

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Thailand Northeast and Isaan People Background

As a baseline for the study and analysis of the transitional change of Isaan characters in the Thai film industry, the geographical, ethnic, social background and economic development of the Northeast or Isaan region are provided. Such background information was incorporated from various sources, mainly from Myers' (2005), "Isan Saga: The Inhabitants of Rural Northeast Thailand and Their Struggle for Identity, Equality and Acceptance (1964–2004)" and Kanala's (1977) "Political Change and Modernization Northeast".

2.1.1 Geographical Background

The Northeastern of Thailand, widely known as Isaan, is the largest and most populous region in the country. Isaan region occupies a total area of 170,226 square kilometers or one third of the whole country's territory. Its population is 21,267,426, one-third of the country's 62,418,054 population (The National Statistics Office, 2004).

Isaan region comprises of 19 provinces namely Kalasin, Khon Kaen, Chaiyaphum, Nakhornphanom, Nakhorn Ratchasima, Buriram, Mahasarakham, Mukdahan, Yasothon, Roi-et, Loei, Sisaket, Sakonnakhon, Surin, Nongkhai, Nongbua Lumphu, Amnatcharoen, Udonthani and Ubonratchathani. (See Figure 1)



Figure 1: Map of Thailand's Northeast region or Isaan.

Isaan's main geographical features are mountainous and its limited plain areas contain sandy soil which is not suitable for any agricultural purposes. In his book entitled "A Window on Isaan: Thailand's Northeast", Rogers (1989) noted that the Isaan region is the most unfortunate area due to its infertile soil and low water retention capacity. The rainfall period of the Northeast covers just 4-6 months and the amount of rain is little in all parts of the region. Due to the shorter period and smaller quantity of rainfall, the region's weather is generally hot and dry. Yet agriculture is the mainstay of the region's economy. The 2003 Agricultural Census conducted by the National Statistics Office reported that 10.7 million people or 49.2% of Isaan population have their own agricultural farm or plantation and that most of the workers on the agricultural farms are as young as 10 years old.

2.1.2 History of Isaan Region and Its Corporation into Siam Jurisdiction

The origin of the Isaan settlement is controversial. While some scholars maintain that the T'ai speaking people first migrated to settle in the Isaan region in the twelfth century following the political event in Southern China, others maintain that there was no migration and that the region's dwellers had their own trace of civilization as can be seen from archeological evidences such as a number of ancient earthen wares and human bones discovered at Baan Chiang in Udonthani province that date back to 5,000 years ago. Many studies, however, claimed that the Isaan region had long been under a control of the great Khmer kingdom. In her thesis "Political Change and Modernization Northeast Thailand's Quest for Identity and Its Potential Threat to National Security", Kanala (1977) reported that the Northeast of Thailand and some parts of the Laos kingdom had been a part of the Great Khmer Kingdom for several centuries before the end of the thirteenth century. Myers (2005) also found that the Isaan region used to be under cultural influence and political control of the Khmer empire and that Korat plateau, which is located in the central part of the region, was under the control of the Khmer kingdom from the tenth to the mid-thirteenth centuries. Traces of the Khmer occupancy are still evident in the Khmer-styled ruins which are found in the region's lower part especially in Buriram province. In present days, Khmer descents also live in the southern part of the region and around the Thai-Cambodia border. After the great Khmer empire declined in the 13th century, the Isaan region was gradually settled by the Laotian migrants. However, there were no evidences that the current Isaan region was incorporated to be a part of the Sukhothai kingdom, the first capital of Siam. Therefore, it remains

controversial whether Sukhothai kingdom had held jurisdiction over Isaan region and its inhabitants during the thirteenth century.

After the decline of the Sukhothai kingdom, two nearby kingdoms were emerging in the mid-fourteenth century; the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya, located on the Chao Phraya river basin and the Lao kingdom, known also as Lan Chang, Luang Prabang, Laos. These two emerging kingdoms played significant roles in the existence of the Isaan region. It was revealed that the dwellers in the northeast Thailand had a closer relation to the Lan Chang kingdom rather than the Ayutthaya kingdom. In her studies, Kanala (1977) found that a Lan Chang founder prince, Fa Ngum, started a mission to unify nearby areas into the state of Laos in 1394. He succeeded in conquering Lao's northern area, Vientiane, and parts of current northeast part of Thailand. After the incorporation of the Laotian kingdom, Fa Ngum ordered around 20,000 of Lao families to relocate to Vientiane and the northern part of the Korat plateau. From the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, Laotian people constantly migrated into the northern Isaan region, which are current Loei, Nongkhai and Nakorn Panom provinces. The Ayutthaya and Lan Chang kingdoms agreed to maintain the Korat plateau as a buffer border area between the two kingdoms.

By the fourteenth century, the inhabitants in the Isaan region began to build their socio-cultural identity with the Laotians as the power of the Lan Chang kingdom was expanding throughout the region. In the beginning of the eighteenth century the southern Isaan region saw the influx of Laotian people to settle in the areas. Eventually, the Laotians populated the entire region throughout several hundred years of migration. Myers (2005) considered this expansion of Laotian into the Isaan region as a political attempt to raise Lan Change kingdom to an equal status to the prominent

Lanna and Ayutthaya Kingdom. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Lan Chang kingdom attacked the Siamese troop of the Ayutthaya kingdom which fought back and conquered the Laotian kingdom, leading to a broken Siamese-Laotian relationship. Afterwards, the Lan Chang kingdom collapsed after the death of its King Suraya Wongsa (1633-1694) and its decline had inspired the Siamese to expand its control over the northeast region.

After the fall of Ayutthaya kingdom in 1767, Vientiane, a former unified state of Lan Chang, was forced to support Burma troop. King Taksin, the ruler of Thailand's third kingdom "Thonburi", ordered the invasion into Vientiane as a means to punish the state for betrayal. His troop, led by General Chakri who was later named King Rama I of the Chakri monarchy, conquered Vientiane and finally forced Vientiane and Champasak, Lan Chang's former unified states, to be vassals of Bangkok. Consequently, parts of the Korat plateau were incorporated as "outer provinces" within the Siamese kingdom. Myers (2005) defined this period as an important transitional period of the Isaan region.

The administrative reform of the Isaan region took place in the reign of King Chulalongkorn or King Rama V as a strategy to prevent the invasion of British and French colonial expansion during that time. The King assigned all districts in the Northeast to be governed by the Central Thai officials in stead of their former local ruling family. Due to the King's reform system, the administrative areas called *monthon* were established and officials from the central government were sent to govern the *monthon* instead of their former local rulers. The *monthon* was established intentionally to tighten the central government's control over the region and to make sure that the local rulers who were of the Laotian origin would not switch their loyalty

to the French colonizers. Since then, most provinces in the Korat plateau became the outer territories to Bangkok and were demanded to submit annual tributes to the Bangkok capital. According to Myers (2005), the end of the rebellion against the central Thai government has marked the successful incorporation of the Laotian or Lao in the region into the Siamese control.

According to Wikipedia, the policy of Thaification or Siamization was strictly promoted to incorporate the region as the integral part of Thailand in the 20th century. The policy included the introduction of the region's name 'Isaan' which is the Sanskrit word meaning "the deity of the northeast". The name 'Isaan' reinforces the region's identity as the northeast of Thailand, rather than a part of the neighboring Laos Kingdom. The Thaification process of Thai government was divided into four main strands. The first strand is the government's target to launch specific policies and actions at the margin groups. For example, the Accelerated Rural Development of the year 1964 aimed at developing the Isaan region and simultaneously instilling the concept of allegiances with Bangkok and the rest of the country. The second strand is the national policy aiming at sending some effects to the fringe group. An example is the promotion of Central Thai use in school which imposes huge impact to speakers of Isaan in the Northeast. The third strand is a policy to encourage Thai nationalism among its citizens which includes the promotion of loyalty to the king, the broadcast of national anthem twice daily and the presence of Thai national flag at schools and any government offices. The fourth strand is the covert nationalistic policy. For example, the prohibition of ethnic or minority languages in schools discourages their native speakers from using them in daily life.

2.1.3 Development of Isaan Social Status

As defined in the online encyclopedia, Thaification or Siamization is the process by which regions at the fringe of Thailand become more similar to the central Thai heartland. The main subject of the Thaification process is the ethnic group on the edge of the country geographically and culturally, including the Lao of the Northeast, the hill tribes of the North and West and the Muslim of the South. The process has been a byproduct of promotion of the nationalist policies in that it not only reinforces the Thai identity in the central heartlands but also creates and instills the Thai identity on the edge of the kingdom.

According to Dr. Thanee Charoenmuang (2005), the process of siamization, the process to make people feel they are Siamese, began when King Rama VI, who reigned the kingdom between 1910 and 1925, forced every region of Thailand, Lanna kingdom, Isaan and the South areas, to be integrated into the oneness of being Siam by many political and economical methods. There were policies to promote Thai nationalism throughout the kingdom such as the promotion of the king as the national figurehead, saluting the flag in school and twice broadcasting of the national anthem at 8 am and 6 pm. It was also noted by Kanala (1977) that the political reform which replaced the local aristocratic rulers with the government officials who were loyal to Bangkok during King Chulalongkorn's reign gradually brainwashed the Thai people in Isaan region to regard themselves as 'Thai' instead of 'Lao'. The local Isaan villagers started to feel that the political power and authority no longer belonged to their aristocratic Laotian-descent leaders but the official from Bangkok instead. In one instance, the process has brought about a major linguistic disadvantage among the regional people. Myers (2005) cited the feelings of an Isaan immigrant in Australia

who felt extremely uncomfortable when speaking Central Thai with Isaan accent at schools and spent five years trying to eliminate his local accent.

At the long-lasting output of the Thaification process, the Central Thailand becomes economically and politically dominant. Since then, Central Thai language has become the language of official use, media and business and its culture become the culture of wealth. More importantly, Central Thai status become more superior to other regional cultures and become attractive to those inferior people in the regional part economically and socially. Kanala (1977) stated that in traditional thinking the relations between Bangkok and the Northeast can be characteristically described as between the 'superior' and the 'inferior'. While the Isaan at home have to obey and practice the laws and regulations implemented by the authority from the Central Thai, those migrating to Bangkok for potential employment actually experience the confrontation with the superior Central Thai. Moreover, Myers (2005) cited that Isaan people in general are made to accept that the Central Thai superiority is a norm and they have been driven unconsciously to believe that they would gain social acceptance and economic prosperity only if they conceal their true identities and replace it with the Central Thai characteristics.

2.1.4 Isaan Cultural Components

Despite the social and political dominance of Thai kingdom, most Isaan populations who are of Lao origin still have much in common with Lao cultures. For example, sticky rice, *plara* (fermented fish), *som tum* (papaya salad), and *larb* (meat salad) is the prominent food of both Thailand's Isaan region and Laos. Other prominent characteristics of Isaan culture are its rituals and festivals related to the

land's fertility. *Bun bungfai* (the Rocket Festival) is a long-established fertility rite of the region taking place in Yasothorn province in May or June of each year. In the book 'Isaan Culture and Society: Suriya and Pattana (1993) reported that the rocket festival is regarded as a symbolic measure that Isaan peasants carry out to relieve their stress incurred by the shortage of rainfall. It is a way to worship *Phaya Taen* whom they believe to be a controller of rainfall abundance. Furthermore, the ceremony provides an opportunity for peasants to make merits and getting closed to Buddhism by praying, offering food to the monks and holding an ordination ceremony simultaneously. The ceremony also reflects social structure of the region and gender relationship. Symbols found in the ceremony define the masculinity including *bangfai* (rocket), *Phaya Taen*, naga, and rainfall whereas soil represents femininity. The symbols reveal that sexual norms in the region allow men to be breadwinners and even leaders of the communities while women have inferior roles in either households or communities. The ceremony also strengthens relationship and unity among community's members. Other fertility rites found in the region include *Hae Nang Maew* (a procession of cats to beg for rainfall) and *Haek Na Soo Kwan* which is also carried out by local farmers to beg for fertility to their cultivated plants from the god.

Apart from festivals involving the region's fertility, some festivals have close relation to their religious belief. For example, the candle festival is usually held in Ubonratchathani province to present Buddhists' respect and support to the monks and Buddhism. Buddhists usually created the *tian pansa* or candles which are created to be larger and longer than its usual size to be presented to monks. The monks use the candles during the three months of Buddhist Lent, during which they are required to reside at the temple and temporarily cancel their traveling to other destinations. The

festival has become a success and attained overwhelmed participation. In 1977, the festival gained official sponsor and promotion from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and later promoted as one of the highlights in TAT's Amazing Thailand campaign from 1998-1999. The festival helps reunion the community's members as it requires manpower and artisans to work on the decoration and join the candle floats procession. Along with the candle floats procession, there are a troop of dancers performing traditional dances and music.

Isaan traditional dances typically include fast rhythm and beats as well as joyful tone. *Serng and mor lam* are the region's famous music and performance which comprise arousing rhythm. These music and performance are enjoyed by Isaan people during the break from their agricultural activities. *Morlam* was developed from a story telling. In the old days, the adults would tell stories which comprise good moral teachings to their children by calling the children for a gathering and listening to their stories. Since ordinary story telling wouldn't attract much attention, the narrators would incorporate body movement, gestures and tones to make the stories more interesting and enjoyable. At first, only men would be seen telling the stories but later women joined the story telling for better effects. The main feature of *morlam* singing is the use of flexible melody which is adapted to the tones of each rhythm and word. Other characteristics are the strong rhythmic accompaniment, vocal leaps and a conversational style of singing that is similar to American rap. Apart from the theme of love, *morlam* also reflects the aspect of life difficulties. Currently, the music does not only gain popularity in its region but has become a favorite of outsiders owing to the spread of Isaan workers in the Central part of Thailand.

Isaan region is also famous for its hand-woven clothes. In the past, Isaan people wove their own clothes in their free time for household use. Famous textiles of the Northeast include Mudmee, Praewa and Khid produced for daily use as well as ceremonial occasions. In present day, the upper area of the region, especially Khon Kaen and Nong Khai, is producing cotton. The central area which is set between Nakhon Ratchasima and Khon Kaen is the location for silk factories. A group of ethnic Phutai who currently reside in Kalasin, Mukdaharn and Chunaman district of Ubonratchathani produce silk with Phutai motifs and techniques. One of its famous textiles is *pha phrae mon* which is used to cover the head of novices during the initiation ceremonies.

2.1.5 Isaan Economic Status

It is common knowledge that the Northeast is Thailand's poorest region. In fact, after having spread its full jurisdiction control over the entire region in 1912, Siamese government labeled the region as having "the poverty of the soil" and "adverse climate conditions". The region was deemed by the government as the unproductive land for cash crops. This overall description of Isaan's geographical and weather feature still remains unchanged in this twentieth century. In 2002, an average wage of Isaan population is listed at 3,928 baht, the lowest average point of the country of which the national average wage is 6445 baht a month.

Economic plight has driven the Isaan people to leave their impoverished living conditions at home seeking employment in Bangkok and other more-developed provinces, thus emerging as the country's prime labor source. The influx of Isaan laborers into Bangkok occurred prior to the migrant workers from neighboring

countries become readily available in the kingdom. Gradually, the Isaan people make up the largest numbers of workers in the fields of low-skilled works such as taxi drivers, housemaids, factory workers, and construction workers. Myers (2005) noted that along with the increasing acceptance of Isaan people due to the role they play on the national economy growth as productive labor sectors, their emergence into such low-paid and unskilled jobs also embedded the ideas of unsophisticated and inferiority to the Isaan people in general.

2.2 Isaan Involvement in Thai Entertainment and Mass Media

2.2.1 Isaan People Involvement in Thai Entertainment

Apart from acting as the backbone of Thai labor industry, a certain group of Isaan people seek better life through entertainment career in the metropolitan Bangkok. Such entertainment careers include comedians, stuntmen works and *mor lum* and *luk tung* singers. These careers do not only fulfill these people's search for employment but they also emerge as life dreams for many of them. The starting era of comedians began when an influx of migrated regional people started to crowd Bangkok in the 1980s. (Chang Noi, 2007) During the period of migration, the night club and restaurant, which is called by Thai as 'café', started to sprout throughout the urban cities. At the same stage, these entertainment venues offered comedian show as their main attractions for its guests.

At the very beginning, comedian troupe is multi-talented as its members are able to showcase their multi abilities ranging from music playing, *likae* and Thai antiphon singing. These comedians include Bamreo Phong-intree aka Note Chernyim. Later, the new trend has replaced the significance of the comedian's multi

talents. The new trend includes the use of Isaan people and katoey, or transgender people, to generate the sense of humors. (กระต๊อง, 2551) Since then, the Isaan people have been included as the must-have components of any comedian shows. This was the golden era for comedians that they could earn greater income than singers and actors and the career of Isaan comedians has been prosperous ever since. In the early 1990s, TV producers began to include some comedians into the game show programs. Since then, several comedian troupes have begun to attain public recognition due to their presence in the mass media through the TV game show programs. The demand for Isaan performers in the entertainment field signified optimistic opportunity among those Isaan who seek for income and life betterment. (Chang Noi, 2007).

In 2000s, Petchtai marked the new development of the comedian troupes as he separated himself from other comedians and developed his prosperous ways into films. (Chang Noi, 2007) After the overwhelming success of the film *Ong Bak* in 2003, no Isaan men have been more popular and successful than “Mum Jokmok”, Thailand’s top comedian from the Northeast, and “Jaa Panom” or Panom Yeeram”, a successful stuntman who were highlighted in the film. A reality film *Sue Ronghai or Crying Tiger* was produced to explore the hardship of the lives of Isaan migrants in Bangkok by Santi Taepanich. The film portrays the lives of two Isaan men leaving their hometowns to Bangkok to fulfill their dreams of becoming the second Mum Jokmok and Jaa Panom. Indeed, both Mum Jokmok and Jaa Panom have recently become the idols of many Isaan people to follow their successful path even though reaching the successful point as both characters experience is filled with much difficulty and obstacles. Their names always taking the top five careers of any poll,

the poor-turned-rich entertainment life of both Mum Jokmok and Jaa Panom has easily become the inspirational dreams of many Isaan people. (ฝ่ายประชาสัมพันธ์สหมงคลฟิล์ม, 2548)

2.2.2 Isaan Characters and Traditional Thai Favors on Leading Actors and Actresses

In her thesis entitles “Cultural Identity in Thai Movies and Its Implication for the Study of Films in Thailand” Kultida (1993) describes typical hero and heroine in Thai performing arts as not only physically attractive but also virtuous. Furthermore, Thai hero must be very brave, gallant and impartial while the heroine must be innocent, gentle, neat, well-behaved, forgiving and virgin. Since leading actors and actresses in films are the important ingredients of all film production in that they are the main magnets to draw audiences to the films along with other aspects like theme, successful promotional plan, extravaganza techniques and the fame of the producers, it would seem almost impossible for Isaan comedians to break into the charismatic roles of protagonists. Only superstars who possess attractive and sophisticated looks can take the leading roles in Thai films. This means that the characteristics and appearances of Isaan people would be a great barrier for them to shine in the Thai film and entertainment industries. The typical stereotypes of the Isaan people which include dark skin, round faces, high cheekbones, flat noses, Central Thai speaking with accent and the region’s unique food namely sticky rice, *som tum* (papaya salad) and *plara* (fermented fish) would be considered suitable for only such lesser roles as maids, drivers, laborers and country music singers. (Parinyaporn, 2005)

2.2.3 Development of Isaan Characters in Thai Films

By comparing the presentation of Isaan-born actors and actresses in Thai films in the past and present, it is noteworthy to observe the increasing social respect and acceptance toward their performing roles through the performing roles of Isaan characters which have significantly developed from minor unnoticeable roles to dominant roles.

The involvement of comedians into television business began around 1984 and coincided with the period when television was becoming affordable for a larger group of people. The Thai comedian troupe made their first appearance when they were hired to perform in the singing contest show Chum Tang Kon Den in 1984 and several years after that became part of the regular shows. The fact that television became an affordable amenity for household further supports the expansion of this type of entertainment. Any talk show, game show and variety show programs would recruit skilled comedians to accompany the program's main hosts. For example, Mum Jokmok appeared in the television program for the first time as the assistant host to Panya Nirankul and Mayura Svetsila in Ching Roi Ching Larn program produced by Workpoint Entertainment (Public) Company Limited in 1990. Somjai Sukjai aka Der Doksadao accompanied Vitawat Sunthornvinate in the night variety show Si Tum Square which was first broadcast around 1991. Thep Phongam has accompanied Metinee Buranasiri aka Nino in Master Key, a program broadcast on Channel 3 and produced by the TV Thunder Co., Ltd. since 1994. Workpoint's Ching Roi Ching Larn program strengthened the prominent roles of comedian in the television's variety shows through its long history of incorporating comedians to its program. As the oldest TV program in Thailand, the 18-year-old Ching Roi Chin Larn included

comedian shows since its very beginning. Until now, one of program's attractions is the comedian drama performed by the Sarm Cha gang which comprises of Pongsak Pongsuwan aka Teng, Chusak Iamsook aka Nong and Mum Jokmok. The program's success has become an icon for other programs to imitate by incorporating comedian shows to increase their popular rating since then.

The very first involvement of Isaan actors in the Thai film industry started around late 1980s as well. Thongchai Pasongsanti is one among the very first Isaan actors who have risen in the Thai film industry during that time. Thongchai is a real Isaan descent since he was born in Nakornratchasima and his look follows the typical appearance of Isaan people with high cheekbone, square face and dark skin. Thongchai first appeared in the romantic film *Duang Jai Krasib Rak* in 1986 and starred in a minor supporting role. Thongchai became more popular when he starred in Thailand's legendary series movie '*Ban Phi Pob*', the film that was a hit in the 1990s due to its simple humorous slapsticks. Thongchai appeared in all films from its first episode which was released in 1989 to the last episode in 1994, with the exception of the 6th episode in 1991. Thongchai performed the minor role throughout the 11 sequential series. *Ban Phi Pob* is originally a novel written by Hem Wechakorn and it was selected by the producer crew named Group Four Company to be released as a film. The film crew decided to produce this ghost film because the company realized that ghost film should be the best selling theme during 1990s. The film itself also combines a large portion of comedy, the main ingredient that has brought a large number of audiences to the film. Throughout his performing record, Thongchai was offered only the minor role.

Almost a decade later, Mum Jokmok's involvement in Thai film began in 1991. He performed a minor supporting role in the same film with Thongchai, Ban Phi Pob 11. Mum Jokmok was first persuaded to cast in a film together with another prominent female comedian, Noi Pho-ngam, to create more humors to the film. The second film was still the Ban Phi Pob 13 in the same year (1991) to continue his induction of laughter to the film. His involvement in these first two films as a guest actor was to introduce the film's fans to a new group of actors.

During the 1990s Isaan characters were largely cast as the minor roles in most of the Thai film. There were no prominent actors with Isaan look emerging as leading actors for any films. However, the transitional change of their presentation in the Thai film started in the 2000s with the introduction of Ong Bak to Thai audience in 2003. Ong Bak (2003) presented Jaa Panom, an Isaan man who has expertise in Thai martial arts as the film leading actor. The film's printed media and advertising featured the portrait of Jaa Panom to attract the audiences together with other supporting characters such as Mum Jokmok and some good looking actors. The film was the real box office hit of the year.

The increasing acceptance towards a number of Isaan-descent actors and actresses in several best selling films in the film industry is noteworthy. These two successful characters, Mum Jokmok and Jaa Panom, are now presented in Thai films in the leading protagonists roles in stead of the minor supporting roles. The way they are presented as heroes goes against the general perception towards Isaan as the less prestigious and submissive folk when compared to their Central Thai cousins. This development of their presentation in current Thai films has built a new milestone for their own folk in the industry. A number of Thai films have featured some Isaan-

descent stars as their main actors and actresses. To name just a few, Jaa Panom plays the main role in Ong Bak (2003) and Tom Yum Goong (2005) and Mum Jokmok casts the leading actor in Cherm (2005) and Yam Yasothorn (2005).

2.3 Theories and Concepts

2.3.1 Social Identity

In their book entitled Social Identity Theory Constructive and Critical Advances, Abrams and Hogg (1990) defined social identity as the self-conception of a group member and categorized it into comprehensible units. A person's perception of sharing the same category of social membership with the others results in his or her sense of involvement, concern and pride. However, individual's sharing of social membership can be formed without close personal relationship or personal interest in the outcomes. By perceiving that an in-group is different and better than the out-group, the individual will achieve positive distinctiveness and one's identity is boosted. Individuals would also discriminate the out-group in favor of their own category or social member despite not knowing or having close relationship with the others or earning any reward from doing. Moreover, the more powerful group generally seeks to maintain their status quo and promote their own values and ideology. As a result, the subordinate groups may have negative social identity especially if the dominant group's values are widely and successfully accepted. However, the subordinate groups may attempt to maintain their positive identity in a variety of ways, depending on their belief structure.

2.3.2 Social Assimilation

In his study on ethnic identity, especially one in the Asian American situation, Le (2006) makes a detailed description of two forms of assimilations: behavioral and structural or socioeconomic assimilation. In behavioral assimilation, a process by which the new members absorb the cultural norms, values, beliefs and behavioral modes of the members of the host society, the newcomers can choose either to maintain their traditional or ancestral culture, norms and behavioral modes while acquiring those of the mainstream host society or to abandon their traditional cultures and behavioral modes and completely conform themselves to those of the host society. In structural or socioeconomic assimilation, however, the newcomers are completely incorporated into formal social, political, economic and cultural organization of the host society.

The assimilation as such can be studied in a linear or non-linear manner. When occurring in the linear manner, time and succession of generation usually lead to increasing economic, cultural and political integration into the mainstream society. In non-linear manner, the minority people retain their old cultural traditions and norms and choose to remain those isolated from the mainstream society, to combine elements of both their traditional minority and mainstream cultures. The combination of the minority and mainstream cultures is referred to as segmented assimilation.

Le (2006) concluded that there are a few factors influencing assimilation of the minorities. The first factor is racial difference. For example, when White migrants came to the US in the 1800s, they were able to assimilate into the American society faster and easier than non-white immigrants. This quick assimilation is a result of their skin which is similar to the mainstream American. The second factor is

the structure of economy. The assimilation of minority people becomes much more difficult in times of economic difficulties because people are competing for jobs and social or economic resources and likely to be antagonistic toward each other. The last factor is class difference. Elements of the mentioned class include levels of education, job skills and language ability. Minorities who are well educated and possess higher job and language skills are likely to achieve socioeconomic success faster than others. These elements enable them to get careers that are higher-paid and high status. By this, they are able to achieve socioeconomic mobility and success faster.

2.4 Previous Isaan Studies

A number of studies on the various aspects of Isaan people serve as worthy and beneficial information for the proposed study of the transitional change of Isaan people.

Palikupt (1983) conducted an attitudinal study of Central Thai, the standard dialect, and Northeastern Thai, the dialect which is felt to be the least prestigious as the majority of its speakers are relatively the lowest in their socioeconomic status.

Her study supports the generalization that speakers of the high-status group usually evaluate their language or language variety and members of their speech group more favorably than they do for the contrasting group. From her study, it was evident that both the Central Thai and Northeastern Thai judges were not significantly different in their evaluations of the Central Thai-guise speakers, whereas their reactions toward the Northeastern speakers were significantly different. Palikupt (1983) concluded that even though Northeastern speakers evaluated Central Thai favorably, they did not rate

their own Northeastern dialect less favorably on the average, thus indicating their language loyalty and own-group pride.

In her thesis entitled *A Study of Thai Short Stories (1958-1982) Concerning Rural Social Problems in the Northeast*, through literary components including contents, plots, settings, dialogues, characters and themes Kanchana (1983) studied many aspects of Isaan people through a number of short stories written during 1958-1982. It was found that the three prevalent problems of Isaan people reflected in the chosen literary works were economic problems, social status difference and values and beliefs. The two main aspects of economic problems of the Northeast were the living conditions in the rural and the migration to urban cities, leaving behind the starvation and unproductiveness of the rural. The difference in social status was seen from the perspectives of the local people through the public service of appointed and economically powerful people. The value and belief problems were a reflection of the clash and conflict between the traditional values and those brought about by materialism, new cultures and emerging modernity.

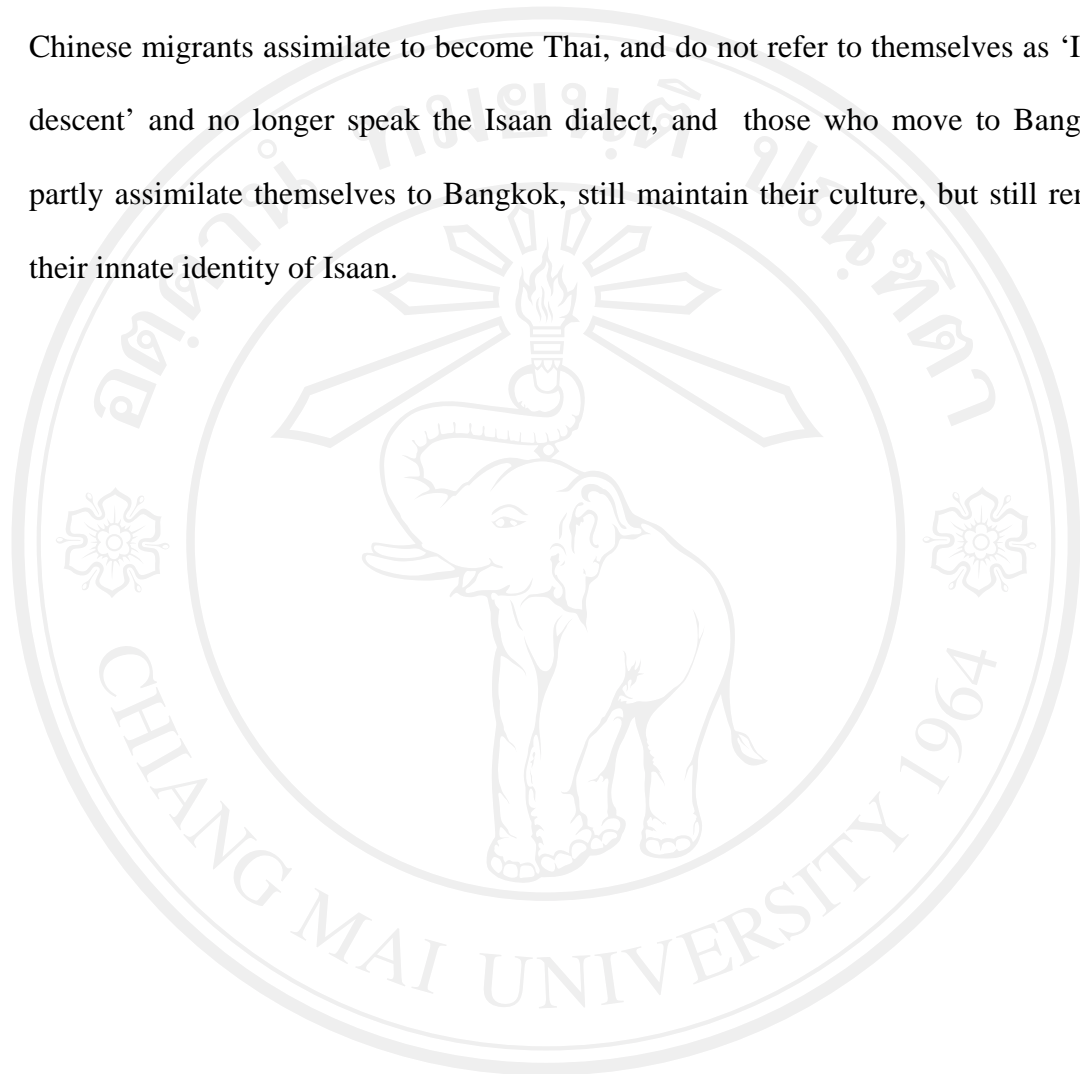
Myers (2005) conducted a field research in the rural area of Northeastern Thailand for his thesis entitled *The Isan Saga: The Inhabitants of Rural Northeast Thailand and Their Struggle for Identity, Equality and Acceptance (1964-2004)*. He reported that the Isaan dwellers in the Northeastern Thailand have undergone an ongoing struggle for their personal identity, prosperity, equality, respect and acceptance by their Thai cousins. Exploring the social, economical and cultural prejudice against the Isaan dwellers, he remarked that an optimistic transitional change of the Isaan people has been noticeable in that the Isaan people have seized some opportunities and gradually risen from their poverty-stricken background and

low social status to become a major labor class of the country. Moreover, some Isaan people have been able to gain acceptance by their Thai cousins who once regarded them as less sophisticated and enjoyed greater significant roles in the nation's socio-cultural, economic and political circles. Myers' conclusion regarding Isaan people's increasing acceptance and better status has been a source of inspiration to this study which will further study and explore the transitional identity change.

Another remarkable study on which this study was based is a study by Boyd (2003). In his book entitled "Young Black Rich & Famous", Boyd (2003) studied the assimilation of Black Americans into the American mainstream societies and concluded that the Black Americans had become recognized and accepted by the mainstream because of their outstanding talents in such fields as music and sports. Boyd (2003) gave an interesting summary that these special talents of Black Americans have created a 'brand-new' and 'brand-name' generation that prefer to maintain their identity, refuse to assimilate, and become the important and prominent element of the mainstream American culture. Boyd (2003) explored how basketball and hip-hop have developed from being objectionable by the American mainstream to receiving mainstream approval and being globally popular and imitated. He also made an interesting note that the approval has also turned Black American with high talents for basketball and hip-hop to earn a good deal of income and reputation.

Another in-depth study that explores the Isaan people's identity and their social and political situation's was conducted by Kanala (1977). In her study entitled "Political Change and Modernization: Northeast Thailand's Quest for Identity", Kanala (1977) classified Isaan migrants in the metropolitan city into three groups: those who temporally migrate to Bangkok to work, earn enough money to support

their families and return homes, those who move to Bangkok and completely assimilate themselves to the Bangkok culture and ways of life, in the same way the Chinese migrants assimilate to become Thai, and do not refer to themselves as ‘Isaan descent’ and no longer speak the Isaan dialect, and those who move to Bangkok, partly assimilate themselves to Bangkok, still maintain their culture, but still remain their innate identity of Isaan.



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