

Making Space for the Rural in an Urban World: Thailand in Asian Perspective

Abstract

The space of the rural seems self-evident. It is the countryside. But this is a narrow conceptualisation which restricts our understanding of many of the key dynamics in the contemporary countryside. Processes of spatial integration Asia-wide have unsettled the rural and urban and the distinctions that are viewed as underpinning and informing such a division. Economic and social change and their spatial consequences have rendered notions of the rural as a bounded and identifiable spatial construct increasingly problematic. Expanding communication networks and intensifying human mobilities have ‘exploded’ the urban, with rural consequences. The rural-urban dichotomy has, as a result, become increasingly awkward and, taken to its extreme, untenable because there is no longer any rural that lies beyond the urban. In addition, and partly in response to these developments, scholars of the rural have cast their net wider, beyond the countryside and farming, and beyond the material. Furthermore, post-colonial scholarship has encouraged a reassessment of some of the foundational conceptual frameworks used to interpret rural (and urban) questions in the global South. This requires that we think of the rural not as a bounded space with empirically identifiable material characteristics, but as a process (or, rather, set of processes) and as an idea. In consequence, this further means that the rural is dynamic and continually evolving, changing and subject to change. Nonetheless, the rural as an idea, even as an empirical ‘reality’ is remarkably tenacious. The challenge of the rural is not just conceptual and empirical, it is also methodological. The categories through which we come to map, measure and therefore understand the rural, and the means by which we do this, are inadequate to the task at hand. The realities of change have sometimes run ahead of our ability to track them.

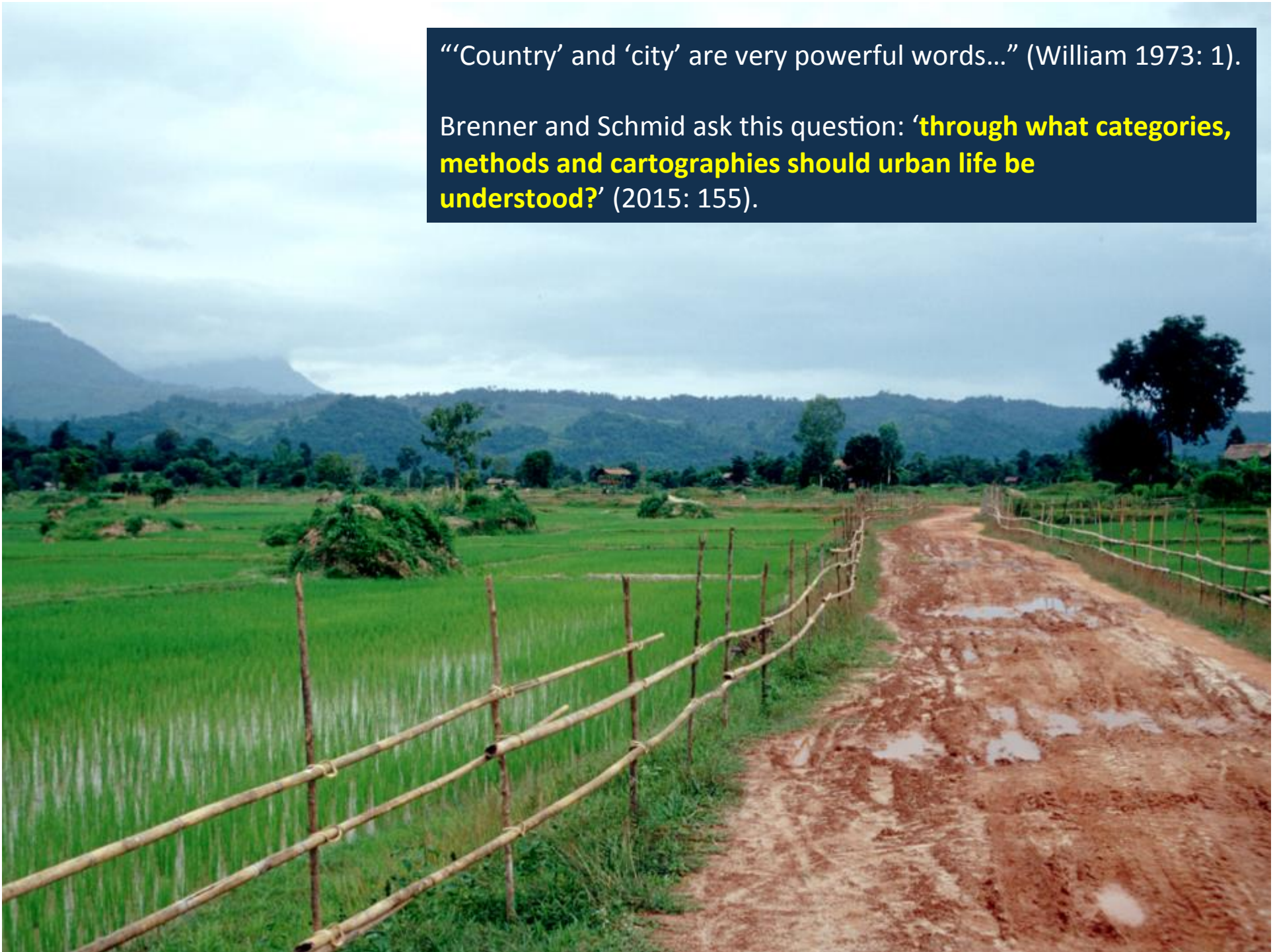
**Making Space for the Rural in an Urban
World:
Thailand in Asian perspective**

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National University of Singapore

“‘Country’ and ‘city’ are very powerful words...” (William 1973: 1).

Brenner and Schmid ask this question: **‘through what categories, methods and cartographies should urban life be understood?’** (2015: 155).



The reasons for this are because of the nature of contemporary transformations:

- Economic and social change and their spatial consequences have rendered notions of the rural as a bounded and identifiable spatial construct increasingly problematic.
- The rural-urban dichotomy has, as a result, become increasingly awkward and, taken to its extreme, untenable because there is no longer any rural that lies beyond the urban.
- This requires that we think of the rural not as a bounded space with empirically identifiable material characteristics, but as lying the intersection of a set of processes.



Delineating the 21st century countryside

First rural



First rural	Second rural	Third rural
Visually rural – the countryside	Social norms and behaviour	Mobile living
Low population density	Consumptions patterns and processes	Multi-sited livelihoods
Farming (primary production)	Social interactions	Hybrid/ hermaphrodite spaces
Nature	Aspirations and preferences	Occupational multiplicity
Non-urban	Baan nok (บ้านนอก)	(Peasant cosmopolitan)
Chonnabot (ชนบท)	Political and cultural identities	
(Peasant)	(Middle class peasant)	

First rural

Second rural



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Second rural



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The challenge of the rural is:

- **Conceptual and epistemological**: what is meant by '*the rural*' and, by implication, '*the urban*'?
- **Empirical**: do we have the data accurately to gauge the urban and rural?
- **Methodological**: what categories do we use to map, measure and therefore understand the rural?
- It is also **historical**, what were rural and urban relations like in the past?



The rural past

Phya Anuman Rajadhon in *The life of the farmer in Thailand* (1948) sets out the rural-urban dichotomy:

“The life of the city and the country are like this: one is near to nature; the other is remote from nature. One is the cradle of food and health; the other is a place where people gather to eat, and a place of disease... Whatever life is like, it continues so, with no progress upward and forward, because the country[side] must depend upon the wealth, intelligence, and power of the city... City people call people outside the city ‘countryfolk’. When one speaks the word ‘country’ [i.e. countryside] he thinks at once of backwardness both in wealth and in knowledge. ... Whatever the countryfolk think or believe is old-fashioned, and unchanged with the times” (Anuman Rajadon 1948: 1-2)



Bang Chan, c.1948



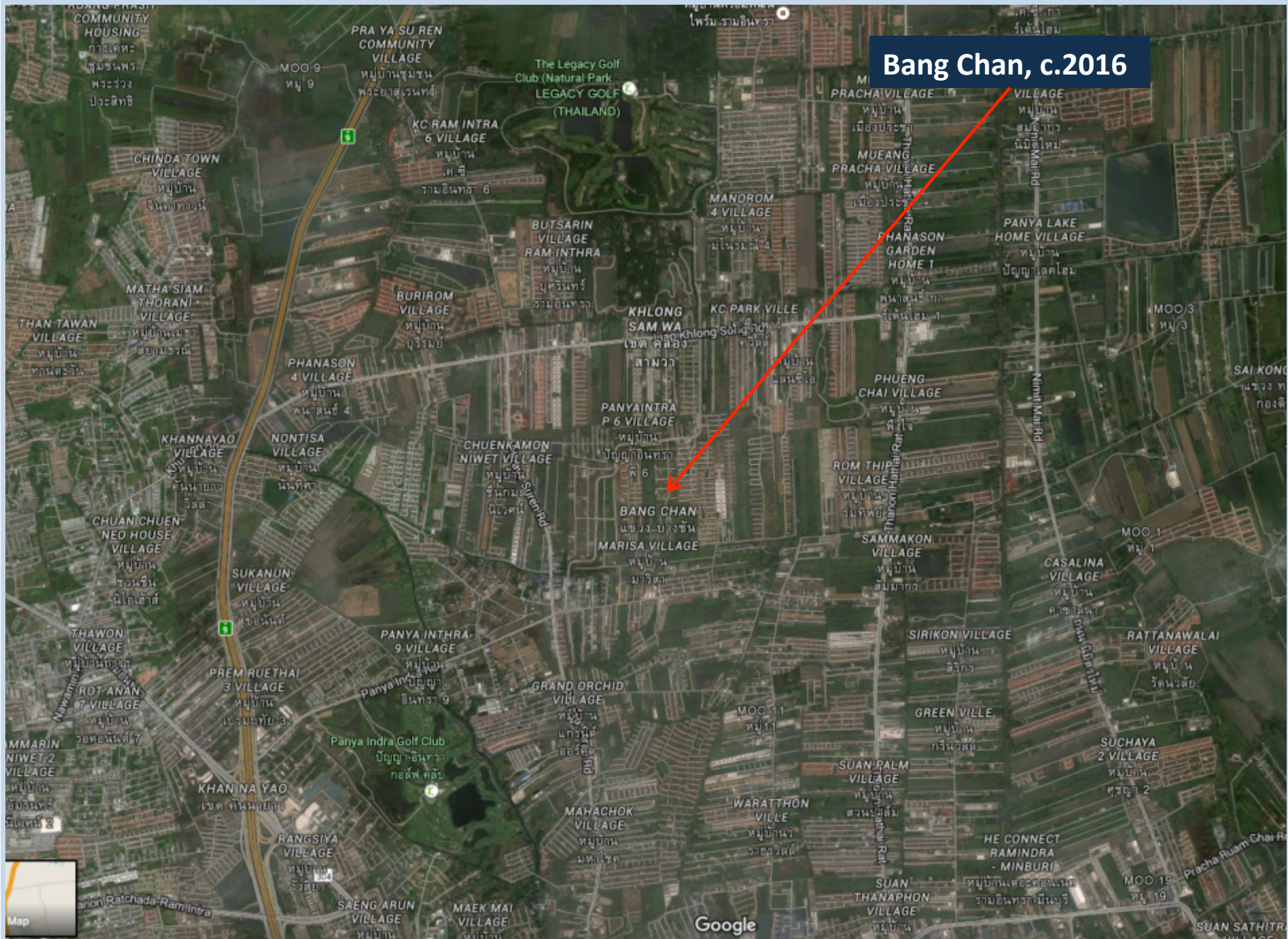
Air photo of Bang Chan

Textor's (1961) *From peasant to pedican driver*

Textor estimates that there were (in the mid-1950s) 9,000 drivers with official pedicab (*saamlor*) licenses in Bangkok the, four-fifths born and raised 'up-country'. Overwhelmingly, the reasons for leaving home were economic and he argued that "most migrants are pushed by the press of poverty rather than pulled by lure of adventure" (1961: 15 and 16).

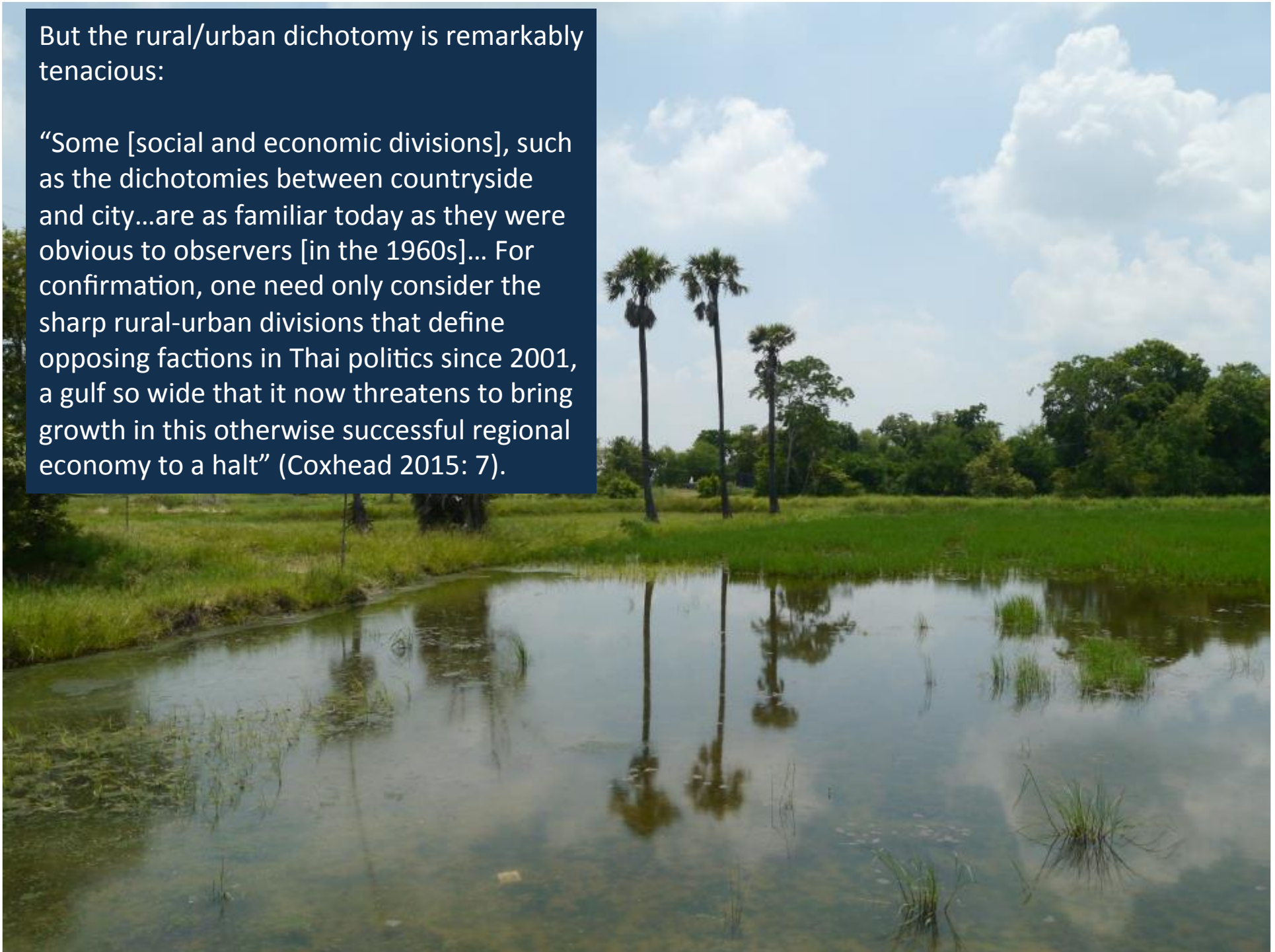


Bang Chan, c.2016



But the rural/urban dichotomy is remarkably tenacious:

“Some [social and economic divisions], such as the dichotomies between countryside and city...are as familiar today as they were obvious to observers [in the 1960s]... For confirmation, one need only consider the sharp rural-urban divisions that define opposing factions in Thai politics since 2001, a gulf so wide that it now threatens to bring growth in this otherwise successful regional economy to a halt” (Coxhead 2015: 7).

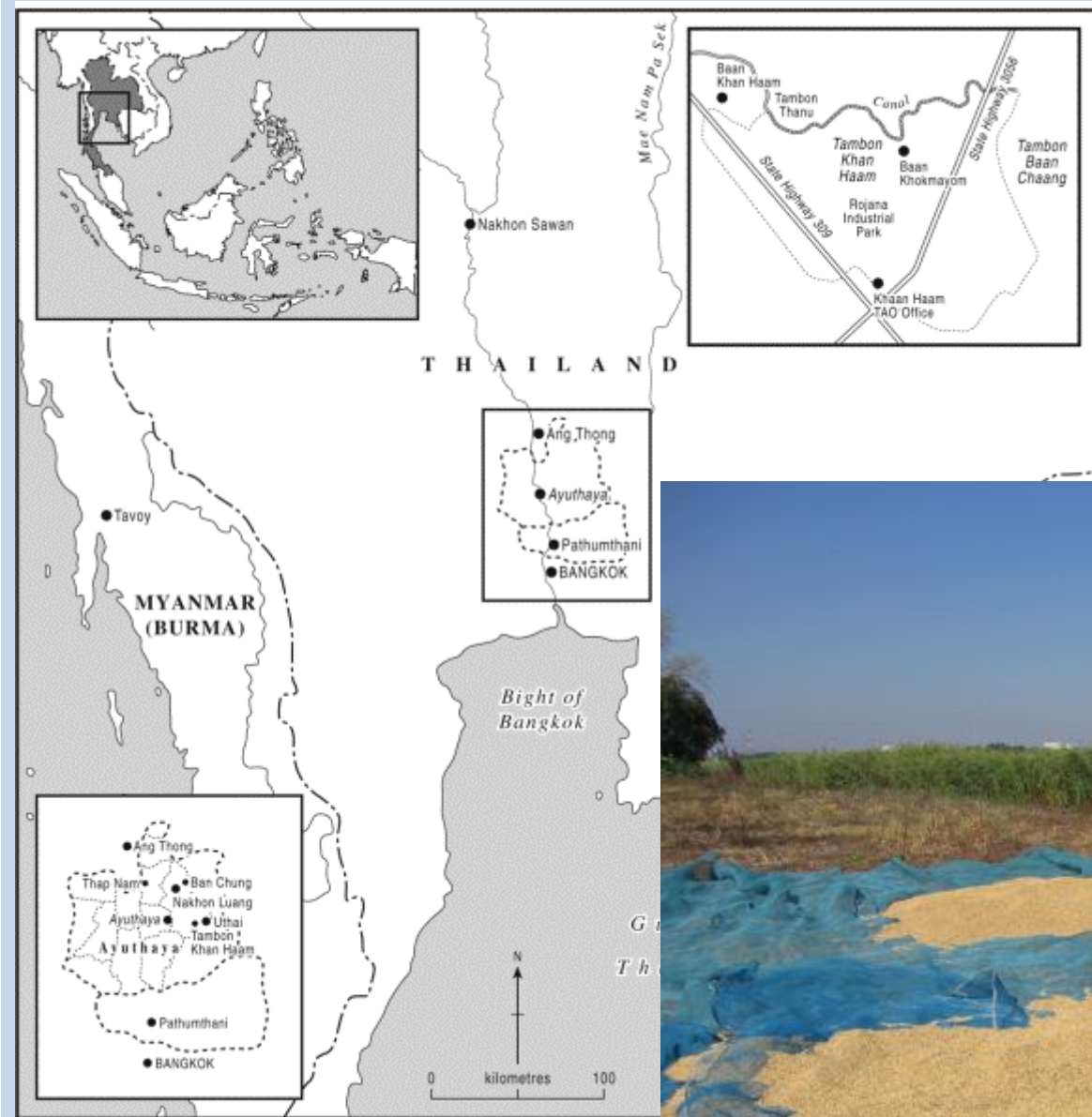


Measuring, gauging and recording the rural-urban dichotomy



In Amyot's (1976) *Village Ayutthaya: social and economic conditions of a rural population in central Thailand*, he writes:

“The physical and social universe of a farmer is relatively simple. Its center at the most elementary level is the homestead where family life evolves and livelihood activity is organized. Other centers in a wider sphere of social relationships are the wat [monastery] and various meeting places such as stores and so on, as opportunities arise. Likewise, the family and household are the primary focus of social relationships extending outwards to neighbours and friends in the same community. These natural ties constitute the normal basis for cooperation and association for social and economic purposes. This is the intimate universe of the Ayutthaya villagers” (Amyot 1976: 45).



Ban Khokmayom





Nikon Ayuthaya Thailand Factory



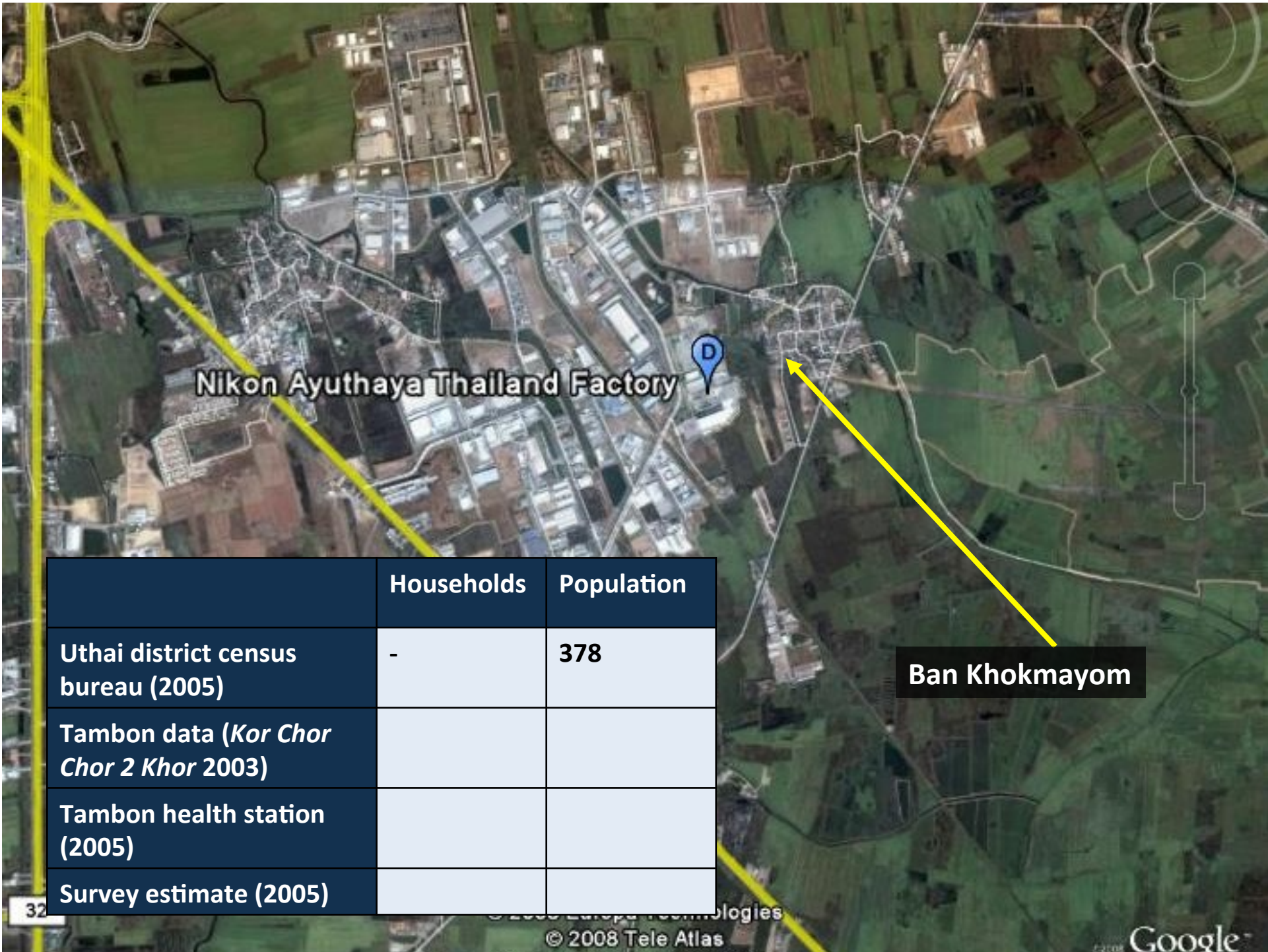
Ban Khokmayom

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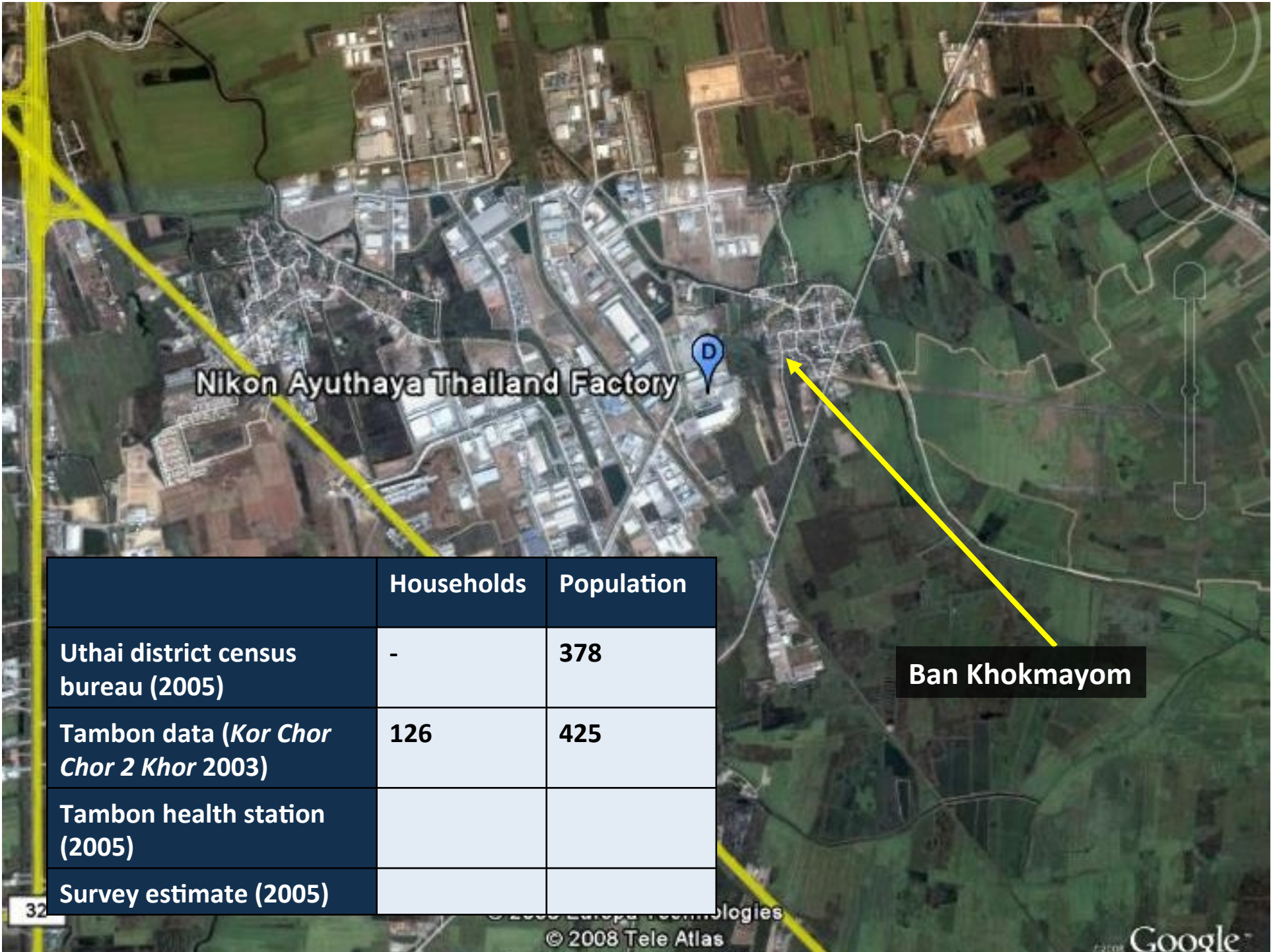
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Nikon Ayuthaya Thailand Factory

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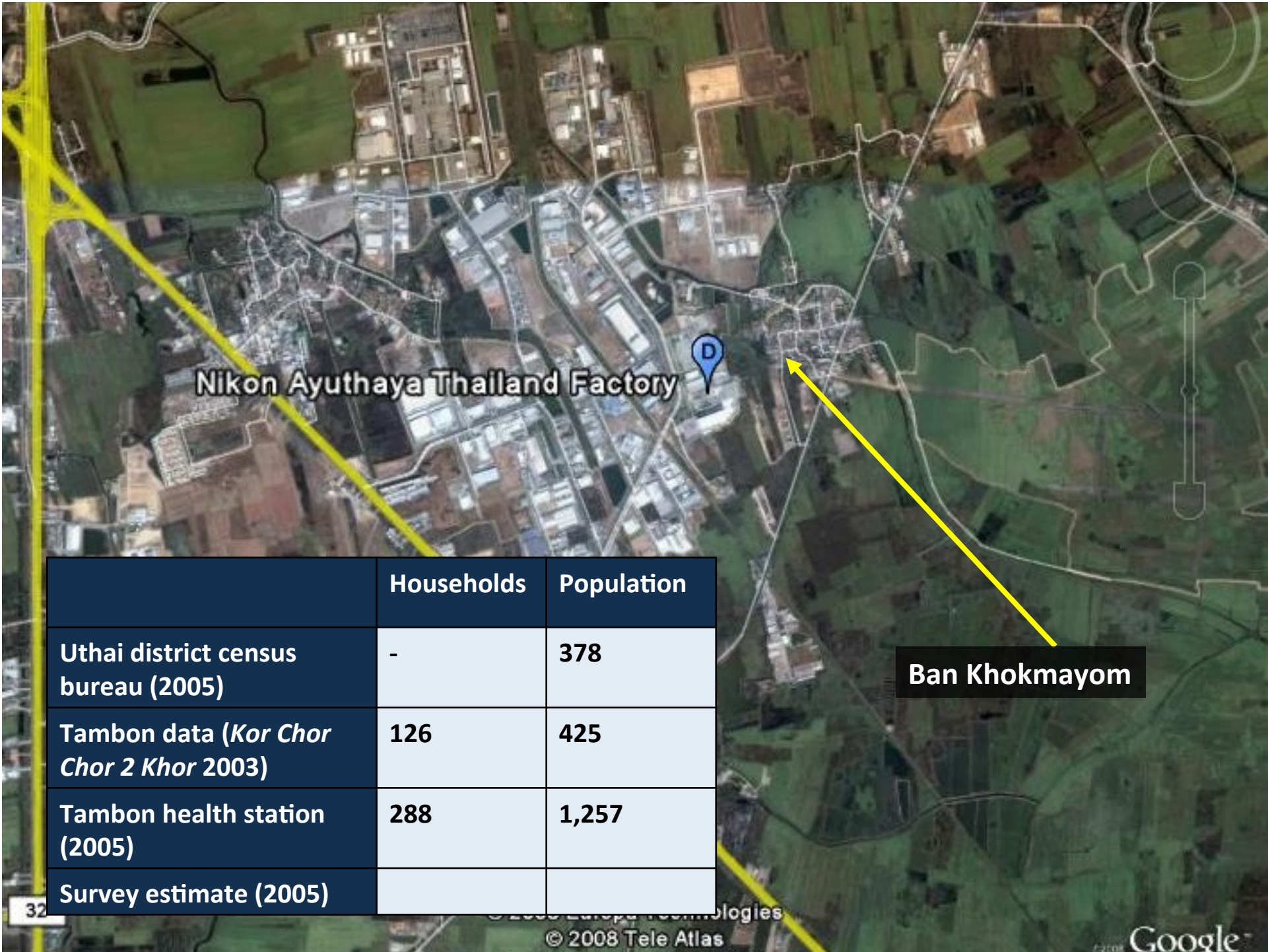
	Households	Population
Uthai district census bureau (2005)	-	378
Tambon data (<i>Kor Chor Chor 2 Khor</i> 2003)		
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Survey estimate (2005)		



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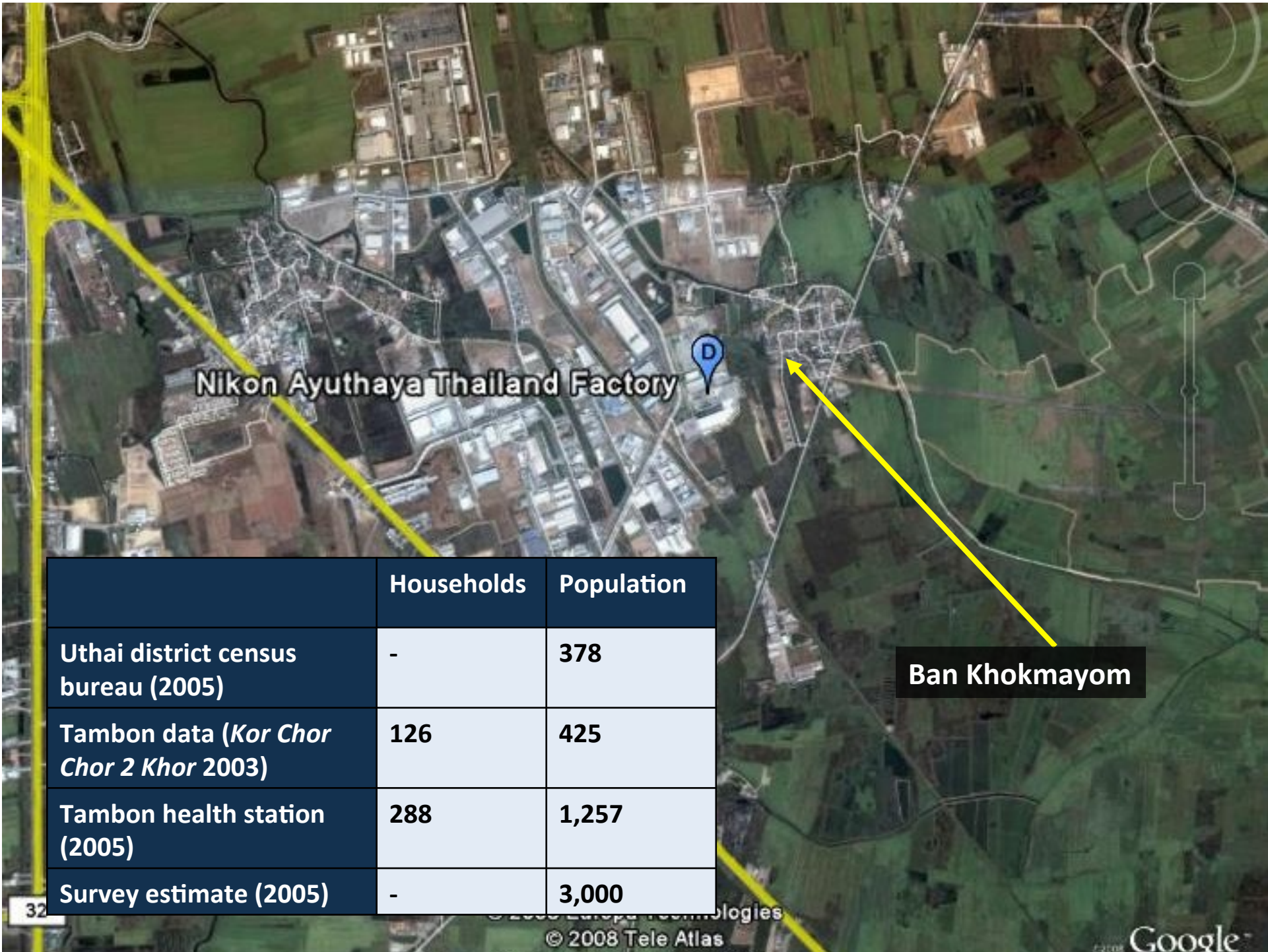
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Measuring and recording the rural-urban dichotomy

	Rural	Urban	Dichotomy (rural/ urban ratio)	Date	Notes
Population (millions)	34.88	32.13	52/48	2013	
Population growth rate (annual, %)	-2.056	3.002	-	2013	
Poverty (incidence, national poverty line)	74.0	43.3	63/37	1988	
	13.9	7.7	64/36	2013	Poverty twice as high in rural areas
Ageing					
Value added per worker (% average)	30 (agriculture value added)	210 (industry value added)	88/12	2012	Value added per worker seven times higher in industry than agriculture
Life satisfaction	78.8%	73.0%	-	2014	
Household income	2,652	6,642	28/72	2002	Household incomes four times higher in urban areas
Net enrolment rate in tertiary education (%)	18.0	39.5	31/69	2013	Tertiary education enrolment rate in rural areas half that in urban
Income inequality	0.445	0.451	50/50	2013	

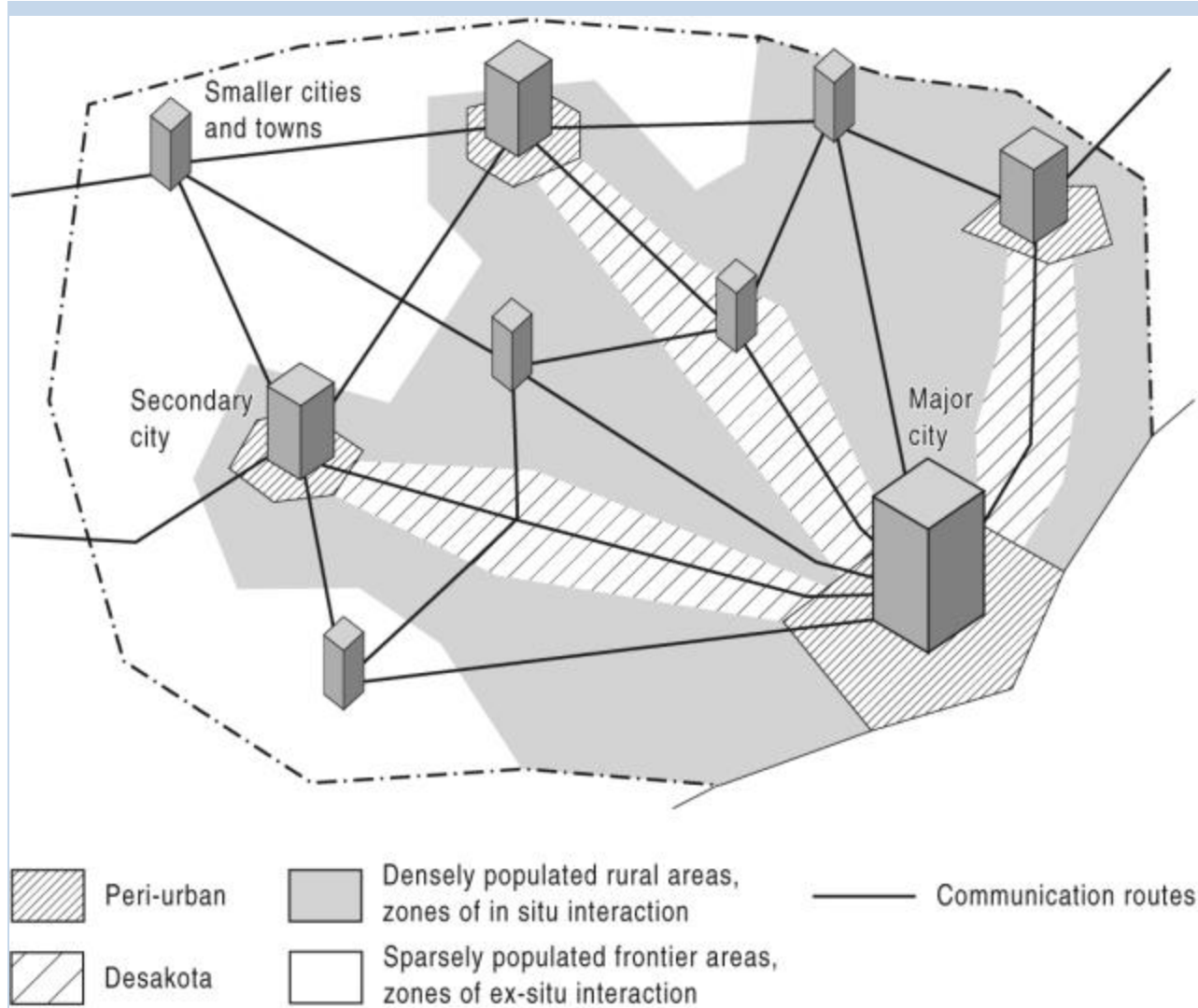
Conceptualising the urban and rural

Urban and rural theory

“...we have a problem in urban theory. It does not require a careful empirical review to know that the cities and issues highly profiled in the canon of urban studies do not reflect the current dynamic centers of urbanization or the most critical contemporary urban problems. At the heart of this tension is the fact that a relatively small group of highly visible theorists tend...to write about their own backyards. ... For urban theory, the consequence of this distortion is the prioritizing of ideas that speak to cities forged by the industrial revolution, the realities of the Anglophone parts of the world, and a related tendency to overlook the rapidly growing cities of the global South...” (Parnell and Robinson 2012: 595-596).



Hanoi, 2010



Terry McGee's *desa-kota* region - schematically

“...while travelling around Java in the mid-1980s and talking to Tommy Firman and other Indonesian scholars, I became convinced that the urban transition, as it was working its way out in the densely populated core regions of Asia, had some distinctive elements. In particular, the traditional sharp distinction between rural and urban activities in western sociology was of limited help in trying to delineate the processes of urbanization as they were occurring in the large Indonesian urban regions of Java. Rather, agricultural and non-agricultural activities were coexisting in extended zones surrounding the cities that I labelled *desakota*” (McGee 2002: 10).

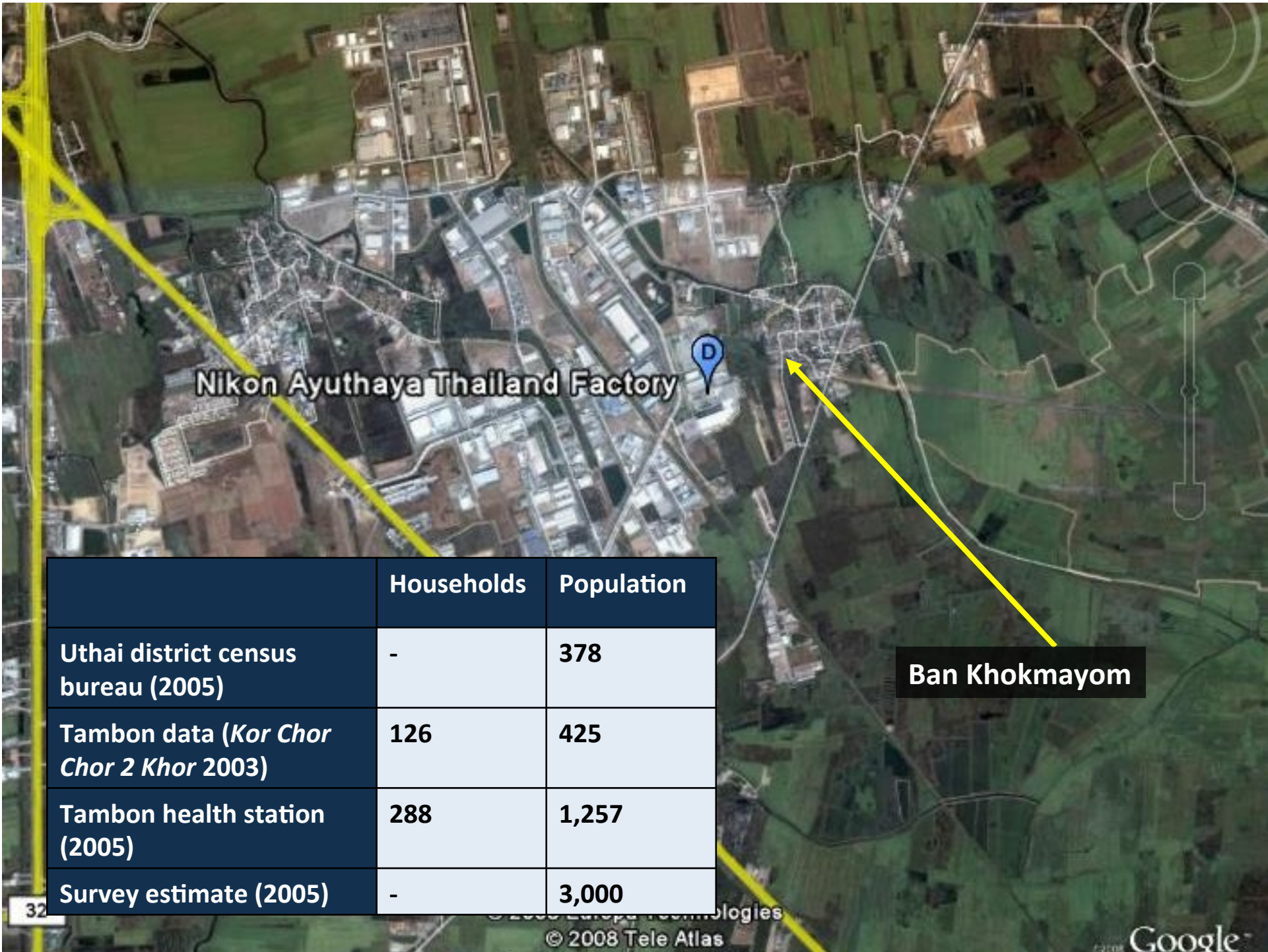


Terry McGee's *desa-kota* region – in practice

It may be that the spatiality of economic development in Thailand and wider Asia is distinct and different from the historical experience of Europe and North America, raising quite significant questions about the usefulness of the rural-urban dichotomy.

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Rural Ayutthaya, urban Ayutthaya



Nikon Ayuthaya Thailand Factory

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Hor pak and dek hor, Ban Khokmayom

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Three intersecting fields of rural and urban change

Distant rural spaces and their urban resonances

The Ayutthaya discussion highlights that transformations in Thailand during the development era have made 'the rural' as a bounded spatial category increasingly less suitable for identifying and understanding many of the changes afoot. The nature of the development process, in other words, requires that we reconsider the epistemology of the rural as well as its utility in terms of planning and policy. This is occurring across three intersecting fields, each with its own spatial signature:

- **Identities and aspirations;**
- production and work; and
- social organisation.



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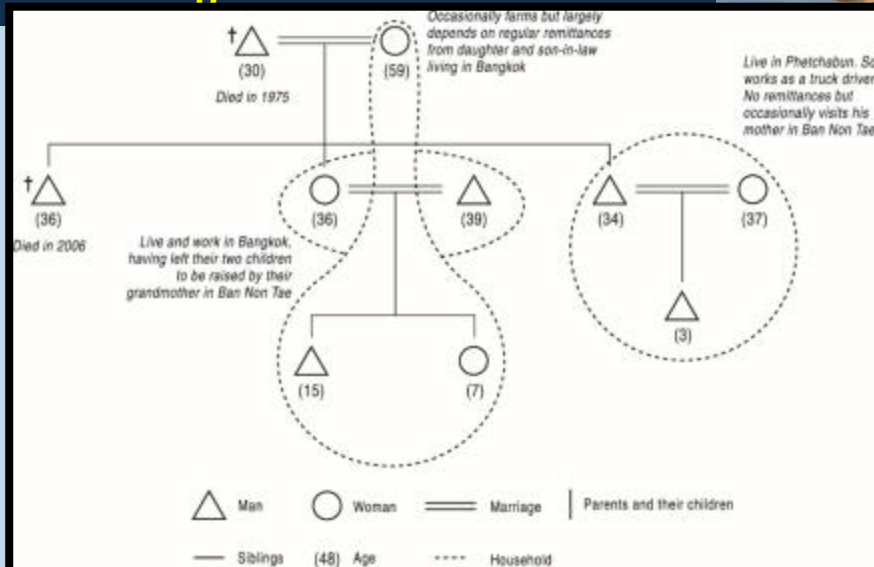
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1. Rural (and urban) identities and aspirations

The notion that rural people are *chao baan nok* (ชาวบ้านนอก) or 'upcountry' has insinuations not just of disconnection from the main currents of change and centres of innovation but also, by implication, a lack of sophistication. On the other hand, urbanites are *thansamai* (ทันสมัย) or 'up-to-date', even *hai-so* (ไฮโซ) or 'high society' and *inter*, 'international'.



A peasant?
A farmer?
A smallholder?
A worker?

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A peasant?
A farmer?
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A worker?



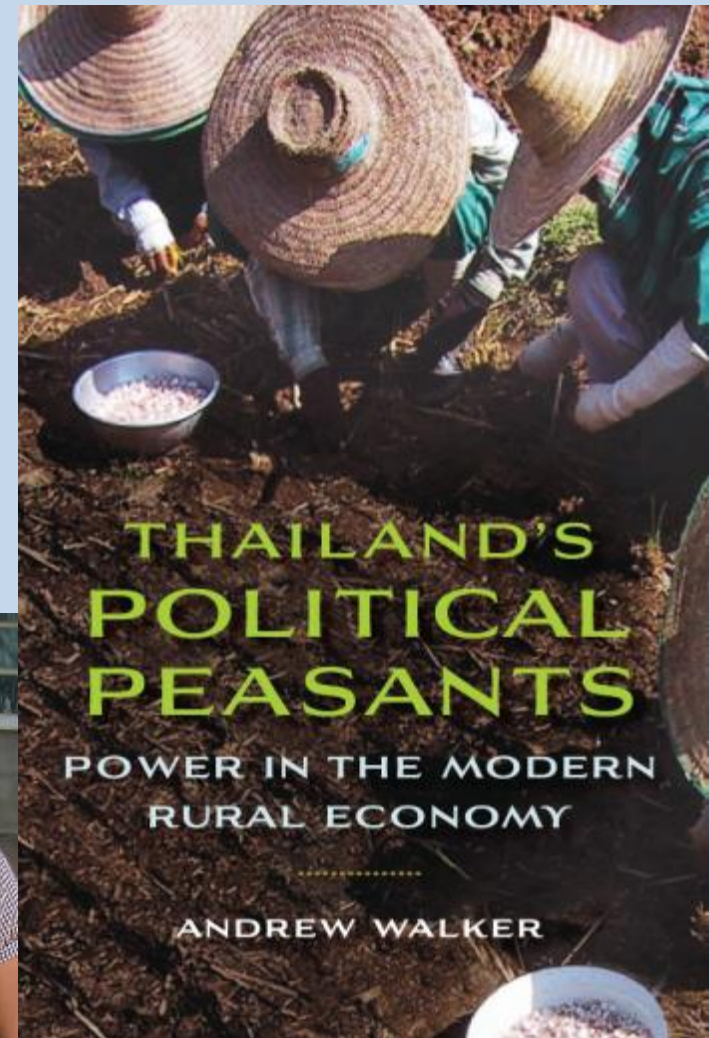


ระเบียบการใช้ถนนใน กทม.



'System for road usage in Bangkok. Monday-Friday: Let vehicles flow. Saturday-Sunday: Let buffalos march'

A rural class?



- Middle income peasants (Walker)
- Peasant cosmopolitans (Keyes)

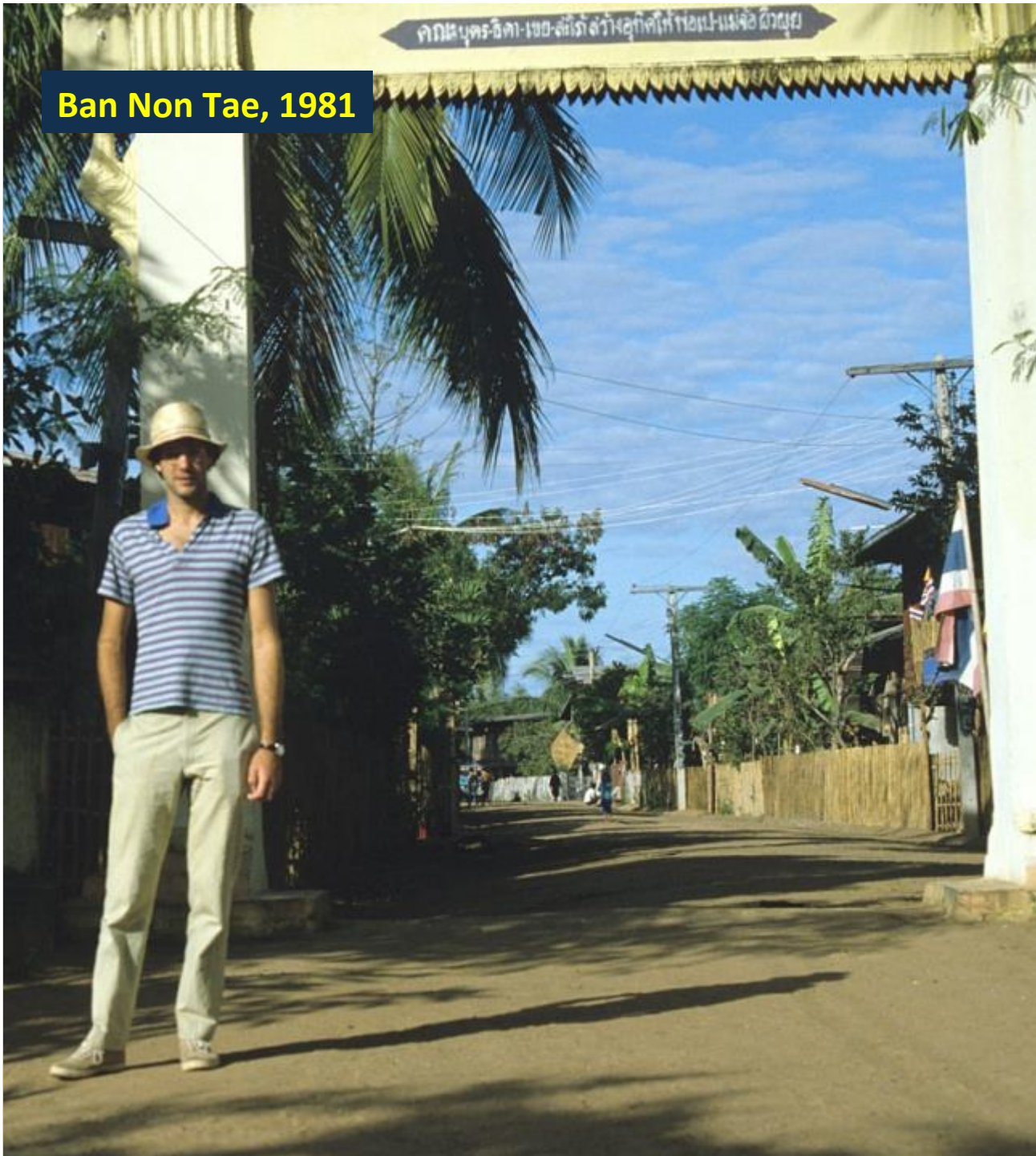
2. Production and work

Work in the new Asian rural encompasses three main areas of transformation:

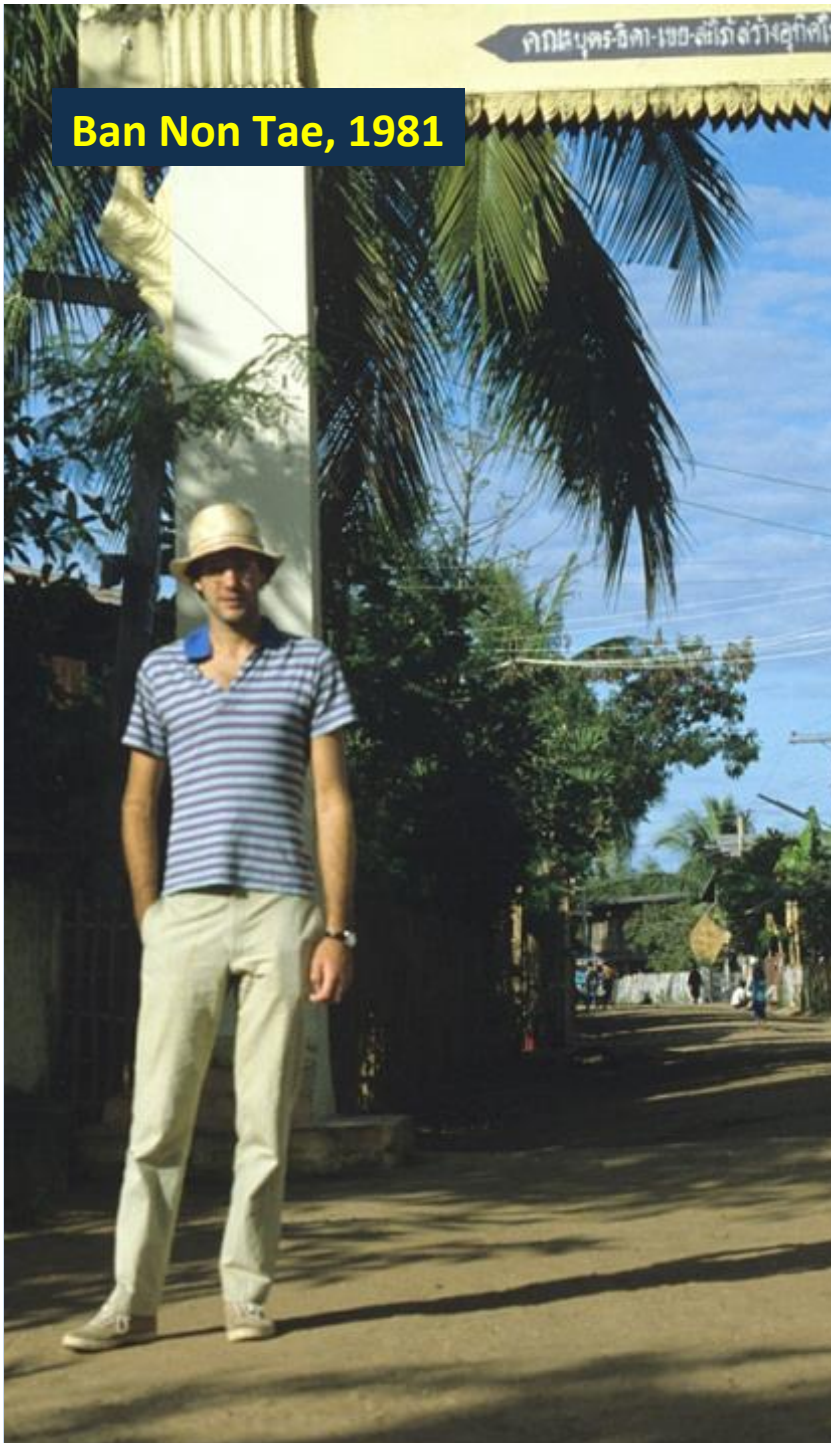
- The composition of the rural economy
- The character of rural work
- The nature of rural production



Ban Non Tae, 1981



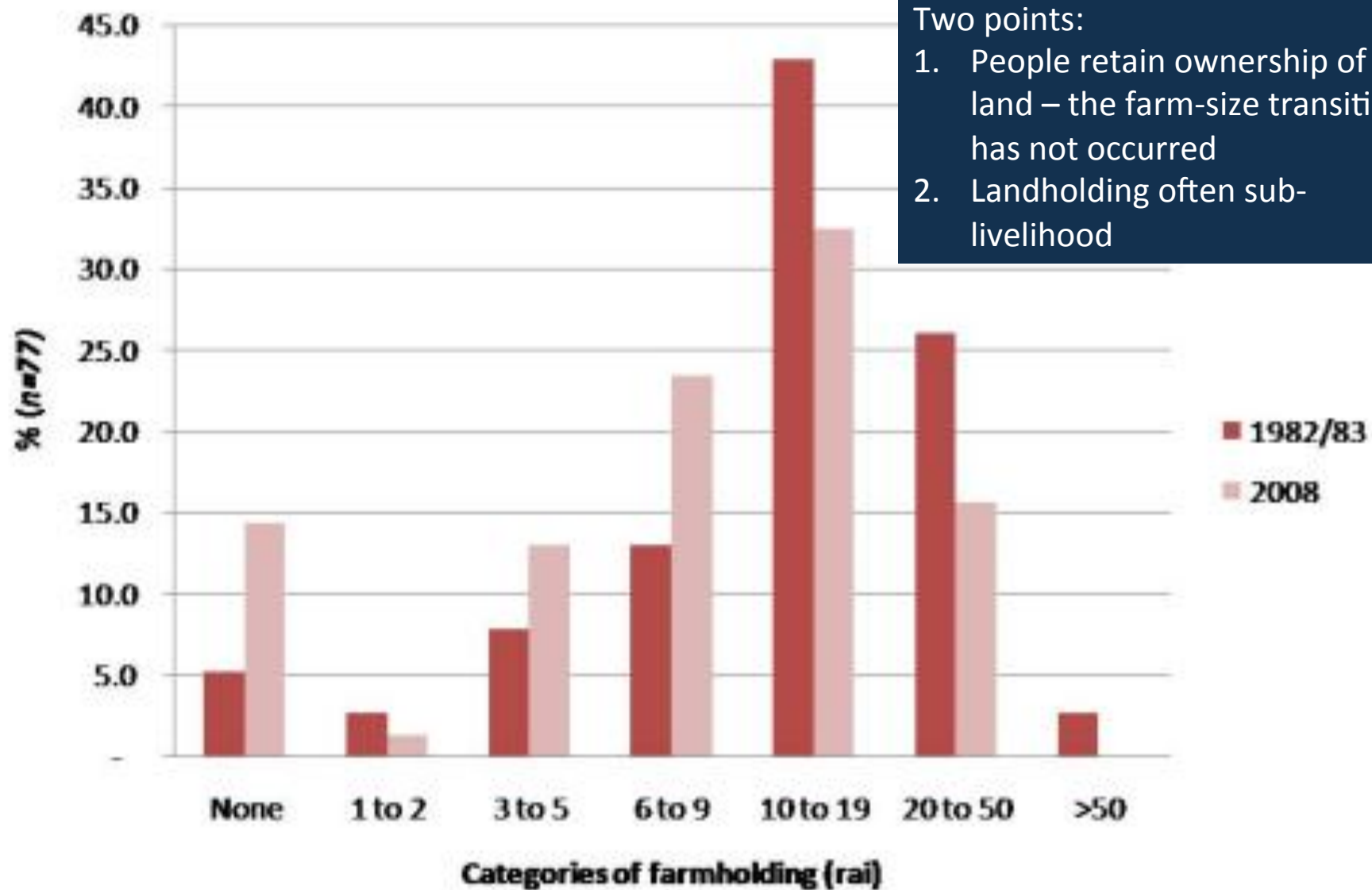
Ban Non Tae, 1981



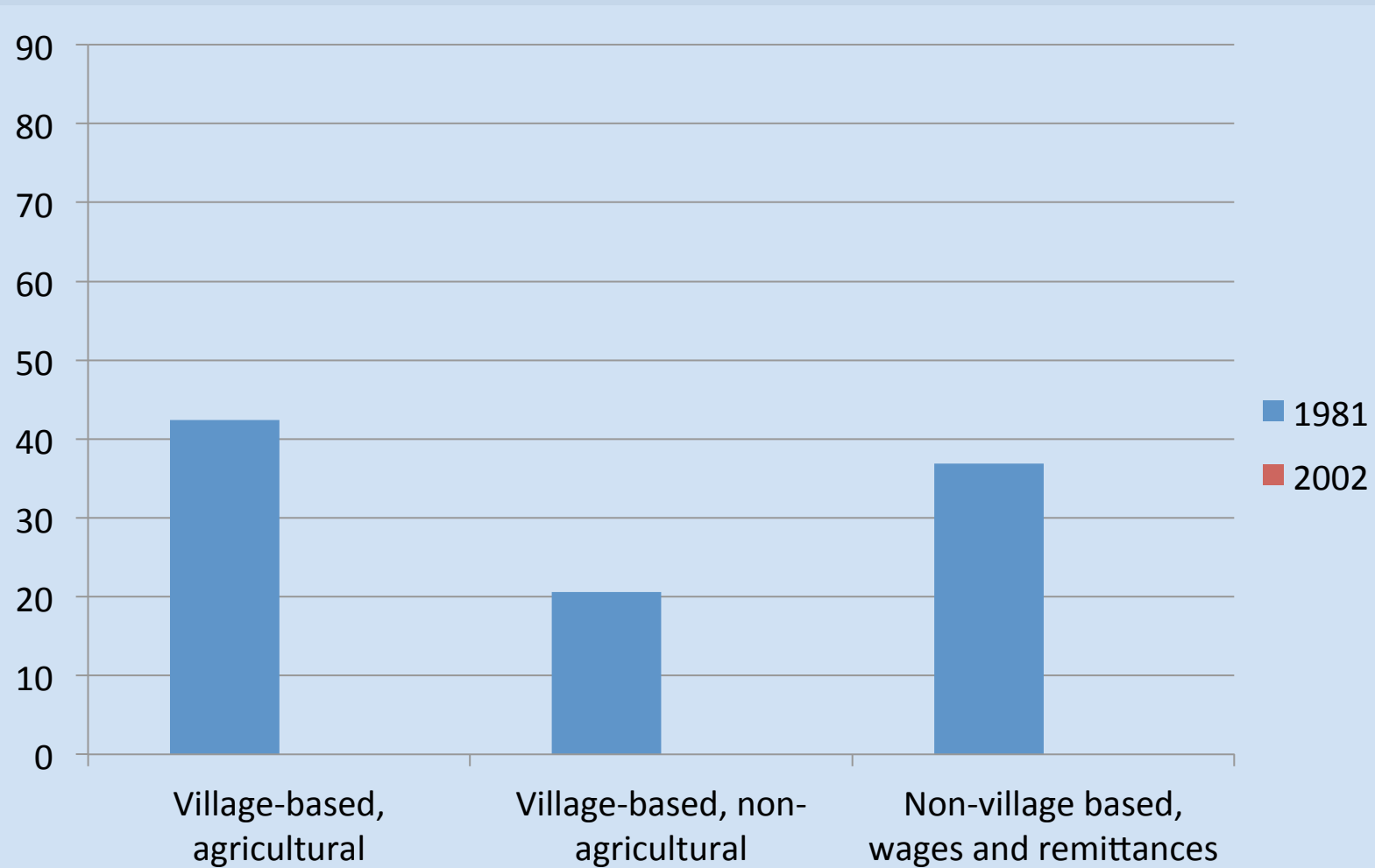
Ban Non Tae, 2008



Distribution of households according to their farmholdings, Maharakham, Thailand (1982/83 and 2008)

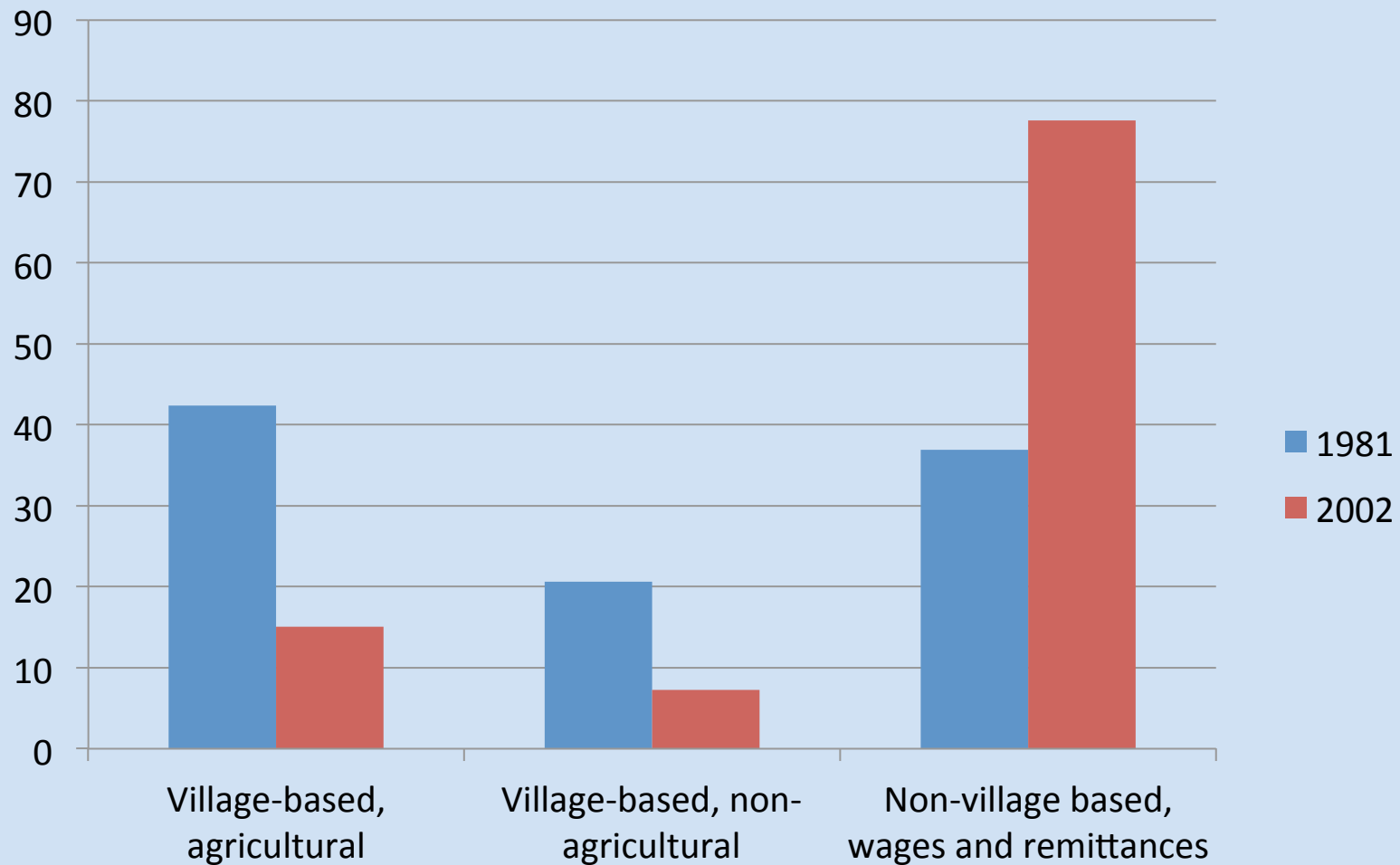


Income sources, Ban Dong Daeng, Northeast Thailand: 1981 and 2002 (per cent)



Source: data extracted from Funahashi 2009: 3.

Income sources, Ban Dong Daeng, Northeast Thailand: 1981 and 2002 (per cent)



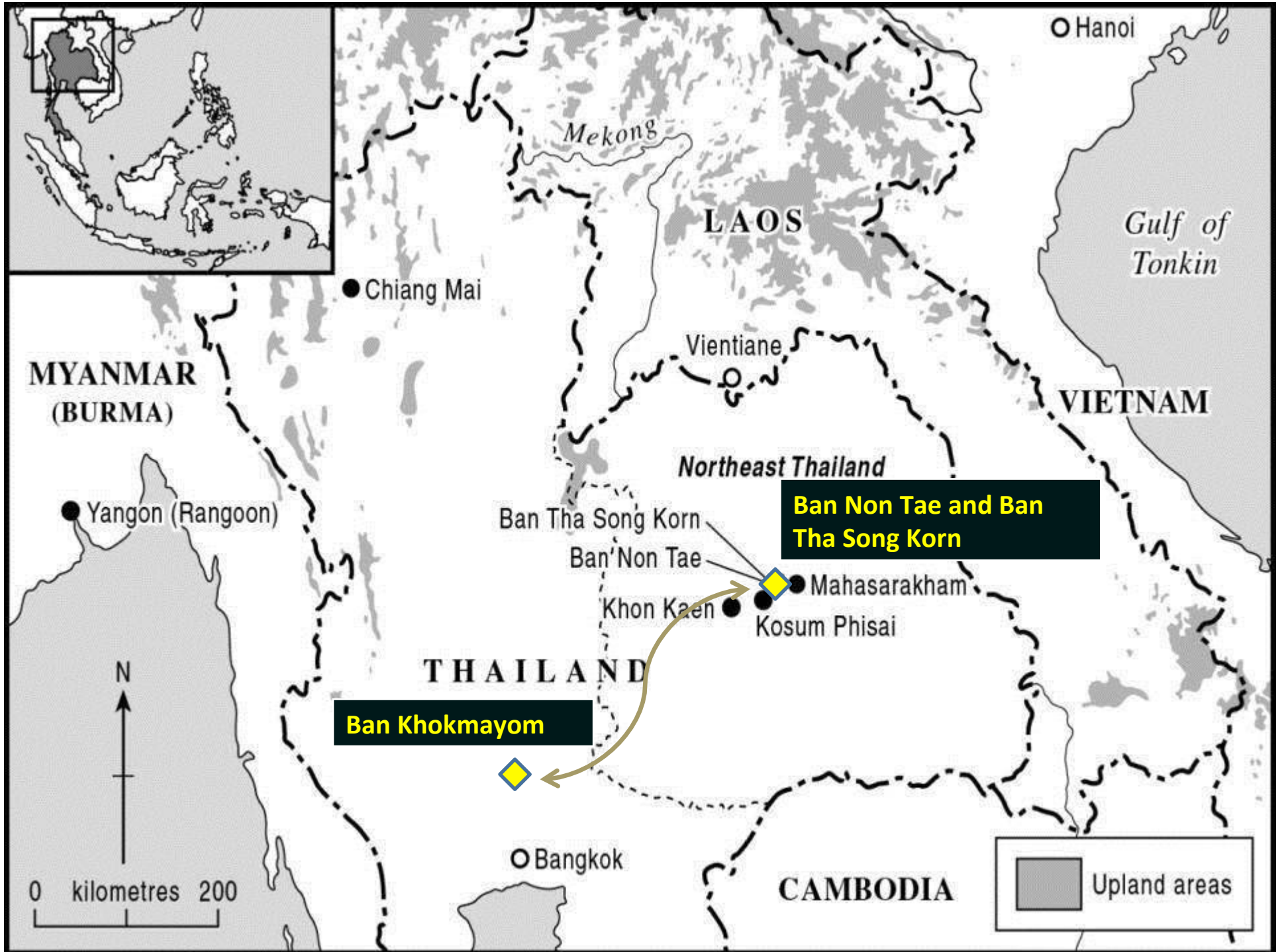
Source: data extracted from Funahashi 2009: 3.

The key first characteristic of the smallholder is that their livelihoods are not met only – or even mainly – from farming.

This means that the economics of farming and the economics of the smallholder are not the same thing.

Terms used: occupational diversity or multiplicity, pluriactivity, diverse and multi-sited livelihoods, and diversification-for-survival





○ Hanoi

Mekong

LAOS

Gulf of Tonkin

● Chiang Mai

Vientiane

MYANMAR
(BURMA)

VIETNAM

Northeast Thailand

**Ban Non Tae and Ban
Tha Song Korn**

● Yangon (Rangoon)

Ban Tha Song Korn

Ban Non Tae

● Mahasarakham

Khon Kaen

● Kosum Phisai

THAILAND

Ban Khokmayom

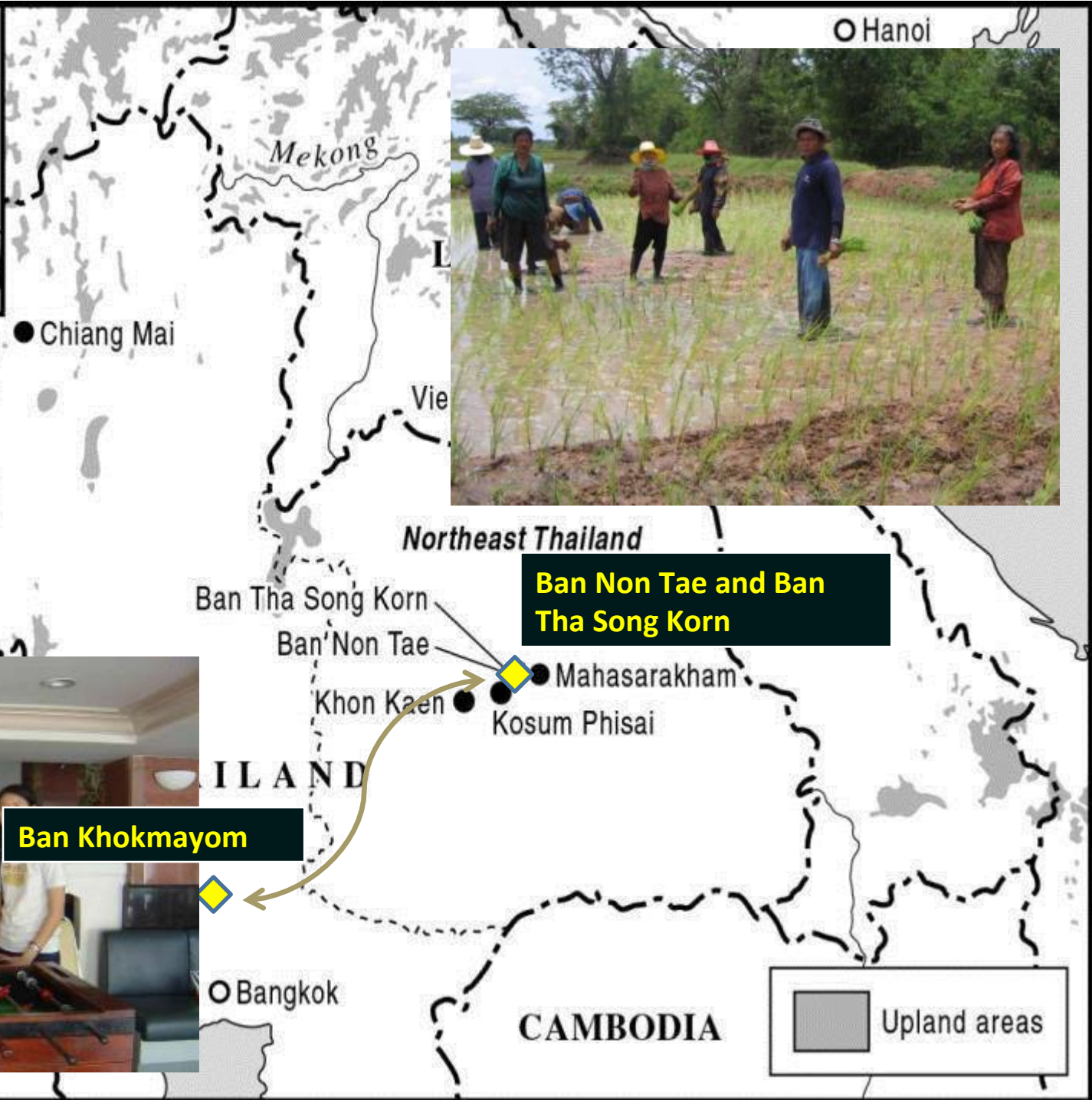
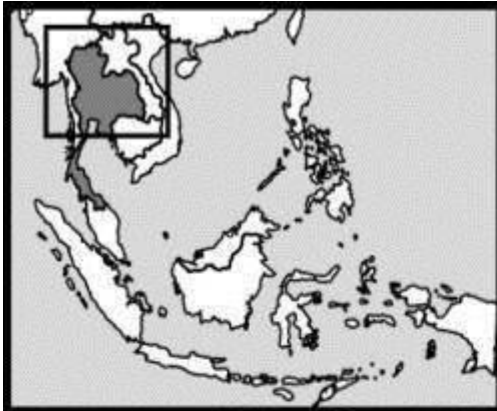
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○ Bangkok

CAMBODIA

Upland areas

0 kilometres 200



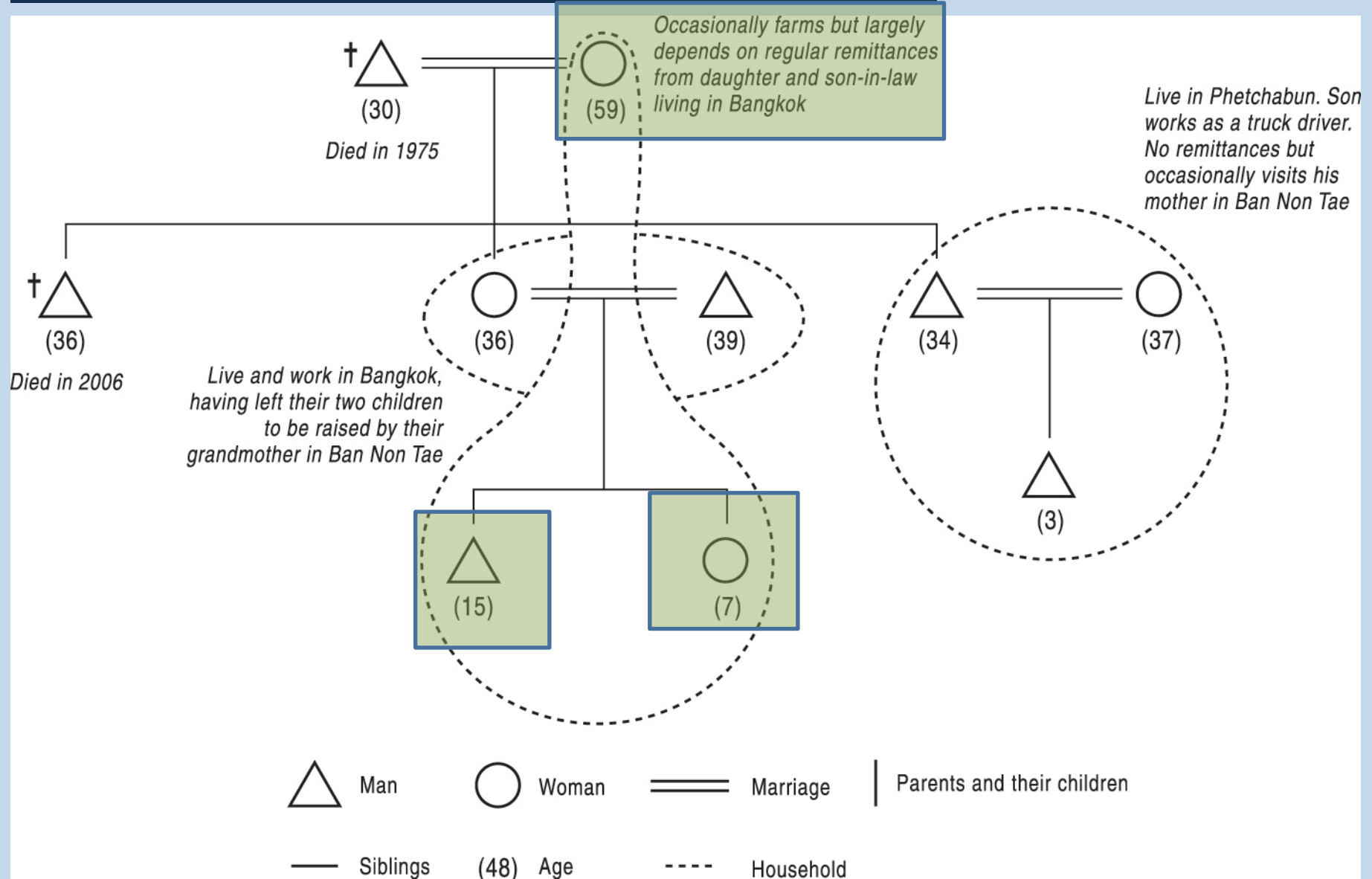
Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn



Ban Khokmayom

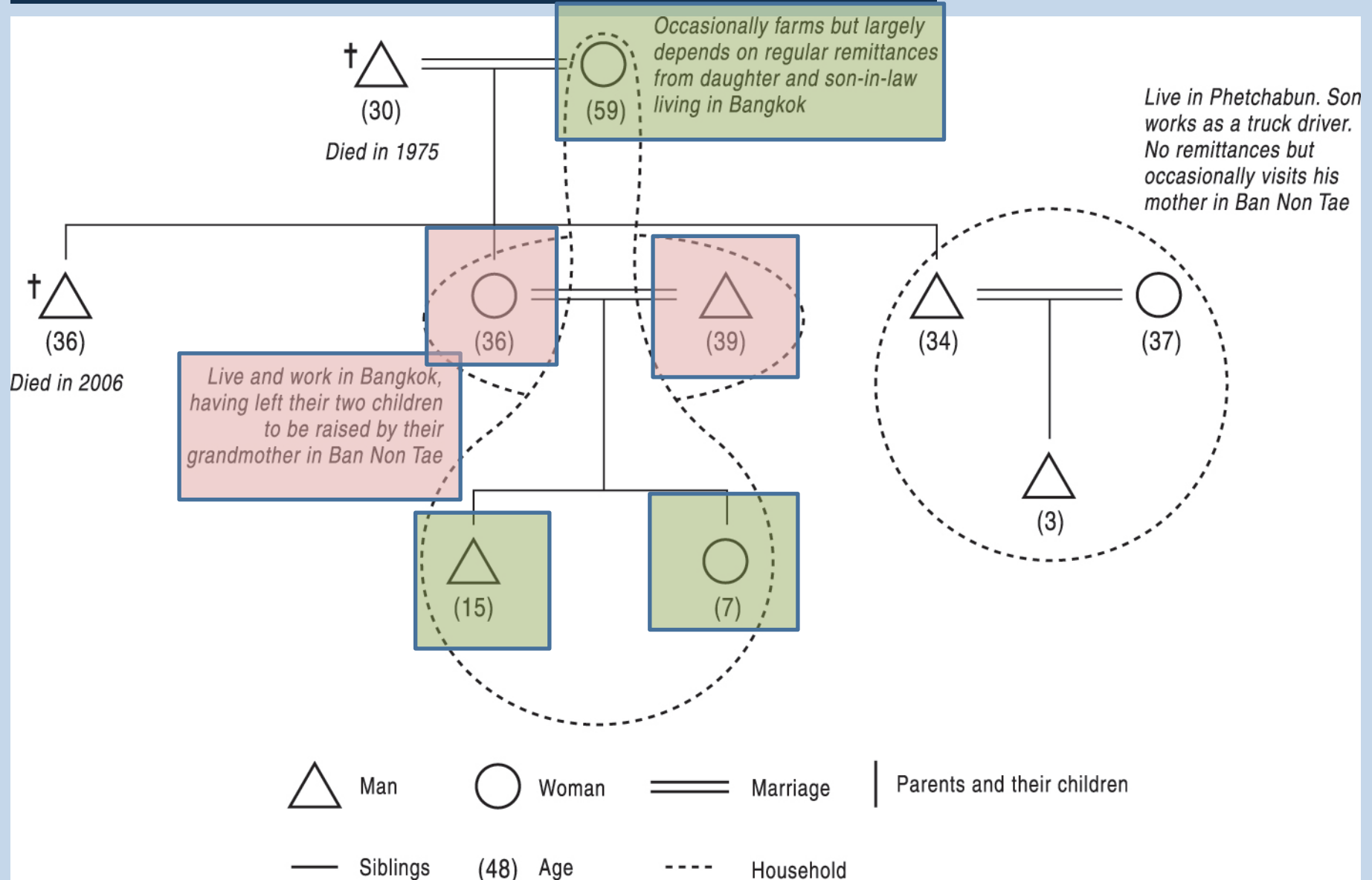
3. Social organisation

Accumulation with social fragmentation (in Northeast Thailand)



3. Social organisation

Accumulation with social fragmentation (in Northeast Thailand)





Country	Average age	Date of survey
Japan	70	2013
South Korea	56% of farm workers >60 years	2010
Philippines	54	2012
Thailand	55	2008
Malaysia	53	2005
Indonesia	80% >45 years old	2011

The persistence of the rural-urban dichotomy

Gullette's (2013) ethnographic study of migrants in Bangkok reveals how difficult it is for migrants to cross the *khon Krungthep* (คนกรุงเทพฯ)/ *chao baan nok* (ชาวบ้านนอก) divide. He quotes one of his respondents saying:

"I think no matter how long I'm here, how much money I make, how many things I have relative to wealthy people in the city, it won't change the way I feel. I'm still *khon ban nok*. I don't think I'll ever feel at home here" (2013: 138).

