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Speaking in Thai, dreaming in Isan: Popular Thai television and emerging identities of Lao Isan youth living in northeast Thailand

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Speaking in Thai, dreaming in Isan: Popular Thai television and emerging
identities of Lao Isan youth living in northeast Thailand

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This is an ethnographic study of how Lao Isan youth living in the northeastern provincial capital Khon Kaen and nearby town Mahasarakham experience Thainess or *khwampenthai* in its most popular form – television. People who inhabit the northeast of Thailand interchangeably label themselves and are labelled by others as Isan, Thai Isan, Lao Isan, Thai or Lao, depending on the ethnic, political, social or familial nuances of any given situation. I use the term *Lao Isan* to refer specifically to Isan people of Lao origin or ethnicity. Lao Isan are subject to complex and often competing notions of *Isanness*, *Laoness* and *Thainess* by insiders and outsiders. Using data derived from a 2002 ethnographic study of the responses of Lao Isan youth (aged 17 to 25) to their favourite Thai television programs, this thesis explores contemporary and co-existing interpretations of Isan identity or *khwampenisan* among Lao Isan youth in relation to historical context and processes of identity formation.

The people of northeast Thailand, or *Khon Isan*, are confronted daily with ambiguities gravitating around the perceived multiplicity of their identity, particularly Thai identity and Lao (Isan) identity. Political, social and cultural constructs of identity are continually contested. Collective themes and understandings of Lao Isan identity are represented and constituted by outsiders and insiders whose views melt into and across cultural borders. Some of these constructions highlight the exclusivity of Isan identity – a tight geographical space that is no longer Lao but *Thai Isan* within the larger Thai nation state. Others ignore geographical boundaries and explore Lao Isan identity within a more open cultural space that encompasses both northeast Thailand and Laos. Informing these constructions are overlapping and often conflicting views on Thai-Lao historiography, Lao Isan indigenous studies, and the influence of popular culture.

Given the fluidity and plurality of cultural representation in Isan and assumptions made by experts about the role of mass media in deconstructing cultural integrity, I asked the questions: What do Lao Isan youth make of their own identity? Is there really such a thing as *Laoness* or *Isanness*? What do these labels represent? My study of the personal responses of Lao Isan youth to television produced in Thailand, attempts to unravel more

about the everyday notions, sense-making and rituals that contribute to their evolving identity formation.

The data presented in this thesis is based on: small focus group sessions conducted with the same groups over a period of one year; in-depth interviews with focus group participants, parents and grandparents; participant observation; interviews with Isan scholars; and textual discourse analyses. Focus group participants came from provinces throughout the Isan region, as well as from both village and urban settings. I investigated responses to popular Thai TV programs currently in favour with youth audiences (i.e. soap operas, comedy, music and game shows). Using these programs as a centre point, I worked to unravel the complex patterns of identity formation by which young Lao Isan people define their sense of self. Expressions of identity were gradually revealed as participants discussed their own personal stories, class and family backgrounds and life experiences in context with the themes and issues portrayed in the narratives of specific TV programs. Personal responses to programs opened up discussion on identity themes such as lifestyle, relationships, beliefs, values and aspirations within the *milieu* of daily life in a contemporary newly industrialised Thailand.

This project is one of the first conducted in the Southeast Asian region to examine the role of mass media communications internally – that is, from one nation state to a specific resident ethnic group. Outcomes of the study suggest a more hybrid and relational approach to Isan identity would open up discourse and assist in dispelling accumulated clichéd constructs of Lao Isan, particularly in relation to how these are manufactured on Thai television. Increased understandings by Thai policy makers of how a sizeable stakeholder population of Lao Isan youth situate themselves within the Thai socio-political-cultural landscape may assist in policy development for youth programming in employment, training and social development in the wider context. This research into emergent culture also contributes to evolving theory within the contemporary paradigm of *open cultural space*, which flows out of post-modern discourse on culture, identity, nation state and ethnicity.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

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This thesis is not just about ideas, analyses and field work. It is about people, about some six years of building relationships with a range of diverse individuals and organisations who helped advise, nurture, support and grow my research into something far beyond the academic. I feel deeply grateful and indebted to the young people from diverse localities within the Isan region who participated energetically and openly within our focus groups; who shared intimate ideas and expressions of themselves and their hopes and aspirations. It was a leap of faith for many, who at first seemed bemused and amused by my interest in them (why does she want to know about us?!). Gradually as the months progressed these young people came out, often putting themselves on the line in front of their peers to express strong emotions about their sense of identity, about their position in the mainstream cultural world of Thailand and about their personal attitudes to the cultural norms of relationships and marriage. It was a subtle process of friendship and acknowledgement that we shared within their television viewing world, and ultimately it was about trust. Many of these younger friends invited me into their family homes and introduced me to their mothers, fathers, grandparents and friends. Their trust, generosity of spirit and hospitality enriched my research immeasurably as I gained access to the rituals of their daily lives and the more private inner world of family and relationships. Their shared selves are the very fabric of this thesis and I feel deep gratitude towards them all.

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NOTE ON LANGUAGE USAGE, TRANSCRIPTION AND CONVENTIONS

The representation of Thai words in the English form is problematic. Formal transliteration systems developed and used by linguists tend to have their own contradictions and inconsistencies and are seldom comprehensible to the general reader. Therefore I have based my transcription of Thai and Lao/Isan words into the English character form on common written form usage, with the sole important criteria being consistency throughout the document. Where a transliterated word is eclectic or not commonly used, particularly Isan words, and for people's full Thai names, I have tried to include the Thai script version in parentheses to avoid confusion.

ACRONYMS

AUA	American University Alumni
KKU	Khon Kaen University
MSU	Maharakham University (previously Srinakharinwirot University)
NRCT	National Research Council of Thailand
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NIC	Newly-Industrialised Country
RA	Research Assistant
SWU	Srinakharinwirot University (now Maharakham University)
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training

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INTRODUCTION

Of the gladdest moments in human life, methinks, is the departure upon a distant journey into unknown lands. Shaking off with one mighty effort the fetters of Habit, the leaden weight of Routine, the cloak of many Cares and the slavery of Home, man feels once more happy. The blood flows with the fast circulation of childhood... Afresh dawns the morn of life...

Richard Burton, Journal entry, 2 December 1856¹

This thesis concerns identity formation within the particular ethnic, cultural, regional, social and political space of northeast Thailand. Therefore it may seem quirky to introduce this thesis with the thoughts of an explorer who traversed the African continent at a time when the British were refining the art of cultural oppression as far as their colonial fingertips could reach. For many years, however, this quote has been pinned up at my desk in whatever *home* I happen to inhabit as I experience my own personal odyssey toward understanding more about identity formation. Burton's references to Habit, Routine, Cares and Home are for me critical elements of what we call *identity*. He is thinking individualistically about how the pressures of daily life can insidiously suffocate risk and creativity. I prefer to think of daily life being at the heart of our cultural identity. We live our lives in certain predictable ways because of who we are culturally, often without asking ourselves whether this is the most valid or enriching way we could live. Of course I speak from within my western cultural framework that assumes a level of choice that most in the majority world have only ever, or never, dreamed of.

The particular journey I embarked upon for this thesis was not into an unknown land – a land I wanted to know more about certainly, but a land not unknown to me. My first real encounter with Thailand was as a journalist covering the plight of Karen refugees along the Thai-Burma border in early 1992. My previous life as a writer and editor covering human rights issues in Southeast Asia stimulated a bigger picture view of social

¹ Brodie, F.M. (1967). *The Devil Drives: A Life of Sir Richard Burton*, (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company Inc), p. 141.

and economic development and led me down the path to this thesis. Identity – our sense of self – is framed by culture (including language), politics and religion. This seeming unholy trinity has often led to conflict since human history was first mapped; it is key to understanding why people behave the way they do. I was in Isan on my first field trip on the 11 September 2001. A note in my journal says: “It dawns on me that the events in the US are inseparable from issues of identity, of how we perceive ourselves... Perhaps my research will help me better understand how identity formation can generate creative lives, as well as retard and destroy humanity.”²

In developing my research proposal, I read much about historical controversies and ambiguities surrounding anthropological research, ethnography and its fieldwork. There is an ambiguity within *fieldwork*, of what the field is and how it has been conceptualised and fashioned by anthropologists over time. Reading this I began to realise my place as the hybrid researcher. I was not *trained* in any of the disciplines I was traversing and hopefully melding at some future point: cultural studies and media studies, with ethnography as my methodology but not through anthropology. I came to anthropology by reading about other people’s quests to redefine the legacy of ethnographic intent and reconceptualise cultural identity research. Informed by current scholarly discussions and debates inside development studies, I began at the very heart of this challenge, not working back over some form of pre-conditioning in the guise of undergraduate studies in one of these specific disciplines. In a way the crux of my own study hangs above and beneath the wrestle with redefinition – looking at constructions of Isan identity – that is how or whether such constructions are lived experiences or rather manufactured presentations ingrained in some form of truth. From the beginning I expected to find (and did) that the layers of identity known as *khwampenisan* (being Isan) are continuously reinterpreted and renegotiated by young people living within complex and competing cultural fusions – fusions that represent contemporary Thai society. Identities are fluid.

² Field journal entry, 14 September 2001.

Why choose Lao Isan identity in Thailand as the vehicle for my quest to fathom identity formation and its leading role in the socio-cultural-political worlds we inhabit? The answer to that question is both practical and academic. In my early naivety and enthusiasm for my PhD project, I had at first envisioned a study of the impact of Thai TV on people in Laos. The completely unexpected, seemingly impossible conception of my first child (a long other story) – a happy event that saw me commencing my doctoral research program as an older first time mother with a 10-month old baby – had me rapidly reigning in those earlier grandiose ambitions to a much tighter, less physically draining project on Lao Isan identity and youth. In the times I had lived in Thailand prior to embarking on my research, I was often fascinated and dismayed by the negative stereotyping of Khon Isan by those in Bangkok and other parts of Thailand. Lao Isan people were the butt of crass jokes about their backward lifestyles and simple country mentality. Khon Isan were viewed as witless, unsophisticated, uneducated, looked different (i.e. Lao) to central, northern and southern Thais and were generally looked down upon by them it seemed – at least superficially to an outsider such as myself. I noticed that taxi drivers, labourers, domestic servants, street stall vendors and bar girls were often from provinces in Isan. Furthermore, this is how they were usually portrayed on the very popular Thai-produced television programs, such as *lakhon* (soap operas).

With more than 34 million inhabitants, Isan is the most populous region in Thailand. Why then was this huge chunk of Thai *beingness* the brunt of crude jokes and stereotypical buffoonery? I wanted to know more. And what struck me as the best place to start my identity quest was with the upcoming Lao Isan generation. I knew from my personal travels in Isan that despite its image in the national psyche as a drought ridden, non-cosmopolitan backwater, the region had not remained cemented in time, but had also changed significantly as Thailand moved rapidly into the realms of a newly industrialised country (NIC). So where did that leave today's youth of Isan? What fed their Isanness? Was their Lao Isan identity a point of pride or denial? In practical terms, did being Lao Isan in any way limit their sense of themselves and what they could achieve, and furthermore, were they the real victims of ethnic discrimination when it came to vocation and building their lives?

Watching television is not one of my favourite pastimes; watching commercial TV with its soapies, grating game shows and sport even less so. So why then choose TV as the medium to explore and stimulate debate on Lao Isan identity? Simply because televisions, playing predominantly Thai produced programs, buzz away in practically every cultural setting in Thailand, with perhaps only the inner sanctum of the local Buddhist temple or *wat* escaping their noisy presence. Thais watch TV – a lot. And even when they are not watching the actual box, its noisy chatter provides an ever-present backdrop in homes, restaurants, hair dressing and beauty salons, Seven 11s, markets, laundromats, petrol stations, airport lounges, as well as hotel, hospital and office building foyers, to name but a few. I knew young Khon Isan would not be excluding themselves from this mass exposure to Thai television. From a research methodological perspective, viewing choices made by young Khon Isan may give me access to their responses to the mainstream manufacture of both Thai and Isan identity, and hopefully trigger discussion providing me with insights into the processes of identity formation affecting these young people. Furthermore, most people in the northeast have only had access to television since the late 1970s and early 1980s when electricity became available in rural areas of the region. This meant that the youth cohort in this study were the first generation of Khon Isan to be exposed to television as an ordinary part of their lives.

This project is one of the first set in the Southeast Asian region to examine the role of mass media communications internally – that is, from one nation-state to a specific resident ethnic group. It would be easy to get caught up in ubiquitous discourse on cultural imperialism (via Thai mass media) and the omnipresent spread of globalism. While theories that frame media and cultural studies discourse within the rapid spread of global economy and communications technology can provide interesting conceptual angles with which to explore identity formation, it is important not to *assume* that global interaction will inevitably and finitely absorb diverse Asian identities into one homogenous mass. The research on which this thesis is based is primarily concerned with how a perceived sense of *Laoness or Isanness* is being expressed, informed, contested and transformed through exposure to Thailand's mass media, specifically popular television.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS AND METHODOLOGY

Identity is, in part, a question of individual consciousness and hence depends on the narratives and practices through which individuals experience themselves and 'others' in their specific cultural and social milieux.

*Annette Hamilton, 1991*³

Ethnography: Inventing or representing?

Ethnography is an appropriate format through which to explore diverse constructions of Isan identity because, like cultural processes of identity formation, it is an interdisciplinary activity that traverses multiple readings – displacements, overlappings, connections and contradictions. Discourse on Isan and Lao identity formation often suffers from a lack of the ethnographic voice – the oral versus the literate. For example in both Lao and Thai interpretations of their *brotherly* relationship we are endlessly subjected to a restrained literalist epistemology – a painstaking, literal mapping of historiography – the tracing of lineage and kinship through pedantic debate on language, territorial space, stolen Buddhist relics, colonial influence and so on. As open culture theorist James Clifford points out: “History feeds on what finds its way into a limited textual record...and there is no way to give voice to the silences in these histories, to choose the unrecorded.”⁴ I was searching for these silences.

Are ethnographers caught up in the invention rather than the representation of cultures? There is a need to be self-conscious about external and self-imposed limits to research, about individual informants and about the final written construction. In a backlash to traditional ethnography, where outsiders sought to expose the *exotic*, indigenous research has been embraced as more *valid* because it is being conducted from the inside. While insiders studying their own cultures offer invaluable perspectives, like outsiders, they are both empowered and restricted by their circumstance. Many Thai researchers use

³ Hamilton, A. (1991). “Rumours, Foul Calumnies and the Safety of the State: Mass Media and National Identity in Thailand”, in Craig Reynolds (Ed.), *National identity and its defenders. Thailand, 1939-1989*, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books), Ch 12, p. 342.

⁴ Clifford J. (1988). *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), p. 340.

ethnography as a way to confirm and/or authenticate established assumptions and identity constructions that fit into conventional Thai-centric historiography. Likewise, one could say that localised (*thong thin*) constructions of Laoness are limited by adherence to indigenous *truths* and unwillingness to accept the effects of cultural flux, such as emerging popular culture, on identity formation.

Ethnography has also been problematised on the grounds that its attempts to closely observe cultural worlds have failed to embed these worlds in larger historic world-system perspectives.⁵ I keep with recent attempts to open up issues of historical narrative – the constructions of history – by representing multiple temporal perspectives.⁶ In this case, examining how historical-socio-cultural-political constructions of Laoness and Isanness may inform and/or challenge Lao Isan youth in the construction of self-identity. Likewise, ethnography is increasingly gaining popularity within media studies and mass communications research is one of the most effective ways “...to learn about the differentiated subtleties of people’s engagements with television and other media”.⁷

The me/you relationship

This ethnography is premised on the belief that social researchers *cannot* speak with assumed authority for others. Indeed a central focus of the project has been to understand how and why others have evolved *authoritative* constructions of Laoness and Isanness

⁵ Marcus G.E. (1986). Contemporary Problems of Ethnography in the Modern World System., In Clifford J. & Marcus G.E. (Eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, California: University of California Press), pp. 165-166.

⁶ Some of these experiments in micro-social description and contextuality arise from the field of political economy where there has been a drive to conduct local level studies of processes and their social construction; ethnography that is sensitive to its context of historical political economy (Marcus, 1986, p. 167). The link between post-modern problematising of cultural identities theory and paradigm shifts in larger Western social philosophical frameworks (ie challenges to positivism) has led to the appropriation of ethnography by those that recognise we live in a much more complex world – one that can no longer depict cultural diversity in terms of spatio-temporal cultural preserves of otherness (p. 168).

⁷ Ang, I. (1989). Wanted: Audiences. On the politics of empirical audience studies. In Seiter E., Borchers H., Kreutzner G. & Warth E. (Eds). *Remote Control: Television, Audiences and Cultural Power*, (London & New York: Routledge), p. 96.

and whether these constructions inform self-identity among Lao Isan youth. As the researcher, I am always the *outsider* looking in. My position is implicit to the research process. The participants are *performing* certain identities for me – the white *farang*⁸ researcher – but they are also performing for each other. Within the insider group there exist micro-identities of outsiders and insiders – male/female, urban/rural, poor/wealthy and so on. There are those who insist on collective national identity as an identity marker and those who surreptitiously locate themselves within their Isanness.

The participants provided verbal representations of their TV viewing preferences – what they say rather than necessarily what they do. To understand their actual practices required more ethnographic probing on the settings and ways they practice their viewing, as well as the discourses on which they draw to make sense of TV shows and how they are embedded in other aspects of their lives. Data are what youth say about the TV programs at the level of public discourse rather than what they may actually think or believe in terms of private viewing practices.

The ethnographic research methodology (i.e. focus groups and personal interviews) was approved by the Edith Cowan University Ethics Committee and by the National Research Council of Thailand. Every person who participated in this project was provided with detailed information in Thai (either written or spoken) on the purpose and format of their involvement and, if agreeable, signed a consent form in Thai (see Appendices E to J).

In the field

Fieldwork for this project commenced on 10 September 2001 and ran through to 2 October 2002. Prior to arriving in Thailand to conduct my fieldwork proper, I was awarded a travel scholarship by Edith Cowan University to assist me in carrying out a preliminary field trip to assess appropriate research sites. From 27 August to 9 September

⁸ *Farang* is a word used in the Thai language to loosely refer to any person with Western or European appearance. The word refers not to actual ethnic origins but rather the way a foreigner looks – a *farang* is basically a white person with Western European features (i.e. narrow nose, wide eyes etc.). Asians are not considered *farang* even though they might be foreigners in Thailand.

2000, I visited Khon Kaen University (KKU), Mahasarakham University (MSU) and Rajabhat Mahasarakham to meet with academics and staff I had previously contacted by email and fax to discuss the possibility of setting up focus groups with some of their students. As a result of these personal discussions, I established workable links with the Department of Mass Communications at KKU, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at MSU and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at Rajabhat Mahasarakham.

For reasons of practical and efficient data collection, I set up my research sites in the region's capital Khon Kaen and its surrounds. In order to access higher and vocational education learning, youth from throughout the Isan region relocate to the centres of Khon Kaen and the smaller Mahasarakham after high school. Students studying at KKU, MSU and Rajabhat Mahasarakham come from provinces all over the Isan region, thereby giving me the opportunity to capture regionally representative data without having to travel to individual research sites across the region. Mahasarakham University, in particular, encourages and supports the conservation of local (*thong thin*) Isan culture. Likewise, Rajabhat Mahasarakham supports *khwampenisan* through its indigenous music quota and program.

KKU Thai language lecturer, Ajarn Wirat Wongpinunwatana, agreed to my setting up small focus groups with some of his mass communications students. Ajarn Wirat specialises in Thai language usage and transformation in mass communications. Approximately 80 per cent of KKU's student population are Lao Isan. KKU graduates are competing with Bangkok graduates of prestigious institutions such as Chulalongkorn and Thammasat universities.

A recognised *thong thin* (indigenous) studies specialist, MSU Humanities and Social Science Dean Ajarn Jaruwan Thammawat was also supportive of me establishing focus groups with some of the faculty's students. I also interviewed Ajarn Jaruwan on several occasions during the course of the fieldwork period.

Then Rajabhat Mahasarakham Vice-President, Ajarn Sahut Hansin promised whole-hearted support to the project. Rajabhats began as teachers' colleges but were recently upgraded to teach across disciplines. They do not yet have the status of a university but appear to fill a post-secondary gap in much the same way that Technical and Further Education (TAFE) or vocational education and training (VET) used to do in Australia (although now VET is highly competitive with tertiary institutions). Rajabhat students are more likely to come from less privileged rural backgrounds compared to their fellow university students at Khon Kaen. The plan was to set up small focus groups with students in the Social Science and Humanities Faculty. In my interviews with Ajarn Sahut, he expressed concern that many young people attending the Rajabhat were losing their Isan identity; however he also said there were others involved in preserving their indigenous culture.⁹ A group of students performs *morlam* regularly on the campus. Several of these students later became focus group participants in my project. On commencement of fieldwork in 2001, Ajarn Mayuree Siriwan, Head of the English Department, became the key academic contact for liaising with students at the Rajabhat.

My pilot research site/focus group was established after arriving in Thailand. I was based in Chiang Mai due to the needs of my young family and discovered that the participants in a recently established socio-economic rehabilitation program for recovering substance users – Ruam Mit¹⁰ – were predominantly Isan. Funded by the Department of Health International (UK) and the European Community, this non-government organisation (NGO) was operating as a fully functioning bakery with shop front/cafe and supplying numerous commercial outlets and private organisations. Program participants developed vocational skills in all aspects of the business. The Ruam Mit pilot focus group enabled me to continue collecting data between my monthly visits to Khon Kaen and Mahasarakham and provided me with access to a group representing some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised of Isan youth. I sought to find out whether their sense of

⁹ Sahut Hansin. (2000, September 5). Personal communication.

¹⁰ *Ruam Mit* is a Thai term signifying social cohesion among diverse elements resulting in enjoyable moments of friendship, quite similar in a culinary sense to the Thai dessert of the same name that combines diverse ingredients to create a tasty delicacy.

khwampenisan differed markedly from that of their more middle class and socially advantaged peers attending universities in Khon Kaen and Mahasarakham.

It was my intention that these focus groups would provide an opportunity to form rapport with students who might be willing to be interviewed in-depth and who might also allow me to interview their parents and grandparents in their homes. Both of these intentions were fulfilled in the second half of the fieldwork period.

Finding a research assistant

I knew that the research assistant (RA) selected for this project would be crucial to its success. Both from a practical perspective, in terms of organisation, interpreting and translation, and from the ethnographic perspective of this person being available to me as a key informant and conduit to forming sincere and credible relationships with the youth participants in the study. The RA would act as a translator of social and cultural mores, youth jargon, language and popular culture preoccupations.

I informally put the word out to my key academic contacts at KKU and MSU that I was looking for a Lao Isan (bilingual in Lao/Isan and Thai) final-year student or graduand who was proficient in spoken and written English, comfortable with research methods and behaviour (i.e. open to constructive critical discussion), and at ease interviewing fellow Isan from all walks of life. Five KKU English major students came forward to be interviewed. All were competent young people. I felt certain a female RA would be more appropriate as a 'fellow traveller' on my ethnographic journey as we would need to spend a considerable amount of informal as well as formal time together.

I chose 'Bim' – a final-year English major and an experienced interpreter with the American University Alumni (AUA) Language Centre on the KKU campus. Born in Kalasin, Bim grew up with *pasar* Isan as her first language and despite never having experienced an English-speaking environment firsthand, was very fluent in both spoken and written English. She fulfilled all my best expectations – talented, responsible, vibrant, focused, good humoured and loving. She became invaluable to the project and remains a

much valued friend despite the geographic distance between us (her in now living in the USA and me in Australia). I give Bim full credit for creating a comfortable and easy-going space for the focus groups to thrive, slipping effortlessly between my English and sub-standard Thai and the students' *pasar* Isan or Thai. I was a demanding *boss*, constantly milking Bim for her experience, perspective and insights on youth life at KKU campus, her family life and relationships with her peers. She was a willing informant and was very candid with me – an opportunity she appeared to appreciate given the more formal relationships that are the norm between Isan/Thai children and their parents and older relatives. Much of Bim is written into this thesis – a case study of the rituals surrounding her marriage to an American in her hometown of Kalasin is presented in chapter four. I visited Bim's family in Kalasin on several occasions throughout the research period. In April 2002, my family and I spent *Songkran* (Buddhist New Year festival) with Bim and her family in Kalasin and I was able to interview her mother. My family and my father (who lives in Thailand) were guests at Bim's wedding in May 2002.

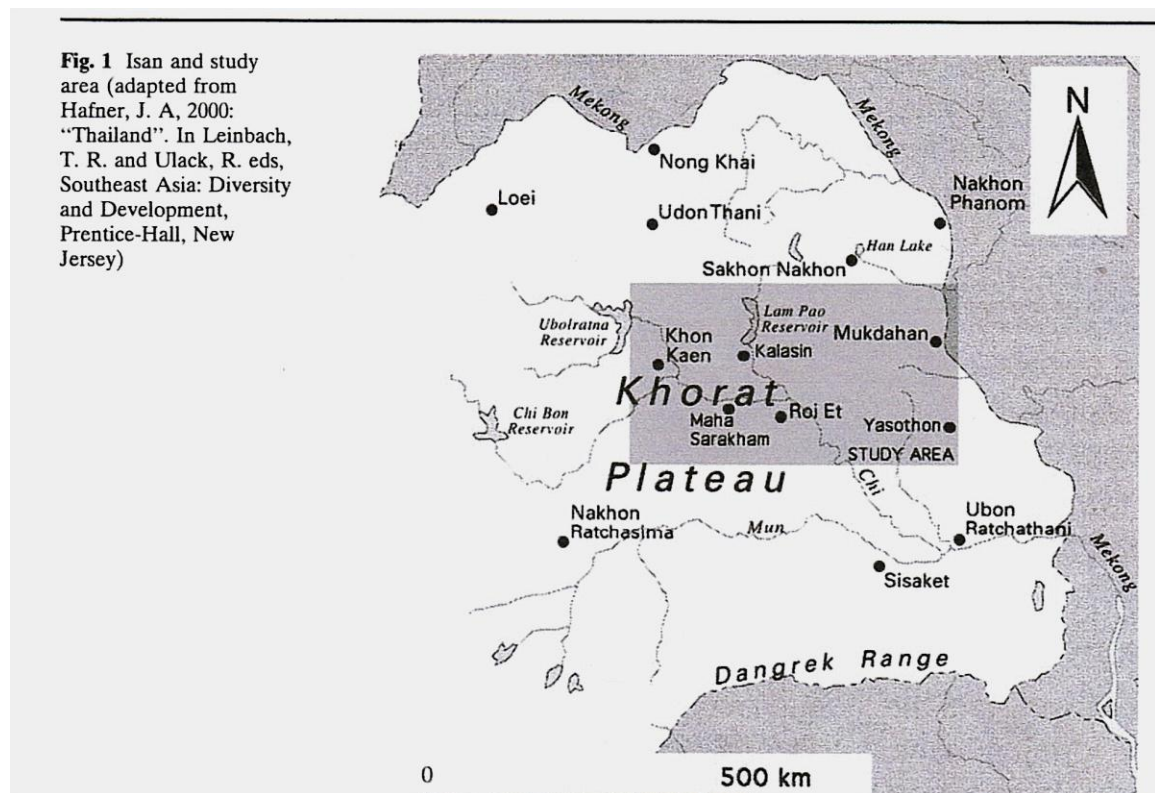
I also required an interpreter for my focus group sessions at the Ruam Mit bakery. 'Ping' was my Thai language instructor at Payap University in Chiang Mai and rather than going through a selection process, I informally approached Ping to see if she would be interested in interpreting for me every few weeks. Ping's role was confined to interpreting at the sessions and the written translations were completed by Bim as my research assistant. Ping was not ethnically Lao Isan; however she spoke *pasar Isan* after spending several years living in Isan while completing her degree at Khon Kaen University. She is a lively and very good humoured woman and for the most part the Ruam Mit trainees were at ease during the discussions.

The data collection process

I investigated personal responses of young people to popular Thai TV programs currently in favour with youth audiences (i.e. soap operas, music and game shows). Processes of identity formation and sense of self were gradually unravelled as participants discussed their own personal stories, class and family backgrounds and life experiences in context with the themes and issues portrayed in the narratives of specific TV programs. Personal

responses to programs opened up broader discussion on identity themes such as lifestyle, relationships, sexuality, beliefs, values and aspirations.

I ran small focus groups of three to five people with students at KKU, MSU and Rajabhat Mahasarakham, as well as one group with four young Lao Isan (former substance users) participating in the Ruam Mit Bakery vocational employment program in Chiang Mai. I conducted in-depth interviews with the focus group participants and their family members, including grandparents. As KKU, MSU and the Rajabhat are regional centres for tertiary and vocational education and training; I was able to capture informants representing provinces throughout the Isan geo-space. The majority of these participants came from the Isan *heartlands* – Khon Kaen, Mahasarakham, Kalasin, Roi Et, Yasothon and Ubon Ratchathani.



We met every month, sometimes twice a month depending on our respective commitments, and watched a program selected by them at the previous focus group session. These were informal gatherings usually at the end of the day. The participants

viewed the sessions as an opportunity to watch their favourite programs and get to know a *farang* (western foreigner) researcher. Many of the students became *friends* and we spent time in social environments eating and chatting. Throughout the research period from September 2001 to October 2002, there were 18 to 20 young people who regularly attended the focus groups and agreed to be interviewed one-to-one. I therefore came to regard these young people as regular participants because of the access they have provided to their families and social networks.

The voices of three of Ruam Mit Bakery participants, Fa, Nai and Jeab, are drawn on regularly in this thesis. Fa and Nai (male, aged 25) are ethnically Lao Isan and speak *pasar* Isan as their first language. Both came from villages in Yasothon province where their parents are generational rice farmers with their own relatively small plots of land. They live in traditional Thai wooden homes with basic facilities. The family economic status is low. Both described seasonal flooding of the rice fields, followed by periods of drought, as major contributors to the ongoing financial difficulties experienced at home. Recovered amphetamine addicts, both these young men were aspiring to build a more stable financial situation through starting small vendor businesses in their home villages. Fa's mother, Mae Noi, appears in chapter five on generational change. Jeab (female, aged 27) was born in the infamous Klong Toey slum of Bangkok. She escaped to Yasothon as a teenage mother with her three young children to recover from drug addiction and domestic violence. She now considers Yasothon her home. She also intended to establish a vending cart business to help support her young single-headed family once her traineeship was complete.

As well as Bim (RA described above), five other female KKU students are regularly heard throughout this narrative. Am and Little (aged 21), are both from urban areas of Ubon Ratchathani. They share culturally *respectable* low-to-middle income circumstances with mothers who are both teachers. Am's father owns an ice cream outlet and Little's father is a police officer. Am is ethnically Lao Isan and Little is part Isan (mother) and part Thai (father). They both speak *pasar* Isan as a first language. Boey (20) is also from a middle-income background in urban Khon Kaen. She is part Thai (mother)

and part Isan (father) and learned Thai and Isan simultaneously from birth. Her parents are both teachers. Eu (22) and Noi (21) share rural village backgrounds with lower-income circumstances. Both are ethnically Lao Isan and native Isan speakers. Eu is from a village area in Khon Kaen province and her parents are rice farmers. Noi is from a village in Loei province and her parents are gardeners and clothing vendors. Perspectives from Bim's mother, Noi, a teacher, are heard in chapter five on generational change.

Three Rajabhat Mahasarakham students are identifiable as regular informants. They all come from lower-income village backgrounds. Goong (female, 20,) and Pui (male, 21) are both ethnically Isan and speak *pasar* Isan as their first language. With parents who are generational rice farmers, from Kalasin and Mahasarakham provinces respectively, their family homes are traditional wooden Thai houses with basic facilities. The voices of Goong's mother, Tin, and Pui's grandmother, Ta, are heard in chapter five on generational change. They identify seasonal flooding and drought as major causes of sustained household poverty. Toto (21) is Phu Thai, an ethnic minority group found in the mountains of Thailand and Laos. While Toto's first language is Phu Thai, he speaks Isan regularly outside his home village. Toto's economic circumstances are modest since his father, a teacher, passed away. His mother is a rice farmer.

Two female MSU students, Jeab and Tui, are also identifiable informants. Jeab (20) is ethnically Phu Thai / Yor (both ethnic minority groups), but grew up in an urban area of Sakhon Nakhon province. Jeab and her parents generally speak *pasar* Isan outside the family home. Jeab's parents earn a modest income as grocers. Tui (20) is ethnically Lao Isan, from Ubon Ratchathani province. She is from a comfortable middle-income background, with both parents in salaried public service jobs. Her father is a postal officer and her mother is a teacher. To understand the constructing of identity and the assumed socio-cultural impact of Thai television and other media, I also talked to members of the Thai academic community, especially those working in mass communications within the Thai context, Isan intellectuals focusing on indigenous studies (*thong thin*), and non-government organisation workers involved in social and community issues in the Isan region. The voice of Ajarn Jaruwat Thammawat, Isan

thong thin specialist and Dean of Humanities and Social Science at Mahasarakham University, is heard on several occasions throughout this thesis.

It is important to note that while data cited in this thesis may be regularly sourced from the specific informants described above; these views are representative and expressive of the general themes emerging from the entire body of analysed data. My data portfolio was not limited to the recorded focus group sessions and in-depth interviews (tabulated in the appendices). As a participant observer, my findings were also based on numerous informal conversations and spontaneous gatherings that are primarily recorded in my field journal and notes. This formed yet another layer of recording, seeing, remembering, noticing and examining my research experience in Isan. The journal was the canvas on which I gathered together my more personal sense of the research journey; it allowed me space to reflect on and cross-examine my role as researcher and tease out new modes of enquiry as new information continually unfolded. Personal email communication, particularly with Thai and Isan academics, was also a regular mode of data collection.

The personal is political

A “mobile comparative project”¹¹ is the way James Clifford (1999) describes how ethnographers cum socio-cultural anthropologists cum cultural/media studies researchers (me) cannot rely on one location as the *home* of their work. Is it the university? Is it the so-called *field*? Is it the travelling in between?

For me, it became even more complex. I had lived in Thailand prior to commencing my fieldwork, during the period of my fieldwork and beyond – some five years. My family lived there with me. My husband worked in his profession as a school teacher in an international school and as a translator. My toddler attended an English language kindergarten with a mixed population of *farang*, *loog krueng* (half Thai/western) and

¹¹ Clifford, J. (1997). *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), p. 77.

Thai children. My second daughter spent her first 18 months living there. As a field journal entry describes:

We have our home in Chiang Mai – not a transient place – all our worldly possessions came with us from Australia, BUT I was not living in Isan. I travel, I travel endlessly – back and forth every month – two homes. I meet anthropologists, Thai-ophiles, who are appalled that I am conducting so-called ethnographic research on Isan identity but don't *live* in Isan. Where do I live? How do we define it? I am the mother of a very young child. Do I drag her on my ethnographic journey? Do I tell my husband to stop his life for the next few years? No, I cannot. We are all our own people within our family microcosm. Our needs extend beyond my needs as a researcher. So do I lack the commitment? Am I a fake? The audience can judge, but I do believe it's possible to cross back and forth and in doing so, I recognise the juxtapositions afresh. Each time the contrast – the slipping in and out – provides me with new perspective, sudden insights. Indeed I am a traveller, a self-confessed traveller with a project.¹²

Running my Chiang Mai focus group with marginalised youth from Yasothon province in Isan, seeing how they suddenly viewed the world as travellers themselves, anchored my project while I was away from the geographic space called Isan. And I did live in the psychological space of the nation state of Thailand. I was exposed daily to its media and popular cultural evolution. In the times away from Isan I could see how much play *Khon Isan* received in the press and other media, how much they figured politically and socially to the rest of Thailand. Closeness and distance provided me with a range of shutter speeds with which to view *khwampenisan* as it exists within, alongside and in conflict with *khwampenthai*. There is:

...a growing awareness of discrepant travel routes – traditions of movement and interconnection not definitively oriented by the “West” and an expanding cultural-economic world system. These routes follow “traditional” and “modern” paths, within and across contemporary transnational and inter-regional circuits. Recognition of these paths makes space for travel (and fieldwork) that does not originate in the metropolises of Euro-America or their outposts. If, as is likely, some form of travel or displacement remains a constituting element in professional fieldwork, reworking the “field” must mean multiplying the range of acceptable routes and practices.¹³

Here Clifford comments on cross-cultural sites of fieldwork – not fixed spaces. My focus group in Chiang Mai consisted of young Lao Isan people (former substance users) participating in an internationally funded NGO vocational training project (run as a fully

¹² Field journal entry, 19 February 2002.

¹³ Clifford, 1997, p. 78.

functioning bakery). The project manager was a Canadian-Syrian woman. Their fellow trainees came from all over Thailand. Their clientele were predominantly *farangs* living in Thailand (ex-pats) or hospitality outlets that cater for Western tourists. Can we call these young participants Isan diaspora? The identity label *diaspora* is applied to people who have spread or been dispersed from their original homeland. Since the 1970s many Isan youth have spent extended periods of time working and living outside their home region, driven by financial necessity to supplement their family's income. I expected to find the majority of young people participating in this study leading or intending to lead predictably diasporic lives. Language choices, when and where to use *pasar* Isan as opposed to *pasar* Thai – as well as the original Isan (Lao) language itself – would be heavily influenced by being ethnic Lao Isan diaspora within their own Thai nation state.

Identifiable limitations and problem areas

The following areas of limitation were identified at the research proposal stage of the project and were ameliorated where practicably possible.

Working through an interpreter

It was important to be actively aware of potential problems associated with filtering and censoring by the interpreter. I believe the long-term and intimate nature of our working relationship engendered a sense of trust and openness. Bim's previous experience as a professional interpreter with AUA (mainly for the US armed forces) meant she was competent at interpreting literally without filtering or subjective interference. If she had suggestions or input within the discussion she would first outline these with me in English and then interpret for the group. After time she was able to read my line of thinking intuitively and the discussions flowed naturally despite the pauses taken up with interpreting.

With Ping there were some issues around her filtering student responses or *re-interpreting* with her own views. These incidents became quite evident in the translated script from the tapes and I was able to discuss the issue with Ping and

thereafter she became more attentive to interpreting fully and accurately. Ping was not as comfortable with discussions that touched on relationships, sexuality or the participants' previous problems with substance use. Although she was easy going, her class background (from a reasonably wealthy and traditional northern Thai family) made her self-conscious of the differences between herself and the Ruam Mit participants with their marginalised backgrounds. She at times appeared to be embarrassed on my behalf.

Awareness of local conditions and distortions

There was a need to recognise and address problems of accessing cultural, social and moral universes, particularly among young people who are often self-conscious. I believe that the long-term nature of my relationship with these young people enabled me to break down barriers. In all cases in the first sessions, participants were keen to impress upon me the nostalgic stereotype of Isan *culture* – a fun-loving, simple and sincere way of life, uncomplicated by the ravages of urban life experienced by central Thais living in Bangkok and other regional centres. These representations of their world/identity quickly fell away as we moved into discussing specific TV programs, and as they became adjusted and comfortable with the focus group format and me, Bim and Ping.

Staying on campus at KKU during my field trips provided access to KKU campus life and sub-culture, most specifically the way the students evolved their own 'youth space' in the KKU satellite city – a small commercial area within the campus where students ate meals at open air, food hall-type restaurants or intimate cafes with internet access. I frequently ate evening meals with student participants in the satellite city or in the main university food hall. Bim introduced me over time to several of her friends. We conversed widely over a range of subjects that impacted on their lives – the use of alcohol and drugs on campus, male/female relations, and their taste in local and international music and celebrities.

Trips to participants' home villages in the provinces of Mahasarakham, Kalasin, Roi Et and Yasothon provided insights into domestic lives and traditional family dynamics as experienced by the youth in my study. On several village field trips where we

interviewed parents and grandparents in their homes, Bim also took me to local festivals and/or musical performances ranging from *morlam* and *lukthung* to karaoke and dance competitions. I spent time observing crowd responses to performances and interactions between young men and women at these events.

Issues of entering the social space of those younger than you

Being able to locate yourself somewhere between the young people being accessed and yourself as an *adult* and researcher is an important consideration.¹⁴ I had grandiosely planned to tackle this issue through engaging the students in processes of learning about ethnographic research that would help them with their own studies and future careers. In the end there was no need to be self-conscious about *assisting* participants to feel comfortable with me. They organically adapted to the format and purpose of the focus groups and ended up interpreting that space for themselves as a *social space*, where they could express opinions and ideas more freely than with the older *ajarn* (teachers) and family members in their lives. Bim's ease and friendship with me rubbed off on the participants. There was a definite discrepancy, however, between the level of ease of the female and male participants. In the KKU groups where all members were female, the atmosphere was feisty and open. In the mixed gender Rajabhat, MSU and Ruam Mit groups, the young women were more reticent about discussing relationships and sexuality in front of their male peers, whereas the young men seemed relatively at ease with these subjects. I did notice that several of the male study participants became more 'polite' or formal with me as my second pregnancy became physically obvious in the final months of the research period. Obviously the pregnancy visually highlighted our age difference and the 'mother' aspect had an impact on them in terms of respect and what they said.

Possibility of being treated with suspicion

Gatekeepers and students at institutions need to be reassured – gatekeepers for tackling established political views on what constitutes Lao Isan identity. My early concerns

¹⁴ Hey, V. (1997). *The Company She Keeps: An Ethnography of Girls' Friendships*. (Buckingham & Philadelphia: Open University Press), pp. 38-39.

regarding this issue proved to be unnecessary. Although some *ajarn* were certainly curious about what I might discover with their students, they seemed happy to allow me to get on with the research without any interference from them whatsoever. My project proposal was assessed and approved by the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT) and each institution was informed in writing of my intentions prior to the commencement of fieldwork. I believe that having fulfilled the requirements of the NRCT process put the academics I worked with at ease about what I was trying to achieve.

Students may experience problems shifting their attention away from me as an *ajarn*-type, representing established hierarchical power, to a point where they feel comfortable talking about personal issues and their own stories. As outlined previously, I believe student apprehension was minimised through: getting to know and trust each other during repeat visits; the participation of a peer (Bim) whom both they and I felt comfortable with; and, to a lesser extent, framing group discussion around popular television as a form of entertainment to enjoy together and a common medium through which to share information, including their enjoyment of developing a more refined sense of media literacy (i.e. understanding how media can manipulate and influence as well as entertain).

Expecting trade-offs

The youths who are willing to take me home to their village may also be those whose economic and social position is higher than their peers. These variables need to be openly acknowledged, and creative, transparent and honest modes of travelling into different worlds investigated. Once again these early concerns did not play out as I expected. Most of the participants seemed enthusiastic about me visiting their homes and interviewing members of their families, regardless of socio-economic background. My one-to-one interviews and home visits included young people from across the focus group sites, including participants in the Ruam Mit Bakery group.

In my project proposal I also raised the possibility of counter-culture resistance in youth and how I might access the covert realm of youth anti-establishment, especially in a society obsessed with hierarchy and pre-determined social space. I suggested that as an outsider and Westerner, I may have a distinct advantage as someone who does not have to report back or adhere to hierarchy. Hey discovered this advantage when she carried out fieldwork into girls' friendships.¹⁵ Marginalisation by school authority figures made her *more* acceptable to her subjects. However, it proved unnecessary for effective data collection and participant observation that I be *marginalised* by authority to gain better access to the worlds of my study participants. It was obvious from the beginning that my work was not being scrutinised by the university hierarchy and that I maintained a fairly neutral position as a Western foreign researcher. Although I am sure there was some filtering going on, especially in terms of personal experiences (rather than general opinion or responses), the participants seemed relatively open about discussing their interests, passions, views, beliefs and aspirations. I often felt they were telling their own stories by projecting those stories as something that happened to 'someone they knew or knew of'.

Ethical responsibilities

The research methodology was informed by the ethical considerations of a) informed consent (receiving consent after informing the subject of your research), b) right to privacy (protecting the identity of the subject), and c) protection from harm (physical, emotional or any other kind)¹⁶. I viewed the research project as a personal, shared, contested and interactive process of discourse reflecting post-modern concern for how social text is produced, where questions of method are *not* secondary to questions of paradigm. Two separate consent forms were developed, one for focus groups and one for personal interviews. Both of these documents were translated into Thai (see Appendices

¹⁵ Hey (1997), p. 47.

¹⁶ Fontana, A. & Frey, J.H. (2000). The Interview: From Structured Questions to Negotiated Text. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Second Edition*. (Thousand Oaks, London & New Delhi: Sage Publications, Inc), p. 662.

E to J). Every focus group participant and interview subject read (or had it explained to them in the case of grandparents not able to read Thai), understood and signed either one or both of these documents before participating in the project. The research proposal for this project was submitted to and approved by the University Ethics Committee for ethics clearance prior to commencement of the project. The project proposal was also approved by National Research Council of Thailand.

THESIS OUTLINE

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. Chapter One outlines the historical backdrop to contemporary issues surrounding identity formation in Isan, including early efforts by the Thai State to assimilate the predominantly ethnic Lao population of the region, and the evolution of mass media in Thailand and subsequent transformations from traditional entertainment patterns to the popular culture formats enjoyed by Khon Isan today. Theories of continual emergence by which my research themes and methodology were framed are also presented.

Chapters Two to Six present the primary ethnographic data of my research divided into significant themes that intersect with each other across the main body of the thesis, to provide the deeper contextual understandings embedded in the material. Chapter Two teases out the broader themes on expression of identity amongst the study group and goes on to examine language preference and how this has become an important symbolic identity signifier for young Lao Isan. Chapter Three describes the viewing options and choices being made by Lao Isan youth and how they respond to Thai programming.

Chapter Four discusses contemporary and co-existing interpretations of Isan identity or *khwampenisan* among Lao Isan youth in relation to gender, self-image and connections with national understandings of physical beauty as they are perpetuated in Thai-produced television programs. Chapter Five on generational shifts explores changing expectations

in relation to family relationships, education, career development, lifestyle choices, spiritual belief and practice, pre-marital relationships, sex and marriage. Chapter Six is a case study of a popular *lakhon* series, *Suer Si Foon* (Dirty Shirts), aired in 2002 at the time my fieldwork was being conducted. The series portrays the lives of migrant labourers from Isan working on construction sites in Bangkok. Language usage, choreography, thematic and script content, actor backgrounds and study participant responses will be explored in terms of how they interplay with unfolding identity formation themes.

In conclusion, chapter seven discusses how the strong feelings of ambivalence Lao Isan youth feel about their identity is being fed on a number of levels whereby external and internal constructions of Isan identity are being communicated by overlapping circles of cultural, social and political discourse. The narratives, personal stories and opinions communicated in this thesis speak to people about the dynamic changes in the way young Lao Isan people view themselves in the world over the space of just one generation. Research findings may contribute to increased understandings of how inflexible projections of Isan identity by key political, social and cultural players in the central Thai state ignore creative processes of cultural change and the huge potential of young Lao Isan to contribute to the development of Thailand.

Chapter One: THE EMERGENCE OF LAO ISAN – STAGES IN IDENTITY FORMATION

I feel sorry for those of you who believe that he or she is a truly 100 % Lao or partially believe that he or she is some what a Lao. Maybe if all you moron out there are more educated, than you would probably know that no such one person is truly what ever he or she is because at sometime, some point, or somewhere we could all be migrating from somewhere and some place.

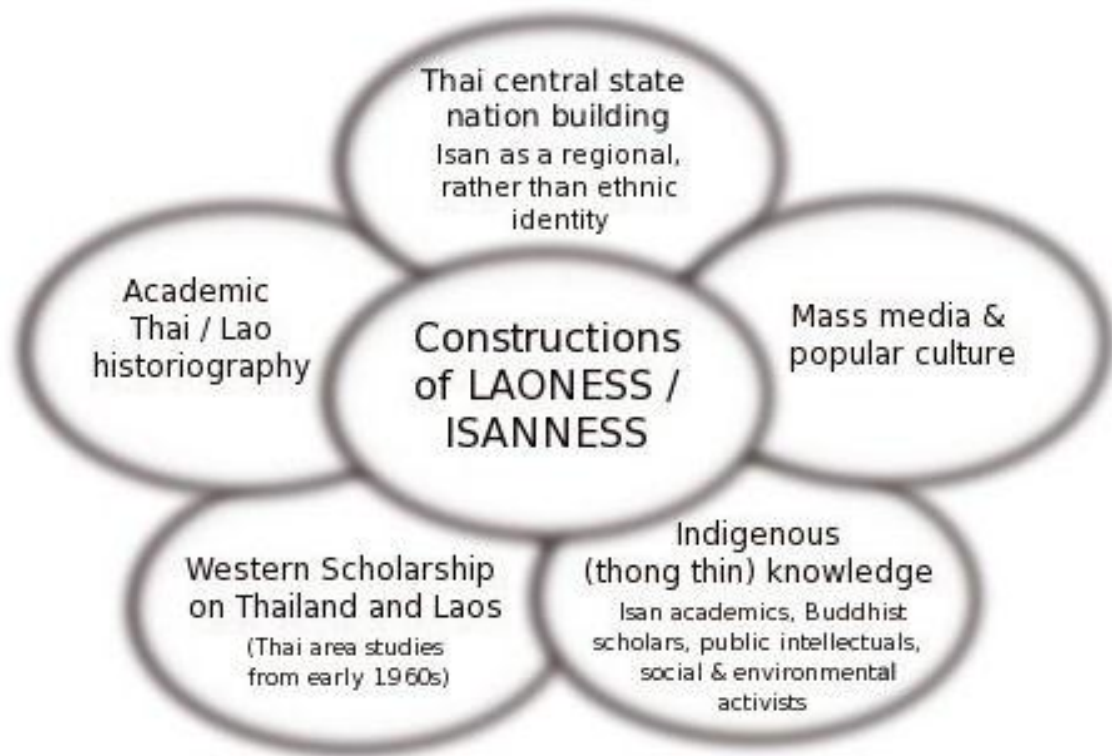
Extract from a posting to the Webmaster, www.vietianetimes.com, 11 June 2000

Northeast Thailand, or Isan, is a geo-political space vibrating with contesting identities. The Pali-Sanskrit meaning of the word *Isan* is northeast and therefore the name itself continually reinforces the geographic, rather than ethnic, identity of the people who are born within the region's borders. While the majority who inhabit Isan are Thai citizens, many identify themselves in multiplicity – selecting Khon Thai, Khon Isan, and Khon Thai Isan etc. – relative to the circumstances they find themselves in. The concept of *khwampen* (being-ness) was consistently used by the youth in my study and by the scholars I interviewed to describe identity – whether it be Lao (*khwampenlao*), Isan (*khwampenis*) or Thai (*khwampenthai*).

Labelling of the self is therefore a dynamic social, cultural and political process. The State may have historically played a pivotal role in generating identity formation discourse based on Isanness rather than Laoness; however, identity is not limited by state policy. It is constructed and played out in a multitude of ways. Some of these identities subscribe to official nation-building discourse on Isan and others do not. Inspired by promoting regional tourism, the Thai State has in recent years projected a nostalgic and simplified image of Isan indigenous identity based on artefacts, festivals and cuisine. The Tourism Authority of Thailand aims to promote “...graceful Northeastern culture under the theme ‘Timeless Thai Elegance’”.¹⁷ While the Thai State would undoubtedly like its Isan populace to express their identity through this sanitized prism, participants in my study playfully and creatively constructed identity in a multitude of forms.

¹⁷ The shining light of Isaan. (2002, July 18). *The Nation*, p. 12A.

Figure 2: Overlapping constructions of Laoness / Isanness



My conceptual framework illustrated at Figure 2 evolved from trying to make sense of the overwhelming mass of information vying for my attention during the Literature Review phase of the project. Trawling through masses of information and attempting to understand the multiple lenses through which this information could be viewed, drove me to clearly identify the multiple, inter-related and overlapping influences on Lao Isan identity creation and then attempt to capture these in a visually comprehensible framework. This framework significantly contributes to new knowledge and ways of studying the complexities of identity formation – being that identity formation is clearly a fluid process with competing and ever-changing influences.¹⁸

¹⁸ I am indebted to James Clifford (1997; 1988; 1986) for his fascinating work on open cultural theory, which undoubtedly permeated my attempts to wrestle the identity beast to the ground. Clifford's ideas are discussed on pages 47-49 of this chapter.

SOME HISTORY: THE CARTOGRAPHY OF IDENTITY

The northeast Isan region¹⁹ of Thailand (also known as the Khorat Plateau) and the lowland areas of Laos share the Mekong River, forming a natural geographical space. Isan is the largest and most populous region in Thailand, comprising almost one-third of the nation's total land area. Of Thailand's population of 67 million, almost half (34.2 million)²⁰ live in the Isan region's 19 provinces. This is substantially more than the number of ethnic Lao currently residing within Laos. An estimated 6.4 million²¹ people live in the nation of Laos – 55 per cent ethnic Lao with the remaining population comprised of diverse ethnic minority groups.²²

Until the French colonisation of Lao territories in the nineteenth century, the history of Lao and Siamese relations can be best described within the *mandala*²³ concept – a waxing and waning of power relations. The appearance of Tai-Lao on the Khorat Plateau may reach as far back as the mid-fourteenth century when the founder of the imperial *mandala* of Lan Xang, Fa Ngum,²⁴ is believed to have extended his influence by resettling Lao families around Vientiane and the northern part of the Khorat Plateau.²⁵ When the French

¹⁹ Also written as Isaan, Issan or Esarn; Thai/ Isan อีสาน

²⁰ National Statistical Office of Thailand. The 2000 Population and Housing Census. From http://web.nso.go.th/en/census/poph/prelim_e.htm

²¹ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2010). *Laos Country Brief*. From http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/laos/laos_brief.html

²² National Statistics Centre (2005). *Laos Population Census*. From http://www.nsc.gov.la/Products/Populationcensus2005/PopulationCensus2005_chapter1.htm

²³ Large power centres or circles of power that extracted tribute from similarly organised smaller ones or *muangs* (Stuart-Fox, M. [1997]. *A History of Laos*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 18-19). Also described as galactic polity or galax, the *mandala* "...is not a measure of control over space, but rather one of control over people" as it reflects power based on merit within the pre-modern Buddhist cosmography (R. Jerndal & J. Rigg. [1998]. "Making space in Laos: constructing a national identity in a 'forgotten' country," *Political Geography*, 17,7, pp. 814-815).

²⁴ Fa Ngum is attributed with founding the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang (A million elephants) in 1353, on which the modern nation-state of Laos lays its official historical claims as a distinct people.

created a modern political space called Laos in 1893 they included the partial Kingdom of Luang Phabang²⁶ and a divided portion of what was once the Kingdom of Champassak; central Laos was made up of a series of small regional *muang*.²⁷ French acceptance of the Mekong River as the frontier of French Laos effectively divided the ethnic Lao population into two unequal populations. It is important to acknowledge that today's population of northern Thailand, particularly the northeast Isan region, were formally recognised as Lao, and only officially placed under the political umbrella of the Siamese state one year before the French claimed control over Laos in 1893.²⁸

Historical *rights* to territorial space were lost with the French version of Laos the nation-state. The Lao *people* have since been challenged with *imagining* their own historical and cultural continuity.²⁹ Mapping the evolution of Lao Isan identity throughout the twentieth century reveals how, as an historical invention, *kwampenlao / kwampenisan* has been masked, contested, revived and ultimately re-imagined. As Lao Isan youth enter the twenty-first century colliding and merging with the colossal forces of kaleidoscopic global space – immediately expressed via Thailand's media empire – one wonders what nascent forms of Laoness will emerge to preserve continuity? There is a culturally essentialist bias in defining self amongst one's localised roots and against travel as a valid

²⁵ Stuart-Fox, M. (1997), pp. 9-10; Keyes, C.F. (1967). *Isan: Regionalism in Northeast Thailand*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, Interim Reports Series no. 10, p. 6.

²⁶ Recent transliteration of the name into English uses the spelling Luang Prabang. However there is no 'r' sound in the Lao language so I have chosen the older English spelling of Luang Phabang, which is phonetically more correct.

²⁷ A broad term, pre-dating the concept of territorial space as a nation-state, encompassing a community, town, city, perhaps even a country – "...that is, an occupied area under the exercise of a governing power but without specification of size, degree of kind of power, or administrative structure" (Thongchai Winichakul [1994]. *Siam Mapped*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, p.49). Stuart-Fox (1997, pp. 18-19) describes *muang* as socio-political principalities or tributaries of larger imperial *mandalas*, with *muang* always having the potential to become the nucleus of a new *mandala*. The term is premised on pre-spatial awareness – it denotes civilised, inhabited space – 'people live here', but the topography and size of that space was irrelevant (Jerndal & Rigg, 1998, p. 816).

²⁸ Grant Evans, (1999). "Introduction: What is Lao Culture and Society?" In G. Evans (Ed.). *Laos: Culture and Society*, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books), p. 21.

²⁹ Evans, G. (1998). *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance. Laos since 1975*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books; Evans 1999; Stuart-Fox, 1997).

mode of identity formation; yet Lao diaspora, as well as ethnic Lao living on each side of the Mekong, enjoy vibrant global identity discourse via a US website cheekily entitled *Vientiane Times* (the name of the state-run English language newspaper in Lao PDR). The research findings presented in this thesis attempt to unravel culturally essentialist constructions of Laoness, Isaness and Thainess as well as challenge the notion that cultural integrity is undermined and subverted by mass media influences.

Appropriation: Learning nation-ness

Heritage for Thailand, especially in connection with the national imaginaire and as a focus for domestic and international consumption, was given its modern form during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910).³⁰

The Lao living in northeast Thailand were subject to a process of *official* cultural homogenisation by the Thai state during the first half of the twentieth century. Charles Keyes observed in 1967 that the vast majority of people living in northeast Thailand, as a result of migration and assimilation, felt themselves to be close cultural relatives of the Lao on the opposite bank of the Mekong.³¹ They were Lao *culturally* but preferred to be part of a strong Thai nation state. Early awareness of membership to the Thai nation state was probably triggered during the process of administrative reform that resulted in centralisation of control during King Chulalongkorn's reign (1868–1910). During this process, indigenous *muang* rulers were replaced by central Thai officials connected directly with Bangkok and northeasterners would have "...experienced for the first time the subordination of local political interests to central Thai objectives".³² This awareness was no doubt heightened with the introduction of centralised education in 1889, followed by the passing of compulsory primary education laws in 1921.³³ Trained secular teachers replaced local monk teachers and the northeast was effectively drawn into a national education program of cultural assimilation whereby students were taught about Thai

³⁰ Reynolds, C.J. (2006). *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press) , p. 266.

³¹ Keyes, C.F. (1967). *Isan: Regionalism in Northeast Thailand*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, Interim Reports Series no. 10, p. 12.

³² *Ibid*, p. 17.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 19.

geography, Thai history and Thai language. Official identity transformation was peppered with the nationalist principles of country, king and religion. Thai government policies since the late 1930s have generally favoured ethnic Thai at the exclusion and subordination of other ethnic groups living within the borders of the new nation state.³⁴ Historian Craig Reynolds designates the two periods of Phibun's military regime from the late 1930s to late 1950s as critical to the evolution of Thai national identity formation. During this period the Phibun regime laid claim to territory in Laos and Cambodia, framing its territorial case on an official directive that declared Vietnamese, Laotians and Khmers living within Thailand's borders shared the same bloodlines as ethnic Thais.³⁵ Early political discourse around shared bloodlines evolved further national discourse describing different ethnic groups as brothers and sisters of Thais.

Collectivism: Regional identity and under-development

Under-development and regionalism have been proposed as ways of explaining Lao Isan identity. Early Isan identity formation was not melded solely via the larger political machinations of an awakening nation state. Arguably, economic and social issues became even more influential to Isan identity during the post-war expansion of the Thai economy. During this period the seeds were planted for the Isan's long-held position as the least-developed region of the nation. Isan regional identity was the result of the dual phenomena of economic under-development and temporary migration of Isan people to Bangkok as cheap unskilled labour. Their inferior social and economic status in this new urban environment triggered feelings of regional collectivism:

From his experience in Bangkok the returned migrant carried home... feelings of class and ethnic discrimination directed towards him as a Northerner by Central Thai inhabitants... and an enhanced awareness of the common culture and problems which all Northerners share.³⁶

³⁴ Reynolds (2006), p. 259.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 260.

³⁶ Keyes (1967), p. 39.

Increased political awareness for Lao Isan occurred during and after the 1941 Thai-French Laos war, which was aimed at reclaiming territories lost to France in the treaties of 1904 and 1907. The outcome of this brief war was the restoration of lands on the right bank of the Mekong River (Sayaboury province and the area around Champassak) to Thailand. The *racial* tone of the war – that the Isan and Lao were ethnically inseparable and belonged together under the Thai national umbrella – reinforced Isan awareness of Bangkok influence over their future lives.³⁷ During Thailand’s alliance with the Japanese during World War 2, several northeastern MPs³⁸ became influential in the movement to free Thailand from the Phibun military government (1938–1944) and its cooperation with Japan. The assassination of a number of influential and respected northeastern politicians during the second Phibun military rule (1948–1957) is often cited as a significant turning point in the Isan people’s sense of political identity.³⁹ These men were eliminated for their support of a Southeast Asia Union. Such support was construed and manipulated by an ultra-nationalist, military-led government that charged these men with involvement in a plot to separate the northeast from the rest of Thailand. These deceased Isan politicians became symbols for growing feelings of resentment toward central Thai administration.

As a postgraduate student in Cornell University’s Southeast Asia Program in the 1960s, Keyes was one of the first *modern* western scholars to explore Isan identity. In *Isan: Regionalism in Northeast Thailand* (1967), Keyes presents an historical account of the evolution of Lao Isan identity in Thailand and proposes a number of significant hypotheses that still hold currency today. Keyes worked within assumptions of cultural essentialism; however, this is understandable given that such beliefs were fundamental to modern theoretical discourse on culture and identity at that time. When Keyes speaks authoritatively about *northeasterners* searching “...for a common identity... within the context of the Thai state”⁴⁰ during the late nineteenth century, he ascribes to a view which

³⁷ Keyes (1967), pp. 27-28.

³⁸ The establishment of Thailand’s constitutional monarchy in 1932 offered provincial leaders their first opportunity to represent themselves in a national forum – the parliament. Keyes (1967, p. 24) suggests that parliamentary representation became a significant factor in establishing Isan identity politics within a national framework.

³⁹ Keyes (1967), pp. 34-35; Jaruwan Thammawat. (2000, December 10). Unpublished interview conducted by Eloise Brown, Australian National University, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Keyes (1967), p. 15.

presumes an already established (western) sense of collective identity. It might instead be argued that as nation state and border were relatively new concepts foisted upon Lao Isan by post-colonial circumstance, collective identity was yet to be imagined. Identity likely became an imaginable concept during the process of administrative reform which resulted in centralisation of control during King Chulalongkorn's reign (1868–1910). Keyes marks the onset of official nationalist identity formation, implemented via centralised state education and administrative reform, as the awakening of Isan regional identity – a process stimulated by the knowledge that the majority of the Isan population shared common cultural ground that was apart from central Thai culture.⁴¹ He argued that during this period (the beginning of the twentieth century), there emerged ambivalence toward central Thai culture as northeasterners realised that their local culture and lifestyles were regarded as inferior by Bangkok elites.⁴²

Keyes also posed the hypothesis that the Lao Isan perceived sense of self-identity was framed within two *conscious models* – one Isan, the other Thai.⁴³ These models were drawn from reverence for the King's position as supreme patron of Thai Buddhism. Such inescapable reverence based on the traditions of merit meant that Lao Isan were interested in moving closer to the King via the bureaucracy or the *Sangha*, and "...the attractions of upward social mobility".⁴⁴ Being Isan within the larger identity of being a Thai national meant that historically Isan regionalism was directed at improving conditions and status for Isan within the nation state and not towards any kind of separatism.⁴⁵ In his later work, Keyes' ideas about Isan identity formation are embedded more firmly in what he terms *ethnoregionalism*.⁴⁶ In an attempt to tone down the loaded political implications of recognising ethnic diversity, the Thai state bound cultural difference within geographical areas. Keyes argues, however, that Lao Isan *acceptance* of their official Khon Isan identity was conditional to expressing ethnoregionalism whereby

⁴¹ Keyes (1967), p. 19.

⁴² Ibid, p. 20.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 60.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp.60-61.

⁴⁶ Keyes, C.F. (1997). Cultural Diversity and National Identity in Thailand. In Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly (Eds.), *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific* (Ch 5, pp. 197-231). (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press), pp.213-214.

“...resources and power were contested by people who saw themselves as disadvantaged by both their cultural difference and their geographical locations relative to the center of the state”.⁴⁷ These more recent ideas were grounded in Keyes’ theoretical position on ethnic change, which he believed was a dialectical process merging cultural essentialist interpretations of ethnicity and social manipulation of ethnicity for specific political, social or economic gain⁴⁸.

Two decades after Keyes’ seminal research into Isan identity, Bangkok journalist Sanitsuda Ekachai profiled the dismal lives of many Isan residents and migrant workers.⁴⁹ While in the 1960s the majority of rural migrants from Isan were male and unattached, labourers in the 1990s were being drawn from both genders and from across ages within the working lifespan. Subsistence farmers in Isan were locked in a cycle of debt due to the low fertility of the land and low crop prices. Labour migration, like drought in the region, had become a regular feature of Isan life. Traditional social values of the Isan people have been popularly captured in the folk saying: “Trouble of not having rice to eat, trouble of not having land to live on, trouble of not having a marriage partner”.⁵⁰ These three basic tenets of survival appear to be as pertinent today as they were several decades ago. While few Lao Isan individuals want to exchange places with their even more materially deprived relatives across the border in Laos, it could be argued that their inferior economic position, relative to the rest of Thailand, has consistently fed constructions of Laoness or Isanness within the region.

Has the nation state been able to deliver to Khon Lao Isan? Have issues of poverty and labour migration strengthened or weakened traditional assumptions about what constitutes Lao Isan identity? The 1997 economic crisis triggered new elements of change with the long-absent middle generation returning to their Isan homes. Just as the

⁴⁷ Keyes (1997), p. 213

⁴⁸ Keyes, C.F. (1981). The Dialectics of Ethnic Change. In C.F. Keyes (Ed.), *Ethnic Change* (Ch 1, pp. 4-30). (Washington: University of Washington Press).

⁴⁹ Sanitsuda Ekachai. (1990). *Behind the Smile: Voices of Thailand*. (Bangkok: The Post Publishing Co. Ltd.)

⁵⁰ Viyouth Chamruspanth, Suwit Theerasasawat & Dararat Mattariganond, (1992). *Summary Report. Social-Cultural Change and Political Development in Thailand, 1950-1990: The Northeast*. (Khon Kaen: Research and Development Institute, Khon Kaen University), p. 53.

Lao living in post-socialist Laos are said to have characterised themselves in terms of their *backwardness*,⁵¹ Lao Isan have come to identify themselves within a framework of ongoing poverty and marginalisation within a larger central Thai context. A 1992 research report on social and cultural change in the northeast by academics at Khon Kaen University contained the comment that “Isarn people have always been regarded by the people of the other regions for [sic] being a fool”.⁵² Some academics in Khon Kaen and Mahasarakham decry the loss of Isan identity among the younger population, the domination of the English language and the homogenising impacts of global communications.⁵³ Is the sense of distinct Lao Isan identity outlined by Keyes in the 1960s finally giving way to national Thai identity, driven as it is by consumer capitalism and its handmaiden mass media communications? Or is it simply being contested yet again by the ongoing maelstrom of political, economic, cultural, economic and social flux?

From scripture to the box: Exposure to mass media

Prior to the advent of mass media communications in Thailand’s northeast, traditional Lao literature played an important social role in reinforcing the continuance of the Buddhist worldview and traditional wisdom, as well as providing a means of popular entertainment. The major body of Lao literature was presented from the *Jataka*, “...life stories of the Boddhisattva taken from the Buddhist scriptures regardless of their content or origin”.⁵⁴ Lao literature was thus inseparable from Buddhism – a medium that both entertained and imparted Buddhist teachings to the people. Lao literature *searchers* provided a crucial role in copying or writing Lao stories onto palm leaves for public consumption. The process of twentieth-century modernisation in Thailand sparked a change in focus from copying and writing for a larger social purpose to analysing traditional Lao literature within the western-style intellectual tradition. This transition not

⁵¹ Grant Evans, 1998, p. 191.

⁵² Viyouth, Suwit & Dararat, 1992, p. 56.

⁵³ Wirat Wongpinunwatana. (2000, September 4). Personal communication; Sahut Hansin. (2000, September 6). Personal communication.

⁵⁴ Koret, P. (1999). “Books of Search: The Invention of Traditional Lao Literature as a Subject of Study”. In G. Evans (Ed.). *Laos: Culture and Society*. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books), p. 227.

only effected “...the evolution of Lao literature but also the evolution of Lao people’s thoughts about their own past”.⁵⁵

There were three key reasons for the decline of the social importance of Lao literature in northeast Thailand. The introduction of centralised education in Thailand meant a decrease in the cultural and political authority of the Buddhist temple at the local level. Secondly, in the early twentieth century the Thai government was particularly concerned with subsuming Isan cultural identity into a larger Thai national identity in order to protect itself against French territorial ambitions and the spectre of Isan separatism. This led to overt suppression of literature and other Isan practices that identified them more closely with their Lao neighbours. Finally, modern technology and the introduction of mass communications such as radio, film and television replaced the role of Lao literature as the main source of entertainment, as well as hastened the spread of Thai and Western culture into the region. The expansion of mass media technology into Isan was rapid. In 1968, 32.1 per cent of households in the region owned radio sets and 0.23 per cent owned televisions. In 1984, radio and television ownership had risen to 73.5 and 15.1 per cent respectively.⁵⁶ In terms of national viewing, in 1994 it was estimated that out of a Thai population of 57 million people, almost 47 million had been watching television since they were six.⁵⁷

Revival and inventiveness: Laoness rocks Thailand

In Thailand today there exist at least two competing processes by which Laoness or Isanness continues to be *constructed*, such as the revival of local or *thong thin* Isan knowledge and popular cultural appropriations of traditional cultural forms. Within the context of democratisation of the Thai state and media liberalisation, those who have lived with their official regional identity are now feeling more confident about expressing aspects of their indigenous or ethnic identity. In short, they are claiming multiple identities for themselves.

⁵⁵ Koret (1999), p. 227.

⁵⁶ Viyouth, Suwit & Dararat, 1992, p. 62.

⁵⁷ *Survey of Mass Media in Thailand*. (1994). (Bangkok: Office of National Statistics, Office of the Prime Minister).

A strong indigenous (*thong thin*) revival of Laoness has evolved in many of the provincial centres within the Isan region. Centres for Isan studies have sprung up within larger tertiary institutions, such as the University of Mahasarakham and the Loei Rajabhat Institute. Local Lao Isan scholars, whose political sensibilities were grounded in the harsh realities of leftist repression during the 1970s, are openly writing about how to maintain Lao cultural integrity in the face of central Thai and Western cultural domination. On the surface, the revival movement appears to cluster around Lao indigenous practices, such as the eating of fish paste and sticky rice, and the preservation of traditional Lao literature. The *thong thin* movement, however, is arguably more about re-politicising the Lao identity issue in the face of growing consumerism and mass media communications. Within this worldview, multiple identities – local, regional, national and global – threaten rather than strengthen *original* identity. Authentic indigenous identity can only be maintained through negative identification with the *other*, even to the point of highlighting Laoness over Isanness. Mahasarakham University *thong thin* specialist Jaruwat Thammawat argues that French and Vietnamese cultural influence and the introduction of socialism has neutered Laoness within Laos: “Now in Laos, Lao culture is fading [but] Laoness is strong in Isan... Lao bloodlines are in Isan”.⁵⁸

Isan studies as a specific stream within Thai studies may have emerged in the 1970s as a way of preserving Lao indigenous knowledge, but today Isanness/Laoness is being actively expressed in the public sphere as way to stake out space for social justice and equity issues, such as sustainable development. While retired Khon Kaen University philosophy and cultural studies academic Udom Buasri⁵⁹ speaks of profound cultural solidarity between Laos and Isan, Mahasarakham University academic Jaruwat Thammawat⁶⁰ speaks of Isan people being more Lao than those in Laos. Jaruwat is regarded by many as the founder of Isan literature studies in Thailand. She believes the military-led repression of Thai leftist students in the 1970s triggered a questioning of Thai-centric knowledge forms leading to regeneration in local studies.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Jaruwat (2000) in Brown, pp. 4-5.

⁵⁹ Udom Buasri (2000, September 4). Personal communication.

⁶⁰ Jaruwat Thammawat, 2000, in Brown, p. 5.

⁶¹ Jaruwat Thammawat (2000) in Brown, p. 2

Jaruwan's trenchant commitment to reviving and promoting local knowledge is closely aligned with the growing social justice movement in Thailand, which in turn is being intimately informed by the spiritual values of the indigenous Thai and Lao Buddhist worldview. This movement takes a blatant stance against what are widely viewed as the key negative effects of western-style development – namely rampant consumerism, environmental degradation, widening urban-rural poverty gaps and the domination of popular culture such as television and pop/rock music. Jaruwan believes *farang* influence has undermined authentic Thai identity forms and stifled the development of a genuine Thai academic discourse: "...people don't have their own identity... People don't look for good in *thong thin*, they don't look for good things in Thai-ness, and they don't look for good things in Eastern-ness. They want to be Western".⁶² She uses this belief as a basis for reclaiming indigenous identity rights: "The cultural battle is an effort to open up my own area, an effort to tell them that there is another group of humans here that are not Bangkok people... It's a battle for honour and respect (*saksri*), for the knowledge of Isan people".⁶³ Jaruwan is now Humanities and Social Sciences Dean at the Mahasarakham University where she is responsible for coordinating *thong thin* studies. Her view is that local knowledge, as a definer of identity, will empower Isan people to participate more fully in their own development and role in larger Thai society:

I think that many Ajarn in Isan take their methods from the elder Ajarn in Mahasarakham [as] the centre for *thong thin* studies... Many of the people in Rajapat at Ubon, Lerei and Sakorn Nakorn, they studied at Sarakham. The Masters in Thai Studies has meant that there are now bank employees who understand culture, policemen understand local culture.⁶⁴

While Jaruwan believes "...most of Isan feel they are Isan more than central Thai",⁶⁵ she playfully appreciates the daily effects of globalisation on Lao Isan identity formation: "I might drive a German car, but I park in front of the Isan restaurant".⁶⁶

In recent research, Somchai Phatharathananunth tackles the politically charged meanings within the term *Isan*:

⁶² Jaruwan Thammawat (2000) in Brown, p. 3

⁶³ Ibid, p. 4.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Personal interview, Mahasarakham University, Mahasarakham, 5 August 2002.

⁶⁶ Personal interview, Mahasarakham University, Mahasarakham, 5 August 2002.

Actually, the word 'isan' has two different meanings. The first meaning, the government usage, indicates the 'Thai-ness' of the region. It argues that although the people who live in Isan are different from the people in the Central Plain, they are Thai ('thai isan'), not Lao. This meaning is now commonly used by educated people and is very popular among the young generation, especially in urban areas, who do not want to identify themselves with the Lao of the underdeveloped region. Another meaning, which is employed by many social activists and progressive farmers, of 'isan' not only implies an ethnic difference between the region and Bangkok, but also the struggle of underprivileged masses.⁶⁷

Other constructions of Laoness or Isanness gravitate around and flow from the process of change. Lao literature has adapted to its audience's changing demands through a modernisation of *morlam* – the musical form of traditional Lao stories. While *morlam* originated with works of Lao literature being acted out to musical accompaniment based on traditional Buddhist chanting styles, it has been increasingly influenced by Thai mass media, and particularly by popular folk-rock music known as *lukthung*.⁶⁸ Entertainment patterns in some Isan villages, however, had dramatically changed by the mid-1980s, from a regular diet of *morlam* to watching Saturday and Sunday night Thai boxing (*Muay Thai*) on TV, followed by gambling sessions on upcoming boxing matches.⁶⁹

Other scholars, concerned with the empowering effects of popular culture, see the emergence of *morlam* formats within popular music as an appropriation of indigenous culture for the regeneration of Lao Isan identity.⁷⁰ In 2000 a number of Isan folk pop vocalists, singing in a combination of *pasar Lao* and central Thai dialects, began playfully referring to northeasterners as Lao rather than Isan.⁷¹ Such direct satire of stereotypical Thai prejudices against the Lao (i.e. as ignorant or stupid) is a new phenomenon, one which highlights the role of popular culture in providing space for emergent identity formation.

⁶⁷ Somchai Phatharathananunth. (2001). *Civil Society in Northeast Thailand: The Struggle of the Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds, United Kingdom, pp. 28-61.

⁶⁸ Koret (1999), p. 230.

⁶⁹ Suwit Theerasasawat & Somsak Srisantisuk, (1986). *The Economic, Political, Social and Cultural Changes in Esarn Villages: A Case Study of Nontabag Village* (Khon Kaen: Research and Development Institute, Khon Kaen University), pp. 250-251.

⁷⁰ Jory, P. (1999). "Political decentralisation and the resurgence of regional identities in Thailand", *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 34 (4), p. 341.

⁷¹ Jory, P. (2001, February 23). Personal communication.

Morlam and derivative styles, such as *morlam cing* (rock)⁷², are now widely broadcast on Thai radio and popular TV music programs. *Morlam* has transformed from folk music rooted in Lao tradition to a commercialised folk-rock phenomenon.⁷³ The cult of personality has attached itself to this genre with *morlam* stars often appearing on Thai TV music shows and their recordings being successfully marketed nationally. My research is set in an environment of increasing competition within the national media marketplace. Competition appears to have driven Thai media operators to create programmes that appeal to ethnic and regional tastes of their audiences, thereby opening up new opportunities for local cultural representation in the media.

Thailand and Thainess (*khwampenthai*)

Established notions of *khwampenthai* are entrenched in conventional Thai historiography⁷⁴ that depicts Thailand as *almost* a victim of western imperialism, thereby justifying any territorial gains over Laos and the subsequent absorption of the Lao of northeast Thailand into the nation state. The Thai state redefined the borders of the northeast Isan region on the basis of geographical rather than ethnic lines, advancing their territorial sovereignty by demonstrating cultural togetherness on the grounds that the Lao were practically a branch of Thai.⁷⁵ Thai exploration of identity has therefore largely been rooted in *proving* historically their central place in the *Tai* world. Much of the identity discourse of the past decade adopts a kind of *in-culture* primordial assumption to social research, whereby an elite Thai worldview is constantly reinforced through static analysis of traditionally-held slices of cultural identity such as Buddhist stories, poetry or folk music. A book of essays entitled *Traditional and Changing Thai World View* first published by Chulalongkorn University in 1985, cites no primary research data and no

⁷² Harking from the mid-1980s, *morlam cing* (literally meaning racing or fast Isan *morlam*/folk singer), refers primarily to a contemporary *morlam* genre involving fast beat rock music, electric instruments, and rock concert style performances targeting youth audiences (Pattana Kitiarsa. 2005. *Farang as Siamese occidentalism*. Working paper series No. 49. Singapore: Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, p. 37).

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 341.

⁷⁴ A number of prominent Thai historians, namely Rong Sayamanonda (1977), Khachorn, Sukhabhanij (1975, 1981) and Tej Bunnag (1966, 1977, 1981) penned colonial histories of Siam during the 1970s, which formed the authoritative base for future works by both Thai and Western scholars, as well as becoming text book references for school children in Thailand. See Thongchai (1994), Ch 8, pp. 140-163) for a detailed analysis of the Thai historiographic-Thai identity continuum.

⁷⁵ Evans (1999), p. 17.

references more recent than 1979. The collection was re-published in 1998 without change. This kind of secondary research uses as its starting point the assumption and the subsequent reinforcement of this assumption of a given Thainess that Thais innately know about and understand.⁷⁶

However there is a growing awareness that Thai-centric preoccupations with the nation's assumed worldview and historical place in the region is impeding research and progressive debate in Thai area studies.⁷⁷ While more conservative academics seek to shut out western knowledge paradigms as undermining Thai scholarly traditions and identity, others are actively engaging in post-modern, globalisation discourse. A growing number of Thai public intellectuals view mass communications as a liberating force for social, political and economic life.⁷⁸ Social thinker Thirayut Bunmi believes that the massive influence of global culture stimulates Thais to assert their local culture and identity.⁷⁹

Thongchai further problematised cultural identity and significantly contributed to Thai area studies with his dissertation research, published in 1994. Referring specifically to Thailand, Thongchai argues that the spatial birth of a nation state, via geographical knowledge and its discourse of mapping, is a defining facet of nationhood – constructing not only a physical space called nation but also perpetuating new cultural assumptions about what constitutes *khwampenthai*. Thainess, he suggests, is a presumed *thing* that binds Thai society together. It is believed to have existed for a long time and provides a

⁷⁶ Amara Pongsapich. (1998). *Traditional and Changing Thai World View*. (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press).

⁷⁷ Chaiwat Satha-Anand. (1998). Problematizing Identity of the Thai Academic Landscape. *Thammasat Review*, 3 (1), 54-63; Charnvit Kasetsiri. (1998). Overview of Research and Studies on Southeast Asia in Thailand: "Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?". *Thammasat Review*, 3 (1), 25-53; Thongchai, 1994; Evans 1998.

⁷⁸ Boonrak Boonyaketmala. (1994). *Thanandorn thi si jak rabop lok thung rat thai* [The Fourth Estate: From the World System to the Thai State]. (Bangkok: Green Frog Publishing); Boonrak, 1999; Chai-anan Samudavanija. (1994). *Kanplianplaeng kap khwamru nai yuk lokkanuwat* [Knowledge and Change in the Age of Globalisation]. Bangkok: Manager Publications; Thirayut, 1993 & 1994 in Reynolds, C. (1998). Globalisation and cultural nationalism in modern Thailand. In JS. Kahn (Ed.), *Southeast Asian Identities, Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand* (Ch 5, pp. 115-145). (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies).

⁷⁹ 1994 in Reynolds, 1998, p. 129.

virtuous focus for living as a Thai.⁸⁰ This belief presumes that the monarchy selectively adopted only good things from the West while preserving indigenous knowledge and values. Although what actually constitutes these good things from the West has never been clearly defined. Likewise, exactly what aspects of Thai culture should be preserved is similarly vague because “...the definition of Thainess has been discursively defined and claimed by the authorities of diverse ideological camps”.⁸¹ Pertinent to this thesis on Lao Isan identity, which acknowledges that the process of identifying and translating cultural identity is by its discursive nature a wholly subjective enterprise, is how imagined realities transmitted via popular Thai television are being consumed and re-imagined by Lao Isan youth.

Thongchai is concerned with the idea of *negative identification* whereby populations generate their nation-ness not so much by defining characteristics that connect them but by identifying those that do not.⁸² So while Thainess is never clearly defined, it is assumed that every Thai is aware of its existence. It is left to identifying what is un-Thai that helps denote Thainess. This notion of otherness is usually broad and non-specific – simply belonging to another nation places these citizens outside the realms of Thainess, however loose the category. For example, the well-known word *farang* is now used so broadly as to be rendered almost useless as a classifier – it refers to all Western people without any regard for nationality, culture, ethnicity or language – in much the same way the word *Asian* is ambivalently bandied around by Westerners. It is within the theoretical context of negative identification that I explore the way Thai media imagines otherness within its own nation. Are the Lao of northeast Thailand, Khon Isan by *nature* and Thai citizens by default? How do they fit into a Thai-centric framework of identity? Do Lao Isan youth imagine themselves as Thai nationals first and ethnically Lao second? Some western scholars seem to believe so. In her 2003 doctoral dissertation on the meanings of sex for students in northeast Thailand, Pamela DaGrossa wrote that:

⁸⁰ Thongchai (1994).

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 4.

⁸² Thongchai (1995), p. 5

Although Isaners are descendants of Lao and the area where they live was part of the Lao kingdom, they are now Thai and currently identify with Siamese history. Their relationship to the Lao culture is somewhat limited to language, the arts, and religion.⁸³

My research findings undermine such absolute statements on Isan identity formation – one of the key findings being how Lao Isan youth express strong attachment to their first language of Lao (or *pasar Isan*) and attribute this attachment to much of their personal and public sense of *kwampenisan*. The idea that Laoness can be *limited to language* is superficial and absurd. Language – the code by which we express ourselves – is surely fundamental to our sense of identity because it is the very mode by which we perceive and interact with the world. These findings are discussed in Chapter Three.

Lao Isan youth involved in my study daily meld their lives around complex and layered social rites that fuse local, national and international messages into a collage of cross-identification. They might tune into MTV in the morning before lectures, drink cappuccinos at university cafés in the afternoon and then go off to practice the traditional three-string *pin* (guitar) for an upcoming *morlam* performance. Their image perceptions – their identity collages – are loaded with ambivalence and contradictions. One of these contradictions is the way young Lao Isan men and women define and assign beauty, and how their relationship to the television they watch is contributing to these definitions. This theme is discussed in chapter four.

⁸³ DaGrossa, P.S. (2003). *The Meanings of Sex: University Students in Northeast Thailand*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii, p. 44.

THEORIES OF CONTINUAL EMERGENCE

My primary goal is to open space for cultural futures, for the recognition of emergence.

*James Clifford, 1988.*⁸⁴

Attempts to map the identity formation of Lao Isan youth is as much about understanding how identity has been imagined and constructed by numerous *others*, as it is about unravelling these young people's perceived notions of their own identity. To this end, the most influential theoretical paradigm within which to explore identity issues and popular culture is post-modern discourse on culture, identity, nation-state and ethnicity. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* attempted to unsettle the complacency of cultural essentialism by deconstructing accepted hegemonic discourse on cultural identity within the nation state and challenging traditional theories of ethnicity and nationalism, where identity was seen as flowing directly from an already existing culture.⁸⁵

The ideas developed by Benedict Anderson, James Clifford and Thongchai Winichakul have all significantly contributed to problematising traditional cultural identity theory.⁸⁶ Ethnographic consideration of identity is inevitably "...mixed, relational and inventive".⁸⁷ There is nothing apocalyptic about ridding ourselves of pre-supposed continuous culture and traditions because this continuity is as *imagined* as new ways of seeing ourselves. In short, the ways in which communities unavoidably brush up against each other leave us in a constant state of cultural flux.

Clifford connects history, literature and ethnography to contest prevailing narratives of identity with the aim of displacing "...any transcendent regime of authenticity".⁸⁸ By moving between local and global perspectives he argues that preserving ethnic identity is

⁸⁴ Clifford, J. (1988). *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), pp. 15-16.

⁸⁵ Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities*. (London & New York: Verso).

⁸⁶ Clifford, J. (1997). *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press); James Clifford, (1988); James Clifford, (1986). "Introduction: Partial Truths", in J. Clifford & G.E. Marcus (Eds.) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. (California & England: University of California Press), Ch 1, pp. 1-26; Thongchai (1994).

⁸⁷ Clifford (1988), p. 10.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 10.

not about “...archaic survival but [is] an ongoing process, politically contested and historically unfinished”.⁸⁹ In the ambiguity of emergent culture creative and flexible theoretical frameworks play a crucial role: “There is no master narrative that can reconcile the tragic and comic plots of global cultural history”.⁹⁰ If we, as academics and public intellectuals, are to contribute to the creative process of our own cultural futures then it is our responsibility to playfully open up narratives rather than dogmatically codify ourselves and our neighbours into cynical corners, where bleak loss of tradition dominates over the celebration of new cultural fusions and ways of being.

This new paradigm of open cultural space has yet to be embraced within official constructions of Isanness, Laoness and Thainess and their inevitable connected-ness. With discourse of borders and nation state identity – based on divine pre-existing culture – the cultural, political and intellectual elites within the neighbouring nations of Laos and Thailand have been preoccupied with their respective glorified pasts, ironically spinning essentialist historical narratives that heavily borrow from traditional western meta-narrative on fixed cultural space. For example, Lao scholars Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn draw on the past in minute detail as a weapon of identity.⁹¹ Perhaps this preoccupation with historical and cultural *truths* is what lies behind the reported *ennui* of academic pursuit in Thailand, where Thai area studies are seen as floundering in Thai-centric preoccupations that ignore diversity and paradigmatic interconnections.⁹² Thai academia undoubtedly contributes one of the influential voices that constructs and manipulates Isanness or Laoness on behalf of Lao Isan people.

⁸⁹ Clifford (1988), p. 9.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p.15.

⁹¹ Mayoury & Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, (1994). *Kith and Kin Politics: The Relationship between Laos and Thailand*. (Manila: Journal of Contemporary Asia Publishers).

⁹² These scholars include: Charnvit Kasetsiri, (1998). “Overview of Research and Studies on Southeast Asia in Thailand: ‘Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?’” *Thammasat Review*, 3 (1), 25-53; Chaiwat Satha-Anand, (1998). “Problematizing Identity of the Thai Academic Landscape”. *Thammasat Review*, 3 (1), 54-63; Thongchai Winichakul, (1994). *Siam Mapped. A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books); Grant Evans, (1998). *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance. Laos since 1975*. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books).

Thongchai Winichakul's unique 1994 study focuses on *geobody* as the defining facet of nation-hood. Geobody encompasses not only the spatial territory of a nation but its values and practices. He describes the collective process of mapping as a means of creating nationhood spatially and in turn, generating social institutions and practices to accommodate and perpetuate this new sense of nation *space*.⁹³ Thongchai uses this premise to challenge the metaphysical notion of Thainess, which assumes a *natural* position in the psyche of a nation. Maps defining borders and topography are concrete yet they are also culturally constructed by a certain kind of knowledge and technology – "...the geobody of a nation is a man-made territorial definition which creates effects – by classifying, communicating, and enforcement – on people, things, and relationships".⁹⁴ This theoretical position holds great currency for my research where Laoness/ Isanness is explored through the viewfinder of how Lao Isan youth experience Thainess in its most popular form – television.

Sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropology – new approaches to language and gender studies

The development of new approaches to sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological study of social issues is relevant to this identity formation study, particularly studies of the relationship between language, gender and political economy. Rudolf Gaudio (2007) explores ideologies of gender and language in Northern Nigeria's new public sphere after the government there introduced Islamic Shari'a law in 2000. His discussion of what constitutes 'the public' and the 'public sphere' stimulates pertinent conceptual questions around power relations of language appropriation and ethnicity discourse in the Thai public sphere. Gaudio and others⁹⁵ consider that the public is constructed and legitimised on the basis of the dominant language/s. Publics are language-based through the use of language (i.e. discourse), and this discourse is:

⁹³ Thongchai, 1994, p. 16.

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 17.

⁹⁵ Gal, S. & Woolard, K. (1995). Constructing language and publics: authority and representation. *Pragmatics* 5 (2), 129-138.

...informed and constrained by ideologies of language, which vary across time and space: What language varieties are deemed valid for public discourse? Who is authorized to learn and use those varieties? Who is granted access to the forums (physical and virtual) in which such discourse takes place?⁹⁶

Pasar Isan (Lao) has largely been a language tolerated at the local level – in the geo-space of the Isan region – but excluded from the national Thai public space. If *pasar* Thai is the language of the public sphere, it is then the language by which “...power and resources are allocated within (the) nation state”.⁹⁷ Binh Nguyen (2007) in a case study of gender and multilingualism in a politically and economically changed post-war Vietnam, further elaborates on the intimate relationship between language and power within nation states:

In most multilingual communities, we can find a language (or languages) which is associated with political and/or economic power through the legitimation of its political status as national language, official language, administrative language, the language of education and so on.⁹⁸

What space then do Khon Isan occupy within the larger Thai polity? One of the main aims of this research project was to tease out how Lao Isan youth locate themselves in Thai public space and to identify the mechanisms and discourse they employ to simultaneously own and integrate their distinct Lao Isan ethnicity and language within the Thai national sphere. Is ethno-regionalism, previously a dirty concept to the Bangkok political and cultural élite, beginning to find a publicly palatable identity space via the growing enjoyment of wider Thai audiences of popular entertainment genres (music, television and film) that feature *pasar* Isan, as well as Isan performers, actors and characters? Or is this further embedding Isan identity stereotypes in the national Thai consciousness?

⁹⁶ Gaudio, R.P. (2007). Out on video: Gender, language and new public spheres in Islamic Northern Nigeria. In B.S. McElhinny (Ed). *Words, Worlds and Material Girls: Language, Gender, Globalization* (237-283). (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter) p. 240.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 239

⁹⁸ Nguyen, B. (2007). Gender, multilingualism and the American War in Vietnam. In B.S. McElhinny (Ed). *Words, Worlds and Material Girls: Language, Gender, Globalization* (349-367). (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter). P. 349.

Monica Heller (2007), in a study on gender and bilingualism in the new economy of francophone Canada, attempts to focus on language "...as an index or emblem of ethnicity, and language as a valuable resource in and of itself".⁹⁹ She describes how "...discursive elements get taken up, circulated, appropriated, modified, recast and cast aside over time and social space".¹⁰⁰ My study is engaged with gaining better understandings of the linkages and inter-relationships between discursive process and Lao Isan identity formation. Questions around appropriation, recirculation and realignment of discursively manufactured Isan Lao public identity markers, not least language itself, are central to this discussion.

Globalisation and post-nationalism

New kinds of post-national identity politics at the global level suggest that the importance of the nation state may be receding in our collective imagination. Increasingly people are negotiating cultural identity across borders rather than from localised cultural or national groups. The link between emergent post-nationalist analysis, accelerated communication technology development, global economics and development politics is being avidly debated.¹⁰¹ The role of mass media and new forms of communications are fundamental to these new ways of seeing. The post-modernisation of identities has been rooted in the global communications and commodities revolution. It will be important in the ensuing discussion to examine aspects of *global* penetration on Lao Isan identity formation; however as anthropologist Mary Bucholtz (2007) points out in her study of youth consumption and branding in a US high school, "...even the most large-scale of social, political and economic forces can only take shape within local interactional contexts."¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Heller, M. (2007). Gender and bilingualism in the new economy. In B.S. McElhinny (Ed). *Words, Worlds and Material Girls: Language, Gender, Globalization* (287-304). (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter) p. 287.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 288

¹⁰¹ Interesting work on post-nationalism and globalism includes that by Arjun Appadurai, (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; and, (1990). "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy". *Public Culture*, 2 (2), pp.1-24.

¹⁰² Bucholtz, M. (2007). Shop talk: Branding, consumption, and gender in American middle-class youth interaction., In B.S. McElhinny (Ed). *Words, Worlds and Material Girls: Language, Gender, Globalization* (371-402). (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter), p. 395.

While one should not over-dramatise the implications of the new global culture, what can now be explored is the way contemporary cultural movements employ new communications and commodities in the formation of their cultural selves.

Post-modern media theory

This project is one of the first set in the Southeast Asian region to examine the role of mass media communications internally – that is, from one nation state to a specific resident ethnic group. It would be easy to get caught up in ubiquitous discourse on cultural imperialism (via Thai mass media) and the wicked spread of globalism. While theories that frame media and cultural studies discourse within the rapid spread of global economy and communications technology can provide interesting conceptual angles with which to explore identity formation, it is important not to *assume* that global interaction will inevitably and finitely absorb diverse Asian identities into one homogenous mass. The cultural imperialism thesis of foreign media programs (mostly western) threatening indigenous cultures is being strongly contested by recent research and thinking on *open cultural space* – the unfinished canvas of identity formation that can appropriate within a specific cultural context. Audiences can construct very different meanings when they consume foreign television programs and while they may be changed by what they see, they are not passive recipients in a process of cultural domination.¹⁰³

Theoretical position

The theoretical approaches discussed above are unequivocal about the discursive nature of identity politics. Cultural identity is imaginary in the sense that it stems from discourse – our discussions of ourselves. Identity is spun out of concrete and historical processes, but it is the *conversations* we have amongst ourselves in an attempt to understand these

¹⁰³ Chan, J.M., & Ma, E.K.Y. (1998). Asian Television: Global Trends and Local Processes. In A. Goonasekera & D. Holaday (Eds.), *1998 Asian Communication Handbook* (pp. 199-207). (Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre & School of Communication Studies, Nanyang Technological University).

processes, including those spun about us by media, politics and power, that inevitably shape mainstream public consciousness of global, national, ethnic, regional or local identity. Conversations mostly communicated by the politically elite and by those self-appointed observers of cultural change – intellectuals, academics and the media – beg the question: who is creating whom and in what ways?

This scepticism runs throughout most contemporary literature concerned with the theory of culture, identity, nation state and ethnicity. Defying the *assumed* has become the launching pad for analysis, if not the *raison d'être* for studies. The contemporary scholar of culture and identity formation is terrified, it seems, of becoming as ensnared in the cultural processes of observation as the elite bearers of identity within that observed culture. Essentialist constructions of identity may unintentionally misrepresent issues and peoples, but at the same time the endless pursuit to deconstruct these representations can be reductionist and self-eliminating. We may be re-envisaging the world using deeply compromised labels such as culture and identity, but at the same time we need language of theoretical analysis to offer any sort of coherency to research.

An ongoing questioning of cultural assumption and an acknowledgment of overlapping layers of identity is crucial to identity research. Some *labels* are required to communicate ideas coherently. This research is premised on the assumed existence of Lao ethnicity, the key marker of which is spoken Lao (termed *pasar Isan* by the Thai state), seconded by inhabitation within a loose geographical space embracing the northeast region of Thailand and lowland Laos. The research on which this thesis is based is primarily concerned with how this perceived sense of *Laoness or Isanness* is being expressed, informed, contested and transformed through exposure to Thailand's mass media, specifically popular television.

In the same way decisions needed to be made about using certain labels to ensure consistency and coherency, the elements of identity formation being described will not always be overtly identified within the narrative as exclusively discursive or exclusively essentialist. One of the conceptual underpinnings of my discussion is that identity

formation is a two way process where external constructions (perceived as essentialist) and self-perceptions (perceived as discursive) are in constant conversation with each other. Elements within our reality generated through a discursive process can at times be described in essentialist terms because the impact they have on us is perceived as 'real'. This should not in any way interfere with the readers' overall thematic understanding, established at the outset, that one of the principle conceptual arguments embedded in this thesis is that identity formation is essentially a discursive process.

Chapter Two: EXPRESSING IDENTITY – “I CAN BE TWO CHARACTERS”

In Khon Kaen we don't think we're Lao. Sometimes we don't know where we first came from. We are Isan but other people call us Lao. In Ubon they can trace themselves back across the border – they say they are Lao.

Khon Kaen University graduate, 13 July 2001

I was born in Ubon but went to school in Bangkok. I *am* Isan although I'm not quite sure what that means to me any more. I can be two characters – one urban, one rural – because my parents insisted on me staying in touch with my Isan roots as a child. I can function in both worlds.

Third-year student, Khon Kaen University, 12 September 2000

In recent Thai history, perceptions of Isan identity within mainstream Thai culture and society have gravitated around stereotypes of Laoness, such as how Isan people look and what their dietary habits are. These mainstream perceptions are also fed by notions of the region's underdeveloped status and associated images of poverty – Khon Isan's menial position in the labour market, lack of education and ignorance. In Thai television production, the Isan character is commonly portrayed as a poor farmer, prostitute, taxi driver, servant or labourer. Lao Isan identity is historically grounded in the region's position as politically subordinate and economically marginalised. Mary Mills, in her study (carried out in 1989–1990) of migrants, modernity and identity in the Isan province of Mahasarakham, found that the manner and discourse of those invested with political and economic power (public servants, merchants etc) was heavily imbued with negative and condescending messages based on their perceived sense of the inferiority of Khon Isan.¹⁰⁴ Within wider Thai society, Lao Isan people are often lampooned as ignorant, superstitious, drunken and uncivilised. In other words they appear to be forever firmly embedded in the minds of urban Thai as folk of *samai kon* (tradition). My research findings indicate that these stereotypical identity constructions tend to mask the dynamic social changes in the Isan region. One university student cited the attitude of her friend's parents from Bangkok, who were worried that their daughter's health might be at risk

¹⁰⁴ Mills, M.E. (1993). “*We are not like our mothers*”: *Migrants, Modernity and Identity in Northeast Thailand*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, USA, p.43.

studying at Khon Kaen University because they believed the Isan region was so primitive: “Their image of Khon Kaen was like a very distant and drought province. There is nothing to eat, only frog [sic], no seafood”.¹⁰⁵

Thongchai’s theory of identity construction based on negative identification, as discussed in the previous chapter, is very much at play in the construction of Isan identity within public Thai discourse. Isanness is defined *against* the dominant backdrop of what is presumed to constitute central Thainess – a modern, progressive, media and technological savvy, middle and upper class elite whose identity gravitates around the pumping sprawling metropolis of Bangkok. The public rhetoric and imagery generated by state officials and central Thai media pits modernity against apparent Isan poverty and traditional rural lifestyles, and sycophantically assumes that Khon Isan are incapable of embracing *samai mai* or new times. In her study of Isan women's health, Andrea Whittaker argues that this ethnicity discourse creates a serious power imbalance between Thai citizens who occupy a publicly acceptable place within mainstream central Thai identity construction and those who sit outside of this artificial construction, because such arbitrary discourse provides the basis “...by which the nation-state assigns resources and the ways in which people are categorized and treated by members of the dominant group”.¹⁰⁶

While poverty continues to persist in rural areas, as in the other regions of Thailand, urban centres like Khon Kaen and Ubon Ratchathani are thriving regional communities with access to the same kind of infrastructure, services, commodities, technology and tertiary educational centres that are available in Bangkok. How do identity constructions of Khon Isan actually influence the way young Lao Isan people feel about their own identity, given the dynamic changes that have occurred within the region within the span of just one generation? Identity construction does not, however, flow in one direction and discourse on identity in Isan is fed not only by the perceptions of *others* living outside the region, but by how Isan people respond to the perceptions of people in central Thailand,

¹⁰⁵ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 16 January 2002.

¹⁰⁶ Whittaker, A. (2000). *Intimate Knowledge: Women and their health in North-East Thailand*. (St Leonards, Australia: Allen and Unwin), p 4.

particularly to *Khon Krungthep* (Bangkokians). Following is a discussion between students when asked:

- Catherine: What do you think is the attitude of people in Krungthep [Bangkok], Khon Krungthep, towards the Isan region and Isan people?
- Student: They probably think we are lower than them.
- S: Sometimes it's like they insult us.
- S: They think we are lazy, no hospitality. When they know us, they know they are wrong. When they depict us on TV they see us in a funny, clumsy way. And they present us in dramas although they...
- S: They don't know us at all.
- S: Yes
- S: They think we are stupid, silly.¹⁰⁷

This sense of how outsiders, especially those from the metropolis, tend to view them in a derogatory or unflattering way prompted several young people to confess embarrassment at being Isan when in Bangkok or other regions of Thailand, yet there was also general ambivalence and confusion about identity labelling. Research by Duncan McCargo and Krisadawan Hongladarom supports the idea that while identity discourse in Isan exists in a constant state of flux, "...*isan-ness* is not an empty signifier...it is a politically charged term with plural voices."¹⁰⁸ Many participants at first expressed ambivalence about *being* anything in particular, but subsequently provided numerous and often contradictory analyses of whom they think they are. They had great difficulty in defining what Isan actually meant to them. When they did explain *khwampenisan* it was usually in terms of Isan-pride stereotypes, such as living a simple life, being in touch with nature, and being community-minded, helpful and generous – stereotypes that served to reinforce dominant central Thai ethnicity discourse:

- Student 1: Khon Isan are simple and care for their families.
- Student 2: Khon Isan's characteristics are caring, generous and fun.
- Student 3: Khon Isan are accommodating wherever you go. Khon Isan are kind and like to smile.¹⁰⁹

When challenged about these stereotypes, however, they usually admitted that these qualities were not necessarily *Isan* but perhaps more to do with rural-urban dichotomies. Interestingly, this self-perception of rural-versus-urban appears to have remained

¹⁰⁷ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 28 November 2001.

¹⁰⁸ McCargo D. & Krisadawan Hongladarom. (2004). Contesting Isan-ness: Discourses of Politics and Identity in the Northeast. *Asian Ethnicity*, 5 (2), p. 231.

¹⁰⁹ Youth focus group, Rajabhat Mahasarakham, Mahasarakham, 15 January 2002.

entrenched since Mills' study more than a decade ago, when she discovered that Lao Isan people, particularly in village settings, were contemptuous of their urban compatriots whom they viewed as cold, impersonal, self-centred and materialistic. Khon Isan, on the other hand, were kind, neighbourly, hospitable and always willing to help one another. Mills reported that people from the same village considered themselves *family* (*yaat phi nong kan*).¹¹⁰

Many Isan youth were at first reluctant to call themselves Lao but once they became comfortable with me they often referred to themselves as Lao. Study participants often also subscribed to the idea of the Lao across the Mekong being kindred cultural spirits. This was not an abstract notion as they often had direct contact and developed friendships with Lao students who came across the border study at Khon Kaen University:

Catherine: How do you see your relationship with the Lao-speaking people of Prathet Lao?

Bim: I really feel that we are brothers and sisters. I've met many Lao students who came to my university and I feel really close to them. I don't feel like they are from another country. The people are very polite and gentle. There's one [exchange] student who has been studying with us for four years.¹¹¹

MAPPING THE HEART OF ISAN

The young people in my study often attempted to define the cultural boundaries of *khwampenisan* by referring to *hua jai khong Isan* (the heart of Isan).¹¹² This heart was usually the central provinces of the Isan region – Khon Kaen, Kalasin, Roi Et and Yasothon – those provinces that are popularly identified across Thailand with specific traditional practices and festivals. During in-depth interviewing with individual focus group participants, the majority described the heart of Isan in terms of traditional or indigenous (*thong thin*) identity, particularly those students from more remote villages,

¹¹⁰ Mills (1993). p. 44.

¹¹¹ Personal interview, Bim, KKU student, Kalasin, 18 April 2002.

¹¹² The heart of Isan can also be *soon klang khong Isan* or *hua jai khong pahk Isan* and *soon klang khong pahk Isan* (*hua jai* is 'heart', *soon klang* is 'centre', *khong* means 'of', and *pahk Isan* means 'Isan region').

such as MSU student, Jeab, as well as the older parent and grandparent generations interviewed:

Jeab: Yasothon and Roi Et are the heart of Isan. They have remarkable traditions. Yasothon has Boon Bang Fai (annual Rocket Festival). Roi Et has the genuine Isan accent – the old Isan that hasn't been influenced, unlike in other provinces.¹¹³

Others felt that authentic Isanness was stronger the closer you were to the border with Laos and became diluted as you moved away from Laos, particularly in relation to the usage of *pasar* Isan (Lao):

Bim: Like we are Isan and we have Isan culture and we don't mix our culture with others. It's like Ubon Ratchathani is right on the border with Prathet Lao so yeah they have *khwampenlao*, *khwampenisan*... more *khwampenlao*, but the provinces that are further away from Prathet Lao they have mixed with some Thai cultures... And also the people that live next to Cambodia they are less Isan than the people who live in the centre.

Catherine: So you're saying as you move away from Laos, the Isanness or *khwampenisan* becomes less *khwampenisan* because of mixing with other cultures?

B: I think the language too because if you move close to the centre of Thailand you need to speak more Thai. It's funny because we always hear that Ubon people are so hard – the tone, their accent.

C: It's hard – as in 'strong'.

B: Very strong. I guess it's because they are close to Prathet Lao and in the provinces further away it gets softer.¹¹⁴

Whilst *hua jai khong Isan* was an attempt to geographically locate Isan authenticity, the characteristics they used to choose *the heart* were more about their personal emotional sense of what constitutes Isan identity. These feelings tended to be sentimental, defined by stereotypical notions of indigenous Isan identity and stories passed on by older generations. They were also often strongly imbedded in the idea of an intrinsic *Isan character*: “Khon Isan are open, straight forward and sincere. Sometimes they look so upright, and others (non-Isan) might see that ...[as] awkward or dorky. The truth is they are very sincere”.¹¹⁵ These feelings about what lies at the *heart* of Isan identity fluctuated

¹¹³ Personal interview, Jeab, MSU student, Mahasarakham, 2 October 2002.

¹¹⁴ Personal interview, Bim, KKU student, Kalasin, 18 April 2002.

¹¹⁵ Personal interview, Am, KKU student, Khon Kaen University, 30 September 2002.

and contradicted themselves, often within the space of one interview, as these young people grappled with their true responses to the external constructions of identity being imposed on them daily. Bim, in the quote above, firstly emphasises geographical proximity to Laos and *pasar* Lao as a prime signifier of Isan authenticity, but later says:

- Bim: Actually I really don't care about the region. I mean if people live in the Isan area for a long time and they can speak Isan, and they can call themselves Khon Isan, then they are Khon Isan. Like Goong's father, I think he is Khon Isan too, but deep down inside I feel that he's Khmer, he's not Khon Isan.
- Catherine: So what would you call those different people – you would give them a double name, like I think Goong's mother said "Khmer Isan" and Fa's mother called herself quite quickly, very decisively, she said "Lao Isan"? So in your mind with other ethnic groups how would you talk about them, like if you met Goong's father somewhere and you were telling your friends you met this man, would you say Khon Isan or Khon Khmer?
- B: I would tell my friends he is from Si Saket; they would know that Si Saket is in Isan, but they would know right away that he is Khmer because people from Surin and Si Saket are from Khmer background.
- C: So you wouldn't necessarily talk about them as Khon Isan, you would just say where they are from?
- B: Actually we still think that they are Khon Isan too, but the feeling is less.¹¹⁶

This being Isan by degrees, a kind of nuanced way of defining *kwampenisan* based on geographic, linguistic and ethnic affiliation, was a common mode by which youth participants in the study attempted to negotiate their way through identity labelling and define what their own identity meant to them. And often this struggle with labelling led them to the insight that nothing is static and permanent in terms of expressing identity. They often talked about how everything was changing and becoming *mixed*. So whilst they did tend to predictably focus on the central and predominantly rural provinces of the region as the heart of Isan, several Khon Kaen university students individually came up with the idea that Khon Kaen province was the heart of Isan because of its diversity, that it represented both the traditional and contemporary aspects of being Khon Isan:

¹¹⁶ Personal interview, Bim, KKU student, Kalasin, 18 April 2002.

- Noi: One province that I think is the heart of Isan is Khon Kaen, compared to Udon.
- Catherine: Is it the location because it's kind of central?
- N: No. I think it's because Khon Kaen is a big province it has many interesting things. In the city it is modern. It is like Bangkok or Chiang Mai, but Khon Kaen still has many villages that are more traditional.¹¹⁷

Others took the pragmatic view that Khon Kaen was the heart because it was the commercial and educational centre of the Isan region: "...it has to be Khon Kaen with its economy and educational system... Everything starts from Khon Kaen".¹¹⁸ Eu, who is from village in rural Khon Kaen, viewed provinces that expressed Isanness and the heart of Isan as different things, again reflecting the ambiguity, contradiction and multiplicity with which many of these young participants viewed Isan identity:

- Catherine: Do you think some provinces are more Isan than others?
- Eu: Yasothon and Roi Et.
- C: Why?
- E: In Yasothon I think they have more Isan identity because they have the *Boon Bang Fai* (Rocket Festival) which is like the symbol of the province. Roi Et has *Boon Pa Wade* [Pra Wessandhon Festival; Pra Wessandhon being the 10th life of pre-Buddha] that indicates the past droughts of Isan.
- C: So Isan culture is Isan identity?
- E: Yes
- C: Are Yasothon and Roi Et the heart of Isan then?
- E: No
- C: Then where?
- E: Khon Kaen
- C: Why?
- E: It's like the centre. Maybe it's because I was born and raised here so I feel like it is the heart...In other provinces I don't know if they would think the same.¹¹⁹

Eu bases her expression of the heart of Isan on her own personal life story, but is astute enough to realise this is a personal reflection and other Khon Isan may not feel the same way as her.

¹¹⁷ Personal interview, Noi, KCU student, Khon Kaen, 5 September 2002.

¹¹⁸ Personal interview, Boey, KCU student, Khon Kaen, 2 October 2002.

¹¹⁹ Personal interview, Eu, KCU student, Khon Kaen, 30 September 2002.

BORDERLINE SIBLINGS: PERCEPTIONS OF THE ISAN - LAO RELATIONSHIP

When asked to consider their cultural relationship with their Lao neighbours, the vast majority of young people in this study referred to the relationship between Khon Lao and Khon Isan as that of siblings: “Our countries are like brothers and sisters”.¹²⁰ This has become a stereotypical way of describing the relationship between Laos and Thailand on both sides of the border – in historical texts, mainstream media commentary and in folkloric expression amongst older generations – so it is not surprising that this is the way these young people also interpret the relationship. However, like their attempts to express their own sense of *khwampenisan*, many also contextualised this description on the basis of their own personal emotional/social experiences: “I’ve met many Lao students that come to my university and I feel really close to them... I don’t feel that Lao people are different, I don’t feel that they are foreigners.”¹²¹ In other cases, the relationships that evolved between the Isan youth in my study and their peers across the border appeared to be the simple result of geographical location. Several of the Ruam Mit Bakery focus group members, who came from very poor and marginalised circumstances in Isan, had started celebrating *Songkran* (Buddhist New Year Festival) across the border in Laos as teenagers and had formed ongoing friendships with Lao young people as a result. Nai cited the case where his close friend from Mukdahan in Isan had met his Lao wife on one of these trips and now lived in Laos permanently:

- Catherine: How old were you when you went there (Laos)?
Nai: Seventeen – I go there a lot. The first time was when I was 17 because they opened the country freely during *Songkran*.
Catherine: Who did you go with?
Nai: With my friend. They charged 35 baht for admission.
Catherine: Did your friend like going there?
Nai: Yes. He has moved to Laos already. He married a Lao girl.
Catherine: Was he a friend from your childhood? Was he from the same village (in Yasothon province)?
Nai: We met at the age of 13, but he's not from my village; he's from Mukdahan. He's Khon Isan.¹²²

¹²⁰ Personal interview, Eu, KKU student, Khon Kaen, 30 September 2002.

¹²¹ Personal interview, Bim, KKU student, Kalasin, 18 April 2002.

¹²² Personal interview, Nai, NGO Ruammit Bakery participant, Chiang Mai, 9 March 2002.

Proximity obviously influences young Isan people's familiarity and access to Laos and its people. Nai was from a small village in Yasothon province, just over 100 kilometres from Mukhadan, which is located on the opposite bank of the Mekong River to Savannakhet, a key trading post in southern Laos. One would expect the level of interaction between Khon Lao in Savannakhet and surrounds and Khon Isan in Mukhadan and surrounds to be higher than for Khon Isan living further inland from the Mekong.

Interestingly, several participants used Lao language competency as the main signifier of *difference* between Khon Lao and Khon Isan:

Catherine: Do you think of yourself as Khon Lao or Khon Isan?
Goong: I think Khon Isan. I can't be real Khon Lao; I can't read or write Lao.¹²³

It is important to note here the distinction between competency in spoken and written language. Goong speaks Isan (Lao) as her first language. She perceives the ability to not only speak the Lao language, but to also have full literacy as a key identity marker. Bim felt more Lao than the Lao because of her belief in the authenticity of *pasar* Isan (Lao):

Catherine: Can you read and write *pasar* Isan or *pasar* Lao?
Bim: What do you mean Lao?
C: Well, how would you describe that to me because you're a language student [English major]...I mean Isan is described as the language of the Isan region, but my understanding is that it is Lao. What do you think?
B: I think Isan and Lao is the same language yeah...We Isan people sound more Lao than them.
C: Than the Lao?
B: Yeah that's what I think.¹²⁴

The comments above are also interesting from the perspective of recent arguments that *pasar* Isan has diverged significantly from *pasar* Lao. This will be discussed in detail in the next section.

¹²³ Personal interview, Goong, Rajabhat Mahasarakham student, Ban Nong Phok, Amphur Kalasin, 17 April 2002.

¹²⁴ Personal interview, Bim, KKU student, Kalasin, 15 April 2002.

Others subscribed to nation state boundaries as the defining difference: “Isan is a region of Thailand – people in Isan are Thais who live in this region of the country. Khon Lao live in Laos, but we have similar cultures and way of life.”¹²⁵ Several students acknowledged that dominant central Thai ethnicity discourse had negatively permeated the cultural relationship between Thailand and Laos: “We share the same ancestors, the same people. We have similar languages and cultures... [but] it seems that Khon Thai and even Khon Isan look down on Khon Lao.”¹²⁶ Cultural resistance to arbitrary ethnic discourse that attempts to marginalise non-central Thai identities has emerged in the form of community radio broadcasting along the border between Laos and the Isan region. A number of the students in my study listened to these programs because they enjoyed the counter-culture aspect of Lao-Isan commonality against a backdrop of central Thai elitism.

KHWAMPENISAN AND ETHNIC MINORITIES

There are a number of ethnic minority groups living within the Isan region, including the Phu Thai, Yor, Sai and Suay or Kui peoples. The most significant minority in the region are the Khmer. While Khon Thai apply the label *Suay*, this group prefers to be called *Kui* – again indicating how identity discourse manufactured at the centre influences and potentially disempowers ethnic minority groups at the periphery. Imagine the further complication of attempting to locate your ethnic minority identity within a regional ethnic identity within a national identity. A number of the participants in my study had one or both parents from these particular ethnic groups, but preferred to identify (at least outwardly) as Khon Isan. Jeab (MSU) whose parents and grandparents were respectively Phu Tai (paternal) and Yor (maternal), described herself as Khon Isan, whilst at the same time confessing that speaking Phu Thai with her family ‘felt like home’:

Catherine:	What language do you speak at home?
Jeab:	Mostly Isan, not Phu Thai or Yor.
C:	Can you speak Phu Thai and Yor?
J:	Yes, I still can.
C:	In what situation do you speak Isan?

¹²⁵ Personal interview, Eu, KCU student, Khon Kaen, 30 September 2002.

¹²⁶ Personal interview, Boey, KCU student, Khon Kaen, 2 October 2002.

- J: When I'm with friends who speak Isan.
 C: What does the Isan language mean to you?
 J: It's a language that's easy to understand and important to me.
 C: Do the languages of your shared cultures make you feel closer to them?
 J: When I speak Isan with friends I feel really close to them. If I speak Thai with them, it feels less intimate and more formal. With my parents, I feel warm when I speak Phu Thai – it feels like home.
 C: Do you think of yourself as Khon Isan or Phu Thai or Thai Isan?
 J: Actually, Khon Isan.¹²⁷

Like her peers of Lao Isan origins, Jeab works through several layers of naming identity in a way that contradicts, but also reveals, her stronger sense of belonging. She begins by saying she does not speak Phu Thai or Yor at home, then goes on to say that speaking Phu Thai represents her strongest identity attachment and finishes with defining herself as Khon Isan.

One young Phu Thai man from Amphur Kao Wong, Kalasin, was explicit about his Phu Thai origins not excluding him from identifying as Khon Isan, despite having limited facility in *pasar* Isan because *pasar* Phu Thai was his first language:

- Catherine: Did you speak Isan when you were young?
 Toto: No, just Phu Thai.
 C: Do you think of yourself as Khon Isan or Khon Phu Thai?
 T: Khon Phu Thai *is* Khon Isan.
 C: If someone from Bangkok asks where you are from, what do you tell them?
 T: I'm from Isan. I am Khon Isan.
 C: When you think about the word 'Isan', what does it mean to you?
 T: Isan is life and soul.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Personal interview, Jeab, MSU student, Mahasarakham, 2 October 2002.

¹²⁸ Personal interview, Toto, Rajabhat student, Mahasarakham, 6 August 2002.

YOUTH LANGUAGE CHOICES

- Catherine: So in what situations do you speak *pasar Isan*, only with your friends and family?
- Student: Mostly. And when we want to emphasise what we mean because when we speak Thai we cannot get the feeling.
- C: When you want to be passionate or emotional?
- S: Yes.
- C: How do you feel about speaking *pasar Isan*? Like is it that you're more comfortable speaking Isan than Thai or both are comfortable, how do you feel about your language or languages?
- S: It depends on the situation. If my friends speak Isan then we speak Isan all the time because we can express ourselves better. When we tell jokes we can get it more and yeah honestly I feel more comfortable speaking Isan.

Khon Kaen University student, 15th April 2002

There is one area of identity discourse, however, where the Isan youth in this study were not ambivalent – that is, their preference for speaking *pasar Isan* (Isan language). While some researchers have argued that spoken Isan has diverged significantly from the Lao language,¹²⁹ *pasar Isan* is basically Lao. Linguist Nick Enfield emphasises that while diversity in spoken Isan and spoken Lao will continue to exist, the notion of Isan language as a separate entity to Lao is a culturally perceived construct: “...in the context of Laos and Thailand, the coherence of ‘Isan’ as a linguistic variety is an *imagined one*”.¹³⁰

Within Thailand the Lao language spoken by Isan people is called *pasar Isan* as a result of the Thai state's desire to separate Thai national identity from Lao national identity. The process of official cultural homogenisation, which occurred from the early 1900s, meant constructing a new identity for the ethnic Lao population now under Thai

¹²⁹ Fry, G. (2002). Intercultural Interactions among the Thai and Lao: Critical Issues of Identity and Language. Parallel Paper Presentation Session on Thailand and Laos: Thai and Lao Relations, 8th International Conference on Thai Studies, p. 11, 9-12 January 2002, Ramkhamhaeng University, Nakhon Phanom, Thailand.

¹³⁰ Enfield, N. (2002). How to define ‘Lao’, ‘Thai’, and ‘Isan’ language? The view from linguistic science. Parallel Paper Presentation Session on Thailand and Laos, 8th International Conference on Thai Studies, p. 4, 9-12 January 2002, Ramkhamhaeng University, Nakhon Phanom, Thailand.

sovereignty – a construction based on regional space rather than ethnicity. As Khon Isan or people of the northeast, these new Thai citizens spoke *pasar* Isan, not Lao. Young Isan people regularly switch between Isan and Thai. While *pasar* Isan (Lao) may be their first language, as an *unofficial* language within the Thai state, most Khon Isan never learn to read or write Lao. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the Thai state’s policy of introducing Thai as the official administrative and educational language of the northeast – a strategy aimed at stimulating Isan acculturation. Unfortunately, this means that Isan people are now constrained by having to express their beliefs, desires and grievances in the written form of a language that is not their first spoken language.¹³¹

In recent years, a number of researchers have pointed to a decline in the usage of *pasar* Isan and an unwillingness or ambivalence by Khon Isan to openly use their first language.¹³² Yet throughout the period of my fieldwork, I found both younger participants in this study and their older family members readily expressing themselves in *pasar* Isan. Several mothers of participants, who live in rural villages in their home province, said they almost never use Thai and if required to fill out official documents in Thai they ask their children to complete them. Most participants declare that Isan is their first language and their language of preference. In an introductory workshop of 31 students at Mahasarakham University in February 2002, 27 participants said Isan was their language of choice. Three of these had learned both Thai and Isan from birth because they had one parent who was a native Thai speaker and the other who was a native Isan speaker, but they still elected Isan as their preferred language. The remaining four students were from other regions in Thailand.

- Catherine: What does the Isan language mean to you?
Student: Isan is my language. I feel proud to speak it. I’ve been talking in Isan since I was very young. It identifies me as Khon Isan. I am not ashamed of speaking it. I can always speak it.
- C: What about Thai?
S: Thai is our official language. It’s our national language, the one we use to communicate in general.

¹³¹ Draper, J. (2004). Isan: The planning context for language maintenance and revitalization. *SLLT: Studies in Languages and Language Teaching Journal*, Journal of the Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Science, Mahidol University, 4.

¹³² These include: McCargo & Krisadawan, 2002, pp.7-13; and, Morgan T., 2001: Language Evolution: The Future of Local Languages in Thailand. Panel 9 on Language and Education, 2nd National Thai Studies Conference, 12-13 July 2001, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Australia.

- C: In which situation do you not use Isan?
 S: In the classroom, when in contact with bureaucracy, or with teachers.
 C: What language do your parents and grandparents speak?
 S: Isan.¹³³

It is interesting to note that while it was obvious to even my untrained ear that my study participants and their peers mostly interacted in informal settings using *pasar* Isan, during our focus group sessions they usually spoke Thai (although jokes were almost always in Isan). My interpretation of this was that as our sessions were mostly conducted in an educational setting, they felt it inappropriate to use Isan. This understanding was confirmed in discussions with the students and with Bim, my RA. Later in the research process when we commenced personal interviews, these young people more readily conversed with me (via Bim) using Isan.

Many of these young people spoke about Isan as their language of sensory and emotional truth – they can really only express themselves adequately in Isan. Thai is necessary for life as a Thai citizen, especially in formal educational and bureaucratic settings. *Pasar* Isan represents emotional attachment to Isan. For example, an email sent by Bim regarding one of our informants, follows: “She sounded very happy and even talked to me in Esan. No more Thai, I guess it is because she feels closer”.¹³⁴ The young people aged from 17 to 25 represented in this study are from provinces all over Isan, many quite urbane; they continue to enjoy Isan as their language of choice:

- Catherine: In which situations do you speak Isan?
 Eu: I speak Isan with my close friends here [at KKU]. When I go home, I speak Isan at home.
 C: How do you feel when you speak Isan and Thai?
 E: It seems formal when speaking Thai. When I want to tell a joke or be funny, I speak Isan.
 C: Do you feel it’s more convenient to speak Isan?
 E: Yes, it’s true to the heart.
 C: What does the Isan language mean to you?
 E: It feels good. I was born here and grew up here. Some people are embarrassed by it, but I am not. My parents could have taught me to speak Thai because our house is in town, but they didn’t. They brought me up speaking Isan. When I started school, then I started to speak Thai.
 C: What do your parents and grandparents speak?

¹³³ Personal interview, Eu, KKU student, Khon Kaen, 30 September 2002.

¹³⁴ Mamber, K. (2002, May 8). Personal communication.

- E: Isan.
 C: Do they speak Thai?
 E: My mother can speak Thai, but my grandparents don't.¹³⁵

In the context of the above, it is hard to envisage Isan (Lao) as a *dying* language. However, several students did express concern in personal interviews that they felt their facility for speaking authentic Isan was constantly being challenged by Thai language interference:

- Catherine: Do you think you are losing your Isan identity?
 Goong: A little bit. I have lost some.
 C: Like what?
 G: The spoken language.
 C: Because it's being replaced by Thai words?
 G: Yes.
 C: Why do you think that is? Is it because of the media?
 G: It's because people move away to places. They get used to not speaking it. When they come back home, they can't speak the same anymore.
 C: Is the Isan your mother speaks more authentic than yours?
 G: More authentic. I go to school; I use Thai. When I learn new words, I forget the old ones.
 C: Are there any words or idioms that your mother speaks that you don't understand?
 G: I understand all of them, but if I use them with my friends, they may not understand. My mother's language is the real Isan without any influence from other cultures.¹³⁶

Despite these concerns, the young people in this study overwhelmingly and consistently made the link between their sense of *khwampenisan* and their preference for speaking their first language – *pasar* Isan. Of all the multitude of prisms through which to articulate their Isan identity, their attachment to their first language was the most strongly indicated as fundamental to being Isan. Not unsurprisingly, they considered *pasar* Isan as the truly unique signifier of their Isanness; it is what set them apart from their compatriots in other regions of Thailand and what drew them together as Khon Isan in the larger Thai nation state. For the most part, they did not perceive their Isan identity as undermining their connection to *khwampenthai* – it was viewed more as a culturally

¹³⁵ Personal interview, Eu, KKU student, Khon Kaen, 30 September 2002.

¹³⁶ Personal interview, Goong, Rajabhat Mahasarakham student, Ban Nong Phok, Kalasin, 17 April 2002.

inherited gift that lent them a different but complementary worldview to that of their fellow Thai citizens.

Code switching: Discomfort in a non-Isan crowd

Some study participants mentioned being uncomfortable using *pasar* Isan in Bangkok if they were alone (for example, speaking on a mobile phone in a public place), but the majority said this would not embarrass them. My RA had a difficult time analysing her own reactions to speaking Isan on a bus in Bangkok when she received a call from her sister on her mobile:

- Bim: I just got this feeling in Bangkok... because I was sitting on the bus and my sister called me on my cell phone and she spoke Isan to me and it's like (whispering) "I'm on the bus..."
- Catherine: You felt self-conscious?
- B: Yeah I told her, "You understand I cannot speak Isan to you now?" OK and she understood.
- C: But why couldn't you speak Isan on the bus?
- B: People will look at you.
- C: Down on you? You think it's that?
- B: Maybe not down, but I can notice...You just don't want to look funny because people in Bangkok think that you are funny if you are from Isan.
- C: So it's not so much about you feeling different or embarrassed or anything like that, it's more that they have a fixed attitude or idea about Isan people...?
- B: Yeah right.
- C: Is that what you think? I mean I'm putting words in your mouth but it's more about what they think rather than what you think?
- B: Yeah and actually maybe both. I felt embarrassed using Isan too.
- C: Are there any situations where you would always use Thai, you would never use Isan?
- B: Whenever I'm in the Isan area, no problem, but when I go up north, I go south then I speak Thai.
- C: When you go to live in America and you might meet someone from Isan, would you be comfortable then to start talking Isan?
- B: Yeah.
- C: So it's only in Thailand.
- B: Yeah.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Personal interview, Bim, KKU student, Kalasin, 15 April 2002.

However, members of the Chiang Mai focus group, young men from marginalised rural backgrounds in Yasothon Province of Isan, said they did not feel uncomfortable using *pasar Isan* when going out, nor had they experienced any negative reaction to speaking Isan in markets or other public places in Chiang Mai.¹³⁸ This could be partly because northern Thai people speak their own distinct language, *Kammüang* (*northern Thai language*), and therefore hearing other regional languages would make less impact than it would in Bangkok. While *Kammüang* and Isan are distinct languages, they share more linguistic features than with Thai. These differing perceptions may also be predicated on socio-economic positioning. While coming from a rural area of Isan, Bim and her immediate family are educated (her parents are both teachers), financially secure and respected within their local community. As a final-year university student, Bim was conscious of positioning herself effectively in the central Thai dominated social and political landscape – such positioning is crucial to job prospects and mainstream acceptance. The young Isan men on the Ruam Mit project came from extremely poor and disadvantaged backgrounds – their main preoccupations were with salvaging a semblance of normal life from the wreckage of chemical drug addiction and securing a basic minimum wage to support themselves in their local villages. They probably held scant regard for what the urban residents of Chiang Mai thought of them. Likewise the opinion of urban northern Thais was irrelevant to the future stability of these young men on their imminent return to Isan.

We all assume different identities to fit different contexts. The purpose of this study is not to arrive at a fixed definition of *khwampenisan* or Lao Isan identity, but rather tease out how these young people feel about their own identity against a backdrop of *static* pre-determined cultural and political definitions and/or characteristics of Isan identity. The data discussed in this chapter supports the notion that identity formation is plural. Study participants consistently reveal ambiguities and uncertainties around their sense of Lao Isan identity as they negotiate their way through their own expectations of themselves in context with stereotypical identity traits generated externally by the wider central Thai community, streamed by nationally produced media and often unwittingly

¹³⁸ Youth focus group, Chiang Mai, 6 March 2002.

reinforced within their own local communities within the Isan region. However, there is no ambiguity about the predominant sense these young people feel that Isan language is a key signifier of their identity. Most study participants felt strongly that the Thai language, whilst necessary, was not considered their *preferred* language.

Chapter Three: VIEWING OPTIONS AND CHOICES

CONTEXT 2002: THE YEAR OF PURITANICAL POSTURINGS

Whilst we ate *kanom* (sweet cakes or biscuits) and chatted about their daily lives growing up as Khon Isan, the political and social world these young people awoke to each day was dominated by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's populist politics of 'Think New, Act New' *reform*. The centrepiece of Thaksin's reform agenda was a social order campaign, run by the aptly named Interior Minister Purachai Piumsoombun. This campaign was designed to address two causes of moral panic within Thai society: the boom in the informal economy of amphetamine and methamphetamine production and the apparent infiltration of these highly addictive drugs in mainstream Thai society, particularly among high school students; and, the apparent corruption of sexual morality (a singularly Western disease according to Thai politicians, policy makers and mainstream tabloid media). Again, this problem was supposedly rife among young people.

Front page photograph, *The Nation*, 26 April 2002.
(Picture courtesy: *The Nation*)



In Thailand amphetamines and methamphetamines are now commonly referred to as *yaa baa*, meaning the 'crazy drug'. The original colloquial Thai term for these drugs was *yaa maa* (horse drug). While the current term *yaa baa* has been in usage since at least the 1960s¹³⁹, it was pro-actively encouraged in Thai public discourse during a

¹³⁹ Charles Keyes. (2011, 17 April). Official communication.

1996 public awareness campaign by then Health Minister Sanoh Thienthong under General Chavalit's cabinet. Constructing state consciousness through mass publicity campaigns reflects Thailand's long-held political culture of nation-state building based on moral obligation. In his 2008 ethnographic study of Thai police culture and the 2002–2003 'War on Drugs', Eric Haanstad describes a Thai education system, that "...stresses conformity, rote memorization and obedience to the three pillars of the modern Thai nation state: nation, religion and monarchy", as the bedrock for a morally saturated 'fantasy nation' that is "...as disconnected from "reality" as the ATS [opium, heroin and amphetamine-type stimulants] culture it supposedly fights".¹⁴⁰ The social order solution for the production and usage of these drugs was a morally questionable shoot first, zero tolerance policy towards alleged methamphetamine manufacturers, traffickers and users, which led to the shooting deaths (what would be called extra judicial killings in western democracy) of hundreds of suspects, including Burmese refugees who had been forcibly conscripted into the industry.

But of more interest to the young people in my study was the Government's approach to solving the so-called problem of sexual immorality. An editorial piece in *The Nation* on 4 March 2002 attempts to sum up the source of this 'moral panic':

There has been a sharp, generational shift in attitudes and practices over the last few years. The new generation start younger. They do it more casually. They often do it more carelessly too. Sexual explicitness has risen in the public culture. Nice girls who model or act now take off their clothes for the front pages of the daily papers and glossy magazines. Television dramas are fascinated with violent rape. Teenage fashion has become aggressively sexy.¹⁴¹

Other *moral panic* assertions included high school and university students selling sex to buy mobile phones and hip clothing, male youths offering the sexual favours of their girlfriends as stakes in video-game competitions and teenage partner swapping for casual sex.¹⁴² Strategies to combat the moral lassitude of young people included 10 pm curfews at night spots frequented by teenagers and a ban on karaoke booths in shopping malls that

¹⁴⁰ Haanstad, E. (2008). *Constructing order through chaos: A state ethnography of the Thai police*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA, p. 100.

¹⁴¹ Chang Noi . (2002, March 4). Social order and moral panic. *The Nation*, p. 5A.

¹⁴² Young video game players betting for sex: senator. (2001, September 18). *The Nation*, p. 13A.

catered specifically to under-18s who could not access adult music and dance venues. Purachai's reasons for the ban included the fact that secret cameras in karaoke booths had revealed images of young couples "...engaged in intimate behaviour".¹⁴³ He says nothing about the unethical practice of *spying* on young people! The gender equality implications of Purachai's social control policies will be discussed in Chapter four. Some of Purachai's social control ideology belonged in the realm of the ridiculous, such as directing parents to read Aesop's fables and success stories of famous public figures to their young children at bedtime because Thai children had a moral obligation to "...help bring the country out of crisis", even if this meant subjugating *fun*: "If our children are still wasting money on drinking and on entertaining themselves, to whom can we put the responsibility of taking care of our beloved country?"¹⁴⁴

Purachai's zero tolerance offensive to tackle substance abuse and dealing among high school students included sending in 'anti-drug SWAT teams' to more than 8,000 education institutions, mainly high schools and vocational colleges (*rajabhats*). These teams would *encourage* students to declare themselves as drug users or sellers; however, if this failed then teachers and students would be *encouraged* to inform on those they suspected of being involved, and these alleged drug users or sellers would then be *encouraged* to confess, and if they failed to do so they would then undergo compulsory urine testing. At the time this particular drug offensive was being launched in the media, Office of Narcotics Control Board director Pinyo Thongchai said: "We will put the drug taking students in treatment programmes while the dealers will be sent to a camp to change behaviour".¹⁴⁵ The use of public shame merges well with the three pillar model of Thai national identity construction based on nation, religion and monarchy.

Throughout 2002 as I ran focus groups and conducted personal interviews with the students, there was no mention of impacts from this so-called 'offensive' within their own tertiary environments. The only participants who mentioned substance abuse were

¹⁴³ Kitja Leeprasirtwong & Waraporn Sukkasem. (2002, March 19). Karaoke booths join Purachai's casualty list. *The Nation*, p. 1A.

¹⁴⁴ Bedtime story from Purachai. (2002, March 3). *The Nation*, p. 2A.

¹⁴⁵ Piyanart Srivalo. (2002, February 20). Anti-drug crusade: Scheme to target 8,000 schools. *The Nation*, p. 2A.

those former users in the Ruam Mit Bakery focus group, who were generally afraid of the involvement of Thai officialdom. This fear appeared to stem from an overwhelming sense that their struggle with substance abuse was viewed by government authorities as a criminal rather than a social problem. They spoke of the support they received from the non-government Ruam Mit Bakery project and how this type of intervention was invaluable to getting their lives back on track because it provided vocational training, including small business management and finance, that could be used to help them establish a small venture like running their own noodle stall. It was practical and accessible. Jeab, a single mother of three small children, ended up at Ruam Mit Bakery after coming clean almost 10 years after being addicted to *yaa baa* as a 13-year-old school girl. Jeab was born and raised in the Klong Toey slum district of Bangkok, but through her life circumstances has come to view the Isan province of Yasothon as her home. As a teenager she left the family home in Klong Toey to live with her husband, also a *yaa baa* addict, who beat her if she refused to deal drugs for him. She later placed her children at a non-government foundation supporting people with HIV and orphans in Yasothon to protect them from the domestic violence at home. The foundation later assisted Jeab to quit her drug addiction by placing her within the Wat Suan Kaew Foundation's community in Nonthaburi, established by revered Buddhist monk Phra Payom. They later organised a position for Jeab with the Ruam Mit Bakery in Chiang Mai. Her goal was to set up a small grocery stand in Yasothon and earn enough to care for her children again. She said she would not return to Bangkok to raise her children.

SUB-CULTURAL TERRAIN: YOUTH ENVIRONMENTS AND RECREATION

The young people in my study generally followed the media debate unfolding around Purachai's social control campaign in abstract – curious but not directly affected or engaged. The main reason for this sense of being one step removed from the impact zone of policies directly targeted at their own peer group appeared to be the sense of autonomy afforded to them as students living away from their home environment. This feeling of independence, coupled with immersion in their studies and extra-curricular activities, provided a sub-cultural terrain that buffered them from directly feeling the impact of the social control initiatives being introduced practically daily.

Parallel universe: The Khon Kaen University environment

Located four kilometres north of the city on 2,500 acres of partially uncleared land, Khon Kaen University (KKU) is the northeast's main tertiary institute. Founded in 1964, KKU currently has 21 faculties offering undergraduate and postgraduate studies across the discipline spectrum. KKU is home to some 24,000 undergraduate and 9,700 postgraduate students. The small business infrastructure that has evolved in the immediate surrounds of the Khon Kaen University campus provides a kind of parallel universe for KKU students – a satellite village offering a high degree of autonomy. This infrastructure includes the obvious student support services such as photocopying, printing, stationary supplies and information technology support. However, of far more importance to the students' sense of independence and confidence as emerging young adults are the food halls, restaurants and cafes, including internet cafes, where they congregate daily to read, study, SMS and make mobile calls, listen to portable music devices, use the internet and generally socialise. Most of the students appeared to have their own motorbikes, some even cars, affording them mobility across the expanse of the large sprawling campus.

Female KKU students cruise across the campus.
Picture: Catherine Hesse-Swain, 2002.



From my personal observations over the course of a year – this was a world where parental authority was reduced to the occasional semester visit and regular mobile phone conversations. This was a striking observation because having previously taught and lived amongst senior high school and tertiary students who lived at home whilst they studied (in Bangkok and Chiang Mai) – it seemed that these young people, coming from other regional centres, smaller towns or villages throughout the Isan region, had made a monumental transition from highly supervised and controlled lives in their family homes to a relatively autonomous and parent-free environment. And for the most part, they appeared to take this transition pretty much in

their stride, maintaining regular class attendance and fulfilling the requirements of their chosen study area.

Most students lived on campus in shared student accommodation, which obviously provided a level of social control as they were required to abide by the hostel rules and supervision. Student hostels usually had a curfew in place of 10 or 11 pm on weekdays and midnight on weekends. The respected role of the university *ajarn* and parental expectations of them as responsible students further reinforced a sense of social structure and cohesion. So this was by no means a free-for-all student environment. In the West (excluding religious colleges in the US) tertiary students possess a relatively high degree of personal autonomy. In the Thai context, however, the extent of independence afforded to KKU students did surprise me. Whether by design or by accident (the latter appears more likely), this university has evolved a subculture of freedom that appears to sustain the students whilst still maintaining appropriate levels of social control. These observations certainly made a mockery of Purachai's puerile approach to ridding Thai society of moral corruption by imposing strict social controls on young people.

All the KKU students I came into contact with, either as study participants or socially, said they had no direct experience of illegal substance use by them or their groups of friends. Of course they would probably err on the side of caution and not divulge information about any drug-related experiences to me directly, although they were quick to highlight that *obviously* drug taking did occur amongst the campus population. My research assistant Bim relayed a conversation she had had with a local policeman who said that drug use was quite extensive at KKU, but again she emphasised that she had no personal experience of this and had not observed anyone taking drugs in her presence. When I questioned her and her male friend further about the kinds of drugs, they said "amphetamines or worse", but when I asked what they meant by *worse* they didn't name any other drugs.¹⁴⁶ With regard to alcohol use it was frequently mentioned by female students that most male students drank whisky or beer on a daily basis. However, most of the male students in my study said they only drank alcohol as a *fun* activity (i.e. that it

¹⁴⁶ Field Journal entry, Khon Kaen University, 13 January 2002.

was reserved for partying on special occasions). The female students reported that on the whole they did not drink alcohol.

Whilst most KKU study participants had watched TV regularly from early childhood, they often commented that they were unable to enjoy TV recreationally during semester time because there were either no or very few TVs in their student accommodation. For this reason, music maintained a larger space in their recreational and social universe. Many students frequently commented that they listened to hardcore rock, particularly Japanese bands. However, a number of other students commented that although Japanese hard core bands were still popular (such as gla and l'arc en ciel), they had personally grown tired of them and preferred a range of music – mainly western and Thai pop. My research assistant said she believed the Japanese bands were more popular with secondary school students.¹⁴⁷ Students reported that live bands didn't perform at the campus; however, there was a university music group that played western popular music and performed every now and then, but these performances did not attract much attendance. There is also a traditional Isan music performance group. There was overwhelming agreement from across the KKU Focus Groups and other students I established friendships with, that the independence of the university environment was highly valued. They had everything they needed, except a disco, but this was addressed informally by regularly holding impromptu discos in their student rooms.

Living their traditional music roots: Rajabhat Mahasarakham

All the students in the Rajabhat Mahasarakham focus groups were members of a 40-strong Isan music performance band. They unanimously favoured contemporary folk (*lukthung*) and 'songs for life' (*phlaeng pleuh chiwit*) – both of these music genres will be discussed further in the next section entitled 'Lao Isan Youth and TV':

¹⁴⁷ Field Journal entry, Khon Kaen University, 13 January 2002.

- Catherine: What kind of television shows do you like to watch?
 Student: Concerts, live music.
 C: Whose concerts do you like?
 S: Noo Meter¹⁴⁸ – folk music.
 C: You don't like country (traditional Isan) music?
 S: No, only folk music.¹⁴⁹

Using only traditional Isan instruments, the band played traditional Isan *morlam* and *lukthung* music. Institutionally, the Rajabhat places great emphasis on student participation in maintaining and developing local Isan music, using a quota system that accepts a number of students based on their traditional Isan music skills rather than their academic skills. Practicing and performing in the band was an integral and much-enjoyed aspect of their student life. The band appeared to provide their main recreational activity outside formal study:

- Toto: We play in a school band right now. It's called *Kaen Isan* (Isan Core). We're a local band.
 Catherine: How many people are in the band?
 Pui: About 40. This is not many at all.
 C: Is it a club?
 Pui: It's a quota for students who are skilled traditional Isan musicians.
 C: When you have a show, do all 40 members perform together?
 Toto: Almost. Some go. Some don't.
 C: Do you perform often?
 Toto: Yes often – there are always school festivals. There are a lot of shows where we can perform for the public as well. We rehearse every Monday to Wednesday.
 C: How many hours?
 Toto: From 5 to 8pm.¹⁵⁰

What surprised me was not their active engagement in their musical pursuits, but the level of passion these young Isan people felt for their traditional Isan musical inheritance, frequently referring with pride to learning their instrument from an older relative:

- Catherine: Did you play any instruments when you were a kid?
 Toto: I played *Isan Pin* (Isan guitar). It has only 3 strings.
 C: How old were you? Who taught you to play?
 Toto: I was 9. My grandfather (paternal) taught me.
 Goong: I play *Pong-Lang* (Isan xylophone).
 C: Did you play when you were young?
 Goong: When I was 10.
 C: Who taught you?

¹⁴⁸ Thai male *lukthung* vocalist Noo Meter produced a number of big hits on the *lukthung* scene throughout the 2000s and is still highly popular.

¹⁴⁹ Youth focus group, Rajabhat Mahasarakham, Mahasarakham, 15 January 2002.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

Goong: My uncle plays *Pong Lang*. He teaches *Pong Lang*. I saw him play and I liked it so I started to learn. There's a cultural centre in my *Amphur* (District) so I went there to play and practice.¹⁵¹

The students in the Rajabhat Mahasarakham focus groups were not only confident in their preference for speaking *pasar* Isan (Lao), but also strongly identified with their Isan heritage through their active interest in playing traditional Isan instruments and performing local Isan music. This does not mean they did not also gravitate towards contemporary forms of Thai music, such as *lukthung* and *phlaeng pleuh chiwit*; however, it was clear that they did not take as much interest in the Thai or international pop/rock scene as the KKU students in my study. One reason for this may be that most of the rajabhat participants were from small villages throughout Isan, while the KKU students tended to come from urbanised settings – provincial towns, other regional centres like Ubon Ratchathani or Khon Kaen itself. Conversely, the Rajabhat would also attract students with local music interests due to its Isan music talent quota. The correlation between these two aspects should not be ignored though – that is, the students interested in local music traditions and less globalised in their musical tastes, also tended to come from smaller village settings in Isan where traditional music formats were still common-day expressions of Isan culture and identity. Interestingly, this appetite for Isan belonging did not stop with the playing of Isan instruments and music, but also found expression through students styling themselves as *morlam*-type comedians as an integral part of the Kaen Isan performances:

Catherine: What do you play in the band?
Pui: I don't play music in the band. I am a band actor. I am a band comedian.
C: What about an instrument?
Pui: I can only play cymbals. They are the easiest.
C: When you were younger, were you ever a comedian?
Pui: I thought of doing it when I was in high school.
C: Is anyone in your family a performing artist as well?
Pui: Two of my aunts on my mother's side are *morlam* artists.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Youth focus group, Rajabhat Mahasarakham, Mahasarakham, 15 January 2002.

¹⁵² Ibid.

And it seems that their fellow students at the Rajabhat are just as keen spectators as they are performers of local Isan music:

Catherine: Are Rajabhat students interested in your performances?
Goong: Very much.
C: Do you get a positive response from them?
Toto: Yes.¹⁵³

The students of the Kaen Isan band at Rajabhat Mahasarakham have happily merged their affection for the traditional music formats like *morlam*, which they were exposed to in childhood, with an interest in more contemporary Thai music genres like *lukthung* and *phlaeng pleuh chiwit*. This appears to support the view of some commentators (discussed in chapter one) that the emergence of traditional Isan music formats like *morlam* within popular music represents an appropriation of indigenous or *thong thin* culture for the regeneration of Lao Isan identity. At the very least, it supports the notion that Isan youth feel an ongoing sense of belonging to their Lao Isan ethnic identity and continue to evolve this belonging through their life choices, including their musical expression and tastes.

MEDIA PREFERENCES OTHER THAN TV (BROADCAST, PRINT, INTERNET)

Outside of television entertainment, the majority of study participants favoured print and radio media. It is estimated that in 2002, Thailand had an internet penetration rate of only 5.7 per cent of the population and that the majority of this usage was in Bangkok and regional cities, with little internet connectivity in provincial areas. Access for young people at this time was largely via internet cafes as penetration into homes was low. Broadband internet access did not become available until 2004.¹⁵⁴ For these reasons, most young Isan in my study were more engaged in other forms of readily accessible media like radio, TV and print media, such as newspapers and magazines. By far the most internet savvy of study participants were the KKU students who were able to access the internet at cafes on campus. My research assistant Bim recently reflected in an email on

¹⁵³ Youth focus group, Rajabhat Mahasarakham, Mahasarakham, 15 January 2002.

¹⁵⁴ Hao Xiaoming & Chow Seet Kay. (2004). Factors affecting Internet development: An Asian survey. *First Monday: Peer-reviewed Journal on the Internet*, 9 (2). From http://131.193.153.231/www/issues/issue9_2/hao/index.html

the difference between her relationship with the internet in 2002 as a student and now (2010):

The roles that the Internet played in my life then and now are totally different! Back then, I would just use it to check my e-mails and go to chat rooms and maybe research for school work here and there. I don't remember if there were any social network sites. If there were, I wasn't aware of them. Also, we didn't have easy access to the Internet like nowadays. The only free service that KKU provided was at the Computer Center and the access was limited. There weren't enough computers for everyone. I mostly used the Internet cafes and that wasn't free.¹⁵⁵

A case study of how KKU students engaged with the internet to express political dissatisfaction with the then government's social order policies follows in the next section.

Focus group and personal interview data revealed a tangible difference between the media interests of urban Isan youth – those studying at KKU who were either from Khon Kaen or from other major regional centres like Ubon Ratchathani – and rural Isan youth coming from villages and provincial centres like Yasothon or Roi Et and attending Mahasarakham University or Rajabhat Mahasarakham. The majority of KKU participants enjoyed listening to the radio on a regular basis and preferred Thai pop/rock, followed by international pop/rock music, primarily from the West and from Japan. Some students also cited an interest in contemporary western Rhythm and Blues (R&B). They listened to local Khon Kaen radio stations, such as 100.5 Mahasarakham and 88.25 Smart Radio. At that time syndicated radio programs from Bangkok were not available to local stations. The university station 103.00 was also popular because it broadcast university news and popular Thai music, and students also had the opportunity to read news or present music. Several KKU students made a point of emphasising their dislike of *lukthung* (folk) music.

Lao Isan students at Mahasarakham University (MSU) and Rajabhat Mahasarakham also enjoyed listening to the radio, but there was a clear preference for Isan *morlam* (traditional), *lukthung* and *phlaeng pleuh chiwit* (songs for life). Goong, a female member of the Rajabhat Kaen Isan band talks about her recreational habits:

¹⁵⁵ Mamber, K. (2010, August 10). Personal communication.

- Catherine: How do you entertain yourself in your spare time?
 Goong: Listen to music.
 C: What kind of music?
 G: Folk music.
 C: Do you play any instruments?
 G: Yes, I play pin (Isan 3-string guitar).
 C: Do you play modern music with friends?
 G: No, I play Isan music like *morlam*. The instrument is not appropriate for modern music.
 C: Do you guys play modern music in the college band?
 G: Isan only because the instruments are all Isan music instruments.
 C: Who is your favourite folk musician?
 G: I like Noo Meter.
 C: Do you like watching TV? Do you read any magazines?
 G: I listen to music most of the time.
 C: Do have any favourite stations?
 G: FM 95 MHz. FM 105 MHz.
 C: Are they stations from Bangkok?
 G: From Yasothon.
 C: What kind of music do these stations play?
 G: Mostly *morlam*.¹⁵⁶

This student clearly carries the thread of her interest in playing and performing traditional Isan music into her recreational listening world. She prefers local Isan radio stations playing local Isan music. Noo Meter has been a popular male Thai *lukthung* vocalist for the past decade and was previously mentioned as a favourite *lukthung* performer by a male member of the Kaen Isan band. Other Mahasarakham-based students have broadened their interest in Isan *morlam* and *lukthung*, into an interest in contemporary *phlaeng pleuh chiwit* (songs for life), with several commenting that they not only listened to these music genres on the radio but regularly enjoyed live concerts broadcast on TV. The students who enjoyed local, folk and songs-for-life music predominantly came from small rural villages in provinces such as Kalasin, Yasothon and Roi Et. Several MSU students expressly did not like these music styles and favoured Thai pop/rock. These students had grown up in urban centres like Ubon Ratchathani. Students commonly reported that radio presenters in regional and provincial centres like Khon Kaen, Mahasarakham and Yasothon all used a mix of *pasar* Thai and *pasar* Isan when broadcasting. The evolution and prominence of *lukthung* and *phlaeng pleuh chiwit* music

¹⁵⁶ Personal interview, Goong, Rajabhat Mahasarakham student, Ban Nong Phok, Kalasin, 17 April 2002.

in Thai popular culture formats are further explored in the section in this chapter entitled “Lao Isan youth and TV”.

Young Lao Isan people in this study also spent time reading print media – both newspapers and magazines. Students based at both Mahasarakham and Khon Kaen commonly read *Thai Rath*, Thailand’s oldest and best selling daily newspaper. Best known for its sensationalist coverage of crime and accidents, it also covers political, economic and social issues in its front news section. The second section of this broadsheet provides sport and entertainment coverage. Female participants generally favoured entertainment magazines, including episode guides dedicated to a specific *lakhon* (drama) currently on air. These magazines, known as *ruang yaw* (meaning ‘summary’ or ‘brief story’) *lakhorn toerat* (TV), provide a plot synopsis and feature stories about and photos of the soapy stars. Whilst many of these young Lao Isan women mentioned well known women’s magazines like Thai publications of the international *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan*, as well as locally produced magazines like *Dichan*, they were often to be seen reading locally published hot gossip magazines that featured currently popular Thai TV or music stars:

- Catherine: Do you read magazines?
Tiu: Yes.
C: What do you read?
T: Many kinds; if the cover features one of my favourite stars, I’d buy it and take it home right then.
T: Do you like news magazines or women’s magazines better?
S: Women magazines.
T: Do you read newspaper?
S: Yes.
T: What do you read?
S: *Thai Rath* – we subscribe to *Thai Rath* at home.¹⁵⁷

Generally male participants mentioned reading the newspaper, again mostly *Thai Rath*, but did not express interest in specific magazines, usually moving directly into talking about their music and TV preferences.

¹⁵⁷ Personal interview, Tui, Mahasarakham University Student, Mahasarakham, 2 October 2002.

Web expression: Who is in control, exactly?

During early 2002, Prime Minister Thaksin made a series of questionable moves to censor international and local media. His attack on media freedom was triggered by a brief article published in the Hong Kong-based *Far Eastern Economic Review's* (FEER) 10 January edition on the relationship between Thaksin and the Thai Palace. The January 10 issue of FEER was banned in Thailand on the grounds that it was a threat to national security and the two journalists responsible for the article were firstly blacklisted and then ordered to leave the country. Independent national media outlets, already experiencing censorship from the Thaksin administration, quickly went to the defence of their international colleagues in broadcast talk-back commentary, and print editorial and opinion pieces. This resulted in Thaksin ordering the Anti-Money Laundering Office (AMLO) to wrongfully investigate a significant number of Thai journalists who were openly critical of the Government, and the closing of a number of broadcast media outlets. The debate in the media over the Government's heavy handling of Thai media outlets spiked the interest of many of the young Isan people in my study, who largely viewed such censorship as a threat to Thai democracy and embarrassing in terms of what they believed was Thailand's image as a relatively developed and sophisticated player on the regional and global stage.

Website logo for Panthip.com



What was interesting was how these young people accessed and used Thailand's popular Pantip.com and Mthai.com websites to vent their dissatisfaction with the Government's handling of the FEER controversy. Pantip.com publishes both an information site and a live chat and blogging site called Bloggang ("for you and your gang"). The site targets younger Thais through its 'Café', which includes pages on beauty and diet, entertainment media, books and living and travelling overseas. The site also provides sub-sites for sports analysis reviews (*Supachalasai*), science and technology (*Wa Ko*), financial markets (*Sinthon*), and community and social issues. There are also pages offering IT technical advice (Techxchange), online shopping (Panthip Market) and free web design software (Pan

Town). Most of these topic-based sub-sites have their own post and online chat room services. Using the politics sub-site entitled *Ratchadamneon*, Khon Kaen University students joined thousands of Pantip.com bloggers and chat room users across the nation to air their views and debate the controversies around the media crackdown unfolding before them. *Nation* journalist Natee Vichitsorasatra commented in his ‘Public Sphere’ editorial piece that: “Very little else has been posted on Pantip.com’s Rajadamneon website this week other than the controversial blacklisting of the two Far East Economic (FEER) reporters, Rodney Tasker and Shawn Crispin”.¹⁵⁸ He also pointed out, ironically, that the site’s webmaster and team had to subject themselves to self-censorship by moderating forum posts so the Pantip.com site itself would not become a victim of blacklisting. Despite this self-censorship, enough time was allowed for strong opinions on both sides of the media control divide to be posted and hotly debated before disappearing off the site.

The Mthai.com site is heavily commercialised, tabloid in its content (i.e. hot gossip) and strongly marketed towards young people. According to *Nation* journalist Natee Vichitsorasatra, the Mthai.com forums attracted vitriolic anti-government commentary from young people, but with little analytical substance:

Mthai.com’s forums were plastered with nastier comments which included words such as “dictatorship” and “communists”, although the writers of the messages didn’t make much of an effort at further elaborating on why they felt that way.¹⁵⁹

Former Senate speaker Meechai Ruchapan used his own personal website www.meechaithailand.com to post an article entitled “Are we still Thais?” where he vented his pro-Thaksin fury on the unknown sources who had provided intelligence to the FEER journalists.¹⁶⁰ Apparently politicians like Meechai see no contradiction in limiting media freedom in Thailand on the one hand, whilst at the same time using public mediums like the internet to spread their own messages both locally and globally. Such unwitting and hypocritical behaviour of their political leaders provided even more

¹⁵⁸ Natee Vichitsorasatra. (2002, March 3). ‘FEER’ issue hits home on boards. *The Nation*, p. 7A.,

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Views on role, limits of press. (2002, March 3). *The Nation*, p. 2A.

incentive for young people, like the KKU students in my study, to feel justified in expressing their own opinions freely via the websites like Panthip.com and MThai.com. In more recent times it appears social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter may have gazumped sites like Panthip.com. When things took a turn for the worse during the Red Shirt protests in Thailand in April-May 2010, several Thai friends living overseas and in-country began posting the Thai flag as their Facebook profile picture as a show of unity, along with a flurry of posts on each others' walls discussing their concerns and calling for a peaceful and sensible resolution to the crisis. Again, my research assistant Bim reflects on this development in the context of her early internet usage as a student:

Had the Thaksin (red shirt protests) thing happened then, I don't think we would have been able to express our concern or form any kind of virtual unity that quickly. I think they have wi-fi all over the campus now. I'm so jealous of the students these days.¹⁶¹

LAO ISAN YOUTH AND TV

Viewing choices

All the young Lao Isan people in this study said they began watching TV as small children or toddlers, with one young man saying he had been watching "...since I started to remember things".¹⁶² Several students cited that their first memory of watching TV was

when they were in kindergarten. The majority of these young Lao Isan reported having access to TV in their own homes. However, several of the Rajabhat Mahasarakham students and Ruam Mit Bakery participants, who were from small rural villages in Isan, said although they had TV at home now, when they were younger they watched at a communal building that housed the only TV in the village. These young people

Rajabhat Mahasarakham students enjoy daytime TV at a friend's home.
Picture: Catherine Hesse-Swain, 2002.



¹⁶¹ Mamber, K. (2010, August 10). Personal communication.

¹⁶² Personal interview, Toto, Rajabhat Mahasarakham student, Mahasarakham, 6 August 2002.

reportedly began watching TV at a later age and watched less TV when they were children compared to their peers who had access to TV in the home:

- Catherine: When did you start watching TV?
Goong: When I was 10 years old.
C: Was there a TV at home then?
G: No, not at home back then. In the past, there was usually only one TV the whole village.
C: Did you watch it often then?
G: Sometimes.¹⁶³

Focus group and interview data revealed that these young people generally preferred drama (*lakhon*), comedy (*dtalok*), game shows, music shows and talkback shows. There were obviously quite distinct preferences amongst individuals about which particular programs within these TV genres they enjoyed. Channel 3, which has high *lakhon* content, was frequently mentioned as a favourite channel. Channels 5 and 9 were cited as good for contemporary music programs, like those produced by Grammy and RS¹⁶⁴ usually featuring Thai pop and *lukthung*. There was a definite gender division in the choice of viewing. While male and female youth said they enjoyed drama, males generally meant drama set in ancient times where the characters exhibit feats of superhuman martial art skills. They also appeared to enjoy *lakhon* set in contemporary urban-scape, usually Bangkok, and involving some kind of criminal or gang element. Female youth appeared to prefer soap opera-style *lakhon*, which centres on love, betrayal and infidelity, usually involving a so-called minor wife (*mia noi*). A majority of female participants enjoyed reading magazines published by the Thai TV networks that provide a brief synopsis of *lakhon* running at that time, known as *ruang yaw* (summary) *lakhon toerat* (TV) or *ruang yaw* for short. Young people from both genders said they also enjoyed Thai historical dramas.

Some young people preferred heavily commercialised *personality* game shows. Game show hosts are hugely popular throughout Thailand and their various attributes have

¹⁶³ Personal interview, Goong, Rajabhat Mahasarakham student, Ban Nong Phok, Kalasin, 17 April 2002.

¹⁶⁴ RS Public Company Limited is a Thai entertainment company with seven recording labels. It also produces programming for television, makes films, publishes magazines and promotes concerts. RS's seven recording labels under RS Music, embrace Thai pop, *lukthung*, rock, hip hop, rhythm and blues and easy listening.

elicited much discussion in focus group sessions. This will be discussed more fully in the following section on Lao Isan perceptions of beauty. Others in the study preferred serious game shows that test knowledge, such as *Fan Pan Tae* (Real Fan), for the very reason that these programs do not rely purely on ‘personalities’: “I like that the candidates get to use their knowledge... and it doesn’t have anything to do with looks.”¹⁶⁵ *Fan Pan Tae* was hosted by Thailand’s respected elder statesman of game show hosts, Panya Nirunkul, who began hosting on Thai TV in the early 1980s. *Fan Pan Tae* first went on air in 2000 and ran daily for seven years. Study participants across the focus groups were keen to watch *Fan Pan Tae* as part of our discussions. In one focus group session we watched *Fan Pan Tae* and the light-weight *Game Zone*, which is hosted by popular mainstream Thai TV and film actors. Most KKU participants preferred *Fan Pan Tae* because of Panya’s skill as a host, the diversity of the contestants who were ‘real people’ and the knowledge content of the program:

I like *Fan Pan Tae*. The reason is the same as Pui; I do not like to see movie stars ...the competitors have different work backgrounds, various occupations, and they know different things, but movie stars are only actors. I used to watch *Fan Pan Tae* when the chosen subject was Ultraman, and the competitors ranged from young children, to teenagers and the elderly. Some players had collected Ultraman models since they were young so it is no wonder they know Ultraman. While I was watching *Game Zone*, I had nothing to think about because it’s not serious.¹⁶⁶

The students who favoured *Game Zone* liked it for the very reason that it was light-weight so therefore more entertaining and relaxing to watch.



Game show host, Panya Nirunkul (Picture: courtesy *Bangkok Post*)

Many young Lao Isan in this study enjoyed music shows on a regular basis, including *morlam*, *lukthung* and *phlaeng pleuh chiwit*. Folk or country music (*lukthung*) shows are widely broadcast throughout Thailand and are easily recognisable for their extravagant colour and glittery stage settings and costumes. A substantial number of these feature Isan *lukthung* artists. Country-style *lukthung*, originating in the 1960s, represented the feelings and views of poor Isan rural dwellers and urban migrants who had left the region

¹⁶⁵ Youth focus group, Rajabhat Mahasarakham, Mahasarakham, 6 August 2002.

¹⁶⁶ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, 16 January 2002.

in search of work.¹⁶⁷ *Lukthung* has evolved to become a vehicle for expressing changing cultural, social, ethnic and political identities in diverse ways. The overlap between popular culture and politics is regularly played out in the Thai *lukthung* music genre. In 2002, when *lukthung* singer Arpaporn Nakhonsawan released a song that included lyrics paying tribute to Chart Pattana MP Pavena Hongsakul, for her work protecting women and children against domestic violence, both women enjoyed a photo opportunity with *The Nation* praising each other for their work.¹⁶⁸ For young Isan performers, *lukthung* is a 'place' where they can be both Isan and Thai. And for some, at least, *lukthung* provides interplay where they can tease out the socio-cultural tensions of identity politics in a playful and more palatable form for central Thai music lovers. When popular *lukthung* Isan artist Chakraphong Mongkhol released an album in September 2001, the title track *Mool Mod Mon* combined words from the Isan (Lao) and Thai languages as a way of expressing his *mixed* identity. *Mool* in Isan (Lao) means 'legacy', but in Thai it means 'trash'. Chakraphong uses a cross-lingual wordplay to warn women to be discerning in love and sex. Mr Badboy, *The Nation's* popular music 'critic', was less than effusive about Chakraphong's choice of words:

But while fans of the *look thung Isaan* singer up in the Northeast have picked up on the message conveyed by the lyrics, residents of the metropolis seem to be having a little difficulty not only in following the lyrics but also understanding the name of the song.¹⁶⁹

In 2002, RS Promotion, one of Thailand's two major Thai pop/rock recording labels established a subsidiary label RS Siam focusing on *lukthung* music. RS Promotion managing director at the time, Soopachai Nillawan, said *lukthung* had been largely ignored by mainstream music promoters because of its association with other genres like 'songs-for-life' and Isan *morlam* music. He argued that the move was designed to get away from the superficial *good looks* ethos that predominated in the pop genre and promote the more *down-to-earth* feelings of *lukthung*:

¹⁶⁷ Lockard, C. (2001). *Dance of Life: Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia*. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books), p. 162.

¹⁶⁸ Arpaporn sings praises of Pavena. (2002, July 18). *The Nation*, p. 4A.

¹⁶⁹ Mr Badboy says... (2001, September 25). *The Nation*, p. 8C.

Our policy is to attract all groups of listeners throughout the country. This time, we are pushing forward in the Isaan region, because we have a few releases of Noi Kaenchan's 'Bun Bangfai Mai Mee Ther' and Anan Jaidee's 'Roop Khao Krapao Ai'.¹⁷⁰

One of Thailand's most popular and prolific *lukthung* artists is the Isaan-born Jintara Poonlarp (จินตหรา พูนลาภ). Born in Roi Et province, Jintara is an example of how an *Isan-looking* girl can make in the world of popular Thai music. Jintara's foresight and ability to embrace the quintessential *fusion* approach to mainstream Thai music is perhaps one reason for her success. She performs in the *morlam*, *lukthung* and western-style pop music genres. One of her best-known songs is *Sao Isan plat tin* (Isan girl poor and far from home), which incorporates the characteristic *lukthung* themes of poverty, homesickness and an unfaithful lover. Other successful titles include the pop hits *Ma Tammai* (Why Did You Come?) and *Faen Ja* (My Love/My Boo/My Girl) recorded with popular *loog krueng* actor and pop artist Bird McIntyre. Like many popular Thai recording artists, Jintara made the transition into film and television in her first *lakhon* role in the historical Isaan drama *Nai Hoy Tamin* in 2001.



Jintara on the cover of her *Morlam sa on 8* album, which imitates Beyoncé's cover for *Dangerously in Love*.

While a number of my key informants play various traditional Isaan string and wind instruments commonly used in local Isaan music and *lukthung* performance, their preference was for playing contemporary 'songs for life' (*phlaeng pleuh chiwit*). The 'songs for life' movement emerged in the 1970s to reflect the growing disenchantment of urban students with the political and social elite of Thailand.¹⁷¹ At its genesis, *phlaeng pleuh chiwit* was influenced by the anti-war, protest song movement of northern American artists like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Phil Ochs, Arlo Guthrie and The Doors. According to contemporary Thai music researcher, Lamnao Eamsa-ard

¹⁷⁰ Look Thung Goes Mainstream. (2002, June 3). *The Nation*, p. 10A.

¹⁷¹ Lockhard, C., 2001, p. 162.

(himself an amateur ‘songs for life’ in the 1970s), these anti-authoritarian Thai artists borrowed musical styles, instruments (acoustic guitar), lyrical content and hippy-style dress from the West, but sang in their native Thai language.¹⁷²

Influential artists include the 1970s student activist band Caravan. The founders of Caravan, Surachai Jantimathawn (Nga Caravan) and Wirasak Sunthawnsi, were student activists at Ramkhamhaeng University at a time when the student movement was instrumental in toppling the dictatorial regime of Thanom Kittikachorn. Caravan’s music reflected sympathy with the struggling farming communities of Isan. One of the band’s most popular songs *Khon Kap Khwai* (Man and Buffalo) celebrates the relationship of rice farmers and their water buffalo. But with lyrics that include, “Come, let’s go now! Come, let’s go! Carry our ploughs and guns to the fields!” it was also a political statement by lyricists Somkit Singson and Visa Kantap, who were both critical of the Thanom regime. On the 6 October 1976, arguably the blackest day of Thailand’s modern political history, student protesters at Thammasat University in Bangkok were massacred during a military-led coup. On that particular day Caravan were playing live for students at Khon Kaen University.¹⁷³

Caravan was followed in the 1980s and 90s by second generation ‘songs for life’ bands like Carabao and Hammer (formerly Krasaetham) and solo artist, Pongsit Kampee, who remain hugely popular in Thailand today. The genre became mainstreamed during this period, with lyrics gravitating more broadly around social issues in the daily lives of ordinary Thais, including social problems like poverty, prostitution, the oppression of women, the struggles of working people and substance abuse. In his 2006 doctoral thesis on Thai popular music, Lamnao Eamsa-ard highlights how *phlaeng pleuh chiwit* artists in the 1980s began to satirise established social structures by exposing social inequities in contemporary Thai society. He cites the songs *Prachatipatai* (Democracy), *Kao-dee* (Good News) and *Puthon* (A Tolerant Person) by Carabao. Lamnao largely attributes the

¹⁷² Lamnao Eamsa-ard. (2006). *Thai Popular Music: The Representation of National Identities and Ideologies Within a Culture in Transition*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia, pp. 173.

¹⁷³ “Songs for Life: The origin of the political song movement”. From <http://www.seasite.niu.edu:85/Thai/music/song4life/songlife.htm>

gradual alignment of *phlaeng pleuh chiwit* music with more commercial music genres to the introduction of broader life themes and more patriotic content in Carabao's music between the 1980s and 2000s, with a distinct shift away from 'songs for life' as purely a vehicle of leftist ideology. *Khwampenthai* became the binding thread within Carabao's lyrics, pulling together themes of patriotism, Buddhism and politics to celebrate what it means to be Thai in a contemporary democratic Thailand. Perhaps one of Carabao's most popular and boisterously sing-a-long songs is the 1984 *Made in Thailand*. In the 1990s, Carabao participated in the Thai army's "Isan Khiaw" concert (Concert for a Green Northeast) to help raise funds for army projects in the region.¹⁷⁴

These lyrical demonstrations of allegiance to their Thai identity did not prevent Carabao from continuing to challenge the Thai government and ruling elite when controversy required. For instance, in 2001 they recorded *Purachai Curfew* criticising the Interior Minister's social order campaign. 'Songs for life' artists also rallied to drive social sympathy and support for victims of the 26 December 2004 tsunami that claimed the lives of at least 5,300 people on Thailand's western coastline and thousands more in other regions of south east and south Asia. Titles included *Tsunami* by Pongsit Kampee, *Sap Numta Undaman* (Sweeping Tears of the Andaman Sea) by Yuenyong Opakun and *Khop Khun* (Thank You) by Hammer. Carabao and other *phlaeng pleuh chiwit* artists have effectively re-framed the music genre within the mainstream Thai music scene by constantly reinterpreting contemporary Thai worldview and perceptions of identity – personal, social, political and ideological. This perhaps explains why this music genre, including live performances broadcast on Thai television channels, continues to attract upcoming generations – particularly rural Isan youth who are constantly negotiating identity issues around being Lao Isan within a larger Thai nation state, as well as continuing to grapple with poverty and development within their local communities.

¹⁷⁴ Lamnao Eamsa-ard, (2006), pp. 169-170.

Comedy appears to be the sole segment of the television entertainment industry where Isan people have been able to make their mark. Comedy shows featuring Isan comedians, such as the renowned Mam Jok Mok (Petchtai Wongkamlao เพ็ชรทาย วงษ์คำเหลา) from Yasothon Province, were popular with the young people in the study. Despite the success of such comedians being rooted in long-held identity stereotypes of Isan people being ignorant, silly and clownish, there is a definite element of Isan-pride to the popularity of these programs among Lao Isan youth.

- Pui: Genuinely, Khon Isan are simple, patient, hardworking and accommodating. We're not picky about work. When we are represented as comedians, it indicates our good sense of humour.
- Catherine: Do you think Isan has changed nowadays?
- Toto: I think Khon Isan are like other people. We're accepted in society. We're not looked down on anymore.¹⁷⁵

Another focus group member said he felt that comedians like Mam made Isan people feel better about themselves and that by code switching between Isan and Thai he brought people together.¹⁷⁶

Mam started his career as a comedian in the Bangkok café scene.¹⁷⁷ His popularity base grew significantly when he began making comedy appearances on the popular variety-game show *Ching Roi Ching Lan* (Challenge for 100 and a Million), which has been running since 1990 and is hosted by Panya Nirankul. Mam's popularity and facility as a comedian has been unashamedly built on his Isan identity. When he played the comic relief character in the popular 2003 Thai action film *Ong-Bak: Muay Thai Warrior*, he was called interchangeably George or 'Dirty Balls' from the Isan word *buk hum lare*. In the 2005 musical comedy *Yam Yasothon* (Hello Yasothon), which he wrote, directed and starred in, he plays a nightclub comedian in the rural Isan province of Yasothon in 1967. The film is viewed as paying homage to the Thai musical comedy films of the 1960s and 1970s. The dialogue was spoken entirely in *pasar* Lao (Isan). Thai subtitles were provided for Bangkok screenings. Mam's stellar television and film career in Thailand

¹⁷⁵ Youth focus group, Rajabhat Mahasarakham, Mahasarakham, 15 January 2002.

¹⁷⁶ Youth focus group, Chiang Mai, 7 November 2001.

¹⁷⁷ The café scene in Thailand actually refers to restaurants where live music and comedy is performed.

has been built on the central Thai popular notion of Khon Isan as clownish and uncouth; however, his success has also provided him with the opportunity to negotiate space in the Thai film industry for themes that integrate Lao Isan identity within mainstream perceptions of Thai history, while at the same time celebrating the independence of Lao Isan identity through the usage of the region's first language, *pasar Lao*. When Mam's sequel *Yam Yasothon 2* was released in 2009, Thai film critics had transformed 'uncouth' into 'spicy' and praised the Isan-pride elements of the film:

Just as much fun as the original and perhaps twice as colorful, *Yam Yasothon 2* is another heaping helping of spicy Isaan humour mixed with '60s-style fashions from comedian Phettai Wongkumlao, better known as Mum Jokmok, who writes, directs, produces and stars as Yam... The jokes are leavened with beautifully composed displays of Isaan handicrafts, dancing and folksongs – reflecting Mum's determination to promote and preserve his Northeastern heritage. Also, the movie is in Isaan dialect, with central Thai and English subtitles in most cinemas.¹⁷⁸

Yasothon-born comedian Mam Jok Mok, with co-star Janet Khiew, featured on the Thai movie promo poster for the 2005 *Yam Yasothon* (Hello Yasothon).



It is interesting to note that this film reviewer says the film is in 'Isaan dialect', which of course does not exist – Khon Isan speak Lao, not Isan as discussed in the previous chapter. Generations of Thais have grown up hearing representatives from Thai public institutions and media refer to *pasar Isan* as the language of Isan and hence they publicly adhere to the official rhetoric that it is a distinct *dialect* or language in its own right and not *pasar Lao*. Perhaps this is actually what many Thais now believe; however, that is the subject of another study. This study found that its young Lao Isan participants were fully cognisant that although the Thai state referred to their first language as *pasar Isan*, and indeed so did they, linguistically it was clearly *pasar Lao* they were speaking.

¹⁷⁸ Review: *Yam Yasothon 2*. (2009, December 4). *Wise Kwai's Thai Film Journal*. From <http://thaifilmjournal.blogspot.com/2009/12/review-yam-yasothon-2.html>

Frozen identity: Youth reactions to Thai TV portrayal of Khon Isan

Viewing Thai drama, comedy, game and music shows together often triggered discussion around how Khon Isan are portrayed in these programs. In particular, many study participants were fully attuned to the fact that Khon Isan are consistently cast in stereotypical roles such as peasant farmer, taxi driver, bar girl, labourer or servant,¹⁷⁹ and that these representations reinforce stigmatised notions of Khon Isan as poor, uneducated, uncouth and simple: “They (Khon Isan) are represented disrespectfully. They are created from the perspective of the producers and are not based on reality”.¹⁸⁰ Another student commented that “...they (TV producers) always represent us as servants and it makes us look like we aren’t educated”.¹⁸¹ MSU student, Tui, was quite strong in her opinion that Khon Isan actors were being discriminated against in Thai TV production:

- Tui: When we see Khon Isan on TV dramas, they are always guards, maids or something like that. In my personal opinion, I feel like that is all Khon Isan can be for them (the producers). Khon Isan can only play clowns.
- Catherine: Why do you think they only let Khon Isan have those kinds of role?
- T: Because Khon Isan are betrayed by their face.
- C: Do you want to see Khon Isan play the main roles?
- T: I’d like to.
- C: Do you think they have equal opportunity with stars from central Thailand?
- T: I don’t think so. For Khon Isan to become stars they need to be really talented or climb up gradually from lesser roles. Occasionally they stand out because of their other attributes like the famous boxer Somrak (Khamsing)¹⁸² and are given the opportunity to act.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ In recent times there have been some significant exceptions to the standard stereotyping of Khon Isan in Thai programming, such as the popular Thai comedy-drama *Mekong Full Moon* (2002), in which a range of local Isan characters (a university student, a physician and a university professor) are filmed in semi-documentary style expounding their various theories as to the origin or cause of the Naga fireballs that arise from the Mekong River in the Isan province of Nong Khai usually at full moon in late October.

¹⁸⁰ Personal interview, Boey, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, 2 October 2002.

¹⁸¹ Youth focus group, Rajabhat Mahasarakham, Mahasarakham, 6 August 2002.

¹⁸² Somrak Khamsing (สมรักษ์ คำสิงห์) is a nationally celebrated Thai boxer who was born in Khon Kaen in 1973. He has appeared in athletic roles in Thai movies, notably *Kerd ma lui* (Born to Fight), a 2004 action film directed by Panna Rittikrai, who also directed *Ong Bak: Muay Thai Warrior* that Isan comedian Mam Jok Mok appeared in. Prior to that he made several cameo appearances in Thai TV *lakhon*.

¹⁸³ Personal interview, Tui, Mahasarakham University student, Mahasarakham, 2 October 2002.

Several less politically savvy male students from Rajabhat Mahasarakham did not identify stereotyping as an issue:

- Catherine: Do you think Khon Isan have a chance to be stars?
Student: I think they can. I think so.
C: Who are some Isan stars you know?
S: Mainly unattractive Isan talents who like to perform and have fun, they mostly are comedians.
C: Most stars on TV are *loog krueng* and Khon Thai, few Isan actors. How do you feel about that?
S: It's normal for me. Anyone can be an actor, but ...I'd like to see people from my region as well. They would grab my attention.¹⁸⁴

This response demonstrates the confusion many of these young Lao Isan felt about how Khon Isan are imagined by the wider Thai public and their own response to those identity images. He wants to be confident about the opportunities Khon Isan have in Thai TV; however, he then goes on to identify *unattractive Isan talents* who work in comedy as his only real familiarity with Isan actors. One presumes he is referring to Yasothon-born comedian Mam Jok Mok. He says it is *normal* for Thai and *loog krueng* (those of mixed Thai and Western European parentage) actors to dominate Thai TV because *anyone can be an actor*, but then expresses a desire to see more Isan actors in Thai TV production. Study participant responses to the popularity of *loog krueng* actors and TV personalities will be discussed in the following chapter.

These young people often struggled to express how they felt about the stereotyping of Khon Isan on TV. They mostly felt that it was detrimental to Isan identity in the wider Thai context; however, at the same time they themselves were not convinced that Khon Isan could be represented in any other way:

- Catherine: Would you like to see Khon Isan play different roles on TV instead of always being a taxi driver or khon chai (servant)?
Little: Yes, I would love to see that change.
C: Why do you think it is difficult for producers to think of Khon Isan in a different way? Why do they think in stereotypes?

¹⁸⁴ Youth focus group, Rajabhat Mahasarakham, Mahasarakham, 6 August 2002.

Little: I think the typical Isan look is not that popular. In the first instance, in the show business or drama world it is really all about the good looks of the people. Therefore, they believe the actors and actresses should be really good looking. Generally speaking, Isan people do not have a great look for others. It would be hard for the wider Thai public to accept them (Khon Isan) as lead actors or actresses.¹⁸⁵

Similar comments were made by other Lao Isan in the study who themselves were obviously grappling with confidence issues around how non-Isan Thais perceived their physical appearance. Experiencing all the usual self-esteem issues that young people must weather in terms of evolving their sense of self-identity, these discussions further amplified the issue of being considered somehow inferior, particularly in terms of physical beauty, than their fellow Thais from other regions of the country. These issues will be further expanded in the following chapter.

In this chapter I have attempted to capture the daily lives of this young Isan generation, through discussions of their recreational reading, listening and viewing preferences and tease out connections between their interests and expressions of Isan identity. There appears to be a stronger alignment between the musical and recreational interests of rural students and their sense of *khwampenisan*, compared to their urban peers who have been more strongly influenced by mainstream Thai and global entertainment genres. This discussion also reveals that the socio-political contextual backdrop to these lives being lived – of moral panic rhetoric generated by the government of the day – contrasts sharply with my findings of open campus life and the freedoms experienced by students away from parents and the home village. The reality of these students' lives and their ability to negotiate productively within their new-found autonomy further reinforces the sense of disproportionate force being then promoted publicly by the Thaksin government.

¹⁸⁵ Personal interview, Little, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, 5 September 2002.

Chapter Four: PROGRAMMING BEAUTY – GENDER, THE ABSENCE OF NA LAO AND THE PREOCCUPATION WITH CAO SUAY

...Isan look is not beautiful to Thai people so if you are Khon Isan or you have *na lao*, what we call *na lao* – Lao face or Isan face. If you have *na lao* you cannot be famous – oh you can be famous but you cannot be what we call beautiful or handsome.”

Khon Kaen University graduate, April 2002

Anyone who has visited Thailand in the past decade will have noticed the presence of female beauty as a vehicle for national identity construction – from the sweetly sensual Thai Airways flight attendant, to the graceful traditional Thai dancer on the tourist beat, to the stiletto-wearing girls on the catwalk of local, regional and national beauty contests. It is therefore not surprising that a constantly emerging theme in discussions with Lao Isan youth is what constitutes beauty and the overwhelming significance of beauty to success in Thailand. How young Lao Isan people define and assign beauty is heavily constructed by central Thai perceptions of beauty and fed by popular Thai television programming and advertising. Penny Van Esterik (2000) argues that “Awareness of the body’s surface appearance is basic to Thai gender identity” and speaks of how young Thai women “...literally reconstruct their identities in Bangkok’s shopping malls”.¹⁸⁶ Perceptions of physical beauty in the construction of Thai gender relations is a heavily researched subject.¹⁸⁷ This chapter aims to examine this subject specifically from the viewpoint of Lao Isan youth, television consumption and Lao Isan identity constructions. It is important, however, to firstly discuss elements of gender roles and relationships as they have historically evolved in Thailand and more specifically how they are acted out in the Isan region today.

¹⁸⁶ Van Esterik, P. (2000). *Materialising Thailand*. (Oxford / New York: Berg) p. 207.

¹⁸⁷ Penny Van Esterik’s publication *Materialising Thailand* (2000) is a comprehensive and coherent exploration of the complex relationships between beauty, race, power and rank in Thailand.

FRAMING GENDER

Contemporary scholarly (mostly foreign) debate on pre-modern construction of gender identities and relationships in Thailand largely gravitates around how Buddhist doctrine interprets the role of men and women in the process of reaching enlightenment. These debates are relevant to the evolution of gender relations for Lao living in what is now the northeast Isan region of the Thai nation state, who – though ethnically Lao – lived within the same Buddhist worldview. The core of these arguments is around the role of women as child bearers and nurturers of sons who they then relinquish to the monkhood or the *Sangha*.¹⁸⁸ Some have argued that this key role in pre-modern Buddhist society meant that Thai women suffered more attachment to the material world. This attachment was used as rationalisation for men asserting superiority over women in the secular aspects of wider Thai society, such as in the labour force and community organisational structures. Others have supported the thesis that Buddhist doctrine has inherently led to an uneven culture of gender in Thailand by arguing that women's historical role in economic activities bound them even more closely to the prosaic world and hence further from enlightenment.¹⁸⁹ Paradoxically, women's attachment to the material world through their role as mothers and money handlers seemingly gave men leverage to take control of the larger Thai political and social world. Controversial Buddhist feminist Khin Thitsa points out that foreign scholars have often fatuously assumed that Thai women's traditional and modern-day links to the economy provide them with higher social status. However, from within the Thai Buddhist worldview both women and money are considered pollutants

¹⁸⁸ The *Sangha* is the commonly used Thai term when referring collectively to Thailand's 'community of monks'.

¹⁸⁹ The following references provide a more detailed reading of this debate: Darunee Tantiwramanond and Shashi Pandey. (1987). The Status and Role of Thai Women in the Pre-Modern Period: A Historical and Cultural Perspective. *Sojourn*, 2 (1), 125-49; Kameniar, B. (2009). Thai Buddhist Women, 'Bare Life' and Bravery. *Australian Religion Studies Review*, 22 (3), 281-294. Keyes, C.F. & Daniel, V. (1984). Cultural/Ethnology: Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry. *American Anthropologist*, 86 (4), 1002-1005; Keyes, CF. (1987). Theravāda Buddhism and its Worldly Transformations in Thailand: Reflections on the Work of S.J. Tambiah. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 21 (1), 123-145; and, Van Esterik, P. (1982). Laywomen in Theravada Buddhism. In *Women of Southeast Asia*, edited by Penny Van Esterik, 55-78. Center for Southeast Asia Monograph Series. (Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press).

and the potential cause of spiritual corruption, which is why monks are not permitted to make physical contact with either.¹⁹⁰

Those arguing that the pre-modern Thai Buddhist worldview subjugated women, variously cite the following prohibitions on women's ability to equalise both their spiritual and their worldly status with men:

- women's exclusion from formal education and literacy, which could only be accessed in the *Sangha*;
- the prevention of women from becoming fully ordained in the Bhikkhuni *Sangha* (the female equivalent of the male Theravada Bhikku *Sangha*) because of the historical *technicality* of there never having been a Bhikkhuni *Sangha* established in Thailand; and,
- the general religious and wider social disrespect for the status of women who become Buddhist nuns or *mae chii*.

Like Thai monks, *mae chii* renounce the material pursuits of the everyday world, donning robes, shaving their heads and eyebrows and committing to a life of abstinence and spiritual merit making. However, they are regarded as spiritually inferior to monks and are not legally accepted as part of the Thai *Sangha*. This means they cannot seek alms from their lay supporters as monks in Thailand do and must support themselves. This inherent discrimination against Thai Buddhist women has survived to present-day Thailand, as Thai literature scholar and translator Susan Fulor Kepner comments:

In the current climate, a Thai woman who is a recognised Buddhist scholar or meditation teacher, or both (there are several such women in Thailand), would *lose* status by donning the white robe, shaving her head and entering the official religious life that is allowed to women. In general, to be a nun is to become invisible; to become a nun who rejects invisibility is to be regarded as an eccentric. She is either a woman who doesn't understand Buddhism, or maladjusted or neurotic in some way, and therefore either does not want or cannot achieve a normal woman's life.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Khin Thitsa. (1980). *Providence and Prostitution: Image and Reality in Buddhist Thailand*. Monograph. (London: CHANGE International Reports), p.23.

¹⁹¹ Kepner, S.F.. (1996). Introduction. In *The Lioness in Bloom: Modern Thai Fiction about Women* (Ed. & Trans.). (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 36.

Sexy but sensible: Sketching Isan gender culture

These gender and Buddhism debates served the very important role of raising the profile of the historical study of gender in Thailand. Several scholars have made the point, however, that aspects of these debates gravitated around cultural norms and traditions in central Thailand where the state asserted more influence over village life, and excluded the more gender-balanced traditional practices and rituals in the northern and northeast regions of Thailand (Isan).¹⁹² These practices are generally described as more equitable division of domestic and farm labour in rural peasant settings, equal land inheritance by sons and daughters, dowry payments from the groom to the bride's family and preference for post-marital habitation in the wife's family home. These family and social traditions have been credited as sources of increased economic status and security for women in the north and Isan regions.¹⁹³

The status of women in the Isan region of Thailand traditionally revolved around central importance of rice production as the economic and social binder of rural community life. Through their matrilineal inheritance of land, the post-marital residence pattern of the man joining his wife's household and women's role in reproducing children as future contributors to the village labour force, women occupied a critical place in the communal network of rice production. With the advent of capitalist economic development, the Isan economy has shifted dramatically from subsistence production to cash based cropping and migrant labour. Women's status in the village community has been significantly disrupted and to some extent compromised. Medical anthropologist Andrea Whittaker describes this transition:

¹⁹² Suchada Thaweessit. (1997). *The Cultural Construction of Women's Sexuality in Contemporary Thailand*. Unpublished M.A. paper, University of Washington, Department of Anthropology.

¹⁹³ Mills, M.B. (1999). *Thai Women in the Global Labour Force: Consuming Desires, Contested Selves*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press) p. 94.

...the extension of capitalist relations of production in daily village life... has eroded many of the former bases of women's status in village communities, separated the reproductive sphere from the productive sphere, disrupted their links to land and matrilineal kin through migration, and exposed them to new, 'modern' values, practices and representations of women. Simultaneously new status markers and meanings are evolving for women, yet often these are beyond the access of village women with low education and skills and few economic resources.¹⁹⁴

My research indicates that it is not only poor village women at the household level who are grappling with external constructions of their status in contemporary Thailand. Young Isan women are also scrambling to make sense of their place in a world that outwardly subscribes to *samai mai* (new times), but often reverts to the moral and social expectations of *samai kau* (old times). This will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

While understandings of gender roles are not the only contributor to social and cultural identity, in the late 1980s Mills found that gender meanings in the rural provinces of Isan were significant and communicated through social behavioural norms, such as limiting physical contact between men and women.¹⁹⁵ In the early 1990s, Pamela DaGrossa carried out a study on the meanings of sex to students at the Srinakharinwirot University (SWU) in Mahasarakham, since renamed Mahasarakham University (MSU). DaGrossa describes the students in her study as growing up in an environment *saturated in sex*, a society that is "...a highly sexed and sexualized one, though one that has social rules defining the appropriate expression of sex".¹⁹⁶ DaGrossa argues that historically Isan culture was relatively open and tolerant of diverse expressions of sexuality and sexual behaviour. Sex was natural part of the cycle of life and sexual satisfaction in marriage for both genders was expected and appreciated. With appropriation of the northeast Lao region into the Thai nation state, this open attitude to sexual identity and behaviour was subsumed into defined gender roles more befitting central Thai understandings of cultural identity.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Whittaker (2000), p. 27.

¹⁹⁵ Mills (1999), pp. 94-94.

¹⁹⁶ DaGrossa, P.S. (2003). *The meanings of sex: University students in northeast Thailand*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii, p. 7.

¹⁹⁷ DaGrossa (2003), p. 7.

DaGrossa's narrative of Mahasarakham in the early 1990s describes an environment where historically-based Lao Isan understandings of sexual openness converge with sexy globalising media and advertising images and messages from Bangkok and overseas. Yet despite this *saturation*, conservative central-Thai cultural rules about sexual propriety and behaviour are maintained, at least on the surface. Women are expected to maintain sexual self-control and abstain from sexual intimacy outside of marriage, or at least outside of a commitment to marriage. Men are encouraged to seek sexual experience from their early teens as part of their transition into the masculine adult world. Similar to my perception that university life brought increased social freedom and autonomy to young Isan people, DaGrossa identifies university culture as a liberalising factor in reducing uneven status between young men and women based on fixed gender culture ideology:

The restrictions separating men and women in their home lives are lessened at the university due to the normal, everyday activities associated with being a student ...students see value in forming friendships with members of the other sex, as companions, study-partners, and advisors. Mixed sex friendships usually do not draw attention if the friends are conscientious of appearance. That is, as long as students keep their time together public, are open about their friendship, and are not physically affectionate, their relationship is socially accepted.¹⁹⁸

Any discussion of contemporary gender culture in Thailand needs to take into account the significant role of *bun khun* between parents and their children. *Bun khun* literally pertains to one who receives meritorious goodness from another. Within the context of the parent-child relationship, this concept encapsulates the fundamental emotional transaction that binds a parent to their child and vice versa. Parents – by giving life, protecting, nurturing and raising their children into adulthood – lavish untold meritorious goodness on them. In return, children are obligated to reciprocate with gratitude (*kattanyu*) and respect (*khwaam naphúú*). Traditionally, girls repaid their debt by fulfilling family obligations – sharing the labour load with their mothers and developing traditional domestic skills like weaving and other crafts, as well as maintaining social propriety in their relations with the opposite sex and making a good marital match. A son's repayment of *bun khun* was most commonly expressed through being ordained in the *Sangha*, a merit-making activity that can be achieved at any time in their lives, not just when they

¹⁹⁸ DaGrossa (2003), p. 246.

are young. DaGrossa reports that traditionally Isan families relied on the youngest married daughter to contribute a larger proportion of assistance to her parents in household labour. As the last to marry, the youngest daughter was required to remain in the family home to care for her aging parents.¹⁹⁹ Ara Wilson (2004), in her ethnographic study of identities, relationships and economies in a globalised Bangkok, views traditional patterns of kinship indebtedness as a kind of commerce in its own right, one that reaches beyond just family relationships:

Exchange is the idiom and mechanism for many, if not most, relationships in Thailand: parent-child, senior-junior, husband-wife, and son-in-law to wife's family, laity-monk, human-spirit, and friend-friend... This calculus is part of a folk economy and remains crucial to defining and evaluating gender, sexual, and familial identities in Thailand.²⁰⁰

Discussions with the young Lao Isan in my research reveal that these traditional residence patterns and forms of repaying *bun khun* have shifted significantly from their parents' and grandparents' generations. *Bun khun* remains a strong family binder; however, both young men and women (certainly in the university and rajabhat groups) largely intended to live and work in regional centres like Khon Kaen and Ubon Ratchathani or in Bangkok, and not to return to their parental home on completion of their studies. Both sons and daughters were more likely to express their gratitude and respect to their parents by providing financial support and social status through their chosen profession, rather than through the sharing of family labour. The more economically and socially disadvantaged youth in the Ruam Mit Bakery group, however, mostly intended to return to their home village and parental home to establish a small business once their vocational training was finished. This indicates that access to and level of education was a key contributor to shifting the fixed gender roles that have emerged through the *bun khun* family paradigm.

¹⁹⁹ DaGrossa (2003), p. 194.

²⁰⁰ Wilson, A. (2004). *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons and Avon Ladies in the Global City*. (Berkeley: University of California Press) pp. 13-14.

My research findings support DaGrossa's experience of *bun khun* playing a levelling role in the development of intimate relationships between the young students in her study. Both female and male students in my focus groups consistently reported having good companionable friendships with members of the opposite sex, but these were contained due to a mutual understanding that romance would undermine their focus on their studies and belonged in a post-graduate world. Likewise, DaGrossa discovered that while the university environment allowed more freedom for romance and sexual intimacy to develop, such relationships were largely kept in check by these young people's primary goal to achieve well in their studies and honour their parental debt.²⁰¹ The continuing role of *bun khun* in family relationships will be further explored in Chapter Five on generational shifts.

WHO ARE WE EXPECTED TO BE? THE NEW GENERATION OF LAO ISAN WOMEN

This changing landscape of family indebtedness and residence patterns obviously bodes well for young Lao Isan women, who often expressed relief that they would not be indebted to follow the same life pattern as their mothers and grandmothers in household and farm labour. They could repay *bun khun* through financially supporting their parents and at the same time pursue interesting careers and enjoy more independent lifestyles. Yet despite this tangible sense of increasing autonomy, female study participants also appeared to be negotiating between inconsistent cultural expectations and discourse, based sometimes on traditional Lao Isan gender roles and other times on the fulfilment of becoming an upwardly mobile and financially able contemporary woman – the *than samai* woman – as messaged via mainstream Thai media and advertising. These young women expressed a range of conflicting anxieties about social expectations for them to be married by a certain age and at the same time wishing to protect themselves from the fates of their mothers and grandmothers, who were primarily assigned the role of *mae bahn* (housewife and mother) and who often had to endure the hurt, humiliation and financial impacts of their husband taking a minor wife or *mia noi*.

²⁰¹ DaGrossa (2003), pp. 246-247.

The tradition of married Thai men routinely taking a *mia noi* is a key gender equity issue in mainstream Thai society. Married men will often have a complete *other* family with their *mia noi*, a situation that throws up all sorts of gender equity issues for women in terms of financial security, inheritance, and social hierarchy and bias. Young women in my KKU focus group frequently expressed complete distrust of the institution of marriage in Thailand, given the high likelihood of a Thai husband taking a *mia noi*. They often said they favoured *farang* (western) men over Thai men as husbands, based on their understanding from foreign media that marriages in the West were more open and equitable. Whilst they enjoyed male friendships in their student environment, they also felt that these same male friends would become like *other* Thai men once they married because of social pressure to conform to masculine stereotypes, particularly in relation to sex. These views reflect a significant trend over the past two decades for Isan women, primarily from poorer rural villages, to marry western men and migrate overseas with their husbands. A survey, conducted by the northeast region's National Economic and Social Development Board in 2004, found that a total of 19,594 women from 19 Isan provinces chose to marry western men.²⁰² My female participants' articulation of preference for marrying *farang* men is supported in localised ethnographic research carried out by Ratana Tosakul in 2004-2005. Through her fieldwork in a village in Roi Et province, Ratana found that while Isan women who marry *farang* men and live overseas retain a strong sense of their ethnic Lao Isan identity, they embody the discursiveness of identity formation in their simultaneous creation of:

...a social space where traditions, norms and practices of gender, marriage and sexuality are exposed to inquiry and negotiations ...they are conscious social actors who aspire to attain economic success by redefining and reinterpreting their cultural values in light of their own local cultural practices and those introduced by Western thinking.²⁰³

Ratana's local research supports the female students' belief that western husbands would generally provide a more egalitarian marriage, including freedom to own their bodies and

²⁰² Ratana Tosakul (2010). Cross-border Marriages: Experiences of Village Women from Northeastern Thailand with Western Men. In W.S. Yang & M. Chia-Wen (Eds.), *Asian Cross-border Marriage Migration: Demographic Patterns and Social Issues*. International Institute for Asian Studies Publication Series, Edited Volumes 2, 179-199. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 177.

²⁰³ Ibid, pp. 177 & 198.

their sexuality. Interestingly, emerging research and commentary²⁰⁴ on cross-border marriages between Thai (including Isan) women and *farang* men largely talks about marginalised village women seeking relationships outside their cultural home. However, the young female university students in my study, who expressed a preference for mixed racial union with a westerner, were generally more socio-economically and educationally advantaged than the cohort represented in published studies. Other than Eu, whose parents are rice farmers in provincial Khon Kaen, and Noi, whose parents are gardeners and vendors in a village in Loei; the other six female KCU students in my study came from urban areas with parents who were civil servants – primarily teachers. It appears that local discourse surrounding the positive outcomes of cross-border marriage with *farang* men is spreading further than the village space. This chapter is concluded with a case study of Bim’s marriage to an American air services officer she met while working as an interpreter.

These young women’s concerns about marrying Thai men are not exaggerated; young women in Thailand today approach conjugal relations against a socially challenging backdrop of high rates of domestic violence against women and a dearth of social justice mechanisms to support abandoned and single women, often with responsibility for both their own children and their elderly parents. Further exploration of the *mia noi* issue is contained in Chapter Six – a case study of the lakhon *Suer Si Foon*.

Female study participants raised views and concerns about wider Thai societal discrimination against single women and unmarried mothers and levels of domestic violence against women. These are warranted concerns; however, what intrigued me was the lack of ideological understanding of both contemporary feminism and gender equality issues. Discussions around issues of sexual and domestic violence were rarely touched upon when focus groups comprised both genders; however, male participants did offer opinions in their observations of the *lakhon Suer Si Foon*, which will be examined in Chapter Six. The following focus group discussion was between all female participants:

²⁰⁴ See Ratana (2010); Patcharin Lapanun (2010); Reynolds (2006).

- Student: Thai society doesn't accept single women.
- S: That's right.
- Catherine: A single woman looks worse than a single man?
- S: Yes. I don't mean gays, however an older man can get married in their 40s or 50s.
- S: And also it doesn't look bad if an older guy gets married to a younger girl, but it's weird if an older woman does that with a young guy.
- S: Saying that a 40-year-old woman is getting married sounds weird to me. People would say why is she getting married. She's too old to have a baby so she has no need to get married.
- Bim (RA): And it's a problem for guys getting married late because people will consider he's gay?
- S: Guys will be considered gay and woman will be considered unattractive dinosaurs.
- C: What is the acceptable age to get married?
- S: About 27-28 for me.
- S: 27-32
- S: 27-28 is ok for me
- S: 25 is ok
- S: 26 is the age to look for the right one and 27 for preparing to get married.

Later in the same discussion, these young women opined that unmarried mothers were still not accepted in Thai society and suffered wide discrimination. What is interesting in this conversation is that whilst the young women express dissatisfaction with the inequity of older single women being discriminated against – as opposed to older single men who do not suffer the same discrimination – they also buy into mainstream social stereotypes about older women being ugly and barren by identifying their preferred medium age for marriage as 27–28, and certainly well before 40. For them, the primary reason for marriage appears to be to produce children. This indicates a struggle between what they know intellectually to be fair in relationships between men and women, and what they habitually believe must happen due to social expectations. I believe that this conflict is partly the result of growing up largely removed from a cultural framework of organised feminist struggle, whereby issues of gender equity are subsequently enshrined in law and effectively communicated at the community and family level through a participatory and pro-active process. This is not to say that women living in Thailand are apolitical and have not and do not organise themselves collectively around issues of feminism and equal rights, but merely that exposure to this struggle for many of the young Lao Isan

women in this study appears to have been limited to the occasional vicarious outrage in the national media around domestic violence stories.

This brings me to my next example. In one all-female workshop at Khon Kaen University, I asked for views on Interior Minister Purachai's crusade to rid Thailand of immoral behaviours, particularly his latest campaign to bar women who turn up alone at night spots from entering (for their own safety). All of the young women said it was fine – a good idea because women were being protected and they must be *weird* (read immoral) to want to go to clubs alone anyway. I was genuinely shocked by their response and asked them whether this meant it would be acceptable to protect women by asking them to dress more conservatively, for example. They were all surprised to think about this issue in this way. There appeared to be no awareness or feeling for women's rights as an intellectual framework – no previous echoes for them to draw on. When I commented that a number of women's rights groups, academics and journalists in Bangkok were against the move, they seemed genuinely surprised; but they still all agreed that the ban was acceptable because it only affected one group in Thailand's population. They didn't seem to realise that they were part of this group. I wrote in my field journal at the time:

Later on I thought that I could not judge them. I had grown up with the ideology of feminism being an overt signifier. I had been educated to understand the concept of 'equal rights'. It was as familiar as cleaning my teeth, but not so in Isan.²⁰⁵

Domestic violence is often graphically depicted in Thai *lakhon* where the main plot centres around infidelity and jealousy, as well as in print media coverage of cases where domestic violence has resulted in the death of the female victim. For this reason perhaps, several young women in the study were more informed regarding the role of women's rights activists in raising awareness of domestic violence in Thailand and the failure of government to adequately enforce laws that protect women and educate the populace on women's rights issues. An interesting discussion on domestic violence and law was triggered by watching an episode of the Channel 3 TV soapie *Ruam Pon Khon Chai* (Maids all together), that depicted a street scene where an angry husband verbally abuses

²⁰⁵ Field Journal entry, Khon Kaen University, 19 February 2002.

his wife and attempts to physically attack her in full view of the *lakhon* heroine's *somtam* (Isan papaya salad) trolley:

- Catherine: Do you think that domestic violence is common in Thailand between husband and wife or the family?
- Student 1: Not common.
- Student 2: It's hard to know because how can we see if it is happening in every day life. It's not really acceptable to try to cover it up, but we do try to avoid the fact that it really exists in our society.
- C: I agree with that too. Why isn't it recognised in the community?
- S 2: Because people don't like to make others the subject of talk because this will lead to gossip after the fight.
- C: Do you think it could be better? If this is a social problem and it was talked about in the community more, then women [victims] may have the opportunity to get protection?
- S 2: About protecting women – yes I think it would be better as we are well aware of how Thai society works and that men are always more empowered in the family situation. Many of us are not brave enough to face the fact that Thai men beat their spouses or something like that. So it's time for a new age. There's a women activist and politician named Paveena Hongsakul²⁰⁶. She is leading the fight for the protection of women in Thai society. This changes a lot of things and encourages Thai women to reveal abuse by their spouse. So I think it would be better if we make official women's right to protection from domestic violence in Thailand.²⁰⁷

The first female student states that domestic violence is not prevalent in Thai society. She is directly contradicted by her fellow female student who believes that it exists behind closed doors. Further into the discussion, when asked whether they personally knew anyone who had been the victim of domestic violence, examples provided were one step removed. One female student said her mother, who was a teacher at a community school in another district, taught a woman who had been regularly beaten by her husband. I often felt that my young study participants were more comfortable discussing sensitive issues in a way that did not directly implicate them in the stories they were narrating. Established styles of interpersonal communications in Thailand are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five on generational shifts. In her ensuing comments about the protection of women, the forthright student above uses as her starting point the widely

²⁰⁶ Paveena Hongsakul is well known in Thailand for her work protecting women and children against domestic violence. She is referred to in the previous chapter.

²⁰⁷ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 5 September 2002.

held belief (in her view) that men are dominant in the family situation. Further discussion on law making and enforcement of women's rights developed around the very high profile and controversial case of Dr Pipat who beat his wife to death and received only a three-year suspended sentence:

Catherine: In terms of domestic violence and violence towards women, do you think that the fact that the judge decided on a suspended sentence is a reflection of the relaxed attitude to women's rights?

Student: I don't think it's about women's rights, but more concerned with the law.

C: Don't you think that the law should protect women's rights?

S: Well the people who issue the law are mainly men and it seems to me that these laws benefit men more than women. There have been campaigns for women's rights, but we need specific laws to protect women's rights. For example, it would be rare for the government to give strong support or official support to set up or back any type of women's rights protection organization in Thailand. There are laws for women's protection but they are conflicting so are not really that effective when put into practice.

C: You mean they are contradictory? Do you think that women's rights groups in Thailand are doing a good job?

S: Well good on one level, but not overall. They have encouraged women to care more about their rights.

C: Making people aware, what about you?

S: For me I don't think they're doing a good job just yet. Successes won't be achieved by the women's rights groups until they are able to attract major attention in the media. They need to be more comprehensive – working on prevention – being there at the very first stage of the problem and not just at the very final or mediation stage.²⁰⁸

RHETORIC VS REALITY: THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY IN THAI GENDER RELATIONS

The young women quoted above may not have a sophisticated understanding of the evolution of Thailand's international commitments and domestic legislative framework pertaining to the protection of women; however, what they do *get* is that laws alone cannot protect women unless there is a wider shift in the cultural and social attitudes of people towards the rights of women and gender equity. Through the often graphic and vicariously oriented media coverage of domestic violence cases, they are able to identify

²⁰⁸ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 5 September 2002.

the lack of authentic commitment by their political leaders in bringing about long-term change. And they are not wrong. Despite ratifying the United Nations Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985 and recognising the Program of Action adopted in 1994 at Cairo's International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), many Thai social activists and researchers argue that Thailand has failed to establish clear political commitment and dedicated programs of action to implement the goals of these two major international conventions. In a 2010 progress report on sexual and reproductive health and rights in Thailand, Suchada Thaweessit and Pimpawan Boonmongkon noted that:

...laws, regulations and programs designed to engage with the issues are imbedded in moral judgement and male-dominated norms. It is widely accepted that sexuality education is an important measure for addressing adolescent sexual and reproductive health problems and is fundamental for protecting sexual rights of female adolescents. Similarly, an increase in awareness of sexual violence against women and girls as well as clear legislation with respect to sexual harassment will serve as a key to enhance women's well being and assure women's rights.²⁰⁹

A quick stock take of English-language print media reportage²¹⁰ throughout 2002, my data collection year, reveals growing public debate around glaring disparities between women's circumstances and participation in Thai society and that of men. Teenage prostitution and trafficking of women and children continued to escalate, with men being both operators and clients in this lucrative industry.²¹¹ Women were significantly under-represented in national decision-making bodies in 2002, with only 46 female MPs among 500 in the House of Representative and 19 female senators among 200.²¹² In 2005 the number of women had dropped to 16 MPs and 10 senators.²¹³ Not surprisingly women's issues rarely get priority in parliamentary and legislative debate. Protection of women in

²⁰⁹ Suchada Thaweessit & Pimpawan Boonmongkon. (2009). *Sexuality Education and Sexual Harassment: Two Critical Issues on Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights in Thailand*. (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: The Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW)), p. 8.

²¹⁰ *The Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* are the two major dailies published in Thailand today. They largely follow the same topical news content as the Thai-language dailies, but with less gratuitous photographic coverage than has come to characterise mainstream Thai print and broadcast media.

²¹¹ More teen prostitutes in park. (2002, March 18). *The Nation*, p. 6A; Trafficking of women is key concern. (2002, March 6). *The Nation*, p. 3A.

²¹² Perfect day to foster rights. (2002, March 8). *The Nation*, p. 4A.

²¹³ *Reproductive Health of Women in Thailand: Progress and Challenges towards Attainment of International Development Goals*. United Nations Population Fund, 2005, p. 7.

criminal law continued to lag behind the rhetoric of equal rights being enshrined in the Thai Constitution and ratification of CEDAW and other international initiatives based on the protection and empowerment of women. For example, rape in marriage remains an unpunishable crime under Thai criminal law. Women are still legally prevented from retaining their family name after marriage. Women make up 45 per cent of the labour force, predominantly in the agricultural, industrial and services sectors. Occupational segregation by gender is glaring with women being twice as likely to be engaged in services and sales, while the reverse is true of men engaged in professional, legislative and managerial positions.²¹⁴

Lurking within a bleak gender landscape of reportage on domestic violence, rape, prostitution, botched abortion, human trafficking and poverty, there were two particular print news pieces in 2002 that illuminated entrenched cultural gender belief and the enormity of shifting cultural and social understandings of gender equity in Thailand. The first was a *Nation* review of a play *You're Gorgeous Honey!* penned by Chulalongkorn University interior design student Sompoj Chitkaesornpong and in the running for a 2002 Sodsai Award, Thailand's first playwriting competition established in 1995. The plot centres around beauty salon owner Maesa whose "...gorgeous eldest daughter Kumpa was gang raped and since then feels that all men are her boyfriends".²¹⁵ The reviewer appears impressed by the way the script confronts Thai male attitudes to physical beauty, while the audience accepts a plotline that trivializes the gravity of the crime of gang rape by depicting the victim's response to her trauma in such a way. Having worked with female Karen refugees and children recovering from torture trauma, including gang rape by Burmese soldiers, I was repelled by the ludicrous and crass notion that a gang rape victim would respond by viewing all men as her boyfriends. Beyond my personal response, however, it does not take much effort to imagine the kind of media frenzy and social debate such a plotline would ignite in countries in the West, where gang rape is viewed socially and criminally as a heinous act of violence against women (and men). The second article in the social pages of *The Nation* was a lightweight banter entitled

²¹⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

²¹⁵ Pawit Mahasarinand. (2002, June 2). Sodsai saving the best for last? *The Nation*, p. 12B.

“Pretty little hi-sos” about how a number of off-shore children’s clothing design companies were using the daughters (aged 10–14) of Thai socialites to model their new season collections. *Hi-so* is a Thai term that refers to the people and lives of so-called *high society* (i.e. those rich, famous, influential or of celebrity status) in Thailand:

The runway is reserved exclusively for these privileged young models, since rich kids are the targeted customers of luxury children’s casual wear... The clothes to be modelled will feature vivid spaghetti stripes, body-tight T-shirts with matching micro-skirts... Taking their parents’ place at a social function, the young ladies will be dressed in elegant lace evening gowns. The children may appear worldly beyond their years, but given their lineage we can hardly blame them.²¹⁶

There are two reasons I have chosen this article to analyse. Firstly, the overwhelmingly sycophantic tone of the writer towards the privileged classes of Thailand implies blithe acceptance of the stark social and wealth gap between the privileged few or *phu yai* (important people) and the rest of Thailand’s populace – that the class structure in Thailand is not only fixed and immovable but that the higher status of these people is somehow intrinsically admirable. Secondly, the lack of awareness of the gender equity implications of socially sexualising young girl children as women long before they become adults. Inappropriate sexualising of girl children through merchandising and advertising is an issue of increasing concern in the west. However, the situation in Thailand is perhaps more concerning from the perspective of Thai women suffering from a long tradition of discrimination. Gender equality has not yet surfaced as a mainstream issue that is collectively recognised in political and social forums to the same extent as this has been occurring in the west, via the process of post-modern feminism borne out of the 1960s women’s movement.

From the tender age of two, my blond-haired daughter was repeatedly told by young Thai female shop assistants and market vendors in Chiang Mai that she was ‘sex-y’. I acknowledge that cross-linguistic confusion may contribute to the inappropriate use of this English word. However, there is cause to suspect that heavy exposure to the sexualised marketing messaging of multinational women’s cosmetic and apparel companies over the past few decades has reinforced mainstream Thai preoccupations

²¹⁶ Tanita Saenkham. (2002, May 31). Pretty little hi-sos. *The Nation*, p. 12A.

with the physical beauty of women. This brings to mind a Thai commercial being aired on commercial TV during my research period. The commercial was for fashion thongs and depicts a handsome Thai guy in a hammock at the beach. Teenage girls gather at his feet admiring his thongs and when he removes his Panama hat he falls backwards in the sand. This advertisement employed the western genre of sexy beach babes giggling over a man.²¹⁷ This seemed a strange advertising concept for Thailand where feet represent the lowest part of the body and it is social taboo to point your feet in the direction of someone's face or head. Western marketing of beauty as a commodity that equates with female sexual appeal has reinforced popular gender discourse evolving from the dominant central Thai socio-cultural belief system, further impeding the progress of women's rights and empowerment in Thailand.

As discussed, young Lao Isan women could grasp issues of gender equity emerging from domestic violence towards women because such violence is so obviously *morally* wrong, when it comes to more subtle ideological readings relating to the inequitable treatment of women in Thai society – such as the previously cited discussion on women being banned from visiting night clubs on their own – these young women remained largely embedded in the patriarchal status quo of gender culture in Thailand. The issues and debates



covered in this section on the culture of gender in Thailand, and northeast Thailand in particular, provide important cultural context for the following discussion on contemporary interpretations of Isan identity or *khwampenisan* among Lao Isan youth in relation to self-image and connections with national understandings of physical beauty as they are perpetuated in Thai-produced television programs.

Card picked up in the Khon Kaen tourist centre, depicting a *typically* fair-skinned, equine-nosed Isan beauty.

²¹⁷ Field Journal entry, 21 February 2002.

THE 'INTERNATIONAL LOOK' AND *LOOG KRUENG* (MIXED RACE) TV PERSONALITIES

Again and again both male and female participants in the study referred to the *problem* of being *Khon Isan* in a world where beauty is defined along lines of what they term the *international look*. This look is characterised by fairer skin, an oval face, a more angular and narrow nose, wide eyes and tallness. I have been told many times of Thai parents (and nannies) who repeatedly squeeze their infant's nose, somehow convinced that this would prevent it from being 'flat and ugly'. In a world where beauty is defined on elitist central Thai perceptions of attractiveness and constantly reinforced through mass media images, these young Lao Isan perceive their looks, sometimes overtly, sometimes sub-consciously, as pivotal to their potential for success in all spheres of life – marriage, career, society.

Contemporary discourse on geopolitics and cultural identity commonly gravitates around how processes of globalisation are evolving the *international* or Eurasian look as a commodity that enhances Western economic structures²¹⁸ – a process that flows on from discourse on European colonisation where the perceived economic and social value of *Caucasian* beauty was "...predicated on historical narratives of oppression and difference".²¹⁹ More recently, those interested in deconstructing established cultural studies discourse on intercultural and interracial politics have presented the idea that practices that seek to emulate facets of European beauty, such as white facing, can also be interpreted as "...attempts to subvert historical notions of desire and debt, by problematising colonial hierarchies of white/non-white commoditisations".²²⁰

²¹⁸ Van Esterik, P., pp. 129-158.

Goon P. & Craven A. (2003). Whose Debt? Globalisation and Whitefacing in Asia. *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 9. From

<http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue9/gooncraven.html>;

Matthews, J. (2002). Deconstructing the Visual: The Diasporic Hybridity of Asian and Eurasian Female Images. *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 8. From

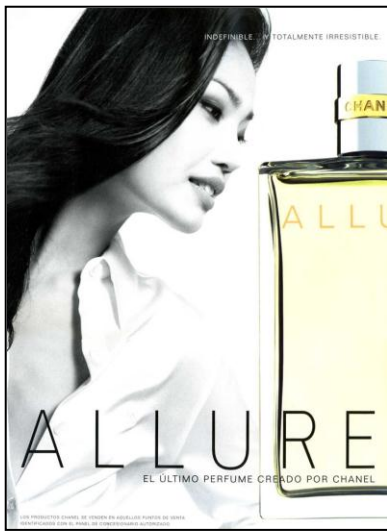
<http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue8/matthews.html>

²¹⁹ Goon P. & Craven A., 9: Paragraph 31.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

Lao Isan youth, however, most often look at themselves through the cultural prism of their central Thai power brokers, not through the wider transnational lens. The ethnic Lao population of Thailand was co-opted into Thai nation space for political and territorial reasons, while their ethnic or cultural identity was sidelined. Thai preoccupations with the *international look* may be the result of western cultural imperialism and globalisation, or arguably more about historical social behaviours based on racialisation, class and hierarchy. Thailand is not the only *Asian* culture where paler skin and refined features have long been social markers of aristocratic heritage and social/caste systems. Several student participants went to great lengths to explain that the Thai obsession with paler skin was not based on European or western physical beauty but rather on Asian races with fairer complexions, such as the Japanese and Chinese, thereby keeping the zone of cultural influence at least within the Asian region. It is important to Thai cultural identity that Thailand has never been colonised by a European power. Cultures within Southeast Asia appear to have already evolved cultural identity markers predicated on comparisons with the skin tone and features of their Asian neighbours. Wilson describes one of the key drivers of this *pan-Asian aesthetic* as commercial marketers who have constructed advertising images that work across Asia, images that usually rely on mixed race Euro-Asian models.²²¹ Today, Lao Isan youth are all too aware of their cultural identity as Thai citizens who *look Lao*.

Isan-born Rojjana as Chanel's Allure girl. (Picture courtesy of Chanel.)



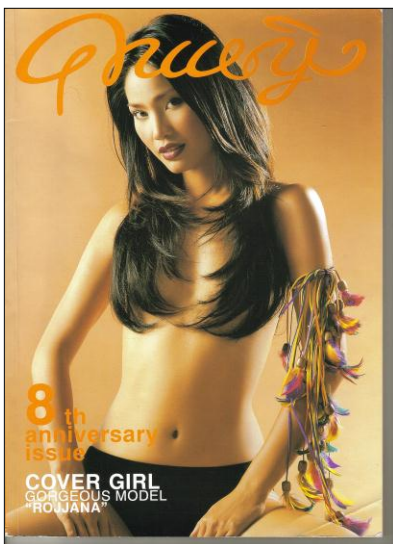
Participants commonly cited the case of Yui Rojjana Phetkanha (รจนา เพชรกันหา), a successful international model from a farm in Isan, who was not taken up by the model agencies in Bangkok because she was considered *too dark* and only became known and generally *accepted* in Thailand following her success internationally, including as the Allure perfume girl for Chanel and *Vogue* Singapore cover girl. In May 2002 Rojjana graced the

²²¹ Wilson (2004), p. 121.

cover of the 8th anniversary edition of the popular Thai women’s magazine *Khun-Ying* (the Thai equivalent of *Cosmo*). In the social commentary breakout entitled ‘Off The Page’, *Nation* journalist Jeerawat Nathalang effusively comments on Rojjana’s popularity in Thailand, and then promptly undermines this by including rumours about her international modelling career faltering:

Rojjana Petchkanha, our favourite model, is back in Thailand and gracing the cover of the latest issue of *Khun-Ying* to celebrate the magazine’s 8th anniversary. And Rojjana is looking sexy as ever... She countered the rumour that she ran out of modelling work overseas by saying that, “I came back here because I need some rest.”²²²

Rojjana finally gains supermodel status in her own country: Cover girl for the glossy Thai *Khun-Ying* women’s magazine, 2002. (Picture courtesy of *Khun-Ying* magazine).



A postscript to Rojjana’s hard-won popularity in Thailand is recent information posted on the Twitter.com page of Bangkok-based French photojournalist Gregoire Lanchant who took a 2006 portrait of the then (apparently washed up) 31-year-old Rojjana against the backdrop of her Chanel Allure campaign publicity shot. Lanchant’s accompanying text to the photograph says Rojjana’s international supermodel experience ended in eight years of poverty back on the family farm in Isan.²²³ As *Nation*



online columnist ‘Dear Nat’ says:

Paradoxically, the only Thai model to achieve success in the West is former Chanel Allure presenter Rojjana Petchkanha, who got little notice at home because she looked like a country bumpkin from the Northeast. Despite Rojjana’s success, few Isaan-looking girls subsequently got work modelling in Bangkok. There was no shift in our standard of beauty.²²⁴

Picture courtesy of Gregoire Lanchant.

²²² Jeerawat Nathalang. (2002, May 28). *Khun-Ying* (Off The Page). *The Nation*, p. 15A.

²²³ Lanchant, G. Rojjana Phetkanha vs. her Allure campaign. From <http://www.flickr.com/photos/gregoireglachant/335184829/>

²²⁴ Wild ideas: Who nose? *The Nation* (Back Issue). From <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/read.php?newsid=91638&keyword=nation>

Heated discussions about perceptions of beauty arose in response to every genre of television watched during the focus group sessions. If we watched drama, we ended up talking about the good looks of the often half-western / half-Thai actor. If we watched game shows, the game show hosts' looks were inevitably commented on. The overwhelming presence of *loog kreung* (literally meaning half-child) TV personalities has been a common trigger for discussions on beauty:

- Student: The advantage [of being *loog kreung*] is that they have an international look which is a real attention getter.
- Student: *Loog kreung* stars are good looking. Most of them know the language (English) better than Khon Thai. They are also influenced by foreign cultures. They are distinctive with their looks and their language knowledge. They have better opportunities than Khon Thai.
- Catherine: Are they better?
- S: I think they are; their looks, their abilities. They have advantages.
- C: Do you think Khon Thai are more talented than *loog kreung*?
- S: Yes, but *loog kreung* have more skills. They have advantages.
- C: What kind of advantages?
- S: I think *loog kreung* are more expressive because ...they have good looks which are more appealing.²²⁵

In her study of the discourse and practices surrounding *loog kreung* and *loog kreung-ness*, the late Jan Robyn Weisman argues that *loog kreung* have become synonymous with modernity in Thailand. Public and commercial Thai marketers are using commodified images of *loog kreung* to project messages to both domestic and international audiences about their growing economic and political importance:

Modern Thainess, presented in the form of *luk kreung*, is constructed as being cosmopolitan and self-confident, successful and beautiful, prepared to take its place alongside other 'modernities' on the global stage.²²⁶ In his 2005 essay on the historical intersections between *farang-ness* (western foreign-ness associated with white Caucasians) and Thai identity formation, Isan scholar Pattana Kitiarsa documents how the first racially mixed relationships involving *farangs* and Thai nationals (regardless of ethnicity) have influenced Thai identity discourse. Not only did these mixed relationships, with usually poor women from

²²⁵ Youth focus group, Rajabhat Mahasarakham, 6 August 2002.

²²⁶ Weisman, J.R. (2000). *Tropes and Traces: hybridity, race, sex, and responses to modernity in Thailand*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of Washington, Seattle, p. 336.

rural areas, physically take the *farang* out of Bangkok and other urban areas and into provincial Thailand, but “...the allure of *farang-ness* began to gain a new momentum through the negotiation of the meanings and values of the *luk kreung*’s hybridities”.²²⁷

Loog kreung personalities have taken the television entertainment industry by storm – these children of mixed western and Thai marriages are described as better looking (that is, wider eyes, fairer skin, and so on), more fun, more hip and better able to get away with being effusive on TV – “For some reason, if you are Thai and you act crazy, you will be criticised... but if you are half Thai, that is alright”.²²⁸ Another student recognises this element of ‘getting away with more’ in terms of *loog kreung* not being as bound by formal Thai social etiquette: “They express themselves. They’re confident. Thai stars are stuck with Thai traditional demeanours. *Loog-kreung* don’t emphasize that part. They express themselves more.”²²⁹ Thai audiences generally appear more accepting of the vibrant behaviour of *loog kreung*, whereas the same behaviour from Thai actors or personalities would be frowned upon as improper and unseemly. As one student puts it: “Khon Thai like to see something new, something exotic as well.”

Loog kreung appear in soap opera, serious drama, as game, lifestyle, music or teen show hosts, and they are also heavily represented in the Thai pop music industry – regularly traversing both the popular TV and music scenes in Thailand. Constrained by mainstream Thai perceptions of their ethnicity and social and cultural conventions, many Lao Isan youth appear drawn to *loog kreung* personalities as windows through which to imagine alternative selves and identities. Conversely, some students, loyal to national identity construction, criticised specific *loog kreung* stars for not speaking Thai correctly.

Young Lao Isan people sometimes appeared unaware of how beauty and identity is being constructed for them:

²²⁷ Pattana Kitiarsa (2005). *Farang as Siamese occidentalism*. Working paper series No. 49. Singapore: Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, pp. 35-36.

²²⁸ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 16 January 2002.

²²⁹ Ibid.

- Catherine: Is it good for the producer to choose *loog kreung* to present on TV?
- Student: Probably there are not enough Thai movie stars, and there are lots of *loog-kreung* movie stars.²³⁰

This student had difficulty identifying the active role producers play in promoting a particular image of beauty and success through casting *loog kreung* actors. Other young people, savvier with regard to the impact of media and advertising in constructing popular images and trends, readily admitted that the absence of popular Lao Isan celebrities was directly related to mainstream perceptions of beauty – *na Lao* restricts access to success in Thai television.

- Catherine: Where do you think this image of beauty comes from?
- Student: I think it's influenced by media, such as advertisements which emphasize or promote fair skin ...very few movie stars have dark skin.²³¹

Others just accepted the *reality*, constructed or otherwise, that looking Lao is an impediment to success in the television industry: "...they [Khon Isan] have to work harder than those who are from the central region. Frankly speaking, Isan people are not acceptable, even though they have abilities, they do not have the good looks".²³²

THE IMPORTANCE OF CAO SUAY (MEANING WHITE RICE OR BEAUTIFUL WHITE...)

"... Isan look is not beautiful to Thai people"— but do we care, really? Picture: Catherine Hesse-Swain, 2002.



Female consumers in Thailand, particularly younger women, appear to regard skin whiteners as a basic skincare product. In 1999, skin whiteners accounted for 20 per cent of the total skincare market. By 2005 they represented 60 per cent, the largest segment of this \$15.5 billion market.²³³

²³⁰ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 15 January 2002.

²³¹ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 15 January 2002.

²³² Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 16 January 2002.

²³³ Nitida Awasanipont. (2005, September 20). Skin-whitening line buoys Nu Skin sales. *The Nation*. From <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/page.arcview.php?clid=6&id=121288&usrsses>

Their much darker skin was a preoccupation with many of the Lao Isan youth in the study, particularly the females:

- Student: White is beautiful.
Catherine: Why do we think that white is beautiful?
S: If you want to be beautiful, you must be white.
S: If you have fair skin you look cheerful, you can wear any clothes, you look great.
S: Look at ourselves, we have dark skin, it is quite difficult. If we wear red, it is very ugly.²³⁴

Do Lao Isan youth use skin whitening products because they genuinely believe fairer skin is more beautiful, or simply as a way to compete with their central Thai compatriots in Bangkok? To *face* their competition must they conform to the Thai ideal of beauty? Goon and Craven (2003) argue that the *faciality of racialisation* indicates the “...extreme localization of ethnic identity in discourses of globalisation”.²³⁵ The many discussions I had with my study participants, both in groups and individually, on the subject of *na Lao* versus *na Thai*, revealed an underlying sense of wry pragmatism on the subject. Did these young people genuinely believe they were *uglier* than their fellow Thai citizens? I don’t believe so, despite their comments to the contrary. For example, my RA laughed when she described her *na Lao* features as ugly, but also readily admitted to feeling excited by the prospect of moving to the US where her *exotic* looks elicited more positive responses. She was explicitly aware that her value could not be undermined by the images of Thai beauty being beamed daily from Bangkok. She subscribed to skin whitening whilst in Thailand, but it became much less important outside that cultural setting. This underlying ambivalence toward central Thai preoccupations with paler skin was also played out in the popularity of coloured North American pop idols, like Destiny’s Child, among the study’s female participants.

AN ISAN GIRL GETS MARRIED – ISAN MEETS THAI MEETS THE WEST

- Bim (RA): In the morning we have the Isan ceremony.
Catherine: And in the evening you have more of a Western reception?
Bim: It’s interesting because in the evening part we will be dressed like Western but we will have a Thai ceremony...Everything is mixing.

Interview, Kalasin, 18 April 2002

²³⁴ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 16 January 2002.

²³⁵ Goon & Craven 2003, Paragraph 27.

In the eight-month period during which I worked with my first RA (Bim), a final-year Khon Kaen University student from Kalasin, she was preparing for her marriage to an American. Bim spoke to me at length about her excitement, fears, concerns and preparations for this major turning point in her life. After her wedding in her hometown of Kalasin, Bim was leaving Thailand to live in the US with her new husband. I was interested in the style of wedding she and her family would choose given the cross-cultural nature of it and the influence of popular mainstream Thai and western culture over the past decade. Bim herself appeared to have little choice in the way the marriage celebration was being planned – a role traditionally carried out by the parents. She was happy for the auspicious date to be determined by monks at the local temple. Her mother was the key organiser of the event and on most issues Bim was happy to defer to her authority. Knowing my preoccupation with unravelling young Isan people’s perceptions of beauty, Bim was happy to discuss her own views on the aesthetics of her coming *traditional* wedding ceremony. Her strong preference was for a traditional Thai ceremony over a traditional Isan ceremony. This was the only area in which she clashed with her mother who was deeply in favour of an Isan ceremony.

Authentic but “ugly”? The bride’s wrist displaying many *fai* (cotton threads) tied on by guests as a goodwill blessing at her traditional Lao-Isan wedding ceremony. Picture: Catherine Hesse-Swain, 2002.



The reason Bim did not want an Isan ceremony was purely aesthetic. A traditional Lao Isan ceremony involves a *Bai Si Suu Khwan* ceremony where the couple is blessed through the tying of many cotton threads joining them with each other and the marriage altar, and the constant chanting of

Buddhist ritual texts which ‘call to the souls’.²³⁶ The ceremony is completed with the *fai phu kan* (cotton tie arm) ceremony where the wedding guests line up to make their own blessing to the couple by tying a thin cotton thread around the bride and bridegrooms’ wrists. Bim thought it was *ugly* (her word) to have so many threads tied around your wrist. Obviously, if you have 50 or more guests at a ceremony the threads begin to add up. She wanted a Thai ceremony, which involves blessing the couple by pouring water over their hands as they kneel together, because it was “...much more beautiful”. In the end, Bim’s marriage to her American fiancé involved a bit of everything – the Isan ceremony in the morning in traditional Isan dress, followed by the Thai ceremony in the evening in Western bridal dress. This blending of traditions embracing Isan, Thai and Western customs is becoming more common among young Isan couples, according to Bim and other study participants: “Right now people in Isan area sometimes they mix the Thai wedding ceremony with the Isan wedding ceremony”.²³⁷ Bridal photographic displays in shopping malls throughout Thailand commonly feature huge portraits of Thai couples in western bridal dress.

The other areas where aesthetics influenced Bim’s choices were dress and make-up. During the Isan ceremony, Bim wore a locally woven *phaa sin* (narrow, sarong-like skirt to the ankles) and blouse. She wore make-up that highlighted her natural Lao Isan features and her forehead was daubed with a Buddhist symbol for good fortune in white paint. The groom also wore traditional dress and make-up. In the evening, Bim wore a princess-like Western bridal gown with white gloves and veil. Her face, neck and arms were heavily powdered to make her look white. As previously discussed, this powdering of the face and upper body is common among Thai women in general. International

²³⁶ The *Suu Khwan* ritual is a regular feature in the spiritual and social life of people living in Isan (northeast Thailand) and the Lao on the other side of the Mekong River. *Suu Khwan* can be loosely defined as ‘go the souls’ or ‘calling the souls’. The ritual marks all significant rites of passage in the human life cycle (ie birth, marriage, and death). It can also function as a healing ritual or as a way to mediate in cases of conflict, in the form of a ritualised apology. (Raendchen O. (2002). *Suu Khwan: Ritual Texts and Ceremonies in Laos and northeast Thailand*. Parallel Paper Presentation Session on Thailand and Laos, 8th International Conference on Thai Studies, p. 1, 9-12 January 2002, Ramkhamhaeng University, Nakhon Phanom, Thailand).

²³⁷ Personal interview, Bim, Kalasin, 18 April 2002.

cosmetic companies, such as Nivea, heavily market skin whitening products like creams and powders. Bim and I had previously discussed the popularity of such products among her peers and she was quite open about the way young Isan women were being sold this particular image of physical beauty. Their understanding that *na lao* was not considered beautiful in Thai society, encouraged them to seek whiter skin.

Reading the subtexts of ambivalence, ambiguity, considered silences and ironic laughter that imbued discussions with my young informants, I believe there was open recognition of the *requirement* to aspire to the norms of Thai beauty, framed within an underlying confidence in their own unique identity as *Khon Isan*. Having dinner one evening in Khon Kaen, Bim asked whether I could tell *Asians* apart. I replied that I could clearly recognise Javanese having lived in East Java, and Thai as opposed to Lao.

- Bim: How can you tell Lao?
Catherine: Well, for example, you look Lao Bim. You are beautiful (laughing).
B: No, I'm not beautiful (laughing too).
C: But you have very distinct Lao features, especially the high cheekbones.
B: Yes I look Lao I know. Some people say I am beautiful.
C: When I visited Laos I thought that in general the women had very distinct and beautiful features.
B: Yes, Lao women are beautiful.²³⁸

Read the ambivalence, the contradiction. Bim denies she is beautiful whilst saying she looks Lao, and then agrees with me that Lao women are beautiful. Why the reluctance to openly acknowledge a Lao Isan concept of beauty? I believe the reluctance is not necessarily conscious, but rather stems from unfamiliarity with acknowledging cultural concepts of beauty based on Lao Isan physical appearance. Perhaps their stated need to ascribe to the Thai ideal of beauty is, after all, only *skin deep*?

In this chapter I have attempted to examine how issues of gender interplay with the processes and understandings of identity formation among the young Lao Isan in my focus groups. While responses to popular Thai television programs indicate that these young people, particularly young women, ascribe to the central Thai stereotype of Khon

²³⁸ Field journal entry, 19 February 2002.

Isan as generally physically unattractive, more in-depth discussions reveal the same kind of ambivalence demonstrated in earlier chapters. These young people recognise discrimination projected through popular Thai television programming; however, for many their more intrinsic sense of confidence in being Isan is not compromised by this recognition. Interesting discussions around physical preoccupations and gender equality were elicited in relation to the depiction of marriage, relationships and sexual and domestic violence against women in Thai *lakhon* series. Young Lao Isan women have a moral understanding of gender inequality, particularly in relation to violence against women; however, they struggle to place this within a wider ideological framework due to ongoing patriarchal dominance within the contemporary cultural, social and political landscape of Thailand. Young Isan women therefore struggle against the dual barriers of imbedded gender inequality in wider Thai society and discrimination perpetuated through central Thai projections of Khon Isan as physically less attractive than those of central Thai ethnicity.

Chapter Five: “IT IS LIKE NIGHT AND DAY” – CHANGE AND GENERATIONAL SHIFTS

The cultural concept of *bun khun* plays a significant role in the way parents and children negotiate within their immediate family and in the social world as they grow older, as introduced in the previous chapter’s discussion of gender in Thailand. This chapter will explore changing expectations in relation to family relationships, education, career development, lifestyle choices (including choice of residence), spiritual belief and practice, pre-marital relationships, sex and marriage, through the lens of these young people, their parents and their grandparents. I will also tease out the intersection of these life themes with processes of identity formation and seek to locate shifting perceptions of *khwampenisan* across the span of three generations.

Traditionally daughters repaid their *bun khun* debt – that is, showing gratitude and respect to their parents for nurturing them – by taking on the daily care of younger siblings and sharing in the family labour at home and in the fields. They were also expected to learn traditional crafts (such as silk spinning, dying and weaving), behave with propriety when it came to their relations with the opposite sex and make a good marital match. As the last to marry, the youngest daughter was obligated to contribute a larger proportion of assistance to her parents in household labour and remain in the home with her husband and family to care for her aging parents.²³⁹ Sons traditionally repaid *bun khun* by gaining merit through ordaining as a Buddhist monk. There was more autonomy offered to them in structuring their futures simply because they could choose their time in the monkhood at any stage in their lives, with the usual period being a single Buddhist Lenten season (the rainy season between July and October).

Whilst *bun khun* remains central to family cohesion in modern day Isan, according to the young Lao Isan in my study these traditional residence patterns and forms of repaying *bun khun* have fundamentally altered from their parents’ and grandparents’ generations.

²³⁹ DaGrossa (2003), p. 194.

Both young men and women largely intended to live and work in regional centres or in Bangkok, and not to return to their parental home on completion of their studies. Both sons and daughters were more likely to repay parental *bun khun* by providing financial support and social status through their chosen profession, rather than through the sharing of family labour. This varied with the more disadvantaged youth in the Ruam Mit Bakery group, who mostly intended to return to their home village once their vocational training was finished. These changes were evolving through a two-way process. Parents and children were reconfiguring their expectations of each other based on the economic and social transformation of Isan from a predominantly rural peasant society, to a more urbanised, economically developed, commercially diverse one with better infrastructure and services, including telecommunications and media that link them to the rest of Thailand and the outside world. By the early 1980s, when the youth in my study were born, labour migration by rural Isan workers to Bangkok and other urban centres in Thailand (and to countries overseas) was a well established change to pre-modern *bun khun* and residence patterns.²⁴⁰

There is a growing body of localised ethnography on the intersections between the globalised economy and the shifting of traditional kinship economies, identities and relationships. In her 2004 study of gender identities and expressions in contemporary commercial settings in Bangkok, Wilson argues that capitalism has both depended on and significantly reshaped the intimate worlds of culture, relationships, and identity within Thailand:

As local exchange systems have interacted with an increasingly powerful and global market economy, they have reconsolidated in new forms. The changes to folk economies wrought by international political economic developments have accordingly transformed practices and meanings associated with sex, gender and kinship relations (which are considered “traditional” and “natural”).²⁴¹

These socio-economic transformations include: inflation in bride wealth; the appearance and sexualisation of dating couples in social public space; and, the appropriation and communication of the nuclear family as the cultural and social embodiment of an

²⁴⁰ Mills (1993), pp. 101-103.

²⁴¹ Wilson (2004), p. 194.

economically and politically progressive Thailand. Accompanying these changes is anxiety and tension around locating a place in this transformed social and cultural world: “In daily life and in public discourse, the differentiation between the values of the market and those of kin, community, and Thai culture has become a noticeable source of anxiety”.²⁴² Aspects of this anxiety were discussed in the previous chapter on gender identities and Isan youth, where young Isan women struggle to negotiate between new social projections of success and expectations generated via the discourse of traditional kinship patterns and lifestyles. Expressions of these tensions will be further explored in this chapter.

RURAL REVERIES: ISAN CHILDHOOD GROWS ANTENNAS

Several Western researchers²⁴³ have argued that public discourses on Isan identity transmitted via the Thai state and national media frequently engage the Thai concepts of *samai kau*, *samai korn* (old times, past times) and *samai mai* (new times) to reinforce elite central Thai projections of Khon Isan as entrenched in the past. Through persistent comparisons of urbane and progressive central Thais (mostly from Bangkok) with rural, peasant, traditional Lao Isan farmers and villagers, these public weavers of central Thai social fabric effectively align under-development with Isanness and/or Laoness. The personal narratives of Lao Isan youth, their parents and grandparents were often framed within the discourse of *samai kau – samai mai*. When responding to a question about the continuing importance of her Isan identity, one female student said: “In Isan I can’t be modern, but when I go out there [beyond the Isan region] I can be modern and civilised”.²⁴⁴

Most participants in my study were born in the early 1980s and raised in small villages or towns in the rural provinces of Isan or in larger regional centres like Khon Kaen or Ubon Ratchathani. They generally did not come from big families, usually having only one or

²⁴² Wilson (2004), p. 195.

²⁴³ Mills (1999), p. 12; Whittaker (2000), pp. 4-6.

²⁴⁴ Personal interview, Goong, Rajabhat Mahasarakham student, Ban Nong Phok, Kalasin, 17 April 2002.

two siblings at the most, indicating a shift in the family planning choices of their parents compared to their grandparents, who usually came from much larger families of five or more children (of which several usually died in infancy or early childhood). Population control using family planning strategies has been an integral aspect of Thailand's national development since the 1970s. As a result, total fertility rates were almost halved in the Isan region between 1969 (7.63 births per woman) and 1984 (3.82 births per woman).²⁴⁵

The parental occupations of these young Lao Isan ranged from rice farmers, merchants, teachers and other public servant positions. DaGrossa's ethnographic survey data of university students in Mahasarakham in the early 1990s indicated that most came from two-parent (still married), rural, lower-middle class Isan families.²⁴⁶ My study in 2002 indicates that this is still very much the demographic for students attending universities in Isan. However, rajabhat students and the vocational students in the NGO Focus Group, largely from Yasothon province, appeared to come from more economically disadvantaged families. Their homes in the family village were very basic traditional Thai wooden structures with minimal material possessions.

Most of the youth in my study attended a local village school for their lower primary education, a provincial school for elementary level and a regional school for secondary level. Most walked to the village school and depending on distance were either taken on motorcycle by one of their parents or travelled by bus to their elementary and secondary schools. This experience already moves them into a more mobile and cosmopolitan frame than that of their parents who largely went to one school in their home village, often located at the local temple. Parents often reported completing school at the end of primary level, while grandparents usually only attended about four years of schooling from seven to 10 or 11 years of age.

Young Lao Isan who grew up in villages or small provincial towns were often sentimental about the rural idyll of their childhoods and bemoaned the next generation's

²⁴⁵ Whittaker (2000), pp. 102-103.

²⁴⁶ DaGrossa (2003), p. 192.

childhood preoccupations with technological gadgetry and media like game boys and play station. This is not an uncommon tradition in the West where life is always described as simpler when ‘we were young’:

- Catherine: What did you do when you came home from school?
Eu: In my elementary years, I played with friends and helped my mother with housework. On the weekends, we’d play in the woods.
C: What was your childhood like? Did you have a lot of toys?
E: I played with a lot of friends of different ages. We played in a group, making toys out of simple things from our imagination, like from leaves and coconut shells. We used our imagination. It was fun. In the evening, we’d go home. On the weekends, we’d look for crabs and shells or bamboos. We ate and shared what we had.
C: Do you think things in Thailand have changed since then?
E: I feel that kids these days and people these days have modern things. People have more modern devices. When I was young we looked for simple things in nature to play with, now they don’t do that anymore.²⁴⁷

At the same time, these youth also said they had watched television from a very young age, usually from kindergarten age, so they were not *literally* protected in their rural village setting in the same way as their parents or grandparents describe. This indicates that from an identity formation perspective, the signifying thread of *khwampenisan* being closely interwoven with rural lifestyles and interests is being sewn through into the next generation despite their confirmed transition to modern, urban lifestyle patterns. Those who grew up in larger urban environments like Khon Kaen cited less outside recreational time as children and more media-based activities: “...I went home and listened to music or the radio, watched TV. Sometimes I would listen to the music till midnight.”²⁴⁸

The young people often framed their sense of their parents’ childhoods with their own in terms of moral teachings. The underlying belief appeared to be that *samai mai* (modern) childhood was not as good a moral training ground as *samai kau* (traditional) childhood. This was due in part to the increased distractions and vices of modern life, which drew young people away from the core moral values and obligations of a traditional village life centred on the local temple and Buddhist rituals and events:

²⁴⁷ Personal interview, Eu, KCU student, Khon Kaen, 30 September 2002.

²⁴⁸ Personal interview, Boey, KCU student, Khon Kaen, 2 October 2002.

- Catherine: Did your parents ever tell you about their childhood?
 Goong: Yes. They told me so I would know what's right or wrong. Their present life and their childhood are different. Sometimes they want me to do things the way they did back then. But things have changed; it's not the same anymore.
- C: Do you think kids these days have more problems than when your parents were young?
 G: More problems. When they were young, they didn't have what we have now. We have more things nowadays so kids change accordingly.
 C: How does having more things create change?
 G: For example, there were no cars in the past. Now we have cars. People are more careless and not cautious in living their life.²⁴⁹

Interestingly the parents of these young people usually viewed development in their own region and Thailand as a nation as wholly positive. Whilst they often described their simple rural childhoods as 'happy', they were not sentimental or maudlin about the past as a lost utopia. Mothers tended to reflect on a childhood balanced between completing household chores and enjoying time for playing outside. Their personal narrative about their childhood was most often succinct and factual: "I collected water and did housework before I went out to play".²⁵⁰ Goong's mother, Ta, talks about the change from traditional to modern lifestyles with unequivocal enthusiasm:

- Catherine: Do you think Thailand has changed a lot since you were young?
 Ta: A lot, it's very advanced. The difference is like night and day. For instance, we didn't wear shoes. Now it is so much better. No electricity in the past either; we used lamps. It's all for the better now.
 C: Are there any disadvantages to Thailand changing so quickly?
 Ta: No, all is good. Everybody today wants to make money.²⁵¹

In my view, this enthusiasm for material and technological progress speaks about the degree of economic uncertainty and poverty many of these farming communities lived with before the Isan region underwent infrastructural and economic development as part of a newly industrialised nation. It is understandable that these Isan parents appreciate the material comforts and opportunities such changes have brought for themselves and their children. The younger generation involved in my study, born in the early 1980s when Thailand had already undergone significant change, did share their parents' memories of poverty and subsistence living and therefore tended to romanticise pre-modern Isan life

²⁴⁹ Personal interview, Goong, Rajabhat Mahasarakham student, Kalasin province, 17 April 2002.

²⁵⁰ Personal interview, Ta, Goong's mother, Kalasin province, 17 April 2002.

²⁵¹ Ibid.



as simple and idyllic. Grandparents reported hard-working childhoods with little opportunity for play so they appeared happy with how development had reduced physical hardship. However, like their grandchildren they were sentimental about the simplicity of days gone by:

Isan grandparents: Caught between *samai kau* and *samai mai*.
Picture: Catherine Hesse-Swain, 2002.

- Tin
(Pui's grandmother): After school, I helped with housework and picked up cotton.
Catherine: Do you think Isan has changed much since you were a child?
T: It has changed a lot; it's more convenient.
C: How?
T: It's better. In the past we had to crush rice, now we don't have to because we have rice factories. We don't have to collect water, no need to carry the series of water buckets on the shoulder. Kids these days don't know what a shoulder pole is anymore.
C: Are there any problems that accompany these developments?
T: It's more difficult to make a living now. Before we looked for food in nature, but now everything is connected with money. If you have no money, you get nothing.
C: Which do you like the present, or the past?
T: I like the past better; we lived simply.²⁵²

Tin identifies the benefits of progress reducing physical labour in farming; however, on another level she finds modern commerce disempowering. She likes the convenience of modernity but prefers the simplicity and self-ownership of traditional farming life and economy. Several Isan participants said they had been raised from infancy by their grandparents while their parents worked the family farm. Reflections and stories of their grandparents were also an influencing factor in these young Isan people looking back to pre-modern village childhood as a salve for the problems of modern youth.

²⁵² Personal interview, Tin, Pui's grandmother, Mahasarakham province, 1 January 2002.

Changes in language usage patterns

All study participants said that they were strictly not permitted to speak *pasar Isan/Lao* in the classroom, only Thai. In lower primary level in their local village school, they sometimes spoke *pasar Isan (Lao)* informally with their teachers in the playground, but once in elementary and secondary school this ceased. This is a significant generational shift from their parents' language and education experiences:

- Catherine: Where did you go to school when you were a child?
Ta: The school close to home; that one, over there. We can see it from here. I walked to school. Bare feet!
C: In what language were you taught?
T: Thai – the teachers taught in Thai, but we spoke Isan.
C: When not teaching, did they speak Isan?
T: Yes.
C: In class, if a student spoke Isan, did the teacher disallow that?
T: No, it's ok to speak Isan. We spoke Isan no problem.
C: How old were you when you finished school?
T: I finished at fourth grade, around 12 to 13 years old.²⁵³

Bim's mother, Noi, who similarly attended a rural village school in Kalasin province, reported that her teachers were all Khon Isan and that *pasar Isan (Lao)* was the primary language spoken both inside and outside the classroom. A teacher for more than 30 years, Noi said that while it is expected that students speak Thai in the classroom, she was happy to use *pasar Isan (Lao)* if her students were confused on a subject.²⁵⁴ Several rural parents reported that they only had fluency in *pasar Isan (Lao)* because they had not used Thai since primary school. They often had not attended formal education beyond primary level. The following extract is from an interview with Ta, the mother of Rajabhat Mahasarakham student Goong. Ta was born, raised and continues to live as a rice farmer in the same small rural community in Kalasin province:

- Catherine: What is your mother tongue?
Ta: Isan, since I was born.
C: Do you use Isan all the time?
T: Yes. I studied from Thai books at school, but always spoke Isan.
C: Can you write or read Laotian [Isan]?
T: No, I can't. I can speak but cannot read or write.
C: Are you comfortable speaking Thai or Isan?

²⁵³ Personal interview, Ta, Goong's mother, Kalasin province, 17 April 2002.

²⁵⁴ Personal interview, Noi, Bim's mother, Kalasin, 18 April 2002.

- T: Isan. I speak it all the time.
 C: When do you speak Thai?
 T: Never. I don't speak Thai. I did in school, but after I left school I never spoke it again.
 C: Did you parents and grandparents speak Isan all the time?
 T: Always Isan; never Thai.²⁵⁵

Ta has obviously never learned to speak, read or write Thai fluently despite studying from Thai text books at primary school. Since she speaks only *pasar* Isan (Lao), but cannot read or write in her first language, she is essentially illiterate. Illiteracy was more common among study participants' grandparents, but also appeared among parents, particularly those of Ruam Mit Bakery and Rajabhat Mahasarakham focus group members. Not surprisingly these families were often from poorer backgrounds in the provincial farming communities of Isan where education in the older generations did not extend beyond primary level.

FROM VILLAGE TO CAMPUS: CAREER AND LIFESTYLE CHOICES

- Catherine: So your grandparents were farmers and then your parents ...studied to be teachers, both of them when they finished school?
 Bim: Yes this is an occupation that people in the past believed – if you are educated – is the only thing you can be. People will pay respect to you as a teacher.
 C: A government official too or mainly a teacher?
 B: I think mainly a teacher. If you have a chance to interview people around my mother's age you will see that everyone is a teacher. That's why I don't want to be a teacher.

Kalasin, 15 April 2002

The transformation of the Isan region from primarily an agriculturally based economy, where rural communities mostly engaged in rice farming, to a newly industrialised economy with larger urban centres catering to rural communities appears to have quite literally occurred across the span of one generation. Both parents and grandparents consistently reported childhoods spent in one village assisting in family farm work and largely subsisting on whatever food was available from within their immediate natural environment. The young women and men in my study experienced significantly different

²⁵⁵ Personal interview, Ta, Goong's mother, Kalasin province, 17 April 2002.

childhoods to those of their parents and grandparents. Schooling took them away from their home village at either elementary or secondary level. Exposure to television and other media occurred from kindergarten age, and computer and mobile phone technology played an increasingly important role in communications as they entered their young adult lives. Their worldview has evolved in relation to media messages beamed daily from urban centres and Bangkok and via international media, and through their own opportunities to travel outside their own villages to urban centres within Isan and often beyond to Bangkok and regional centres in other regions, like Chiang Mai in the north. Increased mobility from an earlier age and increased educational opportunities meant that these young people were establishing more independent lifestyles than those of their parents or grandparents.

Young Isaners often cited a more accessible and better education system, with improved curriculum and more resources, as the one great advantage of rapid urbanisation and development in their region. *Bun khun* continued to frame family relationships within this changed educational setting. Several participants reported that it was their parents who selected their field of study and career. They had little say in this choice. Goong, the only daughter of rice farmers in Kalasin province was directed by her parents to study English as a major and become a teacher. Although she had expressed an interest in studying law, she was content to fulfil her parental obligation through becoming a teacher:

- Catherine: Is there any topic that you and your parents disagree on?
Not necessarily something you argue about though.
- Goong: Yes, school. My parents picked the field of study for me. If there are options, they always choose for me.
- C: What would you choose to study?
- G: I like law. But what I study now, I like too.
- C: Have you ever regretted studying English?
- G: No, I have already chosen it so I am doing it. I am doing my best.
- C: After graduating, what do your parents want you to do?
- G: They want me to be a teacher. And I like that.²⁵⁶

This example reflects the changing patterns of *bun khun* debt repayment discussed earlier. These farmers who own their own rice plots actively chose to send their only child, a daughter, on a completely different life trajectory to their own. She is not obligated to

²⁵⁶ Personal interview, Goong, Rajabhat Mahasarakham student, Kalasin province, 17 April 2002.

repay *bun khun* through assisting in farm and household labour, but is given the modern-day opportunity to build an independent career as a teacher. This is a graduated and sensible step into contemporary *bun khun* family practice because whilst she will not work the farm alongside her parents, she will most likely be posted to a provincial school in reasonable proximity to their home village, thereby ensuring not only a level of predictable financial support through her teaching salary but also a level of physical support due to her being close enough to help at home when required.

The positive attitude many parents expressed toward their progeny becoming children of *samai mai* – that is, taking up opportunities to live more autonomous lives through their choice of independent professions – contrasts sharply with Mills’ discussions with older Isan generations in Maharakham province in the late 1980s. At that time many older villagers (i.e. the generation of my participants’ grand and great grandparents) frequently complained about the younger generation’s preoccupations with seeking urban waged employment away from their home communities and engaging in modern forms of entertainment. The changing attitudes of Isan youth in the 1980s were viewed by their parents and grandparents as a sign of moral deterioration and irresponsibility, and often a trigger for inter-generational conflict. Fear of change was also mixed with tacit approval from parents for their children to work in Bangkok because of the increased financial security this brought to the family.²⁵⁷ The youth these older people speak of would have been born in the 1960s when labour migration to Bangkok was also in its infancy. By the time of my fieldwork in 2002, two decades later, parents and even grandparents were well adjusted to the idea of youth firstly studying and then working in urban settings. *Bun khun* repayment had been re-imagined and parents were enthusiastic for their children to enjoy careers outside of their home communities as long as they continued to provide financial support and participate in important family and Buddhist rituals when they returned home for holidays.

Several Rajabhat students expressed stronger attachment to their village life and an intention to ‘stay close to home’ regardless of their career choice. They believed that

²⁵⁷ Mills (1999), pp. 81-83.

development was mostly focused on urban centres and life in rural Isan had changed little. Toto, a rajabhat student who had chosen English as his major so he could become a tour guide, was assertive in his affiliation with his home village and family life:

Catherine: Do you think Thailand has changed since you were young?
Toto: As Khon Isan, just living here in Isan, I don't think it has changed much at all. I don't hang out in big cities. I don't know how much things change in the big cities. Also, I don't really care much about changes in the nation; I only care about my hometown.²⁵⁸

SPIRITUAL LIFE: URBANISATION COMES TO THE TEMPLE

For more than a decade, there has been a growing social movement in Thailand to re-align people's thinking and expectations around economic development more closely with Buddhist precepts and values. Left-wing social critic and activist, Sulak Siviraksa, has played a prominent role in spearheading and sustaining this debate. In his 1994 book, *A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society*, Sulak comments:

In Siam, since development planning began, a few wealthy people in Bangkok have become continually wealthier, while the people of the northeast have become poorer. And up until now, there has been no indication... that my country is considering a change in its development policies, but it goes blithely on following the blueprints of the capitalist economists... Is it not time that we should speak the truth, and especially those that hold themselves to be religious? We must be honest, and if we are honest, we must admit that this type of development has not added to the happiness of the people in any real human sense...²⁵⁹

Isan *thong thin* academics and activists have contributed to this debate. MSU Dean of Humanities, Jaruwan Thammawat, played a pivotal role in reviving both original content of and interest in local Isan literature: "I am interested in my own culture, interested in *thong thin* (local area studies).... I think it is a political fight through a cultural process."²⁶⁰ Jaruwan overtly links this political struggle to the economic resilience of subsistence agriculture as opposed to the industrialised capitalist economy:

²⁵⁸ Personal interview, Toto, Rajabhat Mahasarakham student, Mahasarakham, 6 August 2002.

²⁵⁹ Sulak Siviraksa. (1994). *A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society*. (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development), pp. 68-69.

²⁶⁰ Jaruwan Thammawat. (2000, December 10). Unpublished interview conducted by Eloise Brown, Australian National University, p. 4.

If all banks were to collapse, the villagers would not die; as they have rice...it is so fertile. They have rice, they have fish, and they have vegetables. Although it is true that they have to have money to buy conveniences. They may not use buffaloes to plough the fields, but use a tractor. They need money to hire a tractor. They have no fertilizer; they need money to buy fertilizer or chemicals. Sustainable economy or self sufficient economyThai society has two types, being sustainable economy and city people who have export economy. They have all collapsed already. But the villagers still survive. At the same time the villagers are concerned about having to buy technology. But if you ask what is the strongest point, it that they are able to rely on themselves for food and rice. I think that farming society is very good.²⁶¹

This view of the rural ideal versus western-style economic development is deeply embedded in the Buddhist worldview of materialism undermining right-thinking or right-living by increasing people's attachment to the physical world and their desire to seek gratification from material pleasures. Jaruwan further outlines her thinking in this regard:

The survival and choice of Isan people is to develop themselves without losing culture... They need to take culture to be capital in development. It is called *phum panya*. It's like when we look at culture, we should not just look at food, or clothes, but we should look at the thought system, *jit jai* system. If you were to go into a village and didn't have any money, you would eat with the villagers. The villagers have no water, and not even one baht, you would still have water to drink. In the village there is no hotel, but you can sleep in anyone's home, safely, right? This is culture. Culture is capital; generosity, helpfulness, which cannot be bought with money. If money could buy society in the world, what would happen then? We have many good things, but they are ignored. We have accepted Western education systems so much that we don't look for the weak and strong points in other people anymore. In truth, all year, the people in the community don't need to spend any money at all. If they buy, they may buy a tractor, a car, fertilizer or chemicals, a radio or a TV; but as for staple factors, food, clothes, house and medicine, they are able to be completely self reliant.²⁶²

Jaruwan's position is aligned with the *samai kau – samai mai* framework so frequently referred to by the Lao Isan study participants and their older relatives. As discussed in the previous sections of this chapter, while some Lao Isan participants are sentimental about the values inherent in traditional Isan village life, their parents and grandparents could see the benefits of economic development in terms of improved quality of daily life and educational opportunities, as well as future financial stability for their children and grandchildren. One might then expect that my study participants would make links

²⁶¹ Jaruwan (2000), p. 7.

²⁶² Ibid, pp. 7-8.

between their Buddhist practice and right-living based on less materiality and moral correctness. The data reveals a diversity of opinions ranging from Buddhist doctrine as the backbone of *good values*, to Buddhist belief being an explicit signifier of *khwampenisan*. Buddhism was consistently referenced as the embracing factor in sustaining the community practices that reinforced traditional family and village life. Several research participants also commented that their parents believed in ghosts (*pi*) and told them ghost stories as children. They did not feel that a belief in the supernatural was at odds with their Buddhist faith and practice. This was further evidenced by KKU students visiting the campus shrine or *Chao Por Mor* (The God or Father of the Campus).



KKU students praying at the campus shrine, *Chao Por Mor*.
(Picture: Catherine Hesse-Swain, 2002).

The central shrine is surrounded small replica elephants and flowers brought by attending students. According to my KKU research participants, students visit the shrine for spiritual reasons – to pray, to ask for good grades or other good things, good health and protection. In return they promise to bring him flowers and small elephant statues or representations. Many of the students believe the *Chao Por Mor* is a spiritual presence there to protect them.

Isan youth in my study generally expressed piety towards their Buddhist belief and the key role Buddhism played in family and social rituals and behaviours in northeast Thailand. Whilst some viewed Buddhism as continuing to provide a central ethical framework by which Khon Isan could live, they did not usually consider their Buddhist faith as a signifier of *khwampenisan* per se:

- Catherine: Do you think Khon Isan practice Buddhism differently from people in other regions?
- Eu: I don't think so. I feel that Khon Isan hold on tight to their religion and firmly respect Buddhism. They're strict. They apply the beliefs and the doctrines of Buddhism to their lives.
- C: Is Buddhism important to you and your family?
- E: I think it's important. We're Buddhist and we can use the teachings to guide our lives.

- C: Do you see Buddhism practice as part of your Isan identity?
 E: I feel that it's a part of life. I think it's the same as other people's beliefs and faith. I don't think it counts as Isan identity just because I practice Buddhism. I am just another Buddhist.²⁶³

Nuanced expressions of Isan identity were evident in these discussions around the expectations, form and role of Buddhism in these young people's family and social lives. Some did not directly locate Buddhism as a characteristic of *khwampenisan*, while others were explicit about Buddhism as a signifier of Isan identity. In their explanations, they drew upon the much used comparisons between Khon Isan versus Khon Thai, and rural versus urban:

- Catherine: Do you think Khon Isan practice Buddhism differently from others?
 Jeab: Yes.
 C: How?
 J: Khon Isan are closer to Buddhism than others. Khon Isan go to temples as a part of their life. They go all the time – to offer brunch to the monks. They go with the heart, unlike central Thais, who only go when they have problems or are unhappy or to ask for something.
 C: Why do you think Khon Isan are closer to Buddhism than other regions?
 J: The way they love their lives and the way they live among nature.
 C: They say only the older people go to the temple. What do you think about that as a young person?
 J: It depends on the area, whether they are close to Buddhism.
 C: Do you mean country people are closer than city people?
 J: Yes, I feel that way. Country people are closer to their religion than city people.
 C: Do you feel that Buddhism is important to you?
 J: Yes, very much.
 C: Do you think Buddhist practice is part of Isan identity?
 J: Yes.²⁶⁴

Buddhism as being central to Isan life, as opposed to being used peripatetically in central Thai life, was commonplace in these discussions: “Khon Isan's routine is to go to the temple for whatever reason, happy or unhappy, we go to the temple. Unlike central region people, they only go to the temple when they're unhappy”.²⁶⁵ This comparison

²⁶³ Personal interview, Eu, KKU student, Khon Kaen, 30 September 2002.

²⁶⁴ Personal interview, Jeab, MSU student, Mahasarakham, 2 October 2002.

²⁶⁵ Personal interview, Tiu, MSU student, Mahasarakham, 2 October 2002.

also seemed to be enmeshed in perceptions that it was Khon Isan's continuing spiritual link to the land and their traditional relationship to the land through farming and village life that made them more authentically Buddhist than central Thais. So again, we have the rural-urban, traditional-modern dichotomies presenting as windows through which to frame *khwampenisan*. References to Isan Buddhist practice as belonging to the realm of *heart* echoes back to previous discussion on young people's predilection for referring to the *heart of Isan* when describing what *khwampenisan* means to them: "...temples are the centre of hearts. We hold festivals in a temple. In the past, Isan people even went to school in a temple".²⁶⁶

Through discussions with these young people, it became rapidly obvious that while they believed that Buddhism and Buddhist practice were both critical to and reflections of their Isan identity, they themselves did not exactly live according to the descriptions they provided:

- Catherine: Do you go to the temple often?
Tiu: Once in a while.
C: When do you go?
T: When I go home to Buriram, I would go sometimes. I never go when I am here [Mahasarakham].²⁶⁷

Like Tiu, other Isan students in my study commonly confessed to being less active in their temple life during semester time. However, they often resumed a more participatory Buddhist life with their family when back home – indicating that their spiritual life was very much framed within family rituals that traditionally gravitate around the village temple and the Buddhist calendar. In many ways this pattern reinforces, rather than contradicts, their descriptions of Isan Buddhism being linked to traditional and rural lifestyles. They access their faith when inside their traditional home space and discard, at least outwardly, these rituals when re-entering their modern urban space. Eu (KKU) was quite literal when she described the difference between village and city temples:

²⁶⁶ Personal interview, Jeab, MSU student, Mahasarakham, 2 October 2002.

²⁶⁷ Personal interview, Tiu, MSU student, Mahasarakham, 2 October 2002.

“Temples in the city are more civilized with their buildings and equipment than the ones in the village.”²⁶⁸

Several students did comment on combining Buddhist practice in their village with attending Christian church in Mahasarakham during semester time. They were remarkably open-minded about their choices:

Catherine:	Do you think of yourself as a Buddhist or a Christian?
Toto:	I can be whatever. I am still Buddhist, but sometimes I just want to learn Jesus’ teachings. It’s all good. I don’t hold so many rules.
C:	Do other friends in class go to the church also?
T:	Yes. ²⁶⁹

I took these conversations as small evidence that with more autonomy in their personal lives and less collective input, some young Isan people were engaging on comparative religious journeys and opening themselves up to previously unheard of experiences of self-determination.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: INTRA-FAMILY EXPECTATIONS OF RELATIONSHIPS, SEX AND MARRIAGE

Young Lao Isan largely affirmed that contemporary parent-child communications in Isan reflect the generic cultural norm for interpersonal communications in Thailand. This cultural norm respects relatively formal social etiquette when it comes to conversation – polite commentary on actual events and circumstances, but little direct use of language that reflects inner emotions and issues. Being direct with your feelings is considered unseemly and even rude. This sense of the need to control one’s emotions is captured conceptually and linguistically in the term *kreng-jai* (เกรงใจ)²⁷⁰, which is usually described as meaning consideration or respect for others. The ethos of *kreng-jai* infuses social behaviour patterns in Thailand. People are socially obligated to be courteous enough not to generate discomfort for others during social interaction – this reflects a kind and compassionate way of being. If a person is too confrontational because something upsets them emotionally this is moving into the realm *jai-rorn* (hot-heart), a state that is looked

²⁶⁸ Personal interview, Eu, KKU student, Khon Kaen, 30 September 2002.

²⁶⁹ Personal interview, Toto, Rajabhat Mahasarakham student, Mahasarakham, 6 August 2002.

²⁷⁰ *Kreng jai* is often described as one of the most difficult Thai expressions to translate correctly into English. Literally the translation is ‘awe – heart’, the sense therefore of utmost ‘awe’ or respect for another person’s feelings or state of heart.

down upon. Westerners who have spent any length of time in Thailand can feel frustrated by the social concept of *kreng-jai*, because they believe it limits or is an excuse not to directly express concerns and therefore inhibits the kind of open communication we consider important to resolving differences. Others refer to the way social relationships are formed and negotiated in Thailand as a reciprocal patron-client structure. This structure exists between husband and wife, parents and their children, brothers and sisters.²⁷¹ Although obligation is central to the forms of social interaction described thus far – *bun khun*, *kreng jai*, and patron-client – it is obligation that is mutually dependent on reciprocity.

Most described their relationship with their parents as close and warm, but were categorical that they could not be open with them on personal subjects like romantic love or intimate relationships, sex and sexual and reproductive health. Most admitted to being secretive at some point about relationships with girlfriends or boyfriends. The need to hide their romantic activities appears to stem largely from their sense of *bun khun* indebtedness and a desire not to disappoint their parents. The participants in my student focus groups felt a huge sense of responsibility to their parents for supporting them through their university or vocational studies. For their part, parents did not want their children engaging in romantic relationships as these were seen as a distraction from their studies. These familial views on reciprocal obligation, however, did not mean that many students were not interested in developing intimate relationships. DaGrossa reported that a third of the students in her 1993–1994 study of Mahasarakham university students (formerly SWU) had boyfriends or girlfriends, and many more expressed a desire to develop a relationship founded on romantic love. Honouring their dual roles as children and as students, most were discreet and aimed to negotiate a careful line between successfully completing their studies and maintaining a modest romantic attachment.²⁷² The following conversation with Toto, a male rajabhat student, reflects the sense of warmth often described in family relationships, coupled with a strong sense of obligation not to disappoint:

²⁷¹ DaGrossa (2003), p. 192.

²⁷² DaGrossa (2003), pp. 196-197.

Catherine: How is your relationship with your mother?
Toto: Good. My parents make me feel loved and warm.
C: Can you talk to her about anything?
T: Yes, I can. She's always the first to know. She knows everything.
C: Do you think your mother can understand you as a teenager? Does she understand your choices of your major, your clothes, and your music?
T: She understands well.
C: Has she ever been disappointed in anything?
T: A little, like when girls come to see me at home, something like that.
C: Why would she be upset about that?
T: She said not to pursue girls yet, not to date just yet. I feel like I've already done it. I feel guilty.
C: Does she think you're too young for that?
S: She thinks I'm not ready. I am not...like...how would I put this...sensible enough.²⁷³

If the young Isan people in my study were reluctant to communicate openly about their boyfriends or girlfriends with their parents, then it follows that they felt even less able to broach the subjects of sex and sexual and reproductive health.

Catherine: Have you ever talked about sex with your parents?
Student: NO, NO
S: I talk only with friends
C: So your mother has never talked about contraception at all – condoms or the pill?
S: No never.
S: I have learned from TV and read about it sometimes. I also talk to friends too.²⁷⁴

The following conversation with my research assistant Bim further reflects these constraints:

Catherine: But you don't tell them about personal things, relationships. I mean they know you're going to have a relationship with your fiancé but I mean you don't talk about it in detail – the kind of relationship?
Bim: No. When I had a boyfriend in the past I did not tell them but they knew by themselves because I was talking on the telephone and they would come to see me at my house so in that way I tell them already what's going on and she knows.
C: So indirectly?
B: Yeah, but I started to tell them more about my relationship with Dan because I'm really serious with him.

²⁷³ Personal interview, Toto, Rajabhat Maharakham student, Maharakham, 6 August 2002.

²⁷⁴ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 20 February 2002.

- C: But when it comes to more personal things like female health and sexuality, those kinds of things you wouldn't...?
- B: No they wouldn't talk about it at all.
- C: Is that the same for all your friends you think?
- B: Yeah we cannot talk about sexual things with our parents.
- C: So you talk to each other?
- B: Yeah a lot!²⁷⁵

The experience of learning about puberty and sexual development, health and relationships from conversations with friends and from the media was commonly reinforced by other study participants. This was particularly the case for female youth who were not informed about the potential onset of menstruation by their mothers, but from friends and younger female relatives – sisters or first cousins. DaGrossa's survey data revealed that only 18 per cent of the female students in her study reported learning about menstruation from their mothers. These young women indicated that they were not at all prepared for the onset of their first period with 34 per cent reporting being scared and 27 per cent reporting being embarrassed.²⁷⁶ Further conversations with my research assistant Bim in the immediate lead up to her marriage, further illustrated the communication issues for young Isan women when it came to understanding their own sexual and reproductive health. Following is a journal entry I made after one of these conversations:

She (Bim) ...wanted to ask about women's health and sexual issues, a subject that is completely out of bounds with her mother. She said she was a virgin and was very apprehensive about the wedding night. She felt almost indignant that she would have to have this wedding night thing while her friends partied on without her – a very strong symbol of how her life was about to dramatically change. She said she had never discussed personal issues relating to female reproduction or health, let alone sexuality with her own mother. The next day she gave me a very formal speech of thanks for discussing these things with her. She seemed incredibly grateful to have this western woman to ask such things of. I felt humbled that I had always taken much of my freedom in this regard for granted. It was worrying to find out that Bim had never heard of health practices, such as pap smears, that are routine for young women in Australia.

Bim said that most of her knowledge of sexual matters was accumulated through discussions with her female friends. She said she was getting irritated at the moment because as the first of her peer group to 'officially' engage in sex she was somewhat of a curiosity. She said friends had said they had had sex and it wasn't such a big deal, but she suspected they had down-

²⁷⁵ Personal interview, Kalasin, 16 April 2002.

²⁷⁶ DaGrossa (2003), pp. 203-204.

played or didn't want to talk about any negative experiences or feelings. Her friends had told her that now she would start taking the pill for contraception she would get fat. This was really worrying her. I dispelled her fears on that one!!²⁷⁷

Study participants also commonly reflected on the moral messaging of their parents in not communicating on sex and sexual health with them. Their parents' refusal to traverse this subject area seemingly predicated on the underlying message that it is immoral and inappropriate for young people to engage in sex before marriage:

- Student: Another reason that Thai people don't talk about it is because they are not allowed to have sex before they get married.
- S: They think that it's not a good thing to talk to young people. They should not know about sex since they are too young.
- S: They will have to wait till they are old enough to know.
- S: I don't think our society is the same anymore. They are just trying to hide the fact by bringing up old thinking of Thai people about having sex. The old thinking is only an ideal now.²⁷⁸

This conversation also indicates that young people have begun to recognise the contradiction between *samai kau* and *samai mai* thinking when it comes to communicating about sex with young people. Parents know that youth are commonly engaging in sex before marriage, but are in denial about recognising this in a practical way. Communication issues based around parents and older family members feeling unable to embrace the sexual element of young people's transition into more independent lifestyles may be partly explained by the fact that many of these parents remain entrenched in their traditional lifestyles and home environments. Traditionally, young Isan women's sexual well being and protection was guided and enforced by them living among groups of their relatives in their home village. These relatives would keep a watchful eye on their virtue and protect them from going 'astray' before marriage.²⁷⁹ With all of the young Isan people in my study living away from their home village for the most part of the year, for study or vocational reasons, this traditional form of social control is substantially undermined. However, as many parents and older relatives remain

²⁷⁷ Field journal entry, Kalasin, 17 April 2002.

²⁷⁸ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 20 February 2002.

²⁷⁹ DaGrossa (2003), p. 195.

very much within *their* traditional lifestyles they have little access to this new world their children are living in. It stands to reason that they are struggling with re-imagining new pathways of communication with their children and grandchildren. Other modes of social control based on spiritual belief are also dramatically diminishing in the minds of young Isan people. In her study of SWU students in the early 1990s, DaGrossa reported that the traditional fear of offending household spirits (*phit phi*) through inappropriate physical contact between males and females was not cited by these students as a reason to refrain from sexual activity. The boundaries of what may offend household spirits had also been relaxed considerably:

...actions that offended family spirits generations ago (i.e. a boy touching the weaving loom of a girl he liked) are commonplace today...at a dance and party celebrating the university's changing status [to become MSU], dozens of students and staff participated in ballroom and Latin dances. Some male-female contact is now regarded as quite harmless and even good fun.²⁸⁰

A decade later, my fieldwork revealed that friendships between the two sexes were



commonplace with physical contact ranging from the mildly affectionate to the flirtatious. One of the most common forms of physical contact between the sexes was sharing a motorcycle to get around campus. While most female students would abide by side saddle etiquette when sharing a motorbike with a male friend, they usually held onto his waist.

Spanning four generations: Isan families finding new ways to speak change. Picture: Catherine Hesse-Swain, 2002.

Western capitalism and its public mouthpiece – mass marketing and advertising – have also been attributed with influencing public display of heterosexual relations. Wilson

²⁸⁰ DaGrossa (2003), pp. 195-196.

connects the rise of a more public *heterosocial* world in Thailand with a similar process in early-twentieth century US, whereby gender identities and social relationships of the working class were reshaped through the emergence of affordable commercial recreation and entertainment, such as the dance hall, the boardwalk and the amusement park.²⁸¹ In Thailand, the backdrop for similar shifts in publicly expressing heterosexual intimacy is usually the vast urban shopping malls that provide both retail consumption and entertainment options, such as chain restaurants, cafes and karaoke booths:

Conventionally in Thailand, private heterosexual relations were subsumed within mixed gender groupings. Now, in the malls, there are more male-female Thai couples strolling together, holding hands and displaying affection. While reflecting norms of transnational commerce, the heterosocial dating found in malls is actually unconventional in Thai society. Such displays of intimacy are noteworthy because public affection between men and women is still considered somewhat taboo, although less and less in the city. These heterosexual hand-holders are appropriating commercial spaces for a new expression of relationship and identity, one that suits, and indeed is encouraged by, the mall.²⁸²

This is consistent with my observations of Isan youth in Khon Kaen shopping malls who staked out significant social space for themselves in this setting. The mall became a place to recreate and socialise – a place to both claim and craft their own expressions of identity and relationships. Similarly, the campus food halls and satellite city of Khon Kaen University served to provide this freedom for the students there.

Female Isan youth in my study commonly approached the subject of relationships and marriage with apprehension and ambivalence. It seems logical to me that this was largely founded on how they perceived the communication patterns of their own parents and then reinforced by the information void between themselves and their parents, especially their mothers, when it came to embarking on their own adult romantic and sexual lives. As she teetered on the edge of her new life with her American fiancé, Bim was filled with curiosity and anxieties about the best communication model for her marriage, as described in this journal entry:

²⁸¹ Wilson (2004), p. 124.

²⁸² Ibid, p. 125.

Bim is naturally feeling apprehensive about her impending marriage to an American and subsequent departure for a new life in the US. She asked me lots of questions about how Western women communicate with their partners. Bim said that she was a typical product of Thai culture where the woman never directly broaches a subject of contention. If she is upset or angry about something she sulks and nitpicks at the man. This has been her role modelling but she doesn't like it and is trying to be braver in her discussions with her fiancé. She wanted to know how my husband and I relate to each other.²⁸³

Most Isan youth in my study said that they had never really discussed expectations of marriage with their parents, not even in an informal bantering way, as is often carried out between immediate family members in the West when parents tend to project future potential marriage partners onto their children based on their individual character traits (i.e. "you'll probably marry a lawyer you're so pedantic!"). The underlying take home message was that their parents did not refer to future relationships or marriage because they wanted their children to focus solely on their studies, graduate successfully and establish themselves in their chosen careers before even thinking about such things. Understandably then, these young people's views on marriage were largely constructed for them by the way their parents conducted themselves within their marriage, through television, film and other media, and via messages generated in the broader social community they lived within. During one KKU focus group session we watched an episode of the *lakhon* series *Fah Peang Din* (Sky Meets the Horizon), which focuses on star-crossed lovers who love each other but do not admit their love and in the end come together through an arranged marriage. The concept of arranged marriage triggered some feisty discussion between the all-female group on whether such things still occurred in Isan society. The general consensus was that there remained a tendency for rural Isan parents to want to match-make their sons and daughters with children of family friends within the same community:

- Student: There are not many arranged marriages nowadays.
S: I have heard mostly from novels.
S: There are some in reality in up-country. I don't think it's called an arranged marriage, but they (parents) just want their sons and daughters to get married to each other.
S: Their parents are friends. It's just an Isan society tradition. If they had sons and daughters they would want their kids to

²⁸³ Field journal entry, Kalasin, 17 April 2002.

get married to their friend's sons and daughters. But if they had sons and their friend also had sons, they would want their sons to be mates.²⁸⁴

The discussion then turned to class differences in marriage choices within Thai society. Whilst Isan match-making was described as neighbourly and understandable, the match-making pursuits of Thai high society were perceived as blatant self-interest in maintaining the wealth of the family:

- Student: If *hi-so* people wanted to get married with the poor, their names would be cut from the family.
- S: People in the same group or society would only know people from that same strata of society so when they get married, they would marry within their class.
- S: So the benefits would not flow out from their rich family and they would be richer if they married within the same social class.²⁸⁵

These views on the difference between marriage in Isan society and wider Thai society were further contextualised within the familiar identity formation frame of rural versus urban understandings:

- Catherine: Do you think the Isan region or young Khon Isan are different from the rest of Thailand, in terms of social attitudes towards marriage?
- Student: It depends on each area.
- S: People in any one village might have the same opinion.
- S: And also people up in the mountains are similar to Khon Isan
- S: They have their traditions, but for us our parents are teachers or soldiers, they are educated. Their way of thinking is more modern.
- S: The way of thinking of educated and uneducated parents is not the same.²⁸⁶

Several young Isan women in this group believed that living in urban settings encouraged co-habitation before marriage, but that this freer living was not necessarily socially accepted and may inevitably lead to family fissure because parents back in rural Isan refused to accept the partner chosen by their son or daughter when they returned home with them:

²⁸⁴ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 20 February 2002.

²⁸⁵ Ibid

²⁸⁶ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 20 February 2002.

- Catherine: Do you think there is any difference, for example, between how young people in Bangkok conduct a relationship and how young people in Isan do so? Maybe young people in Bangkok are more prepared to live with each other before marriage than young people in Isan?
- Bim: Many young people live together, so people are beginning to accept it.
- Student: It doesn't mean they are going to accept it I think.
- S: I think only people in their group accept them. I mean people who live as a couple.
- S: There are many schools and students in Bangkok, so it seems people accept young people who live with each other.
- S: Comparing Khon Kaen to Bangkok, I think it's just the same, but I don't think there are many (unmarried couples) outside downtown Khon Kaen.
- S: I think there are more young people living with each other in Bangkok because they stay in dorms not a house.
- S: Most of them are from the up-country (rural) areas.
- S: That's right. They don't live with their parents and it's also the same in Khon Kaen. Many students from other areas study in Khon Kaen. They stay in a dorm and they might meet one another so they decide to live with each other, just like in Bangkok. I don't think they are going to stay with parents.
- Bim: So it's easier to live with each other?
- S: I think it's hard to see a young couple staying with each other first and then moving to stay with parents. If it really happens, they will move into the guy's parents' house. And if something happens, they will not respond because they will say you moved in here yourself without the invitation.
- C: Do you think most parents would be upset?
- S: Yes they will, but they should have a thought about it because their kids are far away from them.²⁸⁷

The final comment in this discussion speaks volumes about the emerging generational disconnect. Rural Isan parents, who eagerly send their children off to be educated in urban centres like Khon Kaen or in Bangkok, are not prepared for the attitudinal changes these environments bring about in their children – again the clash of *samai kau* with *samai mai*. Perhaps more than in any other area of identity growth and formation, young Khon Isan's perceptions of intimate relationships and marriage were being most dramatically challenged and re-configured. Living outside the traditional confines of their home villages, these young people were undergoing a dramatic broadening of their worldview. These shifts in perception appeared to find most vivid expression through a

²⁸⁷ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 20 February 2002.

questioning of traditional moral norms when it came to the idea of living with a partner before marriage and of marriage itself. The majority of female study participants and several male participants expressed the desire for more open, communicative and egalitarian marriages than those lived by their parents. It has to be said that the young Isan males in this study were far less communicative on the subject of relationships and marriage than their female peers. Undoubtedly the fact that a woman researcher, a *farang* no less, and a woman interpreter were running the sessions played a role in their reticence.

After numerous focus group sessions and one-to-one interviews, I began to experience the overwhelming sense that these young Isan individuals felt compelled or obligated to describe their relationship with their parents as warm and close in much the same way that they often felt compelled to describe Isan characteristics as gravitating around honesty, loyalty, neighbourliness, simplicity and hard work. There appeared to be a definite generic *stereotype* of the Isan family and that not adhering to this stereotype was in itself a breach of reciprocal *bun khun* loyalty and indebtedness. In these young people's minds being close with your parents did not equate to being communicative with them, particularly in relation to the more intimate subjects of romantic relationships, sexual development, and sexual and reproductive health. Nor did self-described closeness necessarily mean that some of these young people could actually find common ground with their parents, especially when came to clashes between *samai kau* (traditional times) and *samai mai* (new times) beliefs and lifestyle preferences:

- Catherine: Is there any topic that you can talk to your parents about?
Goong: When I was a kid, I didn't talk to them much. Now, I can talk about anything.
C: Do you think your parents understand your choices, like your clothes, music, and the way you live?
G: No.
C: What are the main things that your parents don't understand?
G: They are old fashioned. They don't get it. They're not modern and accepting.
C: Not open enough?
G: Yes.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁸ Personal interview, Goong, Rajabhat Mahasarakham student, Kalasin province, 17 April 2002.

From a small rice farming community in Kalasin province, Goong begins by saying she can talk to her parents about anything (a common statement among study participants), but quickly contradicts this by describing how they do not understand her lifestyle preferences. Many rural-based parents who continued the generational lifestyle of their forbears – that is rice farming in their local communities – also continued to live very simple lives without much exposure to media or modern technology and gadgetry. They worked primarily to see their children through their studies, but they themselves expressed little interest in changing their traditional rural lifestyles despite the material progress and opportunities going on around them. Goong’s mother, Ta, described her lifestyle as follows:

- Catherine: What do you do in your free time?
Ta: I never have free time. When I’m free from farming, I look after cows and buffaloes.
C: Do you like to watch TV or listen to radio or read the newspaper?
T: I don’t have anything to do with the media. No TV. No radio. I mostly work and stay at the rice field. Nobody’s home, so I don’t need to have those things. I only work to support my child through school. I don’t own anything like other people.²⁸⁹

This dynamic of the parents remaining in the village doing what the family has always done and the child relocating to an urban environment to study has an obvious impact on parent-child communication. Some Isan youth negotiated their way through this fraught territory by aligning family identity with traditional Isan values and this was often naturally expressed through a direct comparison with the modern Thai family:

- Isan families are very close. Always help each other out. Central Thai families teach their kids to be confident, to think, and to express themselves. Khon Isan always consult their parents, always let parents help.²⁹⁰

Again along much the same corollary as Isanness being expressed through rural values as opposed to urban values, study participants often described differences between traditional-rural perceptions and expectations of relationships and marriage and modern-urban views:

²⁸⁹ Personal interview, Ta, Goong’s mother, Kalasin province, 17 April 2002.

²⁹⁰ Personal interview, Tiu, MSU student, Mahasarakham, 2 October 2002.

- Catherine: So do you think it's different for young people who grow up in a city maybe and have a higher education level like university, than for young people in a village or a country area? For example, is it different in terms of the typical or expected age to get married?
- Student: Yes it's really different. The more they study the more they know. They would plan many things about their future. They would think they are not ready for a married life. They have to get more knowledge to teach their kids.
- S: They would want to study as much as they could to get a better job. So their family will be warm and happy. This way of thinking and planning would make them get married later.
- S: And also the more you study, the more chance you have to meet decent guys. But people in a village have no chance like this.²⁹¹

These female study participants believe that higher education and more cosmopolitan experiences not only delayed the timing of marriage for many Isan women, but also provided better opportunities for upward mobility through meeting *decent* (read educated) men.

MY-KWAMPENSIAN@HOME-AND-AWAY

- Catherine: Do you think you will ever lose your Isan identity?
- Student: No, I'll only gain more.

Khon Kaen University, 30 September 2002

One recurring theme within these young people's identity formation discourse is the association of traditional (*samai kau*), pre-modern lifestyles and culture with the core essence of *kwampenisan*. Talking across three generations about what constitutes Isanness reveals that the youth of Isan are perhaps more engaged in spinning Isan identity through a pre-modern utopian lens, than either their parents or grandparents. Like the official mouthpieces of central Thai political and social ideology, these Lao Isan youth often align under-development in their region with *kwampenisan* or – put another way – development essentially undermines Isan identity:

²⁹¹ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 20 February 2002.

- Catherine: Do you think Thailand is developing fast? Are there any advantages or disadvantages?
- Jeab: Developing fast and not in a good way.
- C: How?
- J: They focus only on the economy and watch only the people who have money. They only try to make the economy better but don't look back at the local wisdoms and cultures, which need to catch up with development. Then the old cultures are being changed, but not integrated with new ways of life. Some cultures need people to cooperate with each other to maintain their way of life, but there are so many changes in society that make food more expensive and make people compete. Here is where the unity is gone. Now it's only all about themselves.²⁹²

MSU student, Jeab, makes a valid point about social development in Thailand being left behind in the pursuit of economic development. The underlying ideology of her argument, however, is the notion that the pursuit of individual wealth within capitalist development subsumes collective spiritual wealth. This echoes Jaruwat's arguments described earlier. The source of this collective spiritual wealth, in turn, is naturally assumed to be old culture, which equates to old wisdoms. The narratives of the Lao Isan youth in my study, however, constantly reinforce their intrinsic self-validation of *khwampenisan* through their attachment and usage of their first language, *pasar* Isan (Lao), and through their experience of being Isan against the dominant political, social and cultural landscape of central Thai expressions of *khwampenthai*. Parents and grandparents seem much more comfortable within their Isan skins – their children and grandchildren appear compelled to make stronger claims to their Isan identity by overtly trying to identify innate Isan characteristics. I believe these feelings of staking claim are aligned with the new pathways they are forging into external Thai socio-cultural space. This Lao Isan generation, more than any previously, is living the life of *samai mai* – their educational experiences have led them into a more mobile existence as they take up courses in urban centres away from their home villages and mostly they are studying to achieve status and security within an independent profession – that further reinforces a *samai mai* life lived either outside their region in Bangkok, or at the very least, outside their home community in a regional or provincial urban centre. For the most part, parents who spent periods of

²⁹² Personal interview, Jeab, MSU student, Mahasarakham, 2 October 2002.

time as migrant workers in Bangkok or as civil servants in their home localities (i.e. teachers), did not actually leave their home communities permanently to forge careers beyond the pre-modern residence patterns of their ancestors. Grandparents essentially remained for their entire lives in the one community and lived traditional *samai kau* lives – with childhoods attending the village school and sharing in family labour, with their productive adult years based on rice farming and subsistence food extraction from the local environs, and a lifetime of family and spiritual practice centred around the local temple.

As discussed in the previous section, many Lao Isan youth reduced their Buddhist practice and visits to the temple during the semester and resumed these once again on their return home for holidays. This reads like an anecdote for the constant realignment of self these youth make as they negotiate between traditional (family and village) and new (student urban life) circles of influence. Their sense of *khwampenisan* runs along the same continuum – they feel compelled to externally associate their Isanness with traditional rural living and family practice, when in fact they are *being Isan* because they are Isan – they were born and raised in their ethnic identity space and they speak *pasar* Isan (Lao) as their first and preferred language. Their parents do not suffer these same anxieties; they will often say bluntly ‘I am Khon Isan’, with no further explanation necessary. Rajabhat student Pui’s 69-year-old grandmother said in response to the question of whether she considered herself Khon Lao or Khon Isan: “There’s nothing different between Lao and Isan, not even the language. I’m Khon Lao Isan”.²⁹³

Lao Isan youth are speaking about their identity because they are the first Lao Isan generation *en masse* to make their way independently in a central Thai-dominated world. In our conversations they often felt compelled to counteract the negative stereotypes and images projected by mainstream Thai print and broadcast media, by Thai-produced television, film and performance arts and by successive governments dominated by central Thai politicians. Sometimes they seemed to feel the need to be more Isan than

²⁹³ Personal interview, Tin, Pui’s grandmother, Mahasarakham, 2 January 2002.

Isan, while at the same being self-conscious of their Isan identity in Thai public space (i.e. Bangkok) because of the prejudices constantly reinforced by central Thai ideologues. They, after all, wanted to fulfil the ambitions of their studies and actually gain secure employment in their chosen professions, even if this meant disassociation from their Isanness in the wider Thai social context. Talk about being caught between a rock and hard place. Little wonder that my research assistant Bim was enthusiastic about escaping to the US where she could bathe in being *ethnically exotic* and at the same time just be herself!

Chapter Six: ISAN FANTASY ON A BANGKOK CONSTRUCTION SITE
– *LAKHON* AND HOW DIRTY SHIRTS GOT TO BE SO CLEAN

Thai produced *lakhon* (drama) is one of the most-watched genres of popular television in Thailand. In this chapter I examine the emerging popularity within mainstream audiences of *lakhon* set in Isan or focusing on Isan people and their daily lives and preoccupations, through a case study of the drama series *Suer Si Foon* (Dirty Shirt) broadcast on Channel 3 in 2002. *Suer Si Foon* is a simple love story about two building labourers from Isan working on construction sites in Bangkok. It is filmed in and around constructions sites, slum communities and commercial areas easily recognisable to Bangkok residents, such as the Lat Phrao shopping precinct surrounding Jusco Department store. Language usage, choreography, thematic and script content, actor backgrounds and study participant responses will be explored in terms of how they interplay with the unfolding identity formation themes discussed in previous chapters.

EVERYDAY ESCAPE: *LAKHON* IN THAI PEOPLE'S LIVES

The meanings and place of *lakhon* in the everyday life of Thai people was the subject of Sara Van Fleet's 1998 ethnography of working class and lower-middle class television viewers in the northern city of Chiang Mai. Van Fleet connects the emergence and growing popularity of *lakhon* in the daily lives of the poorer classes to their experiences of social fragmentation instigated by the rapid and often uneven economic and social development of Thailand over the past 30 years. This analysis fits with earlier discussions on *samai kau* (old times) and *samai mai* (new times) interpretations of Isan identity formation. She refers to viewers enjoying *lakhon* set in more traditional agrarian times in Thailand when life was less complex and less demanding: "...a (an imagined) past or "tradition" when what was "good" and what was "bad" was more clearly mapped out."²⁹⁴ Van Fleet argues that *lakhon* creates an alternate universe where people, even poor people, may have the opportunity to fulfil their desires, dreams and fantasies. Against all

²⁹⁴ Van Fleet, S. (1998). *Everyday dramas: Television and Modern Thai Women*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Washington, United States.

odds – pain, suffering and longing will ultimately be resolved in true love and/or unexpected economic and social success. For those Thai citizens, especially women, who tolerate unenviable hard working lives, *lakhon* offers an accessible and palatable escape from the rigours of their everyday life. It does not matter if the basic plot lines and themes remain unchanged and wholly predictable through series after series of *lakhon*, as long as the drama fulfils the desired fantasy of a happy ending. The repetitiveness of *lakhon* is often described as *lakhon nam nao* (rotten water) in Thai popular culture discourse, an expression with origins in the 1970s student resistance movement, whose members used it to refer to the rigid and corrupt military government they were fighting to change. Van Fleet points out that while the term *nam nao* appears superficially derogatory; it is actually used by people with ironic affection for the very typical nature of the *lakhon* genre, a predictability that is at the very heart of the genre.²⁹⁵

Participants in my research were well aware that the fairytale nature of *lakhon* is what makes this kind of television attractive. They were savvy enough to recognise that producers of Thai television drama are specifically targeting *lakhon* at a mainstream audience of mostly working class Thais. One student made this comment about *Suer Si Foon*: “Real construction work is hard; they don’t sing and dance like in this drama. On TV, they (the producers) want real construction workers to watch and enjoy”.²⁹⁶ This awareness by producers of the desire for escapism by the less privileged masses has led to the steady emergence of both modern and historical *lakhon* series either set in the Isan region or that deal with the lives of Khon Isan outside their home region, particularly in the sprawling metropolis of Bangkok. There are more Khon Isan in Thailand than any other ethnic group and they are largely poor. Therefore it is not surprising that in the last decade Thai television producers and promoters have identified them as a significant target group, in much the same way that the promoters of mainstream Thai music recording labels have identified the Isan *lukthung* music genre as a potentially lucrative market in the Thai commercial landscape. Likewise, non-Isan viewers also appear to take interest and/or amusement, pejorative or not, in the lives of their Isan neighbours.

²⁹⁵ Van Fleet (1998), pp.228-231.

²⁹⁶ Youth focus group, Rajabhat Mahasarakham, 1 October 2002.

In the minds of my research participants, the advent of popular Isan *lakhon* was the 2001 broadcasting of *Nai Hoy Tamin* (Lieutenant Cruelty) about the life of rural Isan people in historical times. This long-running series of 13 episodes was greeted by the Isan television watching community with great anticipation because it was one of the first occasions that the main actors would attempt to speak in *pasar* Isan (Lao). The two lead actors, Saranyu Wongkrajarn (Tua) as Nai Hoy and Namfon Komolthiti as Kum Kaew, were not Khon Isan but of central Thai origin. Many people, my research participants included, were disappointed with the result:

- Student 1: They don't speak like Khon Isan.
S 2: I watched it and felt unsatisfied.
S 3: They did not speak as well as we expected, but the characters were like Khon Isan in real life. And the actors were admired, so many were not bothered much with the language and were able to share their stories of the past with their children by watching this drama.
Ajarn Wirat: So the only part you didn't like was the language?
S 3: Yes. It's ok with the feeling though because the actors are the ones we like. Children always ask the oldies if the past was same as in the drama.
S 4: The genuine Isan actors played only small parts, not main characters.
S 2: They were token Khon Isan.²⁹⁷

Popular Isan singer Jintara Poonlarp was one of these *token* Isan acting in her first television role. Given that *pasar* Isan is actually the Lao language, it was perhaps rather ambitious to expect that these young popular Thai actors could become fluent enough in a second language to appear as native Khon Isan in the series. This is one of the key issues Thai producers working on Isan *lakhon* are obviously grappling with and will be discussed further in the following sections.

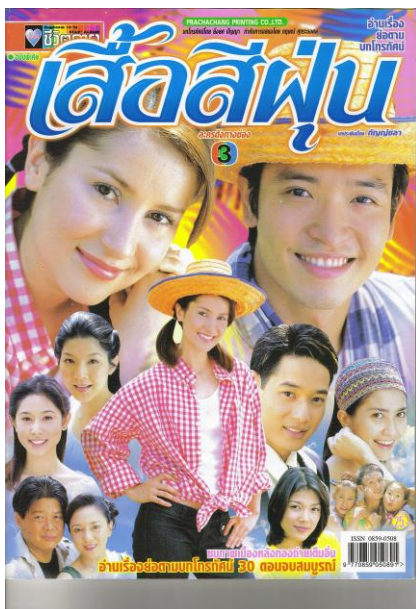
²⁹⁷ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 28 November 2001.

***SUER SI FOON*: SETTING THE SCENE**

Suer Si Foon was produced by Channel 3, owned by Bangkok Entertainment Corporation (BEC) of the commercially and politically influential Maleenont family. While BEC may be a public company (not traded), the Maleenont family have been embedded in Thai political life for several decades. The family are well known as one of the leading financiers of the Thai Rak Thai Party. At the time this study was being conducted, Mr Pracha Maleenont was Deputy Interior Minister in the Thaksin administration. A public company with undoubtedly a joint interest in promoting drama that reinforces the Thai state's central ideology of nation, religion and king, and building a strong audience base in the densely populated Isan region. While *Suer Si Foon* is focused on Isan people and culture rather than central Thai, its content is politically palatable to the Thai Government because of its potential to reinforce the unification of Isan people with the rest of Thailand. By simultaneously paying attention to and entertaining the Isan populous, Channel 3 is potentially building space for *khwampenisan* to publicly co-exist with *khwampenthai*.

A familiar plot with an Isan flavour

Suer Si Foon TV magazine cover
(Image courtesy of Channel 3)



Suer Si Foon is a story of the working class; specifically of Isan migrant workers eking out their livelihood on the hot, dusty construction sites of the capital Bangkok. The beautiful Uan is learning to be a cement worker from her father Ing, who is skilled at his trade. Each day is a struggle for survival for Uan and her family. Jong, a good man who is also cement worker on the same construction site as Uan and her father, falls in love with her. Uan has never paid any attention to Jong. She has given her heart to a handsome and outgoing man called Glid, the son of the workers' boss. Her love has led her to be a maid in

Glid's house. However, Glid can only give friendship but not love to Uan. Finally, Uan recognises Jong's genuine love for her and settles on him as the most suitable man.

The *Suer Si Foon* television magazine or *ruang yaw* touts the series as a "...story about labourers from Isan ...how hard the labourers' lives are and how difficult is the struggle for survival in Bangkok".²⁹⁸ In the *lakhon* tradition of creating an enjoyable fantasy for viewers, the true grit, filth and danger of the extreme working conditions endured by rural migrant labourers on building sites in Bangkok is not genuinely portrayed. In the opening scene, the workers dance out a carefully choreographed routine in the Disney-style musical format. They sing, leap and gyrate to an upbeat country folk song wearing well pressed working class garb, including the telltale labourer's plaid *pa kaw ma* (scarf) and very *not-dirty*, white t-shirts. The first scripted scene includes one of the labourers playing the traditional Isan *can* (pipe) in the foreground to ensure that viewers get the flavour of *real* Isan culture. I am being facetious of course; all this is a deliberate construction of stereotypical Isan identity enjoyed by Khon Isan because they are being noticed in the wider popular culture scene of Thailand. Furthermore, it is what one expects of good *lakhon* – corny, predictable and sentimental. This fantasy construction site world is maintained through the language of the *ruang yaw* when describing the blessing or *Boungsoun*²⁹⁹ ceremony for the commencement of filming, organised by the Channel 3 public relations team:

Later, the first group of actors dressed like labourers appeared for the still photographers. When we first saw them we thought that they were real labourers who came to visit the filming site. Their costumes looked like real construction labourers; labour style trousers, sarong, local scarf and bamboo woven hats.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ *Suer Si Foon: Dirty Shirt. Special Magazine: Album of TV Stars, Suer Si Foon Series*. Channel 3, 2002 [No publication date cited].

²⁹⁹ A ceremony conducted to pay respect to good spirits and to ask for their blessing.

³⁰⁰ *Suer Si Foon: Dirty Shirt. Special Magazine*, 2002, p.3.

THAI ACTORS WITH ISAN VOICES: A STRUGGLE FOR AUTHENTICITY

Suer Si Foon was intended as a drama spoken in *pasar* Isan (Lao). There are no Isan actors in the lead roles. In promoting the series, the Channel 3 *Suer Si Foon* TV magazine, says:

Most of the actors have to speak the Isan language throughout the series. Ann, the main actress, depended on her maids from Isan for training. At the film sites, the make-up lady who is originally from Isan trained Ann to read her script in the Isan language and to carefully pronounce word by word. After that, Ann did not worry so much about speaking the Isan language.³⁰¹

The general perception of study participants on watching *Suer Si Foon* was that the actors playing Isan characters generally attempted to speak *pasar* Isan (Lao) when speaking amongst themselves. However, there was general consensus that the dialogue was restricted to clichéd Isan expressions, anecdotes, sayings and jokes that would usually be recognisable to the wider Thai audience. Most agreed that the Isan dialogue was so badly pronounced that it was often difficult for even themselves as native Isan speakers to understand. My research assistant, who translated two episodes of the series, comments: “...they speak mainly Isan among the laborers. The actors who aren't Isan don't speak Isan that well. They try, but with the Thai accent. That's pretty common in Thai soaps”.³⁰² Some Isan youth in this study were quite happy to extend their belief in the *lakhon* construction site fantasy to include an acceptance of the poor reproduction of *pasar* Isan by the non-Isan cast: “I liked it (*Suer Si Foon*); it was fun. They speak broken Isan and it's kind of amusing”.³⁰³ Parts of the script that included central Thai characters, such as the building site boss addressing the workers, are obviously spoken in *pasar* Thai. As there are no subtitles provided for the Isan language, one can assume that the comic and romantic elements of the plot were enough to retain the attention of the wider Thai audience. The above *ruang yaw* quote about Ann learning her Isan lines from her Isan maids and the ‘make-up lady’, is not only a quintessential moment of stereotypical Isan identity construction, but also reflects the degree of public ignorance around the linguistic status of *pasar* Isan or Lao being a completely separate language from Thai. This

³⁰¹ *Suer Si Foon: Dirty Shirt. Special Magazine*, 2002, p.3.

³⁰² Mamber, K. (2011, January 17). Personal communication.

³⁰³ Youth focus group, Rajabhat, Mahasarakham, 1 October 2002.

reference is akin to a German actor saying he or she is learning Dutch from the Dutch guy who cleans the car on the weekend.

The character of the love-lorn Jong is played by central Thai actor Chatayodom (Chai) Hirunyathiti. Chai was born in Bangkok in 1976 of an elite family with a high-ranking military father who was stationed in the United States for a period. He was schooled in both the US and Thailand and settled in Thailand in 1993. Chai reflects on his role:

I am happy to act in this series and act as a construction labourer. Before acting I had sun baths to darken my skin but it did not work out well. It turned red and my skin peeled off, and then it turned to the same white colour. My face as you can see now is full of rashes. This is because I am allergic to the sun. In this series I act as a cementer specialist. The day we filmed at the construction site, I carried things, pushed the wheel barrow full of cement and continued to do so until the director told the film crew to cut. This series made me aware of how skilful the labourers are. Their tasks are not easily done but need a lot of skills. In addition, I have to speak the Isan language. At the beginning, my accent is not the same as a local accent, but the crew have trained me all the time. After some days with continuous acting, my accent is getting better and more proper. If I stop acting and speaking Isan language for some days, I am afraid I have to restart again. It is not as smooth as when I continue to use the language. However, I enjoyed it very much.³⁰⁴

Chai's preoccupation and travails with darkening his skin colour conforms to earlier discussions on central Thai stereotyped perceptions of Khon Isan being unattractive because of their darker skin. The less than subtle subtext to this narrative on the problems arising from his attempts to darken his skin colour is Chai's intrinsic belief that lighter skinned people are *sensitive* to the sun. It follows then that darker skinned (Isan) people make *natural* outdoor workers, such as labourers and farmers. Through their ethnically evolved physical attributes, genetic traits, Isan people are supposedly suited to these working class livelihoods so why change the status quo. Likewise, Chai's simplistic view that a few days exposure to the Isan language has resulted in his more proper pronunciation of the language reflects a patronising worldview of Khon Isan and their distinct language. Any non-Thai speaking person who claimed to have achieved an authentic Thai pronunciation or accent through a few days exposure would be emphatically criticised by most Thais, although their efforts to speak Thai at all would be

³⁰⁴ *Suer Si Foon: Dirty Shirt. Special Magazine*, 2002, p.12.

applauded! Chai's comments on how playing the role of Jong increased his awareness of the skill and difficulty of labouring work could, however, be perceived as a positive message of empathy for Khon Isan and their working lives.

Anne Tongprasom, who plays the female lead of Uan, is a *loog krueng* actor of Thai and Swedish-Arab parentage. Anne has been in the entertainment business since she was 13-years-old and is very popular within Thailand because she adheres to the moral codes of good Thai behaviour. Anne's commentary on her role as cement worker Uan reflects a more genuine sense of realisation about the physical hardships Khon Isan face in their daily working lives:

This is the most untidy role I have ever played. However, the film crew helped me not to look too nasty. It is difficult and tiring acting because the film was taken in the hot sun. I have put on a lot of sun cream. I have to work hard to weld steel, to learn to speak the Isan language, to learn how to do cementing and tiling. My hands are getting so hard and tough. In this series, most of the time I wear little cosmetics and wear denim shorts. I feel that this way of life is so difficult. While filming I have faced some unpleasant situations. There are many mosquitoes in the slum where we were filming. However, the film crew looked after me quite well. I enjoyed acting in this series because I do not need to dress nicely as I have when I acted in other series... This is a strange role for me compared to others series I have acted in. I acted in a different character; one that I have never acted as before. I have to do welding, cementing, cement lining, carry stone and sand, etc. I have often seen the labourers do this work before. In this series, I have to do it myself. I do not think that it is so difficult to act as a labourer. I just have to be careful for my safety. In some places, the filming sites are at real construction sites. I do not know when any objects will fall down on me... Though the crew has properly looked after my safety, I have to be more careful to protect myself too. Regarding the dust, I am lucky that I am not allergic to dust. The dust makes my skin get so dark and dirty, in particular my nails. I have to clean it more than usual.³⁰⁵

Anne is honest about her discomfort at being too genuinely representative of an Isan labourer. She enjoys the freedom of not being doled up for the role as is her usual experience as a *lakhon* star, but does not want to be dirty, sweaty and dark skinned as would truly be the case for Isan labourers working on building sites in Bangkok. Anne is also more humble about her attempts to master the Isan language and refers to learning from fellow cast members like Liafia Mok Jok, a native Isan speaker:

³⁰⁵ *Suer Si Foon: Dirty Shirt. Special Magazine*, 2002, p.13.

I speak the Isan language in the series. At present, my Isan is improving through use. I can speak fluently if the film is continuously filming. Some days I forget how to pronounce it correctly. I am lucky that Uan is originally from Sisakhet province and that her accent differs from Phi Noi and Phi Liafia³⁰⁶. I have received a lot of support from these two Phi (elders) on speaking the Isan language. I have tried speaking Isan when I meet Isan people. They were so surprised that I can speak their language.

One of the few Khon Isan actors in the series is comedian Liafia Mok Jok who plays the comic relief character Gling. Liafia is a member of Mam Mok Jok's widely popular comedy troupe. It is worth noting that Liafia did not feature among the 11 key actors profiled in the *ruang yaw* (TV magazine), despite playing an important comic relief role, being a recognised Isan comedian and a genuine Khon Isan actor playing an Isan character. So while the Channel 3 distributors of *Suer Si Foon* saw value in manufacturing Isanness through non-Isan actors describing their experiences of interpreting their Isan roles; they obviously did not view Liafia's authentic Isanness as a valid way to promote the series. In a 2006 interview, Liafia describes himself as an ordinary Isan man who suffered extreme poverty and deprivation when first travelling to Bangkok from his remote village to look for work. He reflects on the isolation Khon Isan migrants feel living away from their local culture, language and village network:

I watched many movies and series before coming to Bangkok. In my imagination, Bangkok was so beautiful, colourful and is the dream town where everybody seeks happiness... Now I have told my friends (from Isan) not to send their children to Bangkok. Life in Isan is much better. At least we can hear some sentences like "Hi young fellow! Where are you going? Would you like to eat with us? Whose child are you? Come and join us eating". In Bangkok, I am so sorry to tell you that the people do not know even their neighbours who live next door. I used to ask some Isan friends about their life in Bangkok. They all said "Totally living in Hell". They refer to all hard and tough jobs and life. For those who want to look for a job in Bangkok, you should be well prepared to face with all kinds of problems and to struggle for your survival in Bangkok. At my Isan home, I only speak Isan language. One day, I got off the bus at the Victory Monument and I asked one man in central Thai language "Brother where does this road lead to?" "Where do you want to go?" that man asked me in turn in Isan language. I finally discovered many Bangkokians are the same as me; from Isan. They are everywhere and they carry a similar and specific type of bag.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ Liafia is originally from Isan and Phi Noi, who plays one of the labourers, speaks Isan fluently.

³⁰⁷ Liafia Mok Jok interview (2006, June 19). From <http://www.siamzone.com/movie/news/index.php?id=2420> (translated by Varunee Kritchareon).

Respected veteran Thai actor, Montri Janeaksorn (Pu), plays the character of Ing, Uan's father. According to my research participants, Montri was the only non-Isan actor with genuine facility in the Isan language. Montri is well known as both an actor in Thai film and television production and as a voice-over actor for foreign language films. Montri was lead actor in the classic 1979 Thai film *Khon Poo Khao* (The Mountain People), one of the first in Thai cinema to attempt to explore ethnic differences and gender inequality through the story of a minority hill tribe village. Montri's experience and professionalism mean he is committed to learning the languages of the characters he plays to a competent level. My research assistant believed he must be Khon Isan because of his excellent Isan pronunciation. The series' *ruang yaw* (TV magazine) and associated interviews simultaneously reinforce and ameliorate some of the obvious negative Isan stereotyping. In particular, Montri sincerely expresses an increased understanding of and compassion for the very difficult conditions many Khon Isan live and work under as migrant labourers in Bangkok:

Acting as the labourers' chief, I have to dye my skin / body black to make it look like a real labourer. When I first saw myself in the mirror, I could not recognize myself. I feel like I am a labourer because at the filming site, it is so hot. These experiences have taught me how the labourers feel; hot, sweaty. I actually work on many tasks like cementing and mixing cement. The actors wonder how we take it. This reminds me of Mr Note Chernyihm, when he acted in the *Phoo Gong Yod Rak* series. He acted as a drunken dirty man, sleeping on the footpaths. He said that if he is not an actor, he may not be able to act like this. I fully agree with him. If I am not an actor, I would not have experience being in this extreme heat. I accept that those labourers are very patient.³⁰⁸

While many research participants wanted to see Khon Isan playing the lead Isan characters, they also commonly demonstrated a complacent acceptance that this was not possible:

Catherine: You've watched *Suer Si Foon*, which is about Khon Isan at a construction site. Why didn't they hire real Isan actors to play the roles?

Student: Because stars like Ann and Chai are skilled. They can deliver the roles. They only needed to learn a little Isan and they were good to go. If they use Khon Isan, they may not be able to deliver the acting. They cut the problem by hiring professional actors.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ *Suer Si Foon: Dirty Shirt. Special Magazine*, 2002, p. 15.

³⁰⁹ Youth focus group, Khon Kaen University, 20 February 2002.

Speaking their own language: Alexandra and Wia in *Pleng Rak Rim Fang Khong*.



Thai *lakhon* producers are perhaps just beginning to recognise that Khon Isan characters might better be played by actors who can speak Isan (Lao). The 2007 series *Pleng Rak Rim Fang Khong* (The Love Songs of Khong River), stars Lao-speaking actress Alexandra Bounxouei, who comes from Lao and Bulgarian parentage and grew up in Laos. The *lakhon* series is a love story between an Isan man and a Lao woman taking place along the Mekong River. The male lead is played by Khon Kaen native and KCU graduate, Sakullawat Kanaros (ศุกลวัฒน์ คณารศ), known by his nickname of Wia. Both

actors speak pasar Lao/Isan throughout the series. My research assistant commented that Alexandra was very popular with mainstream Thai audiences because she speaks with a *pretty* Lao accent as opposed to an Isan accent, which is considered by many outside Isan as blunt and unattractive.³¹⁰ One student had this to say about his strong belief that Khon Isan should play Isan characters:

Nowadays, there are two kinds of Isan in drama: non-Isan actors trying to speak Isan and Khon Isan speaking real Isan. I feel very proud of how Isan people are stepping up to be at the very front row. Before, it seemed that people from central Thailand were not providing opportunities for Isan people to demonstrate to the public eye what we have got, but now it is changing. I very much despise actors who attempt to speak Isan when they are not Khon Isan because they don't really know deep down what it means to be Isan like we do.³¹¹

However, those who may *get* the appropriateness of Khon Isan playing Isan characters from both a local ethnicity and an open cultural perspective, including Khon Isan themselves, are up against a strong hegemonic Thai identity discourse. This is a discourse that appropriates *loog kreung-ness* and elements of Isanness to complement elite central Thai notions of Thailand as a progressive, suave cultural and political presence on the

³¹⁰ Mamber, K. (2009, January 12). Personal communication.

³¹¹ Youth focus group, Mahasarakham University, Mahasarakham, 7 August 2002.

global stage. The popular Channel 7 *lakhon Morlam Summer* (2003) featured the half-British (father) / half-Thai *loog kreung* actress and model, Araya Alberta Hargate (อารยา อัลเบอर्टต้า ฮาร์เก้ต), commonly known by her nickname Chompoo. Araya plays a teenage Isan-American schoolgirl who spends her holidays away from home in New York at her grandmother's home in Ubon Ratchathani. In the short period she spends in Ubon she manages to achieve mega-stardom within Thailand as a *lukthung morlam* singer, as well as falling in love with a young Chinese-Thai entertainment business entrepreneur. Isan scholar, Pattana Kitiarsa, believes this particular *lakhon* reflects the dominant identity discourse in contemporary Thailand:

A Thai/Isan-American *luk kreung* performing a trademark of Thai-Isan or Thai-Lao cultural identities under the pleased gazes of national prime-time TV audiences signifies at least how the Thai popular media could lead their national audience to consciously imagine and juxtapose their cultural self on the world stage.³¹²

Pattana argues that the dominant players constructing national and cultural identities in Thailand today are the middle class who own and operate significant segments of the mass media (not least former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra). Pattana asserts that the voices of the middle class, via the machinery of mass media, are more influential and powerful than those of the State.³¹³

LAKHON FIXTURES: HOW KHON ISAN ARE PORTRAYED AND WHAT ISAN YOUTH THINK

A quick dissection of episode one of *Suer Si Foon* reveals the simple ingredients of *lakhon* fantasy with a special Isan flavour. There is quaint romanticising of Isan culture in the opening scene where one of the labourers features in the foreground playing the traditional Isan pipe or *can*, while his co-workers wearing traditional *pa kaw ma* (scarves) argue with each other using crude insults. The script is littered with crass language and dirty expressions that are apparently the mainstay of conversation for the Isan working class:

³¹² Pattana (2005), p. 37.

³¹³ Ibid.

Pon and a fellow labourer are attempting to help the cook down from the scaffolding while she's whining and yelling. She's playing and joking with them, sticking her butt out at them. Pon lifts her down on his back.

Pon: Why didn't you come down peacefully? Why did you have to fart on me? Stinks like hell!

Maum: Sorry, just a little fart.³¹⁴

Most of the crass expressions and dialogue are associated with bodily functions and/or sexual innuendos. No matter how comic such dialogue seems to both Isan and non-Isan viewers, the end result is to reinforce central Thai constructions of Khon Isan as uncouth and uneducated, such as this expression also scripted in scene one: "Getting crap is better than getting farts!"³¹⁵

There is consistent gender stereotyping that conforms to so-called traditional rural norms about how married men and women behave towards each other, limited educational opportunities for girls and typical male sexual behaviours and mannerisms. Uan's mother, Pien, is portrayed as a complaining, nagging, sarcastic woman who denigrates her husband verbally on a regular basis: "You are so naïve it makes you dumb Ing!"³¹⁶ Thesis research participants of both genders were quick to point out the comic value of these exchanges and highlight that once again this was *lakhon* and not real life:

Male student: In a comedy, if the mother is always sweet and speaks politely, it would be boring and uninteresting.

Catherine: Why don't they make the father behave this way sometimes?

Male student: If a man does that, it would look aggressive and cruel. It would make it look like the man doesn't love the woman. It's cuter when a woman does it.

Female student: I agree with Toto. If a man does it, the story wouldn't be as funny and might even be too serious. Men, as a matter of fact, are not afraid of women but they pretend like they are. That's why it's funny.³¹⁷

Pien is portrayed as a hard working, uncompromising woman who has little compassion for her daughters' various ambitions to improve their lot in life. When her youngest daughter comes home with news of her excellent exam results, Pien quickly quashes any notions her daughter may have of continuing with her schooling. Education in Pien's

³¹⁴ *Suer Si Foon*, Episode 1, Channel 3 (script translation by Kunlakan Mamber), p. 2.

³¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 7.

³¹⁶ *Suer Si Foon*, Episode 1, Channel 3 (script translation by Kunlakan Mamber), p. 8.

³¹⁷ Youth focus group, Rajabhat, Mahasarakham, 1 October 2002.

worldview is irrelevant to her daughters' future lives. They will work on the family food stall and help their mother at home until they marry and in turn become mothers themselves:

- ON: I will be able to help you sell food for the whole three months (of the school break)!
- PIEN: I don't think that's going to happen. You'll have to help me for the rest of your life now. You're a girl. Twelfth grade is good enough. Quit school and help me work for a living, okay?³¹⁸

This is an example of how Thai producers lock their Isan characters into a frame that is no longer relevant to the contemporary experience of Khon Isan living in Thailand. As reflected in chapter five, Isan parents from poor and more middle class backgrounds are very keen for their children, both girls and boys, to achieve a good level of education and take up professions away from their home villages if this is beneficial to their future lives. On watching this particular scene in *Suer Si Foon*, study participants were generally of the opinion that former working class attitudes to girls accessing education were no longer current in Isan:

- Student: I think girls have more opportunity and they want to study more than boys.
- S 2: In my family, both of my sisters have bachelor degrees. We have the same opportunity.
- S 3: Girls study. Boys often work to support their sisters through school.
- S 2: From what I've seen it doesn't matter if you're a boy or girl. If you're the eldest, sometimes parents expect you to work and support your younger siblings to go to school.

The only discrimination reflected in this discussion is not gender-based but aged-based; the eldest perhaps having to support younger siblings to obtain an education.

³¹⁸ *Suer Si Foon*, Episode 1, Channel 3 (script translation by Kunlakan Mamber), p. 8.

Gling (Liafia Mok Jok) & Keb hamming it up. (Picture courtesy Channel 3).



In *Suer Si Foon*, men often verbally insult their female co-workers, usually with negative comments about physical/sexual appearance, such as the wordplay between the comic relief characters of Gling (played by Liafia Mok Jok) and Keb. These two are portrayed as crass, tacky and clownish. With her garishly made up face and uncouth character, Keb's infatuation with the reserved, handsome Jong and Gling's crude flirtations with Keb are a kind of parody of the serious love story unfolding between Jong and Uan. In one scene, Keb grabs onto the *pa kow ma* Jong has firstly offered to Uan to dry her face:

KEB: Jong, if Uan doesn't want it, let me have it, okay? No need to be shy. You're even cute when you are shy. Oh, your fabric is so soft. So soft so perfect for my young and soft skin...oh IT ALSO SMELLS GOOD! So good...

She then keeps sniffing the fabric with her eyes closed like she's dreaming. Uan shakes her head and taps on Jong's shoulder before taking off. Jong looks back and forth between Uan and the fabric before deciding to run after her. Keb's still smelling and sniffing it. Seeing Keb's eyes still closed, Gling takes Jong's place. Keb can't stop talking about how good Jong's 'pa kow ma' smells as she keeps sniffing over to Gling and eventually rests on his chest; still sniffing. Before long she finds he smells strangely bad. She then opens her eyes.

KEB: (screams) I thought it was some rotten dog! (Hits him with the fabric) You, jerk! Ruined my mood! (looks for Jong) JONG! Jong, wait for me!

GLING: (yells after Keb) You've got fried-egg boobs!³¹⁹

In episode one, comedy is also leveraged from a dramatic scene of violence towards women, when one of Uan's food stall customers is assaulted by a man who alleges he is her husband:

Customers start to approach. They are making a sale with enthusiasm before some GUY appears in the dark corner behind them. He then walks right to the second customer who's just ordered her food.

³¹⁹ *Suer Si Foon*, Episode 1, Channel 3 (script translation by Kunlakan Mamber), p. 4.

GUY: Hey there you are! I've been looking for you!
 GIRL: Who are you talking to?
 GUY: Isn't it obvious that I am talking to you!?
 GIRL: I don't know you.
 GUY: Oh you don't know me, huh? (slaps the girl in the face)
 UAN: HEY ARE YOU CRAZY? Why did you assault my customer, huh?
 GUY: (to Uan) Stay out of it!
 UAN: Hey, talking like that, you are asking for trouble! Do you know what they call a man who hits a woman? A pussy face!
 GUY: Hey you watch your mouth! Stay out of it, if you don't want to get hurt.
 UAN: Try me, you son of a bitch!

On tries to stop Uan from getting into a fight with the man. He grunts and turns to the girl, grabs her wrists and throws her over to the vendor. Pots full of food are knocked out of the cart. Uan is furious, grabs a pot lid and swings it at the guy. The girl who just got thrown around then runs back to the man and blocks Uan from hitting him.

GUY: Oh now your memory's back! You psycho! You couldn't remember your husband, huh?
 GIRL: (sobs) (to Uan) It's just a little misunderstanding. Sorry.
 (to husband) Let's go, Chit! I'll go please those men wherever you want me to.
 Let's get out of here. (to Uan) I'm so sorry.³²⁰

The incident is later discussed with a degree of ironic humour on the girls' return to their family home. Uan's father, Ing, pays lip service to reprimanding Uan for getting involved in the fight, but he also appears secretly pleased with her feisty nature. His amusement at the incident draws a typically narky response from his wife Pien: "You just sit here and drink all night instead of helping the girls sell the food! What are you smiling for?".³²¹ No one in Uan's family comments on the girl's giveaway line to her supposed husband that she is prepared to "...please those men wherever you want me to go". The young Isan people watching this episode with me were very open about this meaning she was in fact a prostitute and that 'Chit' was most likely her pimp not her husband. Some believed that the scriptwriter does not traverse this territory within the setting of Uan's family home because in good Thai households prostitution would not be an appropriate subject for the younger daughters, and after all, Uan is the pretty and morally sound heroine. This amused me a little because Uan's language during the incident is hardly ladylike! Study participants commented on the prevalence of young Isan women working as prostitutes in Bangkok, mostly with empathy for their circumstances:

³²⁰ *Suer Si Foon*, Episode 1, Channel 3 (script translation by Kunlakan Mamber), p. 11.

³²¹ *Ibid*

I think they have no choice. They need money. If there were other jobs, they'd choose other jobs too. The ones who become a prostitute, I think, they don't go school. You can't get a job that pays well if you don't have an education; that's why they choose to be a prostitute.³²²

Study participants also cited the unfortunate dual circumstances of being a poor uneducated woman and being abandoned by their husband, especially if they had children and/or elderly parents to support, as a major reason for Isan women entering prostitution. As previously discussed, Khon Isan make up a significant proportion of the now established flow of migrant workers that come from rural areas to work in Bangkok or regional cities. In her 2004 ethnography of Thai workers in the globalised economy of Bangkok, Wilson observed that many of the sex workers in Soi Cowboy (a well known strip of girly bars in Bangkok) are *kin* from the same area in Isan. In some bars the workers may come from one small area of connected villages.³²³

Labourers, maids, prostitutes; *Suer Si Foon* is indeed testimony to the central-Thai predilection for casting Isan identity in the timeworn, inflexible mould of poor, uneducated, uncouth, rural whimsical, clownish and quaint. In my interview with Isan *thong thin* (indigenous) specialist Jarawan Thammawat, she comments on how these set-in-stone stereotypes of her people cause her discomfort and stress when she studies Thai produced *lakhon* with her students:

I suffer whenever I watch *lakhon* with Isan people playing menial roles like servants... really it seems impossible for Isan people play the lead role in drama. The real reason I suffer when I see Isan on TV programs is because it reminds me of the reasons why we cannot improve the circumstances of our people. Of course I am not mad at the scriptwriter; they see it the way it is. Everywhere maids are Isan for them. But when students laugh, I feel like crying because it's the bitter truth that we continue to struggle to improve ourselves.³²⁴

Ajarn Jarawan would surely be appalled and frustrated by the following conversation between the pretty but cement-worker aspiring Uan and her skilled father, triggered by his request for her to fold his work clothes:

³²² Youth focus group, Rajabhat, Mahasarakham, 1 October 2002.

³²³ Wilson (2004), pp. 75-77.

³²⁴ Personal interview, Ajarn Jarawan Thammawat, Humanities and Social Science Dean, Mahasarakham University, 5 August, 2002.

UAN: Look at them, so old. A few patches on them already. Colours are all tired. Look at this spot...covered in paint and cement. It won't come off when you wash anymore. Why don't you just buy a new one?

ING: Why buy a new one? They're just clothes I wear to work; the older, the better. Your expertise can be told from how old it looks. You don't need to tell anyone that you've been working for so long.

UAN: That's true. Everyone knows my dad is the man for the job.

ING: That's because I love what I do. I always do my best at work. You remember for yourself, Uan, no matter what kind of job you have, if you do it as best as you can, you'll definitely succeed.

Uan thinks.

UAN: But we can never be rich, dad.

ING: Though we're poor, we are happy, aren't we? At least, we are an important part of civilization. No matter how advanced technology has got, they still need us to build those hundred-floor buildings! Be proud of your labour job, my child. We are the first who get to lay our feet on the top floor, before those rich people, am I right?³²⁵

This conversation brings to mind the struggle of indigenous people in Australia, my own country, to gain recognition beyond the rigid identity constructions bestowed upon them by colonial forbears. Patronising paternalism is the bedrock of ethnic and racial discrimination. Past (and arguably present) Australian policy makers assumed the so-called *primitive* character of Aboriginal people meant they required less – physically, psychologically, economically and spiritually – in effect their *right* to basic human rights was inferior to that of Anglo-European settlers. In the above conversation, we are exposed to this kind of patronising assumption that Isan people naturally identify with their poverty – it has become an intrinsic part of their character and therefore they will forever remain content with their lower social and economic status within wider Thai society. I describe this external identity construction as a kind of imposed and inverted parochialism, whereby the discriminated group is encouraged to wear their *apparent* inferiority with pride, as elemental to their identity.

³²⁵ *Suer Si Foon*, Episode 1, Channel 3 (script translation by Kunlakan Mamber), p. 19.

Despite this series triggering some serious discussion around the social, economic and ethnic issues of being Khon Isan within a larger Thai worldview, most study participants happily accepted the *Suer Si Foon* series for what they assumed it was meant to be – pure escapist fantasy. For the most part, they were not personally offended by the clichéd representations of Khon Isan. More significantly perhaps, they rarely contextualised how Thai produced *lakhon* continuously reinforces negative Isan stereotypes; constructions that they themselves had previously identified as barriers to their own social and economic development and future success in a central Thai-dominated world. Many Khon Isan appear pleased and entertained by the attention focused on them through a burgeoning Isan *lakhon* genre in mainstream Thai TV production. It is, however, obvious that those manufacturing these programs in Bangkok are simply identifying a significant target audience in the most populous region of Thailand. At the same time, they also need to maintain the interest of their non-Isan viewers, which means pandering to their clichéd perception of what constitutes *khwampenisan*. This Isanness is constructed against the backdrop of what most Thais perceive as the primordial characteristics of *khwampenthai*. It is perhaps naïve to consider *lakhon* production as a place for stimulating social and attitudinal change; however, this kind of drama now occupies a significant place in the daily lives of ordinary Thai people and therefore it would seem appropriate and ethically good for Thai TV producers and their broadcasters to consider their implicit contribution to the evolution of the wider Thai social consciousness. *Lakhon* is a potential harbinger of positive social change, with the capacity to play an important role in focusing the attention of elites on the raw and challenging social issues of the poor, as well as empowering poor communities to both dream of and fight for change. Truer representations of people's real lives, albeit within the confines of predictably romantic plots, would contribute to more open and realistic interpretations of Thailand's diverse population. Popular media could contribute to real understanding of multi-cultural Thailand. It would also make for great entertainment as the popularity of increasingly gritty realism in Australian television drama continues to show.

Chapter Seven: CONCLUSION – “I CAN TOTALLY SAY I AM KHON ISAN”

And even in corners
There lies a glory
When all of our doors
Swell up in their frames
I know it will be raining soon
And we'll all be changing

I know now
Our minds are
A made up thing³²⁶

– Josh Pyke

I believe these lyrics by Australian indie musician and songwriter, Josh Pyke, resonate with the puzzle of what we call *identity formation*. The Lao Isan youth who participated in this study, reverberated with their own sense of quixotic ambivalence about being labelled by others and labelling themselves. There is no question that they viewed themselves as citizens of Thailand, but they also emphatically embraced their core identity as *khwampenisan* (being Isan). However, when it came to defining what constitutes Isanness or questioning the relevance of clichéd constructions of Isan identity imposed by outsiders, they negotiated their way through a minefield of often contradictory understandings and expressions. And these expressions most often found the light of day with comments to the effect of: “I am just Isan”, or “I speak Isan so I am Khon Isan”. The declaration by one of the Khon Kaen University students in my focus groups of: “I can totally say I am Khon Isan” is my personal favourite. It exudes identity confidence with the exuberance of youth who are buzzing with nascent feelings of autonomy and independence. What is hopeful and reassuring about this youthful confidence is that despite overwhelming external influences continuing to feed intransigent stereotypical and, most often, negative constructions of Isan identity, and despite their own feelings of ambivalence about what constitutes Isanness, these young Khon Isan steadfastly returned to their ethnic roots.

³²⁶ Pyke, J. “Even in corners”, from the album *Chimney's Afire* from <http://www.lyricsmania.com/print/857019.html> accessed 7 February 2011.

This thesis has revealed that strong feelings of ambivalence felt by Lao Isan youth toward their sense of identity are being fed on a number of levels. External and internal constructions of Isan identity are being communicated by overlapping circles of cultural, social and political discourse. Identity formation theories based on negative identification – whereby the non-dominant culture (i.e. *khwampenisan*) is described in terms of how it fails to measure up against the dominant culture (i.e. *khwampenthai*) – are significantly at play. Isan identity within public Thai discourse is defined *against* the dominant backdrop of what is presumed to constitute central Thainess – sophisticated, civilised, progressive, modern and urbane. This public identity story further weaves the palatable version of predictable and clichéd Isanness through a prism of *samai mai* (new times) and *samai kau* (old times). Public rhetoric and imagery manufactured by state officials and central Thai media strengthens this *khwampenthai* narrative of modernity pitched against assumed Isan poverty and traditional rural lifestyles, and continues to reinforce the Thai public's belief that Khon Isan, through their ignorance and entrenched impoverishment, are incapable of embracing *samai mai* or new times. In turn, ongoing public sentiment that Khon Isan are lower in the cultural and ethnic pecking order provides Thai nation state elites with the rationale for continuing to assign state resources, as well as social, political and cultural relevance and capital in favour of the dominant group.

Isan studies as a specific stream within Thai studies emerged in the 1970s as a way of preserving Lao Isan indigenous knowledge, but it has also provided the impetus for a dynamic and diverse range of modes by which Isanness is today being actively expressed in the public sphere. Isan songwriters and performers have made significant inroads into the contemporary popular Thai music scene through genres such as *morlam cing* (rock), *lukthung* (country/folk) and *phlaeng pleuh chiwit* (songs for life). These artists often playfully employ the Isan language, as well as cross-linguistic wordplay and themes, as a way to stake out space for social justice and equity issues for their people. In film and television, Isan appropriation of contemporary media is moving at a much more gradual pace, largely due to the significant cultural weight central Thai media manufacturers and audiences place on physical appearance and an implacable addiction to Isan stereotyping.

It is confirmed in my mind that yes *Isanness* is “...a politically charged term designating plural voices.”³²⁷ What is reassuring in the findings of this thesis is that the most important voices among these plural voices – Isan voices – are starting to find their way into the central Thai headspace, and becoming increasingly more confident along the way. So while many of the young Isan people who contributed their voices explained *khwampenisan* using stereotypes that served to reinforce dominant central Thai ethnicity discourse (i.e. simple living, neighbourly generosity and kindness, nature-loving etc); one of the key findings was how strong attachment to their first language of *pasar* Isan (Lao) most genuinely defined their personal and public sense of *khwampenisan*. This does not surprise me; language is the code by which we express ourselves and is therefore fundamental to our sense of identity because it is the very mode by which we perceive and interact with the world. The emerging presence of *pasar* Isan in contemporary Thai music forms and popular Thai television and film, especially *lakhon* (soap operas) and *dtalok* (comedy), is a significant moment in the history of Isan identity formation. These modern forms of entertainment commonly adhere to and reinforce negative and patronising Isan stereotypes, nonetheless the idea that Isan voices are being heard in this wider Thai public space is exciting because of the potential for mediating gradual attitudinal change towards seemingly intransigent constructions of Isan identity.

I chose the narratives, personal stories and opinions communicated in this thesis to speak to people about the dynamic changes in the way young Lao Isan people view themselves in the world over the space of just one generation. Their intrinsic self-validation of *khwampenisan* may be attained through their attachment and usage of their first language, *pasar* Isan (Lao). However these young people are also embroiled in a process of forging new pathways and identities for themselves in the wider Thai socio-cultural space. To some extent their parents and grandparents appear far more comfortable within their Isan skins. Their children and grandchildren at times appeared compelled to make stronger claims to their Isan identity by reverting to externally constructed stereotypes, which they

³²⁷ McCargo D. & Krisadawan Hongladarom. (2004), p. 231.

self-consciously labelled as innate Isan characteristics. This Lao Isan generation, more than any previously, is adopting a *samai mai* life – their educational experiences have led them into a more mobile existence as they study away their home villages, mostly with the goal of achieving status and security within an independent profession. This, in turn, will further reinforce a *samai mai* life lived either outside their region in Bangkok, or at the very least, outside their home community in a regional or provincial urban centre. Bim explains: “I am still Khon Isan but I’ve seen more things than my parents – it’s about education and how you can support yourself.”³²⁸ These changes require a continual realignment of the self as these young Khon Isan negotiate between traditional (family and village) and new (student urban life) circles of influence. Their sense of *khwampenisan* naturally runs along the same continuum – at times they feel compelled to externally associate their Isanness with traditional rural living and family practice, when in fact they are *being Isan* because they are Isan – they were born and raised in their ethnic identity space and they speak *pasar* Isan (Lao) as their first and preferred language. Their parents do not suffer these same anxieties. They will often say straight up ‘I am Khon Isan’, while their children usually took a more circuitous and soul searching route to reach the same simple conclusion.

Lao Isan youth are speaking about their identity because they are the first Lao Isan generation *en masse* to make their way independently in a central Thai dominated world. They often felt compelled to counteract negative stereotypes and images projected by Thai political elites and mass media. Sometimes they felt the need to be more Isan than Isan, but at the same time were often self-conscious about their Isan identity in Thai public spaces outside the Isan region because of the obvious prejudices being played out in these non-Isan environments. Like most young adults they want to carve out successful and secure careers following the completion of their studies, even if this means disassociation from their Isanness in the wider Thai social context. It is not surprising that these young Isan people often saw the benefits of masking their Isanness, when they had experiences like this one:

³²⁸ Personal interview, Bim, Kalasin, 18 April 2002.

When I go to Khon Kaen and then come back to Chiang Mai, friends would ask me whether Khon Kaen has apples for sale. They think Isan is so drought ridden. They ask if there is water to take a bath. I say yes and also apples.³²⁹

For young Isan women, these identity issues are further complicated and amplified by gender equality issues. These issues include:

- central Thai preoccupations with women's looks, particularly in context with the stereotype of Khon Isan being considered generally physically unattractive;
- issues of unequal marriage, including the cultural institution of husbands taking a *mia noi* (minor wife);
- sexual and domestic violence;
- a lack of exposure to and understanding of the conceptual and ideological underpinnings of the empowerment of women in Thailand; and,
- obvious contradictions in expectations of them as *samai mai* women.

While young Lao Isan women have a moral understanding of gender inequality, particularly in relation to violence against women, they struggle to locate this within a wider ideological framework due to ongoing patriarchal dominance within the contemporary cultural, social and political landscape of Thailand. Young Isan women therefore struggle against the dual barriers of imbedded gender inequality in wider Thai society and discrimination perpetuated through central Thai projections of Khon Isan as physically less attractive than their compatriots of central Thai ethnicity. Despite these barriers, young Isan women (and men) are quite capable of recognising ethnic discrimination projected through popular Thai television programming. For the most part, their intrinsic sense of Isanness was not compromised by this recognition.

³²⁹ Youth Focus Group, Ruam Mit Bakery, Chiang Mai, 7 February 2002.

The last chapter examined the growing interest of Thai popular television producers in creating *lakhon* series around the traditional rural or contemporary lives of Khon Isan, with a view to broadening their audience base. Given that the Isan region is the most populous region of Thailand this seems like a sensible commercial and marketing step. Through a case study of the 2002 *Suer Si Foon* (Dirty Shirt) *lakhon* series about Khon Isan working as labourers on construction sites in Bangkok, I explored/exposed/analysed the predictable clichéd characterisation of Isan people as simple hard working folk with uncouth, bawdy and clownish language and mannerisms. The poverty and daily struggles of the Isan characters are sentimentalised to fit neatly with the romance of the expected *lakhon* plot – poor Isan girl desires young, handsome, rich (Thai) man, but eventually realises that the sweet humble Isan boy she works alongside everyday is the right (class appropriate) love match for her. The colourfully crass, building site shenanigans of the Isan labourers are viewed through the fantasy lens applied to all *lakhon*. On that basis, the young Isan participants in my thesis accepted the narrow identity constructions being manufactured on their behalf with good humour. However, on the subject of their most preciously held Isan signifier – their first language of Isan (Lao) – they were less accommodating. The language performances of mainstream Thai actors playing Isan characters were regarded as disappointing and lacking in authenticity. Study participants questioned why Thai TV producers were so intent on choosing Thai actors over Isan actors given the negative impact on the quality of the overall production. Exploring this particular series and the responses of study participants who watched it with me, crystallised many of the recurring themes of Isan identity formation uncovered throughout the course of this thesis and answered many of my original research questions. These themes include:

- the alignment of Isan identity construction with the dominant public discourse of traditional rural lifestyles (*samai kau*) and progressive contemporary lifestyles (*samai mai*);
- the participants' persistent expression of *pasar* Isan (Lao) as the defining signifier of their Isan identity, contrary to decades of Thai nation state identity labeling based on disassociation with the Lao language;

- the social and gender impacts of central Thai preoccupations with the inferior status of ethnic Lao Isan physical appearance;
- the role of central Thai public discourse, mass media and popular entertainment genres in unashamedly reinforcing negative Isan identity stereotypes; and,
- conversely, the growing confidence of Khon Isan to claim these stereotypes back as tools of empowerment and change.

If Thai TV producers have already shifted toward an awareness that perhaps it would be more culturally respectful and appropriate (as well as better television) to cast Isan-speaking actors in Isan roles, then it is perhaps not too ambitious to expect they will also gradually recognise the changing face of contemporary *khwampenisan*. Would it be too much to imagine them doing the socially responsible thing of leaving behind the two-dimensional Isan caricature in favour of a more genuinely plural interpretation of Khon Isan living in *samai mai*?

I remember an email discussion with Isan anthropologist Pattana Kitiarsa, at the time of my fieldwork, about how to translate the term *popular culture* into Thai. Pattana had a passionate interest in contemporary interpretations of *morlam*, such as *morlam cing* (rock), within popular Isan and Thai culture. He said the problem of translating *popular culture* had been a hotly contested topic among Thai anthropologists for some time and no clear agreement on the subject had then been reached. He preferred *watthanatham pracha*, meaning quite literally any culture that belongs to the people. Critics argued that this expression did not accurately reflect the commercial and media connotations of the English term. Others suggested *watthanatham muanchon* (mass culture) or *watthanatham talat* (culture of the marketplace).³³⁰ This debate could be an anecdote for how the dominant central Thai world is failing to keep abreast of the dynamic changes occurring within the borders of its own nation, let alone meet the challenge of capturing these changes within popular social and political debate and mainstream media. Young Khon Isan individuals, sometimes tentatively and at other times confidently, identified and expressed the dramatic shifts in the experiences and choices of their generation,

³³⁰ Pattana Kitiarsa. (2001, October 8). Personal communication.

compared to that of their parents and grandparents. Yet, to a large degree, they also felt constrained by the social and vocational limitations placed upon them by wider Thai society via persistent manufacturing and reinforcement of negative Isan stereotypes and labeling.

In his essays on renewing Thai society through the integration of Buddhist precepts and values, Thai social critic Sulak Sivaraksa comments fervently on the role of youth in promulgating an enriching future for the nation:

...we must recognize and encourage thoughtful young people to build more networks or relationships nationally, intra-regionally and inter-regionally. The problems of youth are our problems, and we must think of them in terms of the totality of our communities and societies... The young must participate and share responsibility. This will require tremendous institutional change...³³¹

In the present national environment, Isan youth struggle to imagine their capacity to establish and sustain inter-regional and national networks when they are so frequently made *not* to feel at home in regions outside Isan. This is especially the case in the capital Bangkok, where key political and social decisions impacting on their current and future lives are made. The people of the diverse Thai nation state would benefit significantly should the cultural, social and political elites of Bangkok heed Sulak's message of integrating youth into the "...totality of our communities and societies".

Collective constructions of identity are about history, race, ethnicity, language, geography, climate, politics, and private and communal rituals and self-definitions. Identity is convergence – it is relational, inventive and constantly evolving. It is fluid and therefore could, should and often does envelope change. Tensions arise when one group embraces change, but external and more dominant cultural players, either unintentionally or by design, do not recognise and/or understand those changes. In this situation, the dominant group will not integrate these identity shifts into their own definitions and therefore will ultimately fail to adapt their public conversations with and about the less dominant group accordingly. After many decades of engagement with Thai and Southeast Asian historiography, Australian historian Craig Reynolds urges resistance to hegemonic

³³¹ Sulak Sivaraksa (1994), pp. 93-94.

Thai identity discourse at both the national and ethnic level, and challenges those interested in studying Thai identity construction to push back:

Subordinate classes can respond creatively and constructively to the most hierarchical, repressive, and paternalistic dominant ideologies. Perhaps the way Thai national identity has been studied ...has dwelt too much on hegemonic notions of Thai identity and thus has given them too much agency, even if these notions have often rather too ingeniously been reformulated by elites from folk and ethnic traditions that lie far from the center of power.³³²

My thesis explores and raises questions about broadening understandings of identity formation and labelling in Thailand. Writing the voices of young Isan people is a process of identity recognition that I hope will open up space for new perceptions, narratives and ideas of what actually constitutes Thainess and Isanness. Writing this recognition is also about broadening humanity by increasing understanding of how collectively-voiced, singular interpretations of identity evolve and are then perpetuated in the public sphere regardless of their potentially negative and damaging impact on the psyche of individuals, communities and peoples. As revealed through the research data, young Khon Isan are forging their own identities and these identities are plural, fluid and ever-evolving depending on the given social context or moment that they are being expressed in. The Indian social justice and development economist Amartya Sen offers the following illuminating analysis of the linkages between identity and violence:

The insistence, if only implicitly, on a choiceless singularity of human identity not only diminishes us all, it also makes the world more flammable. The alternative to the divisiveness of one pre-eminent categorization is not any unreal claim that we are all much the same. We are not. Rather, the main hope of harmony in our troubled world lies in the plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions around one single hardened line of vehement division that allegedly cannot be resisted. Our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when our differences are narrowed into one devised system of uniquely powerful categorization. Perhaps the worst impairment comes from the neglect and denial of the role of reasoning and choice which follows from the recognition of plural identities. The illusion of unique identity is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse classifications that characterize the world in which we actually live. The descriptive weakness of choiceless singularity has the effect of momentarily impoverishing the power and reach of our social and political reasoning. The illusion of destiny exacts a remarkably heavy price.³³³

³³² Reynolds (2006), p. 274.

³³³ Sen, A. (2006). *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Books), pp. 16-17.

The importance of particular identity depends upon the social context. We are all individually involved in identities of various kinds within the disparate contexts of our respective lives. Background, interest, associations, social activities, gender, and lifestyle choices are just a few of our contextual identity determinants.

The Isan region is the most populous region in Thailand. Young Lao Isan therefore hold the promise of a significant new generation of motivated and increasingly educated individuals who can help Thailand continue on its trajectory towards improved social and economic development for its entire people. In this thesis I have explored the ideas and visions of young Isan women and men; given them the voice and space to express and share their opinions. These young citizens are enmeshed in the process of spinning their own unique identities in diverse social contexts – home, village, region and the nation state of Thailand. I hope these thesis findings may contribute to increased understandings of the creative processes of cultural change and the huge potential of young Lao Isan to contribute to the development of Thailand. I exposed how inflexible projections of Isan identity by key political, social and cultural players in the central Thai state have tended to ignore cultural change. It is therefore the responsibility of Thai policy makers, purveyors of mass media, social and intellectual identities and Thai popular culture icons to think more deeply about their role in perpetuating discrimination toward Khon Isan and other ethnic groups who make up a significant part of the diverse population of the Thai nation state. To be a truly democratic state, it is necessary to challenge cultural norms, traditional beliefs and inflexible modes of thinking. As several young Isan people commented to me, everything is *changing* and becoming *mixed*. It is necessary to open the cultural doors to progressive change based on social justice and more transparent governance and public communications. Change should not be viewed with trepidation, for within change there will always be opportunities to reclaim and re-imagine identity.

I would like to complete the written expression of my research journey with the personal, because I believe it is the individual in all of us that is the genesis of identity, creativity and human agency. When I rush down the back steps of my home each workday morning, bustling three extraordinary small people – each with their own individual expectations for the day ahead – into our disorderly car, one tiny part of my scrambled brain notices how the fallen leaves have been blown into a new unique pattern by the night wind. We are like these leaves surreptitiously shifting in the night – sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly, sometimes aware, sometimes unaware – but inexorably shifting and relocating self to merge with and re-embroider the social fabric of our lives and our communities. Like these leaves fallen from unique varieties of trees, our different and unique colours rub up against each other, spinning new understandings of ourselves and generating new agency in the world we inhabit. Imagine a world where all leaves on every tree were the same shape, size and colour. For centuries, the poet and muse have been inspired and compelled by nature’s strength, ingenuity and diversity. Why then should we be surprised by the simple recognition of these elements in our own human race? I end this chapter as I began – our minds truly are a made up thing.

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APPENDIX A: Focus groups

Average session duration: 90 to 120 minutes

RUAM MIT BAKERY (NGO) Chiang Mai	WORKSHOP DATES	PARTICIPANTS	GENDER	BIRTH YEAR	HOME PROVINCE	FIRST LANGUAGE
	24/10/2001	Fa	Male	1976	Yasothon (Ban Kuang Kam, Amphur Muang)	Isan
		Nai	Male	1976	Yasothon	Isan
		Ped	Male		Yasothon	Isan
		Jeab	Female	1974	Yasothon (born in Klong Toey slum, Bangkok)	Isan / Thai ³³⁴
	07/11/2001	Fa, Jeab, Ped & Nai ³³⁵				
	15/12/2001	Fa, Jeab, Ped & Nai				
	07/02/2002	Fa, Jeab & Nai				
	06/03/2002	Fa, Jeab & Nai				
Number of participants	3 male, 1 female					3-4

³³⁴ Where a participant is described as having both Thai and Isan as their first languages, this usually indicates that one parent is a native Thai speaker, the other is a native Isan speaker (most commonly the mother being the native Isan speaker).

³³⁵ Fa, Jeab and Nai were also in-depth interview participants (see Appendix B).

KHON KAEN UNIVERSITY (Social Sciences & Humanities)	WORKSHOP DATES	PARTICIPANTS	GENDER	BIRTH YEAR	HOME PROVINCE	FIRST LANGUAGE
Introductory session	28/11/2001	Am	Female	1981	Ubon Ratchathani (Amphur Muang)	Isan
		Bam	F	1982	Khon Kaen	Isan
		Bim	F	1981	Kalasin (Amphur Muang)	Isan
		Boey	F	1981	Khon Kaen (Amphur Muang)	Thai / Isan
		Eu	F	1980	Khon Kaen (Amphur Kao Suan Kwang)	Isan
		Jang	F	1981	Nakhon Ratchasima ³³⁶ (Amphur Muang)	Thai
		Jenny	F			
		Little	F	1981	Ubon Ratchathani (Amphur Muang)	Isan
		Noi	F	1981	Loei (Amphur Arawan)	Isan
		Tuk	F	1982	Nakhon Phanom	Isan
Group 1	16/01/2002	Boey, Jang, Eu & Am				
	20/02/2002	Boey, Jang & Am				
	03/09/2002	Boey, Jang, Eu & Am				
	01/10/2002	Boey, Jang, Eu & Am				
Group 2	15/01/2002	Tuk, Noi, Little & Bam				
	19/02/2002	Tuk, Noi & Little				
	05/09/2002	Noi & Little				
	01/10/2002	Noi & Little				
Group 1 & 2	08/08/2002	Boey, Jang, Eu, Am, Noi, Little & Jenny				
No. participants	8-9 female					

³³⁶ Also commonly known as Khorat.

RAJABHAT MAHASARAKHAM (Social Science & Humanities)	WORKSHOP DATES	PARTICIPANTS	GENDER	BIRTH YEAR	HOME PROVINCE	FIRST LANGUAGE
Introductory session	15/01/2002	Toto	Male	1981	Kalasin (Amphur Nakoo)	Phu Thai
		Pui	M	1981	Mahasarakham (Ban Nong Bua, Amphur Muang)	Isan
		Den	M	1981	Mahasarakham (Amphur Borabue)	Isan
		Goong	Female	1982	Kalasin (Ban Nong Phok)	Isan
		Mee	F	1981	Mahasarakham (Amphur Muang)	Isan
	19/02/2002	Toto, Pui, Goong				
	06/08/2002	Toto, Pui, Goong & Den				
	03/09/2002	Toto, Pui, Goong & Den				
	01/10/2002	Toto, Pui, Goong				
Number of participants	3 male, 2 female			4-5		

MAHASARAKHAM UNIVERSITY (Community Development students)	WORKSHOP DATES	PARTICIPANTS	GENDER	BIRTH YEAR	HOME PROVINCES	FIRST LANGUAGE
Introductory session ³³⁷	14/01/2002	22	Female	1980 to 1982	Chaiyapum Kalasin Khon Kaen Mahasarakham Si Saket Sakhon Nakhon Roi Et	Isan (13) Isan / Thai (3) Thai (5) Yor (1)
		9	Male	1981 to 1982	Khon Kaen, Mahasarakham Nongbualumphu Roi Et Ubon Ratchathani	Isan (9)
	07/08/2002	Rot	F	1981	Kalasin	Isan
		Tiu	F	1980	Ubon Ratchathani	Isan
		Jeab	F	1981	Sakon Nakhon	Isan
		Tuan	M	1981	Ubon Ratchathani	Isan
		Nu	M	1981	Khon Kaen, Amphur Nampong	Isan
		Kae	M	1981	Roi Et	Isan
	04/09/2002	Rot, Tiu, Jeab, Tuan & Kae				

³³⁷ The introductory session was extremely well attended. This enabled good baseline data collection, particularly in terms of identifying first language usage and preferences. Unfortunately, the take up in the workshops was very low. As a consequence the formal focus group workshops were not sustainable. I did, however, conduct in-depth interviews with female participants, Tiu and Jeab, whom I befriended during the two workshops that did go ahead.

APPENDIX B: In-depth interviews – Focus group participants

Average interview duration: 90 to 120 minutes

Name & focus group	Interview date/s & location	Home community	Age at interview	First language	Parents' ethnicity & first language	Parent occupation
Fa Ruam Mit	16/04/2002 @ family home	Ban Khuang Kam, Amphur Muang, Yasothon	25	Isan	Father Khon Isan, pasar Isan Mother Khon Isan / Mon, pasar Isan / Mon	Rice farmers with own plot of land, in the same village back at least until great-grandparent's generation.
Nai Ruam Mit	09/03/2002 @ Ruam Mit Bakery, Chiang Mai	Village community in Yasothon Province	25	Isan	Father Khon Thai (Nakhon Sawan), pasar Thai Mother Khon Isan, pasar Isan	Father Traditional doctor Mother Rice farmer (also buffalos & cattle); owns five rai ³³⁸ of land
Jeab Ruam Mit	09/03/2002 @ Ruam Mit Bakery	Childhood in Bangkok's Klong Toey slum, but now considers Yasothon her home.	27	Thai (understands Isan)	Father Hainan Chinese, pasar Thai Mother Khon Thai, pasar Thai	Father Electrical mechanic (waged) Mother Mae bahn (housewife)
Am KKU	30/09/2002 @ KKU campus	Ubon Ratchathani (Amphur Muang)	21	Isan	Father & mother Khon Isan, pasar Isan	Father Owns an ice cream outlet Mother Primary Teacher
Bim ³³⁹ KKU	15/04/2002 18/04/2002 @ Kalasin	Kalasin (Amphur Muang)	21	Isan	Father & mother Khon Isan, pasar Isan	Father Education program officer Mother High school teacher

³³⁸ One hectare is equivalent to 6.35 rai. Nai's mother therefore owns 0.8 of a hectare.

³³⁹ Bim was my research assistant as well as a study participant.

Name & focus group	Interview date/s & location	Home community	Age at interview	First language	Parents' ethnicity & first language	Parent occupation
Boey KKU	02/10/2002 @ KKU campus	Khon Kaen (Amphur Muang)	20	Thai / Isan	Father Khon Isan (Khon Kaen), pasar Isan Mother Khon Thai (Chinese from Samut Sakhon), pasar Thai	Father Teacher Mother Teacher
Eu KKU	30/09/2002 @ KKU campus	Khon Kaen (Amphur Kao Suan Kwang)	22	Isan	Father & mother Khon Isan, pasar Isan	Rice farmers with own plot growing rice, sugar cane & taro.
Little KKU	05/09/2002 @ KKU campus	Ubon Ratchathani (Amphur Muang)	21	Isan	Father Khon Thai (Ayuthaya). Pasar Thai (speaks Isan) Mother Khon Isan (Ubon), pasar Isan	Father Police officer Mother Teacher
Jang KKU	30/09/2002 @ KKU campus	Nakhon Ratchasima (Amphur Muang)	20	Thai (understan ds Isan)	Father Khon Thai (Nonthaburi), pasar Thai Mother Khon Thai (Ayuthaya), pasar Thai *Moved to Khorat before Jang was born.	Father Army officer Mother Mae bahn (housewife)
Noi KKU	05/09/2002 @ KKU campus	Loei (Amphur Arawan)	21	Isan	Father & mother Khon Isan (Khorat), pasar Isan	Gardeners; clothing stall

Name & focus group	Interview date/s & location	Home community	Age at interview	First language	Parents' ethnicity & first language	Parent occupation
Goong Rajabhat Mahasarakham	17/04/2002 @ family home	Ban Nong Phok, Kalasin	20	Isan	Father Khon Isan (Srisaket, on border with Cambodia), pasar Khmer & Isan Mother Khon Isan (Kalasin), pasar Isan	Rice farmers with own plot
Pui	07/08/2002 @ Rajabhat Maha campus	Ban Nong Bua, Amphur Muang, Mahasarakham	21	Isan	Father & mother Khon Isan, pasar Isan	Rice farmers
Toto	06/08/2002 @ Rajabhat Maha campus	Kalasin (Amphur Na Koo)	21	Phu Thai (speaks Isan with friends and outside home village)	Father Khon Phu Thai / Yor, pasar Phu Thai & Yor Mother Khon Phu Thai, pasar Phu Thai	Father Teacher Mother Rice farmer
Jeab MSU	02/10/2002 @ a friend's house, Maha Sarakhm	Sakon Nakhon (Amphur Muang)	20	Phu Thai / Yao (however generally speaks Isan at home)	Father Khon Phu Thai, pasar Phu Thai Mother Khon Yao, pasar Yao (both speak Isan outside the home)	Grocers
Tiu MSU	02/10/2002 @ a friend's house, Maha Sarakhm	Ubon Ratchathani	20	Isan	Father & mother Khon Isan, pasar Isan	Father Postal officer Mother Teacher

APPENDIX C: In-depth interviews – parents and grandparents, others

Average interview duration: 90 to 120 minutes

Name & family relationship	Interview date/s & location	Birth year	Ethnicity & languages	Education	Occupation	Parents & grandparents
Mae Noi Fa's mother	16/04/2002 @ family home, Ban Khuang Kam, A.Muang, Yasothon	1942	Khon Isan, pasar Isan Studied written Thai at school, but taught in Isan. Not a fluent Thai speaker.	From age 7-8 to 12 (until 4 th grade)	Rice farmer with own plot	Parents & grandparents described as Lao Isan. Farmed the same rice fields as Mae Noi. Did not attend school.
Ta Goong's mother	17/04/2002 @ family home, Ban Nong Phok, Kalasin	Not known ³⁴⁰	Khon Isan, pasar Isan Studied from Thai books at school, but always spoke Isan. Never speaks Thai.	From age 7-8 to 12 (until 4 th grade)	Rice farmer	Parents and grandparents described as Khon Isan. All born and live/d in the same village area.
Noi Bim's mother	18/04/2002 @ Rim Pao Hotel, Kalasin	1952	Khon Isan, pasar Isan Studied Thai at school & home. Parents speak both Isan and Thai.	Graduated high school at 15. Attended teachers college, followed by university.	High school teacher	Parents described as Khon Isan. Born and live in Kalasin, A. Muang. Rice farmers & vendors.
Tin Pui's grandmother	02/10/2002 @ family home, Ban Nong Bua, A.Muang, Maha Sarakham	1935	Khon Isan (grew up in Surin province), pasar Isan Studied Thai at school, but always spoke Isan. Not a fluent Thai speaker. Says she has no need to use it.	From age 7-8 to 12 (until 4 th grade)	Rice farmer	Parents described as Khon Isan. Born & lived in Surin province.

³⁴⁰ Ta gave the Thai calendar year of 2468 (1925). This would have made her 80 years of age. Both parents and grandparents struggled to recall their birth year accurately, but said immediately whether they were the “year of the monkey” or the “year of the tiger” etc.

Name & family relationship	Interview date/s & location	Birth year	Ethnicity & languages	Education	Occupation	Parents & grandparents
Pui's grandfather	02/10/2002 @ family home, Ban Nong Bua, A.Muang, Maha Sarakham	Around 1932, but not sure	Khon Isan (grew up in Surin province), pasar Isan Studied Thai at school, but always spoke Isan. Not a fluent Thai speaker.	From age 7-8 to 12 (until 4 th grade)	Rice farmer	Parents described as Khon Isan.
Ajarn Jaruan Thammawat Dean of Humanities & Social Sciences, MSU	05/08/2002 MSU campus	1950	Khon Isan (grew up in a village in Ubon Ratchathani province). First language is pasar Isan, but studied Thai at school & teaches in Thai. Identifies herself as Khon Lao Isan	From age 7-8 to 15 Teachers' college	University dean Isan <i>thong thin</i> (local area studies) specialist	Father described as Khon Isan. Mother described as Lao Isan. Maternal grandparents were Khon Lao. Parents were market gardeners.

APPENDIX D: Thai television programs watched with study participants

PROGRAM	ENGLISH TRANSLATION	GENRE	DISCUSSION THEMES	FOCUS GROUP/S
<i>Game Zone</i>		Game show	Loog krueng personalities, ideals of beauty, identity <i>Loog krueng</i> , Isan representation on TV <i>Loog krueng</i> & concepts of beauty, future dreams	KKU Rajabhat Mahasarakham Ruam Mit Bakery
<i>Fan Pan Tae</i> (<i>Game Zone</i> & <i>Fan Pan Tae</i> were watched in the same session and compared)	Real Fan	Game show	Loog krueng personalities, ideals of beauty, identity <i>Loog krueng</i> , Isan representation on TV Loog krueng & concepts of beauty, future dreams	KKU Rajabhat Mahasarakham Ruam Mit
<i>Kon Song Kom</i> (Channel 5)	Two men at Knife Edge / on the Edge	<i>Lakhon</i>	Status, wealth, values, relationships (sex)	Ruam Mit Bakery
<i>Fah Peang Din</i>	Sky Meets the Horizon	<i>Lakhon</i> (drama)	Marriage, dating, affairs (minor wives or <i>mia noi</i>), social & parental attitudes	KKU
<i>Ruam Pon Khon Chai</i> (Channel 3)	Maids all Together	<i>Lakhon</i>	Isan representation / look on TV, domestic violence, women's rights Relationships, marriage, Isan representation on TV	KKU Rajabhat Mahasarakham
<i>Suer Si Foon</i>	Dirty Shirt	<i>Lakhon</i>	Stereotyping of wives & older women, realism vs dramatic invention, worker's rights, women and education, prostitution	KKU Rajabhat Mahasarakham MSU
'Live Show' segment of <i>Twilight Show</i> (about <i>yaa baa</i> addiction)		<i>Dtalok</i> (comedy)	Relationship with grandparents, childhood Childhood & drug use Relationship with grandparents, childhood & drug addiction	KKU Rajabhat Mahasarakham Ruam Mit
<i>Cha, Cha, Cha</i> ³⁴¹		Game show	Self-identity, Isanness, tattoos & fashion	Ruam Mit
<i>Miti Lilub</i>	Sixth Sense	Supernatural re-enactments	Ghosts (<i>pi</i>), family spiritual and religious beliefs, Buddhism	MSU

³⁴¹ This game show featured Isan comedian Mam Jok Mok and several other Isan members of his comedy troupe.

APPENDIX E: Statement of disclosure and informed consent – interviews

Speaking in Thai, dreaming in Isan: Popular Thai television and emerging identities of Isan youth living in northeast Thailand.

The Research

Understanding how Isan youth make sense of their own identity by investigating their relationship with popular Thai television programs, such as soap operas and music shows. Your interview with the researcher forms part of a one-year ethnographic study of Isan youth living in the city of Khon Kaen and the town of Mahasarakham in northeast Thailand. This research is being conducted for my PhD in development studies.

Benefits of the study

The Thai community as a whole may benefit from increased understanding of the identity, role and representation of *Khon Isan* within larger Thai society.

Any questions concerning the project entitled *Speaking in Thai, dreaming in Isan: Popular Thai television and emerging identities of Isan youth living in northeast Thailand* can be directed to Catherine Hesse-Swain (PhD candidate), School of International, Cultural and Community Studies, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia, ph 053-212160 (Chiang Mai), e-mail identity@australia.edu or Khun Kullakarn (Bim) Chanakarn, Project Research Assistant, 017 990 765 or bim1980@hotmail.com

If you have any concerns about the project or would like to talk to an independent person, you may contact Dr Nancy Hudson-Rodd, Development Studies Program Coordinator, School of International, Cultural and Community Studies, Edith Cowan University, on n.hudson_rodd@cowan.edu.au (Australia) or Ajarn Mayuree Siriwan, Head of English Department, Rajabhat Maha Sarakham (Thailand), ph 043-722118 (extension 113) or mayu958@hotmail.com

✂.....

I _____ have read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to one-to-one interviews with the researcher of not longer than one to two hours, at a time and place of my convenience.

I understand and agree that my interview will be recorded and that I can withdraw my consent at any time during the interview.

I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be published provided I am not identifiable.

Participant _____

Date _____

Researcher _____

Date _____

APPENDIX F: Thai translation of consent form – interviews

STATEMENT OF DISCLOSURE AND INFORMED CONSENT - INTERVIEW

สัญญาการยินยอมการสัมภาษณ์

พูดเป็นไทย ผันเป็นอีสาน (Speaking in Thai, dreaming in Isan):

รายการโทรทัศน์ยอดนิยมกับการสร้างเอกลักษณ์ของเยาวชนอีสานในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทย

งานวิจัย

เข้าใจเกี่ยวกับเอกลักษณ์ของวัยรุ่นที่สื่อออกมาจากรายการโทรทัศน์ยอดนิยม เช่น ละครโทรทัศน์ และรายการเพลง การสัมภาษณ์ของท่านกับผู้ทำการศึกษาเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาที่ใช้ระยะเวลา 1

ปีเกี่ยวกับการใช้ชีวิตของเยาวชนอีสานในเขตเมืองขอนแก่นและมหาสารคาม ในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทย การวิจัยนี้มีผลต่อการศึกษาในระดับปริญญาเอก สาขาวิชาการพัฒนาการศึกษาของข้าพเจ้า

ประโยชน์ของการวิจัย

คนไทยทั้งหมดจะได้รับประโยชน์ในด้านการเพิ่มความเข้าใจเรื่องเอกลักษณ์ บทบาท และการข้อเท็จจริงของคนอีสานในสังคมไทยส่วนใหญ่มากขึ้น

หากท่านมีข้อสงสัยเกี่ยวกับหัวข้อวิจัย พูดเป็นไทย ผันเป็นอีสาน (Speaking in Thai, dreaming in Isan):

รายการโทรทัศน์ยอดนิยมกับการสร้างเอกลักษณ์ของเยาวชนอีสานในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทย

ท่านสามารถติดต่อโดยตรงได้ที่คุณ Catherine Hesse-Swain (นักศึกษาปริญญาเอก) School of International, Cultural and Community Studies, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia เบอร์โทรศัพท์ 053-212160 (เชียงใหม่) หรือเบอร์อีเมล

identity@australia.edu หรือ คุณกุลกานต์ ชนะภาณูจน์ (บีม) ผู้ช่วยงานวิจัย เบอร์โทรศัพท์มือถือ 017 990 765 หรือ

bim1980@hotmail.com

หากท่านมีข้อสงสัยประการใดเกี่ยวกับงานวิจัยหรือต้องการติดต่อเป็นการส่วนตัว ติดต่อ Dr Nancy Hudson-Rodd, Development Studies Program Coordinator, School of International, Cultural and Community Studies, Edith Cowan University, Perth,

Western Australia ที่เบอร์อีเมล n.hudson_rodd@cowan.edu.au (ออสเตรเลีย) หรือ อ.มยุรี สิริวรรณ หัวหน้าภาควิชาภาษาอังกฤษ สถาบันราชภัฏมหาสารคาม (ประเทศไทย) โทรศัพท์ 043-722118 (ต่อ 113) หรือ mayu958@hotmail.com

✂.....

ข้าพเจ้า _____

ได้อ่านข้อมูลดังกล่าวข้างต้นแล้วและข้าพเจ้าได้คำตอบที่พอใจในทุกคำถามที่ข้าพเจ้ามี

ข้าพเจ้าเต็มใจให้สัมภาษณ์แบบตัวต่อตัวกับผู้ทำการศึกษาในเวลาไม่เกินหนึ่งถึงสองชั่วโมง ในเวลาและสถานที่ที่ข้าพเจ้าสะดวก

ข้าพเจ้าเข้าใจและยินยอมว่าข้อมูลการให้สัมภาษณ์ของข้าพเจ้าจะถูกบันทึกและตระหนักว่าข้าพเจ้าสามารถถอนตัวจากสัญญาได้ทุกเวลาระหว่างการให้สัมภาษณ์

ข้าพเจ้ายินยอมว่าข้อมูลการวิจัยสำหรับการศึกษาคำนี้สามารถตีพิมพ์โดยไม่ระบุชื่อของข้าพเจ้า

ผู้เข้าร่วม _____ วันที่ _____

นักวิจัย _____ วันที่ _____

APPENDIX G: Statement of disclosure and informed consent – workshops

Speaking in Thai, dreaming in Isan: Popular Thai television and emerging identities of Isan youth living in northeast Thailand.

Research problem – Understanding how Isan youth make sense of their own identity by investigating their relationship with popular Thai television programs, such as soap operas and music shows. This research is being conducted for my PhD in development studies.

Methodology – Young people aged 17 to 25 years will be involved in small workshops (3-4) with the researcher. We will watch popular TV programs and talk about your responses to these programs, including themes such as lifestyle, identities, relationships, beliefs, values and aspirations. You are under no obligation to discuss issues that make you uncomfortable. The sessions will be informal and relaxed. You may be invited by the researcher to take part in one-to-one interviews (via an interpreter). Workshops will be tape-recorded. Some photographs may be taken. All material will be regarded as confidential and stored securely.

Time commitment – The study will be carried out over a one-year period from November 2001 to November 2002. The researcher will conduct workshops of no longer than 90 minutes every month or two during this period. For students, workshops will be arranged to fit in with your timetables and minimise disruption to your study. Some workshops may form part of your normal curriculum program.

Benefits of the study – You may enjoy learning more about yourselves and being part of an ethnographic research process that may help you with your own studies. The Thai community as a whole may benefit from increased understanding of the identity, role and representation of *Khon Isan* within larger Thai society.

Any questions concerning the project entitled *Speaking in Thai, dreaming in Isan: Popular Thai television and emerging identities of Isan youth living in northeast Thailand* can be directed to Catherine Hesse-Swain (PhD candidate), School of International, Cultural and Community Studies, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia on (053) 844 915 (Chiang Mai), or email hesse@chmai2.loxinfo.co.th

If you have any concerns about the project or would like to talk to an independent person, you may contact Dr Nancy Hudson-Rodd, senior lecturer, School of International, Cultural and Community Studies, Edith Cowan University, on n.hudson_rodd@cowan.edu.au (Australia) or Arjan Wirat Wongpinunwatana, Lecturer Mass Communications, Khon Kaen University (Thailand) (to be confirmed).

✂

I (the participant) have read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I may withdraw at any time.

I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be published provided I am not identifiable.

Participant _____ Date _____

Researcher _____ Date _____

c:\devstudies/phd planning/consent – workshops.doc

APPENDIX H: Thai translation – Statement of disclosure and informed consent – workshops

สัญญาการยินยอมการอภิปราย

“พูดอย่างไทย ผันแบบอีสาน :

รายการโทรทัศน์ยอดนิยมและเอกลักษณ์ที่ปรากฏออกมาในวิถีชีวิตของวัยรุ่นอีสานในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทย”

ปัญหาการวิจัย — เข้าใจเกี่ยวกับเอกลักษณ์ของวัยรุ่นอีสานที่สื่อออกมาจากรายการโทรทัศน์ยอดนิยม เช่น ละครโทรทัศน์ และรายการเพลง การวิจัยนี้มีผลต่อการศึกษาในระดับปริญญาเอกสาขาวิชาการพัฒนาการศึกษาของข้าพเจ้า

วิธีการวิจัย — วัยรุ่นอายุ 17 –25 ปี จะรวมกลุ่มอภิปราย กลุ่มละ 3 ถึง 4 คน อภิปรายร่วมกับนักวิจัย ผู้อภิปรายและนักวิจัยจะดูรายการโทรทัศน์ยอดนิยมและพูดเกี่ยวกับการตอบสนองต่อรายการนั้น เช่น วิถีชีวิต เอกลักษณ์ ความสัมพันธ์ ความเชื่อ ค่านิยม และความไม่ฝืน คุณสามารถจะไม่เข้าร่วมอภิปรายในหัวข้อที่ทำให้คุณไม่สบายใจ การร่วมวงอภิปรายเป็นแบบกันเองและสบาย นักวิจัยจะสัมภาษณ์คุณแบบตัวต่อตัวโดยผ่านล่ามแปล การร่วมวงอภิปรายจะถูกบันทึกเทปและอาจจะมีการถ่ายรูปด้วย ทุกอย่างจะถูกเก็บไว้เป็นความลับ

ระยะเวลาในการดำเนินการ — การศึกษาจะมีระยะเวลาเป็นเวลา 1 ปี ตั้งแต่เดือนตุลาคม 2544 ถึงเดือนตุลาคม 2545 นักวิจัยจะดำเนินการอภิปรายไม่เกิน 90 นาทีต่อเดือนหรือสองครั้งต่อเดือนในเวลา 90 นาที สำหรับนักศึกษา ในการอภิปรายจะจัดให้เหมาะสมกับตารางเวลาเรียนของคุณเพื่อไม่ให้รบกวนเวลาเรียนของคุณ การอภิปรายกลุ่มอาจมาจากบางส่วนของหลักสูตรการเรียนของคุณ

ประโยชน์ที่จะได้รับ — คุณจะพอใจเกี่ยวกับการเรียนรู้ตัวเองมากขึ้นและเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของขบวนการวิจัยชาติพันธุ์วิทยา ชุมชนไทยทั้งหมดจะได้รับประโยชน์จากการเพิ่มความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับเอกลักษณ์ บทบาท และการแสดงออกผ่านโดยคนอีสานที่มีอยู่ในสังคมไทย

หากคุณมีข้อสงสัยประการใดเกี่ยวกับการวิจัยนี้ กรุณาติดต่อ คุณ Catherine Hesse-Swain นักศึกษาปริญญาเอก School of International, Cultural and Community Studies, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia เบอร์โทรศัพท์ (053) 844-915 เชียงใหม่ หรือ เบอร์อีเมล hesse@chmai2.loxinfo.co.th

หากคุณมีข้อสงสัยประการใดเกี่ยวกับการวิจัยนี้หรือต้องการติดต่อเป็นการส่วนตัว กรุณาติดต่อ Dr Nancy Hudson-Rodd, Senior lecturer, School of International, Cultural and Community Studies, Edith Cowan University หรือเบอร์อีเมล n.hudson_rodd@cowan.edu.au (Australia) หรือ คุณ อารีย์ลักษณ์ พันธุ์เขียน เบอร์อีเมล areeluckph@hotmail.com

ข้าพเจ้า (ผู้เข้าร่วม) ได้อ่านข้อมูลดังกล่าวข้างต้นแล้วและข้าพเจ้าได้เต็มใจในการเข้าร่วมการอภิปราย

ข้าพเจ้ายินยอมที่จะเข้าร่วมการอภิปรายครั้งนี้, และตระหนักว่าข้าพเจ้าสามารถถอนตัวได้ตลอดเวลา

ข้าพเจ้าขอยินยอมว่าข้อมูลการวิจัยสำหรับการศึกษาค้นคว้าครั้งนี้สามารถตีพิมพ์โดยไม่ระบุชื่อของข้าพเจ้า

ผู้เข้าร่วม _____ วันที่ _____

นักวิจัย _____ วันที่ _____

WHO ARE YOU?

People are complex beings - How much of you is cultural, social, political?

What role does popular television play in your self-image?

Explore your own thoughts about identity and share other people's by joining *informal* workshops with Australian PhD student Catherine Hesse-Swain from Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. Catherine is conducting a one-year ethnographic study entitled:

Speaking in Thai, Dreaming in Isan: Popular Thai television and emerging identities of Isan youth living in northeast Thailand.

Learn more about yourself and increase your understanding of ethnographic research. If you are interested in being part of small workshops once a month, please contact Khun Catherine on identity@australia.edu or Arjan Wirat Wongpinunwatana, Thai Language Department

September 2001

คุณคือใคร

มนุษย์ทุกคนต่างมีความแตกต่างกัน

ไม่ว่าจะเป็นความแตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรมความเป็นอยู่ สังคม และการเมือง
ความแตกต่างเหล่านี้ถูกสื่อออกมาในรูปแบบรายการโทรทัศน์
ยอดนิยมและบทบาทใดที่แสดงถึงตัวของคุณเอง

สำรวจความคิดเห็นของคุณเกี่ยวกับเอกลักษณ์และแบ่งปันกับผู้อื่นโดย
ร่วมสนทนาแลกเปลี่ยนความคิดเห็นกับนักศึกษาปริญญาเอกชื่อ Catherine
Hesse – Swain จาก มหาวิทยาลัย Edith Cowan, Perth, Western
Australia. Catherine เป็นนักศึกษาผู้กำลังศึกษาเกี่ยวกับ การวิจัย สังคม
ชื่อหัวข้อ

**พูดเป็นไทย ผันเป็นอีสาน (Speaking in Thai, dreaming in Isan):
รายการโทรทัศน์ไทยยอดนิยมกับการสร้างอัตลักษณ์ของเยาวชนอีสาน
ในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทย**

เรียนรู้เกี่ยวกับตัวคุณเองได้

โดยการอภิปรายเกี่ยวกับทัศนะและการตอบสนองเกี่ยวกับรายการโทรทัศน์
ยอดนิยมในกลุ่มอภิปราย กลุ่มเล็กๆ เดือนละหนึ่งครั้ง

สำหรับรายละเอียดเพิ่มเติม ติดต่อ คุณ แคทเธอริน เบอร์รี่เมลล์

identity@australia.edu หรือ อาจารย์ Mayuree Siriwan, English
Language Department เบอร์ โทร 043- 722118, เบอร์อีเมล

mayu958@hotmail.com, หรือ อาจารย์ Sooksil Prasongsook เบอร์อีเมล

sooksilp@yahoo.com

มกราคม 2545