

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Rationale

The Northeast region of Thailand known as Isaan is the largest, most populous, but least developed region of Thailand. It occupies a landmass of 65,000 square miles or nearly 171,000 square kilometers, roughly one-third of Thailand's total-area landmass, and comprises approximately one-third of the nation's entire population. Only a small area of its land can be used for farming due to the nature of its soil and climate patterns. The Isaan distinctive culture and language is similar to those of the neighboring countries, Laos and Cambodia. The typical physical stereotypes of the Isaan include round faces, high cheekbones, flat noses, Central-Thai speaking with accent, sticky rice, *som tum* (papaya salad) and *plara* (fermented fishes). Being from poor rural backgrounds which offers very little opportunity for economic advancement makes Isaan people low in their social position.

Offensive remarks about the Isaan people are often heard. In his study, entitled *The Isan Saga*, Myers (2005) states that Isaan people are customarily viewed by their status-conscious fellow countrymen as simpleminded, unsophisticated, and ignorant groups of people. In The Nation's news report on 11 November 2005, the former Deputy Minister Kosin Ketthong stirred a public reaction when he proposed a relocation of the people in the Northeast to three southern-most provinces, where the Emergency Law was often used, and a distribution of free plots of land to cultivate as a drastic measure for dealing with their poverty. In response to such a careless remark, the deputy chair of the Democrat Party was quoted saying that the proposed

plan was an insult to the Isaan people and that the government members viewed Isaan people as pitiable folks subject to the desires of the government.

Interestingly, Myers (2005) stated that after decades of being neglected by the Central government and “derided by their Central Thai cousins”, the Isaan-descent people have now found their identity, self-advancement, respect and acceptance by Thai people from other regions. Over the years many factors have contributed to the recognition of the Isaan people. The Isaan people are prime labor source not only for employment in Bangkok and nearby cities but also for overseas industry. Politically, the Isaan people have become a great asset to politicians as they are a major voting block. Consequently, the Isaan region has benefited from various governments rural development projects. With its rich cultural traditions, handicrafts, and religious values, the Isaan region has also been promoted as one of Thailand’s major tourist attractions. In Myers words:

... Not that there aren’t challenges to face, hurdles to cross, and setbacks to overcome, after a four decade struggle, it appears that the tenacious Isanians have been able to gain the acceptance full-fledged fellow members. Of a truth, the village-dwelling Isan people of rural northeast Thailand are winning in their struggle for personal identity and self-advancement, as well as their desire for respect and acceptance by the Thai ... (Myers, 2005)

Parinyaporn (2005) dedicated a column in the Nation Newspaper entitled “Isaan Roars” discussing the transformation of Isaan characters in the Thai entertainment industries during the last decade. In the past, Isaan characters were considered unsophisticated and were cast in stereotypical roles of maids, drivers, laborers and “look thung” (country) singers. After decades of “silent roles” in the Thai film industries, the shift of the Isaan social images is marked by the presentation

of their new roles. Not only was the romantic comedy film ‘Yam Yasothorn’ directed by the Isaan born comedian Petchtai Wongkumlao or ‘Mum Jokmok’ but it also has Isaan soundtrack dialect with central Thai subtitle throughout the story. The movie was a success nationwide as it brought in over hundred million baht in revenue. Moreover, Surin native Panom “Jaa Panom” Yeerum became internationally known with his high-kicking roles in the 2003 blockbuster “Ong Bak” and the 2005 action sequel “Tom Yum Goong”. The phenomenon of Isaan association with the Thai film industry, which is regarded as the mainstream media, has caught much interest of the Thai people unconsciously. Despite all this, Parinyaporn feels that it remains to be seen whether the Isaan characters will move from “humor and high kicks” to “heavier subjects”.

The shift in identity of the Isaan people has been regarded by some to be similar to that of the Black people in the United States. In his interview with Parinyaporn (2005), Isaan actor Thongchai Prasongsanti said that he sometimes thinks of Isaan people as ‘blacks’ of Thai society with regard to the mainstream discrimination against their physical appearance, dialect, and lifestyle as well as their assimilation path into the mainstream society. In Thongchai’s words, “...We are both discriminated against over race and color but we share a love of music and the ability to work hard. I’m not offended by the disparaging remarks. I’m very proud of who I am.” (Parinyaporn, 2005)

Dr. Todd Boyd (2003), named “the hip-hop professor” by CNN and the author of “Young, Black, Rich and Famous”, claimed that in the U.S, basketball, especially the rise of the NBA, and the hip hop music represent Black influence and assimilation into the mainstream society. Viewed along these lines, it can be said that

Isaan people are beginning to play increasingly influential roles in the mainstream's entertainment industries by using their talents for comedy and martial arts. Some Thai newspapers and media have started to use the word 'superstar' to describe an Isaan descent millionaire Mum Jokmok. This is indirectly signaling the increasing social acceptance toward the successful and rich Isaan characters.

This phenomenon warrants a study as the change in image of the Isaan people goes into the opposite direction with the inferior stereotyped image regarded by their fellow Thais from other regions, especially Thai urbanities. Hence, it would be interesting and worthwhile to examine the process in identity change of the Isaan people in association with their identity portrayed through the mainstream's film industry. Under the social, educational, and political concepts of mainstream assimilation, the study aimed at considering the new Isaan images and characteristics as reflected in selected Thai films produced in the 2000s.

### **Purpose of the study**

To examine factors involving the change of identity of the Isaan people portrayed through the leading roles in recent Thai films.

### **Application of Advantages**

It is hoped that the study will provide an insight into the social assimilation path of the Isaan people from the perspectives of the Isaan people themselves as well as those of their fellow countrymen.