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**Deposited in DRO:**

19 January 2010

**Version of attached file:**

Accepted Version

**Peer-review status of attached file:**

Peer-reviewed

**Citation for published item:**

Rigg, J. D. and Salamanca, A. (2009) 'Managing risk and vulnerability in Asia : a (re)study from Thailand, 1982-83 and 2008.', *Asia pacific viewpoint.*, 50 (3). pp. 255-270.

**Further information on publisher's website:**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8373.2009.01399.x>

**Publisher's copyright statement:****Additional information:**

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# **MANAGING RISK AND VULNERABILITY IN ASIA: A 25-YEAR VILLAGE STUDY FROM THAILAND**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the 1980s, rural settlements in the Northeast of Thailand were farming-focused and strategies of living were structured around the need to secure subsistence in the face of a capricious environment and a weak developmental state. More than half of households in the region lived below the poverty line and the immediate prospects for 'development' were not bright. Drawing on a 25-year longitudinal study of two villages in Mahasarakham, the paper describes and reflects on how risk and vulnerability have been re-shaped during a quarter of a century of profound economic and social change. From largely environmental and local, the pattern of risk and opportunity have become increasingly economic and non-local as external events wash across the shores of rural settlements like Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn.

**Keywords:** risk, vulnerability, Thailand

## MANAGING RISK AND VULNERABILITY IN ASIA: A 25-YEAR VILLAGE STUDY FROM THAILAND

### Introduction: risk, crisis and living

In the early 1980s, the development prospects of the villages of Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn in the marginal Northeastern region of Thailand were not bright (Figure 1 [Map of Thailand and study settlements]). Not only did these villages have to contend with a capricious climate that made wet rice cultivation a challenge and a struggle, but wider events seemed to be intent on disrupting the Thai government's attempts to foster 'development'. Successive oil price rises, a faltering economy, stubbornly high levels of poverty, the continuing role of the Communist Party of Thailand, and fears that Vietnam might be expansionist given that country's foray into Cambodia all contributed to the sense that rural Northeast Thailand was going nowhere fast. This is not to say that villagers in the region were destitute; they may have lead meagre lives, they may even have been poor in the way in which the development industry has been intent on counting, describing and categorising the poor; but the inhabitants of Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn were not destitute in the sense of being without food, shelter and clothing. Households generally met their subsistence needs and owned the principal resource to achieve this – their land. In many respects, the individuals and families the first author worked with in the early 1980s were rich, if wealth is considered in cultural, social and psychological rather than purely economic terms.

Since then, Thailand has made the transition – on the back of a so-called economic 'miracle' – from a low income and developing, agricultural economy, to a middle income, mixed economy. The country has also become thoroughly integrated and mobile, with families juggling mixed livelihoods in different places. This process of rapid social and economic transformation has not, however, been smooth (Figure 2 [Graph of GDP growth, poverty and development events]). The Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 led to a sharp contraction in the economy and the current global economic malaise may also, in time, be regarded as an equally important historical 'moment'.

In this paper we are intent on exploring the way in which risk and vulnerability are produced and reproduced over time. More particularly, we are interested in considering how risk and vulnerability are re-shaped in the context of a rapidly integrating, expanding and 'modernising' economy and society. Have, in short, the changes that have reverberated through Thailand also altered the way in which risk and vulnerability are produced, transmitted, experienced and managed at the levels of the village, the household and the individual? We will address these issues by drawing on a longitudinal study of two villages in Northeast Thailand that began in 1982: Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn. To provide some ethnographic substance we will also focus on the experience of one woman, Mrs Achara Wattana, who while not a 'case study' or an 'exemplar' does, in the specificity of her life experiences, illuminate the issues which we also raise in more general terms.

### UNPICKING RISK AND VULNERABILITY THROUGH A QUARTER OF A CENTURY OF CHANGE

In 1982 when the first author visited Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn in the Northeastern Thai province of Mahasarakham, it was easy to assume and imagine that villages such as these were, to a significant extent, 'worlds unto themselves'. We are not suggesting that there was no mobility or interaction with the world beyond the village, but this was limited, certainly when compared with today. Two of the earliest detailed village surveys carried out in Northeast Thailand are those of Mizuno in 1964 (Fukui 1993) and the CUSRI Village Study of 1969-70 (Amara Pongsapich *et al.* 1976), both conducted in the province of Khon Kaen which neighbours Mahasarakham. In Mizuno's survey, 126 out of 132 households were agricultural and not one household engaged in extra-village

work as a matter of course, although there was some dry-season labour migration to the local town of Tha Phra to work in a kenaf processing factory. Rice, fruit and vegetables were cultivated for home consumption, livestock were raised, fish and crabs trapped in local watercourses, most clothes were made at home by the women of the household, and many farm implements and household goods were home made as well. This is not to say such economies were un-monetised – Mizuno writes of villagers having to buy metal plough shares, twine to make fishing nets, oil lamps, rubber sandals and, occasionally, a bicycle or radio (Fukui 1993: 274). A similar picture of a largely subsistence village existence (rather than ‘economy’) where the spatial bubble of the settlement remained largely unpunctured is also evident in Amara Pongsapich *et al.*’s study of the late 1960s.

Today in Thailand, across the country every settlement is thoroughly economically and spatially integrated, dependent on resources and opportunities situated beyond the boundaries of the village, indeed beyond the sub-district, district and province. While Amara and Mizuno describe households that met most of their immediate needs, and villages which were collectively almost self-sufficient in the basics of life, villages are now far from being places where space (settlement), economy (livelihoods) and community (society), intersect. The village has ‘dissociated’ in multiple ways:<sup>1</sup> families are stretched across space and newly mobile populations have led to the emergence of ‘shadow’ households where members may not be co-resident; livelihoods are increasingly delocalised and differentiated; subsistence crops have been partially replaced by cash crops; and community practices such as reciprocal labour exchange (*long khaek*) have largely disappeared. This should come as of no great surprise. But in commenting on the ubiquity of such patterns and processes there is a risk that something quite profound may be missed: the dissolution of one of the key building blocks of rural scholarship in the Global South – ‘*the village*’.

In the context of this paper, we are specifically interested in exploring how these processes of dissociation have re-shaped the way in which risk is transmitted, experienced, managed and ameliorated. To explore this question, we will characterise the nature of risk in two periods separated by a quarter of a century of profound social, economic and environmental change: 1982-83 and 2008-9.

### **Risk and vulnerability in 1982-83**

In the early 1980s, the key risks facing rural households in the Northeast of Thailand related to the possibility that their subsistence wet rice crop might fail. Fields were rain-fed and, with a seasonal and highly variable pattern of rainfall, the chances of individual crop failure were high. Indeed, the core of the subsistence strategy of villagers revolved around how to maintain output in such a context and this involved planting a range of rice varieties across different agro-ecological niches, all with a view to maintaining a certain minimum level of output, and thus ensuring subsistence (see Grandstaff 1981, 1988, 1992 and 2009, Rigg 1985, 1986, 1991 and 1993). A ‘safety first’ principle prevailed. As the classic Thai novel of rural life in Northeast Thailand in the 1930s, *Luuk Isaan*, recounts: “When Koon and Jundi and their fathers arrived at the *phuyaiban*’s [headman’s] house, the men talked about what they always talked about – the lack of rain and the lack of food in the village” (Kampon Boontawee 1988: 202). This picture of the risks and vulnerabilities facing rural people in a subsistence world resonates with much of the classic literature, exemplified by R.H. Tawney’s well known reflections on China in the early 1930s:

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<sup>1</sup> For papers that explore such issues see, for example, Rigg et al 2008 (Thailand), Caces et al 1985 (Philippines) and Thompson, 2004 and 2007 (Malaysia).

“There are districts [in China] in which the position of the rural population is that of a man standing permanently up to the neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him” (Tawney 1932: 77, see also Scott 1976)

In addition to household ‘strategies’ being finely tuned to juggle environmental risk against subsistence necessity, the villages of Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn also supported a set of social practices and community arrangements – a ‘moral’ economy – that served to provide additional support when household and family subsistence strategies came under pressure. Friends, neighbours and relatives would share work and reward, assist during times of crisis, and provide a community safety net which further underpinned individual household strategies (Table 1). The historical literature on Thai rural settlements notes that occasionally even these layers of practice, action and response were inadequate and, then, villagers would stop ‘managing’ and start responding in emergency mode. This might mean selling a daughter into prostitution, disposing of core assets (in particular, land), banditry – or simply abandoning the village (Table 1).

### **Risk and vulnerability in 2008-09**

In the villages of Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn today, many of these approaches to managing livelihood risks are either no longer possible, and/or no longer desirable. Households generally do not own land ranged across different agroecosystems; the carefully selected rice varieties attuned to the specific environmental conditions of different ricelands are largely forgotten; the wildlands of the 1980s have been decimated and denuded; the extension of childhood into the late teens means that children are not available as an economic resource; and community practices of self-help and community support have largely dissolved and disappeared.

This does not mean, however, that life has become riskier; indeed, far from it. While the villages are just as unequal places as they were, they are also materially richer – and richer across the spectrum (Figure 3 [graph of incomes by quintile]). At its simplest level, the spectre of hunger has been banished. Today, no one goes hungry in Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn. More obviously, but less significantly, it can also be seen reflected in consumerist markers of status: in the ownership of televisions, mobile phones, motorbikes, pick-up trucks, microwave ovens, refrigerators and electric rice cookers.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in the place of traditional practices of dealing with livelihood risks are new schemes and practices (Table 2). The key changes here are concurrent shifts from farm to non-farm, from local to extra-local, from social to economic, and from community to state. These transformations, we suggest, are profound in the way in which they have restructured how rural people experience, think about and respond to livelihood risks.

In the 1980s, the field notes of the first author record parents saying they could not see the utility of going to school beyond learning to read the back of a pesticide packet and calculating the interest on a loan or the return from selling 500 kg of rice. Why, they would rhetorically ask, does a child need to learn history or English? By the 1990s, the value of education was unquestioned – and the more, the better. During the Thai financial crisis of 1997-98 – which led to a contraction of more than 10% in the Thai economy (four times greater than that expected from the current crisis) – the World Bank and many analysts predicted that poorer households would have to take their children out of school, and that this would have long-term effects on their livelihoods and on Thailand’s wider development prospects (World Bank 1998, but also see World Bank 1999).<sup>3</sup> But in a separate study conducted in the district of Sanpathong in Chiang Mai

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<sup>2</sup> A point that Grandstaff *et al* also make for the region as a whole (2009: 290-291).

<sup>3</sup> The Thai economy expanded by 2.6% in 2008 and is projected to contract by -2.7% in 2009 (World Bank 2009: 4). In 1998 the Thai economy contracted by over 10%.

province in 1999-2000, not a single child was removed from the local school during the months of the crisis (Rigg and Sakunee Nattapoolwat 2001). Households took many other actions to adapt and adjust to tide themselves over the crisis: they sold assets, borrowed money, cut back on certain foods, and sent returning laid-off sons and daughters back to the city to find work as soon as possible. But they did not take their children out of school.

In 1980 it was hard for teachers to convince parents to send their sons and daughters to school beyond the four years of compulsory basic primary education; by the turn of the Millennium parents would do all they could to keep their children in school. Children have become an economic resource not through their immediate labour value but through their future value secured by their engagement in new arenas of skill- and education-intensive work which might then provide a stream of remittances to sustain parents in later life. As indicative of this shift in the relative values ascribed to different assets, there have been reports of farmers selling their land to finance their children's education (Phusadee Arunmas 2009: B14) – although it should be added that there was no evidence of this from Ban No Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn, possibly because other routes to financing education were available to families.

The 'state', while not quite the developmental state of East Asian persuasion (but see Dixon 2001, Booth 1999), is hard to escape in rural areas of Thailand. Powerfully, though indirectly, the inhabitants of Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn are connected to the world beyond the village by roads, bridges and electrification, and well as by education and diversifying social networks. These, in turn, bring television and newspapers and mental connections which are at least as important as the heightened levels of mobility that improving transport has allowed. Successive Thai governments have also invested in a plethora of other areas; in education and health care, in family planning and agricultural extension, in subsidised loans to farmers and clean water, in support for farm inputs and the subsidisation of outputs, and in training and irrigation projects. This is not, of course, all 'free': villagers are indebted to a degree that was not the case in the 1980s, and this debt is guaranteed using farmers traditionally most precious asset – their land. Ironically, many of the investments that the state has made in rural areas of Thailand have done more to extract people from the countryside and from farming, than they have to support rural living and farm-based livelihoods.

### **From local environmental to extra-local economic risk**

The approaches to making a living outlined above also reflect a change in the location and nature of risk. In the 1980s, risks largely revolved around locally experienced environmental perturbations. Some of these may have arisen from regional-level events – flood and drought, for instance – but the impacts and responses were local. There were other crises to be sure. Historical accounts recount disease and conflict sweeping across the region from time to time. But there was little that villagers could do about these in terms of strategising. With the integration of villagers into broader national and international circuits of production, consumption and exchange, so the threats – and the solutions – to livelihood crises have similarly been 'scaled up'.

The 1997-98 Asian financial crisis led to millions of Thai migrant workers being laid off, often with little or no severance pay. Housed in dormitories or rented rooms close to the factories and building sites where they worked, many returned to their villages in rural areas – villages like Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn. The 2008-9 crisis has produced a similar set of effects, albeit less pronounced. A global economic crisis has led to loss of employment (or a reduction in hours worked) in the industrial and service sectors in Thailand, which is particularly pronounced among younger workers; migrant workers have been laid off, many without compensation; remittances to rural areas have

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fallen; some of the unemployed have taken refuge in their villages of origin; and agriculture has struggled to absorb these laid-off workers, putting rural economies under additional strain (World Bank 2009, NSO 2009).<sup>4</sup> In consequence, poverty is projected to rise in 2009.

There has been a quite vigorous debate about what these economic crises mean for rural peoples – and for strategies of development. A populist response that has considerable traction in Thailand is that they amply show the dangers of engaging with the world economy and emphasise that stable and sustainable livelihoods need to be built on a re-invigoration of the farm and village economy. Indeed the Thai government, with the urging of the King of Thailand, made just such a view the centrepiece and the guiding philosophy of the 9<sup>th</sup> Five-year Social and Economic Development Plan (2002-2006).<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately for these *romantanistas*, the 1997-98 crisis did not lead to a long-term re-orientation of rural livelihoods. The trends which can be dated from the mid-1980s have continued. Even a contraction in the economy of -10.5% in 1998 and a rise in the number of rural poor from 14.9% (1996) to 21.5% (2000) of the population (see Figure 2) failed significantly to do more than retard temporarily earlier trends. Just as the farmers of the early 1980s were held hostage by the vagaries of climate and the marginality of their environment, so the farmers-cum-workers of the 2000s are held hostage by the dependencies linked to Thailand's thorough-going and enthusiastic engagement with the world economy. Even the King of Thailand, it seems, is unable to wean the rural population off their consumerist, non-farm desires. In 1986, 71% of households in the Northeast reported that agriculture provided their main source of income; by 1994, shortly before the crisis, this figure had declined to 45%; in 2004, it stood at 37%. Income from remittances and non-farm activities, meanwhile, contributed the main source of income of 63% of households in 2004, up from 29% in 1986 (Figure 4 [main source of income in Northeast, 1986-2004]).

#### Dealing with crisis: social capital and the dissociation of the village community

One outcome of the processes described above, as noted, is the 'dissociation' of the village economy. This is mainly described in economic terms: the village as a container of economic and livelihoods practices has partially dissolved. There have, though, also been social implications. In particular, the 'social capital' which went some way to regulating and patterning inter-household and intra-village relations has been devalued. Villagers are less likely to resort to community support mechanism to tide them over periods of crisis and shortage; they are also, for that matter, less likely to be offered such support. As Thompson says of the village in Malaysia, while *gotong royong* (mutual aid, reciprocity) may remain a trope to encompass *kampung* (village) life, *gotong royong* spirit is largely absent. For Thompson, the village in Malaysia has become 'socially urban' in the manner of its functioning and there is as much *gotong royong* in the apartments of Kuala Lumpur as there is in the countryside; in Thailand, something similar is in the process of emerging (see Thompson 2002, 2004 and 2007).

In a separate study in central Thailand (see Rigg et al 2008), the settlements in question were becoming more integrated and, in that sense, more 'open' villages. At the same time however, they were becoming more 'closed' communities. Traditionally, house compounds were not fenced, and owned space was not rigorously demarcated or

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<sup>4</sup> The Oriental Hotel, for example, has not offered new contracts to temporary staff. The service charge that staff receive in addition to their salaries has also been cut, so much so that a number of staff have left this prestigious hotel.

<sup>5</sup> "The Ninth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2002-2006) adopts the philosophy of sufficiency economy bestowed by His Majesty the King to his subjects as the guiding principle of development and management" (NESDB 2002: i).

patrolled. Villagers would drop by each other's houses for a chat, to share their food and to engage in the collective experience of what it was to be a *chao ban* or villager. It was normal to walk across another villager's house compound without asking permission. The village was a quasi-collective space where people interacted with comparative freedom and openness. Now most houses compounds are fenced and most houses are gated and grilled. Village ceremonies and festivities, the very performed essence of social capital, have undergone a similar process of change. From being collective and inclusive affairs for which food was cooked and shared by the community and in which everyone was a participant, weddings and other celebrations today require outside commercial caterers to be brought in and participation is by invitation rather than by custom based on membership of the village community.

The same debates characterise Ban Non Tae and Tha Song Korn. The 47 year-old agrarian entrepreneur, Mr Suchart, laments the increasing individualisation of the village which he describes as becoming "like a city" where "we live on our own; we're not supporting each other anymore". With regard to reciprocal labour exchange, the practise has become a victim of heightened expectations such as better food served during the activity, raising the real cost to farmers. Furthermore, because there is no longer a shared experience of what it means to be a villager as livelihoods have increasingly diversified into non-farm and non-local activities, so practices based on such assumed shared experiences have become harder to sustain. This is not to say that 'the village' is disappearing. Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn are physically and administratively still 'there', to be found, visited and researched. There are village monasteries, schools and headmen; there is a sub-district village administration and statistics are collected at the village level. The village has 'traction' in these senses. But the village covenant has been fractured. We certainly do not wish to romanticise the past and see this fracturing as a necessarily negative and destructive process; but it has occurred, a point that is locally accepted.<sup>6</sup>

#### Vulnerability and resilience in a post-community rural world

The spectre of climate change has led to a proliferation of studies on vulnerability and resilience. Our longitudinal study of Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn, although it is not explicitly focused on issues of climate change, is concerned with understanding transformations under conditions of social, economic and environmental stress and turbulence. It thus, we suggest, provides some insights into these wider debates. One particular theme in the climate change literature is an interest in understanding 'resilient communities'.

'Communities' are usually seen in this literature as spatially situated: "We view communities as the totality of social system interactions *within a defined geographic space...*" (Cutter *et al.* 2008: 599 [emphasis added]). In turn, resilient communities are "inextricably linked to the condition of the environment and the treatment of its resources" (Cutter *et al.* 2008: 601). When this community of intersecting social and environmental capitals is unpicked – as they certainly are in Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn – then vulnerability is seen to ensue. Thus, in their work on vulnerability and adaptation to climate variability in Uttarakhand, India, Kelkar *et al.* (2008: 571) reflect that "as they

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<sup>6</sup> We are mindful of Samuel Popkin's rejoinder to James Scott's (1976) moral economy thesis: "A way of life that may have existed only for lack of alternatives is extolled as a virtue. Peasants who had little or nothing to eat are assumed to have had a rich spiritual life. Sons who may have stayed with their fathers only in order to survive are credited with filial piety. What may have been the absence of incentives to change becomes a resistance to innovation and a defense of traditional ways. The rich who hid their wealth are perceived as having shown great modesty, and hostility among villages is converted to village solidarity. Somehow, what might only have been the necessities or oppressions of one era come to be interpreted as traditional values during the next" (Popkin 1979: 3).



move towards non-agricultural jobs in the city...many [villagers] are becoming more vulnerable due to dislocation and disruption of their familiar way of life" (see also Acosta-Michlik *et al.* 2008: 541)

The experience of Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn over a quarter of a century of perturbation offers a rather different view of vulnerability, resilience and adaptation, at least in this small corner of Northeast Thailand.<sup>7</sup> To begin with, the idea of a spatially situated community is problematic when mobility, migration, shadow households, remittance landscapes and dispersed livelihood footprints are defining features of life and living across much of rural Asia.<sup>8</sup> Resilience, it seems, is not to be uncovered in communities but in the spatially distributed networked lives that increasingly rural Thais – and many others – live, not because they are forced to as a result of livelihood failures 'at home', but because it is in the combination of local and extra-local, farm and non-farm that resilience is to be found.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, there are instances of distress migration of the type that Acosta-Michlik *et al.* allude to when they propose that "when all available and accessible adaptation measures fail, migration tends to be the ultimate solution" (2008: 541); but migration in the two study sites, more often than not, is far from being a strategy of escape induced by a livelihood crisis. These adaptations are, moreover, not neat transformative shifts of one type of living to another, but multiple, over-lapping, nuanced and contingent changes where spatial and temporal mosaics emerge.

There is no doubt that the inhabitants of Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn, like those of most of Thailand's rural settlements, have become dramatically more mobile. Grandstaff *et al.* (2009: 299-301) using census and household registration data show that the *majority* of Northeastern rural households are likely to have a household member living outside the region – some 2.5 million. These are family members who have 'absented' themselves from the household long-term. In addition to these missing villagers there are the seasonal migrants, who are also highly numerous. There are two points of note here which resonate with the experiences of Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn. First, migration and mobility have come to be defining features of life and living in Northeast Thailand. Migration is not an aberration – as it is so often presented in policy documents and by officials – but part of the essence of the Northeast in social and economic terms. Second, migration *sustains* a reformulated household which transcends space. No longer a 'co-residential dwelling unit', the household is increasingly defined by its spatial disaggregation. In Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn one surprising outcome of this is that households are becoming both smaller *and* more complex. The average size of the household between the two survey dates declined from 6.3 (1982/83) to 4.7 (2008), but at the same time the proportion of nuclear family members (parents and children) also declined from 83.5% to 57.0% (Table 3). While the normal expectation is that social changes leading to smaller families also results in a reduction in household complexity as nuclear families become more common, the data from these two villages indicate that the reverse is happening. The most dramatic change is the increase in the number of grandchildren in the total household count, rising from 9.2% to 21.3%. These

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<sup>7</sup> Although the story here also resonates with work in the Central Plains (Rigg *et al.* 2008) and Northern region (Rigg and Sakunee Nattapoolwat 2001) of Thailand.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Thompson's work on Malaysia (2004, 2007), and McKay's work on the Philippines (2003, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> This is not quite the whole picture. It is also very clear that there is a trend to work outside farming not just because it may deliver a higher income, but also because it is more desirable. Mr Palong Piroomyu, a farmer in Nakhon Pathom, has been quoted saying: "Most Thai farmers who send their kids to get higher education generally tell them to stay away from rice farming because it's back-breaking work with a high exposure to price fluctuations" (Phusadee Arunmas 2009: B14).

are largely the 'left-behind' children of absent migrant household members, a practice known as *liang laan* (taking care of grandchildren) (see Funahashi 1996).

The erosion of social norms and the moral economy, on the one hand, and a disrupted and degraded environment on the other does not mean that villagers have less recourse to support structures during times of trouble, and are therefore more vulnerable; rather, those support structures have changed. They are more likely to be formal and institutional than informal and community; and they are increasingly centred on the immediate family, rather than an extended array of neighbours and friends – fellow villagers. While the village may have become increasingly dissociated, and households increasingly spatially separated, this has become intrinsic to building resilience and minimising risk in the context of Thailand's evolving economy. In addition the state, in various guises, has offered alternative social safety nets. All of this needs to be set against a broadly improving economic context where incomes have been rising, employment opportunities multiplying, the capacity of the state increasing, and the economy diversifying.

State policies aimed at redistributing at least some of Thailand's wealth to rural areas came to a zenith under the populist administration of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and have remained in place since. The villagers of the study settlements welcomed Thaksin's 30 baht health care policy and the one million baht per village fund that he distributed to kick-start village development initiatives. They were also delighted when the short-lived administration of Thaksin's successor, Samak Sundaravej, in 2008 introduced free electricity (if usage was less than 50% of the allotted 10kwh per household per month), flooding assistance of 606 baht/rai, and financial support of 500 baht per month for the elderly (see Table 4).

Liu *et al.* (2008) in their study of farmers' coping responses in China's Lower Yellow River note that vulnerability needs to be seen not as a snapshot, but as a historical process (pages 546 and 551). Our timelines from Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn emphasise this point where idiosyncratic household shocks are often the events propelling households into vulnerability. The death of key income earners is the obvious example. This shifts livelihood responsibilities to other household members, who often struggle to maintain the same level of productivity, profit and income. With lack of investment and the absence of key decision-makers, in time businesses may fail and assets such as land and livestock are sold to meet immediate exigencies. There is sometimes a cascade of cause and effect which can only be fully appreciated as a historical process.

#### Mrs Achara Wattana: the dissociated management of risk

The case of Mrs Achara Wattana provides a vignette into how rural families manage livelihood threats in Thailand in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Mrs Achara, is a 58 year-old widow and household head in Ban Non Tae. We interviewed her in May 2008, and for a second time in 2009. First impressions are of a vulnerable woman living at the margins – Tawney's woman 'standing permanently up to the neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown her'. Achara is in poor health, suffering from heart problems and hypertension. Her husband was struck by lightning and killed in 1975 when she was a young mother with three children of her own to support and one adopted son (her nephew). Her husband's livestock trading business consequently collapsed and, as a result, the household's main source of income dried up. Later, Achara was forced to sell a large part of her land to pay hospital bills. Of her three children, one son was killed in a road accident in 2006, a second son left the village to live in Phetchabun (another province in the Northeast), while Achara's only daughter lives

with her husband in Bangkok.<sup>10</sup> By 2008, a reasonably robust rural livelihood in the mid-1970s, had become progressively a more marginal one. It is not surprising, therefore, that she has moved down the village wealth hierarchy. Our wealth ranking in 2008 placed Achara close to the category 'poor', at least as defined by local villagers. Based on the quintile distribution of income, Achara's household in 1983 belonged to the 4<sup>th</sup> quintile (with the fifth being the richest); in 2008, her household had moved down to the 3<sup>rd</sup> quintile.

A rural-focused view of Achara's existence generates a picture of vulnerability. For scholars such as Jim Glassman in his book *Thailand at the margins* (2004), the marginalisation of the Thai peasantry is part and parcel of the dependent industrialisation that has also made the country a deeply problematic 'miracle' economy:

"The growth [from the mid-1980s] was predicated heavily on marginalization of the peasantry, 'feminization' of manufacturing labour, and fragmentation of labour and political opposition – thus ensuring that growth on the periphery of the periphery would be of the 'sweatshop' variety..." (Glassman 2004: 205).

An 'everyday' view of Achara, however, provides an alternative insight to that afforded by a political economy of peripheral marginalisation perspective. Figure 5 [Mrs Achara's 'extended' HH] shows that Achara is not alone in her rural redoubt: she looks after the children of her daughter – her two grandchildren. Achara's daughter and husband are caught up in the maelstrom of Thailand's miracle/crisis experience. Her son-in-law is a taxi driver; her daughter worked in a garment factory before she moved to Bangkok in 2008 to join her husband. Between the two of them they remit around 3,000 to 4,000 baht (US\$90-120) per month to support their children and their 'carer' – Achara. A series of rural marginalisation processes shaped and driven by Thailand's industrialisation has also provided the support mechanisms which sustain families such as Achara's. This sustenance, however, is intimately associated with the very processes that some scholars highlight as emblematic of the vulnerabilities associated with Thailand's development model.<sup>11</sup> Income data for the Northeast region resonate at a generalised level with Achara's experience. Table 5 shows that in 1981 farming and home-based activities generated 63% of rural household income; by 2004 this had more than halved to 27%. Over the same period, income from remittances quadrupled from 3.8% to 15.8%, while the share of non-farm income had doubled from 21.3% to 42.2%. At the same time, as noted above, spatially divided families had become the norm.

## Conclusion

It is striking how far scholars, development practitioners and government officials still rehearse the script of Northeast Thai villages being poor, farming dependent and isolated:

"The popular view of Northeast Thailand (Isan) seems to have changed little over the years. As still portrayed in the media, impoverished farmers forever battle with poor soils, droughts and floods that devastate their subsistence rice crops upon which their livelihood depends. While the rest of Thailand develops, the Northeast lags behind, trapped in rural poverty and increasingly disadvantaged" (Grandstaff *et al* 2009: 289).

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<sup>10</sup> The adopted son has also left the village and no longer keeps contact with his adoptive mother.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Bello and Cunningham 1998.

This, of course, then creates the context in which risk and vulnerability are framed in terms of a capricious environment, marginal lands and uncertain subsistence. We argue, however, that for the inhabitants of Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn – and for many others in fast-developing Asia – risk and vulnerability have been re-shaped in significant ways. This applies to where risks originate; how they are transmitted; how they are experienced; and how they are managed.

The parameters of these changes are clear, as noted above: the shift from farm to non-farm, from local to extra-local, from community to state, and from social to economic. These shifts are negotiated at the local level but they are very evidently responses to developments which have reverberated through Thai economic space linked to national policies and international perturbations. In sum, they raise questions about whether the 'community' is any longer an appropriate unit through which we can reflect on either risk or resilience. As settlements no longer map neatly onto households; and as household livelihoods are no longer neatly captured through a village-focused perspective, where does that leave 'community' studies? The idea of community has considerable popular appeal and, as outlined above, many studies of resilience highlight the necessity of rebuilding or preserving community if resilience is to be maintained. But the emerging communities in this corner of Thailand are networked communities ranged across space where multi-situated households help to sustain rural settlements even as they erode rural communities.

Research on rural development in Europe (see Marsden 2009) emphasises the necessity to address the 'devaluing' of rural life if development which is socially, economically and environmentally sustainable is to be achieved, and points to the success of some locality-based initiatives which stress multifunctional agriculture as a counter-movement to the usual agri-business tendencies. Marsden's paper ends by rhetorically asking whether "our conceptual lenses [are] sufficiently developed or refined to conceptualise [such alternatives] as more than archipelagoes in a sea of continued ecological resource abuse and constructed denial and peripherality?" (2009: 128). This study from rural Thailand certainly reinforces the view that our conceptual frameworks for thinking about the nature, location and management of risk are inadequate to the empirical realities of change. This applies to the units of analysis that are employed (the village, the household), the objects of concern (farming), our assumptions about the very nature of life in the rural South (immobile, farming-focused), and the ideals that inform our views (notions of community).

**Table 1: 'Scales' of risk management in a 'traditional' Asian village (c.1980)**

<b>Family and household scales of risk management</b>	
Patterns of landownership and inheritance	Managing land across a range of padi types from drought prone (and therefore flood protected) to flood prone (and drought protected). Planting across agroecosystems
Rice variety selection strategy	Selecting and planting rice varieties able to harness the particular qualities of different rice lands and be resistant to the environmental pressures that exist
Upland cultivation	Planting of 'upland' (non-riceland) to crops such as kenaf (akin to jute) and cassava to earn a modest cash income
Diversified family labour use strategies	Division of labour across generations with pre-school and school age children regarded as a subsistence asset, and the elderly too
Exploitation of 'wild' resources	Collection of non-timber forest products (frogs, fish, insects, honey, tubers, wild grasses, hunting...), usually divided by gender and generation
Off-farm, dry season work	Migration of men and women, sometimes whole families if conditions dictated, to areas where agricultural (large rice farms of the central plains, sugar fields of the western region) or non-agricultural (on construction projects, in the urban informal sector) work is available
On-farm dry season work	Use of the dry season not only to mend farm implements and re-roof houses, but to produce cloth and other handicrafts for sale and home use
'Everyday peasant resistance'	Peasant 'sub-culture' including pilfering, gleaning, stealing (from the state, not from other villagers) and poaching
<b>Village and community scales of risk management</b>	
Reciprocal labour exchange practices	Sharing of tasks to meet the labour needs of peak periods in the farming cycle
Gifts and loans	Gifts and loans of money, time (labour) and food as a matter of course between relatives, friends and neighbours – given because the following year the positions might be reversed
Practices of adoption	Children that cannot be adequately cared for by the biological parents are adopted/fostered by (often quite distant) relatives
Village rice banks	The headman ( <i>phuu yai baan</i> ) on behalf of the village might assist those in particular difficulty
<b>Crisis responses</b>	
Selling land	As the core resource for survival, to sell land is a short term recipe for immediate survival, likely to lead to long term hardship
Dissolving the family	'Selling' daughters as indentured labour – with most entering the commercial sex industry. 'Why do they [the villagers] let their girls, as young as 13, be sexually violated at the whim of strangers? ... All such questions have to be swallowed when coming face-to-face with Pon Chaitep, a peasant who let his daughter go to work as a prostitute in Sungai Kolok, a town on the Malaysian border, in exchange for 15,000 baht [about US\$600]. . . . "I didn't sell my daughter ... She saw me suffer, she saw the family suffer. And she wanted to help"' (Sanitsuda Ekachai 1990: 169–70).
Moving the family	Abandoning the village and moving to a new location whether to carve out new lands or to areas where their might be work
Banditry and crime	Making the transition from low level crime (broadly accepted in village terms) to banditry

**Table 2: 'Scales' of risk management in a 'modern' Asian village (c.2009)**

<b>Family and household scales of risk management</b>	
Diversification beyond farming	Rather than juggling different farm practices, households juggle farm and non-farm, working in factories, as traders, on construction sites, in supermarkets, and in government
Delocalisation of work	The subsistence 'bubble' of the 1980s has been replaced by a household economy which straddles sectors and spaces, where the threads of livelihood reach across the Thailand economic space, and beyond
Farming as a subsidiary buffer	Households still farm but, for some, as a subsidiary and subservient activity. Upland and marginal riceland are planted to tree crops such as eucalyptus that require little care; rice is broadcast rather than transplanted; labour intensive vegetables are purchased from the market rather than cultivation in home gardens
Security in the education of children	Children are educated as long and as far as possible even if that means borrowing money or leaving land unplanted. Education demands immediate outlay for future security
'Everyday citizen resistance'	The peasant 'sub-culture' has been replaced by a citizen and voter sub-culture of popular resistance through the media, demonstration and the power of the ballot box
<b>State and national scales of risk management</b>	
30 baht health scheme	A 'national health service' introduced by former PM Thaksin Shinawatra where poor Thais can access medical care through a one level fee of 30 baht (US\$0.90, £0.50).
State support	Emergency support at times of crisis – during flood or drought events; rice price support schemes; subsidised support for farmers and farming; debt forgiveness
Securing loans from commercial banks	Borrowing money from commercial banks to meet an immediate livelihood shortfall or subsistence crisis
Village development funds	One million baht (US\$25,000) allocated per village to support small business development
<b>Crisis responses</b>	
Dissolving the family	Families are atomised as individualistic response to crisis supplants the traditional communal response
Moving the family	Abandoning the village and lands and moving to urban and peri-urban areas to access non-farm work opportunities

**Table 3: Household complexity in Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn, 1982/83 and 2008**

<b>Household head or relationship to household head</b>	<b>1982/83</b>	<b>2008</b>
Size of household	6.3	4.7
<b><i>Simple nuclear family members</i></b>		
Household head	15.7	21.3
Spouse of household head	13.6	13.0
Child of household head	54.2	22.7
<i>Total nuclear family members</i>	<i>83.5</i>	<i>57.0</i>
<b><i>Extended household members</i></b>		
Spouse of child of household head	3.9	8.8
Grandchild of household head	9.2	21.3
Spouse of grandchild of household head	0.2	0.0
Nephew/niece of household head	0.2	2.5
Parent of household head or spouse	1.0	1.4
Sibling of household head or spouse	1.6	2.2
Other extended family members	0.4	6.9
<i>Total extended household members</i>	<i>16.5</i>	<i>43.1</i>
Total	100	100.1

Source: survey data, 1982/83 and 2008

**Table 4: Government support programmes, 1975 to 2009**

Year	Programmes	Remarks
1975	Money Distribution Programme ( <i>ngern phan</i> )	Rural development and job-creation projects during the agricultural off-season period
1984	Rural Development Fund	Targeting villagers and activities within villages
1992	Urban Community Development Fund	Addressing the urban poverty problem
1993	Poverty Alleviation Project	Raising income and the quality of life of targeted poor households in more than 18,000 rural villages
1998	Social Investment Project	Creating job opportunities and providing social services for the unemployed and poor
1999-2000	Financial support under the "Miyazawa" scheme	Tackling the economic and social problems of the urban poor during the 1997-98 financial crisis
2001	Village and Urban Community Funds	Introduced during the first year of the Thaksin administration and continuing. Provides financial support to villages and urban communities, with the aim that villagers become self-reliant, have more employment opportunities, higher incomes and improved social welfare
2001	Urban relief fund	Introduced during the first year of the Thaksin administration. Loans from the Government Savings Bank worth 30,000 baht each including to the urban poor (e.g. street vendors)
2001	Three-year debt moratorium/debt reduction for small farmers	Introduced during the first year of the Thaksin administration to cover period 1.4.01 to 31.3.04. Assists in reducing debt incurred through Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) and poverty of small-scale farmers while offering training.
2001	People's Bank Project	Introduced during the second year of Thaksin administration. Operated by the Government Savings Bank. A revolving fund of one million baht per village to boost domestic demand and support small and medium scale enterprises
2003	Care " <i>Ua-athorn</i> " programmes	Introduced during the third year of Thaksin administration. Welfare type policies such as: a life insurance scheme for the poor; bicycle loans for 300,000 students living far from schools; scholarships for students from poor households; loans for the purchase of low-priced televisions and computers; loans for purchase of taxis; and cheap housing for middle income urban families. Overall goal to boost consumption and income
2003	Capital creation scheme	Introduced during the third year of Thaksin administration. Reclassified or redefined assets to achieve a legal title which can be used as collateral to obtain loans
2009	Free education policy	Introduced during the first six-months of the Abhisit administration. Free education and subsidised expenses (e.g. student uniforms, stationery, textbooks and compulsory educational activities) for 15 years
2009	Senior citizens	Introduced during the first six-months of the Abhisit



	allowance	administration. Covers people >60 years old. Allowance of 500 baht monthly
2009	Cash handout	Introduced during the first six-months of the Abhisit administration. 2,000 baht cash handout for the lowly paid as part of the measures to tackle the 2008-9 financial crisis through boosting consumer spending
2009	Sufficiency economy fund	Introduced during the first six-months of the Abhisit administration. Fund for local communities

Sources: Anuchitworawong 2007; Looney 1981; Phongpaichit 2004; Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva 2009.

**Table 5: Share of Northeastern village household income by source (1981-2004, %)**

	1981	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2004
<b>Farm</b>	30.3	27.1	25.1	16.4	18.8	17.9	19.0
<b>Non-farm</b>	21.3	27.1	30.1	39.4	40.2	40.9	42.2
<b>Remittance</b>	3.8	3.3	7.9	14.3	12.3	16.4	15.8
<b>Home produced</b>	32.6	28.6	23.8	14.7	15.5	10.7	8.0
<b>Other non-monetary income</b>	12.0	13.9	13.1	15.2	13.2	14.1	15.0
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Grandstaff et al. 2009: 302

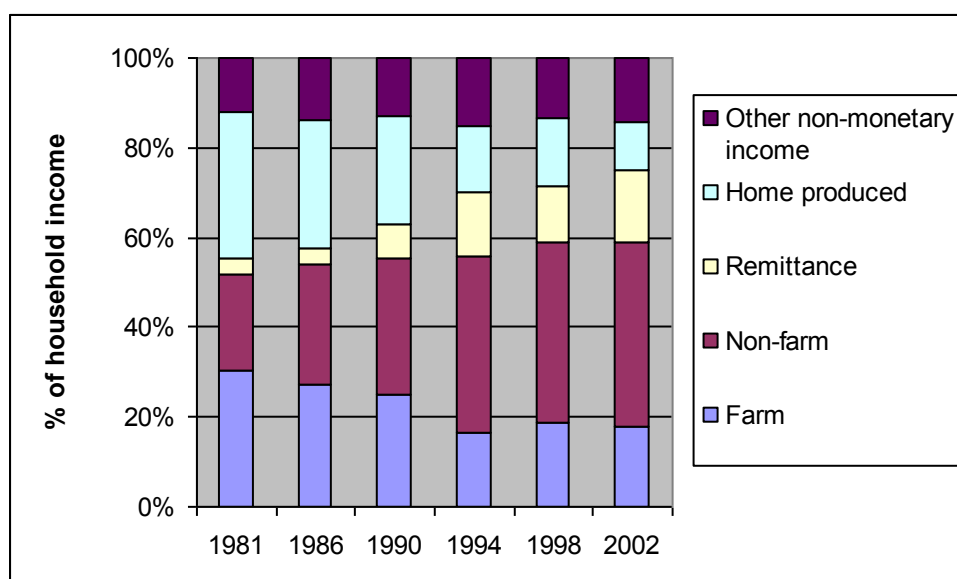
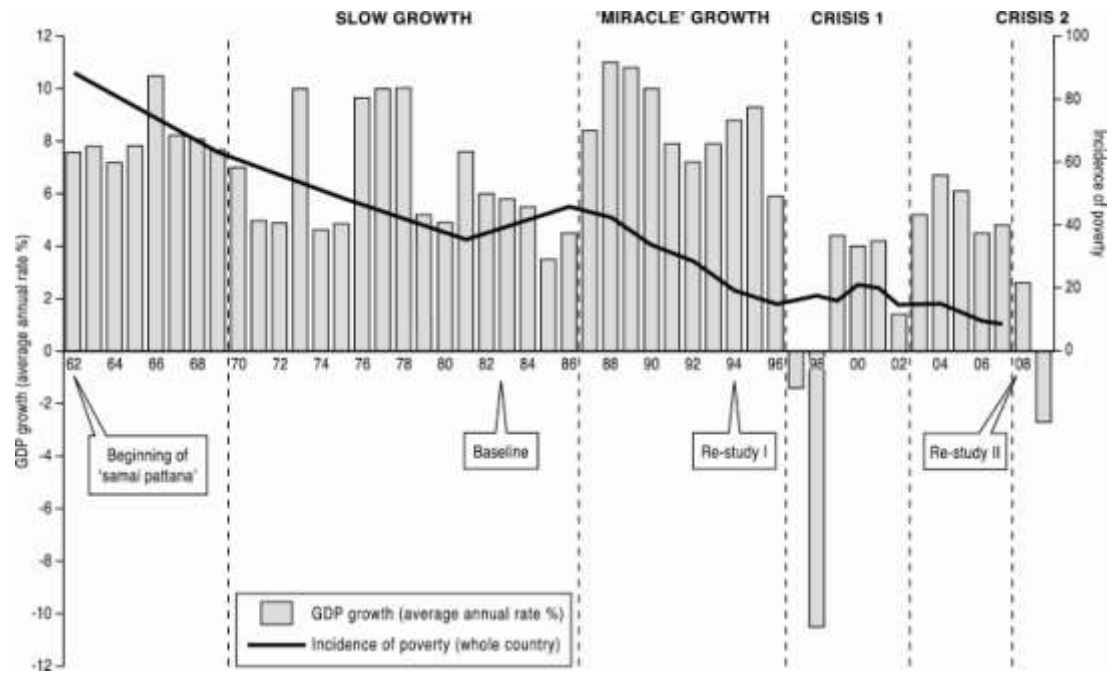


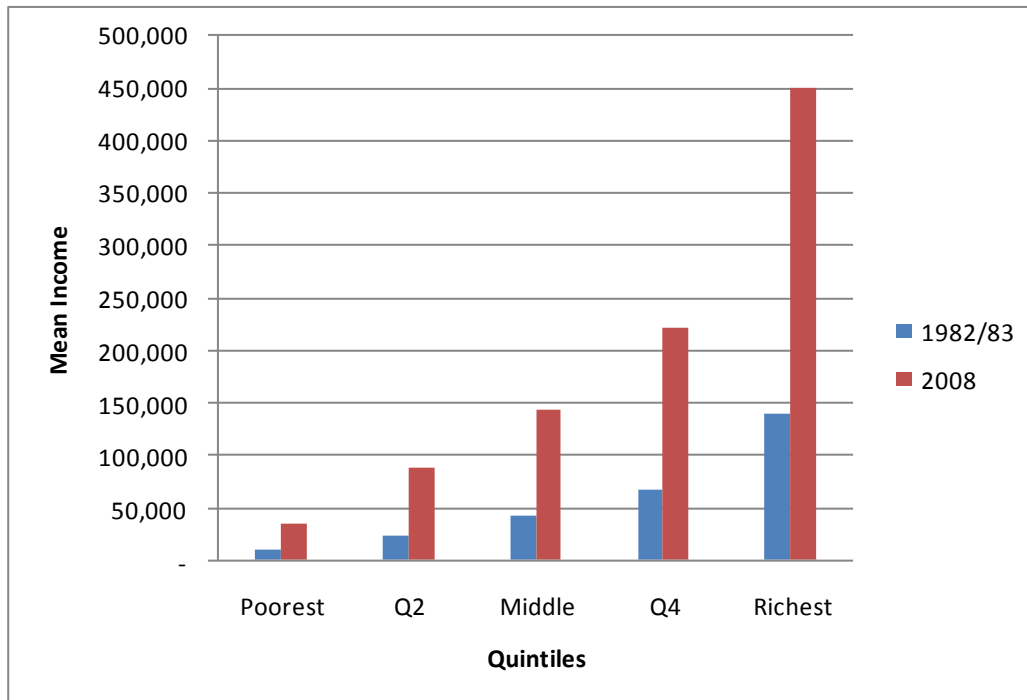
Figure 1: map of research sites



Figure 2: A timeline of development (1962-2009)



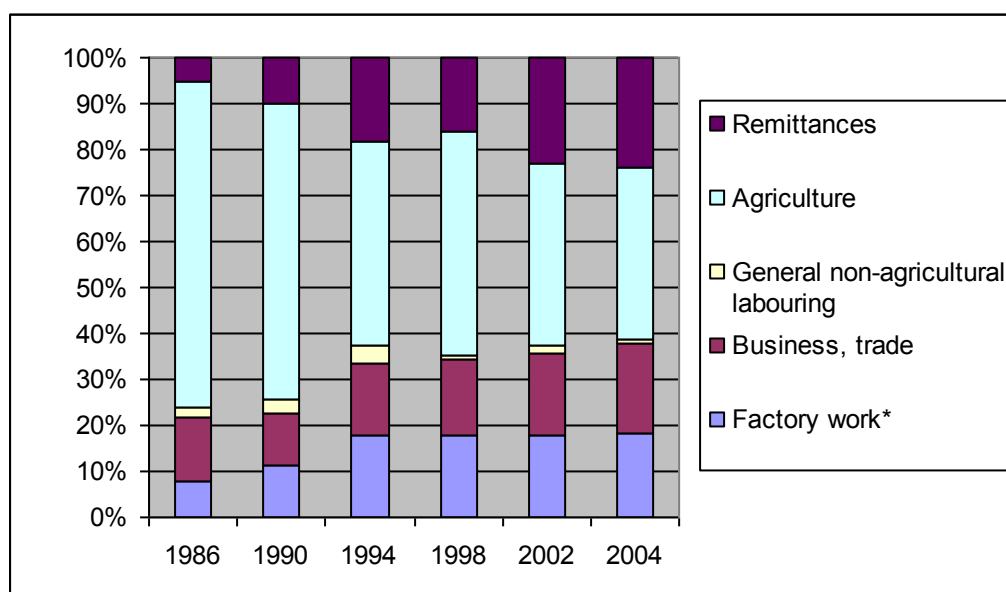
**Figure 3: Mean income of households by quintile, Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn (1982/3 and 2008, constant 2008 prices)**



Source: Survey Data

Note: n = 77 (1982/83 and 2008)

**Figure 4: Main source of income of households in Northeast Thailand (1986-2004, percent total households)**

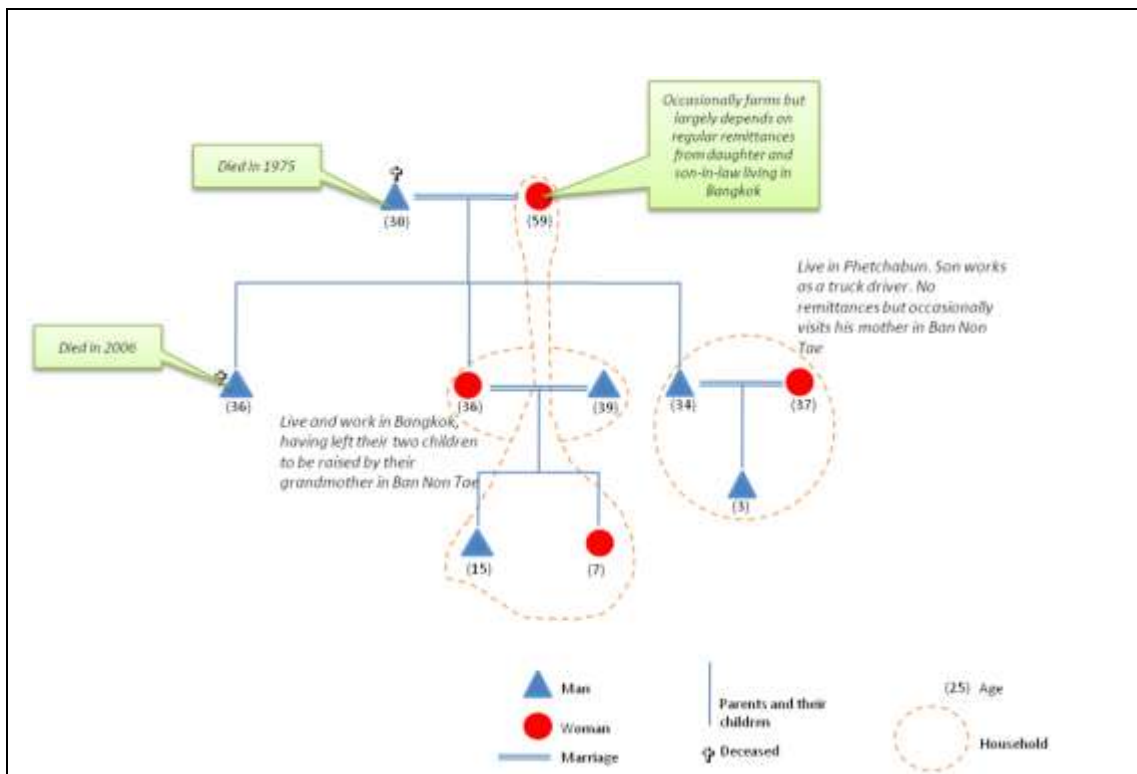


	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2004
<b>Factory work*</b>	8.0	11.4	18.0	17.9	17.7	18.1
<b>Business, trade</b>	13.6	11.4	15.6	16.6	18.1	19.6
<b>General non-agricultural labouring</b>	2.4	2.7	3.8	0.8	1.6	1.2
<b>Total non-farm</b>	22.4	25.5	37.4	35.3	37.4	38.9
<b>Agriculture</b>	70.6	64.4	44.5	48.6	39.4	37.2
<b>Remittances</b>	5.4	10.1	18.1	16.1	23.2	23.9
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100

\* = Clerks, construction and factory work

Source: Grandstaff *et al.* 2009: 298

Figure 5: Mrs Achara Wattana's 'extended' household (2009)



Source: interviews, 2008 and 2009

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