

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The first chapter introduces how the idea of conducting this research developed. It also includes the purpose, possible application and benefit of the study.

1.1 Rationale :

In academic sphere, “Lao studies”, albeit interesting, was not conducted internationally until 2003 when the First Lao History Symposium was held at the University of California-Berkeley, followed by the First International Conference on Lao Studies at the University of Northern Illinois in 2005. Grant Evans claims in *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos since 1975*, that Laos authorities still monopolizes the channel of information and propaganda even though the economic system has changed significantly from the New Thinking Policy influenced by the Soviet Union, the most powerful country in the communist camp (Evans, 21). The body of knowledge about Lao Literature, therefore, is limited.

Having become a socialist country since 1975, Laos Peoples Democratic Republic, a Southeast Asian country, has adopted Stalinism and Maoism in fighting with the Royal Lao side while maintaining relationship with the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Assistant Professor Dr. Vattana Pholsena at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore contends in *Post-War Laos: The Politics of Culture, History and Identity* that the ultimate goal for the Lao Communists as it had been for their Soviet, Chinese and Vietnamese counterparts, guided by a historicist and evolutionist vision, was to eradicate the “old ” identities and replace them with a new socialist one. Unlike other communist countries, Laos has its way of defining identity.

Until 1986, The Lao Peoples Democratic Republic officially declared the “New-Thinking Policy”. Anin Puttichot asserts in *Relations between Educational and Economic Development Policies under the Lao PDR’s “New Thinking”, 1986-2000* (2003) that the first period of the New-Thinking is the era of Kaysone Phomvihana

(1986-1992) which is the beginning phase of the transition of the country's development particularly in the economic context. Under the New-Thinking policy, Educational Reform movements in this period were rather limited to the realm of strategic planning. The second period is the Post-Kaysone Phomvihana era (1993-2000). In this era, all other areas of the society were reformed. Therefore, during this period, Laos had made an extensive educational policy and implemented educational reform in a clearer and more concrete way. However, educational development of Laos in 2000 A.D. continued to face several major problems, e.g., geographical hindrances, population composition, budget insufficiency, inconsistency in the levels of development in various administrative areas, including obstacles caused by political system.

In the People Democratic Republic of Laos, the Ministry of Information and Culture is in charge of formulating the Function of Information by controlling all publications. The Amnesty International reports that the Lao government greatly restricts the fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. The only legal political party in the country is the Lao Peoples Revolutionary Party, the communist party which controls the government. Opposition to the government is not permitted, and the state retains control of institutions such as the media, religious organizations and trade unions. This measure is a claim to political legitimacy. Written, spoken or performed expressions that do not conform to the current ideology are simply not allowed (<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa260042002>). As a result, there is still no modern and free literature in this state. Despite the control from the government, the New thinking Era can be considered the crucial transition.

During this transitional period of the society, to escape from social dilemma, literature as a representation of the society portrays an identity formation based on the political viewpoint of the author. In order to reach mass readership, the short story is the genre of literature that can draw attention from the readers because of its single climax. Three contemporary writers, namely Outhine Bounyavong, Saisuwan Phengphong and Bountanong Chomchaipon are worth studying as they obtain significant recognition among Laotian readers and the Lao Writers' Association. Moreover, all of them attempt to publish their works outside the country. Despite the different point of views towards "Laotian Identity", their literary works can be

regarded as an excellent case to interpret the changes and impact on the Laotian identity in the New Thinking era.

An eminent writer, Outhine Bounyavong continues writing from the pre-communist period until the communist period. He is considered a conservative writer. Most of his themes concern the nostalgic feelings of old Laos. Saisuwan Phengphong is another eminent writer in the New-Thinking era. Saisuwan's style of writing is humoristic. His point of view is mostly against traditional beliefs, which he regards as old fashion. The third equally imminent writer is Bountanong Chomchaipon. His main theme is class struggle.

Outhine Bounyavong was born in 1942 in Sayabouri, a province in Northwestern Laos. He completed secondary school education in Vientiane. Before the communist victory, he was a journalist. His earlier writing consists of short stories and prose pieces which appear in various newspapers and magazines. The limited audiences that existed at that time preferred humorous works to fiction with a serious theme. In the mid-1960s, Outhine published his first book, a collection of short stories entitled *Sivith Ni Ku Lakone Kom* (Life Is a Short Play). At that time, collections of Laotian fiction were rare. It was necessary for the author to finance the cost of his publication and the responsibility for its distribution. Outhine walked the streets of Vientiane, placing books in coffee shops, hotel lobbies, and anywhere else he imagined an audience to exist. Eventually, approximately half of two thousand copies of his books were sold. In late 1960s, Outhine began to associate with a group of writers who are the children of Maha Sila Viravong, the pioneering Lao scholar. He eventually married one of the most prolific writers, Duangdeuane Viravong, who remains to this day one of the most prominent female Lao authors. From 1975 to 1990, he worked at the state Publishing House in Vientiane as a book editor. In the early year of the new regime, he was sent to interview revolutionary soldiers to record their life histories. In 1982, Outhine was one of the founders of Vannasin magazine which remains in Laos's publication cycle until the present day (Koret, 23-33.) His works contain details of the displacement of Laotian people caused by war as well as corruption and capitalism. His works are recognized internationally. Apart from being the first piece of short story that is translated into English, *Phang Mae* (Mother Beloved) is also translated into Russian, Vietnamese and Thai.

Saisuwan Phengphong, the second writer was born in October 17th 1950 in Vientiane where he completed his Diploma from Vientiane College. During 1970-1974, Saisuwan Phengphong had learned to be the pilot of C-123 aircraft with Air America in Vientiane. He also engaged in the revolution within the Lao air force in 1974. Then, he went to learn to operate the aircraft in the Soviet Union in 1975. In the following year, he was responsible for Pilot instruction for Lao Aviation, and was assigned to be the committee of the young writer club. During 1987-1988, Saisuwan joined the editorial team of *Vainum*, a magazine based in Bulgaria and West Germany. In 1989, Saisuwan became the executive of Lao Pacific Airlines. Working as a pilot for 16 years before and after revolution shapes his vision resulting in proliferation in literary work. In 1969, Saisuwan wrote a collection of poetry entitled *Dok Mai Rim Se* (Flowers along the Road). In 1980, he produces another collection of poetry entitled *Chivit Shod* (A Single Life). In 1985, he started writing a novel *Nok Sip Fon* or Ten-Rains Bird. In 1986, He is one of the short story writers for the Army. This collection is *Pol Ta Han Leuk Ku* (Private's Mate Selection). In 1987, another short stories collection entitled *Luk Rak* (Beloved Child) was released. In 1988, he composed a song for *Sao Baan Hao* (Our Village's Girl) Band. In 1989, he wrote the short story collection entitled *Lao Tevada* (Whisky of Angel). In 1990, his short story collection of *Pinaikamluk Nee* (Debtor's Will) is released. The short story collection entitled *Kwai Duay San* (Buffalo Passenger) is translated into Thai in 1991 by Somkit Singsom. These 10 short stories were formerly published in several of Thai magazine namely, *Matichon weekly*, *Pak Kai*, The Magazine of Thai Writer Association, and *Naka*.

Bountanong Chomchaipon was born in Champassak in 1953. His literary works includes fiction, poetry, and songs firstly appear in the mid 1970s and he plays an active role as both editor and contributor to various Lao literary magazines. Bountanong writes socialist short stories prolifically. Three collections written by him namely *Kadook American* (The American Bones), *Hug Phang Hug Lai Lai* (A Great Deal of Love), *Ran Lao Rim Pa Cha* (A Bar Near the Graveyard) have been translated into Thai. In *Peun Lae Dokmai* (Gun and Flower), Bountanong persuades his readers to give up their land for the collective utility of the communist ideology. In many of his short stories, Bountanong asserts that there are only two classes in the feudal

society which are the suzerain and the slave. This representation discourages those who support the liberal ideology by foregrounding how alienated the liberal supporter would be when they are excluded from the society. Bountanong, moreover, attempts to replace the old value such as the belief in superstition with modernity. His insightful and often outspoken accounts of contemporary Lao society attract considerable acclamation. Despite their long involvement in Laotian literature and international recognition, relatively few studies have been conducted on these three authors' works.

Despite producing the political discourse to eradicate class system, Laos still maintains the authenticity of Laotian Identity such as traditional and religious beliefs. In *Speaking through the Mask: Hannah Arendt and Politics of Social Identity*, Arendt, a political theorist, remarks likewise that political action is always an assertion by a compromised and constructed identity (Moruzzi, 26). Historically, "Identity" derives from the Latin word *Identitas* referring to the same. Richard Jenkins asserts that identity connotes two meaning: similarity and difference. However, Identity is not innate quality. Identity is always elusive, and never finished or fixed (qtd in Leepreecha, 32-33). To explain how identity is constructed in the selected short stories, the paper would rebut theories originated from Modernism which supports Essentialism. On the contrary, the paper would argue that Identity is not innate, fixed nor stable.

It would be, therefore, interesting and worthwhile to critically study the various works of these three well-known Laotian writers to examine how their works serve as a literary expression of the reconstruction of the Laotian Identity during the Socialist Era. The findings of the study, therefore, will raise an awareness and understanding of the issues of identity and reconstruction of identity among the Laotians in a significant era. The study will also add more literary perspectives to the sphere of Lao literature.

1.2 Purposes of Study

To demonstrate and explain the re-construction and maintenance of Laotian Identity from New-Thinking policy in the Socialist Era after the 1990s as reflected in selected short stories by three well-known Laotian writers.

1.3 Possible Application and Benefit

Few studies to date have focused on applying Post-Structuralism on Lao Literature. The study, therefore, would offer a new approach in analyzing these texts. The findings of the study will also raise an awareness and understanding of the issues of identity and reconstruction of identity among Laotian writers in an era significant to the sphere of Lao literature.

1.4 Scope

The study will focus on the following stories by three writers.

1. Saisuwan Phengphong: “Kwai Dauy San”, “Lao Tevada”, “Nammayot”, and “Kem Kad Nak”
2. Bountanong Chomchaipon: “Kong Mai”, “Nak Tod”, “Poy Nok” and “Kadook American”
3. Outhine Bounyavong: “Phaeng Mae”, “Mok Tao” and “Moo Po”

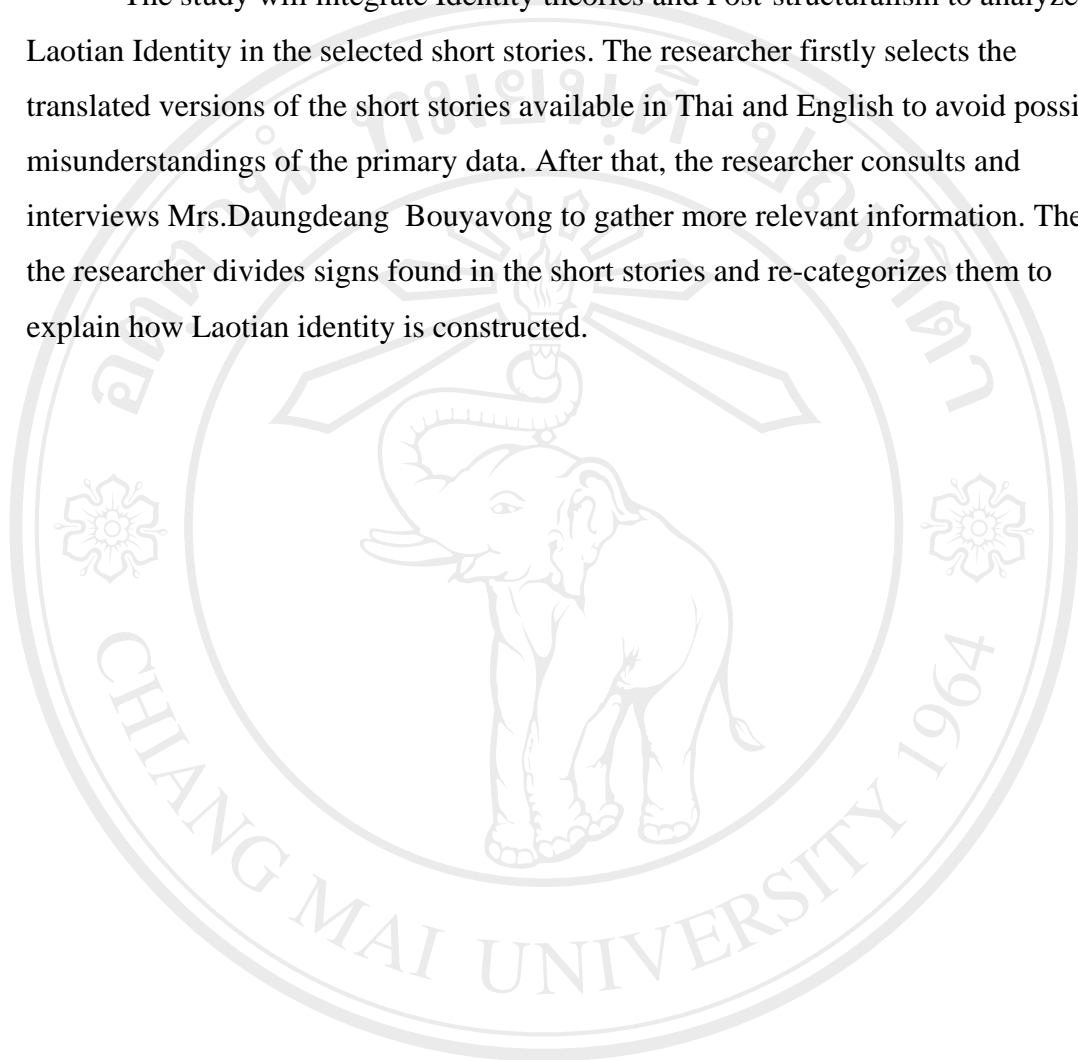
The study will be limited to the expression of the Laotian cultural identity in the New-Thinking era as reflected in short stories by three well-known Laotian writers.

1.5 Terminology

Firstly, “Laotian” means “of Laos” in general as a nation. The term “Laotian” indiscriminately applies to all ethnic groups while “Lao” is limited to the Lao ethnic that may include people from northeastern Thailand. Secondly, “Readerly” (*lisible*) is the literature which can only be read in the sense of being submitted to while “Writerly” (*scriptible*) is the literature that invites the self-consciousness to read it, to join in and be aware of the interrelationship of the writing and reading which offers the readers the joys of co-operation and co-authorship.

1.6 Methodology

The study will integrate Identity theories and Post-structuralism to analyze the Laotian Identity in the selected short stories. The researcher firstly selects the translated versions of the short stories available in Thai and English to avoid possible misunderstandings of the primary data. After that, the researcher consults and interviews Mrs.Daungdeang Bouyavong to gather more relevant information. Then, the researcher divides signs found in the short stories and re-categorizes them to explain how Laotian identity is constructed.



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