who moonlight as pothunters in Central America (2010, 235). In the Southwest, “[m]ethamphetamine addicts now make up part of the pothunting demographic” (Childs 2010, 80). In addition, money can be laundered, as artifacts are transformed from illegal to legal by the acquisition of fake provenance. The value of the criminal trade in antiquities and art comes in third after trade in drugs and arms and may be linked to organized crime (Charney 2015, 207). In 2005 UNESCO put the total value of stolen or smuggled antiquities and art trafficked across the globe at more than six billion dollars, illicit revenue second only to the international drug trade (Vitale 2008, 1874). Watson (2004) estimated that 159,000 looted objects were available for sale each year. Three billion dollars’ worth of looted art treasures are sold on the world market every year, and this is not a victimless crime, since looted antiquities can be used to launder money and support terrorist activities (Chippindale and Gell 2000). A report from the Rand Corporation argues that the size of the market for looted antiquities is overestimated and that much of the market is composed of fakes (Sargent et al. 2020). It is not surprising that there are widely varying estimates of the size of the market, since there are few examples of accurate assessments of the market value of looted antiquities. Following ISIS’s looting of sites in Syria, one study combined data from the sale of antiquities from dealers with data from previously excavated sites to model the value of the antiquities market. ISIS claimed from 20 percent to 50 percent of the sale price of the

looted antiquities. The study revealed the importance of small finds that the looters could pocket easily. Small finds with no discernable aesthetic or historic value to collectors were most popular. In fact, they dominate the black market in antiquities (Greenland et al. 2019, 35).

Auction houses define antiques as objects around 100 to 300 years old and antiquities as much older objects—even prehistoric objects. Are these objects public or private property? In many countries, collecting artifacts is legal if you have the permission of the landowner. People can dig artifacts up from their own property; an American farmer “can do what he wants” on private property (Childs 2010, 222). Some owners charge an “entrance fee” to dig on their land. In the Thai case, Ban Chiang villagers dug first under their own houses and in their rice fields. Looters themselves make only a small fraction of the final selling price of the goods they sell. The Thai police expect a cut of a looter’s profit, or they will confiscate both the loot and the profit. The confiscated antiquities in the custody of the police in Khon Kaen had an exceptionally large number of reproductions and repainted pots compared to the private collections, suggesting that the private collectors were better able to recognize repainted pots. (See Illustration 10, vessels 813, 795, and 837.) Some middlemen charge a finder’s fee for supplying a customer with a particularly fine piece. Private Thai collectors paid looters and middlemen for special finds. At least one collector of Ban Chiang artifacts was accused of supplying local addicts with methamphetamine so that they could dig all night and provide him with the best artifacts in the fastest time.

Art auctions function to set prices for artifacts and often to launder money as well as the objects themselves. This can also be accomplished through what Renfrew (2000) calls “reputation laundering” by putting looted pieces into an exhibition. Scholars can be made part of this laundering process, as they often are used to authenticate items and to provide a value for insurance and tax purposes. Often it is when archaeologists report their findings that potential looters are alerted to the value of what is in the ground; once that happens, it is difficult to stop the looting. But the looter always faces a problem; the more the public knows about the objects in question, the harder it will be to broker sales. When there is no provenance information associated with the looted objects, it becomes even easier to sell fakes, as I demonstrate in the next chapter.

Brodie estimates that, over the last twenty years, between 65 percent and 90 percent of antiquities offered for sale on the art market have no clear published provenance (2008, 1490). Auction houses such as Bonham’s, Christie’s, and Sotheby’s have huge warehouses full of antiquities that have often transited through Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok, London,

or Switzerland because of lax laws or lax enforcement in those locations. China now dominates the world art market, accounting for 39 percent of the global art market in 2011, with the largest boom in Chinese antiquities. China has no restriction on the import of cultural property, only on export. Like many other countries, it lacks a good monitoring system (Lee 2012). Most looted antiquities never come on the market but are disposed of in underground sales (Watson 2004, 95).

The art market responds to fads. In one year Spanish colonial objects are in fashion; another year it might be the modernist appeal of the sleek white Greek Cycladic figurines. Things of beauty and things of rarity attract looters. Despite the visual appeal of Ban Chiang painted pottery, it never became part of an international decor fad. Instead, its most attractive feature centered on its uniqueness—the claim that it was the “oldest painted pottery” accompanied by the “first bronze” in the region. There is an obvious profit motive as well, but by art market standards, Ban Chiang painted pottery would be considered small potatoes compared to the trade in better-known and more profitable items such as Greek coins, Biblical artifacts from Israel, or Egyptian paintings (cf. Kersel 2012).

Brodie has argued that the antiquities market has expanded in the twentieth century because of the increase in the number of museums, more inclusive Western tastes including interest in primitive art, the diminishing supply of antiquities because of heritage protection, better access to distant archaeological sites, and the opening of formerly closed trade markets (2008, 1493). Although purchasers may claim to be innocent buyers, Vitale asks, “What, exactly, constitutes an *innocent* art dealer” (2008, 1867) or a museum official who fails to do “due diligence”? Dealers tend to launder their stories, scrub out the past, so as not to incriminate themselves (Childs 2010, 226). The collectors I met rarely revealed details about how they obtained their treasures; those who did no doubt also laundered their stories for my benefit.

### Looting at Ban Chiang

I never observed anyone looting at Ban Chiang. Looters and middlemen are difficult to find and interview. Instead, I relied on the stories of Thai and foreign collectors who knew the market well, Thai journalists, and a few researchers like Marie Nakamura (2017) who carried out ethnographic work in the modern village of Ban Chiang.

It is difficult to think of poor farmers in a village in northeast Thailand who dig up old pots under their houses and sell them to gullible tourists as

committing crimes against humanity. They are more interested in immediate financial returns than heritage preservation and could be considered subsistence looters (cf. Byrne 2016, 350). But their actions are still destructive. Subsistence looting is a response to poverty and opportunity. Many peasant farmers looted on their own property first before being employed as looters. It is easy to assume that looters are always after valuable artifacts to sell. Following the end of an excavation in a Lao cave, the excavators reported that Lao villagers dug up the site to obtain the rice bags that were used in the backfill, not the artifacts (Lewis et al. 2015, 73), a clear response to poverty. Hart and Chilton (2015) refer to American artifact collecting as meaningful social practice where collectors experience the pleasure of connecting with the past through socially valued artifact exchanges. That was not the case in the modern village of Ban Chiang.

Looting at Ban Chiang was at its height between 1970 and 1972. But it was also extensive in 1968 and 1969 among those with connections to military, Thai royalty, police, or the Thai Fine Arts Department. The well-connected could order specific pieces to be found and delivered to them, as was common with looted artifacts from Cambodia (Stark and Griffin 2004). The Ban Chiang villagers could sell a large pot in good condition for the equivalent of USD 10 to 20, while a Thai middleman might take an additional commission of USD 20 on a much larger selling price (Sanborn 1974). A pot that fetched USD 10 for a villager might sell for USD 5,000 in the US. Many Ban Chiang villagers dug under their houses at night in imitation of the official excavations run by professional archaeologists. But the pits in public spaces in the village became obstacles for others:

The villagers who wanted to sell artifacts were digging the ground at night because they were scared they might be found by someone. As a result, when I woke up in the morning and walked outside, there were holes that I had not known about on the previous day. So if I was not walking cautiously, I would have fallen down a hole. (Nakamura 2017, 9)

According to villagers, starting in the late sixties, cars from Bangkok parked nearby with buyers ready to purchase whatever the villagers found. The villagers' relation with the Thai archaeologists is quite ambiguous. Marie Nakamura's interviews about the early excavations by the FAD in the village of Ban Chiang suggest a casual approach to the material on the part of the Thai archaeologists and officials. The villagers reported that some of them earned a lot of money by selling relics to brokers from the Bangkok Museum researchers. A villager who had several ceramic artifacts and

beads from the site explained where they came from: “Thai archaeologists gave them to me without any problems because they were not complete so they could not be used as materials for research” (Nakamura 2017, 7). The archaeologists inadvertently directed the villagers to the phase where the most popular artifacts came from, and they would tunnel down to the depth of that phase and tunnel out to obtain the pots that would fetch the best prices (Gorman 1982, 32).

When floods revealed bones and potsherds under their houses, villagers feared the possibility of retribution from ghosts if they used the pottery themselves. There is a widespread belief in Thailand that archaeological sites are protected by tutelary spirits (*phi* in Thai), but those sites were more likely to contain Buddhist relics or the remains of ancient Buddhists. But Buddhist beliefs did not stop determined looters whose tattoos and protective amulets would protect them from spirit attacks. Others rationalized that if the bones found in Ban Chiang were not from Buddhist bodies, there was no need to be afraid of them. In sites in nearby Lao PDR, spirits could even be invoked to protect sites (cf. Kallen 2015, 165).

One elderly village woman from Ban Chiang explained her concern with ghosts:

Earthenware was found in the basement of the house when I was eight years old. Since the human bones came out together, I thought the pottery belonged to the ghosts. After that, a number of earthenware pots often appeared but as they were used by ghosts, we could not use them as containers for drinking water but only to keep in them the indigo dye for dyeing or use them as containers for tools. (Nakamura 2017, 5)

Artifacts from the early excavations were placed on the altar of Wat Pho Sri Nai, the village temple, and displayed in a shop in front of the temple. Foreign antique dealers including many from Japan came visiting all the time. The wife of the government museum caretaker at Ban Chiang offered to act as go-between to facilitate the illegal sale of the pottery (*Bangkok Post*, May 29, 1974). According to the Ban Chiang villagers, American soldiers also came to the site (Nakamura 2017, 7). Other collections were made by the families of Air America pilots stationed nearby in Udorn Thani and Vientiane.

Police, army, royalty, and collectors were all implicated in the illegal removal of artifacts from Ban Chiang. Pointing-hand signs on the road from the town of Udorn Thani directed visitors to “pre-historical searching” on the lane to turn off to Ban Chiang village, only an hour-long taxi ride from the town. As the supply of pots and other artifacts dwindled, Ban Chiang

villagers had to dig in other villages far from Ban Chiang and bring the objects found there to Ban Chiang and sell them as “Ban Chiang relics,” further complicating attempts to define and interpret Ban Chiang style and pottery sequences. After they knew that selling relics was illegal, some villagers stopped digging, and others mixed old pots with fakes and sold them together, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Illustration 9b shows a mix of old and repainted pots in a temporary museum at Ban Chiang. When they were stopped by police at check points, villagers could prove that they were transporting “souvenirs” and not real artifacts. No doubt the police confiscated the real pots. According to some villagers, the real Ban Chiang boom began after the king’s visit in 1972 because the visit made the village more attractive and popular for domestic tourists. The official view is that all looting stopped after the king’s visit. After Ban Chiang became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992, the Ban Chiang villagers saw themselves as protecting the national heritage by discouraging looting and encouraging art and cultural tourism, but by this time, all the pots were gone, and the site was almost obliterated.

### Collecting and Marketing the Pots

Looted goods need a market. In the sixties, there was a limited market for Ban Chiang painted pottery, although it was for sale in Bangkok. One might wonder why Ban Chiang artifacts were deemed collectible in the early years. Was financial gain enough incentive? Unlike some elite luxury goods that act as rare status symbols, there was no sudden acceleration in prices for the artifacts from Ban Chiang and no evidence that purchases of antiquities were used for local money laundering. But when headlines in the seventies declared Ban Chiang the newest archaeological breakthrough, the market expanded dramatically. The excavators themselves bear some responsibility for sensationalizing the site and creating the looting frenzy at Ban Chiang. Chester Gorman claimed that the pot smuggling was based on a giant mistake—the erroneous thermoluminescence dates as early as 4600 BCE, as claimed in 1976. The earliest pottery was later dated around 2100 BCE, with the Late Period red-on-buff painted pottery dated from 300 BCE to 200 CE. Nevertheless, he is quoted as saying that “Together the bronze and the pottery could be the oldest in the world” (*Bangkok Post*, July 8, 1974). Other team members noted that local farmers began bringing the artifacts that they dug up to be photographed and described by the excavators before selling them (Schauffler 1976, 29, 34).

The breakthrough discovery of an autonomous Bronze Age tradition in northeast Thailand excited a handful of Southeast Asian archaeologists but not the general public. Even Thai archaeologists were more interested in Buddhist relics and dynastic epigraphy that could more easily be integrated into the Thai nationalist narrative than a new archaeological tradition in the northeast of the country. But that disinterest has now been transformed into rigorous research programs studying prehistoric change in the region, such as the Middle Mekong Archaeological Project and the project on the Origins of the Civilization of Angkor.

The English-language newspapers continued regular reporting on the site in the seventies. Thai newspapers enjoyed exposing the looting behaviour of Thai collectors. Clearly the media knew exactly what was going on and reported it in the Bangkok papers, both Thai and English. It has been estimated that at least 30,000 pots were shipped out of Thailand in five years in the seventies. Because the Thai government attempted to limit press coverage of the Americans in the Thai air bases in northeast Thailand, there are few reports about the activities of American soldiers beyond their sexual exploits on R&R.

The idea that American soldiers might be stealing or buying valuable Thai artifacts provided a convenient rationalization for Thai collectors. As Thamnoon Ladpli explained: “When the Government cannot do anything to preserve it [the pottery], I as a Thai have the duty to save it from being pilfered by foreigners so that these Thai objects can be saved for our own posterity” (*Bangkok World*, June 26, 1972). Illustration 9a shows one of many storerooms containing his collection.

By 1970 Ban Chiang painted pottery could be found in every antique shop in Bangkok. One smuggler was stopped in a Bangkok taxi with antiques from Ban Chiang that he purchased for 35,000 baht (around USD 1,800). He was on his way to sell them to tourists in a Bangkok shopping arcade. He had five bowls (painted and incised), five lamps, two chains, and six bracelets around human bones. The artifacts were confiscated and taken to a police station in Bangkok.

To counter the publicity around the looting, the Thai government issued a decree in 1972 requiring all collections of Ban Chiang materials to be registered with the Fine Arts Department. The elite Thai collectors supported these stricter laws because they already had amassed large private unregistered collections, whose value would increase when restrictions went into effect (Byrne 2016, 347). Sure enough, newspapers reported that “[w]hen the law went into effect the value of their collections skyrocketed” (*Bangkok Post*, July 8, 1972). Foreign letter writers to the English-language

newspapers pointed out that Thai collectors were inciting the villagers to dig for artifacts, and if no one offered to buy Ban Chiang painted pottery, they would stop digging. Other collectors shipped pottery out of the country to be sold overseas, including a patron of the arts and a high-ranking government official (*Bangkok Post*, July 8, 1974). Solheim noted that among the collections accumulated by some Thai officials, there existed “one or more ... said to be better than the collection of the National Museum” (1973, 120). My experience certainly confirms his impression.

There were probably hundreds, if not thousands, of people collecting antiquities from Ban Chiang in Thailand at the time the new regulations were announced. Few Thai owners registered their collections with the Fine Arts Department, as required by the new antiquities law. The seventy-two individuals who came forward in 1972 to acknowledge they owned Ban Chiang ceramics (7,025 items among them) and register them with the Fine Arts Department (*Bangkok World*, August 29, 1972) represented only a small percentage of the looted pots (Byrne 2016, 347). One collector, Mom Chow Viphavadi Rangsit, is photographed registering the collection of pottery she bought from villagers in Ban Chiang. She donated a number of artifacts but not all: “I was so grieved that I had to buy the artifacts to donate to the Department of Fine Arts, as my financial means permitted it.” She donated 10,000 baht (USD 500) to FAD for excavations (*Bangkok World*, July 13, 1972).

The personal collections of Thai elites appear to be much larger and more significant than foreign collections. Thai citizens claim to have saved the Ban Chiang pots to protect the national heritage from foreigners. “Collectors in Southeast Asia comprise the political, military, and bureaucratic elite along with members of the burgeoning commercial middle class and, in Thailand, the aristocracy” (Byrne 2016, 346). The valorization of antiquities as national heritage, rather than inhibiting acquisition by citizen collectors, facilitated a process wherein collecting became a form of cultural capital accumulation. These elite citizen collectors viewed themselves as the protectors of Thai national heritage; they could easily bypass regulations as they had their collections declared personal or private museums (cf. Childe 2010, 223).

The mid-twentieth century saw the growth of a culture of collecting among members of the elite and middle class in Thailand (Byrne 2016, 344):

In the mid-20th century in Thailand the aristocracy itself included notable collectors, such as Princess Pantip Chumbhot, whose large personal collection was opened to the public in 1952 (Diskul 1982:17). It featured such traditional collectibles as antique Buddha images but also the new range of objects, including ancient ceramics, which archaeological investigation was



bringing to light. The princess was one of the first private collectors to acquire “looted” Bronze Age Ban Chiang ceramics in the 1960s. (Byrne 2016, 346)

Princess Chumbhot began collecting Ban Chiang objects for the Suan Pakkard Museum with the idea of saving them from American officers who had begun collecting them as souvenirs. Princess Chumbhot explained to Lyons, “They will ship them all out of the country before the Fine Arts Department does anything!” (Lyons and Rainey 1982,7). Princess Chumbhot’s argument was somewhat justified, as her reporting of the finds to the Thai Fine Arts Department in 1966 resulted in only small-scale test pit excavations, the first of which took place in 1967. She was reported to have removed one of the first lots of one hundred pots from the site on her first visit to Ban Chiang.

### Displaying the Pots

Many Ban Chiang artifacts made their way into museums around the world. Museums display objects already out of context. Although museums also collect, museum directors defend their collections: “Museums do not alienate objects. Museums give these alienated objects a good home” (Kersel 2012, 78). Many of those homes are American. In 2008 Finkel listed the following American museums with a number of Ban Chiang artifacts on display: Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 77; Freer and Sackler, Washington, DC, 56; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 33; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 17; Cleveland Museum, 8; Minneapolis Institute, 5; and the Bowers Museum of Art, Santa Ana, California, around 1,000. The museum curators did not think of their collections as illegal, and many claimed they would return them if they were later found to be illegal (Finkle 2008, 29).

The United States now treats museum officials who acquire looted art and antiquities much like drug traffickers (Vitale 2008, 1836). More recently, it has become easier to charge museums and others who purchased or accepted donations of pots of dubious provenance (or no provenance). All donations to museums now require confirmation of acceptable provenance. The University of Pennsylvania Museum, most closely associated with the excavation of Ban Chiang, was also one of the first museums to adopt a clear policy on acquisitions—accepting only those objects with a clear pedigree. Museum officials are expected to demonstrate due diligence, the measures that a museum should undertake to ensure its acquisitions were legally obtained. International museums in London, Singapore, and elsewhere in Europe and Australia also have Ban Chiang collections.

As is the case in Thailand, personal collections of antiquities can become defined as museums, blurring the line between museums and private collections; both deal in antiquities. De-accessioned items that are liquidated for cash to improve the museum collection can be sold to dealers or private collectors in what Kallen calls a currency exchange among museums (2015, 151). For example, an American woman purchased “de-accessioned duplicates” of Cham sculptures from Vietnam, then sold them to a German collector who donated them to a German museum founded in the 1950s from his collections (Nguyen Duyen 2021, 148).

Art patrons like Arthur Sackler and entrepreneurs like Jim Thompson and others have made and donated substantial collections of Asian art. Reginald LeMay was an avid collector of Thai antiquities in the 1930s and 40s, as well as a respected author on the subject of Thai art. Another expert on Thai art, A. B. Griswold, bequeathed his collection of Thai antiquities to the Wolters Art Gallery in Baltimore. This model of enjoying the collections in this life and then leaving them for others to enjoy is not uncommon among academics.

Douglas Latchford, a citizen of the UK and Thailand, presents a more recent and less benign model of the connoisseur collector. His estate agreed to give back his vast collection of looted Cambodian art to Cambodia following his death at eighty-eight in 2020. Some celebrated his expertise on Khmer art and the generosity of his daughter in returning his collections to the National Museum of Cambodia. But he was well known as the primary distributor of stolen antiquities from Cambodia and a broker of stolen art in the international art market since the seventies. He was equally skilled in the creation of false documents to show provenance and was under federal investigation for art fraud in the United States at the time of his death (Thompson and Murphy 2021). He was well aware of the importance of art restorers in the process of getting antiquities ready for market, including their ability to disguise stolen antiquities.

Contemporary archaeologists working in Thailand have never been accused of making private collections from their excavations. Foreign archaeologists have been criticized by Thai archaeologists for many failings, as Glover (1993) has documented, but making off with Thai antiquities is not one of them.

If one wants to acquire antiquities in Thailand, you do not go there as an archaeologist registered with the Fine Arts Department and the National Research Council, but as a tourist, with a full wallet and a few introductions, and you will find Thai nationals only too willing to sell

their cultural heritage to the *farang*, as they do to wealthy Thai collectors who have most of the best collections. (Glover 1993, 50)

The following examples illustrate the complexity of the relation between looting, museums, and the antiquities market.

After a five-year investigation of antiquities and tax fraud by several federal agencies, in 2008 the FBI raided two antiquities dealers and four museums in California on suspicion of theft and tax fraud (Brodie 2014, 27). The two dealers were Jonathan Markell, owner of the Silk Roads Gallery, and Robert Olson, owner of Bobby-O Imports. The four museums served with search warrants for their collections by the FBI include the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, the Bowers Museum of Art in Santa Ana, and the Mingei International Museum in San Diego. Almost all the Ban Chiang materials in the museums were donated, a common way for museums to acquire their collections (Brodie 2014, 30).

The investigation found that Robert Olson, who had been making regular trips to Thailand since the seventies, headed a smuggling ring that brought illegal antiquities from Thailand, Burma, and Cambodia into the United States. Olson, as the owner of Bobby-O Imports, allegedly sold to collectors and museums (including to Armand Labbe, chief curator at the Bowers Museum) from shipping containers filled with Ban Chiang artifacts that he said he imported legally. In addition, he allegedly sold USD 50,000 to 100,000 worth of antiquities a year for over ten years to Barry MacLean, a wealthy Chicago collector and a trustee of the Art Institute of Chicago, whose private collection/museum included materials from Ban Chiang obtained from Olson (Felch and Boehm 2008b, 1; Rod-ari 2021, 103). Mr. Olson attempted to make the Thai antiquities appear to be souvenirs to fool customs agents by placing “Made in Thailand” stickers on them (Vitale 2008, 1864).

Olson sold antiquities to an undercover FBI agent, inflated prices for tax assessment, and then tried to donate them to museums. According to the FBI documents, a client of Olson’s donated USD 250,000 worth of antiquities to the Bowers Museum. An FBI undercover agent paid USD 12,000 for Ban Chiang items and received an appraisal of more than USD 44,000; to get the tax benefit, he had to have owned the goods for more than a year (Brodie 2014, 29).

Olson allegedly sold looted objects to Jonathan Markell, an art dealer caught in the FBI sting operation. An agent posed as a collector to buy Ban Chiang painted pottery and then tried to donate the materials to California museums in exchange for tax write-offs. For example, pots that the undercover agent bought for USD 12,000 received a tax write-off for over USD 20,000 (Vitale 2008, 1863–64). The museums failed to ask for evidence

of provenance but were not likely involved in illegal activities themselves. But they clearly did not do their due diligence, and they appeared ready to acquire antiquities without provenance. The Los Angeles County Museum turned Olson down when he tried to donate Ban Chiang artifacts to the museum (Rod-ari 2021, 95). Olson was indicted and charged with conspiracy and trafficking in stolen goods in 2013 (Brodie 2014, 28).

The FBI investigation also alleged that Roxanna Brown, the ceramics expert I met in Bangkok, had sold Thai antiquities to dealers including Robert Olson. Robert Olson had a private warehouse of objects and a file of correspondence labelled “Roxanna,” including a list of items she would sell him. He asked Brown for her expert advice on his items for sale. Brown did art appraisals in Hong Kong and while she was working on her PhD at UCLA. She also appraised objects for the Markells’ high-end home decor store and art gallery, Silk Roads Gallery. The Markells were considered respected art gallery owners. An undercover agent purchased an item for USD 1,500 from Markell, who later appraised it for USD 4,990 and donated it to the Mingei International Museum (Rod-ari 2021, 95). Jonathan Markell was sentenced to eighteen months in prison, and he and his wife were charged with tax evasion. The Markells were key players in creating a market for Ban Chiang artifacts in the United States.

Brown was paid by both Markell and Olson for supplying antiquities and blank signed forms for tax appraisal (Rod-ari 2021, 96). The forms would allow for artificially inflating the value of antiquities for tax purposes, including Ban Chiang painted pottery donated to California museums. She did admit to loaning her electronic signature to the Markells but claimed that she did not know how they made use of her signature. She was arrested in 2008 for alleged wire fraud and accused of involvement in the acquisition of unprovenanced Ban Chiang artifacts by four California museums. Before she was due in court, she died of peritonitis in jail in 2008. Because of her premature death, it is difficult to know the nature and extent of Brown’s role in the antiquities trade. Eventually the US Attorney’s office closed the case against her and paid USD 880,000 to Roxanna Brown’s estate.

Some of the California museums charged with acquiring unprovenanced Ban Chiang artifacts, including the Bowers Museum, were willing to give Thailand access to its collection for research purposes and returned 554 pieces to Thailand (including 222 pottery items) in return for an agreement not to prosecute anyone from the museum. The other museums have their smaller collections of Ban Chiang goods in “constructive custody” of the federal authorities and are not on public display. The Mingei museum has also returned its eighty-three artifacts to Thailand (Rod-ari 2021, 97).

## Repatriation: Sending Antiquities Home

It should be possible for an American or European museum to give back Ban Chiang artifacts and have them displayed in the museum in Bangkok or in Ban Chiang. But with court cases pending, there are complications. From a legal perspective, the state party requesting repatriation of its cultural property must pay for its return and delivery; moreover, if the cultural property was seized from a bona fide purchaser, the requesting state must pay that purchaser just compensation (Vitale 2008, 1845).<sup>3</sup> In general, the Thai government has been more interested in the return of Hindu-Buddhist artifacts than the return of Ban Chiang artifacts.

Gifting antiquities can also be complicated and may involve potential conflicts of interest between teachers and students, other academics, alumni, and donors. Elizabeth Moore, a recently retired and highly respected Professor of Southeast Asian Art and Archaeology at SOAS (London) donated a Ban Chiang pot to the school in 2013. The vessel, purchased in Bangkok or Singapore in the early seventies, was no doubt looted from the site and was given to her as a gift around 1995. The school accepted the unprovenanced donation without “due diligence” (Chui 2019). It is interesting that it was a Thai scholar who suggested she give it for display to the gallery at SOAS rather than returning it to Thailand, hinting that they knew what would happen to the pot if it were repatriated to Thailand. Academics, too, can become embroiled in complications when they attempt to repatriate objects without provenance.

Both museums and individuals in colonized and crypto-colonized countries face difficulties with repatriation, including conflicting claims on items. Museums can always block efforts to repatriate items in their collections. Repatriation or object restitution is part of an ongoing movement of de-colonization involving museums that acquired objects from their colonies. A recent book, *Returning Southeast Asia's Past* (Tythacott and Ardiyansyah 2021), provides case studies about repatriation of objects looted from Southeast Asia, including from Ban Chiang. For example, British seizure and return of the Mandalay regalia, French collecting in Indochina, and the Netherlands' return of Javanese antiquities to Indonesia all demonstrate the complexity of the task for colonizers and former colonies.

Thailand has no ongoing relationship with a colonizing country but has received repatriated antiquities from a number of North American and

3 For example, the Markells had to pay around USD 25,000 to cover the costs of repatriating their Ban Chiang artifacts.

European museums. Unlike the loss that Indonesians felt when Javanese art treasures were taken to the Netherlands, the loss of Ban Chiang pottery did not cause the country “their greatest anguish” (Sapardan 2021, 214). Thai anguish was reserved for the export and loss of Hindu-Buddhist treasures—art that has an ongoing connection to modern Thai Buddhists. Ban Chiang antiquities, unlike Hindu-Buddhist sculptures, belong to already extinct cultures whose remains just happened to be discovered in the territory of the modern nation of Thailand (cf. Ardiyansyah 2021, 163).

The Thai state has intervened to repatriate other antiquities. A stone lintel from the entrance to the eleventh-century Khmer sanctuary of Phanom Rung in the northeast of the country was stolen in the early 1960s and “discovered” in 1976 in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago by a Thai art historian. I bought a T-shirt from students at Silpakorn who were organizing a protest to have the lintel returned. The T-shirt had a picture of the lintel and “Stolen from Thailand” written under it. “In the Thai media storm surrounding the subsequent repatriation campaign and the lintel’s triumphal return in 1989, Thailand was cast as a poor country victimized by rich Western collectors” (Byrne 2016, 349). Cultural tourists can now visit the temple with its lintel restored in the Phanom Rung Historic Park. Will other cultural tourists see repatriated Ban Chiang painted pottery restored to the museum at the partially excavated site of Ban Chiang?

Consider also the experience of Mark O’Neill at the Glasgow Museum when faced with questions about the authenticity and owners of the museum’s ghost dance shirt (2006). He explains the criteria for repatriation used by the Glasgow Museum, including the status of those making the request, the continuity between the community that created the object and the current community on whose behalf the request is being made, the cultural and religious importance of the object to that community, and the fate of the object if it is returned (2006, 111). As in the case of the Ban Chiang artifacts, other values may be more important than possession or preservation of the objects themselves (O’Neil 2016, 114). But repatriation is not inevitably a loss for museums, as Stephen Nash (2021) demonstrates with another First Nations example where a museum displayed the old traditional repatriated totem pole beside a new provocative carving commissioned by the museum. He also documents cases where the receiving country acknowledges the return by reciprocating with another object, not as compensation but to complete a gift-giving cycle. This form of restitution or propatriation encourages the possibility of future collaboration and productive relations among museums, including joint exhibitions.

Repatriation of Ban Chiang artifacts is ongoing, delayed in part because the Thai government has not actively requested the return of the artifacts (Rod-ari 2021, 99). The problem of repatriating the pots differs for Thai nationals and non-nationals. The non-Thai purchasers might include American military personnel who had access to the Air America flights or European tourists who brought a few artifacts home from vacation, as well as serious art collectors. The personal desire for certain objects changes over time. What is considered beautiful at one point in time may be considered ugly or uninteresting at another. Museums and collectors may decide they want to return antiquities to their rightful owners. But who are their rightful owners? And how do they return them?

How can collectors dispose of their antiquities responsibly after they are bored with them or find that their families do not wish to display or store them? Many American owners of Ban Chiang artifacts may have purchased them from Thai markets or even vendors selling their wares on the side of the road in the late sixties before the 1972 legislation explicitly outlawing the purchase of Ban Chiang painted pottery was passed. They were no doubt unaware of the 1961 legislation that made it illegal to remove any antiquities from the country without a license; they were probably aware of the lax enforcement of the law.

It is often difficult to pass these objects on to people decades later who were not caught up in the experience of buying what they thought of as beautiful souvenirs. Tourists visiting Ban Chiang may have assumed the pots and bronze artifacts that were offered for sale were fakes, since objects for sale at other historic sites such as Ayutthaya and Sukhothai were reproductions. Why would they think they were purchasing priceless antiquities on the side of the road? For example, the collection I had access to when I was in graduate school came from a woman who had a strong interest in archaeology and asked to volunteer with the FAD excavation at Ban Chiang in the late sixties and was turned down. She subsequently bought a collection of artifacts from someone selling them on the road to Udorn Thani and shipped them home via Air America. Now in her nineties, she is anxious to donate her collection to a museum or university in the US, but no one wants them. She felt that she did not receive much help from the Thai Embassy in Washington when she tried to repatriate them to their country of origin.

Imagine the surprise of a Canadian woman who discovered a cache of sixteen Thai pots wrapped in Thai newspapers dated 1971 and 1972 in the attic of a relative's newly purchased home in Ottawa. They were well protected in wooden crates padded with foam. The many empty crates still

carried the round impressions of circles that probably belonged to pots long since sold or otherwise disposed of.<sup>4</sup> Unable to trace the relatives of the long-deceased owner of the house, she had few options available to her to send the pots where they belonged, perhaps to a museum in Thailand or a museum in Canada. The Royal Ontario Museum instructed her to contact the Thai Embassy, but since many were repainted, the Thai Embassy may not have considered them valuable enough to ship back to Ban Chiang. She could sell them to an interested antiquities dealer or even keep them in her living room or make them available for educational purposes. For now, they sit in a closet in her bedroom.

The media publicizes some successful repatriations. Twelve Ban Chiang artifacts that were “previously in the possession of an American woman” who felt they “should be on display in Thailand so that children can be proud of the value of their Thai heritage” were returned to Thailand in 2018. Another American collector living in the US returned forty-six pieces, saying they “always intended to return them to their homeland.”<sup>5</sup>

Did American military personnel who purchased Ban Chiang pots really find the pots beautiful and appealing to own, or just rare and valuable—like owning “the last komodo dragon”? Or did they recognize a good investment when it presented itself to them? How many American military families ended up stuck with a storage room full of Ban Chiang pots when the site was no longer making headlines? They would also quickly learn that the pots with round bottoms were difficult to display as interior décor.

The repatriation problem is different for Thai nationals, who may well have had a wide range of motivations for acquiring the artifacts, including displaying their cultural capital along with their pots or saving them from foreigners who they feared would remove the artifacts from the country. Returning the pots is easy for wealthy Thai elites. Surat Osuthanugrah, the founder of Bangkok University, gave 2,000 pots to the university. About 250 were on view to the public in the Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum, Rangsit campus, which opened in 2005. Roxanna Brown, the founding director, documented the collection (Brown 2009).

Other members of the Thai elite, such as Vataneer and Sukhum Navaphan, former president of the Thai Military Bank, have substantial collections of Ban Chiang artifacts. Vataneer reported in an interview for the May 29, 1974, issue of *Bangkok World* that she joined the Thai FAD expeditions and could openly show off her collection of 800 Ban Chiang ceramics and “several

4 The previous owner of the house was a civil servant working overseas.

5 These stories were reported on a PBS broadcast on August 4, 2018.



thousand” pieces of bronze displayed in cases in her home. Her relation to the government means that returning them would not be a problem for her, as Vataneer explained to the *Bangkok World*: “Do I have a license? Sure, the government knows about my collection. Ultimately, they will all revert to the National Museum.” Meanwhile, the rest of their Ban Chiang collection was packed up to be housed in the Vataneer Golf Course (*Bangkok World*, May 29, 1974).

Not all repatriation efforts are directed through museums. Phanomvan (2021) documents the role of social media in efforts to repatriate the sculptures from Plai Bat temples in northeast Thailand that were taken from the country in the 60s. This local heritage activism includes internet watchdogs who locate items stolen from Thailand in acts of modern colonialism and try to return them to local communities rather than national museums.

## Pots Out of Place

In the early seventies, the painted pots from Ban Chiang were too new to the antiquities market to be listed as stolen antiquities. Until the pots were dated and described in the public media, there was a very limited market for them. They were a curiosity, picked up out of casual antiquarian interest in the hopes that the pots had monetary value and their story would become important one day. But the pottery did make its way into a living museum diorama in *Muang Boran* (Ancient City) on the outskirts of Bangkok, where a few real and fake Ban Chiang pots hovered incongruously in the shadows of rural Thai dwellings on display.

The Late Period Ban Chiang painted pottery also found a place in the world of luxury hotels and catalogues of exotic Asian antiquities. In the nineties one of the best collections outside Thailand was to be found in the lobbies and display niches in the hallways of the Hyatt Hotel Maui. I visited the hotel and studied the pots on display, but I never found out where their collections came from. Although I corresponded with the public relations department, they never responded.

Ban Chiang pottery had limited popularity in the world of decor and exotic luxury. Whereas handicrafts and decor were always a part of Thai heritage promoted through government ministries and the royal projects, Ban Chiang pottery had an ambiguous place in a model of culture as lifestyle choice expressed in interior design and decor. The rough surface of Ban Chiang painted pottery meant that people used to the elegance of other Thai pottery traditions did not view it as an attractive decorative piece

for household display. Besides, it was neither lustrous nor gold-edged. The designs on Ban Chiang painted pottery did not exhibit simple symmetry as found on the tessellated delicate surfaces of historic decorated pottery like Bencharong porcelain but rather much more complex symmetry that required informed examination to be appreciated.

For example, the coffee-table book *Thai Style* (Warren and Tettoni 1990) shows Ban Chiang painted pottery on the top shelf of a beautiful Thai home, while displaying other Thai art objects such as lustrous porcelain to enhance the interior decor (often Bencharong, which, as a Thai friend told me, was much prettier than Ban Chiang pottery). Similarly, an American collector had a special high display shelf built more to protect the collection than to display it.

In the United States, Ban Chiang painted pottery could be found in the catalogues of the Horchow collection of exotic luxuries, a Texas-based mail-order company bought by Neiman Marcus. The pots were considered unique exotic luxury goods but not obvious priceless antiquities or works of art, according to Mr. Horchow, who claimed that he “wouldn’t dream of offering them [Ban Chiang pots] again” (Gorman 1982, 33). Gump’s of San Francisco, the luxury home decor retailer selling “unique Asian gifts,” sold the pots later than Horchow, well after the origin story of Ban Chiang was known. None are displayed in their online catalogues today.

Private collections are not going to disappear: “Ancient things have always moved from hand to hand. They do not belong to a black-and-white ethic, rather they are part of the myriad relationships that arise from our fascination with the past and its objects” (Childs 2010, 185). Childs cites Cornelius Holtorf’s argument that archaeology is significant not because it manages to import actual past relics into the present but because it allows us to recruit past people and what they left behind for a range of contemporary human interests, needs, and desires (2010, 43). Holtorf calls for “investigation of the life history of things as they unfold in the present and extend both into the past and the future” (2004, 55). Collectors claim that owning old objects is one way that they can connect with the past. But these connections are not always what they seem. Collections of painted pots on display or for sale today are full of forgeries.

Deception requires knowledge and skill; both artists and con artists were involved in two faking processes: how to make real pots look like fakes and how to make fake pots look like real ones. The problem for antiquities dealers like Olson was how to make authentic Ban Chiang pots look like fake souvenirs for the purpose of customs inspection by putting black paint over the designs or plastering them with “Made in Thailand” stickers (Vitale

2008, 1864). The problem for Thai artists was how to make fake pots look real enough to get the highest possible price or how to make souvenirs that would recall or draw attention to Ban Chiang designs.

Looting involves deception as well as theft; that is one area of overlap between looting and the faking of Ban Chiang painted pottery. Looted objects cannot be legally sold in the international art market without proper documentation. But such documentation can also be faked to produce a “clean biography.” The cessation of looting was a precondition for Thailand’s nomination of Ban Chiang to the World Heritage Committee in 1990 (Pelleggi 2017, 114). But the designation of Ban Chiang as a World Heritage Site simultaneously promoted the cottage industry of producing pottery replicas as well as impressive fakes of Ban Chiang painted pottery, the subject of the next chapter.

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## 5 The Fake Past: Forgeries and Souvenirs

### Abstract

This chapter explores the production of fakes and forgeries of Ban Chiang painted pottery by talented and not-so-talented artists in the seventies and eighties and how selling fake antiquities affects the antiquities market, drawing on what we know about forgery in European art. I propose a classification of replicated Ban Chiang designs from fraudulent forgeries to tourist souvenirs, sometimes recognizable from symmetry mistakes. The chapter includes the role of museums in the collection and display of real and forged artifacts and the complexities of repatriation when current owners of antiquities try to send their artifacts, including pots, home.

**Keywords:** art forgeries, recognizing fakes, theories of replication, tourist art, museums

Although such symmetry is something we take for granted—in the shape of our own bodies, in nature, in our various productions—it underlies much of what we find both disturbing and fascinating about copying.  
(Boon 2010, 192)

Looting is finite work. At some point there are no more Ban Chiang pots or bronzes to dig up and sell. But once looted antiquities reach the art market, the demand for those objects increases. This demand creates the need for fakes. Faking, then, is a product of looting and the antiquities market. The tension between morality (how we live) and legality (agreed upon rules) might have a small part to play regarding looting, which is both immoral and illegal, but it plays a larger part in considering copying and faking. Soon after looted Ban Chiang painted pottery began to appear in Thai markets, fake Ban Chiang pottery appeared as well. As the originals disappeared into the hands of collectors, they were soon replaced by repainted and fake pots. And as Chester Gorman admitted, some of the work of faking coming out



of the village of Ban Chiang was impressive (see Illustration 13, vessels 835 and 836). Gorman recognized that the poor villagers in Ban Chiang had two options: to excavate pots from their own village and neighbouring ones, or to make and sell fakes. “They of course chose both” (1982, 34).

The villages closest to Ban Chiang made fake Ban Chiang pots from scratch using the same clays and similar motifs as the excavated pots. Vessel 835, for example, could easily have been repainted on an old pot made from the same clay used by the original potter-artists from Ban Chiang. Often the modern artists created simple band designs on the rims quite accurately, while the body designs are simplified versions of familiar motifs arranged in bifold rotation (p112). Villagers also used broken sections like rims or pedestals and reconnected them to produce “complete” pots, as in Illustration 13, vessel 643. They also made fakes from pieces of original pots with fake additions attached with resin; these half-old, half-new pots can be hard to distinguish from the original (Gorman 1982, 32), since they may be mistaken for pots with officially authorized repairs made by government restorers. Vessel 973 illustrates pieces of redrawn designs from a large, flared rim crudely held together with masking tape (Illustration 14, vessel 973). While some of these pastiches would be easy to spot as fraudulent, many examples in public and private collections were more questionable. For example, I identified Illustration 13, vessel 836, as Late Period painted pottery until I came across several identical pots for sale in the village of Ban Chiang a few months later. In the store display of identical pots, it was easy to see the hand of the modern artist mass-producing a single design. I make no claim to having a great eye, but repeated exposure to the designs and making quick sketches of the elements gave me some confidence in my judgements regarding repainted designs. Close examination of the skilled lines drawn on sherds also helped.

These pots raise questions about how fakes are recognized and valued. In my case, I could seldom say how or why I thought that any one Ban Chiang painted vessel was a fake. Nor could I always rely on symmetry to guide my decisions, as I had initially hoped. Does restoration of antiquities such as painted pots from Ban Chiang encourage their misrepresentation? Is deception always involved in the production of souvenirs? What does it mean to copy a prehistoric design onto a T-shirt?

Faking and copying is a part of the Ban Chiang story. It provides another frame for viewing the relation between past and present. To an art historian, fake pots present a real difficulty; in contrast, an anthropologist views every object or piece of art as an authentic cultural artifact. Before turning to the process of creating fake Ban Chiang pots, this chapter considers how

Western art history has approached imitation and art forgeries. Are there any lessons here for understanding Ban Chiang designs and answering some of these questions about copying?

### Approaches to Replication

Copying objects is nothing new. Scott (2016) distinguishes between material, conceptual, historical, and aesthetic authenticity and explores how fakes are regarded across different time periods and cultures. There are different approaches to the process of imitation itself. Admiration for and emulation of objects from the past is common. Romans copied Greek statues; Europeans copied Roman statues. Copies displayed in royal courts encouraged a taste for antiquities during the Renaissance (Scott 2016).

The Egyptians, Romans, and Chinese aided in and encouraged the production of copies with no stigma attached and made no distinction between originals and copies (Banfield 1982, 31). Producing multiples of Chinese scrolls, bronzes, and other artifacts is considered a way to preserve tradition and is based on a veneration of the past. But within this respect for the past, there is room for artistic frauds, middleman frauds, and owner frauds, which the Chinese government is constantly trying to prevent (Scott 2016, 268). Handler sees concern for authenticity as a product of the modern Western world with its focus on the individual artist (Scott 2016, 65). In Western culture, non-creative repetition can be considered wasteful and unproductive. In France, if a piece of art is determined to be a fake, it is confiscated or destroyed (Scott 2016, 60).

Western art historians have long been concerned with authenticity in relation to aesthetic value. Hans-Georg Gadamer approached the problem of imitation from the perspective of hermeneutics and phenomenology. In *Truth and Method* (1975), he explains how imitations differ from originals in aesthetic experience. Imitations do not belong to the work of art itself since they did not participate in the aesthetic experience of production or creation. To Gadamer, imitations are not merely a second version but also a recognition of the essence of a piece of work (1975, 103). He writes: "When someone makes an imitation, he has to leave out and heighten. Because he is pointing to something, he has to exaggerate whether he likes it or not" (1975, 103). The imitation has no aesthetic function except to resemble the original, and it is valued according to how closely it succeeds. A good imitation allows a spectator to recognize the original in the copy. It only identifies the original and thus "cancels itself out" when it reaches this goal (1975, 122).

Gombrich emphasized how exceptional true creativity is and how the familiar will be the likely starting point of the unfamiliar. He writes in *Art and Illusion*: “The more we become aware of the enormous pull in man to repeat what he has learned, the greater will be our admiration for those exceptional beings who could break the spell and make a significant advance on which others could build” (1960, 25). Gombrich attributes the mistakes of copyists to their lack of schema (1960, 147), an argument that some forgers might disagree with. He refers to “cheap imitations which give an object a look of brilliance unconnected to its true worth and thus enables its owner to appear as something he is not” (1979, 33). Excess ornamentation may also give this impression. He views culture as based on man’s capacity to be a maker, to invent unexpected uses, and to create artificial substitutes. Some art dealers say that selling fake antiquities poisons the market (Childs 2010, 224), but it is equally possible that copies increase the esteem or value of the original. Umberto Eco (1985) also argues that fakes, forgeries, and various kinds of copies have the potential to dissipate the value of the unique original and to disrupt the circuits of exchange and consumption in which the original is located.

Replicating is not new, but the mechanical reproduction of a work of art in the form of lithography, photography, film, sound recordings, and digital formats *is* new, and it complicates the relation between original and copy. In his famous essay *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin wrote that the onset of modern printing technology would cause works of art to lose their “aura” when photographed, published, and replicated over time (2006).<sup>1</sup> He argues that mass production destroys the aura of a work of art as something unique, authentic, and individual and detaches the object from the domain of tradition. If reproductions lack the connection to the work’s unique place in time and space, then the fact that no one knew how to locate a looted pot from Ban Chiang in time or space already removes both the real and the fake from the domain of tradition (Benjamin 2006, 221). Yet Benjamin argues that the uniqueness of a work of art comes from being embedded in the fabric of tradition (2006, 223). The shattering of tradition liquidates the traditional value of cultural heritage, an argument with implications for the construction of Thai heritage explored in Chapter 6. Digitalization also disrupts the conceptual distinction between original and reproduction, as images, sounds, and words are received, deconstructed, rearranged, and restored. “Digitalization transfers this aura to the individual copy,” merging

1 Benjamin’s famous essay was first drafted in 1935, with second and third versions in 1936 and 1939.

the replica and the authentic original (Davis 1995, 381). “In this sense, copies, forgeries, and fakes which have a long history, do not threaten the aura of the original but seek to partake of it” (Appadurai 1986, 45).

In Madrid, Factum Arte is a digital mediation workshop that uses 3-D printing to digitally reproduce copies of antiquities and works of art. Factum’s work “transcends the taint of chicanery and cheesiness which traditionally has been associated with copies” because the goal is not deception but verisimilitude in order to study art more deeply and redefine the relation between the original and the copy (Zalewski 2016, 69). Their reproductions reveal that originals are not static but constantly changing, and that the aura can in fact migrate from the original to the copy and at the same time provide forensically accurate information and provoke a deep emotional response. Additionally, “[a] facsimile also allows the public to see objects that are nearly impossible to approach in person” (Zalewski 2016, 69). Replicas can preserve something fragile that otherwise could not be seen.

The internet is full of two-dimensional renditions of Ban Chiang designs on pots and other products for sale, including cartoon Ban Chiang pots with eyes and feet. Some Thai and foreign artists have unwound the designs and reproduced them on wall art and mugs. Particularly impressive is the work of Bobbi Freelance Art, with his beautifully rendered sigmoid urn with the design drawn in dark blue on a white background. Other paintings in the more accurate red on buff could easily be mistaken for museum-quality drawings. It is the three-dimensional pots that carry the aura of authenticity, even when they have been repainted.

Like Davis, Boon (2010) avoids the copy-original binary usually covered by copyright, trademark, and patent law, none of which can be directly applied to antiquities. Boon praises copying and stresses the arbitrariness of the rules defining authenticity rather than the morality of the process of copying, taking us back to the tension between morality and legality. The significance for Ban Chiang is that the fakes threaten the stability of the commodity market in art and antiquities. Approaches to imitation also confound the art-craft distinction, mentioned in Chapter 3. Fakes would be considered craft objects, while only the authentic painted pots have the potential to be considered as art, according to Dutton (2005).

## Art Fraud

Art forging as an activity is mostly known from European sources, and much of our knowledge of faking comes from forged paintings of individual

named artists. Why tell their stories here? The minds of past Ban Chiang potter-artists remain inaccessible to us, but we do have access to the mental processes of modern art forgers, or at least the ones who have been caught. It is art historians, collectors, and curators and not anthropologists who have been forced to carefully define imitation. The difference between original and copy matters a great deal to art historians and art connoisseurs. Authenticity to these specialists is not a matter of theory but a practical economic necessity with legal, moral, and aesthetic implications. To an anthropologist, every object or work of art is an authentic cultural object worthy of study. Legally, of course, making or selling forgeries of objects involves a deliberate deception on the part of the maker or the seller and breaks the law, as the following life stories demonstrate.

The stonemason Alceo Dossena replicated medieval antiquities, Greek gothic carvings, and Renaissance terracottas. Dossena began as a skilled craftsman who restored medieval sculptures. When he needed extra funds, he began to create not copies but sculptures of bronze, wood, and marble in the style of Greek and European artists (Scott 2016, 286). Frank Arnau writes that “there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that Dossena ever knowingly defrauded a third party” (1961, 214). He merely supplied what his customers wanted: archaic, Roman, Gothic, or Hellenistic. It was the dealer who provided false documentation for the work. Eventually Dossena confessed that he made the sculptures; dealers were misrepresenting his work and selling the sculptures as authentic.

His legal position was clear. He had never sold a sculpture under false pretenses. His clients, on the other hand, knew that the sculptures they bought from him were all his own work. What they paid him was no more than the normal price for good contemporary work. He supplied what was ordered without fraudulent intent, without being party to any deception and without deriving any financial gain from the fact that his creations were resold as medieval or classical originals. (Arnau 1961, 216)

Did Dossena imitate? If he utilized the technique and craftsmanship of a particular period and captured the style or spirit of a period without using a model to copy, was he imitating or recreating a certain style, much like the Ban Chiang forgers who painted pots in the style of Late Period Ban Chiang pottery?

Arnau writes that Dossena was neither copyist nor forger nor imitator, but rather something in between (1961, 219). He worked from a schema in his mind and then gave it expression. His works were not copies but

new creations based on knowledge of the rules of construction of that period, much like the argument made by the artists who made Ban Chiang reproductions.

Clifford Irving wrote a biography of famous art forger Elmyr de Hory in 1969 and later applied the lessons learned by writing a fake biography of Howard Hughes. After he was convicted of fraud, he wrote a book called *The Hoax* about the process (Irving 1981). Like Dossena, Elmyr de Hory claims in his biography (Irving 1969) that his forging activities, ranging over a wide range of styles and periods, began as a means to gain the necessities of life, not to deceive the general public. He produced works attributed to Picasso, Matisse, Renoir, Dufy, Van Dongen, Derain, Modigliani, Braque, Bonnard, and other contemporary French painters. He began his forgeries by studying available drawings, making preliminary sketches “until his hand had developed a fluency for the particular line that he wanted to reproduce” (Irving 1969, 39). “Eventually,” he tells Irving “... I knew the subjects so well I didn’t even have to look at the books any more to get what you may call ‘inspiration’” (1969, 112). But some paintings came easier to him because he felt what he called an affinity for certain creative personalities—Modigliani in particular. He did not like to view himself as faking. Rather, he says, “I made paintings in the style of a certain artist. I never copied. The only fake thing in my paintings was the signature” (Irving 1969, 234). He prided himself on creating his own versions of a Picasso or a Modigliani, using their technique, style, and subject matter to produce a unique product. In fact, he writes that he may have unconsciously used his own earlier fakes as models. “Without having them in front of me to refer to, except that I could see them in my mind’s eye” (Irving 1969, 112). Fakes then became prototypes for new fakes.

Han van Meegeren painted the Dutch Vermeers at a time when the Netherlands was trying to reassemble its art treasures scattered during World War II and stolen by the Germans. Accused of collaboration with the enemy, Van Meegeren chose instead to expose himself as a master forger of Vermeer masterpieces rather than face the punishment and shame due an active collaborator with the enemy. One of the paintings he sold to Göring was a fake (Scott 2016, 142). He was driven not by greed or a desire to be famous but by the desire to dupe the art establishment into acknowledging his work as a genuine Vermeer. His reward would be the knowledge that he had put one over on the art critics who rejected his own original work. He faced the forger’s choice: keep the secret and get rich or announce the truth and get credit and fame, but also a jail sentence. Forgers practice their art for greed, vengeance, or thrill (Dolnick 2008, 66).

Van Meegeren studied Vermeer's technique and carefully prepared his materials to withstand the scrupulous technical examination that any new Vermeer would be accorded. Having solved the problems of paint, varnish, canvas, and brushes, he could produce a Vermeer; Vermeer's technique had become his own. An authority on Dutch masters carried out four technical tests: 1) resistance of the paints to alcohol and other solvents, 2) evidence of white lead in the white portions, 3) X-ray examination of the substratum, and 4) microscopic and spectroscopic examination of the principal pigments (Arnau 1961, 257). Van Meegeren's Vermeers passed all the tests with flying colours and took their place in the history of Dutch art. During the war, he produced more Vermeers, but his poor health and erratic behavior provided little opportunity for him to enjoy his fortune. After confessing to the forgeries, his strength failed, and he died in December 1947 at the age of 58 (Arnau 1961, 262). Despite numerous scientific tests, there are still arguments as to which of Vermeer's pictures really came from Van Meegeren's hand. In fact, a certified Van Meegeren fake sells for more than a work by an authentic but obscure painter of the seventeenth century (Scott 2016, 146).

These stories remind us that economic factors drive the activity of art forgery. In the case of Ban Chiang artifacts, there appears to be no element of competition or pride guiding the work of contemporary potter-artists, only the recognition of a new market opportunity. Like these art forgers, it is not only the objects themselves that are fabricated but also the documentation that demonstrates their authenticity. Fake provenances are also for sale. We find in the experiences of these art forgers the importance of practice in developing fluency and skill in drawing "in the style of" the relevant artist. When that fluency has been achieved, fakes can become prototypes for new designs. Some modern Ban Chiang potter-artists create an authentic body of craft objects of their own. Art experts confirm that exact copies of existing works are seldom forged, as they will be difficult to sell to knowledgeable buyers. In the case of Ban Chiang painted pottery, the best forgers aim for perfect copies. Deception is possible because buyers and experts are not knowledgeable about the whole range of designs on prehistoric painted pottery in northeast Thailand.

## Recognizing Fakes

Malcolm Gladwell opened his book *Blink* (2005) with a good illustration of the importance of rapid cognition. After completing and passing all the technical tests to determine whether a Greek statue purchased by the Getty

Museum was a fake, it was the immediate feeling of “intuitive repulsion” that knowledgeable curators felt after a first glance at the statue that confirmed to the museum staff that it was a modern fake. Antiquities dealers, too, rely on instinct and experience in addition to scientific tests to detect fakes. Connoisseurship and expert knowledge can be used to relieve anxieties about authenticity so common in modern art markets.

There are several publications to guide the curator or collector: there is work on the vulnerable consumer of art objects, haunted by the fear of allowing fakes into their collections (Kurz 1967; Ragai 2018), and many first-hand accounts of forging are equally valuable (Amore 2015; Salisbury 2016; Perenyi 2013; Charney 2015). Art historians rely on both technical and qualitative assessments to detect fraud. Recognition of forgeries can be based on technical scientific analysis of the object, the confession of forgers, and the expert judgement of the sensitive and knowledgeable art connoisseur. The successful forger of paintings must possess knowledge of the paper or canvas used by the painter; the equipment used, including paints, brushes, glazes, varnishes; and the effects of age on a new material object. Any inappropriate or anachronistic material allows an expert to recognize a work of art as deceptive or forged, regardless of the intent of the artist. The technical means available for identifying the authenticity of an artifact include the use of x-ray photography, spectroscopy, microscopic examination, and chemical analysis. A fake object made in the same period as an authentic object cannot always be detected by technical means.

Experts have become particularly adept at recognizing “pseudo-antiquity,” the attempt to condense time or artificially age an object. Among the easiest techniques to detect by technical analysis is artificial craquelure, obtained by scratching the surface varnish and heating the surface of the painting or applying a coat of “craquelure” varnish (Arnau 1961, 203). X-rays of an object may give information about chemical composition and show if a picture has been painted over an earlier picture. Simple procedures like probing layers of paint with a pin to see if it sticks are no longer adequate to detect the work of master forgers like Van Meegeren, who know techniques that will fool the experts. Forgers study the latest scientific research to learn how to bypass problems like fake patinas. But science is not always enough: “only with connoisseurship and a well-trained eye can there be decisive discernment between the original and the copy” (Ragai 2018, 128). To distinguish between original and copy, there “needs to be a consensus between science, art historians and/or connoisseurs” (Ragai 2018, 129). There are, however, lots of grey areas. Picasso, writing about works attributed to him, wrote: “if I like it, I say it is mine. If I don’t, I say it is a fake” (Nall 2014, 103).



It is the qualitative judgements of experts rather than technical analysis that is of most interest to the Ban Chiang story. Of De Hory's imitation of Picasso, a critic said, "It's not a bad painting, but it was wrong, all wrong. I knew the year, I knew the palette Picasso used, and I recognized all the elements in different paintings that had been put together to make this one" (Irving 1969, 195). Another expert admitted that it is difficult to explain how you recognize a fake.

The first look at a work of art has to give you the emotional response of truth or fake ... no one who produces a fake can avoid putting his own personality into it somehow, and that personality just isn't the personality of the artist you know so well who is being forged. The better you know this personality, the easier it is to detect the forgery. A work of art is a direct extension of the personality of the artist. This is something the forger cannot do. (Irving 1969, 231)

The Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg (1989) pointed out that art historians used trivial details such as shape of earlobes to establish a painting's authenticity, since the more conspicuous and well-known characteristics of artists' work are easier to fake.

Hans Tietze brings substantial experience to bear in his book on fakes and forgeries. He writes that it is the first attempt that often takes in the experts. Repetition evokes comparisons and arouses suspicions (1948, 54). The forger is also dependent on the tastes of his own time. He quotes from other experts to support his argument: "forgeries must be served hot as they come from the oven" (1948, 72).

Experts trained to recognize and evaluate the art products of a particular person, place, or time can argue that, in their experience, the object in question does not appear to be a legitimate member of a certain class. Basing their judgements on a lack of some elusive quality, a lack of ease of line or a lack of spontaneity in the work, the expert may offer a qualitative judgement that the work is not what it is claimed to be.

Emphasizing the creativity of the artist as opposed to the imitation of the artisan, Mayer argues that creation is only possible if there is freedom to choose between alternatives (1967, 59). Thus, forgers do not exercise any freedom of choice but merely reproduce what has been done before. They face no risk of artistic failure—only of being found out (Mayer 1967, 60). While subjective judgements about works of art are difficult to question, expert judgements may be quickly reversed when technical analysis or confession renders their judgement in error.

To art and antiquities dealers, efforts to limit the quality of reproductions are necessary to avoid devaluing the original objects. These efforts include increasing or decreasing their size to ensure that they could not be mistaken for originals (Banfield 1982, 33). Only bad reproductions are good for business. For example, the National Museum of Ban Chiang has a number of painted pots dotted around the property, each approximately double the size of an original pot decorated in the style developed by the local souvenir makers; and of course, the giant Ban Chiang pots welcoming visitors in the intersection leading in to Ban Chiang could not be mistaken for genuine antiquities. (See Illustration 16.)

### Replicating Ban Chiang Designs

I have been using many different terms for copying and faking interchangeably, using insights from European art forgeries. Let us now consider more precise definitions for both objects like fakes and processes like faking.

Title 18 of the US Federal Criminal Code distinguishes between the possession of things used to counterfeit objects and uttering or attempting to use the counterfeited objects (money, securities, stocks, etc.) as if they were real. The law stresses that the false making, forging, counterfeiting, or altering of objects is always carried out with the intent to defraud. Similarly, objects used to make copies cannot be impressed or copied, as such acts would imply intent to deceive. Forgery by legal definition means fraudulent deceit, and there is no honest meaning implied by the term forgery. In an earlier, broader definition, the crime is defined as endeavoring to give the appearance of truth to a mere deceit and falsity.

In the world of art and antiquities, both objects and documents such as provenance or history of ownership can be faked. Art fraud is a general term to refer to intentional deception. The term may be used interchangeably with art forgery, but forgery is usually used to refer to documents. Forgery, then, is always a copy of an original document or object. Both objects and documents can be forged, but they require different processes and personnel. Provenance documents are often forged (Nall 2014, 105). Sometimes the signature on a document is real but the art is fake, as in the case of an aboriginal artist who says he signed some drawings while drunk for a forger (Chappell and Hufnagel 2014, 71). More often, it is the signature and not the art that is fake. Ryan and Thomas (2003) note that to forge is to make or create as well as to create falsely, adding a new subtlety to the category of forgery. Copying, from the Latin *copia*, meaning abundance—making

multiple copies of something (Boon 2010, 41)—is a much broader process than forgery.

At the time when fake Ban Chiang pots were first being made, no one knew much about the site of Ban Chiang or related sites in the region. The contexts of the looted pots were unknown and unknowable. Thus, there were few excavated examples to guide the construction of a ceramic sequence in the region, or even in Ban Chiang. Before the mid-seventies, it was only the Ban Chiang villagers repairing the pots who were intimately familiar with the motifs on the pots and the design layout, just as Ayutthaya became a centre for faking Thai and Khmer antiquities by building on the skills acquired from restoring the originals. Early on, I recall photographing a pot that I assumed was an Early Period black incised ware from Ban Chiang—until an informant told me she purchased it from a forger in Ayutthaya. Vessels 157, 158, and 159 (Illustration 12) were all purchased from vendors in Ayutthaya.

To make sense of the production of modern Ban Chiang designs, I needed to improve my definitions. Those that I developed in 1976 and 1982 build on two contrasts, grammaticality of the designs and the intention of the artist/creator, to produce the following definitions.

*Replicas* are objects constructed in a new medium and are not intended by the artist to be mistaken for authentic Ban Chiang artifacts. The designs are not intentionally innovative but rather attempt to reproduce original Ban Chiang designs as faithfully as possible. See vessels 130, 131, 132, 133, and 134 (Illustration 3) from Ban Chiang Products for sale in a market stall in Bangkok.

*Reproductions* are also constructed in a new medium and represent legal souvenirs or reminders of Ban Chiang painted pottery. The designs themselves are intentionally innovative but reminiscent of Ban Chiang designs, primarily because they are painted dark red on a cream or tan background. They are low-cost legal souvenirs such as vases or ashtrays that recall or draw attention to the pottery from the site, but they were not intended to deceive the buyer. (See Illustration 14, the ashtray 1324.)

*Fakes* often make use of old unpainted vessels from the site or elsewhere. Both artists and salespersons intend to represent the objects as authentic Ban Chiang painted pottery. Often repainted on old pots, the designs were usually grammatical, faithfully copying the Ban Chiang designs, and there was intention to deceive the buyer. Vessel 836 (Illustration 13) shows simplified motifs arranged in bands in bifold rotation (p112). Other fakes are more like pastiches, composed of a mix of old and new pieces.

*Copies* also use old unpainted vessels as well as new materials. They are falsely identified as authentic Ban Chiang painted pottery but are often

innovative in design structure. Vessel 880 (Illustration 14) is painted on an old pot with a motif invented by the artist.

Fakes, copies, replicas, and reproductions may also be referred to as *imitations*, since the boundaries of these categories are permeable. Some designs are more accurate renderings of Ban Chiang designs than others, and there is a range in the degree of intentionality to deceive buyers.

The recent painting on old and new pots is often very sloppy. It is hard to believe that collectors would have chosen these pieces deliberately; they may have been part of job lots that were not closely examined by either middlemen or the purchaser. Vessel 222 (Illustration 12), for example, has been sloppily repainted but has an old pedestal that has not been repainted. Vessel 319 (Illustration 12), from a museum collection, is repainted on an old bowl. I was never sure about vessel 428 (Illustration 12); perhaps “touched up” copy might be a better designation. It came from a collector who claimed that he knew that every pot he purchased was genuine, authentic Ban Chiang. Vessels 222, 319, 428 (Illustration 12), and 458 (Illustration 13) were displayed together by this Thai collector who had many badly repainted vessels. Vessel 643 (see Illustration 13) is composed of two pedestals combined to form a stand.

Are these definitions still useful? Should they be modified or changed? Are intention and grammaticality still the most useful criteria? It is difficult to determine the intention of the artist, the dealer, and the buyer as pots move into different settings. One problem in analyzing Ban Chiang designs is how to tell the uniquely original from the deeply bizarre, particularly in the face of local and regional diversity in ceramic decorative traditions. Can these definitions account for variants such as frauds made “in the style of,” much like Van Meegeren claimed to paint in the style of Vermeer? Is a caricature a copy? And then there are the outliers: a lamp made from two genuine Ban Chiang pots for sale on eBay, a Ban Chiang bikini, and cartoon Ban Chiang pots with eyes and feet.

In the 1970s art historian Roxanna Brown, who was very familiar with the designs on Ban Chiang painted pottery, called them “spontaneous, fluid, and the lines more sinuous” than the fakes on the new pots, which “tend to be overly mechanical: short strokes can be detected, and the lines are too evenly spaced and of too exact a width” (1974, 34). But the new replicas and reproductions produced in the northeast are often made from local clay with rice husk temper and fired in an open straw fire, much like the ancient Ban Chiang pottery. The modern potters from Ban Kam O, a few miles from Ban Chiang, report that a man brought them a footed pot with black etched designs and asked them to copy it and make as many as

possible for him to sell. Explained the potter: “I think he tells people they are very old” (Dickenson 1973, 16). The local potters would have to know a great deal about the old pots in order to create replicas; buyers would also need to know a great deal about the old pots in order to identify a fake. Illustration 15 shows newly fired vessels destined for sale as replica Ban Chiang pots. Illustration 15 also shows the preparation and firing process for replicas and for modern pots used in the village.

For most people who purchased repainted Ban Chiang pots, the fakes remain undetected. Of course, dealers and collectors who acquire or sell a fake may be reluctant to admit their faulty judgement or fear defamation lawsuits if they falsely accuse someone of forging a work of art. Provenance information may be withheld from the buyer because the vendor desires confidentiality. As a result, there may be a delay in identifying fakes, making it even more difficult to recognize them. Undetected forgeries expand the definition of the design class and would indeed be considered legitimate members of that class. Stating that something is or is not a legitimate member of a certain class requires that the “expert” know the definition of that class.

But what if the expert is trained on a corpus of fakes? Beltracchi, a German forger recently released from a German jail, forged as many as 300 paintings of modern European painters. He was convicted on the basis of fourteen of his works. Police studying the Beltracchi case accepted the expertise of someone who had misidentified fakes before: “There are so many fake Capendonks out there that an expert has probably already studied on fakes in the course of developing expertise” (Chappell and Hufnagel 2014, 66). Beltracchi researched the German expressionist Capendonk before painting what he thought Capendonk would have painted. He never copied his existing paintings.

Similarly, it is possible that I developed my approach to the designs on Ban Chiang painted pottery through including fakes in my initial analysis. My first exposure to Ban Chiang painted pottery was seeing them in antique shops and open markets. My next task was examining the collection in the National Museum in Bangkok, where I tried to learn as much as I could about Ban Chiang and related sites in the northeast. I spent a good deal of time studying every pot on display and paying particular attention to the construction of the designs. The museum signage drew attention to the meaning of the designs—flowers, snakes, penises—rather than provenience. It never occurred to me then that any of the vessels displayed in the museum could be fakes or repainted. I was thus educated on the designs from the pots displayed, assuming that all vessels in the museum would be

authentic examples of what I thought was the epitome of genuine Late Period Ban Chiang painted pottery. I accepted the expertise of the institution. Six months later, having studied several collections in Bangkok and the northeast, I re-examined the museum collections and concluded that many were indeed repainted or fakes. There appeared to be the fewest fakes in private collections and the most fakes in museum collections. Museums are full of fakes. Forgeries make up around 90 percent of the art sold today (Scott 2016, 378).

For example, I first judged that vessel 855 (Illustration 13) was a repainted fake; it was from an early raid on looted materials from Ban Chiang made by local police. The elements and symmetry motions are appropriate, but the potter-artist was not able to master the layout. It was more likely made by someone living in the Late Period at Ban Chiang who was very familiar with the design repertoire and the symmetry motions required to produce the design but was unable to master the layout—perhaps an apprentice. The restoration/repair could also have distorted the layout.

This uncertainty presented a problem since my first categories were developed from a corpus that was already potentially non-original. Some collections had repainted pots and obvious fakes mixed in with originals. Some of the most interesting designs were produced from a pastiche of real sherds held together with resin.

Once I began using symmetry analysis, I soon began to recognize how forgers (and souvenir artists) broke symmetry rules and “got it wrong.” For example, both “restorers” and forgers exaggerated the representational potential of Ban Chiang designs with no subtlety. The person outlined in vessel 1319 (Illustration 4) bears no resemblance to other representations of humans or animals from the region. Fashion designers were particularly interested in adding animal images on clothing. See, for example, the clothing displayed at a weekend market in Bangkok—a halter dress, a shirtwaist dress, a tunic top, and a lizard skirt, all made with red or black designs on cream-coloured cotton (see Illustration 11).

Most forgers elaborated elements rather than unwinding the designs to determine the symmetry rules applied by the original artists. They identified and practiced certain design elements but then placed them anywhere on the vessel (or the dress). Forgers also used counterchanged colour schemes, a technique absent in Ban Chiang Late Period painted pottery. Copies often reversed the figure-ground and painted the designs in buff on a red background, as in this vase (Illustration 8, vessel 1322). When restorers added hatching, the lines often faced the “wrong” direction, as in vessel 838 (Illustration 13), or appeared to be drawn with a ruler.

Evidence of crowding or stretching to fit design fields was rare on the old pots, unlike some copies or fakes where the rotated units do not fit the design field.

For example, the artists who produced vessels 835 and 836 (Illustration 13) were skilled at recognizing some design elements and used bifold rotation (p112) to move the design around the pot, but they were unable to reproduce the fluency of the symmetry motions used by the Ban Chiang potter-artists. They often reduced the design to simple translation, as in vessels 971 (Illustration 14) and 837 (Illustration 10). The artists who produced Ban Chiang replicas and reproductions eventually produced uniform ceramic products, as they gradually became skilled in producing one particular design such as spirals. For example, I recognize the work of a restorer/artist in Ban Chiang who developed a particular approach to making sausage-like figures, and his fakes become easier to recognize over time. (See for example Illustration 14, vessel 952.) This process is also obvious in souvenir production. But after years of practice, some copyists like Krachang of Ban Chieng Products learned to flow with their own designs, not Ban Chiang designs.

Some collections may have been purchased together as job lots. Gorman (1982, 34) pointed out that Princess Chumbhot purchased over one hundred pots and loaded them into her car on her first visit in 1970. The expertise of the collectors varied; only some selected the pots themselves, and others requested (and paid more for) “special” designs like spirals or concentric figures. In fact, spiral designs were most commonly faked and subsequently disproportionately represented in museum collections abroad (Rod-ari 2021, 92).

## **Ban Chieng Products<sup>2</sup>**

The most successful Ban Chiang reproductions business in the mid-seventies was Ban Chieng Products, founded by the trained artist Krachang Chansang, who immediately recognized the commercial potential of the Ban Chiang designs. He thanks HRH Bhanu Yugala, an expert on Thai art, for the original idea and help with the designs. His studio, the house of Ban Chieng Art, was open to the public in the 1970s (See Illustration 3, Vessels 130-134).

2 Some Thai sources spell the name of the village as Ban Chiang, others as Ban Chieng; the sound is somewhere in between.

He drew inexpensive, colourful, and legal souvenirs by painting what he identified as Ban Chiang designs on new vases, ashtrays, water jars, posters, and clothes. (See Illustration 14, 1324 ashtray.) The pottery was made to his specifications in a village northeast of Bangkok. He chose the designs and vessel shapes based on articles and books on the site (including my 1974 paper). Although he made use of these sources, he was also guided by what sold best. He drew the primary design unit on the vessel body first in pencil and then painted in the secondary designs and fillers himself or gave it to his apprentice to complete. It took him almost a year to be able to draw spirals and sigmoid shapes freehand. As a result, he often simplified his designs into a version that his assistants could mass-produce. (See Illustration 16, showing his assistant painting a souvenir.) Ban Chiang reproductions were also sold at Naraiphand, the government handicraft store, as souvenirs and remembrances for tourists and antique lovers who cannot acquire real Ban Chiang pots. The store also had in-house artists to design Ban Chiang souvenirs.

Other designers produced clothing such as dresses, jackets, and even bikinis painted with washable red on cloth for sale in tourist shops. These products were designed to remind people of Ban Chiang designs, not to deceive them, although it is unlikely that anyone could mistake the wheel turned pottery with its bold red designs for authentic Ban Chiang antiquities, let alone a Ban Chiang bikini.

At least one other company produced souvenirs for a wealthier clientele, including glazed celadon ware advertised as Ban Chiang celadon ware. This attractive green glazed ware did not replicate the vessel shapes of Ban Chiang painted pottery. Nevertheless, the designs were often accurate simplifications of Ban Chiang designs. No doubt the artists who painted these replicas would also be skilled enough to produce fakes and copies. While these artists may be producing legal souvenirs, middlemen and shopkeepers can market the souvenirs as authentic Ban Chiang artifacts to gullible tourists.

Neither reproductions nor replicas are particularly profitable products to market, since they are very reasonable in price, and the demand for the products is primarily from tourists who had heard about the site but had no knowledge of what the ceramics from the site looked like. More artistic opportunities are available to artists to produce designs in the style of Ban Chiang, putting their own artistic personalities into their work. Artists with the requisite skills for producing accurate designs are much more likely to apply their skills to the production of more profitable if illegal copies intended to deceive the buyer. These artists were not willing to be interviewed.



## Replication and Thainess

Thai intellectuals do not idealize originality very highly but recognize and value the skill required to make perfect replicas, particularly of Buddha images. Building on Chinese classical art practices, early art training in Southeast Asian schools consists of perfecting the art of precise copying and imitating other works, not expressing a personal vision (cf. George 1999, 217). In Southeast Asia a perfect replica is highly valued.

These skills have come in handy when copying clothing and purses. In the 1970s Bangkok was the counterfeit centre of the world, second only to Italy. My fascination with fakes began in Bangkok when it was pointed out to me that the label on the butt of my jeans was “Sweet Camel,” likely a real company making fake jeans. It was unlikely a fake label because “Sweet Camel” was not a well-known luxury brand like Lacoste, for example. Luxury labels could be purchased by the roll in Bangkok street markets and affixed to any item of clothing, much like fake Harrods labels in London. I bought a raincoat with a Land’s End label in Bangkok. The seller assured me that it was not a Bangkok knockoff but rather a product that fell off the truck between the legitimate Land’s End factory and the shipping office. The item was genuine, but the seller was not authorized to sell it.

Knockoffs may be legal or illegal consumer goods, depending on the percentage of the design that is changed. Arm and Hammer becomes Arm and Hatchett, Jardon toothbrushes from Norway are copied as Jordan from Taiwan, and there are other deliberate misspellings (Mathews 2016). Some companies copy the design, not the label; others copy the design plus the label. Customs officers are supposed to be trained to tell the difference between originals and knockoffs, but most cannot; neither can most customers. For example, the former rector of Thammasat University was threatened with arrest after he posted a comment about Prime Minister Prayuth’s wife Naraporn Chan-Ocha on October 2, 2017. He was charged under the computer crime act, accused of spreading false information online after he mis-identified her local products purse from a royal folk arts project for a fake Hermes luxury purse. “Thai leaders must look expensive not cheap,” he was reported to have posted. When he wrote that she had a fake Hermes purse, he was charged with intentionally spreading false information. Similarly, an official with too many luxury watches would be suspected of corruption. Fake watches presumably indicate that the wearer is not corrupt but rather knows what brands are recognized as markers of luxury. Thailand is no longer the leading producer of counterfeit goods; China provides most of the world’s fakes. But knockoffs and fake luxury objects remain of great

concern to the Thai government. This concern about fake luxury goods does not extend to antiquities.

### The Case for Fakes and Faking

If museums displayed reproductions, they would save money on security and conservation; experts argue that it is snobbish to ban forgeries from museums (Banfield 1982, 30). Some Southeast Asian museums display casts and reproductions of sculptures in the collections of overseas museums, considered by some a controversial decision (Nguyen Duyen 2021, 155). This is a position supported by many Thai art experts as well. Considering the complexities of repatriating Ban Chiang antiquities discussed in the last chapter, a museum of fakes has some appeal. As a curator dealing with First Nations artifacts explained, “Sometimes you want it to be a fake,” just to ease ethical dilemmas around repatriation of objects (O’Neill 2006, 118).

Nelson Rockefeller invested USD 3.5 million in an enterprise to sell reproductions of his private art collection to ensure that art would be available to the middle class through public institutions like libraries. Reproductions of famous works of art challenged the opinion that a reproduction cannot have the aesthetic value of an original. Rockefeller was accused of cashing in on “haute schlock” and creating “high class fakes” (Banfield 1982, 28–29). Similar populist approaches faced an elite critique around actions like putting opera on TV or in movie theatres. Perhaps fake Ban Chiang pots increased knowledge about and interest in Ban Chiang and Thai prehistory in general. Scott (2016, 162) notes that “[f]orgeries of Egyptian art have been very influential in spreading the appreciation of ancient Egyptian civilization to a wide audience.”

In 1976 *African Arts* invited twenty-eight authorities to discuss fakes and authenticity in African art and concluded that genuine versus fake is not a dichotomy but a continuum with complex gradations (Allison 1976). No museum would admit to displaying fakes. Collectors understood the categories from most authentic and expensive to the least, suggesting that they were well aware of the complexity of defining an authentic piece of African art. They recognized the role that colonialism played as well. For example, the British removed the Olokun bronze head from Nigeria to the British Museum and sent a copy back to the Ife Museum. The copy has also been copied. Even specialists in African art may be fooled by the copies. Colonialism per se is less relevant in Thailand, where negotiations about

fakes and repatriating objects must be arranged with all nations, as the country has no former colonial master.

What these commentaries in *African Arts* reveal is that experts will readily disagree on the authenticity of any one item of material culture. The experts cannot provide indisputable evidence that any object is indeed authentic nor that it is what it is claimed to be. At best, they may be able to prove that a piece is a forgery. But information about forgeries in art, particularly very skilled forgeries, is difficult to obtain and would often be treated as confidential out of respect for the feelings or reputation of the dealer or the duped purchaser. Dealers fear the loss of reputation if accused of selling fakes, and accusers fear libel from falsely accusing someone of selling fakes. An added concern could be that increased distribution of knowledge about fakes could lead to improvements in the process of imitation. (Recall that I ended my dissertation in 1976 with the flippant hope that my analysis of Ban Chiang painted pottery would be of value to the forgers.)

In the past, collectors and museums worked cooperatively. Museums are themselves collectors (Mayhew 2006, 87), and they often display private collections, giving the collections a kind of legitimacy. De-accession of objects by museums further blurs the border between public and private collections, as objects move back and forth between the two. But now that the ethics of collecting is under scrutiny, there is more distrust between collectors and museums, and more antagonism (Mayhew 2006), particularly when museums that authenticate objects may also find themselves dealing directly with forgers or looters. Many academics are hostile to collectors and the antiquities market (cf. Mayhew 2006, 86), particularly archaeologists who are most affected by looting and faking artifacts.

Museums and art galleries play a role in defining the real/fake binary. Cultural institutions, including libraries and universities, become gatekeepers deciding what is real and what is fake, whose stories get told and whose stories do not, and why some stories are valued more than others. In 2019 an installation at the Robertson Davies Library (Massey College, Toronto) called *Make-Believe: The Secret Library of M. Prud'homme. A Rare Collection of Fakes* (curated by Heather Jessop and Claire Battershill) aimed to study the relationship between imaginative work and cultural institutions, between fake and fiction. But the library of fakes is fake. The exhibit and the curatorial statement raised the question of who has the authority to decide what is fake (cf. <https://www.prudhommelibrary.ca>). The Minneapolis Institute of Arts curated a collection of fakes and forgeries, and the show's catalogue is a valuable source of information (1973). The British Museum also curated a show called *Fake: The Art of Deception* (Jones 1990).

Another relevant context, but one not explored in detail here, is the popular culture of archaeology, what the public knows about archaeology and the past.<sup>3</sup> The educated public can fit the site of Ban Chiang into the simplified framework of world prehistory recalled from school, glossed as Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. While this is no longer an acceptable academic framework, particularly for Southeast Asia, it resonates with public discourses about the past. Several foreign collectors expressed a romanticized notion of archaeology and spoke of their desire to participate in excavations at Ban Chiang, offering to wash artifacts or pack boxes, but they were dismissed out of hand. And so they bought pots—real and fake—as reminders of the site. Thai collectors spoke less of the romance of the past and more of heritage commodities or investments. They rarely considered them as works of art. But many artists used Ban Chiang designs creatively, even on bikinis. For them, their designs inspired by Ban Chiang potter-artists are better than the originals. Were purchasers of these different versions of Ban Chiang designs deceived, or did they get what they paid for?

If great art is significant because the feelings it arouses are independent of time and space, it should not matter whether a Ban Chiang design was created in 200 BCE or in 1975. But “because our fundamental beliefs influence our sensations, feelings, and perceptions, what we know literally changes our responses to a work of art. Thus, once we know that a work is a forgery our whole set of attitudes and resulting responses is profoundly and necessarily altered” (Mayer 1967, 57).

Copies also speak to the contrast between hand-crafted and mass-produced objects. Homemade is valued more than industrially produced, whether we are speaking of sweaters or cakes, because the product bears the hand of the individual maker. Any one pot found in a burial was likely made for a specific individual. Vulcan (named by the excavators), buried in the Early Period of Ban Chiang, was a robust man in his forties, taller than average, suffering from osteoarthritis, and buried with clay pellets, bronze bangles, a bronze adze, and a painted and incised pot with a scroll-like pattern (Douglas et al. 2012). The pot he was buried with once had a ritual use value and perhaps an exchange value, but it was unlikely to have been appreciated for its aesthetic value. Was it even meant to be viewed by the living? When that pot or one like it moves to a showroom at Neiman Marcus, to a display case in a collector’s home or a decorative niche in a Hawaiian hotel, does it matter if it is real or fake? Real or fake, the pot has been

3 From my experience, the macho adventurer model of the archaeologist, which resonates with public culture in film and TV, has a certain element of truth to it.

recontextualized. While the pot was created for a particular individual, the reproductions quickly became mass produced commodities sold in tourist shops and art markets. Are the original painted pots from the Late Period Ban Chiang any more a real part of Thai Heritage than the giant fake pots that welcome visitors to the Ban Chiang Museum at the World Heritage Site? These giant pots clustered in the middle of the road into the village display accurately painted designs on a larger-than-life scale. They draw particular attention to spiral designs and the round-bottomed sigmoid urns that collectors favour. They mark the entrance to the World Heritage Site of Ban Chiang, a key destination for heritage tourism. Unlike antiquities, heritage itself cannot be copied, but it can be invented; it is a non-renewable resource of great value to tourism and the state, as I discuss in the next chapter.

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## 6 The Packaged Past: Implications for Thai Heritage

### Abstract

The final chapter of *Designs on Pots* broadens the discussion to examine how Ban Chiang is framed in relation to Thai national identity and heritage production. The chapter reviews UNESCO approaches to tangible and intangible heritage and heritage tourism in mainland Southeast Asia. It explores how the non-Buddhist parts of the Thai patrimony are handled in heritage discourses and how conflicting values are negotiated in relation to policies around heritage and nationalism in Thailand. The book concludes with a discussion of the place of Ban Chiang both in Thai national heritage and in world prehistory, using the concept of regional civility to draw attention to the uniqueness of Southeast Asia as a region.

**Keywords:** Thai identity, politics of heritage, nationalism, heritage tourism

Ambiguous heritage arises when discordant meanings collide.  
(King and Lertnapakun 2019, 298)

Chapter 2 addressed the question of what archaeological sites in northeast Thailand can tell us about the prehistory of Southeast Asia and ultimately about global prehistory. In this chapter I consider how archaeological evidence from Ban Chiang has been used or ignored in the construction of Thai national heritage, adding one additional context for examining Ban Chiang painted pottery. What can the distribution of old painted pots from Ban Chiang demonstrate about heritage construction, materiality, and even aesthetic pleasure? I then draw all six contexts together to conclude.

Heritage refers to what is passed down through the generations from one's ancestors to future generations. It is this relation between the past and the present that so fascinates heritage scholars and practitioners. It



draws temporal connections between ancestors, contemporaries, and future descendants, making it basic to the formation of identity (Kearney 2008, 210). It may include knowledge, skills, buildings, and other tangible objects of material culture such as documents, textiles, and art. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers to heritage as “a new form of cultural production that takes recourse to the past” (1995, 369). Because heritage is socially constructed, a more recent manifestation of the invention of tradition (cf. Hobsbawm 1983), it draws attention to some things or sites and obscures others. Heritage is always selective: it is not an unmediated palimpsest of past events, monuments, or texts. Rather, it refers to what of the past is valued in the present, usually by the nation-state to legitimate the present in some way. In this heritage model, the state “owns” culture in the form of folklore, dances, or music, for example. Nationalist archaeology often contributes to the construction of this heritage. But archaeological evidence is not immediately or inevitably tied to legitimating nationalist narratives in the service of the state (Meskell 2002a, 287); it can also be used to subvert those narratives (Byrne 2011, 150), much as Ban Chiang subverts Thailand’s national origin myth.

On the other hand, Ban Chiang is not an example of negative heritage, a repository of negative memories (Meskell 2002b, 558). Nor has information about the site been erased from history in the way that political events such as the Balinese massacre of 1965–66 (Cribb 2001) or the Thai massacre of 1976 (Winichakul 2020) have been erased. Nor does the site conform to a prehistoric version of what Michael Herzfeld (2022) calls subversive archaism, performative acts based on uses of the past that threaten the moral authority and cultural legitimacy of the state.

The conflicted nature of heritage becomes particularly challenging when sites feature monuments and items reflecting a religious heritage not currently recognized or practiced in that location—for example, Hindu-Buddhist sites in Islamic states. The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan in 2001 by the Taliban was part of the process of destroying or removing pre-Islamic art and sculpture, thus giving the impression that heritage and history only started with Islam (cf. Meskell 2005).<sup>1</sup>

For archaeologists, there is much to learn from the materiality and tangibility of old things, an interest shared by heritage managers. The privileged discourse of archaeology provides the expertise behind the collection of data that may become heritage. Archaeology is expected to contribute to a single historical narrative, but it is historical and not prehistoric archaeology that usually acts in service of national heritage construction. It is more

1 The implications of the destruction of the Banyan Buddhas are not addressed here.

difficult to integrate prehistory into heritage, particularly when the links to ancestors are absent or unclear.

For heritage managers, it is often hard to represent prehistory as performance spectacles, particularly without monumental architecture. Even dioramas face the dangers of presentism and back processing when representing prehistoric pasts. Prehistoric materials cannot be easily linked to individual or collective memories. A greater span of time has passed between the past and the present moments, producing more discontinuity with prehistoric than with historic stories and materials. The prehistoric “other” is just too old, too distant, too hard to identify with, too strange. Many equate prehistory with primitive. Compounding the problem of a greater time depth is the problem of unknown, debated, and uncertain chronologies for prehistoric sites. Archaeological evidence is always incomplete, always partial, leaving too much room for imaginative but iffy reconstructions and alternative models. This raises the question of when heritage begins—with history or prehistory or only with the development of state-sponsored national heritage? If writing is the dividing line for expertise on the past, historians took written history, leaving prehistorians to explore other ways to understand the past.

Gillman identifies two opposed heritage discourses held by cultural cosmopolitans and cultural nationalists, reflecting the tensions between universal human values and national particularism (2010, 1). What underlies this debate is the question of whether other peoples’ heritages are part of one’s own (Gillman 2010, 12). Identifying objects as having outstanding universal value (OUV), the criteria used by UNESCO, makes them a part of global heritage and effectively erases the local. Objects of OUV would then not need to be repatriated as long as the public has access to them.

Applying the principle that all countries have the right to recover the most significant part of their respective cultural heritage lost during periods of colonial or foreign occupation, Greece made the case for Britain to return the Elgin/Parthenon marbles (Gillman 2010, 26). Regardless of whether Elgin had legal title to the marbles, the conflict still exists between personal property and collective rights, and between a moral versus legal claim to historic property. For example, Britain has now stopped the export of objects of outstanding aesthetic importance (Gillman 2010, 143). But who gets to determine aesthetic importance? The US has some of the strongest protection for personal property rights, along with Britain and Australia. It is not a crime to destroy something you own, although it may show a lack of respect for its aesthetic value. We should respect things valued by others (Gillman 2010, 173). Of course, objects like Ban Chiang pots can and have

moved from private property to the public domain and back again, and there are different opinions regarding their aesthetic value.

The concept of heritage has been particularly valuable in Europe, where a coherent national heritage could be used to fend off counterclaims from other nation-states (Kearney 2008, 218). Meskell demonstrates how particular states set the UNESCO agenda, making it an agency for global branding rather than global conservation (2014, 217). The twenty-one states that are elected for four years to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee tend to form political blocs that vote together to control the heritage agenda and block or promote sites according to an intricate political game—global patrimony as pawn (Meskell 2014, 220). Those who contribute to UNESCO also have considerable say in the designation of heritage sites.<sup>2</sup> UNESCO defines the outstanding universal value (OUV) of the past and generally values monuments themselves as tangible evidence of OUV. Peleggi points out that Ban Chiang presented the heritage committee with a challenge because it had limited visible monumental evidence of prehistoric occupation (2017, 114).

Since 2003 UNESCO has added the category of intangible cultural heritage to expand the traditional understanding of tangible cultural heritage. This recognition of intangible heritage such as music and dance has been included in UNESCO documents and discourses to counter the European bias in the selection of sites and to draw attention away from the preservation of monuments. European universalism holds that heritage can be described as something which is old, grand, monumental, and aesthetically pleasing. Smith describes this common-sense perception of heritage as representing “Western elite cultural values” (2006, 11). The work of heritage preservation in Thailand also includes identifying individuals, such as dancers and musicians, as national living treasures (Van Esterik 2000, 122), as is done in Japan. Western dance research rejects the binarism of tangible/intangible heritage and proposes a model of living cultural heritage to address the complexity of dance as heritage (Iacono and Brown 2016). These models of living national treasures are, of course, irrelevant for prehistory. For anthropologists and many heritage practitioners, the distinction between tangible and intangible is arbitrary and unhelpful, since all heritage designations are ideologically and politically driven. Tangible and intangible cannot be separated; they are two sides of the same coin. Byrne also points out that since heritage is a discursive construction, it is always somewhat intangible (2009, 230). In an interview with Byrne, Michael Herzfeld identifies the Cartesian

2 The United States left UNESCO in 2018 and is currently not a member.

and colonial baggage that comes with the distinction (Byrne 2011, 148). As Kearney argues, “human heritage is always and at once tangible and intangible” (2008, 211).

## Representing Thailand

Thai state institutions are skilled at identifying elements of tangible material culture to represent the nation-state. As an archetypical presentational society, Thailand’s spectacle culture lends itself well to display, at home and abroad. Siam, later Thailand, took advantage of World Fairs to display their most appealing objects internationally. The items displayed at world fairs are part of Thailand’s tangible cultural heritage. After the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851, which Siam did not attend, the country participated regularly in world exhibitions, beginning in Paris in 1867, 1889, and 1900. With the help of talented Thai artists, they displayed the essence of Thainess in the form of musical instruments, masks, models of royal barges, Buddha images, furniture, silk, and jewelry, in addition to agricultural and natural products. Siam also participated in American expositions that placed more emphasis on trade and business, beginning with a small exhibit in Philadelphia in 1876 and a much larger one in Chicago in 1893. Often the Siamese pavilions won prizes. The country received praise for its artisanal work such as enamelware, silverwork, and textiles and provided these and other items for sale (Peleggi 2002, 144–58). These are products that remain appealing to modern tourists as well.

The country’s material culture is stunning: stupas, temple architecture, woven textiles, and elaborate pottery traditions such as Bencharong and Suwankhalok, among others.<sup>3</sup> These objects act as signifiers for an imagined but fetishized glorious past that is both civilized and exotic, what I call “Chakri chic.” Textiles and objects like betel boxes often act as visible markers of status, part of an elaborate system of sumptuary rules emanating from the royal courts. The state heritage managers focus on royal courts and Buddhist temples and mostly ignore the vernacular everyday beauty in Thai living communities, a criticism frequently voiced by Thai heritage specialists.<sup>4</sup>

3 Suwankhalok refers to glazed pottery from the Sukhothai period. Bencharong is a delicate multi-coloured porcelain derived from Chinese court pottery and later used in the Siamese courts.

4 Peleggi has documented in several definitive publications (2002, 2017) how Siamese royalty fashioned modernity through consumption and spectacles.

Antiquarian societies like the Siam Society perpetuated these heritage values; funding agencies followed suit. For example, in 1974, at the height of interest in Ban Chiang, the Ford Foundation gave a grant to the Siam Society for the conservation of Thai arts and culture. There was no evidence of interest in funding grants related to Ban Chiang or other prehistoric sites. The grants, ranging in amounts from 1,600 to 30,000 baht (around USD 80 to 1500), allowed the committee members and grant recipients to undertake such projects as the preservation of Buddhist palm leaf manuscripts; art exhibitions; research on the institution of the Siamese monarchy; the foreign affairs of Rama VII; visits to *prasat hin pimai*, *khao phra vihara*, and other temple complexes; reproducing temple wall paintings; making recordings of Thai music using instruments from north and northeastern Thailand; sponsoring performances; and organizing folk music contests in Ayutthaya.<sup>5</sup> The projects funded all reflected interest in Buddhist and royal institutions and heritage as handicraft.

In *Materializing Thailand* (2000), I explored how nostalgia for an imagined past guides the selection of items used to construct a usable representation of Thai national heritage, pointing out that the Thai state reads the Orientalizing West very accurately, and they have done so since the founding of the nation-state. Thailand has always controlled the way the nation-state represented itself to others; no one tells the Thai state how to represent itself. As a crypto-colonized state (cf. Herzfeld 2002), Thailand can celebrate the fact that it has never been a colony while at the same time unselfconsciously adopting and adapting all things Western when needed. The nation-state materializes the past very effectively through artisan craft objects, soap operas, movies, TV shows, historical parks, food—even (and especially) royal rituals. Cultural heritage emerges in support of Nation, King, and Religion and sets the first-level “spectacle” frame as the central core of Thai cultural heritage and national identity while repressing ambiguous or negative moments such as 1932, 1973, 1976, and 1992—moments around military coups, protests, and counter-protests. Thongchai Winichakul (2020) attributes some of this unforgetting to what he calls “royalist nationalism.” Corruption, violence, and social inequalities become part of the suppressed second-level heritage that can cast doubt on the dominant first-level spectacle heritage (King and Lertnapakun 2019, 299).

Certainly, heritage managers make no attempt to interpret or explore the values underlying each layer and the genealogy of such values:

5 Sompot Pirom, the head of the Fine Arts Department at the time (and who approved my research), resigned from the Siam Society committee, citing other commitments.

From rampant polygamy and family-as-defense (Rama III), religious display as legitimation (also Rama III), to Western modernity as display (Rama V), to royalty's embeddedness in commercial capitalism (Ramas V, VI and VII), to the surrender of the city to the dynamics of capitalism itself and its concomitant headlong technological and cultural changes (the present). (King and Lertnapakun 2019, 306)

Royalty, then, provides both first-level spectacle heritage while also being the focus of protest, particularly since the coronation of Rama X, King Vajiralongkorn, and the attendant "personal scandals" around his household. In particular, the king's revival of polygyny harkened back to earlier reigns. In 2019 he elevated his mistress to the title of Royal Noble Consort shortly after elevating his newly married wife to queen. A few months later, his consort was demoted and disappeared. In September 2020 she was reinstated, along with all her titles, according to the *Royal Gazette* (September 2, 2020). While the story itself is steeped in spectacle heritage, it was also circulated publicly through social media. But for many in the country, commentary on what could be considered dissonant heritage is suppressed by strict *lèse majesté* laws, applied for communicating anything deemed defamatory towards the royal family (Loos 2020). Underlying the protests of 2020 and 2021 is the fear that the lack of democracy in the country and the financial dealings of the monarchy are evidence of an attempt to turn back time to the absolute monarchy before 1932. Tourist materials suppress the dissonant heritage of coups and protests. Tourism can be threatening when its gaze falls on the ideological screens placed across the genesis of the modern state (King and Lertnapakun 2019, 308).

## Heritage Tourism in Thailand

Since the 1960s tourism has been an important part of Thailand's development plan. The Thai tourist establishment knows how to sell exotic objects and sights effectively to both domestic and international tourists. The country has it all: heritage tourism, ecotourism, culinary tourism, sex tourism. While the country benefits from beach and sex tourism, it aims to increase the number of quality tourists—high-spending, "well-behaved" tourists. In fact, most Thai tourism is a form of heritage tourism since signs of the past are mingled with the modern throughout the country. Political protests and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 have severely cut into tourist activity in the country. Between April and December 2020, the number of

tourists entering Thailand dropped by over 80 percent; tourism accounts for more than 10 percent of Thailand's GDP.

Bangkok in 2016 was the world's most visited city, with 21.47 million overnight visitors, including an increasingly large number from China. The appeal of the city includes the glorious spectacle of the Grand Palace and the temple of the Emerald Buddha, Wat Pho and the Reclining Buddha, the Chao Phraya riverfront, and any of the city's over four hundred impressive temples including Wat Arun (the Temple of Dawn). The appeal of these spectacular heritage sites in Bangkok is undeniable. The National Museum has much less appeal to foreign tourists, who rarely visit, although it is the site of the former Front Palace (*Wang Na*) (King and Lertnapakun 2019, 298) and is the place where national heritage is most clearly and self-consciously defined and displayed.

Unlike heritage tourism, mass tourism in the country benefits from easy access to the Thai vernacular, the everyday. Tourists even explore the urban vernacular in places like Khao San Road in Bangkok, where heritage lane houses have become beer joints. Rural tourism attracts international but also urban Thai domestic tourists, who experience nostalgia for an imagined rural past that they may never have experienced themselves, what Appadurai calls "armchair nostalgia" (1996, 78). Both domestic and international tourists appreciate the beauty of rural locations where they enjoy local food, woven textiles, and other local products characteristic of the district (OTOP).<sup>6</sup> Domestic tourists in particular make leisure trips to Buddhist theme parks such as Ancient City, Sanctuary of Truth, and Wat Muang in Angthong province (McDaniel 2016). Some of these parks are also heritage sites. These sites also provide opportunities to collect amulets and special Buddha images, replicating the royal pattern of collecting ancient and modern Buddha images with supernatural power and bringing them to the court.<sup>7</sup>

Travelling to experience local pleasures has a long history in Thailand. Even among the non-nobility, everyday folk travelling together to beautiful places such as waterfalls and special temples is a valued part of being Thai. These trips produce *paj thiaw* (going away to have a good time) stories—both of the "sowing wild oats" variety and family outings captured in photographs.

6 OTOP stands for one district (*tambon*), one product. It was a way to promote and market local products.

7 For example, elite antiquarianism inspired the collection of ancient Buddha images displayed around Wat Benjamabophit in Bangkok. Images became models for making other images which carried the supernatural power of the original image after suitable rituals were performed.

It is important not to underestimate *sanuk* (fun) as a motivating factor in domestic heritage tourism.

Heritage tourism draws attention to cultural objects from the past that are worth retaining and passing on to the next generation through cultural resource management and other heritage industries such as historical parks. Heritage installations are continuously reinvented in the present. Heritage tourism to historic sites like Sukhothai and Ayutthaya are widely promoted by Thai tourist companies to counter Thailand's reputation for sex tourism. Sukhothai Historical Park opened in 1988 with 193 "restored" monuments. Many historians challenged the accuracy of the restorations, which were often based on descriptions in texts rather than evidence from archaeological excavations (Peleggi 2017). In 1991 Sukhothai and Ayutthaya were recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. At the same time as Thailand developed its historic parks, it let many of its relics fall into decay; King and Lertnapakun comment on the elitist neglect of real Thai heritage (2019, 307), as living communities such as *Pom Mahakan* in Bangkok are destroyed to make way for heritage parks or other state-sponsored beautification projects (cf. Herzfeld 2016).

Tourism, public culture, and heritage are intimately connected. For example, fairs held at historical sites in Thailand sell local food and souvenirs from the site to Thai tourists and counterfeit Rolex watches and Gucci bags to international tourists. Heritage tourists can purchase fake antiquities as souvenirs at historic sites. It is not surprising that antiquities sold at the historic parks would all be fake and thus not surprising that heritage tourists would assume that the Ban Chiang painted pottery they purchased at or near the site would also be fake.

## Lao and Cambodian Heritage Tourism

Unlike Thailand, which never had a colonial power overseeing and directing the way its past was represented and preserved, Laos and Cambodia had their heritage directed by France as part of its civilizing mission. In Laos and Cambodia, then, links between colonial consciousness and heritage are more explicit than in Thailand. Of course France would take a particular interest in Cambodian antiquities, for example, because the country saw their civilizing mission in Indochina as a significant part of France's heritage, part of their historical narrative. This narrative has been used to justify the French government authorized looting of Khmer treasures since the late 1800s (French 1999; Abbe 2021).



France has been intimately involved with heritage protection in Lao PDR, where the colonial legacy of heritage tourism is particularly clear. In 2019 France offered funds to help protect and restore Lao historic temples and heritage buildings, including colonial houses. At an event to mark the restoration of the Khmer style complex of Vat Phu in Lao PDR in June 2020, the French Ambassador to Lao PDR said: “France and Laos share a long history around cultural heritage in Laos. I believe that a better knowledge of the Lao heritage by the Lao people contributes to the national identity.” That heritage no doubt might gloss over France’s colonial behavior in the country.<sup>8</sup>

Tourism is less developed in Lao PDR compared to Thailand. Thai tourists to Laos view the country as a place where time stands still, a place like Thailand was fifty to one hundred years ago (Berlinger 2012, 240). Ecotourism is particularly popular in areas where the tourist infrastructure is not well developed. Ecotourism is seen as benign tourism, suitable for a country in poverty. Ecotourists have good intentions, but they are generally low spenders. Ecotourism in Lao PDR provides an opportunity to explore and secure cultural treasures and is considered effective in preventing looting of historical sites (Kallen 2015, 115, 126). But when the government is the looter, the situation is more difficult to explore and change. Corruption in Lao PDR includes illegal trade in antiquities (Kallen 2015, 179). To encourage local tourism, the province of Xieng Khuang plans to build a stupa modelled after That Luang in Vientiane to house more than 600 Buddha images salvaged from bombed-out temples in the province. Although Luang Prabang is a UNESCO heritage site, it is currently under threat by the construction of new dams. The Lao government has ignored UNESCO warnings about the obligation to protect heritage sites in its rush to become the “battery of Southeast Asia.”

War tourism is rare in the country, despite the powerful stories that could be told regarding the nationalist struggle against French colonialism, the American secret war in Laos, the fight against communism, and the victory of the Pathet Lao in 1975. Ethnic groups like the Hmong do not fit neatly in Lao PDR war history, since they fought for both sides during the secret war in Laos. But the state is developing tourist sites like the Vieng Xay caves occupied by the Pathet Lao for what Long (2012) calls socialist tourism.

As in Thailand, Lao heritage romanticizes ethnic diversity into a state of entangled temporality that reaches back to the “golden age of Lao Lane Xang

8 The French Ambassador to LPDR made the speech on June 18, 2020, as reported in *Preserving Lao Heritage* KPL, the Lao national news service.

culture” by fetishizing exotic traditions of the Lao Lum (lowland Lao), Lao Thung (midland Lao), and Lao Song (upland Lao), usually represented by costumed women (Koshcheeva 2020). Textiles and dress remain important markers of these ethnic differences (Van Esterik 2002), as in Thailand.

Lao national identity features multiethnic liberation struggles, while at the same time stressing the dominance and continuity of lowland Lao traditions. An examination of Lao heritage presentations reveals ambiguities and contradictions between revolution and tradition, socialism and religion, progress and heritage (Tappe 2011, 606). For example, the revolutionary museum in Vientiane downplayed the importance of Lao Buddhism and presented it as an obstacle to the revolution, until recently when it became clear how important Buddhism was to tourists and tourism in the country. The official anti-Buddhist stance has since diminished in the country, as Buddhism is redeployed in the service of tourism and the state. Buddhist temples and rituals attract tourists.

Museums like to present an unbroken genealogy between ancient times and the modern state. Socialist heritage must repackage feudalism and colonialism as “benign interludes” in Lao history (Berliner 2012, 241), as the royal palace in Luang Prabang becomes a museum, something from the past that poses no threat or harm in the present. Post-socialist Lao PDR combines a single-party authoritarian communist rule with free market capitalism, all heavily controlled by China through investment in development projects such as dams. The resultant debt threatens the independence of the country.

The prehistory of Lao PDR is not well integrated into the unbroken genealogy of Lao heritage discourse. The plain of jars in Xieng Khuang Province that became a World Heritage Site in 2019 is generally ignored as a part of Lao history. The links between megalithic structures and the current ethnic groups in the country are complicated. For example, the Phong people living in the uplands of northeastern Lao PDR stress that the Hintang megaliths near them were not made by their ancestors; they are clear about the discontinuity between themselves and the builders of the megaliths but recognize and respect the spiritual power that animates these sites (Kallen 2015, 59).

Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia look to their precolonial and prehistoric pasts as a basis for constructing their national heritages. The French saw themselves as the rightful owners and heirs of Dongson in Vietnam and Angkor Wat in Cambodia (Kallen 2015, 151). But colonial claims over the former Indochina are more emotional and complex than anything crypto-colonized Thailand has experienced. No other country can make claims on Thai heritage sites except neighbours such as Cambodia, Malaysia, Lao

PDR, or Myanmar, whose borders have shifted over time. These contested borders have had an impact on Khmer sites within the current borders of Thailand but not on sites such as Ban Chiang.

Since borders and maps were drawn differently in the past, disputes over heritage sites can become complex. Take for example Thai/Cambodian claims and counterclaims regarding *Preah Vihear* or *Phra Viharn* (Thai) temple in disputed territory on the border between Thailand and Cambodia. This Khmer temple to Shiva from the eleventh century sits on a hill that was occupied by Thailand until the 1960s when the International Court of Justice upheld Cambodia's claim to the temple site based on a French map made at the turn of the century. Claims and counterclaims from each country are complicated by the history of colonial and domestic politics over the last few centuries as borders were redrawn. There are around 300 Khmer temples in what is now Thailand. But there are also well over a million ethnic Khmer living in Thai provinces bordering Cambodia.

It is the Khmer ruins and not prehistoric sites like Ban Chiang that have become an important part of Thai national heritage. In fact, neither Cambodia nor Thailand can make a claim to the land around the *Preah Vihear* temple on the basis of direct ancestral heritage; the site and its surrounding land is rather the ancestral home of the Kui, an Austroasiatic-speaking minority group living on both sides of the Thai/Cambodian border, whose occupation probably predates the Khmer empire. Their connection to the site is generally ignored by both nations.

After Cambodia asked for *Preah Vihear* to be declared a World Heritage Site in 2008, Thailand suggested that the site be jointly administered by both countries as a transborder heritage site that could be developed as a tourism resource for both countries (Silverman 2011). Meanwhile, the Khmer in Thailand have become a focus for Thai heritage tourism, sponsoring festivals that stress their glorious past through music and costumes. As Denes's research shows, "[r]ather than empowering the ethnic Khmer to determine for themselves what aspects of their heritage they regard as significant or valuable, the state-led revival is one which circumscribes Khmer identity as a means of reasserting Thailand's extant claims of entitlement to the Khmer past—particularly the legacy of Angkor" (2012, 179). This appropriation is facilitated by the restoration of Khmer sanctuaries within Thailand's borders, including *Prasaat Muang Tam*, *Phimai*, and *Phanom Rung*, and their identification with the birthplace of royal lineages predating Angkor (Denes 2012, 172). If the presence of the Kui as a precursor to Angkor is ignored by both nations, how much harder would it be to imagine Ban Chiang as part of Thailand's origin story?

The Thai claim around the “golden age of Angkor” is facilitated by the research and writing of Charles Higham, whose model of the origins of Angkor reaches back to Neolithic sites in northeast Thailand. Higham argues that some of the Iron Age sites on the Khorat Plateau represent an unbroken line to early states in the northeast and to Angkor Wat:

For the first time, the entire prehistoric cultural sequence from late hunter-gatherers to the end of the Iron Age has been documented and dated. We find that after the ingress of rice farmers from southern China in the mid-second millennium BC, there were two surges in social complexity. Both were coincidental with the availability of new exotic goods through exchange. The first took place in the initial Bronze Age, in the eleventh century BC, and was followed by several centuries of relative poverty in mortuary practices. The second took place in the late Iron Age and led directly to the foundation of powerful chiefdoms from which can be traced the genesis of early civilizations in Southeast Asia, including that of Angkor. (Higham 2012b, 265)

This consideration of prehistoric and historic societies from the vantage point of the evolutionary endpoint (in this case, Angkor Wat) exhibits a hindsight fallacy, what White calls the “rear-view mirror perspective” (Thailand Archaeology Monographs [TAM] 2018a, 83). Since the site of Ban Chiang was abandoned by 200 CE, it is off the beaten path to Angkor and cannot participate in the reflected glory of empire. Other sites in Thailand such as *Phra Rung* and *Phimai* are more useful than Ban Chiang for establishing connections to the pre-Angkor Khmer empire and can bask in that reflected glory, downplaying the prior right of place of indigenous groups like the Kui. King Mongkut brought into the Royal Palace in Bangkok a model of Angkor Wat modified to meet Thai aesthetic standards, a way to lay claim to the glories of the Khmer empire. In this case, the past reappears in the present as a moral exemplar for the future, not as the linear historical connectivity that Higham seeks.

### **The Past in the Present**

“Archaeological objects and places are potential contact points in a transaction in which past lives become real to us by drawing upon our own subjective experience of life in the present” (Byrne 2009b, 230). This is particularly important in Southeast Asia, where old objects contain and

retain the spiritual essences of their past owners. Objects from the past are valued as moral exemplars for the present. Stuff itself is impermanent, but old things may be important containers for spiritual values, and spiritual values carry the connection from the past to the present. Some things have intrinsic power and become objects of veneration, including amulets and Buddha images collected and displayed in homes, offices, temples, and institutions like schools. But stones, mountains, and trees may also have intrinsic power (cf. High 2022).

Byrne proposes a cosmopolitan heritage practice that would expand the community of the present to include the community of the past (2009b, 249) and to acknowledge the spiritual connectivity and spiritual forces that animate objects and places. Ruins, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, become places where animistic protective spirits reside (Karlstrom 2009, 149). Even non-Buddhist objects can contain spiritual power. Antiquities removed from their original landscapes and contexts may lack the spiritual power that made them sacred. For objects to retain sacred power, they must demonstrate their efficacy. For example, many years ago I explored the symbolic power of jars or pots as containers as a persistent guiding metaphor in the region (Van Esterik 1984). These abstract notions of the power *of* and *in* the past do not animate or even inform discussions of “dead and gone” Ban Chiang antiquities. The more pragmatic uses for old Ban Chiang pots in the “alive and real” present concern localism and nationalism. I will return to the more abstract discussions about cycles and time in a discussion of the broader questions that Ban Chiang raises about the past in the present.

## Ban Chiang and Localism

In 1992 Thailand was successful in promoting Ban Chiang as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the year after the former Siamese capitals of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya were identified as cultural heritage sites. Thailand's ideological agenda in promoting Ban Chiang as a heritage site was linked to enhancing national prestige. But the site itself presented a challenge for the UNESCO selection committee because of the lack of monuments and other obvious cultural materials visible on the site surface (Peleggi 2017, 114). The Ban Chiang World Heritage Festival is held every year in February and advertised as part of tourist packages to northeast Thailand.

The discovery of the site of Ban Chiang was a windfall for a poor farming community. The villagers who occupy the site today protect or exploit the site not because they have a right of ancestry but because they have a right of

place. They are not the biological descendants of the prehistoric occupants but the current residents in the site—relative newcomers to the region and not related to the people who made the pots. But for the inhabitants, this is where the pots were found, where excavations were carried out, where tourists come. It all “happened right here, in this place,” creating a mnemonic environment (cf. Cubitt 2007) of local importance.

Community participation in heritage management at Ban Chiang, as at other world heritage sites, is considered an important part of safeguarding sites and protecting them from looters. The Ban Chiang villagers living at the site today are intimately involved in heritage tourism, offering home stays, art classes, and workshops on recreating Ban Chiang designs on textiles and on ceramic do-it-yourself souvenirs such as mugs, key chains, and fridge magnets. They perform a Thai Phuan dance (formerly known as a Lao Phuan dance) for visitors. They further support heritage tourism by wearing indigo jackets decorated with the outline of a Ban Chiang pot designed by villagers at the request of the government. My jacket, purchased at the site in 1986, is dark red, replicating the red of the painted designs, with the same pot design printed on the pocket as on the indigo jackets. The swirl and spiral patterns are reproduced on T-shirts and signage as symbolic emblems of Ban Chiang. To mark their trip to a World Heritage Site, visitors to the village are asked to sign a guestbook with comments on their visit. Comments are also encouraged on tourist websites.

Signage at the nearby *Phu Phrabat* Historical Park directs tourists to visit Ban Chiang, “the birthplace of the world’s oldest civilization,” offering 5000-year-old hand painted objects. It is unclear from the Thai translation of the tourist signs whether these “delicately shaped and crafted” objects are for the visitor to admire or to buy. The park itself has cave paintings of stylized animals and people and geometric motifs in red ochre said to be similar to the decorations on Ban Chiang painted pottery (Peleggi 2017, 12).<sup>9</sup> While other documents have updated the chronology for Ban Chiang, the signs in Thai at the Ban Chiang Museum also identify the site as 5,000 years old (Peleggi 2017, 115).

Today, villagers regret their past destruction of evidence. But they still feel that they have a right to the relics. As one villager explained,

I think it is better that we people of Ban Chiang have these relics than outsiders have them. I have the relics because I had an experience of working at the excavation site and I want to keep them as a souvenir. This

9 I did not see any similarities to Ban Chiang designs.

is also an important point to me. Occasionally, some people want them and contact me to buy them, but I am not going to sell them. (Nakamura 2017, 7)

After the king's visit in 1972, some villagers felt there was a better market for selling pots. They recognized the importance of the king's visit for determining the value of objects from the site. Others said that they stopped selling antiquities altogether. The altar of Wat Pho Sri Nai, Ban Chiang's village temple, was adorned with Ban Chiang painted pottery and Buddha images, showing that the villagers are observant Buddhists and not afraid of spirits. Sites like Ban Chiang are assumed to be inhabited by ghosts, animated spirits, and even deities. Old things, including old ruins, help to sustain good relations with ancestral and guardian spirits and give protection against bad and evil spirits (Karlstrom 2009, 207). It can be dangerous to disturb objects that have spiritual power. Bad things can happen when spirits are disturbed and objects are moved from their appropriate place. Karlstrom recounts the story of a Lao man who found an old pot and began to suffer from headaches until he reburied it, after which he recovered (2009, 141). Fear of offending the guardian spirits of ruins and other archaeological sites would not stop determined looters, but they might protect themselves with tattoos and amulets just in case. Byrne reported that looters in Thai sites appeased local guardian spirits by making offerings at their shrines (2016, 350).

The earliest Ban Chiang Museum was the schoolhouse where Khru Mon Tri displayed a few pots as he tried to get the FAD interested in the site. A more permanent exhibition was built in 1981 and expanded in 1987 and 2006, the latest expansion funded by ASEAN. It now houses the original travelling exhibition curated by the University of Pennsylvania, "Ban Chiang: The Discovery of a Lost Bronze Age," as well as a number of dioramas illustrating life in prehistoric Ban Chiang.

It is unclear how the UNESCO heritage site designation will play into the future of the site. Does the designation mean higher prices for artifacts or better protection from looting? For Ban Chiang villagers, it was really not a choice. Since the site was looted out, it was better and more lucrative to protect the village as a tourist site than to continue to dig deeper and wider or to create more fakes, which would have diminished value as the painted pots became better known and the fakes become harder to sell.

For many Thais, Ban Chiang qualifies as an imagined community with unclear temporal roots. It belongs somewhere in the fuzzy past. It is, of course, very real for the villagers who live in the site today and for the Thai

and foreign archaeologists excavating in the area. But even as a UNESCO heritage site, its place in the Thai national narrative is unclear at best.

## Ban Chiang and Nationalism

National heritage in Thailand and Southeast Asia, as in other regions, is always political, always part of an invented (or reinvented) tradition. In Chapter 2 we saw how Ban Chiang fits in the Thai prehistoric record based on archaeological evidence; here we explore how this archaeological evidence fits or fails to fit into the broader narrative of Thai national heritage.

If there is one thing which [Thai archaeologists] are seeking to achieve at the moment, it is documentation and conservation of the wealth and variety of the material remains of man in Thailand over the past four or five thousand years. As in Indonesia, but in marked contrast to what is happening in Vietnam, most resources devoted to archaeology in Thailand go into the reconstruction of the great temples and ancient cities of the Khmer, Sukhothai and Ayudhya phases of the Thai medieval period. This is archaeology in the service of both nationalism and business, for Thailand is a country where tourism is a major industry. (Glover 1993, 48)

Mayhew argues that “nation states are not always the best custodians of their own heritage, but they are necessarily charged with that role” (2006, 89). Nevertheless, heritage policy cannot bypass nation-states, particularly since groups like UNESCO work with national offices (Byrne 2011, 147). The state gets to choose which projects are heritage-worthy and how they relate to Thai identity.

In 1994 the FAD defined the seven constituents of Thai national identity (Peleggi 2002, 26). They included food, nation, monarchy, religion, language, music, and architecture. Ban Chiang is not implicated in any of these seven constituents of Thai national identity; in fact, it challenges or contradicts some cherished constituents.<sup>10</sup>

Ban Chiang presents a problem for the origin story of the Thai nation. If Sukhothai is the founding moment, the “start” of the Thai nation, what came

10 Nor does Ban Chiang find a place in the newest government scheme to market Thailand internationally. In April 2022 the Thai Ministries of Culture and Commerce released a new scheme called the 5 Fs: food, film, fashion, fighting and festivals, the soft power of Thai culture.



before is not Thai and not of the nation. The evidence from Ban Chiang does not lay out a new origin story for the Thai, despite attempts by archaeologist Srisaksa Vallibothana (1990) and others who argued that Ban Chiang should be the foundation of the Thai nation-state, not Sukhothai. Similarly, Sujit Wongtet argued in his Thai book that “The Thais were always here,” suggesting that Tai peoples and cultures spread through the region in prehistoric times (Peleggi 2017, 112).

Food was no doubt listed first in the FAD constituents of Thai identity, with an eye to the famous Ramkhamheng inscription from Sukhothai: “In the field there is rice, in the water, fish.” While Ban Chiang is often presented as an early example of a rice farming community, the population was probably also reliant on a great deal of hunting and gathering, as well as staples like millet and yams until its later occupation. It was a mixed subsistence system.

Ban Chiang was clearly pre-state and pre-urban. Although there are differences of opinion about the extent of social hierarchy in the region, there is no evidence for centralized elites controlling populations and building massive architectural monuments; their houses might have been made of perishable material such as bamboo. Nor is there evidence for chiefs or men of prowess who could be considered powerful leaders of population centres. This, of course, means that Ban Chiang and comparable sites on the Khorat Plateau are pre-state and pre-monarchy and thus contribute nothing to the formation of either nation or monarchy, key components of Thai identity.

The Thai, particularly the present Chakri dynasty, have nostalgia for a stable, royal past ruled by a *dhammaraja*, a righteous ruler guided by Buddhist morality. International heritage regulations and the Thai state both favour protection for royal and Buddhist heritage over the everyday, the vernacular. It was understandably difficult for heritage managers to summon nostalgia for a 3,000-year-old community in northeast Thailand among domestic and international tourists.

Prehistoric Ban Chiang was not Buddhist nor even necessarily pre-Buddhist; no doubt animism and possibly ancestor worship shaped their active ritual life, particularly around death. Thai identity work focuses on Buddhist texts and epigraphy, none of which appear in this prehistoric timeframe. Ban Chiang reminds Thai Buddhists of their animistic past and current animistic practices that have been defined by the state as superstitious, even though they are an integral part of Thai Buddhist practice. Buddhism and local spirit practices are easily accommodated by practitioners but create tension for analysts who often retain evolutionary approaches to religion, implying that animists lag behind their Buddhist fellow citizens.

The prehistoric residents of Ban Chiang are unlikely to have been Tai-Kadai language speakers, and they certainly left no written language. Higham speculates that the descendants of the Iron Age inhabitants of the region spoke Austroasiatic languages and founded the early Mon state of Dvaravati and the Khmer state of Chenla (Higham 2013, 26). The Austroasiatic languages shared many words in common, including words for rice, fish, child, and dog (Higham and Thosarat 2012, 269). In sum, Ban Chiang does not relate to any of the constitutive features of Thai national identity; the site fails to provide evidence for any of the FAD state-defined identity markers of Thainess.

Whenever possible, historians prefer to have unbroken links between populations to construct a viable heritage narrative. This is not possible in this case; Ban Chiang offers no unbroken links to the contemporary Thai population. In fact, examination of the skeletal remains by Dr. Sud Sangvichien, a Thai doctor with a strong interest in the site, speculated that some of the skeletal features resembled Polynesian features more than Thai. As Michael Pietrusewsky speculated, “the ancient inhabitants of Ban Chiang may represent some of the earliest ancestors of a people who would eventually populate the vast Pacific domain” (1982, 48).

The available research suggests that the prehistoric residents of Ban Chiang have no direct genealogical links to the present Thai population, let alone to the people currently residing in the village of Ban Chiang. The current residents of the village are Lao Phuan, who immigrated to Ban Chiang from Xieng Khouang province in Laos in the late eighteenth century (1784, according to Intakosai 1972). From around 525 CE, the village of Ban Chiang was deserted and not inhabited again until the arrival of the Lao Phuan.

Archaeological ethics require consultation with the descendants of the people who inhabited the sites being excavated. In the case of Ban Chiang, as in many other archaeological sites, this consultation is not possible. In fact, information about the descendants of the original inhabitants is not a focus of attention at Ban Chiang. The current occupants are neither descendants of the makers of Ban Chiang painted pottery nor Thai. As Lao Phuan, they differ from the surrounding Lao Isaan population in the pronunciation of some words. Heritage tourism documents refer to the current inhabitants as Thai Phuan rather than Lao Phuan.

There are other regional examples of the complex relationship between original inhabitants and current caretakers. Recall a similar situation in Lao PDR among the Phong who denied any historical connection between their ancestors and the megalithic Hintang stones nearby, arguing that the stones were already there when their ancestors arrived (Kallen 2015, 79). And as Michael Herzfeld (2016) shows in the Bangkok community of *Pom*

*Mahakan*, the present community members were not always the original inhabitants of the area. His research demonstrates that the Rattanakosin heritage celebrations overvalued royal and Buddhist heritage while ignoring the vernacular of living communities like *Pom Mahakan*. Nevertheless, the residents of the area took over the role of contemporary caretakers to protect their community. Instead of trying to claim rights through descent, the residents of *Pom Mahakan* made allies with other slum groups in Bangkok with whom they were linked by the experience of urban poverty but not by ancestral ties to the neighborhood. In the end, their attempts to remain in their homes failed.<sup>11</sup> Just as most of the folks in *Pom Mahakan* cannot claim links back to the original inhabitants of Bangkok, modern Thais cannot trace their descent from the prehistoric occupants of Ban Chiang. Those residing in Ban Chiang village today act as caretakers of the site and claim benefits through the right of place, not right of descent.

So what use is Ban Chiang to the Thai state? In the late seventies, before many official reports about Ban Chiang were available, the prime minister's office already took pride in the site, opening the section on "The Land and the People" in the book *Thailand in the 80s* with the following: "The world's oldest civilization was flourishing in Thailand at least 5,600 years ago," 600 years before the Tigris-Euphrates "cradle of civilization" (1979, 9). While these claims would never be made today to international audiences, they remain part of the local tour guide discourse.

Ban Chiang is better known nationally and internationally than other more prolific prehistoric sites in the region. It is cited in a teaching tool for ASEAN countries. The UNESCO resource book *Understanding Shared Histories: A Teaching Package for Southeast Asia* (2019) includes information on the site of Ban Chiang before discussing the early centres of power on the mainland, the mandala kingdoms of Champa, Ayutthaya, Bagan, and Angkor. Unit Two of the series uses the site to teach students about grave goods that accompany burials and how communities need to cooperate to exchange scarce resources. There is no mention of looting. The prehistoric site of Ban Chiang is presented without making any links to the historic kingdoms that follow in the syllabus, recognizing it as a unique piece of the historical puzzle, not a placeholder for Angkor Wat.<sup>12</sup>

Shortly after the king's visit in 1972, the first stamps with an image of some of the most recognizable Late Period Ban Chiang painted pottery

11 Unfortunately, the community was forcibly evicted in 2016.

12 I was a reviewer for the resource package and suggested ways that Ban Chiang could be incorporated into the narrative but received no response from the editors.

were released in 1974 to commemorate the hundred-year anniversary of the founding of the National Museum. A second set released in 1976 featured four classic painted pottery designs. If the site mattered to the king and the royal family, then it should be important to all Thai citizens. The connection to royalty changed the discourse, at least for the locals, who began to see themselves as heritage protectors. On the other hand, the visit may have simply added value to the artifacts that were still being looted from the site.

Ban Chiang was not needed to fend off the counterclaims of other groups and nations as in Europe (cf. Meskell 2014, 218) because Thai national identity already relied on a coherent national narrative that incorporated northeast Thailand (*Isaan*) as a poverty-stricken region of the country needing development. Ban Chiang was thus hard to marshal for the task of national identity building. Instead, the site draws attention to the value and antiquity of the northeast, the poorest but most populous region of the country. The site could have political implications for *Isaan* identity, exposing possible tensions between Thai national identity and the ethnic identity of Lao *Isaan*.

Lao PDR would be in a better position to make claims on Ban Chiang through the common features of the Bronze Period sites on both sides of the Mekong River. Instead, Ban Chiang provides evidence for the unity of the Mekong area, as newly discovered Bronze Period sites on the Lao side of the river such as Lao Pako suggest possible relations with Ban Chiang. Unlike Cambodia, which is in direct conflict with Thailand over the management of Khmer sites on both sides of the disputed border, Lao PDR is unlikely to use sites such as Ban Chiang to support a claim to northeast Thailand; but it is a reminder to view the Mekong River as defining a region, not as a timeless national boundary marker.

“The more rubble you leave behind, the larger your place in the historical record,” argues Scott (2008, 13). But what if the rubble does not fit neatly into the existing historical record or even into heritage discourse? Ban Chiang left a lot of rubble but has an ambiguous place in the Thai prehistoric and historical record. Still Ban Chiang failed to signify Thainess in the official discourse on Thai national heritage. In addition, the site itself is hard to access. Tourists from Bangkok or Chiang Mai can take three-day package tours that cover other cultural and natural sites in northeast Thailand, leaving a day for a pottery workshop in Ban Chiang or a few hours to tour the museum. Since the site is in the middle of a bustling village, there are no sound and light spectacles as there are at the unoccupied heritage parks at Ayutthaya and Sukhothai. The giant Ban Chiang pots that greet visitors to the site are the largest reminders of the prehistoric site.

## Regional Civility: Beyond Localism and Nationalism

Ban Chiang was never an example of localized descent heritage with descent communities claiming and protecting their heritage, nor did it fit well into the national narrative about Thainess. Instead, it moved immediately to what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls the translocal heritage of humanity (2006, 170). Journalists homed in on the implications of early (erroneous) dating of fourth millennium BCE for bronze at Ban Chiang; the *Washington Post* article by Joseph Alsop was titled *Rewriting Human History* (1975). National pride in Ban Chiang centred around the idea that the site might draw attention away from Mesopotamia to Thailand: Ban Chiang as “the cradle of civilization” and “Southeast Asia’s most important prehistoric settlement,” even after the early thermoluminescence dates were challenged and declared inaccurate. Recall the promotional brochure for Ban Chiang Reproductions that reads: “Which came first, Ur of the Chaldees or Ban Chiang?”

Tourist sites in the northeast still refer to Ban Chiang in sensationalist language. Signs at *Phu Prabat* Historical Park, Udon Thani province, direct tourists to also visit nearby Ban Chiang, with its “unique and fascinating history”: “Ban Chiang long considered the birthplace of the world’s oldest civilization offers up to 5,000-year-old hand painted objects, delicately shaped and crafted at this world-famous archaeological site.” Early press reports about dating spread false expectations and sensationalized the site even before analysis and reports were available. Sensationalizing Ban Chiang encouraged looting, overseas purchases, and jacked up prices for the artifacts looted from the site. Even the excavators in the 1970s stressed the importance of Ban Chiang for world prehistory. *Newsweek* (May 31, 1976) reported that the excavators had found “the remnants of one of the most ancient centers of civilization yet unearthed.” Gorman argued that the discoveries were forcing Western archaeologists to rethink the meaning and history of the concept of “civilization” as a stage in human development that combined bronze, pottery, and intensive agriculture around cities. Here civilization refers to an advanced stage in social, cultural, and technological development of human society characterized by states, social classes, writing, taxation, monumental architecture, and agricultural surpluses to support urban populations. This definition of civilization presented a problem, since there was no evidence for urban centres in northeast Thailand in the time period of Ban Chiang, although Gorman (1982) was actively looking for them. Perhaps, he speculated, the Near East was not the cradle of civilization. Perhaps Ban Chiang and related sites in the northeast might suggest other approaches to civilization.

Other approaches to civilization are suggested in the definition of the term itself, which includes refinement of manners and civility based on a notion of moral progress of society. It is this latter sense that might have inspired Margaret Mead's alleged response to a student who asked her what would constitute the earliest evidence for civilization. Her purported answer was a healed femur bone.<sup>13</sup>

Can we read regional civility into Ban Chiang's past? Minimally, the site suggests the need for new terminology, new paradigms, a task Joyce White and colleagues have already begun. Ban Chiang offers yet another reason to reject universal stage models and avoid imposing fixed stages of human development on regional sequences. Ban Chiang does not represent the prehistory of northeast Thailand. It is one localized example of something still in the process of being defined. Prehistoric Ban Chiang is not an instance of civilization, nor is it primitive. Although it had no system of writing, it might well have had a sophisticated system of symbolic communication.

The prehistoric occupants of Ban Chiang appeared to be non-violent, egalitarian, creative, innovative, and some of the earliest users of bronze and iron technology in the world, even before site reports provided evidence to support some of these claims. Now that more reports are available, many of these initial impressions have indeed panned out. The site is representative of a transegalitarian, village-level exchange network that benefitted from peaceful coexistence and trade with other communities. The decision to elaborate child burials rather than the burials of adult male warriors hints at a set of values not usually associated with Bronze and Iron Period societies.

The work of Richard O'Connor on the importance of Southeast Asia as a region (1995, 2003) provides an opening for speculation about regional civility. The snapshot we have of prehistoric Ban Chiang suggests some guiding metaphors with broader application to the region and enduring implications for contemporary communities. Deep history suggests that Ban Chiang was a time and place that exemplified regional civility, a place where communities are interdependent but skilled at negotiating around identity; where differences (including ethnic and gender differences) are resources not threats; where growing rice becomes a model for raising children, as they both demand skilled nurture (Thai, *liang*); where women are important (cf. Bacus 2007); where people use negotiating skills rather than coercion to create and maintain social relationships (some heterarchical and some

13 Margaret Mead's apocryphal quote was first cited in *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: A Surgeon Looks at the Human and Spiritual Body* (Brand and Yancey 1980). Brand said that he attended the lecture where Mead answered the question about civilization.

hierarchical, patron-client relations being one of the most enduring and effective); where care is taken to keep every baby alive, and when that fails, babies and toddlers are accorded respect and dignity most societies reserve for powerful adult males.<sup>14</sup>

These human capacities are passed down through the generations, from newborns to ancestors in cycles that include living and dead and spirits of rice and locality. Sharpe (1962) identified these as regularly repeated patterns that gave the region its distinct cultural character. Continuities such as nurturing practices and feeding others could have been maintained over time through widely shared ritual language including the material language of objects of beauty (like heirloom pots and bronze drums), strengthened through feasting attended by territorial and ancestral protective spirits. As Work (2022) reminds us, the spirits like parties; they still do.

Ban Chiang was good for antiquities dealers, good for peasant farmers who could afford to buy tractors and taxis, and good for Thai elite collectors when it was thought to be the oldest or the first, or when items looted from the site could be sold for a large profit. Being the first or the earliest brought prestige to the nation. If dates were wrong or challenged, then interest quickly waned. It was valued when the occupants were considered unambiguously Thai. But it was never emblematic of Thai identity or heritage nor comparable to Dongson motifs as a symbol of Vietnam's glorious past or Angkor Wat as a symbol of the Khmer golden age. Why would a Ban Chiang pot not acquire the same symbolic importance as a representation of Thailand's glorious past, or at least be used to create links to early Thai history and the constructions of Thai art history? That honour goes to kings from the glorious historical past who fought to keep enemies away from the borders of the royal centres and who now protect the nation collectively in the form of a national guardian deity, *Phra Siam Thevothirat*.

## Pots on the Move

Pots can be moved around relatively easily; they are not part of the landscape.<sup>15</sup> They can be buried, stored as heirlooms, removed from harm's way,

14 Infant death was common in the past and infants were almost expected to die. But in other times and places, a dead newborn would be disposed of like trash. Infant corpses in Indonesia are buried quickly under the house without expense or ritual because they had not yet achieved status in life (Hutchinson and Aragon 2008).

15 An exception to this mobility would be the giant stone jars on the plain of jars, Lao PDR.

presented in a museum display, or even forgotten in an attic. In the 2018 movie *Crazy Rich Asians*, a large, round-bottomed Ban Chiang painted pot can be seen in a metal tripod support decorating the mansion of a wealthy Asian family. The set designer brought in Asian antiquities, including, in my opinion, a Ban Chiang painted urn with complex sigmoid designs (or an excellent replica), as markers of extreme wealth to enhance the impression of elite status and cultural capital for the Singaporean family portrayed in the movie.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, the Thai elite needed the cultural capital of knowing about Ban Chiang painted pottery and displaying their Ban Chiang artifacts: “Ban Chiang utensils would be proudly displayed by its owner to show off his taste,” one letter writer complained in the up-market publication *Silapa Watanatham* (Hong 2011). But that did not mean they found the ancient pottery aesthetically pleasing or worthy of household display.

The mobility of antiquities like pots means that they have been moved in and out of different relationships with people and diverted from their conventional paths (Myers 2001). In the expected path of archaeological research, broken pots would be found in cemeteries or residential remains, whereupon they would be studied in situ and removed for analysis in the country where they were found or loaned to a partner institution for further analysis. They would then be returned to take their place in the local museum, where they would advance the current historical narrative. Over time, future analysis might challenge those narratives and force their revision. At this time, the pots and their designs would take their place in an altered and updated narrative. That was not the whole story for Ban Chiang pots.

## Storied Pots

Who owns Ban Chiang?<sup>17</sup> Does Ban Chiang belong to a particular place (northeast Thailand), to a particular people (the current villagers of Ban Chiang), to all Thai people or all Lao people (or to all Tai people), or to humanity, all of mankind, acknowledging its outstanding universal value (OUV), as a cosmopolitan perspective on heritage would entail (Gillman 2010)? Does the site of Ban Chiang need to be protected because it is part

16 I was unable to confirm that these were Ban Chiang pots after repeated attempts to reach the producers and the director, John Chu.

17 The phrase “Who owns Ban Chiang” was often used in newspaper headlines and articles in Thai and English, most recently in Rod-ari (2021).



of the Thai state's cultural property or because of what it contributes to understanding world prehistory? Or both? If its importance lies in its OUV, would that justify the location of Ban Chiang artifacts in museums around the world? Does this mean that the pots are equally at home in California museum storehouses, a movie set, the Ban Chiang Museum, the attic of a suburban house in Ottawa, a Hawaiian hotel, a Thai golf course club house, or a storage room at the Ban Chiang Project at the Penn Museum?

I raise these questions for others to answer. In this book I have identified some partial stories about Ban Chiang pots, few of them linear in form. Only Chapter 2 conforms to what is expected from an evidence-based chronological narrative. The chapters are all partial stories, all pieces of larger stories that can never be fully told. The selection of stories is based on my personal experiences, including my initial errors in recognizing the "authentic" painted pottery. Some stories have been told so often that they have achieved mythic status: Stephen Young tripping over a buried pot; Ban Chiang was a peaceful, egalitarian, creative society. Other stories have been suppressed: the role of the Thai and American military in looting and exporting antiquities, the work of skilled forgers, tax fraud. And some stories have yet to be told: the production process from clay to finished decorated pot, the relation of earlier black incised ware and painted and incised ware to painted ware, the use of pots and other items as grave goods in burial rituals. This last story was always destined to remain speculative. But the stories are interconnected. The archaeological story in Chapter 2 is not independent of the looting story or, indeed, the forgery story, and both are implicated in the heritage story. The different frames relate to one another through my story, my life experiences. They form a totality of sorts but do not produce a consistent, coherent story. They represent some of the many ways objects from the past enter the present. I arbitrarily put them together in a sequence to form a narrative that can neither start nor end definitely; all narratives always start in the middle, and the so-called end is a temporary cut in a never-ending sequence of facts and stories. We all must choose when and where the narrative starts and when and where it ends (Karlstrom 2009, 80). For me, this is where these stories end.

The story in Chapter 1 started early in my professional life when I saw Ban Chiang painted pottery in an antique market in Bangkok. Fifty years later I picked up the story in my retirement when I could not bring myself to throw out the photographs of the looted pots. I felt that I had to create an archive that might prove useful for future researchers and perhaps provide insights into the movement and life story of the pots in a way that would not encourage more looting. I was surprised to find themes in my past work re-emerge in the

way I approached Ban Chiang painted pottery, a palimpsest of sticky ideas: pattern, style, ritual, nurture, infancy, and commensality, which continually shape the way I approach anthropology. By making the images and stories available to others, I aim to be accountable to future researchers.

Chapter 2 presents the Ban Chiang story from the perspective of “the privileged discourse of archaeology” (Smith 2004), a form of expertise that I do not possess but whose expertise I rely on. The archaeological story began for me when I was asked to write an article on the painted pottery for *Asian Perspectives* as a graduate student; my interest was reignited when I had the opportunity to review the TAM reports on the excavations at Ban Chiang for the *Journal of Asian Studies* in 2020. Ongoing archaeological research will add to and change the story, which will always be incomplete. Even the “privileged discourse of archaeology” can produce more than one story about the prehistoric past of Ban Chiang and nearby sites, as the debates between Charles Higham and Joyce White demonstrate.

The symmetry analysis in Chapter 3 provides a vocabulary for talking about painted designs on Late Period pottery associated with Ban Chiang and links to the story of the fakes and the repainted pots, as I came to recognize something was “not right” about the designs on some of the pots identified as coming from Ban Chiang. The promise of symmetry analysis will not be realized until more regional archaeologists make use of a consistent classification system for designs using symmetry operations such as the one used by Washburn and Crowe (1988). But the examination of this one artifact type opens up possibilities for more complex interpretations of Ban Chiang society.

Were the looters described in Chapter 4 cultural heroes saving Thai heritage from greedy ignorant peasants, foreign art collectors, and the American military? Or were they peasant farmers exploiting all possible resources in their community? Looting at the site had a beginning and an end; the most substantial looting probably lasted only about a decade. But that decade’s work destroyed evidence that would have provided opportunities to better interpret the site.

Chapter 5 explored the process of faking antiquities and art, demonstrating the shifting and flexible boundaries between authentic and inauthentic designs. With insights from European art forgers, I considered the motivation and process of copying in general. Ban Chiang painted pottery stimulated industries producing replicas, souvenirs, and wall art as well as excellent forgeries that found their way into museums.

Chapter 6 explores heritage in general and Thai heritage in particular, as constructed from these and other stories about the past. If cultural heritage

is the continuous manifestation of change over time, then heritage includes the looting and the faking. Heritage actively creates the flow of time through the pastness that heritage objects possess (Holtorf 2015, 410). In Southeast Asia, tourism has stimulated the development of historical parks that remind people about the imagined past. But objects from Ban Chiang and from other prehistoric sites do not kindle memories of the past or even fit into linear models of historical progress. Instead, they generate other kinds of critical thinking about time, permanence, and values. And when a nation's past is commoditized, does it really matter whether the objects are real or fake?

These multiple stories provide examples about some of the ways that the past is embedded in the present. They hint at a potentially unique way of life in a region of the world easily ignored, whose legacy is artistic creativity and not military exploits. Hopefully the stories and images are more than nostalgia production. Does Ban Chiang, or my version of it, provide a positive narrative for the future—one not connected to hyper-royalism or religious conflicts? Looting has robbed us of evidence for another way of life, another story about the human condition.

The links between past and present at Ban Chiang are complex and challenging. They are not limited to linear historical questions about origins. Buddhist logic animates practices where destruction and renewal are expected parts of a cyclical approach to time, where the past loops back into the present in a sort of temporal palimpsest, compressing and preserving layers of historic moments (Koshcheeva 2020, 7). Unlike modern historical or chronological time where the past is dead and gone, past, present, and future exist simultaneously in ritual event-based time, facilitated by exemplary objects and places. The intersection of time and space to provide unique contexts brings past events into present contexts. The Thai term *kalatessa* captures this important guiding metaphor around balance, orderliness, and appropriate context (Van Esterik 2000, 36). Ritual action also brings a person out of “the temporality of mundane life” into past historic moments and not just memories of these moments (Kuchler and Carroll 2021, 120).

If the world's greatest problems could be recast as the failure of moral inclusivity and the decline of nurturing practices,<sup>18</sup> then life on the Khorat plateau provides an interesting glimpse into a time and place where infants had moral worth equivalent to adults and had social standing even if they were stillborn or died at or shortly after birth (Halcrow et al. 2008, 382). At

18 Nurturing practices are the subject of *The Dance of Nurture: Negotiating Infant Feeding* (Van Esterik and O'Connor 2017).

the least, they were considered human and deserving of ritual attention by the community. The spiritual values that animated burial rituals resonate with contemporary families.

The story of Ban Chiang illuminates more than a past moment in time and space on the Khorat plateau of northeast Thailand. Past and present are connected by a continuity of human experience. Neither artistic creativity nor infant death is a feature of the past; both exist in the present and will probably persist into the future. Every human group—past and present—must find ways to live with other people, including strangers. It appears that Ban Chiang communities were not spooked by difference and took a pragmatic approach to living in peace with their neighbours. Strangers did not present an out-group threat but an opportunity for expanding local resources: good hunters as mates, new skills such as bronze-making, and trade in scarce resources such as shells. There are widely divergent opinions about the significance of the site itself. From Higham's dismissal of the site as merely a "footnote" in the prehistory of Southeast Asia (2020, 221) to Kallen's wistful statement "We all work to some extent in the starlight of the Ban Chiang legend" (2004, 57), sites such as Ban Chiang teach us as much about the human condition in the present as in the past.

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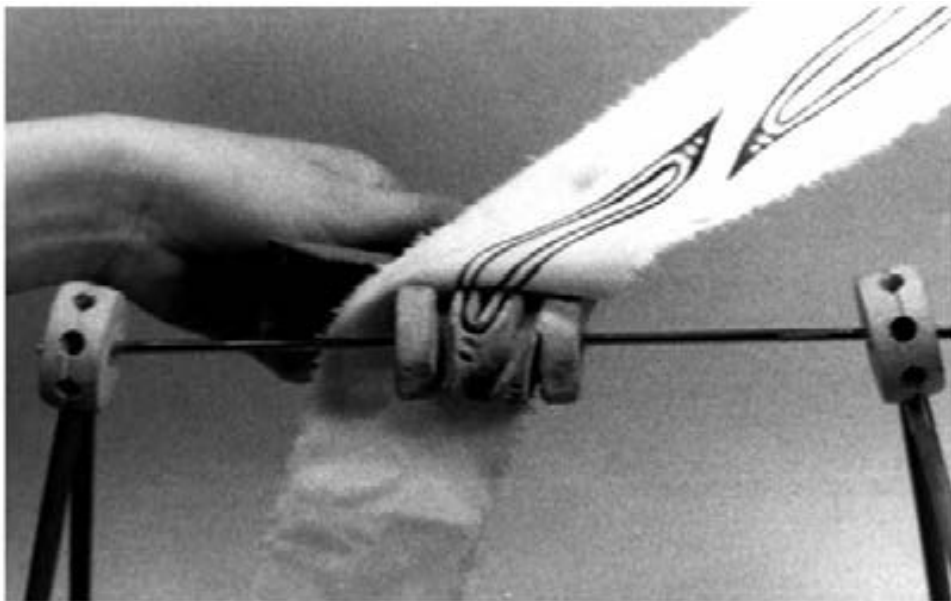
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# Illustrations

**Illustration 1** Ceramic roller (above) from Ban Chiang and an experiment using roller as stencil (below).



**Illustration 2** Vessels 597, 631, 845, 853, 854, and 954.



Vessel 597



Vessel 631



Vessel 845



vessel 853



Vessel 854



Vessel 954

**Illustration 3 Ban Chieng Products, vessels 130–34; vessels 1020, 1028, 1203, and 1124.**



Vessels 130–134



Vessel 1020



Vessel 1028



Vessel 1203



Vessel 1124

**Illustration 4** Vessels 1315, 1319, 210, 429, and 434.



Vessel 1315



Vessel 1315



Vessel 1319



Vessel 210



Vessel 429



Vessel 434

**Illustration 5** Vessels 438, 466, 481, 553, and 537.



Vessel 438



Vessel 466



Vessel 481



Vessel 553



Vessel 537



Vessel 537

**Illustration 6** Vessels 603, 798, 610, 611, 814, and 820.

Vessel 603



Vessel 798



Vessel 610



Vessel 611



Vessel 814



Vessel 820

**Illustration 7** Vessels 845, 847, 856, 857, and 862.



Vessel 845



Vessel 847



Vessel 856



Vessel 856



Vessel 857



Vessel 862



**Illustration 8** Vessels 868, 870, 946, 962, 1322, and 138.



Vessel 868



Vessel 870



Vessel 946



Vessel 962



Vessel 1322



Vessel 138

**Illustration 9** A. Thai collector's storage shelf (above left); B. Old and new pots for sale in Ban Chiang (above right); C. Thai collector's shelf organized by design type.



**Illustration 10** Vessels 401, 402, 543, 795, 813, and 837.



Vessel 401



Vessel 402



Vessel 543



Vessel 795



Vessel 813



Vessel 837

**Illustration 11** Clothing promoted as displaying Ban Chiang designs for sale at the weekend market in Bangkok in the early seventies.



**Illustration 12** Vessels 157, 158, 159, 222, 319, and 428.



Vessel 157



Vessel 158



Vessel 159



Vessel 222



Vessel 319



Vessel 428

**Illustration 13** Vessels 458, 643, 835, 836, 838, and 855.



Vessel 458



Vessel 643



Vessel 835



Vessel 836



Vessel 838



Vessel 855

**Illustration 14** Vessels 880, 952, 971, 973, 1330, and 1324.

Vessel 880



Vessel 952



Vessel 971



Vessel 973



Vessel 1330



Vessel 1324

**Illustration 15** Production of ancient replicas and domestic pottery produced and fired in Ban Kam O, near Ban Chiang.





**Illustration 16** Artist painting Ban Chiang designs. Giant painted pots on the road into Ban Chiang (photograph credit: courtesy of Marie Nakamura).



# Appendix



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Follow this link for access to the archive of images of painted pottery photographed by Penny Van Esterik in the late sixties and early seventies, authentic and fake, and all points in between. The photographs are of uneven quality, but they are a record of what was considered Ban Chiang painted pottery at that time. The photographs were taken in the homes of Thai collectors, in museum storerooms, in police storage areas, in open markets, in glass display cases, in bank vaults, on the street, and in antique showrooms. Please cite this publication, “Designs on Pots” if using the photographs.



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