

# Print Journeys

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## Designs on Pots: Ban Chiang and the Politics of Heritage in Thailand

Penny Van Esterik



What can I say about the experience of writing *Designs on Pots*? Life has a strange way of pushing us in certain directions. During a two-year period of teaching English for anthropology and archaeology students in Bangkok in the late 1960s, I occasionally photographed beautifully painted prehistoric pottery for sale in Thai antiquities markets. The following year in graduate school, I was all set to conduct dissertation research on the relation between Buddhist and Brahman ritual in rural Thailand when I learned I was pregnant. I thought life with a baby would be easier working in museums in Bangkok rather than in a village in Suphanburi Province, and I shifted my research topic to the designs on Ban Chiang painted pottery, based on my examination of private and museum collections made in the early 1970s.

Objects, too, have their life cycles. Consider the destruction of the Buddha images in the Bamiyan Valley, Afghanistan. With their destruction, we lose irreplaceable parts of our rapidly disappearing human heritage. Buddhists recognize the impermanence of all things and can probably let go of the destruction of Buddha images more easily than curators and managers charged with protecting national heritage. In the case of Ban Chiang painted pottery, artifacts were looted and sold before the site had been fully excavated and recorded.

It has been over 50 years since I first saw those pots in markets in Bangkok. And it has taken me 50 years to tell some of the stories about those pots in this book. For reasons I relate in the first chapter of my book, I did not take my research on Ban Chiang much further than my PhD. I did not follow the usual path of extracting all possible publication value from my dissertation on *Cognition and Design Production in Ban Chiang Painted Pottery* (1976). Instead, I treated the PhD like a union card letting me practice anthropology. I reverted to focus more on cultural anthropology with a particular focus on food rather than pots. But I never forgot about those mesmerizing red designs.

Why the long delay in writing these stories down? First, the full site reports on the formal excavations made in 1974-1975 in Ban Chiang were not published until recently (2018, 2019). I needed to know more about the archaeological context because I am not a specialist in that subfield of anthropology with its well-defined research methods, although I did participate in several excavations as an undergraduate and also passed graduate-level coursework in the subfield. I viewed my work as based in cultural anthropology but making use of excavated objects from the past. Ironically, I spent most of my academic life at York University, where archaeology was not a focus. In fact, I removed my earliest publications on Ban Chiang from my resume when I applied for the job in the Department of Social Anthropology at York in 1984. I played up my

other research experiences around gender, food, and infant feeding in Southeast Asia. I also felt constrained by my lack of specialized knowledge of ceramic technology, symmetry analysis, art history, and the complexity of the antiquities market – all areas of expertise that I deemed essential to writing the book. I was particularly concerned about addressing the issue of who was doing the looting and selling of antiquities to art collectors and museums. I tried to make up for my lack of specialized knowledge in researching the book.

Why couldn't I just throw out the old photographs and notes, acknowledging that Ban Chiang is just one of many sites in northeast Thailand that could contribute to Southeast Asian culture history? Did I leave the pots too long in an academic parking lot? Why take up the subject of Ban Chiang now? Moving to a new city after retirement provided the perfect opportunity to pitch out the boxes of articles, drawings, and photographs from Ban Chiang. I couldn't do it. Instead, my interest was reignited when I was asked to review the Thai Archaeology Monograph Series containing detailed reports on the excavations of 1974-1975 at Ban Chiang for the *Journal of Asian Studies* in 2020. This required me to review decades of advances in the field. A second motivation was receiving an email from a woman in Texas who bought a collection of pots that were for sale along the road to Ban Chiang in the early 1970s and who was now trying to repatriate them to Thailand. Shortly after, another email arrived from a woman in Ottawa who found boxes in a relative's new house that had formerly held pottery, along with around twenty pots still boxed, forgotten in an attic. The stories about how those pots traveled and the next steps on their journeys drew me to include the subjects of looting and faking in the book.

Returning to the subject of Ban Chiang 50 years later is rather like the community re-studies of earlier ethnography, except what has changed is me – the research instrument – not the object of study (i.e., the pots). I hope *Designs on Pots* is more than the story of an aging academic looking back with

regret for the path not taken, for not speaking out sooner about looted antiquities, for not keeping up with an important regional topic like heritage production. In an era without apprentices, it is difficult for academic elders 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? Looking back at my career in anthropology and Southeast Asian studies as I approach my 80th birthday, I think *Designs on Pots* is my attempt to answer that question. By utilizing the figshare feature at the back of the book, future scholars can build on my photographic and textual materials to answer new questions, as they deal with the trajectories of theoretical change and new archaeological discoveries.

Now that the book is finished and the stories and images are out there for others to consider, I can make links to broader issues beyond Ban Chiang and Thailand. I am reminded of why anthropology matters in this complex modern world. Anthropologists are interested in the human condition in all times and places. The discipline provides an opportunity to create models that go beyond weird – Western, educated, industrial, rich, developed – societies in modern times. Ban Chiang provides a glimpse into another way of being human. The site hints at a potentially unique way of life in a region of the world that has been easily ignored, partly because the legacy of Ban Chiang is artistic and technological creativity rather than monumental architecture or military exploits. The world could use another model of a peaceful, egalitarian, creative society

putting their best artistic efforts in the graves of infants rather than warriors, of a people that made jewelry rather than weapons.

In the academic worlds of specialized knowledge, anthropology needs to remain a unified field – a discipline that makes room for multiple stories from multiple perspectives. The stories about the painted pottery from Ban Chiang demonstrate some of the ways that the past is embedded in the present. Some stories have been suppressed: the role of the American military in looting and exporting antiquities, the work of skilled forgers, art appraisals and tax fraud. Some stories have yet to be told: the production process from clay to finished decorated pot, the relation of earlier incised wares to the painted pottery, and the use of pots and other items as grave goods. Some stories, like the ones I tell about the use of pots in infant and child burial rituals, are quite speculative and destined to remain so.

The Ban Chiang stories I tell in the book, and those that will be told in the future, are not just about archaeology. The archaeological story in Chapter 2 is not independent of the looting story in Chapter 4 or of the forgery story in Chapter 5, and both are implicated in the heritage story in Chapter 6. The different frames relate to one another through my personal story, my life experiences, as discussed in the first chapter.

I hope that there are many more stories in addition to the six I tell in the book. Some of the issues for others to explore might include: (1) Questions about heritage diplomacy, the ancient practice of gifting the cultural riches of a country to visiting foreign diplomats. (2) Questions about recognizing the differences between deceptive faking, respectful copying, and outright appropriation. (3) Questions about symmetry as a bodily-based regimen of skilled design practice. (4) Questions about how infant feeding practices affect population expansion and diseases in mainland Southeast Asia. (5) Questions about whether museums should display or hide away their Ban Chiang collections, knowing the collections had questionable provenance and were probably looted from the site. I hope that readers of my book will generate many more questions and I look forward to learning about their potential answers.

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## Designs on Pots. Ban Chiang and the Politics of Heritage in Thailand

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The prehistoric site of Ban Chiang in northeast Thailand challenges the narrative of Thai origins, while at the same time appealing to the public's vision of Thailand as an early centre of civilization. Ban Chiang demonstrates the complexity of constructing national heritage in modern Thailand, where the Thai national narrative begins and ends with Buddhism and the monarchy. *Designs on Pots. Ban Chiang and the Politics of Heritage in Thailand* contributes to the literature on cultural preservation, repatriation, fake antiquities as souvenirs, and the ethics of collecting, and demonstrates how heritage tourism intersects with the antiquities market in Asia. Ban Chiang itself is important for rethinking the

model of indigenous development in Southeast Asia prehistory and provides informed speculation about the borders between prehistory, proto-history, and history in the region, challenging current and past models of Indianization that shape the Thai state's heritage narrative.

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