Archaeology in Thailand, and Southeast Asia generally, is full of impressive monumental architecture and delicately decorated ceramics. It is easy to see why this is the case - these artefacts have tremendous aesthetic appeal and are easily appreciated by ambiling through the ruins at Sukhothai or getting lost in the spirals on Ban Chiang ceramics. Some writers, such as Ian Glover of the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, argue that the focus on monumental and spectacular archaeology in Thailand is a strategy to cultivate a contemporary national identity that traces its roots to powerful, centralised and skilled ancient cultures (as well as making picturesque attractions to capture tourist markets).

Maybe there's some truth to the suggested political purposes of archaeology in Thailand. But this isn't all that's going on, if you've had enough of the glitter of empires past then you might be interested to see some of the more exciting and innovative directions that Thai archaeologists have been taking recently. The old-school habits of large military-style surveys and excavations with sweating coolies supervised by monocled, elder gentlemen are well and truly gone. The new directions have two important features: firstly, using archaeology as an instrument of local community development and secondly, telling the stories of the ancient cultures that lived in Thailand for tens of thousands of years before any monuments or ceramics appeared.

The Highland Archaeology Project in Fangmapha (HAPP) is a microcosm of the new directions of contemporary Thai archaeology. One important detail is that the project is run by a woman, Rasmi Shoocoongdej, currently Assistant Professor at Silpakorn University. Rasmi's long experience of Thai archaeology has been complemented by a doctoral degree from the University of Michigan, where she developed productive relationships with many prominent international scholars. Her doctoral degree was an archaeological investigation into the life of prehistoric hunter-gatherers at some caves in Kanchanaburi. This was distinctly unglamorous work - no ceramics with delicate curlicues and certainly no atmospheric ruins to wander amongst. Rasmi's doctoral work was more or less pure research and many Western archaeologists agree that it is some of the most substantial research on prehistoric hunter-gatherer societies in mainland Southeast Asia. Within Thailand it is distinguished as one of the few archaeological studies to go beyond the tedious work of cataloguing and describing artefacts to actually explain ancient human behaviours using anthropological concepts.

and several human burials. For the specialists, Rasmi and her staff have published a variety of academic articles in international archaeology journals (in English and Thai) as well as a book (in Thai) on the scientific results of the project so far. But the HAPP is more than just pure research. The project is funded by the Thai Research Fund (TRF), the equivalent of the prestigious National Science Foundation in the United States. The TRF requires that the project must include a research component and a development component. Internationally, archaeologists often struggle to think how they can do 'development' in addition to their research, the big question is: how do we make this work relevant, useful and easy to understand?

Rasmi's HAPP has risen to many of these challenges with considerable success. Although the scientific analysis and report writing is still in progress for the HAPP, they have already had several major public education and outreach events, with more planned for this year.

In August 2005 the HAPP ran a training activity for the women who guide visitors through the 600m of caverns and formations at Tham Lod. Tham Lod is a vast cave in Fangmapha, Mae Hong Son, that draws about 10,000 tourists each year and just happens to be a few hundred
metres from the key excavation site of the HAPP and the HAPP field laboratory (located in the Tam Lod Forestry Department building). The guides all come from the adjacent Shan village, and over 90% of the guide fees goes directly to the guides. Almost by accident, cave tourism at Tam Lod has become an ideal eco-tourism operation. Although many of the guides possess an impressive knowledge of local history and ethnobotany, Rasmi was keen to provide them with some useful information about ancient societies who used the area. In addition to teaching the guides some basic details about cave science and the story of the past from archaeological evidence, the workshop provided them with some English language training to help them communicate this knowledge to foreign visitors.

The guides were trained with simulated tour situations during the workshop and given scripts and a CD so they could continue to practice at home. If the guide gets tongue-tied and loses her confidence she can simply show tourists the laminated information cards that the workshop has prepared. The guides also direct curious tourists to visit the nearby HAPP office for a hands-on experience of the archaeological lab work.

Rasmi’s concept of development is not just about economic development through improving tourism, it also extends more broadly to empowering local people by giving them knowledge about their landscape and past. A good example of this was the HAPP workshop in April 2005. This workshop was a camp for children in the district to give them some insight into the world of archaeology. The activities were designed for the children to learn how prehistoric people made their artefacts, how archaeologists find sites and artefacts and how archaeologists try to understand what they find. As expected for a children’s camp, everything was accompanied by a good deal of singing and laughter.

The aim of the HAPP camp was to cultivate in the children, and hopefully their families, a sense of the value of the remains of the past and the importance of preserving them. By giving them a narrative of their unique local past - a past that they encounter the evidence of everyday - rather than a homogenising national past, they can feel a more positive sense of belonging and connection to their heritage. This camp was so successful that it will be repeated later in 2006 in another village close to the HAPPy study area.

Rasmi’s HAPPy has also undertaken more conventional public education activities, such as poster displays on-site and at district fairs, and workshops featuring internationally famous experts. A notable example was the specialist HAPPy workshop in October 2004, on the archaeology of human bones with some of the participants later finding their new skills useful to assist in the tsunami disaster.

But exactly what kind of story about the past is coming out of these workshops and going into the minds of the guides and local children? Much of the story is about the almost-forgotten life of hunter-gatherers, an unfamiliar story especially in Thailand, where the timelessness of the agricultural way of life is reinforced by Buddhist and animist mythology.

These ancient hunter-gatherers understood the landscape well. During the dry season they lived mostly in the river valleys, making use of the abundant river cobbles to craft stone tools, which were probably used to make a great variety of bamboo utensils and hunted a wide variety of animals. Like hunter-gatherer societies around the world, they probably lived in small nomadic groups of extended family members. During the wet season they changed their lifestyle, moving on to the high ridges, away from the mosquitoes and uncomfortable humidity. They adjusted their stone technology to adapt to the increased distance to the sources and adjusted their diet to include highland animals like primates. Simple, but flexible and finely tuned lifestyle carried on for over 20,000 years in Pumngapha.

In recent crop intensification (the last 5000 years) the story gets more complex with people probably coming in from different places, speaking different languages and having more complicated lifestyles, like planting crops, making pots and having herds of animals. Then there are the distinctive log coffins, which were made by an enigmatic group of people from about 2000 years ago until 900 AD. The coffins come in a variety of different styles, probably indicating the group or family identities of the people they contained. The problem with the log coffin people of northern Thailand is that they were rather like the Stonehenge builders of southern England – they left impressive and rugged marks on the ancient landscape, but few clues about what it all meant.

This is of course an abbreviated account of what we know from the HAPPy work in Pumngapha. The easiest way to find out more, and to see the results of the HAPPy community development in action, is to simply drop in and visit at Ban Tam Lod (it’s in most guidebooks because of the big cave). The English historian Lowenthal famously wrote that the past is a foreign country, a place we travel to in order to give some meaning to the present. The good news is that, in this case, it welcomes visitors, and it’s just a few hours on the bus from Chiang Mai.