

Detectives of the Past (Rasmi Shoocongdej)

By Piyaporn Wongruang

Nation, published on February 14, 2002

<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/option/print.php?newsid=6575>

Archeologist Rasmi Shoocongdej finds fulfilment in reading messages and finding answers that have long baffled mankind deep under the earth. The last light of day has gone and the sky is beginning to get dark. The building housing the Department of Archaeology of Silpakorn University is also dark, except for one room at the farthest corner. There, Assistant Professor Rasmi Shoocongdej is still busy, working her way through a huge pile of papers that includes student tests. She knows she will be spending many more hours in this quiet room, burning the midnight oil, if she is to complete her tasks. Arriving home late and getting up early is Rasmi's way of making every minute of her teaching work count. It is a practice to which she has adhered for the last 10 years. But her dedication is not entirely due to her career as a lecturer specialising in prehistoric archaeology, but also to the other cap she wears: that of an archaeologist.

After Rasmi finishes her course work, she changes out of her formal outfit into pants and a T-shirt. She picks up the small backpack filled with personal stuff, including a hand trowel, and heads off upcountry searching for artefacts buried deep. Her passion is for all things prehistoric. She has travelled to many remote areas to dig for hidden treasures. As a youngster she scoured the long beach along the Mekong River in Chiang Rai's Chiang Kong district.

Her passion has also led her to New Mexico and Arizona where, under the scorching sun, she has found fragments of bison's bones and stone tools, and the Euphrates River in Turkey where she lent her willing hands to a friend's project. "Hidden prehistoric treasures like stone implements have always impressed me, especially since my student days," says Rasmi. "They can't be easily understood. Many fields of knowledge are needed for interpreting the messages of our ancestors hidden inside the treasures. I used to wonder how archaeologists knew whether they were man-made materials or not. Who used them or how - that kind of thing. I haven't thought of anything else since."

Rasmi compares prehistoric archaeology to forensic science: both disciplines search for the truth, using clues to construct the evidence. "We are the detectives of the past," says Rasmi "We search for the truth behind the artefacts, to find the answers to such questions as who lived at the site, their age and why they lived there, among others. To be able to do this, we need multi-disciplinary skills to interpret data. Archaeologists have to study many subjects ranging from geology, anatomy, as well as ancient languages in the case of historic archaeology."

At present, Rasmi is working on a two-year project in Mae Hong Son's Pang Mapa district that is being supported by the Thailand Research Fund. This highland archaeology is quite rare in the Kingdom. Rasmi explains that highland archaeology is the study of the social and cultural development of the ancient peoples who lived on the mountains, on foothills, and in the valleys.

For the project, she determines the height at 500 metres above sea level to specify the boundary of her study area. This level, she says, distinguishes the different environments of the two areas above and beneath it. "I dream of visiting the archaeological site of Machoo Puchoo in Peru located in the Andes," says Rasmi "This project is also concentrating on the highlands. It's a pioneer project and complicated. However, if we can make people understand this, I think it's worth trying."

Rasmi says highland archaeology is often considered a marginal field, as most archaeological studies have concentrated on civilisations in fertile river basins. In the mountainous Northern region, there are a few archaeological sites from the prehistoric period such as Obb Luang in Chiang Mai's Hod district and the better known site in Lampang province where fragments of Homo Erectus were found. In Mae Hong Son, archaeological studies have been undergoing since 1970.

A great deal of archaeological evidence has been found that tells the researcher that human life here existed more than 10,000 years ago. More importantly, several ancient coffins dating back 2,000 years were also uncovered in this area. Unfortunately, these studies were conducted based specifically on the interests of the researchers involved and the individual work was not compiled so as to create a full picture of the lives of the people who inhabited the area.

Rasmi expects that once she has completed her current project a clearer picture will emerge. The data will cover the relation between man and the environment, all the more interesting as there were a number of major climate changes in the late Pleistocene (11,000-18,000 years) and Holocene (2,500-10,000 years) eras. She adds, with a wry grin, that projects of this kind are rare in the Kingdom and only very few studies about the environment in archaeological context exist.

Rasmi says that without a proper understanding of the environment, we may never be able to ascertain - or at least make an educated guess - on why people chose to settle on river plains in the historical context. She points to human excesses that have caused large areas of land to be abandoned in the past, and that this can happen again in the present. She also argues that society today needs to learn about natural resource management. Since March last year, Rasmi is often seen walking the steep mountain trails in Pang Mapa district along with some 10 fellow archaeologists and environmentalists.

Between March and August, the team conducted a series of surveys of river basins in Rang Luang, Lang, and Pam. They found 10 archaeological sites in those areas, two of which were selected as samples for an intensive study through excavation due to their rich archaeological value. During the cold spell in November, Rasmi started the excavation works on the first site, Ban Rai. Over the mountaintop behind the village was a large open space with a 200-metre cliff on one side. It was once a large cave.

The roof had collapsed long ago. Around 30 pillars and log-like artefacts later recognised as ancient coffins dating back 1,200 to 2000 years were found, as well as such other evidence as stone tools, pocket-knives, fragments of animal bones, ash layers, a human skeleton, and wall paintings.

To Rasmi, these findings provide evidence that at least two separate civilisations have lived in the area. The first group, born more than 10,000 years ago, led a nomadic lifestyle, while the later generation to settle there used the area as their burial grounds between 1,200 and 2,000 years ago. A sense of self Next summer, Rasmi and her team will start excavating the second site at Lod Cave. For this project, she will be assisted by some of her students. She laughs as she recounts how certain of the youngsters in her class remind her of herself in her youth, digging the ground with the same enthusiasm and passion.

After graduating from Silpakorn's faculty of archaeology in the '80s, Rasmi was recruited by the Fine Arts Department to work on prehistoric archaeological sites in Kanchanaburi. When stone tools were uncovered and she found herself unable to do more than identify them, she decided to save her cash and head off to the States. "At that time, no university in Thailand was offering a Master's course in prehistoric archaeology and I was anxious to learn more," she says. "One stone tool can tell so many stories about societies and the environment." She was accepted by the University of Michigan and during the course was given the opportunity of assisting on the excavation of some archaeological sites located in the Southwest of the US. To maintain hearth and home, she worked part-time as a librarian and applied for scholarships. "It's was a good lesson about life," says Rasmi "The tough conditions forced me to learn how to manage my own life. What kept me going was the hunger for more knowledge on archaeology. I often tell my students that anything in life is possible. They have to work to attain their dreams. If the dream is important enough, then they mustn't be afraid to chase it. They need role models, need to understand how others have fought for success. It is never easy."

Rasmi returned Thailand in 1987 and started her career as a lecturer in Silpakorn University. Five years later, she returned to the University of Michigan to pursue her doctorate degree. Rasmi says that archaeological knowledge can be applied to a variety of occupations. But to survive as a specialist, especially one dealing with the prehistoric period, demands a great deal of determination. Chances are rare and the Fine Arts Department's policy is based more on unearthing information on various historical eras than the prehistoric. "There are more jobs available on historical sites such as restoration projects and if student have knowledge about the historic period, they have a better chance of surviving.

Knowing about stone tools is hopeless in terms of survival. They need more sophisticated knowledge in order to survive in this field." Bridging the gap Rasmi is trying to bridge the gap. She hopes that the project will help her student learn the hands-on processes that will allow them to work professional archaeologists, surveying, excavating, collecting, interpreting data, and writing documents. "After going through this process, I think they will be able to start their own projects in the future and become independent archaeologists," she says. "And, unlike in the past, we will have new faces in this field."

There is little doubt that Rasmi will be playing a major role in developing and refining these "new faces". Although archaeology focusing on the prehistoric period has never made much of an impact on the general public, she feels that knowledge will help the new generation to associate with the past. "It helps us to understand ourselves better," says Rasmi. "Mae Hong Son has been in existence for tens of thousands of years and look how much it has evolved. I firmly believe that history does repeat itself and thus we can learn from ancient societies." Textbooks available in Thailand contain little on the prehistoric period, although a great deal of information is given on historical events. "Once I discovered the stories hidden inside the stone tools, it connected me with them and I want to pass this feeling on," says Rasmi. "There are still many questions remaining about artefacts in Southeast Asia but it still has a marginal status in the world of archaeology. Therefore, the region should be promoted among today's students as the ideal ground for research."

But while Rasmi is content - for now - to make new discoveries in the Asia-Pacific region, she still dreams about travelling to Egypt and Peru for digs. "They have such great archaeological sites," she says with a wistful smile.

Rasmi Shoocongdej