

CHAPTER 4

Analysis of the Transitional Changes of Isaan Characters in Thai Films

This chapter explores factors that have influenced the transitional change of Isaan images in Thai films and entertainment industry, aiming to show that there is a clear difference in social respect and acceptance toward the performing roles of Isaan-born actors in the past and at present.

4.1 Traditional Leading Actors and Actresses and the Isaan Characters

Other than aspects like theme, successful promotional plan, extravaganza techniques and the fame of the producers, leading actors and actresses are the important ingredients of all film production in that they serve as the main magnets to draw audiences to the films. As cited in the Thai film section in <http://sunsite.au.ac.th> (2007), Thai producers commonly choose actors and actresses who have Thai-favored appeal to ensure their optimistic feedback. Reflecting on this issue, Parinyaporn (2005) states that only superstars who possess Thai ideal beauty looks were preferred to perform the leading roles during the 1960s - 1980s. In fact, Kultida (1993) states in her thesis entitled “Cultural Identity in Thai Movies and Its Implication for the Study of Films in Thailand” that typical heroes and heroines in Thai performing arts are required not only to be physically attractive but also virtuous. She further maintains that Thai film heroes must be very brave, gallant and impartial while the heroine must be innocent, gentle, neat, well-behaved, forgiving and virginal.

As such, the characteristics and appearances of Isaan people have long served as a major barrier for them to shine in the Thai film and entertainment industries. Parinyaporn (2005) states that the typical image of the Isaan people which include round faces, high cheekbones, flat noses, Central-Thai speaking with accent and the region's unique but unusual diet namely *khaw niaw* (sticky rice), *som tum* (papaya salad) and *plara* (fermented fish) are generally regarded as not sophisticated enough to be associated with the leading roles in Thai films. Due to these general perceptions, Isaan characters are often cast in stereotypical roles of maids, drivers, laborers and country music singers. In an interview on Thai's action film "Ong Bak", Sita Vosbein, the managing director of Baa Ram Ewe production house, describes the Thai favor on attractive and sophisticated looks. (Perrin, 2004). Sita said that Thai audiences are not familiar with seeing northeasterners in the leading roles of Thai films and that Thais generally think the people with dark skin are uneducated and ugly and these northeast people are usually cast as bad guys. These perceptions indicate that there is little chance for Isaan performers to be chosen for the main protagonist roles in Thai films. This helped explain why very few Isaan actors and actresses were famous during the 1960s - 1980s.

4.2 Current Isaan Characters

Thai society has witnessed a transitional change or shift of images of Isaan actors and actresses in the Thai film industry. Parinyaporn (2005), a film critic writer, conducts a comprehensive report on this change. She maintains that the great success of the Surin-born Jaa Panom, who has grabbed the world media's attention with his master martial art featured in several Thai flicks, and Thailand's new rising media

mogul, Mum Jokmok, marks the new century of Isaan people and build more social acceptance towards the Isaan people.

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 was cast the leading actor in Cherm (2005) and Yam Yasothorn (2005). Since Jaa Panom and Mum Jokmok were presented in the film as the main protagonists instead of minor supporting roles, the way they were presented as heroes goes against the general perception towards Isaan as the less prestigious and submissive people in comparison to the “Central Thai” performers. It can be said that this development of their presentation in current Thai films has built a new milestone for their own people in the entertainment industry.

4.3 The Rise and Success of Isaan Characters in Recent Thai Films

This part will examine the film biography of the Isaan superstars, Jaa Panom and Mum Jokmok, as well as the success of the films from 2003 to 2007 in which both personalities took the leading roles. The characters of the subjects under study will be discussed individually.

4.3.1 Jaa Panom



Figure 2 Panom Yeerum or Jaa Panom

4.3.1.1 Biography of Jaa Panom

Jaa Panom was born Panom Yeerum to a small farming family in Surin Province, in the northeast of Thailand on February 5, 1976. He is the third of four children and has one brother and two sisters. His parents were mahouts and Jaa Panom spent a great deal of his childhood rearing his family's elephants and became very attached to the elephants, Dok Mai and Bai Mai. Jaa Panom also found his affection in martial arts films when he was very young. He really enjoyed watching action films free of charge on the village outdoor white wide screen. He showed his initial great passion in the film because he would travel 10 kilometers just to see it each time. He then discovered the action film, which in those days featured popular Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, as his consolation from daily hard works.

Most evenings after school, Jaa Panom would receive training in the martial arts and practice them early in the morning before school and late evening after school. Soon he became inspired by Thai action film "Kerd Ma Lui" directed by

Panna Rittikrai and in 1989 joined Panna's crew of action film production at the mere age of 13. He became an errand boy doing various small backstage jobs, cleaning and helping the production crews preparing and arranging the film shooting. While living and working for Panna's crew, he spent his spare time learning about martial arts from the stunt crew.

Almost a decade later in 1997, at the encouragement of Panna, Jaa Panom furthered his study at Maha Sarakham Physical Education College to learn various types of martial arts, ranging from Tae Kwan Do to Judo and other related gymnastic skills. Two years after his graduation, Jaa Panom was encouraged by Panna to follow his dream by seeking an opportunity to show off his great stunt skills in big films. Jaa Panom's potential talent in martial arts caught the attention of Prachya Pinkaew of Baa Ramm Ewe, a production branch of Saha Mongkol Film. Baa Ramm Ewe's first action flick "Ong-Bak" was produced in 2003 with the highlight of elaborate stunt and martial arts choreographed by Jaa Panom.

The hit action flick "Ong-Bak" has changed his life. Originally a rural boy, Jaa Panom then earned international recognition with a bright start of "Ong-Bak" and the subsequent release of internationally recognized film "Tom Yum Goong" in 2005 and a screening of the Protector (an American-named version of Tom Yum Goong in the US) in 2006. Jaa Panom, known internationally as Tony Jaa, has attracted a large group of fan club. His official website, www.tonyjaa.org, was created by his fan club. His life and film caught the attention from worldwide journalists and writers. As a result, Jaa Panom has become busy with the international media, various screenings and interviews. In his interview with Franklin (2005) in Firecracker Magazine, Jaa Panom told Franklin that he did not want to be compared with his hero, Bruce Lee, as

the world's media had attempted to do. "I deemed Bruce Lee as a person whom I look up to the most and he has been inspired by him. So I shouldn't be compared to such a great hero as Bruce Lee," he reportedly said during an interview. The interview shows him a humble man with a stable admiration towards his hero. Jaa Panom's another intention was to give something back to his hometown. He has established his project to support students in his alma mater in Maha Sarakham and raise funds for elephants.

Below is the chronological list of Jaa Panom's filmography:

1. A leading character named Ting in Ong Bak (2003)
 - aka Ong-Bak: The Thai Warrior (Philippines, USA)
 - aka Daredevil (USA: informal literal)
 - aka Ong Bak: Muay Thai Warrior (Singapore)
 - aka Ong-Bak: Muay Thai Warrior (International English title)
 - aka Thai Fist (Hong Kong)
 - aka Ong-Bak: Enter the New Dragon (India)
2. Cameo appearance in The Bodyguard (2004)
3. A leading character named Kham in Tom Yum Goong (2005)
 - L'Honneur du Dragon Tom Yum Goong (France)
 - aka Thai Dragon (Spain)
 - aka Ong-Bak 2 (Korea)
 - aka Warrior King (UK)
 - aka Revenge of the Warrior - Tom Yum Goong (Germany)
 - aka The Protector (USA, Canada)
 - aka Gaja Baludu (Elephant Warrior) (India)

4.3.1.2 Characteristics of Jaa Panom in the Films and the Films' Success

4.3.1.2.1 Jaa Panom in Ong Bak (2003)

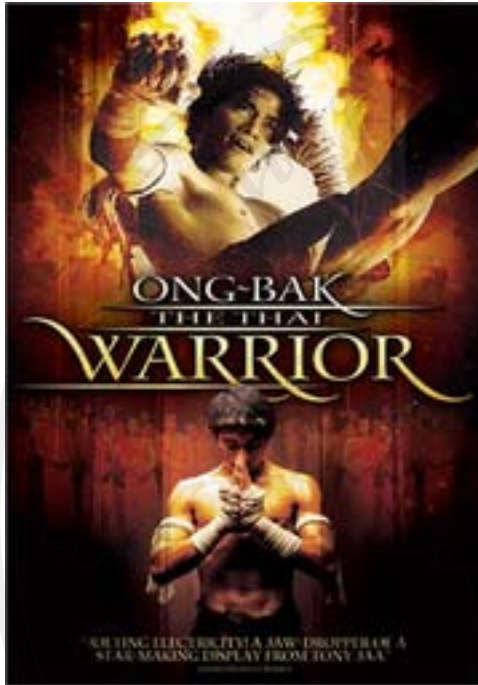


Figure 3 Jaa Panom as a leading character in *Ong Bak* (2003)

Jaa Panom performs a role of a villager of a small village in the Northeast where its respected Buddha image has been stolen. Jaa Panom takes the role of Ting, a Thai boxing expert who is chosen by other villagers to bring the Buddha image back to the village by using his martial arts skills and survival instincts. In the film, he incorporates the style of *muay boran* or ancient Thai boxing to demonstrate the full repertoire of his martial arts. The film purely showcases his great martial arts acts and unrivalled choreographing such as jumping across a boiling pot, floating in the air, stepping over a man's shoulders and many other courageous movements, without special effects and wirework.

In the film, Ting is portrayed as a young, innocent and humble Isaan man who is easily tempted and deceived by city people. His characteristics are shown through

the way he handles problems in his life. For example, Ting is reluctant to fight in an illegal boxing match because he has made a vow to his uncle that he will not use his expertise in Thai boxing to harm one person for the benefits of others. Ting is not violent-oriented because he gently refuses to fight with other fighters although he has high skills in acrobatic and fighting. These characteristics have been said to be the general characteristics of local Isaan people and are presented through Ting, a great Isaan fighter.

All martial arts presented in the film were choreographed by Jaa Panom and his mentor, Panna. Both did a research on ancient Thai boxing by interviewing old masters. They discovered more than 100 unknown moves of the boxing and filmed their own creation of martial arts mainly featuring such moves. They presented their creation to director Prachya Pinkaew of Baa Ram Ewe production house. Their martial arts presentation was favored by the director and “Ong Bak” was produced with Jaa Panom as the leading role.

Even though the film is the first dedication to martial arts, it gained overwhelmed attention owing to Jaa Panom’s great martial arts. According to an article on “The Successful Path of Ong Bak” in Position Magazine, August 2005, Ong-Bak successfully earned approximately 200 baht nationwide from the film goers in 2003. The film not only introduced Jaa Panom to Thai fans but also sparked global critics and movie goers’ interests in him and his brilliant martial arts performance. The film was shown in theatres in Asian as well as western countries. After the success of Ong Bak, Jaa Panom had to take English lessons for the international promotional trips for his film.

4.3.1.2.2 Jaa Panom in Tom Yum Goong (2005)

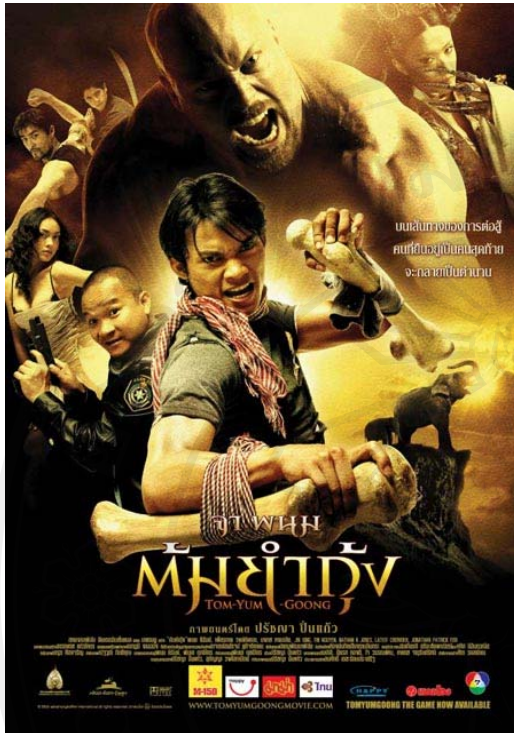


Figure 4 Jaa Panom as a leading character in Tom Yum Goong (2005)

In Tom Yum Goong, Jaa Panom is cast as Kham who has a duty to guard his family's white elephant to be presented to the king. When his family's elephant is stolen and smuggled to Australia where Vietnamese and Chinese gangsters conquer the street, Kham sets out on a journey in search of his elephant. In Australia, he meets Mark, a Thai-born Australian policeman starring Mum Jokmok, and a young Thai woman 'Pla' who is being forced into prostitution, starring Bongkoj 'Tuck' Khongmalai.

In the film, Jaa Panom combines a new boxing style called 'Kachasarn' (literally meaning elephant) with his martial arts. Panom told the Associated Press that the movement of his arms symbolized how an elephant would use its tusks to defend itself. Throughout the film, Jaa Panom portrays intense level of Isaan characteristics similar to those of Ting in Ong Bak (2003) because Kham is also naïve

and has high virtue and gratitude. Kham is also a down-to-earth person as the film presents him as a local Isaan man who tends elephant herds and lives his life in a rural Isaan lifestyle. This presentation reflects the reality of Isaan people life. Again, in the film, Isaan villagers are victimized and bullied by the outsiders because an elephant, an animal associated with the rural Isaan, is stolen from the village. This is a repeated plot as presented earlier in *Ong Bak* (2003) in which the Buddha statue's head is stolen from the local Isaan family. Unfortunately, in *Sydney*, his mission is not easily achieved. Once Kham arrives in Sydney, he is caught and bullied by the policeman. It can be concluded that the film producer and director Prachya Pinkaew intends to stick to this same plot and characteristics because the production of *Ong Bak* (2003) gained an overwhelming success. Jaa Panom is twice portrayed in the same stereotype role of a naïve, innocent, virtue-minded, grateful and down to earth person despite his unrivalled boxing skills.

Released to theatre in 2005, the *Tom Yum Goong* film built a new face of Thai film to the international film industry. Apart from domestic success, *Tom Yum Goong* was a real talk of the town in overseas countries and marked the rise of new-born martial artist, Jaa Panom, at the international level, with *Tom Yum Gung* the top most-watched movie of the Thai Box Office in 2005. The movie earned 198.5 million baht from Bangkok and nearby areas and approximately 400 million baht from 30 overseas countries. The words 'most interesting' and 'most-watched' were used to describe the movie while the word 'rising star' was used to describe martial-art expert Panom. This clearly describes the success of the film.

4.3.2 Mum Jokmok



Figure 5 Petchtai Wongkumlao or Mum Jokmok

4.3.2.1 Biography of Mum Jokmok

The biography of Mum Jokmok is a summary of information obtained from the online encyclopedia, wikipedia. Born Petchtai Wongkumlao, Mum Jokmok has long been famous for his comedian works and brilliant slapstick skills. He became known since he was a comedian working at the café restaurant during 1980s. Mum Jokmok was born to a poor family in Yasothorn province, in the Northeast of Thailand in 1965. He ran away from his hometown in the Northeast of Thailand at the age of 16 in 1981, with only Pratom 4 (Grade 4) level of education. His career started as a member of a country music band.

Mum Jokmok's journey to Bangkok coincided with the period in which the comedian show had become the main selling feature at many café restaurants during the 1980s. He later started his comedian career with the troupe led and managed by Suthep Pho-ngam aka Thep Pho-ngam. At this time, he began to showcase his brilliant skills in creating slapsticks and humor. His skill eventually led him to the

television industry. Mum Jokmok was hired by Workpoint Company in 1990 to be the co-host to Panya Nirankul and Mayura Svetsira in Ching Roi Ching Larn program. Two years after his role as a co-emcee of Ching Roi Ching Larn, Mum Jokmok was hired by another program *Weteetong* to be the co-emcee of the program.

Mum Jokmok also performed in smaller roles and leading roles in a number of Thai films, ranging from romantic comedy to dramatic ones as listed below:

1. Ban Phi Pob 11 (1994)
2. Ban Phi Pob 13 (1995)
3. Killer Tattoo (2001)
4. Ong Bak (2003)
5. The Bodyguard (2004)
6. Cherm: Midnight My Love (2005)
7. Luang Pi Teng (2005)
8. Dumber Heroes (2005) (cameo role)
9. Tom Yum Goong (2005)
10. Yam Yasothorn (2005)
11. Variety Phi Chalui (2005)
12. Chai-lai (Dangerous Flowers) (2006)
13. Krasua Valentine (2006)
14. Nong-Teng (2006) (cameo role)
15. The Bodyguard 2 (2007)

Apart from his casting in the above films, Mum Jokmok directed three films including *The Bodyguard* (2004), *Yam Yasothorn* (2005) and *The Bodyguard 2* (2007). He was not only a famed and most-wanted actor, but he was also emerging as

one of Thailand's leading entertaining television hosts. All of the programs Mum Jokmok has worked for as a host have attracted a great number of Thai audiences, owing to his unique sense of humors. The TV programs Mum Jokmok has been involving in are as follows:

1. Ching Roi Ching Larn (The Millionaire Game) (1990 – present)
2. Weteetong (1994 – 2004)
3. Raberd Terd Terng (1996 – 2003)
4. Roi Waeng Takaeng Sibha (1998 – 1999)
5. Fancy Mee Harnng (1999)
6. Koke Koon Trakul Khai (2003)
7. Chai Bodin Show (2003 – 2008)
8. Mahanakorn (2007)
9. Mum Show (2005 – 2008)
10. Chiang Roi Chiang Karn (holiday version) (2005 – present)

4.3.2.2 Mum Jokmok Characteristics in the Selected Films and the Films'

Success

4.3.2.2.1 Mum Jokmok in Ong Bak (2003)

In this action film, Mum Jokmok's has a supporting role as Humlae, a cousin of Ting (starred by Jaa Panom). The character lives in a big city, renames himself George because of the negative meaning of his local, and dyes his hair blond. In the film, Humlae together with Muay Lek, performed by Pumwaree Yodkamol, are the main assistants to Ting during his search for the stolen Buddha statue head, which is stolen from their village in the Northeast.

Like many Isaan immigrants in Bangkok, Humlae is presented as a tough immigrant who finds it difficult to cope with life in the big city. Humlae earns a living working as a street-bike racing hustler, a low-paid job, and ends up falling in with a bad crowd of *yaba* drug dealers. Humlae is portrayed as an idle and irresponsible person because he leaves his Isaan hometown and never earns enough money to support the family back home. He is also portrayed as a tricky man because when he is asked for help by Ting, he is reluctant to give a hand. Humlae just changes his mind when he notices that Ting has some amount of money which he can steal and use it for gambling at the illegal boxing bar. Humlae then tempts Ting into his apartment room and eventually steals Ting's money when he is taking a bath. In the film, Humlae represents a group of migrant Isaan people who assimilate themselves to the Bangkok lifestyle and choose not to maintain their identity as Isaan. Humlae is portrayed to be totally different from Ting, a man with high level of pride in his Isaan identity. The change of name and the physical transformation symbolize the pressure to modify his identity.

4.3.2.2 Mum Jokmok in the Bodyguard (2004)

Following the success of *Ong Bak* in 2003, Mum Jokmok dreamed of directing his own film. A comedy action film *The Bodyguard* (2004) was his first directed film in which he also starred in the leading role. The film stars Mum Jokmok as a professional bodyguard from Laos named Wongkum. In the film, Wongkum is a calm, smart and highly talented bodyguard. Wongkum's position as the main bodyguard to Asia's richest millionaire portrays a very positive image to Wongkum, a Lao-descent bodyguard. Wongkum is presented an intelligent and witty man because

he always recognizes about any possible harm to his millionaire boss in advance. Even though Wongkum is fired after his boss is killed by a group of assassins, he at the end is presented as the rescuer. Other bodyguards who are hired in replacement of Wongkum are portrayed as less capable than Wongkum. All of these new bodyguards are eventually killed while on duty to protecting the millionaire's son. Wongkum returns to help his ex-boss's son and family from the assassins. Wongkum remains skillful and witty at the end because he can successfully rescue his ex-boss's family. The film also includes martial arts action which was choreographed by Panna Ritikrai. Jaa Panom who was famous from his first film Ong-Bak in 2003 also takes a small role in a scene of fighting in a supermarket. Mum Jokmok demonstrates his sense of humor in the film scenes, one of which he runs naked across the Victory Monument square in Bangkok.

The Bodyguard (2004) which is his first directed film gained overwhelming welcome and success from movie goers. Thai Box Office 2004 report marked the film as the second most-watched flick with total revenue of 74.4 million baht. It was recorded as the second best selling film in 2004, after only the top-hit ghost film "The Shutter" which earned a total of 110 million baht. This proves Mum Jokmok's great ability in producing well-sold film and the film goers' favor with Mum Jokmok as a producer and actor.

4.3.2.2.3 Mum Jokmok in Cherm (2005)



Figure 6 Mum Jokmok as a leading character in Cherm (2005)

Mum Jokmok was offered an unconventional character of a shy, quiet and humble man called Sombat in the romantic drama film, “Cherm” (Midnight, My Love). As a loner taxi driver, he gets into a relationship with a woman working at a massage parlor, starring Woranuch ‘Noon’ Wongsawan. As portrayed in the film, he represents many Isaans who moved to Bangkok to earn a living as a taxi driver. The film shows a lot of hardships and loneliness. The film’s title itself, Cherm, meaning unfashionable, describes the characteristics of Sombat well. Sombat’s lifestyle and taste can be described as totally unsophisticated. Sombat enjoys listening to Suntraporn, an old-styled music with soft and pleasant rhythm, through the AM mode radio channel. He always eats the same soup with rice at the same restaurant. This characteristic signifies Sombat’s high loyalty to his favored or fond person. For Sombat, listening to this type of music from the radio is the only consolation to fulfill his dream of an ideal world in which people with unfashionable looks are considered

“good” and are treated with honor and respect. Sombat is considered not attractive by other women but he finally falls in love with a pretty masseuse, whose characteristics are totally different from his. However, it is not a happy ending for Sombat because he could not win the heart of the woman he loves.

The film was quite a success since it was shown at the renowned Pusan International Film Festival in Korea. Mum Jokmok’s outstanding dramatic role made him one of the nominees for best actor at the 2005 Thailand’s National Film Awards while his co-star, Woranuch, was also nominated the best actress. The film earned 38.99 million baht in revenue and was ranked the fifth best selling movie in 2005.

4.3.2.2.4 Mum Jokmok in Tom Yum Goong (2005)

In the film, Mum Jokmok was cast a supporting role of Sergeant Mark, a Thai-born police inspector in Sydney, Australia, who patrols an area in which Asian people populate. He is portrayed as a main joker through his awkward spoken English, which becomes the film’s main source of humor. The movie earned 198.5 million baht from Bangkok and nearby areas and approximately 400 million baht from 30 overseas countries.

4.3.2.2.5 Mum Jokmok in Yam Yasothorn (2005)



Figure 7 Mum Jokmok as a leading character in Yam Yasothorn (2005)

Yam Yasothorn is another creation of Mum Jokmok. He wrote the script, directed, and starred as one of the supporting roles in the film. The film's prominent aspect is its dialogue carried out entirely in Isaan dialect. It is the first film that introduces Isaan dialect as the main language of the flick and provides subtitle in Central Thai. All components in the film also portray Isaan lifestyles as well as cultures. The film narrates the love story of two couples, Thong and Soi (performed by Chaipan Ninkong and Yaowalak Toomboon) and Yam and Jeai (performed by Mum Jokmok and Nongnuch Somoonwong aka Janet Kiaw). The first couple, Thong and Soi, has a good romantic relationship while the second couple does not really get along well. The film repeats the same old plot in which the two pairs are from different social class and are not approved by each woman's parents because they want their girl to marry a rich man.

The film earned 99.14 million baht and ranked the third best selling film in 2005. Surprisingly, the film was also nominated in many categories for the Thailand National Film Awards, and the film received the best actress nomination for Mum's co-star, Nongnuch Somboonkaew aka Janet Kiew.

4.3.2.2.6 Mum Jokmok in The Bodyguard 2 (2007)

The Bodyguard 2 is the second film in a series following the plot and unfinished stories of The Bodyguard (2004). The story narrates the life and works of the protagonist, Wongkum. The film is a flashback style telling a story when Wongkum works at his hometown, Vieng Republic, a fictional Southeast Asian country that borders Thailand and shares a common culture and dialect with Thailand's Northeast. In the film, the leading man named Khamlao is a very talented and skilled secret agent who is assigned to work in Thailand to look for the country's most wanted terrorists who reside in Thailand. Khamlao deceives his wife, performed by Nongnuch Somboon aka Janet Kiew, that he would be working as a construction worker in Bangkok. In fact, Khamlao disguises himself to be a country music singer.

Throughout the film, Khamlao conveys many aspects of Isaan cultures and characteristics. First of all, Khamlao speaks Isaan dialect when he is in his hometown, Vieng Republic, and switches to central Thai when he is on a mission in Bangkok to conform to the mainstream Thai. Khamlao is also portrayed to be a loyal husband to his wife. He also has high loyalty to his employer for keeping his career as a secret agent unrevealed to anyone including his wife. Khamlao is also devoted to his employer by his hard working and determined characteristics as presented in the

film. The character is represented as a witty and multi-talented bodyguard like the role in the first version.

4.4 Factors Influencing the Transitional Change of Isaan Characters

It is interesting to see how Jaa Panom and Mum Jokmok managed to cross the socio-cultural boundaries and become widely accepted in Thai's film industry. To date, both characters are referred to as ones of Thailand's richest stars and are ranked top stars in Thailand's entertainment industry – Jaa Panom as a martial art expert and Mum Jokmok as a comedian.

In her study on the popularity of Thai superstars in Thai movies, Kultida (1993) stated that in old Thai classical drama and literature, the heroes and heroines are kings and queens or reincarnation of gods while in Thai films, heroes and heroines are presented as normal people. Moreover, superstars in modern films were more down to earth even though they possess the qualities of ideal heroes and heroines. Since these superstars come from the same background with the majority of Thai people who need to assimilate into the Thai mainstream culture, they well represent Thai people's dream of better life. They have influences on the majority of Thai people by ensuring them that a dream of entering the enchanting entertainment world for them is achievable. They are socially accepted because their success serves as an example to follow. Jaa Panom's and Mum Jokmok's poor family background serves as an example for those leaving their hometowns to seek better fortune in life in a big city. Thus, it is possible to conclude that both of them are widely accepted because they represent the Thai majority's dreams.

Apart from this factor, there several factors that influence the transitional change of Isaan involvement in the Thai film industry. All relevant factors have given significance impacts in supporting these characters and encouraged social acceptance towards them as being analyzed subsequently.

4.4.1 Individual Talents

Despite their physically unappealing physical attributes, Jaa Panom and Mum Jokmok have been successful in their leading roles largely because of their talents. Both personalities' talents will be examined individually as follow:

4.4.1.1 Jaa Panom and His Talent in Martial Arts

Jaa Panom's individual talent of martial arts has led him to become a successful and famed superstar. His name is listed together with many internationally-recognized actors of action films such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Jet Li and Steven Seagal. Panom is among 16 international martial artists who have been described as the world's martial artists on their own expertise fields.

In the news report 'Leap into the Lime Light', Nilubol (2003) described Panom as 'self-trained', an indication that Panom has developed his talent in martial arts on his own. Jaa Panom started imitating Jackie Chan's performance and practicing kung fu fighting at the age of 10. His practice of kungfu fighting was inspired by the action films performed by Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, the two renowned martial artists. In his interview cited in his fan website, Panom said that Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan made him realize that he wanted to be a martial artist star and that he wanted to do something to show Thai culture and Thai martial arts.

Because of his outstanding talents, Jaa Panom was selected the main stuntman performing stand-in roles in several films. The selection of Jaa Panom as main stuntman for Robin Shue in *Mortal Kombat 2* (1997) is a proof of his outstanding talent. Prior to the production of *Mortal Kombat 2*, 100 stuntmen applied for the casting. Jaa Panom's talent outperformed all other competitors and he was finally chosen the only stuntman for the film's main actor, Robin Shue. Jaa Panom also performed stunt works for a young attractive superstar, Ruengsak 'James' Loichusak in the Thai teenage film "Gang Gratack Guan" by Five Star Production in 1998. Jaa Panom's brilliant stunt works in both films significantly introduced him to the film business.

Many fighting scenes in both *Ong Bak* (2003) and *Tom Yum Goong* (2005) are also some of the strong evidences depicting Jaa Panom's high talents in martial arts. Jaa Panom showcases his high talents in Muay Thai and acrobatic in many scenes to prove that there is no stuntman double or high-tech technique involved in his choreographing. This style of action film is acclaimed fresh and innovative in the Thai film industry. In his first film, *Ong Bak* (2003), some of these scenes that explicitly showcase Jaa Panom's original talent include his solo boxing fighting against his enemy. The choreographing combines both of his skills in *muay boran*, a traditional Thai boxing, and such gymnastic skills as high jump as illustrated in Figure 8.



Figure 8 Jaa Panom's action repertoire in Ong Bak (2003)

Jaa Panom's martial art wit and talents are also portrayed throughout his mission to trace for the missing Buddha statue especially when he is being chased down by a group of gangster on Bangkok crowded streets. As shown in Figure 9, Jaa Panom hurdles through a circle of barbed wire in a small alley when he is being chased by a gangster member. With the barbed wire circle blocking his way, Jaa Panom is not reluctant to jump through the circle while other following guys do not dare to do so. In Figure 10, Jaa Panom performs a high jump to cross a group of street vendors and street pedestrians. Figure 11 shows Jaa Panom bravely running through the fire that light up his feet when fighting with his enemy in the paddy field. Jaa Panom's brilliant and hard-to-imitate action talent is portrayed throughout his chase for the stolen Buddha statue in Ong Bak (2003).



Figure 9 Jaa Panom hurdles through a barbed wire circle in Ong Bak (2003)



Figure 10 Jaa Panom jumps across vendors and pedestrians in a small crowded alley in Ong Bak (2003)



*Figure 11 Jaa Panom jumps through the fire and fights his enemy in
Ong Bak (2003)*

Apart from Ong Bak (2003), many scenes in Tom Yum Goong (2005) also emphasize Jaa Panom's well-developed talent in martial arts. As shown in Figure 12, Jaa Panom fights against 70 men. These 70 members fight with Jaa Panom one by one and are all defeated. This action scene involves no weapons. Both Jaa Panom and his 70 enemies purely use their physical movement to fight against each other.

This scene takes 4.14 minutes and is dedicated to the breathtaking showcase of Jaa Panom's choreographic genius and high talents.



Figure 12 Jaa Panom beats 70 fighters in Tom Yum Goong (2005)

The last but most outstanding fighting scene in the film takes place in the Buddhist monastery which is set on fire. This climax fighting scene presents Jaa Panom fighting against his stronger and muscular enemies who are obviously taller, bigger and apparently stronger than Jaa Panom in terms of physical appearance. At the beginning of the fighting, Jaa Panom is beaten by his enemies and is almost defeated and fallen into unconsciousness. However, his consciousness returns and he bravely fights back the three stronger enemies. Jaa Panom eventually outperforms the three gigantic wrestlers and beats them. The film's producers, Prachya Pinkaew and Panna Rittikrai, intend to present these three giant wrestlers as Jaa Panom's challengers in Tom Yum Goong (2005) to emphasize Jaa Panom's great and developed talent.



Figure 13 Jaa Panom fights against Nathan Jones in the final climax scene of Tom Yum Goong (2005)

The six illustrations from Ong Bak (2003) and Tom Yum Goong (2005) provide strong evidence to support that Panom's talent is the crucial factor behind his success in both films. Several reviews cited in www.ongbak.com.au (2004) emphasizes that Jaa Panom's talents in martial arts portrayed throughout the film is the main appeal of Ong Bak (2003). In fact, the Toronto Film Festival 2003's review stated that Ong Bak's (2003) plot is simply an excuse for Jaa Panom, the film's main lead, to unleash his stunning Thai martial arts.

Both films' slogan also supports that martial arts wit is the only selling of Jaa Panom's film. In Ong Bak (2003), the slogan "No Wires, No Stunt Double, No Special Effect" was used to call people's attention to the film. For Tom Yum Goong (2005), the slogan "The Return of Jaa Panom" and "ทุ่มทับจับหัก", literally means "throw, lie on top, break some parts", were used to depict the strength of the

performers and the real feeling of action film to arouse audience's interest. (ฟรานซิส, 2548)

As Jaa Panom's talent in martial art has been seen as the sole selling point of the film, it can be concluded that his brilliant talent in martial arts alone is the main driving force which leads him to take leading roles in *Ong Bak* (2003) and *Tom Yum Goong* (2005).

4.4.1.2 Mum Jokmok and His Talent in Comedy

While Jaa Panom has martial arts and gymnastic skills as his main talents, Mum Jokmok has developed a great ability in creating humors throughout his entertaining career. His talents in comedy show is the main factor which leads him to rise in the Thai entertainment world. Mum Jokmok does not have a good familial, economical and educational background to support his success. In the contrary, all the success and fame Mum Jokmok enjoys today is a result of his own talents and hard works.

Mum Jokmok's performance in *Chiang Roi Ching Larn* program is the main evidence to his slapstick wit and comedy talent. Mum Jokmok produced many slapstick and gags for comedian shows which are also performed by his Sarm Cha gang's crews, Teng and Nong. The show performing by Sarm Cha Gang is one of the four sections of *Ching Roi Ching Larn* program. The show allows Mum Jokmok to exhibit his brilliant skills in slapstick as well as performing skills to the audiences. Sarm Cha performance usually imitates Thai soap opera and films and the three crews including Mum Jokmok, Teng and Nong usually perform the main roles in selected

soaps or films. Through these various roles in Sarm Cha weekly performance, Mum Jokmok has developed his talents.



Figure 14 Mum Jokmok (most left) performs a young student in the show performing section of Chiang Roi Ching Larm program.

The terms used to describe and explain Mum Jokmok in Thai press also indicates that Mum Jokmok has always been accepted as a talented performer. Superlative adjectives used include ‘superstar’, ‘Thailand’s leading comedian’, ‘multi-talented entertainer’, and ‘gifted comedian’. Mum Jokmok is a multi-talented person as he later becomes an acclaimed successful actor, director and film producer, all of which are not developed by his educational background but by his learning and talents. Mum Jokmok once told the press that he bears in his minds that continual development is the key to being a good comedian. He admitted that being a comedian requires great talents and spirits in order to deliver their best performance to the audiences. Mum Jokmok also values the ability to adapt an individual’s emotions to

the situation while performing the comedy show. All these indicate that being a comedian for Mum Jokmok involves high level of skills, improvement and talents to ensure the best quality of works conveyed to the viewers.

Mum Jokmok is a multi-talented person as he also becomes an acclaimed successful actor, director and film producer, all of which are not developed by his educational background but his learning-by-doing approach and talents. He has directed and produced three box office hit films within 4 years. The Bodyguard (2004) Mum Jokmok's first directed film and the film was a real hit in 2004. The Bodyguard was ranked second in the Thai Box Office in 2004, with the outstanding revenue of 80 million baht. The film only came second to the acclaimed most successful ghost film of the year The Shutter (2004) which earned 110 million baht. His second directed film Yam Yasothorn was released in 2005 and was ranked third in Thailand Box Office with the recorded revenue of 99.14 million baht. In Yam Yasothorn, Mum Jokmok was not only the film's main director and producer but he was also the film narrator of the whole plot and scenarios. His third debut directorial film The Bodyguard 2 followed in 2007. Phatarawadee (2007) marked an interesting caption of interview with Mum Jokmok in her special feature entitled "Comedian, Film Star, Action Hero, Director and now Singer". In this interview, Mum Jokmok admitted that he learned about producing a good quality action film from Prachya Pinkaew, the director of Ong Bak (2003) and Tom Yum Goong (2005), during his casting in both films. He then combined his signature of comedy and new acting techniques as learnt from Prachya into his recent film The Bodyguard 2 (2007). These are indicators that Mum Jokmok is a genius and highly talented film director and producer.

4.4.2 Influential Mass Media: Films and Television

4.4.2.1 Jaa Panom

Current trends in Thai action films include a development toward more elaborate fight scenes featured in Western films. This trend is influenced by the massive success of Hong Kong action cinema both in Asia and in the west. Asian martial arts elements such as kung fu can now be found in numerous non-Asian action films. Moreover, a distinction can be made between films that lean toward physical, agile fighting such as *Blade* and *The Matrix* and those that lean toward other common action film conventions like explosions and plenty of gunfire such as *Mission Impossible 3*. However, most action movies do not employ elements of both.

A study was conducted by the Kasikorn Bank Research Center in 2001 surveying the demand of Thai films among Thai people. It was found that historical movies was in great demand among Thai movie goers (22.3%), with comedy and action films ranking second (21.9%) and third (14.9%) respectively. This survey in 2001 indicates that action film is one of the top three most watched by Thai film goers. The demand for action films in Thailand has been relatively high since the golden era of two Thai action actors, Mitre Chaibancha and Sombat Metanee, during the 1960s and 1970s. Hundreds of action films were produced starring both heroes.

Five years later, Anchalee (2006) reported in her article “New Thai Cinema” that the majority of annual releases (around 30-40 films) were such repeated genres as action, slapsticks and horror. Here again action film remained one of the most popular forms of entertainments among Thais. According to the report, it was the overwhelmingly successful *Ong Bak* film (2003) which helped strengthen the demand for action film. The film, which hit Thai box office with high revenue of approximate

200 million baht, forced the film director into the making of sequel Tom Yum Gong in 2005.

Since his first casting as leading actor in Ong Bak (2003), Jaa Panom has attracted a large group of people to adore his talents. Panom's refusal to use safety wire when performing the action choreograph in his first film Ong Bak put the spotlight on him as a great and spirited martial artist. To present the action star with no safety wire in Ong Bak helps Panom to stand out from the others. The film enormously sparks the audiences' interest and impression because his action scenes are real. This style of presentation is hard to find in Thai mainstream films. This proves that the high skills and talent of Panom showcased in the film indicates people's acceptance towards his performance.

Following Panom's fame and success, the role of stuntman has become a dream job for aspiring actors. Parinyaporn (2005) noted that stuntmen are presented in action films as one of many Isaan people's dream jobs. The theme of the reality movie Sua Ronghai is a character's dream to follow the path of Panom. In the movie, one of the characters named Nate Inseelek is determined to become the next Jaa Panom. He left his hometown in the Northeast to seek employment in Bangkok and started working as the stuntman for film production. Despite hard work and obstacles, he still does not abandon his dream to become as successful as Panom. For Nate, Panom is considered his life icon and Nate has attempted to practice and imitate all actions performed by Panom and other famous Thai and Hollywood martial artists such as Panna Rittikrai and Jackie Chan. These successful martial artists become the examples for Nate to follow. An interview with Panna Rittikrai also indicates that the craze for being stuntmen has been emerging after the success of Tom Yum Goong

film in 2005. (พราวณิช, 2548). Although money and fame are the two main reasons for most young people trained for stuntmen skills, Panom trained very hard solely because of his great passion, Panna revealed. (ฝ่ายประชาสัมพันธ์สหมงคลฟิล์ม, 2548)

Following the overwhelming success of Panom, the demand for stuntmen has also been increasing in Thai film markets. In 2005, Sahamongkol Film with the collaboration of Panom and Panna ran a campaign to recruit new talented action heroes and heroines to serve the market's rising demand for martial artists. The company built a studio equipped with modern facilities to accommodate the training and practice under Panom and Panna. The two new generations of action hero and heroine launched in the Thai film markets following the success of Panom are Chupong Changprung, who impressed movie goers with his outstanding high kicking in his first film *Kon Fai Bin* (2006) and a 23-year-old female artist, Yanin Vismitananda, aka Jeeja who performed stunning acts in the film *Chocolate* (2008). Prachya Pinkaew, Sahamongkol Film's renowned director, stated that all action heroes who have been trained by Sahamongkol Film are inspired by Jaa Panom's success (ณัฐสุดา, 2548). An article by Jindawan Singkongsin presented the life of Thai stuntmen. Kawee Sirikanerat, the founder of Seng Stunt Team who has spent 20 years working as stuntman, also maintained that the success of *Ong Bak* (2003) and *Tom Yum Goong* (2005) movies has introduced Panom as an icon who inspired young people to dream of becoming stuntmen. (จินดาวรรณ, 2548)

The film success and Panom's popularity has directly built a new standard of Thai stuntmen. Jindawan interviewed Phaengrit Saengcha, the manager of a stunt group named Perfect Group, and found that the income earned by stuntmen in 2003 is

much higher from the past and demand for Thai stuntmen has consequentially increased. This is partly influenced by the well-sold Ong Bak (2003). According to Phaengrit, in the past a stuntman earns approximately 800 – 1,500 baht a day while in the 2000s the stuntman can earn up to 2000-3000 baht a day. This rate goes as high as 15,000-30,000 baht a day if the stuntman is hired by an international film company. From 2002-2005, the demand for Thai stuntmen among international film producers has been rising. The broadcast of both Ong Bak (2003) and Tom Yum Goong (2005) overseas also helped introduced Thai stuntmen's skills and talents to international markets. Apart from the consequence of these film's exposure at international markets, Kecha Kampakdee, the owner of Jaika Stunt & Rigging Team, revealed that film producers in the United States, France, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and India prefer hiring Thai stuntmen because of their skills, patience, higher spirit and cheaper rate when compared with stuntmen from other countries. Kecha stated that Thai boxing is a magnet that adds a charm to Thai stuntmen and make the demand for their actions to continue rising. Panom's stunning choreographing of ancient boxing in the internationally recognized film Tom Yum Goong also promotes the charm of authentic Thai boxing to foreigners.

Panom has not only been successful at domestic market but he has also obtained international recognition due to his great stunt performance. Anchalee (2006) summarized in her article "New Thai Cinema" that the Thai action films have been registered at the world market in the past recent years through the kickboxing arts depicted in Ong Bak: The Muay Thai Warrior (2003). In other words, the skillful martial arts of Panom showcased in the film have promoted him as a new international action icon, following the footsteps of Hong Kong's stars such as Jackie

Chan and Jet Li. Their ways of performing real martial choreograph which do not involve safety wires make their actions authentic and highly admired by film goers. Anchalee (2006) concluded that Jaa Panom successfully goes into international spotlight due to his talent in authentic Thai kickboxing arts and his young age. Even though he is being compared with other former successes such as Jackie Chan and Jet Li, Panom is different from the others because he is currently the only action hero who has expertise in authentic Thai martial artists. As presented through Tom Yum Goong film (2005), Panom is praised as highly skilled in Thai boxing, gymnastics and swordplay.

4.4.2.2 Mum Jokmok

Mass media serves as another major supporting factor that helps strengthens the popularity of Isaan characters in Thai films. According to Gerbner and Gross (1976), television is the most influential mass media which manipulates the life of people. It prevails over other types of mass media as it does not require literacy, is free and comes into an individual's place and reaches the individual freely. Moreover, it combines all convincing aspects of visual and sound.

Mum Jokmok's regular presentation in television program is the main influential backup that arouses audience's recognition in his multi-talented abilities. Mum Jokmok has been involved in Thai television programs for 18 years. He first appeared in Thai television in 1990 when he co-hosted Panya Nirankul and Mayura Svetsira in a famous game show Ching Roi Ching Larn. Petchtai was a co-host in Weteetong game show from 1994 to 2004, in Roi Waeng Takaeng Sib-ha from 1998 to 1999, in Fancy Mee Harng in 1999, performed an owner of grocery shop in Raberd

Terd Terng program from 1996 to 2003, performed in a sit com Koke Koon Trakul Khai in 2003 and was the main host in Mahanakorn talk show in 2007. Currently, Mum Jokmokl still performs in a comedian show together with his fellows from Sarm Cha gang in Ching Roi Ching Larn Cha Cha Cha (holiday version). He is also one of the three main hosts of Chaibodin Show from 2003 until present and the owner and main host of Mum Show from 2005 until present. From Mum Jokmok's profile, it is apparent that he has been a television personality throughout the course of 18 years. His multi-talents and fame is known among the Thai audiences and his media name, Mum Jokmok, has become a household term. Television has helped strengthening people's recognition in his stardom and abilities.

In 2008, Petchtai is involved in three main programs and his roles have drawn in positive feedbacks and generated a boost in rating. One program Ching Roi Ching Larn, is deemed the most influential program, emphasizing the popularity of Mum Jokmok as Thailand's leading comedian and entertainers. Mum Jokmok was employed to add slapstick and jokes to the program in 1990 during the time when most of Thai comedians still earned their living in the night club or café and were rarely chosen to perform their jokes in popular game shows. Panich Sodsri launched a group of comedians named Sarm Cha gang in 1998 based on the idea that a good entertaining program needs a team of brilliant and talented comedians. Since then, the Sarm Cha gang becomes the main magnet for the program. Mum Jokmok is set to provide entertainment to people at all age with his brilliant slapsticks which are created straight away on the stages while Pongsak Pongsuwana, aka Teng, attracts a group of women with his good looking face and gentle words and Chusak Iamsuk,

aka Nong, entertain children with his chubby shape and child-like clothing styles. Panich used the word ‘superstar’ to describe the three comedians.

Presently Mum Jokmok’s status and relation to the Workpoint Co., Ltd. is growing significantly and grabbing attention from the Thai audiences and press. Most of the television programs he is involved in include Mum Show, Ching Roi Ching Larn, Ching Roi Ching Larn Cha Cha Cha and Chaibodin Show. Mum Jokmok is considered to be Workpoint’s main strategy to draw audiences to its several programs. His roles are said to be as significant as the company’s owner Panya Nirankul and are crucial to the company’s future and popularity.

4.4.3 Positive Identity Perception

As discussed in previous chapters, Central Thai people has a more socially and economically powerful identity when compared with Isaan people. Based on the social identity concept by Abrams and Hogg (1990) in which inter-group relationship is observed, one group is more powerful and prestigious than others. The higher prestigious status of the Central Thai can be viewed as a result of social comparison between the Central Thai against the out-group which include other regional people, including Northeast or Isaan, Northern and Southern. The social comparison of these four main regional people results in the perception that Central Thai identity connotes better values and prestige than those of Isaan and other regional people. This means that the subordinate identity may also convey negative social identity if the value of dominant group is widely accepted. As Myers (2005) pointed out, speaking local Isaan dialect at school causes some students to be punished by the teachers because the Central Thai language has become the lingua franca at schools.

Jaa Panom and Mum Jokmok both exhibit their attempt to construct the positive identity on their Isaan descent culture and characteristics through their various lines of works. Mum Jokmok indicates his pride in Isaan identity through the film entitled *Yam Yasothorn* (2005) in many aspects. Firstly, the film was directed and produced by Mum Jokmok himself. Secondly, all actors and actresses were of Isaan descents, who have round face, high cheekbones and non prominent nose, all of which are associated with lack of sophistication and grace. Thirdly, Isaan dialect was chosen as the language spoken in all scenes in this romantic film while Central Thai, the official language, was used as the sub-title in the film. Here language was used to identify Isaan characters in a positive way. The film reflects the strong sense of pride of Mum Jokmok, the film's director, who has a very clever and direct way to promote positive Isaan identity. Prior to the film production, the casting to search for the film's main actor and actress was carried out in Ubonratchathani, one of the big city in the Northeast. Mum Jokmok designed his casting mission to be taken place in the Northeast in order to find the most appropriate character with Isaan look and fluency in Isaan dialect.

The Bodyguard (2004) and *The Bodyguard 2* (2007), which were directed and produced by Mum Jokmok, also convey intense aspects of Isaan identities. *The Bodyguard* (2004) presents Mum Jokmok himself as an intelligent and skilled bodyguard working for the millionaire boss. The bodyguard is given a typical Isaan name as "Wongkum" and throughout the film Wongkum does not conceal his identity as being Isaan descent. This clearly shows that Mum Jokmok intends to convey and promote characteristics of Isaan as favorable to the audiences. Three years later, *The Bodyguard 2* was released. In this sequel, the Isaan identities are heavily presented

throughout the film. To start with, Mum Jokmok is again the leading actor, a secret agent working for a fictionally-created republic named Vieng, a country which borders Thailand and shares similar culture and dialect with Thailand's northeast. Vieng is recreated to represent Mum Jokmok's hometown. The leading actress is a known female comedian Janet Kiaw, who cast the beloved wife of Wongkum. Both Petchtai and Janet Kiaw possess Isaan facial features. Moreover, the bodyguard is given an Isaan name "Kham Lao". All films produced and directed by Mum Jokmok were rich in Isaan cultures and were box office hits.

Apart from the film, Mum Jokmok's pride in his Isaan identity is also equally presented in his own television program, Mum Show, broadcasting every Saturday at prime time on channel 5. The program, which is under the production of Mum's company, Bungfai Studio, showcases his high esteem in Isaan identity in various aspects. To begin with the show's title, Mum Show is named after himself. With the name Mum Show, audiences would expect to watch his talent in humorous and slapstick show. The name Mum literally means a type of Isaan meat sausage. It tells his origin and his development of a comedian career which took off 20 years ago. The show is also divided into several parts, namely Petchtai show, Wongkumlao show and Yasothorn festival. Petchtai and Wongkumlao are derived from his real name and surname respectively while Yasothorn is his hometown province in the Northeast of Thailand. This clearly shows the intention to portray his real identity and homebound relation through the program. The company name Bungfai Studio also depicts the real Isaan cultural strength. As explained earlier in the cultural background section, Bungfai is one of Isaan's traditional events and a major part of Isaan's life style and

belief. All these suggest that Mum Jokmok highly values his Isaan identity as he incorporates these identity aspects into his highly-invested business.

By the same token, Jaa Panom has shown high appreciation in his Isaan identity and background. Jaa Panom always shows his high gratitude and homebound relations to his hometown; both Isaan region and Thailand. Even though selected films of Jaa Panom under this study were not produced by Panom himself, the film's director, Prachya portrayed Jaa Panom with rich Isaan characteristics. Despite being naïve and bullied, Jaa Panom as Ting in *Ong Bak* (2003) and *Tom Yum Goong* (2005) turned the victor in both films. The film intends to show to the audience that virtuous, grateful and sincere Isaan man is a favorable character. Besides, the film's plot involves an elephant, a symbolic animal which provide association with the monarchy and nation's symbol. Therefore, Jaa Panom, as the rescuer of the stolen elephant, has to be perceived as well favored. The characteristics of Isaan people including gratitude and sincerity are then enhanced in this film.

Noticeably, the poor-turned-rich Jaa Panom and Mum Jokmok never look down on their deprived Isaan background. Their new position as superstars never caused them to disvalue their inherited identity and background of Isaan. On the other hand, they both enhance their identities which are stereotypically unfavorable by the mainstream through their presentation in media. Despite attaining international recognition and fame, Jaa Panom always maintains that he is proud of his rural background of a poor elephant mahout family in Surin, Northeast of Thailand. In the news feature by Kirkland (2005), Panom quoted that he would like to pay back to the society that nurtured him. Jaa Panom intended to reflect the Thai culture through films and was proud to pass down his ancestors' traditions to foreigners through films.

Besides, in an interview with Uyen Le, Mum Jokmok told Le (2006) that it was very fortunate for him to become an action movie star. Jaa Panom also mentioned that being the action star enabled him to pay back the country and his parents by building forest for his elephants back at home in Isaan. Mum Jokmok also largely enhances his inherited identity in his works. Once Mum Jokmok becomes rich and can afford the production of films and television show, he does not feel awkward to present his innate Isaan identity at all. Mum Jokmok on the other hand insert Isaan cultures and identities to his works as much as possible.

Both Mum Jokmok's and Jaa Panom's high sense of social identity can be explained by the concept of social identity by Abrams and Hogg (1990). Both characters strive to maintain or enhance their self esteem in order to achieve positive evaluation of their social identity. Even though both Mum Jokmok and Jaa Panom are involved in the mass media and become the public interest alike other actors and actresses, they belong to the subordinate group as Isaan descent. Mum Jokmok chooses to explicitly expose his real social identity as Isaan people through mass media amid the richness of mainstream's Central Thai cultures and other emerging foreign cultures such as Korean and Japanese. By this continual presentation through media, members of this social identity or the Isaan people which make up the largest group of population of Thai citizens might have grown their positive perception towards their own identity as well. Meanwhile, it helps build the mainstream people's acquaintance towards the Isaan identity and cultures due to the factor which will be elaborated consequently.

4.4.4 Strong Popularity of Isaan Culture

Isaan people form the largest figure of population in the country and their migration to other regions leads to the popularity of Isaan cultures in the Thai society. The phenomenon as such helps support the nationwide popularity of both Jaa Panom and Mum Jokmok, the Isaan-descent entertainers.

In an article “Morlum, Pong Lang and Comedians, the Sellable Isaan Trace” in Matichon newspaper, Dr. Somkiat Tangnamo, a professor from Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University, provides an in-depth and useful analysis on the rising popularity of Isaan culture. Dr. Somkiat considered the rising popularity of Isaan culture and people in Thai media as being largely influenced by the largest number of Isaan people in the country. In Dr. Somkiat’s viewpoint, the kind of poverty encountered by the Northeast region and its population has led to the migration of a large number of Isaan people to other regions. The migration of the Isaan people therefore influences the popularity of Isaan culture. It enables people in other regions to be exposed to and fall in love with Isaan culture. Isaan people who either settle or temporarily migrate to other regions especially Central Thailand and Bangkok also form a large group of consumers who desire to consume their own culture and characteristics presented through any types of media when being away from home. This would create interests and curiosity from their fellows from other regions to enjoy consuming Isaan cultures, which are highly distinct from those of other regions. About the trend of using Isaan superstars to promote products, Dr. Somkiat’s notion on the popularity of Isaan culture was that there is still an ongoing prejudice on the regional Isaan people. Dr. Somkiat sums up that the Isaan culture sells well among three groups of people: the group of Isaan people who migrate to other metropolitan

cities and become the country's main labor sector, the group of people from other regions who perceive the Isaan people as being inferior to them, and the group of people who enjoy consuming the naïve, innocent and clumsy characteristics of Isaan people.

Warayut Mirintajinda, one of Channel 3 main soap opera producers, stated in an article that his soap opera *Rachinee Mor Lum*, literally means the queen of *mor lum* songs, broadcast in 2005, is well favored by people at all levels. Warayut, further explained that the movie was favored by both low-income vendors, middle class and a group of well-to-do people. Warayut cites the main plot that presents poor Isaan people's spirit-filled attempt to become the famous *mor lum* singers as the main strong point that attract audiences. Another attraction was the charm of *mor lum*, an authentic Isaan-styled song. Warayut is certain that more and more television soap and movies narrating the culture and characteristics of Isaan will be launched to serve Thai audiences' entertainment needs.

Many marketing planners have recently used Isaan cultures as the main magnet in their media works in order to draw attraction of people to their promoted products. In 2005, Thailand's Ministry of Agriculture under the administration of Khunying Sudarat Keyurapan chose Jaa Panom and Mum Jokmok as the main presenters to promote the consumption of longan nationwide and in China, the country to which the highest amount of Thai longan are exported. Both Jaa Panom and Mum Jokmok are presented in the television commercial to promote longan purchase and consumption among all levels of Thai people nationwide. In 2007, Mum Jokmok was chosen by Thailand's major telecommunication network, True Corporation, to be its new brand ambassador performing in its 5 series commercial

that promote both True mobile phone service and multimedia networks. True Corporation's Managing Director Supachai Jiarawanont gives an interview to the Thai press stating that the company targeted a larger group of consumers nationwide and Mum Jokmok was the perfect choice to deliver its message to these people. Supachai considered Mum Jokmok as a well liked characters by all classes and levels of Thai people. Suphachai also cites Mum Jokmok's main characteristics as confident and reliable as corresponding to the company's image. Mum Jokmok appeared in True Corporation's commercial and printed media since September 2007.