



## Article

# Prehistory and Ideology in Cold War Southeast Asia: The Politics of Wartime Archaeology in Thailand and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1954–1975

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**Abstract:** The two decades comprised within the partition of Vietnam and the end of the Indochina Wars surprisingly saw major advances in prehistoric archaeology in the region. This article examines the political context and implications of archaeological investigations conducted in Thailand and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under the guidance of, respectively, American and Soviet specialists, as an aspect of the cultural Cold War. Archaeological discoveries in both countries debunked colonial archaeology's account of prehistoric Southeast Asia as a passive recipient of Chinese cultural influence by documenting autonomous technological development. The article argues that the new image of mainland Southeast Asia's prehistory that formed by the early 1970s reflected the superpowers' objective of empowering the region's postcolonial nation-states notwithstanding their political contrasts, yet it was not equally congruent with the nationalist narratives of Thailand and North Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Cold War; Democratic Republic of Vietnam; Thailand; archaeology; nationalism



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## 1. Introduction

'New' Cold War studies have brought to the fore the role of cultural diplomacy as a weapon in the 'war of position' (to borrow Gramsci's expression) in which the United States and the Soviet Union engaged to make hegemonic, within and also without the international blocs they led, their respective national cultures—broadly understood as encompassing the domains of education, technology, and scientific research, as well as high and popular art.<sup>1</sup> This analytical perspective frames the Cold War as an essentially ideological contest—'a clash of belief systems in the absence of direct military hostilities' (Gould-Davies 2003, p. 212)—whose main theatre was postwar Europe. In Southeast Asia, however, the Cold War was anything but cold, witnessing the bloodiest armed confrontation of the second half of the twentieth century. Having originated in the anticolonial movement of the 1930s and 1940s, the war in Vietnam escalated during the 1960s into a regionally fought global conflict that saw the direct and indirect military involvement of the two superpowers and some of their allies, as well as the People's Republic of China (PRC), which increasingly competed with the USSR for the status of patron of anticolonial movements.

In this belligerent context, prehistoric archaeology unexpectedly made significant progress in the region as evidence of Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures emerged in both the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and in the Kingdom of Thailand, countries that stood on the opposite sides of the Cold War divide. Advances in archaeological knowledge were the outcome of cooperation between North Vietnamese and Soviet researchers and, conversely, Thai and American researchers—cooperation that complemented the massive military and economic aid the two superpowers showered onto their Southeast Asian allies as part of their effort to extend their influence in the region after the fall of the European colonial empires.

The colonial officer-scholars who first investigated Southeast Asia's prehistory at the turn of the twentieth century formulated the theory that the region had been a cultural

and technological backwater whose development was the result of Indian and especially Chinese influences. Underlying this appraisal was the theory of diffusionism, which arguably projected colonialism's unequal power relations and its underlying racist attitudes onto Southeast Asia's remote past (Peterson 1982–1983, p. 124). By the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, newly collected archaeological data had put diffusionism to rest and replaced it with an image of mainland prehistoric Southeast Asia as a region that had experienced autonomous technological development, and had possibly even influenced China.

The paradigm-shift in the knowledge of Southeast Asian prehistory in the late 1960s, at the peak of the Vietnam War, was described thus in the specialist American journal *Asian Perspectives*: 'Archaeology in Southeast Asia has in recent years developed into a battlefield where an ever-expanding inventory of revolutionizing data, allied with an ever more precise technical apparatus, forces our conventional conceptual system into a last stand retreat'.<sup>2</sup> Such warlike verbal imagery, while an apparent reflection of the context at the times, connoted the contiguity of military and archaeological undertakings in Cold War Southeast Asia, a contiguity that has thus far been overlooked (Peleggi 2016). The following quote from an archaeological report also shows awareness of the political implications of the new knowledge of the region's prehistory that was being advanced: 'The swift rise of interest in archaeology by local Southeast Asian peoples is most certainly bound up with the nationalism of recently independent nations and their determination to organize their own excavations and perhaps, quite literally, to dig up their own identities' (Gorman and Charoengwongsa 1976, p. 14). While controversial by today's standards, such a confidence in archaeology as a tool of decolonization and nation-building accorded to politic developments since the Bandung Conference of 1955, when former European colonies in Asia and Africa had made their collective debut on the world stage as independent nation-states (Lee 2010).

This article contributes to the cultural history of the Cold War in Asia by probing the serviceability of Soviet and American 'imperialist archaeologies'<sup>3</sup> to the superpowers' foreign policy agendas as well as to the nationalist agendas of their respective client states in Southeast Asia. The political and ideological relevance of archaeology is a topic much discussed in recent scholarship, especially in relation to nationalism and colonialism.<sup>4</sup> The politics of Southeast Asia's wartime archaeology, though a seemingly peripheral aspect of the cultural Cold War, demonstrates that the production of knowledge—involving the creation of ad hoc instruments and techniques as well as its practical and ideological applications, its divulgation to non-specialists, and the training of practitioners (Raj 2007, p. 10)—was a significant aspect of the pursuit of global hegemony by the superpowers and of nation-building by postcolonial states.

## 2. DRV and Thailand, 1954–1975: An Overview

During World War II, the government of French Indochina, which was loyal to the Vichy regime, collaborated with the Japanese occupation forces.<sup>5</sup> At the war's end, the Vietnamese nationalists, who had opposed both foreign governments, continued their struggle against the returning French, whose defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 marked the end of the First Indochina War. Following the partition of Vietnam along the 17th Parallel negotiated at the Geneva Peace Conference of 1954 between France, the DRV, and the State of Vietnam (i.e., South Vietnam), nationwide elections were scheduled for 1956. The non-recognition of the Geneva Accords by the US-supported Republic of Vietnam (RVN), which in 1955 replaced the State of Vietnam, led the DRV to abandon its diplomatic strategy for national reunification and support the guerrilla warfare waged in the south by the National Liberation Front (NLF), which had been formed in December 1960. Throughout the war the DRV received military and economic aid from both the Soviet Union and the PRC by managing an equidistant position between the two increasingly antagonistic communist powers.<sup>6</sup> However, the deepening of the Soviet–Chinese split at the end of the decade pushed the DRV to rely more heavily on Moscow on the calculation that the Soviets had a greater ability than the Chinese to provide the heavy weaponry and military

training made necessary by the escalation of the conflict, which had begun in 1965 with the American aerial bombing of DRV territory and troop deployment in the south, and climaxed with the Tet Offensive that the NLF launched in January 1968.

Soviet involvement in the Vietnam War began in 1965 with the visit to Hanoi of the USSR Premier, Alexei Kosygin (successor to the ousted Nikita Khrushchev), which resulted in the delivery of air defense missiles.<sup>7</sup> Aid by Moscow grew exponentially in the five key years of the war (1968 through 1972),<sup>8</sup> although such a growth did not produce a proportional increase in Soviet political influence over the DRV leadership: 'Moscow had no monopoly in Vietnam; its influence was shared with Beijing throughout the war' (Gaiduk 1996, p. 247). Historian I. V. Gaiduk shows that while Moscow supported the DRV militarily and economically, it also invited Hanoi to negotiate a peace with the RVN, wary of the war's possible nuclear escalation and its repercussions on the prospects of a USSR–USA detente. China regarded Vietnam as being historically within its sphere of control, but its support for the DRV until the mid-1960s was purely rhetorical; the radicalization of the PRC foreign policy driven by the Cultural Revolution, which started in 1966, redoubled by criticism of Soviet revisionism, motivated the provision of a considerable amount of military supplies to the DRV in 1967–68, just before Hanoi tightened its links to Moscow (Chen 1995; Zhai 2000). Disagreements with the PRC emerged about Hanoi's willingness to negotiate with Washington after the limited gains of the Tet Offensive. Though unsuccessful in hindering the Paris peace talks that started in May 1968 (prior to China's own rapprochement with the US), the PRC continued to provide Hanoi with military and food supplies throughout the end of the war; following a second peak in supplies in the early 1970s, relations between the two countries deteriorated rapidly and, by 1979, eventuated in the Sino–Vietnamese conflict (Shao and Zhang 2019, p. 551).

Thailand (Siam until 1938) escaped direct colonialization in the nineteenth century by making territorial and diplomatic concessions to France and Britain. During World War II, it sided with the Axis Powers. In the immediate postwar period, it formed a 'special relationship' with the United States, even as the first USSR legation in Southeast Asia opened in Bangkok in 1948 (Fineman 1997). Foreshadowed by its inclusion in the US Military Assistance Program at the start of the 1950s, Thailand's role as the Free World's bastion in mainland Southeast Asia was cemented in 1954 by the headquartering in Bangkok of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The Thai–US strategic alliance tightened at the end of the 1950s under Sarit Thanarat's despotic regime, which advertised itself domestically as the promoter of *kanpatthana* (development), a neologism which in the Thai state's Cold War rhetoric represented the antonym of *kommunit* (Chaloemtiarana 2007).

A key pawn in the US domino theory, Thailand was second only to the RVN in the amount of American military and economic aid received during the Vietnam War (USD 2 billion of the first and USD 650 million of the latter in the quarter century 1950–1975).<sup>9</sup> The main beneficiaries of US aid were the Provincial Police and the Border Patrol Police, created in the early 1950s with CIA assistance. In 1962, the Kennedy administration reaffirmed its 'firm intention' to protect Thailand's independence and, in response to the advances of the Pathet Lao army and the likelihood of border clashes, dispatched to Thailand 6500 marines—a deployment that laid the groundwork for the subsequent American involvement in Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> Also in 1962, the Thai government implemented its first five-year economic plan on the World Bank's recommendation (Keyes 2014, pp. 102–8). A separate chapter in this plan dealt with the northeastern region because of the worry that its economic underdevelopment and corrupted administrators might lead the local population, especially the sizable Lao and Vietnamese ethnic minorities (Ho Chi Minh had found refuge there during the 1930s (Goscha 1999)), to support to the clandestine Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). The filo-Chinese CPT, formed at the end of 1942 and briefly legal during 1946–1952, had its base in the northeast, where its guerrillas first clashed with government troops in August 1965.<sup>11</sup>

In the latter half of the 1960s, Thailand acquired a key role in the US air strategy in the Indochina War, as underscored by Lyndon Johnson's visit in October 1966 (the first

ever by an incumbent US president in the history of Thai–American relations), followed by Richard Nixon’s in August 1969. By then, some 48,000 American servicemen were stationed on Thai soil while some 11,000 Thai troops were serving in Vietnam, with possibly twice as many in Laos. The northeast hosted several airbases from where US planes took off on bombing missions to Laos and Cambodia; the aptly named Friendship Highway was expressly built to connect the military bases to Bangkok. The principal bases were in Nakhon Ratchasima, host to the 7th US Logistic Battalion, and Udon Thani, the frontline facility of the US 13th Air Force from 1964 until 1975, as well as the headquarters of the CIA-operated Air America, the façade civilian airline employed for covert operations in Laos (Conboy and Morrison 1995; Randolph 1986, pp. 50–53). The massive American presence in the kingdom caused resentment not only among leftists but also some conservatives, who blamed the Americans for the boom in the sex and drug trades. Thailand was in the grip of army and police strongmen until October 1973, when the junta resigned owing to mass demonstrations of students and workers that had the implicit endorsement of the throne. However, parliamentary governments over the following three years produced a political polarization that, in the wake of the communist takeovers in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia led to a bloody military coup d’état in October 1976 and the reintroduction of martial law.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. From Colonialist to Imperialist Archaeologies in Cold War Southeast Asia

The gathering of knowledge as a key aspect of colonial politics has been a sustained focus of scholarship since the 1990s (Baber 1996; Cohn 1996). At the turn of the twentieth century, the Orientalist societies established a century earlier by gentlemen-scholars gave way to institutes of knowledge that were part of the colonial administrative apparatus. Along with the Archaeological Survey of India, the most renowned of such institutes was the École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO), founded in Saigon in 1898 and headquartered since 1902 in Hanoi. Archaeology as practiced by the EFEO scholars was ancillary to the study and conservation of the monuments built by the Chams in central and southern Vietnam and, above all, by the Khmers in Cambodia (Clémentine-Ojha and Manguin 2001, pp. 26–36). Excavations were undertaken in colonial Vietnam by amateur archaeologists with the support of their colleagues in the Geological Service of Indochina. In the 1920s, the botanist Madeleine Colani discovered Mesolithic sites in Hoa Binh province, while the concurrent discovery of bronze artifacts, in particular large ritual drums, at the site of Dong Son, in the Red River Valley, had an even greater resonance. The various theories on Dong Son metallurgy that were proposed in the 1930s—notably at the First Congress of Prehistorians of the Far East, held in Hanoi in 1932—connected its origins to the migrations of Sinic (or, even more conjecturally, Slavic) populations into northern Vietnam, or, at best, as evidence of local craft techniques informed by Chinese Bronze Age technology.<sup>13</sup>

Archaeological research in the DRV was revived at the end of the first Indochina War under the leadership of the Institute of History and with President Ho Chi Minh’s blessing as well as the advice of specialists from the Soviet Union and China, which in the mid-1950s began cooperating extensively in Asia to propagate the communist ideology (Gould-Davies 2003, p. 204). Lacking a prior academic foundation, training in archaeology was initiated in the Department of History of Hanoi University by the Russian P. I. Boriskovsky, who taught the inaugural course from March 1960–March 1961 and whose lectures were the basis of the first Vietnamese textbook on archeology, published in 1962. Boriskovsky also participated in excavations and surveys, the findings of which were published in the Soviet Union but also promptly translated in the American journal *Asian Perspectives*, testifying to the exchange of knowledge across the two Cold War blocs.<sup>14</sup> A chair in archaeology was instituted at Hanoi University in 1967. The following year saw the establishment, at the height of the war, of the Institute of Archaeology with a mission explicitly linked to the ‘national war of resistance’ (its first director, Pham Huy Tong, was Ho’s former secretary); publication of the Institute’s journal, *Khao Co Hoc*, began in 1969. Within the framework of the Marxist–Leninist ideology that informed state cultural policy in the DRV, knowledge of



prehistory was closely shaped by the way archaeology was practiced and theorized in the Soviet Union (Cherry 2009, pp. 104–10).

Soviet archaeology originated in the early 1930s, when dedicated university departments were created and field research carried out under the auspices of the Institute for the History of Material Culture in Moscow. Unlike the descriptive or cultural history approach then dominant in European archaeology, Marxist archaeologists strived to reconstruct an excavation site's economic structure and social organization; technological progress as evinced from archaeological data was predictably explained as the result of changes in the forces and relations of production in accordance with the doctrine of historical materialism. Despite the ideological constraints they faced, Soviet archaeologists pioneered novel excavation methods and promoted the discipline's theoretical innovation by explaining cultural change as a result of the development of social systems rather than the migration of people and the diffusion of technology from its originating place. However, Stalin's political goal of uniting the Soviet Union's ethnically diverse populations forced archaeologists in the late 1930s to focus on tracing the origins and extolling the achievements of particular ethnic groups, such as the Eastern Slavs. Mirroring the abdication of internationalism in Soviet foreign policy, in the years before the Second World War archaeologists revived the outmoded concept of archaeological culture to link particular prehistoric cultures to specific ethnicities, whose distinctive traits archaeological data supposedly made manifest (Trigger 2006, pp. 326–44; Schnirelman 1995, pp. 120–38; Klejn 2012).

The preoccupation of archaeology in the DRV with locating the ancestral cultures of the Lac Viet people bore a clear analogy to the nationalist drive of prewar Soviet archaeology. Deeply rooted in the history of precolonial Vietnam, nationalism was at least as significant as the socialist ideology in the struggle for national reunification (Marr 1981). The galvanizing effect that archaeological discoveries made at the turn of the 1960s had on DRV society is suggested by the claim, no doubt hyperbolic, that 'almost everyone could help locate potential archaeological sites' (Khoach 1980, p. 24).

In the survey of Vietnamese prehistory Boriskovsky wrote after he returned home,<sup>15</sup> published by the USSR Academy of Science in 1966 and serialized in English translation within the next two years, he credited the new generation of academically trained researchers for the advances made in archaeological knowledge since the 1950s and praised the DRV's political and cultural institutions for employing archaeological collections in the education of the masses 'in the spirit of Marxism–Leninism'.<sup>16</sup> Boriskovsky praised the DRV legislation for ensuring—'like Soviet laws'—that finds recovered during infrastructure construction projects were salvaged and studied, as well as local villagers for providing key assistance to the identification and preservation of archaeological sites, and the scientific methods developed by Socialist countries, 'particularly the experience of Soviet archaeology'. By contrast, he stigmatized the scarcity of archaeological discoveries made in the south of Vietnam since 1954. Boriskovsky also acknowledged the achievements of French archaeology even as he castigated it as colonialist for excluding the Vietnamese from archaeological training and even from collaborating in excavations, and also for proposing explanatory theories that held 'progressive phenomena observable in the history of Vietnam during various periods ... as having been imported from without by conquerors' (i.e., the Chinese).<sup>17</sup>

French colonial archaeology exerted a crucial influence in Thailand as well, which, in this as in matters of administration, adapted colonial practice to domestic needs. The epigraphist George Coedès, in the employ of the Thai bureaucracy for a decade prior to his appointment in 1929 as the director of EFEO, was instrumental in setting up the Siamese Archeological Service, the task of which was to survey and draw the inventory of ancient monuments, and the National Museum in Bangkok, where artifacts were exhibited according to a sevenfold stylistic classification that Coedès devised together with Prince Damrong Rajanubhap, the country's chief antiquarian (Peleggi 2013). Prehistoric archaeology, bearing no obvious relevance to the historical narrative of Thailand delineated in the 1920s and pivoted on the settlement of the Thais in the Chaophraya Valley in the early centuries of the

second millennium, attracted little institutional interest before the 1960s. In his final book, originally published in France in 1962, Cœdès reaffirmed the theory of cultural diffusion by writing that ‘the autochthonous peoples of Indochina seem to have been lacking in creative genius and showed little aptitude for making progress without stimulus from outside’ (Cœdès 1966, p. 13). Southeast Asians’ alleged indebtedness to Indian and Chinese civilizations was reaffirmed in Cœdès’ introduction to the catalogue of an exhibition of Thai antiquities that toured nine European cities on the Western side of the Iron Curtain during 1963–1965 and was the follow-up to another such traveling exhibition that had toured the United States during 1960–1962.<sup>18</sup> These cultural diplomatic initiatives pandered to growing curiosity in the West for Thailand as an exotic but westernized kingdom, a curiosity triggered by the seven-month state visit to Europe and the United States made in 1960 by the young King Bhumibol (born in Cambridge, Massachusetts) and his newly wed wife, Sirikit. The visit had been engineered by Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat as a public-relations stunt to legitimize his despotic government.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike Indochina, the kingdom of Thailand, formally independent, had never been an object of colonial knowledge. Washington’s Cold War strategy of containing communism in Southeast Asia required, however, knowledge both of the layered bureaucratic elite and the provincial peasantry. In the course of the 1960s, American social scientists articulated discursively the impediments that Thailand faced in becoming a full-fledged modern state, ‘democratic and equalitarian, scientific, economically advanced and sovereign’, in the words of modernization theorist Edward Shils (Gilman 2003, p. 1). Modernization theory, ‘the most explicit and systematic blueprint ever created by Americans for reshaping foreign societies’ (Gilman (2003, p. 5), had another key proponent in Walt W. Rostow; his *A Proposal: Key to an Affective Foreign Policy* (1958), coauthored with Max F. Millikan, advocated ‘a significant expansion of American development aid for the newly independent nations of Asia and Africa’ (Engerman 2003, p. 281; Latham 1998).

American academic knowledge of Thailand can be considered neocolonial on two counts: it foisted a discourse on the kingdom’s political and sociocultural constitution on Thai technocrats, who were being trained in ever larger number in the United States thanks to USAID and Fulbright scholarships; it also concurrently informed aid and counterinsurgency projects run by the Thai government under the supervision of US agencies.<sup>20</sup> Several anthropologists collaborated with the US Department of Defense’s Advanced Research Project Agency (ARPA), which ran a field office in Bangkok from 1961 to 1972, in the development of projects designed to counter communist insurgency in the northeast. The denunciation of their activities from the pages of the *New York Review of Books* in November 1970 caused the notorious ‘Thailand Controversy’ within the American Anthropological Association, which as early as 1966 had issued a condemnation of the US government’s military involvement in Vietnam. The pamphlet lamented that ‘the [US] government is less interested in the economic, social or political causes of discontent than in techniques of neutralizing individual or collective protest’ (Jorgensen and Wolf 1970; Hinton 2002; Price 2016, pp. 324–42; Wakin 1992).

Processual or ‘New’ Archaeology, the first archaeological theory to emerge from America, was formulated at the turn of the 1960s as the twin of anthropology (European archaeology was, on the contrary, conceived as a historical discipline); by the turn of the 1970s, Processual Archaeology had achieved a predominant position among American prehistorians.<sup>21</sup> Bruce Trigger charges that New Archaeology, as an expression of postwar American imperialism, shared with the social sciences the ambition of producing ‘objective, ethically neutral generalizations that were useful for the management of modern societies.’ (Trigger 2006, p. 407). The emphasis placed on cross-cultural generalizations minimized the importance ‘of national traditions and of anything that stand[ed] in the way of American economic activity and political influence’ (Trigger 1984, p. 366). New Archaeology reflected, thus, the universalism of modernization theory, for which national character was a remnant of the past that the process of modernization would make redundant (Engerman 2003, p. 280). New Archaeology was, thus, no less ideological than Marxist archaeology: both

claimed scientific validity and a commitment to progress in the Cold War context of cultural and scientific competition between the United States and the USSR, and both were exported to countries in their respective spheres of hegemony. However, New Archaeology's functionalism and Marxist archaeology's historicism produced different interpretations of archaeological data relating to Southeast Asian prehistory, which, in turn, were not equally congruent with the nationalist narratives of Thailand and Vietnam.

#### 4. Unearthing Prehistory in Wartime Southeast Asia

In both Thailand and North Vietnam, fragments of Neolithic earthenware first emerged accidentally in the late 1950s in analogous circumstances: road and canal digging. After initial finds in Phung Nguyen, a village north of Hanoi, excavations were undertaken during 1959–61 at a number of sites in the Red River Delta area. In addition to decorated potshards, stone and ceramic tools (axes, chisels, arrowheads) and body ornaments were recovered, but not bronze objects; only traces of slag resulting from the smelting of ore were found. The finds were published domestically by the archaeologist in charge of digging, Nguyen Van Nghia, and later publicized by Boriskovsky, who described Phung Nguyen as a long-inhabited settlement of agriculturists who also domesticated animals ([Boriskovsky 1970c](#), p. 231). Excavation at nearby sites revealed the spread of a Phung Nguyen culture that was dated to ca. 2000–1500 BCE, hence, considerably earlier than the site of Dong Son (ca. 500 BCE), first excavated in the 1930s. Colonial scholars had taken the Dong Son Bronze Age culture as showing the influence of Chinese metallurgy, but based on the stratigraphic excavations carried out in the early 1960s, when large burial sites were revealed, and typological comparison with artifacts unearthed elsewhere in north Vietnam, the Dong Son culture was reappraised as the culmination of an autonomous technological development initiated with the Phung Nguyen culture.

Over the course of the decade, DRV archaeologists located two other archaeological cultures, Dong Dau and Go Mun, which they regarded as being chronologically intermediate between Phung Nguyen and Dong Son. Unfolding along a four-stage continuum spanning the Neolithic to the Bronze Age, the prehistorical cultural sequence of North Vietnam was mobilized by the DRV historians to authenticate the semi-legendary kingdom of Van Lang and its ruling dynasty, the Hung, mentioned in fourteenth-century Vietnamese annals, the historicity of which had been dismissed by French scholars. The territorial contiguity of the four archaeological cultures of Phung Nguyen, Dong Dau, Go Mun, and Dong Son fit the nationalist belief in an ancestral Vietnamese territory and culture; making the Bronze Age coterminous with the Van Lang kingdom of the Hung kings also buttressed claims about the existence at a very early stage in Vietnamese history of a state federating 'fifteen tribes'. Of major ideological import was the thesis, based on the typological and stylistic analysis of newly excavated artifacts, that the whole Bronze Age cultural sequence was autochthonous and predated the beginning of Chinese domination in 111 BCE.<sup>22</sup>

In Thailand, too, the early 1960s saw the rise of prehistoric archaeology. After the Thai–Danish expedition of 1960–1962, in 1963, the University of Hawaii initiated, with Thailand's Fine Arts Department (FAD), the Archaeological Salvage Program, funded by the National Science Foundation (a US federal agency), to investigate sites in Northeast Thailand that were to be flooded under the Khong River Basin Development Project. The latter was one of several large-scale infrastructures built to foster the Green Revolution, a major facet of the non-belligerent Cold War in Asia.<sup>23</sup> The finds of the Archaeological Salvage Program, whose conclusion in 1968 coincided with the escalation of the conflict in Indochina, supported the claim that the Khorat Plateau spanning western Laos and Northeast Thailand was home to one of the world's oldest Bronze Age cultures ([Solheim 1968](#); [Youdi 1970](#)).

Further support for this claim came from the finds of two excavation seasons conducted in 1974–1975, during the final years of the Second Indochina War, in the northeastern village of Ban Chiang by a FAD–University of Pennsylvania Museum mission with financial support from the National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation. Ban Chiang lies

at a short distance from the provincial capital of Udon Thani, host to a large US airbase, and a mere 80 kms from the border with Laos, where the civil war between the Pathet Lao army and American-supported government forces was raging.

Fragments of Neolithic pottery had first surfaced in Ban Chiang in 1957 during road construction but had aroused no great interest. It was only a decade later that FAD officials in Bangkok took a serious interest in newly discovered fragments that were brought to their attention by Stephen B. Young, a Harvard undergraduate and the son of the US ambassador to Thailand in 1961–1963 (during Sarit's regime), who was conducting fieldwork in Ban Chiang on the alleged apolitical stance of villagers, which American analysts thought would make them vulnerable to communist propaganda. Young, in an interview given to a Bangkok newspaper in 2009, reminisced that at the time of his sojourn in Ban Chiang the only communication devices available were battery-powered radios, although the strongest radio signal came from a station broadcasting 'Chinese communist propaganda'.<sup>24</sup> The sudden popularity of Ban Chiang's prehistoric pottery caused much illegal digging by local villagers and export of archaeological objects via the Udon Thani airbase for resale to American museums and private collectors (Gorman 1982; Thosarat 2001). In March 1972, the Thai royal couple paid a visit to remote but now internationally famous Ban Chiang. Seeking to dissuade villagers from further illegal digging, King Bhumibol asserted that 'this kind of discovery and information would be important to people all over the world and not merely to the people of Thailand' (Charoengwongsa 1982, p. 13; Youdi 1972). The following July, an act widening the scope of the existing legislation on the export of antiquities was promulgated by the ruling anti-communist military junta that was to be overthrown in October 1973 by unprecedented mass protests.

Taking off in this turbulent political climate, the Ban Chiang mission had a more egalitarian structure than earlier joint archaeological expeditions.<sup>25</sup> Its co-directors were Pisit Charoengwongsa, a junior FAD official, and Chester Gorman, an anthropologist at the University of Pennsylvania, who had been second-in-charge in the Archaeological Salvage Program and was reportedly hostile to US military personnel stationed in the area.<sup>26</sup> The mission's field crew included specialists from the United States, Britain, and New Zealand, as well as archaeology students from Thailand and other filo-American countries in the region; several of them, including Pisit, later enrolled for postgraduate degrees in American universities, according to an old colonial pattern whereby local elites were educated in the metropole. Thailand's position of neocolonial minority vis-à-vis the United States is also demonstrated both by the massive illegal export via the US airbases of archaeological artifacts, most of which made it to museums in the United States,<sup>27</sup> and by the legal transfer of 18 tons of excavated material to the University of Pennsylvania Museum, where such material (never formally acquisitioned) remains to this day as a long-term loan from the Thai government.<sup>28</sup>

In their preliminary report on the Ban Chiang mission, Gorman and Pisit proposed a tentative chronology of the Ban Chiang cultural sequence spanning 3600 BCE–250 BCE, which they predicted would cause 'a major revision of the Bronze Age prehistory of East Asia, perhaps of even all of the Old World'. Earlier diffusionist accounts of civilization in Southeast Asia were countered by finds documenting 'a technically innovative and amazingly advanced society . . . attest[ing] to a long period of economic prosperity, security and stability' (Gorman and Charoengwongsa 1976, p. 17). This image of the Southeast Asian Bronze Age contrasted sharply to the conditions of the region in the mid-1970 after two decades of conflict. In introducing the report, the editor of the University of Pennsylvania Museum's journal suggested that cultural transmission might have followed a reverse path to that commonly assumed, i.e., from Thailand to China (Muhly 1976, p. 12).

In the immediate aftermath of the American retreat from Indochina, the theory, later disproved, of a Southeast Asian Bronze Age that was a thousand years older than China's, and as old as (if not older than) Mesopotamia's, attracted considerable international interest.<sup>29</sup> In 1982, the Smithsonian Institution mounted the itinerant exhibition *Ban Chiang: Discovery of a Lost Bronze Age*, which toured 12 American cities in the course of 1986 and



stopped en route in Singapore for one more year, before landing in 1988 at the Ban Chiang Museum, where it was installed in a new wing built with funds provided by the local John F. Kennedy Foundation (White et al. 1982). Domestically, however, nationalist pride on being the world's earliest Bronze Age conflicted with the disdain in which central Thais held the northeast, a Lao region that Bangkok had colonized over the course of the twentieth century. In fact, the claim of an early, indigenous Bronze Age culture was hard to reconcile with the nationalist narrative pivoted on the settlement of Tai-speaking populations from south-western China in the Central Plains during the early centuries of the second millennium CE. Eventually, neither an ethnic nor a historical link could be established between those migrants and the prehistoric technologists of the Khorat Plateau, whose ethnic identity and provenance archaeologists have still not been established with any certainty; the Phuan, the majority ethnic group in the Ban Chiang area in the 1970s, were a Tai-speaking group that had settled there as late as the eighteenth century and—ironically enough—possessed no metallurgical skills (Sangvichien 1974).

### 5. Southeast Asian Prehistoric Archaeology after the Cold War

Reviewing the state of the art of Vietnamese archeology five years after the end of war, the American Donn Bayard, who had excavated in Thailand's Northeast, wrote: 'The view presented is thus essentially similar to that from Thailand: a largely indigenous development of technology and society . . . cereal agriculture was present in the area well before the traditional date of 2500 BC. Similarly, the evidence for bronze metallurgy before 3000 BC is becoming more and more impressive' (Bayard 1980, p. 98). Boriskovsky had reached similar conclusions as early as 1966 by noting that archaeological evidence for 'the local roots of the principal primeval cultures in Vietnam' confirmed American anthropologist Lauriston Sharp's thesis on the Southeast Asian Neolithic as 'fundamentally independent', having no archaeological, anthropological, or linguistic association to the mass immigration of populations who possessed better technologically skills. Boriskovsky did acknowledge that migrations and ethnic intermixing had influenced the cultural makeup of early mainland Southeast Asia, 'but all within the confines and against the background of the distinctive local development of culture'.<sup>30</sup>

Despite its theoretical grounding in the Cold War's rival ideologies, knowledge of prehistory produced in wartime Southeast Asia put cultural diffusionism to rest by crediting the region's prehistoric inhabitants, belittled by colonial archaeologists, for developing metallurgy autonomously. The rejection of colonial knowledge's civilizational hierarchies, topped by India and China, may be seen as being consistent with the purported objective that both the United States and the Soviet Union pursued in Southeast Asia: to empower postcolonial nations by proving that they were the artificers of their past (and, thus, implicitly, the masters of their future). This rhetoric masked the ideological and geopolitical interests of the superpowers in the region, which clashed in the Vietnam War. Exchange of research finds between Soviet and American archaeologists about discoveries made, respectively, in the DRV and Thailand can be taken as further evidence that scientific communication was an aspect of the Cold War's cultural diplomacy, whereby the superpowers exchanged ideas 'in order to weaken the ideological grip of the other and thus change its intentions'.<sup>31</sup> In the case examined here, however, a quadrangular dynamic of knowledge production was at play, which complicates answering the question posed by Kapil Raj with regard to the transmission and appropriation of knowledge in colonial spaces of intercultural encounter: 'Was this a simple process of diffusion and acceptance or was there an active process of reception and reconfiguration of the circulating knowledges and skills?' (Raj 2007, p. 10)

The unearthing of the Southeast Asian Bronze Age was among the most significant archaeological discoveries of the second half of the twentieth century; however, it was of political utility to the Thai and North Vietnamese states only insofar as it supported claims of cultural continuity by both states pivoted on the agency of a dominant ethnic group. In fact, even today, the population of both Thailand and Vietnam includes several

ethnic minorities. Marxist archaeology, primarily concerned with the social and economic organization of ancient and prehistoric societies, was reconfigured in the DVR to serve Vietnamese nationalism by using evidence of the Neolithic and Bronze Age culture of the Red River Delta to authenticate a semi-legendary kingdom that was allegedly the first instantiation of a centralized Vietnamese state. On the contrary, New Archaeology's cross-cultural generalizations and disregard for national cultures destabilized the nationalist construct of 'Thai-land' (*prathet thai*), for the latter had no apparent connection to the Bronze Age culture of the peripheral Khorat Plateau. The incongruity of prehistoric Ban Chiang within the nationalist narrative was underscored by the tepid domestic reaction to the site's inscription in 1992 on the coveted UNESCO World Heritage List in comparison to the nationalist burst caused by the inscription, one year earlier, of Thailand's 'ancient capitals', Sukhothai and Ayutthaya.

Archaeological investigation of Southeast Asian prehistory has progressed considerably since 1975, producing revisions and ongoing debates. By the late 1980s, more accurate dating of archaeological objects as well as human and animal remains invalidated the hypothesis of a local Bronze Age older than China's; the beginning of the Ban Chiang Bronze Age is now dated to 1500 BCE, and even later by some.<sup>32</sup> Archaeologists have nevertheless reaffirmed the innovative character of Southeast Asian metallurgy by shifting the emphasis from its chronological primacy to its technological distinctiveness (White 1988, pp. 175–81). Such a proposition was well suited to the expectations of economic growth the end of the Cold War generated in Southeast Asia at the turn of the 1990s, expectations that were encapsulated by the Thai government of the day in the slogan, 'Let's turn the battlefields of Indochina into marketplaces'. In 1995, exactly 20 years after the end of the Indochina War, Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), followed by Laos in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. Following in the wake of the knowledge produced during colonialism and then the Cold War, accounts-in-the-making of Southeast Asian prehistory are likely to reflect the post-Cold War climate of regional cooperation.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Among others see (Barnhisel 2015; McDaniel 2015; Saunders 2013). An early review of this growing historiography by Osgood (2002). The concept of 'war of position' was articulated in the 1930s by Antonio Gramsci (2007, p. 168).
- <sup>2</sup> Kaneko (1970, p. 3). Kaneko's piece was an obituary for Robert von Heine-Geldern, a founding figure of Southeast Asian archaeology and proponent of diffusionism). By 1968, some 540,000 US ground troops were deployed in Vietnam. Fatal casualties, as recorded in DCAS, amounted to 16,899 in 1968 and 11,780 in 1969: <<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics>> (accessed on 20 March 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> 'Imperialist or world-oriented archaeology is associated with a small number of states that enjoy or have exerted dominance over large parts of the world. . . . [Its practitioners] engage in much research in other countries and play a major role in training students who find employment abroad.' Trigger (1984, p. 363). Trigger identifies in his article three imperialist archaeologies: British, Soviet and American.
- <sup>4</sup> Political archaeology has come under considerable scrutiny, starting with an article by Fowler (1987). See, among others, (Kane 2003; Kohl and Fawcett 1995). On Southeast Asia, see (Cherry 2009; Glover 1999, 2003; Peleggi 2002).
- <sup>5</sup> The Indochinese Union, formed in 1887, was a composite administrative construct. Vietnam was divided into three administrative regions: Tonkin in the north and Annam in the center were administered as protectorates, while Cochinchina was a formal colony. Cambodia and Laos, too, were protectorates whose monarchies were maintained as puppet institutions, such as the Nguyen dynasty of Vietnam. See (Brocheux and Hemery 2010).
- <sup>6</sup> Chinese sources place the total value of the PRC economic and military aid to Hanoi throughout the war in the region of USD 180–200 million (Khoo 2010, p. 25).
- <sup>7</sup> A CIA memorandum dated 23 February 1966 suggested that, in addition to political convenience, the Soviet Bloc's 'limited commitment of resources in support of the North Vietnamese' might 'also reflect in part the DRV's limited capacity to absorb

material aid, particularly complex modern weaponry'. Released CIA memo: Soviet Bloc Aid to the DRV: Evidence of Tokenism and Dissension (RDP78T02025R00080002004-6), 8–10.

US intelligence's estimate of Soviet aid to Vietnam from 1968 to 1973 as exceeding USD 3.1 billion (USD 1.765 billion in economic aid and USD 1.395 billion in military aid at the 1974 USD value) appears greatly exaggerated. Soviet aid to North Vietnam: <[www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/vietnam/hist-2nd-indochina-ussr.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/vietnam/hist-2nd-indochina-ussr.htm)> (accessed 20 March 2022).

On this aspect see (Randolph 1986). Aid figures from Girling (1981, pp. 235–36) and Kislenko (2004, pp. 65–96). The first amount included USD 940 million for defense and security, USD 250 for the construction of airbases and USD 760 million for the equipment and operating costs of the Thai troops. Some USD 850 million were additionally pumped into the Thai economy by US servicemen on rest and recreation leave from Vietnam.

The statement was contained in a joint communiqué issued by the State Department during the visit of the Thai minister of Foreign Affairs, Thanat Khoman. Kislenko (2003, pp. 224–25).

Surprisingly enough, there is no historical study of the CPT in English; a brief overview in (Peleggi 2007, pp. 127–34). A historical sketch can be found in the propaganda publication, *The Road to Victory* (1978), available on Internet Archive: <<https://archive.org/details/TheRoadToVictoryDocumentsFromTheCommunistPartyOfThailand>> (accessed on 20 March 2023).

Among the analyses of the democratic interlude 1973–76 and its aftermath, see (Anderson 1977; Morell and Samutvanija 1981). Cherry (pp. 94–101). The papers delivered to the 1932 congress were published in (*Præhistorica Asiae Orientalis: Premier Congrès des Préhistoriens d'Extrême-Orient* 1932).

Boriskovsky (1962). This was the combined, abridged translation of two field reports Boriskovsky had published in *Soviet Archaeology* and in *Herald of the USSR Academy of Science* in 1962.

Back in the Soviet Union, Borisvosky succeeded his mentor as head of the Paleolithic Section of the Institute for the History of Material Culture and as professor in the Department of Archaeology at Leningrad University. Klejn (2012, p. 343).

Boriskovsky (1966). The English translation of this book was published in seven installments in *Soviet Anthropology and Archaeology* between 1968 and 1970 (Boriskovsky 1968a, 1968b, 1969a, 1969b, 1970a, 1970b).

Boriskovsky (1968a, pp. 26–28). Boriskovsky acknowledged the discovery in the RVN of a Neolithic site (Hang Gon) near Saigon and the research carried out in the late 1950s by the French ethnographers Pierre B. Lafont and George Condominas as well as the Swedish archaeologist Olov Janse, who in the 1940s had conducted the first scientific excavations at the Dong Son site.

In Europe, the exhibition was on view from February 1963 to May 1965 in the cities of Bonn (West Germany), The Hague, London, Paris, Brussels, Florence, and Copenhagen; in the United States from October 1960 to March 1962 in Bloomington (Indiana), New York, Boston, Toledo (Ohio), Seattle, San Francisco, and Honolulu.

The tour was promoted by Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat as part of the royalist revival he promoted to legitimize his authoritarian regime. In Europe, Thailand's royal couple met with peers in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia (as well as republican heads of states and even the Pope); the hallmark of the visit to the United States was, however, the meeting with pop icons, such as Elvis Presley and Benny Goodman. In New York, the Thai royals assisted to the Broadway musical *The King and I*, based on the memoirs of Anna Leonowens, English governess to the court of King Mongkut, played on stage (and later on the screen) by Yul Brinner, which was (and still is) officially banned in Thailand.

Typical works include Riggs (1966) and Jacobs (1971). On American universities' involvement in Cold War research, see (Chomsky et al. 1997; Robin 2001).

For the formulation of the New Archaeology, see (Wiley and Philips 1958; Binford 1962). See also (Smith 2004, p. 39).

Cherry (2009, pp. 118–22). The thesis of Van Lang as a federation of 'fifteen tribes' (possibly meaning various ethnicities, not just Vietnamese people) was proposed in article by Nguyen Link and Hoang Hung that was published in March 1968 in *Tap San Nghien Cuu Lich Su* (Journal of Historical Research), no. 108.

The phrase 'Green Revolution' was coined in 1968 by William S. Gaud, the then director of USAID, the national agency for international development, as the semantic opposite of Asian and Latin American 'red' revolutions, whose threat the 'Green Revolution' exorcised through the promise of agricultural plenitude. For a critical appraisal, see (Perkins 1997).

The interview was published on the English-language Bangkok daily, *The Nation* (10 September 2009).

Elizabeth Lyons, a Bangkok-based American art historian who had helped setting up the Ban Chiang expedition, reminisced a decade later: 'The University Museum team lived in a Thai house in the village, ate local food, worked together in the hot sun, drunk cold beer together in the evening and argued out the problems together. *Perfectly normal American procedure*, and understood and welcomed by the thoroughly independent, *never colonized Thais*.' Lyons and Rainey (1982, p. 10; emphasis added).

Charles Higham, written communication to the author (14 July 2016).

In November 2014, 554 artifacts originally removed from Ban Chiang that had been acquired by the Bowers Museum, in Orange County, California, were repatriated as a result of a non-prosecution agreement between parties. The handover ceremony took place at the Bangkok National Museum in the presence of the Thai Minister of Culture, the FAD Director-General, and the United States *chargé d'affaires*. National News Bureau of Thailand (2014).

In 2008, Joyce White, Chet's Gorman doctoral student who after his untimely death in 1981 took on the task of dating excavation finds in the laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, was quoted verbatim in a *New York Times* article as remembering

crates of material shipped from Ban Chiang, which included ‘small finds—bronze bracelets, clay rollers . . . and bags and bags of broken pottery’. Finkel (2008): <<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17/arts/design/17fink.html>> (accessed on 20 March 2023).

- 29 Articles on Ban Chiang appeared on the *New York Times* (8 June 1975), the *Washington Post* (8 November 1975), and *Time Magazine* (31 May 1976), as well as on the British magazine, *New Scientist* (10 June 1976).
- 30 Boriskovsky (1970c, p. 263). Boriskovsky cited here the Russian translation (1963) of an essay by Sharp, who had been conducting field research in Thailand since the late 1940s and was among the anthropologists that came under fire during the ‘Thailand controversy’ for collaborating with US government agencies.
- 31 Gould-Davies (2003, p. 196; original emphasis). Metallic finds from the Archaeological Salvage Program’s excavations in Northeast Thailand were sent for analysis to the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences. See (I. R. Selimkhanov 1979).
- 32 White (1986). In disagreement with White is Charles Higham, emeritus of the University of Otago, New Zealand, who was a number of the Ban Chiang mission in 1975–76. See (Higham 1893, 2014).

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