

ACCENT *Thai*

OCTOBER 1993 VOLUME VI NO.X

80 Baht

**BEYOND
BANGKOK**

Go East
young man!

**DANGER OF
THE 21ST
CENTURY**

Where have
all the forests
gone?

**ANGKOR
WAT**

Cambodia's
ancient
past revisited

**METEOR
MAN**

The world of
tektites and
dinosaur
droppings

Dinosaur Droppings & Stones from the **Sky**

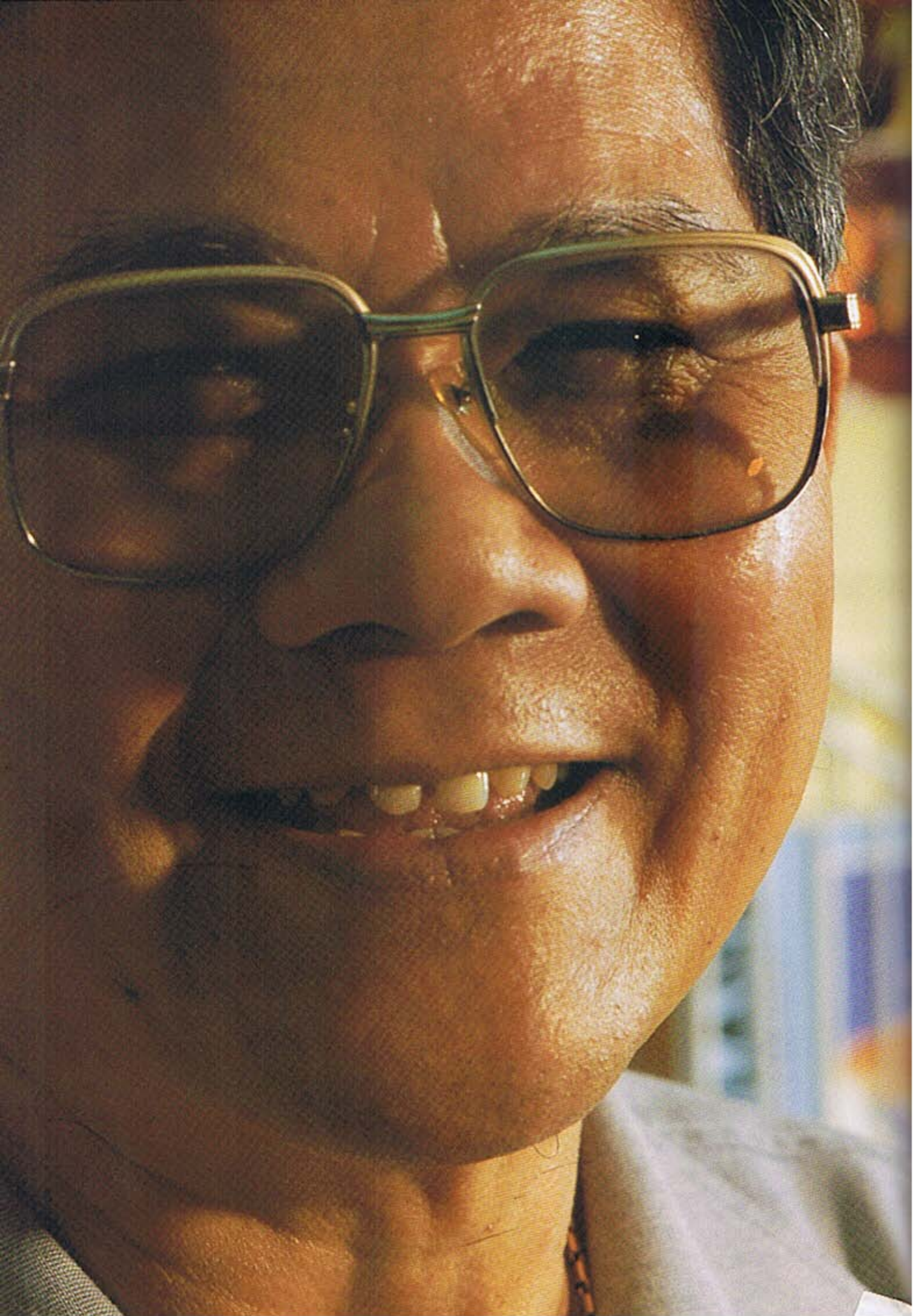
INTERVIEW: Paul O'Connor



Behind an unimposing shop-front on **Charoen Krung Road** lies one of the most interesting shops in the capital. Here, at the modestly named '**House of Gems**', **Mr. Boonman Poonyathiro** has collected the most unusual collection of tektites, fossils and geological samples in the Kingdom.







Born in Chantaburi Province, Mr. Boonman spent five years at University in India (graduating in Oriental Studies) before going to England to work in the Thai Embassy in 1962. It was here that his love-affair with rocks began.

People ask me why I don't change the name of my shop to 'House of Rock'

"The Embassy in London stood opposite two museums; The Geology Museum and The Natural History Museum, so in my free time or when it was cold or snowy I went there to look at the rocks and the girls! Every time that I visited one of

the two museums I always managed to find something new and interesting that I hadn't seen before. Over the 12 years I spent working at the embassy in London I found myself becoming more and more fascinated by rocks, fossils and suchlike."

On returning home to Thailand in 1974 Mr. Boonman

took over the management of his in-law's business; a small gem shop which had already been established for some years. Although the gem business was going well, he soon found a way to incorporate his interest into the business.

"I had found a piece of petrified wood in the grounds of a house that I was visiting. After finding out that there were several shops along New Phetburi Road selling similar items, I went along there to have a look and soon became a regular customer. I used the pieces of petrified wood that I bought on Phetburi to make ashtrays, clocks and so on.

When I exhibited some of the objects which I had made at an industrial promotion fare, many people expressed an interest and bought them. My first 'big' rock sale came a few years later. A Swiss tourist walked past my shop and happened to see a large piece of petrified wood in the window. He came into my shop and told me that he wanted to buy it. I didn't want to part with this piece, so I just gave him the first price

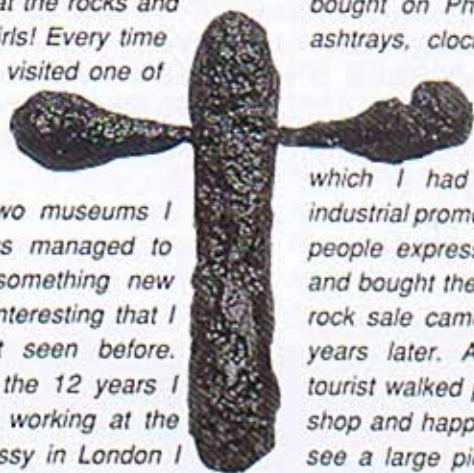


which came into my head; 2,000 Baht. To my surprise he didn't argue the price. In fact, he subsequently returned and bought quite a few pieces more. That's when I first started to think that it was possible to make a business out of my hobby. My in-laws thought I was crazy opting for rocks not gems but I haven't done so badly. Nowadays many people

The Phra (Buddha images) which are made from tektites are believed to be very powerful."

ask me why I don't change the name of my shop to 'House of Rock' but I think I will stick with the old name!"

Although pieces of rock and stone may not look as beautiful (to some people) as gems, Mr. Boonman's wonderful little shop has something for everyone. As a small child, I had been fascinated by rocks, dinosaurs, comets, meteorites and all manner of strange and wonderful things. However, I had never seen a collection such as his outside of a museum; a display of more than 100 million years of natural history. Among the many fine geological specimens Mr. Boonman has on display, he is especially proud of his large collection of **tektites** (in Thai





Hin Saket Dao). I asked him to tell me the story of these mysterious pieces of dense

When I was living in England Thai Buddhism was unheard of.

black stone.

"Thai tektites mostly come from the North East of Thailand ; the nearest ones to Bangkok being found in Kanchanaburi. No one knows for sure how they were formed; there are

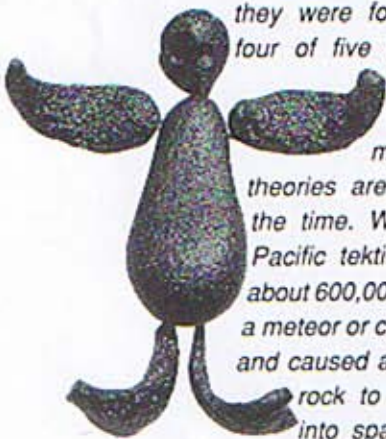
four of five theories but, as the Buddha said, 'nothing is permanent' and the theories are changing all of the time. We think that the Pacific tektites were formed about 600,000 years ago when a meteor or comet hit the earth and caused a large amount of rock to be blasted high into space. We hope to prove this theory soon thanks to a survey to be carried out by the US Space Shuttle ."

"The two largest tektites in the world (a weighty 24.1 kilograms each - on display in the shop) were found very close together on the Thai-Laos border. Therefore, we believe the impact crater to be in this area and hopefully the Space Shuttle survey will prove this.

Actually the survey should have taken place this October but, because of the delays and problems that NASA has had with the Shuttle program, it had to be put deferred to next April. As I said, there are quite a few theories; The Russians believe it was another planet which hit the Earth, some people think they were deposited here when

a comet made a close earth pass and others think that they were created by pre-historic volcanic activity on the moon. We hope this survey will help to provide us with some of the answers."

Those of you who have never seen a tektite before may be amazed at the variety of wonderful shapes and sizes



they come in. There are two main kinds of tektites: the large layered tektites (which aren't much to look at) and the smaller 'shaped' tektites (usually weighing under 500 grams) which broke away from the parent rock in-flight. The shape of the tektite, Mr. Boonman informed me, depends on the speed it rotated at as it fell through the atmosphere. However did he find so many?

"Well, we roughly know the location of the areas which contain tektites so we employ the locals to collect them for

In Thailand the villagers believed it was the dung of the Lord Buddha's sacred cow. The use to soak the rocks in water and then drink the water or bathe in it believing it would give them good luck!

us. Quite often a farmer will turn one up as he is ploughing his field! The villagers keep them for me and then, every so often, I go around the villages,



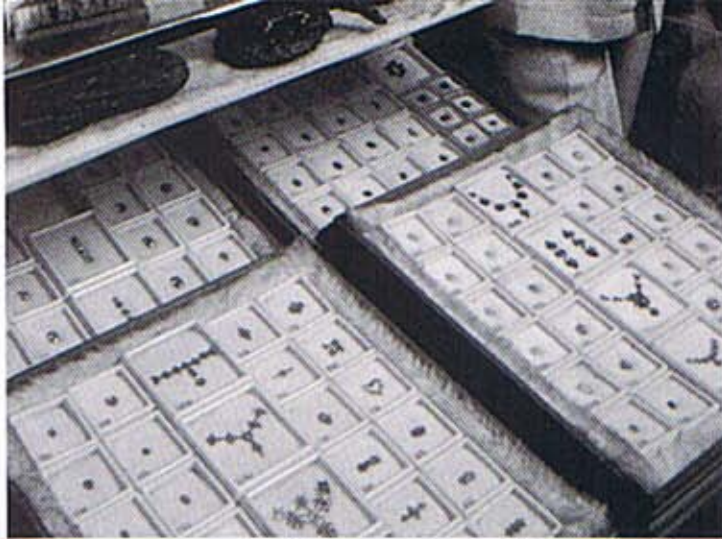
collect all the tektites and pay the villagers who found them." "For a long time the Thai people have valued the tektites

some people believe that a Phra like this will give powerful protection to the person wearing it."

As a member of the Thai Geological Society, Mr. Boonman receives correspondence from around the world while here in Thailand he is the man that people turn to when they want to put a price on meteorites! This however, is not the whole story. When asked which aspect of his life

that they have found in their fields. Many people believe that they are very lucky for travellers. I have a Phra (Buddha image) made from tektite;





he was most proud of, Mr. Boonman talked not of rocks but of Buddhism.

"At the time when I was living in England Thai Buddhism was unheard of. There weren't any temples or anyone to give Thai Buddhist instruction so I began to give courses in the art of Thai meditation at Cambridge University, where I became the Vice President Of the Buddhist Society for many years. This led to the setting up of the first Thai Buddhist meditation school in that country and in 1987 The Samatha Centre opened at Powys in the

north of Wales. Nowadays there are classes held all over England and the present trustees of the foundation are some of the original students from my classes in 1971. They often write to me and ask me to pay them a visit. I promised them I would do so when I reached 60, I'm 61 now! I'll probably go to visit them in a few years when I'm not so busy."

With dinosaur fever gripping the country (if not the world) I had to ask Mr. Boonman about his famous collection of fossilized dinosaur droppings.

"When I received the first lump about 6 years I didn't know what it was", he laughed. "You know in Thailand the villagers believed it was the dung of the Lord Buddha's sacred cow. The use to soak the rocks in water and then drink the water or bathe in it believing it would give them good luck! Soon after I got the first piece a customer, who was a British gem trader working in Bangkok, told me exactly what it was. He saw a piece on display and asked me what it was so I told him that I believed it to be ancient cow dung. 'You're wrong', he told me, 'it's copperlite - petrified dinosaur droppings!'. I was very surprised to hear this so I sent a piece to the Department of Mineral Resources to see what they thought. They were very happy with the piece I sent them, confirmed that it was dinosaur droppings, and sent me a piece of dinosaur bone to say 'thank you'."

"The droppings range in weight from 10 grams to about 2 or 3 Kilos. I sell the pieces for 1 Baht per gram; the largest piece I have ever sold was 8 kilos so that went for 8,000 Baht. Would you like to know how we tell if the dinosaur was a meat or plant eater?" He asked. "OK, the plant eater's stools are brown in colour and aren't so heavy whereas the ones from the meat eaters are a dark grey colour and are heavier."

It seems that in 'The House of Gems' that old adage; "Where there's muck, there's brass" hold true. How many people looking in the shop would guess that sitting here among the geodes, quartz and rock samples from around the world you would find the remains of The Flintstones neighbour's lunch.

