

THE ISAN SAGA:  
THE INHABITANTS OF RURAL NORTHEAST THAILAND AND THEIR  
STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY, EQUALITY AND ACCEPTANCE (1964–2004)

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by  
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Struggle for Identity, Equality and Acceptance (1964–2004)

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## DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the betterment of the village-dwelling Isan people of rural Northeast Thailand—with whom I spent some of the most rewarding years of my life—in hopes that it will contribute in some way to the understanding of their plight, and in doing so, help advance their cause, that of finding the sense of wellbeing that they have so long sought after, both for themselves and their posterity.

Though I may be poverty-stricken, I refuse to be a pauper.

—*An old Lao-Isan maxim*

*(tueng maen khoi si tuk lai, khoi ka boh yaum jon)*

ถึงแม้จนข้อยสิทุกข์หลายข้อยกะบ่ยอมจน

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Isan Saga:  
The Inhabitants of Rural Northeast Thailand and Their  
Struggle for Identity, Equality and Acceptance (1964–2004)  
by  
Ronald L. Myers  
Master of Arts in Asian Studies  
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The village-dwelling Isan people of rural northeast Thailand are in an ongoing struggle for personal identity, prosperity, and equality, as well as a desire for respect and acceptance by their fellow countrymen. Presently over twenty-one million in population (as of 2004), the Isan people have taken the initiative over the last several decades to seize various opportunities and are currently emerging from their poverty-stricken agrarian roots and lowly social position to becoming the formally-recognized labor class of Thailand.

This ongoing process is occurring despite long-standing economic exploitation and neglect, as well as hindrances placed in their way by their more urbane, status-conscious Central Thai cousins, who have customarily dismissed the Isan dwellers as being simpleminded and ignorant. Notwithstanding, their progress is now clearly evidenced by an increasing acceptance by the Thai, together with enjoying a greater significance on a national scale in socio-cultural, economic and political terms.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO ISAN: THE PEOPLE AND REGION OF NORTHEAST THAILAND

The village-dwelling Isan people of rural northeast Thailand are in an ongoing struggle for personal identity and self-advancement, as well as respect and acceptance by their fellow countrymen. Presently over twenty-one million in population, the Isan people have taken the initiative over the last several decades to seize various opportunities and are currently emerging from their poverty-stricken agrarian roots and lowly social position to becoming the formally-recognized labor class of Thailand.<sup>1</sup>

This ongoing process is occurring despite long-standing economic exploitation and neglect, as well as hindrances placed in their way by their more urbane, class and status-conscious Central Thai cousins, who have customarily dismissed the Isan dwellers as being simpleminded and ignorant. Notwithstanding, their success is now clearly evidenced by an increasing acceptance by the Thai, together with a greater significance on a national scale in socio-cultural, economic and political terms.

"Thailand," of *Anna and the King of Siam* fame, literally means "land of the free." Today, the Royal Kingdom of Thailand has made important political and socio-economic strides. It has evolved from a feudalistic, slave-holding tribal society of yesteryear into a politically modern, industrialized third-world trading nation. Since 1932 Thailand has enjoyed a benevolent monarchy, alongside a localized form of parliamentary-styled constitutional democracy, replete with elected local representation.

However, today's inhabitants of Thailand's vast Northeast (Isan) Region have not been as *free* to enjoy all the benefits and opportunities of constitutional democracy as the name of their country may imply. The Isan region was not always a part of the Royal

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<sup>1</sup>The population of Thailand's Isan region is approximately twenty one million as of Jan. 2003.

Kingdom of Thailand, having come under full Thai suzerainty in an on-going military and political process that lasted from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup>

Descended mostly from Laotian and Mon-Khmer stock, the twenty-one million plus inhabitants of Isan comprise one-third of the nation's population, as well as occupying one-third of its land mass. The Isan are indelibly steeped in ancient customs, traditions and beliefs. Typically subsistence-level rice farmers by heritage, most Isan people still survive by the sweat of their brows on a day-by-day basis in an archaic, agrarian-based sub-culture, a life-style passed down from their forefathers. However, today, the Isan are now making observable socio-economic advancement, compared to even a decade ago.

Although the rural-dwelling Isan may appear outwardly lethargic and blasé, they are hard-working people, toughened by the land on which they toil and the socio-economic conditions they have had to endure. The Isan have traditionally been an oppressed people, routinely taken advantage of by local merchants, as well as derided by their politically-shrewd, status-conscious Thai cousins. Exploited by regional favoritism and ethnic prejudice, their situation is subtly sanctioned by government policy and practice.

Despite continual derision and censure by the mainstream Central Thai populace, the rural dwellers of the Isan region have been able, not only to endure, but to advance themselves in Thai society. This is due to a survivor attitude that contradicts their predicament. Consequently, the inquisitive outsider is often mystified as to what internal driving force compels these hearty people to persevere, despite their circumstances.

Even so, the Isan are quietly emerging from their humble, deep-rooted agrarian origins, gradually transitioning into what is becoming the nation's semi-official labor class. They are also moving away from exclusive reliance on their agrarian-based sub-economy to taking a greater participatory role in the national market-based economy. As a result, the Isan are becoming more widely accepted by the general Thai populace and are even being catered to by astute politicians. The reason being, they represent a potentially powerful voting bloc, to be reckoned with as representative democracy and constitutionally-mandated social equality develops and matures across Thailand's political landscape.

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<sup>2</sup>Char Karnchanapee, *History of Isan* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 1.

## THEIR KING AND GOVERNMENT

The Isan region is part of the Royal Kingdom of Thailand. His Royal Highness, King Bhumibol Adulyadej,<sup>3</sup> officially known as Rama IX of the Chakri Dynasty, is Thailand's Benevolent Royal Sovereign. King Bhumibol is truly a benevolent sovereign to the Isan people, doing what the Thai royal family has become famous for—rural development and community service. King Bhumibol has designed and implemented numerous development projects throughout Isan, as well as followed them through to completion, bypassing typical bureaucratic corruption, cronyism, and political infighting.

The democratically-elected head of the parliamentary-styled representative government is the current Prime Minister along with affiliated party members. Thailand enjoys a new Constitution, which ensures individual rights by law, including religious freedom and freedom of speech.

In 1996, the caretaker Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun<sup>4</sup> and a ninety-member committee began work on a new anti-corruption constitution. They sought a radical restructuring of the Thai government, and decentralization of power out of Bangkok, as well as an independent election commission. The new constitution found solid support among Bangkok's middle class, in anticipation that it would lessen political cronyism and corruption. Conversely, rural Thai citizens, including rural Isan dwellers, resented the constitutional changes, since they depended on the patronage of corrupt politicians to build roads and wells in their villages. Even though they acknowledged knowing about the problem of corruption, they reasoned that the new constitution would bring an end to help programs for them. The new anti-corruption constitution was approved on September 27, 1997.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The Thai Monarch's name is pronounced: pume-ee-pone ah-doon-yah-date.

<sup>4</sup>Diplomat-turned-businessman, Anand Panyarachun has twice been appointed caretaker Prime Minister by the King—once in 1991 (for fourteen months), then again in 1992 (about five months). In Thailand, Prime Ministers come and go on a regular basis with questionable reputations, but Anand has remained in most Thai minds as one of their most honest and efficient of Prime Ministers. “Anand Nurtures New Charter With Steady Hands,” *New Strait Times* (Kuala Lumpur), Nov. 16, 1997, 12.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*; Joceline Tan, “Thai Politicians Jittery Over New Constitution,” *New Sunday Times* (Kuala Lumpur), Aug. 31, 1997, 14.

## THEIR LAND

The Kingdom of Thailand, where the Isan people dwell, was previously called Siam.<sup>6</sup> A charter member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Thailand is a key player in the region's economy. Roughly the size of France, Thailand occupies a geographical area of between 513,000 and 514,000 square kilometers (just under 200,000 square miles). Thailand is divided into four main geographical regions: North, Northeast, Central, and South. Thailand's northeastern or Isan region is bordered by Laos to its north and east (separated by the Mekong River), with Cambodia forming its southernmost border. The Isan Region is the largest and most populous region of Thailand—albeit the least developed—occupying an area of nearly 169,000 square kilometers (just over 65,000 square miles).

Thailand's system of geopolitical administration is divided up into provinces or *jangwats* with over seventy-two *jangwats* in total. Isan comprises nineteen of these.

Geographically, the Isan region is spread mostly over the Korat Plateau, a vast tableland that derives its name from an ancient Khmer kingdom-settlement, which once governed the area during the pre-Thai era. The Korat Plateau is drained by streams and tributaries that flow into the Mekong River watershed, which also forms the entire Thai-Lao northeastern border. The word *Korat* is the shortened form of *Nakhon Ratchasima*, a major northeastern province that forms the southern gateway to the Isan region.

The Isan countryside, averaging 400 to 600 feet above sea level, is characteristically suited for rice-paddies and is interspersed with forested and mountainous regions. Isan typically has a harsh, sunbaked climate. During the monsoon rice-planting season, various locales frequently receive uneven rainfall often to the point of being either draught- or flood-ridden, resulting in unpredictable crop yields.

The Isan people, who inhabit centuries-old ancestral lands, have eked out an austere existence in generally favorable conditions as subsistence-level agrarians and pastoral hunter-gatherers, not unlike their ancestors before them. As a result, this indigent farmer-class

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<sup>6</sup>"The official name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand in 1939, back to Siam in 1945, and to Thailand again in 1948"—Char Karnchanapee, *Thai Politics and Foreign Aid in Rural Isan Development and Modernization in the 1990's* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 1.

people have learned to make do with what they have within the confines of their own sub-economy, developing a resilient love of life that belies their predicament.

### THEIR HERITAGE

Isan is the largest of Thailand's four major geographic regions and contains one third of the nation's population. The people of Isan are an ancient people who inhabit an ancient land. They are descended mainly from Lao, Mon and pre-Cambodian Khmer ancestry. They have their own distinctive language and culture, more similar to that of neighboring Laos than Thailand. The inhabitants of lower Isan are of Cambodian heritage.

The progenitors of the Isan, together with their Thai and Lao cousins, likely migrated from Southern China or beyond, beginning from the first millennium AD or earlier. Traditionally, this is the most widely accepted view, being consistent with socio-linguistic patterns and indicators. It is also verified by various ancient chronicles, including Chinese, Khmer, and Indian, as well as established Thai and Lao oral traditions and writings. However, through a reevaluation of historical evidence, new origin theories have been postulated by revisionists that the Thai race originated in Isan. This theory has caused an ongoing debate, mainly among Thai and Lao historians.

The entire Isan region is rich in ancient Buddhist shrines and temples that dot the landscape, indications of a deep-rooted religious and cultural heritage. In addition to innumerable ancient Buddhist artifacts, the Isan region contains ancient pre-Buddhist Khmer palaces and temple ruins, remnants of Brahman-Hindu architecture and influence.

These structures date from the Indianized Angkor civilization period of the first millennium and are located throughout Isan's southern sector, adjacent to the Cambodian border. These include the mountaintop Khmer temple ruins of Phanom Rung in Buriram province and the temple compound of Prasat Hin Phimai in Korat province.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Center for Southeast Asian Studies. "Thailand, Land of Contrasts." (2000). Accessed Jan. 20, 2000 from <http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas>.

## THEIR BELIEFS

The chief religion of Thailand is Theravada Buddhism, adhered to by more than ninety percent of the populace.<sup>8</sup> Although religious freedom exists under the Thai constitution, the majority of life and culture in Thailand revolves around the Theravada or orthodox school of Buddhism. Teachings, based on the eight-fold Buddhist middle path,<sup>9</sup> discourage displays of emotional outbursts, combined with a generally optimistic outlook, helps give Thailand the reputation of being the *Land of Smiles*. As the nation's state-ordained religious system, Buddhism is also practiced by most all Isan people.

According to Buddhist teachings, there is no Supreme Being to entreat or rely upon as in the Christian world view. Conversely, Buddhism teaches that by performing various religious deeds, along with conquering one's carnal or temporal desires, a person can hope to achieve enough merit to gain *enlightenment* and passage into Nirvana, described as being an idyllic state where one ceases to exist as an individual entity,<sup>10</sup> thus escaping the endless cycle of reincarnation caused by one's own karma, or bad deeds.<sup>11</sup>

Blended with a syncretistic combination of ancestor veneration, Animism,<sup>12</sup> Brahminism<sup>13</sup> and Shamanism, along with a liberal mixture of superstitious folklore and

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<sup>8</sup>Frederica M. Bunge and Robert Reihart, eds., *Area Handbook for Thailand*. 5th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), 3–47.

<sup>9</sup>*Middle Path*, meaning the avoidance of extremes, including extremes of desires and emotional display, as well as lifestyle, whether affluence or asceticism.

<sup>10</sup>i.e., realizes the illusion of an independent self, according to Dr. Sandra Wawrytko, Department of Asian-Pacific Studies, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA.

<sup>11</sup>Phil Parr, ed., *The Eight-Fold Path (of the Middle Way)* (Titahi Bay, New Zealand: Aspect Press, 1985). With comments by Phil Parr.

<sup>12</sup>Animism, meaning belief in a parallel world inhabited by malevolent spirit beings, who cause calamity and misfortune to befall the unsuspecting adherents who have unwittingly committed some offense. This belief is evidenced by the keeping of taboos and the practice of shamanism, i.e., spirit mediums that use various means of divination to contact and to arrive at an appeasement price sufficient to placate the offended spirit. This is usually a blood sacrifice in the form of a chicken or pig. Territorial owner or guardian spirits, who are believed to preside over entire cities, towns and villages, are normally offered sacrifices of greater worth, usually consisting of one or more larger animals such as cattle, oxen or water buffalo, offered annually on a specific auspicious occasion.

<sup>13</sup>Brahminism, meaning the trust in omens, amulets, incantations, auspicious days and occasions. According to present-day Thai and Lao worldview and practice, this is combined in syncretistic fashion with local forms of Buddhism and Animism.

traditions, the aggregate provides a powerful socio-cultural identification. This results in a belief system and lifestyle not readily open to outside influence or change.

### THEIR EMERGENCE AND CURRENT SITUATION

Despite years of lethargy and mediocre response to the Thai government's various perfunctory assistance programs, the rural-dwelling Isan people eventually began to awaken and take initiative for themselves. This process began in the 1960s, precipitated by the advent of the Vietnam War. U.S. contractors opened the opportunity for employment, needing a local source of labor in constructing United States Air Force (USAF) bases situated in four locations in the Isan region, as well as roads and other development projects. Unlike the poor treatment and meager wages they were used to, these new jobs provided the rural Isan people with unprejudiced treatment and well-paying jobs by which they could advance and prosper within their own cultural setting.

The reality of these new opportunities aroused an eagerness to pursue a better lifestyle for themselves and their families, heretofore unattainable due to the past conditions and the meager earnings forced upon them by the status quo. During this period, many Isan people migrated inter-provincially to seek employment at the various newly-arrived USAF bases. There, they found employment for a fair wage working for U.S. construction companies, while gaining valuable skills that would benefit them later.

Ironically, the hashish-growing industry soon developed and flourished in parts of the rural Northeast. It provided an unparalleled, albeit illegal, source of income for the previously-indigent rice farmers as they supplied a readymade market, i.e., U.S. Soldiers stationed nearby. This market peaked in the mid-to-late 1970s and later tapered off, due to the departure of U.S. Soldiers and a concentrated effort by the authorities, which made it increasingly difficult to continue.

Upon the cessation of the Vietnam War and the closure of the USAF bases in 1975, a succession of global events occurred that provided further opportunities for advancement for the Isan, namely the oil embargo crisis and resultant OPEC nation internal development programs, funded by the higher crude oil prices.

In the mid-1970s, the oil embargo by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) created overseas employment opportunities for the Isan as these nations

became engorged with foreign capital. Oil-rich OPEC nations used newly acquired surplus funds to finance building and development programs. In globe-trotting fashion, the Isan traveled overseas to the middle-eastern OPEC nations as semi-skilled expatriate construction workers, earning even better wages than they previously had in the U.S. Air Force bases in their home region.

Then, in the 1980s, Bangkok began to develop industrially, providing further job opportunities, both in construction, local industry, and in foreign-owned manufacturing and assembly plants. Many Isan sojourned back to Bangkok from their overseas employment with newly acquired skills to work as laborers in construction and modernization projects, as factory workers, and as skilled technicians, helping in their own country's modernization process. Meanwhile, as surrounding Asian economies flourished because of burgeoning global industry, other good-paying employment opportunities continued to arise in surrounding Asian Tiger nations such as Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore.

This rapid economic growth pattern continued at record pace until the Asian economic collapse in mid-1997, dropping the value of the Thai Baht roughly in half. This adversity slowed things down considerably and sent myriads of Isan workers back home to the Northeast where their agrarian sub-economy sustained them through the hard times. As things later began to pick up economically, the Isan returned to Bangkok to find new jobs.

Thus, over the last few decades, as if by some internal region-wide signal, the rural-dwelling Isan people began to rise to the challenge to improve their lot. Taking personal initiative, they migrated in cyclical waves, both within Thailand and beyond, to seek employment at a fair wage. They returned home to their respective villages with the economic fruits of their labors, newly-learned skills, and new-found knowledge of the outside world, to the benefit of their families and the betterment of their country. This whole process has seen the Isan emerge from their modest agrarian roots, to becoming the recognized labor class of Thailand, a byproduct of their journey to self-advancement.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

### Tourism

Thailand's tourism industry has taken root and has begun to prosper. The Northeast, being the most needy and least developed region of the country, rarely received mention in Thailand's Tourism Authority literature (TAT). It can be argued that this is because mainstream Thai society feels condescending towards the backward Isan region, and is stigmatized and embarrassed to be identified with them. Consequently, the Tourism Authority wrongly assumed that foreign tourists would not favor Isan as a tourist destination, and even discouraged foreign-owned tour companies that saw the potential.<sup>14</sup> However, as the TAT and tourist-related Thai businesses began to realize that foreign tourists didn't have the same perspective as the Thai, they also realized they were missing an untapped lucrative potential. As a gesture towards Isan, 1998 was designated "The Year of Isan" as the region was formally recognized by the Thai Tourism Authority as a viable tourist destination. This has helped bring recognition to the area, prosperity to both businesses and locals, and a changing attitude among the status- and face-conscious Thai.

### Industry

Concurrently, the Thai Board of Investment (BOI), the arm of government that oversees and regulates foreign investment, is following an incentive strategy to encourage foreign investors to move out of Bangkok into more-provincial regions of the country, including the Northeast. The concept being, this will lessen congestion in and around Bangkok, while helping to develop and provide jobs and strengthen local-area economies in other regions of the country. Northeastern provinces are gearing up for this by developing industrial parks and other programs to make their locations more attractive to foreign investors.

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<sup>14</sup>One travel agency that realized and promoted this untapped potential was North by Northeast Tours, operated out of Nakhon Phanom province, Northeast Thailand.

## CONCLUSION

As a result of their perseverance and tenacity, the Isan are becoming more respected as a people, having been taken advantage of in times past by their Thai cousins. They are now becoming more knowledgeable and astute, and beginning to acquire more political leverage. Consequently, they are being shown more respect, and are being courted politically.

This paper will trace the steps and review the catalyst mechanisms and events that have occurred from the mid-1960s through the arrival of the new Millennium. This will demonstrate that, despite oppression and the relative failure of Thai government assistance programs, and the poor attitude by the Thai populace, the Isan have taken the opportunity to improve their educational, political, and socio-economic standing within the greater Thai society.

In the process, various underlying factors regarding the dichotomy between the Thai and the Isan will be explored, as well as the motives as to why the Thai have treated their fellow countrymen so shabbily. New developments and changes that the Isan have experienced in their ongoing journey will be traced. These include opportunities for upward mobility, internal and external difficulties and challenges, as well as victories and setbacks encountered along the way. In compensation for their struggle for identity and personal betterment, the families and villages of Thailand's Isan Region are finally receiving significance and recognition on a national level as they emerge from their agrarian origins to their new-found status, that of Thailand's principal labor class.

## CHAPTER 2

### ORIGINS AND HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE ISAN REGION AND ITS INHABITANTS

#### ANCIENT ORIGINS

A noted scholar once said that every problem or difficulty, to be properly understood, should be traced back to its source. With this in mind, to properly understand the present situation with the Isan people and their plight at the hands of the Thai, one must return to the beginning.<sup>15</sup>

Any legitimate attempt to understand the Isan people of Northeast Thailand and appreciate the various aspects of their present-day afflictions and circumstances<sup>16</sup> would require an overview of the origins of the Isan people and the region that they presently inhabit. The Isan region is said by some to represent the ancient heartland of Thailand, where centuries-old customs and lifestyles still survive.

Thus, this paper requires at least a summary mention of the peoples and migrations of the various predecessors that waxed and waned in size and influence across the centuries, and the reciprocating tug-of-war struggles to occupy and exert control over the Korat plateau. This is vast semi-arid tableland that drains southeastward into the Mekong River, which forms the eastern boundary between Thailand and Laos.

Northeastern Thailand, usually referred to as Isan, is one of the most provincial and least developed regions in Thailand. However, upon traveling throughout modern-day Isan, it becomes apparent that more advanced and prosperous civilizations once existed there. This is evidenced by the numerous ancient temples and other assorted edifices that are found throughout the width and breadth of the vast region.

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<sup>15</sup>Robert Dick Wilson, the distinguished Princeton Seminary Old Testament Scholar. Princeton Theological Seminary inauguration speech of Robert Dick Wilson as professor of Semitic philology and Old Testament criticism, Sept. 21, 1900.

<sup>16</sup>Various aspects of the Isan class struggle would include: social, cultural, economic, educational and political advancement or development.

The word Isan, designating both the people and region of Northeast Thailand, is said by some to be a derivative of the ancient Bali term *Isana*. Possibly this refers to an old Mon-Khmer kingdom named Isana that once flourished in the region. The term might also be loosely translated as meaning either “vast” or “prosperous,” although “vast” seems more appropriate. Others maintain, because of the general barrenness of the land, that the name Isan is associated with the Hindu deity Phra Isuan, also called Phra Siwa or Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction.<sup>17</sup>

In any event, according to D. G. E. Hall in his work, *A History of Southeast Asia*, the origins of the predecessors of the Isan people of Northeast Thailand and their Laotian neighbors are at best "legendary and clouded in obscurity."<sup>18</sup>

### Prehistoric

Modern scholars of various disciplines<sup>19</sup> have concluded that the entire Mekong river basin and valley area—including Thailand’s Korat plateau (the Isan region) and parts of Laos—was inhabited in primeval times by hunter-gatherer agrarian aborigines of Austro-Asiatic stock as early as five or more millennia ago. Others believe that these tribal groups likely emigrated southward from China into the area of what is now Thailand and surrounding countries in Southeast Asia. Whatever the case, their presence is evidenced by numerous prehistoric archaeological discoveries located throughout the region. These include the cliff paintings of Pha Taem, found in Ubon province, overlooking the Mekong river, as well as and the Ban Chiang excavations, located in Thailand's northeastern province of Udonthani.<sup>20</sup> Although relatively little is known of these early inhabitants, the five thousand

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<sup>17</sup>The various players in this unfolding drama of possession of the Isan region over the centuries include the Khmer, the Thai, the Burmese, the Lao and their predecessors, the Cham, the Mong, and others. Mark Caldwell, “Isan People Profile Paper, 1997,” (photocopy) , International Mission Board, Richmond, VA.

<sup>18</sup>D. G. E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia*, 2nd ed. (Norwich, Great Britain: Jarrold and Sons, 1965), 238.

<sup>19</sup>Historians, archeologists, socio-cultural anthropologists and linguists, as well as other related disciplines.

<sup>20</sup>Ban Chiang diggings: Ban Chiang is a village located within present-day Udon Thani province, approximately 40 miles east of Udon city. There are also adjacent findings in village areas in the general Sakon Nakhon Basin region to the east of Ban Chiang.

year-old archaeological sites in the village of Ban Chiang contain some of the oldest evidence of Bronze Age rice cultivation and art forms in the area.<sup>21</sup>

Ancient accounts of the area, chronicled by early Chinese and Indian merchant-traders, refer to the early inhabitants of the entire Southeast Asian region (including Thailand's northeast sector) as being primarily rice farmers skilled in the production of bronze and iron tools, handmade pottery and textiles. Early inhabitants of the region maintained a close sense of community, dwelling in villages situated on raised knolls near streams and rivers where they raised paddy and upland rice on the surrounding land.<sup>22</sup> The ancient peoples that inhabited the area had codes of social conduct and economies based on crop cultivation and animal husbandry. Inter-community trade was also practiced as village members skilled in the trades made tools and ornaments from bronze and later from iron.<sup>23</sup>

The inhabitants also enjoyed similar worldviews, including beliefs pertaining to death, burial and the hereafter. Original inhabitants of the area, it has been determined, also depended heavily upon hunting and gathering for their sustenance. Native traders used established mountain, jungle, and river routes from earliest times to make interregional contact. Because of its superior size, the Mekong River and its tributaries was the route of choice, allowing traders to penetrate deep into isolated areas of the plateau region where they bought and traded for various products and foods.<sup>24</sup>

### Cultural Interchanges: Through the First Millennium

Approximately the beginning of the Christian era, external influences began to occur. Local inhabitants of the Southeast Asian region came into contact with Indian and Chinese merchant traders who had immigrated to the area, bringing their cultural traditions, art forms,

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<sup>21</sup>The Library of Congress. "A Country Study: Thailand." (1987). Accessed Aug. 10, 2002 from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/thtoc.html>, 1.

<sup>22</sup>George Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1968), 36–96.

<sup>23</sup>Approximately five to six thousand years ago, according to Thai claims. This would coincide with the bronze age and later the iron age.

<sup>24</sup>The Library of Congress, A Country Study: Laos. (1994). Accessed Sept. 5, 2002 from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html>, 1.

religious values, socio-political ideals and world views along with them.<sup>25</sup> Over a period of time, these more-sophisticated concepts and institutions were adapted by the indigenous Mon and Khmer societies of the day. Having established expansive and powerful kingdoms, the Mon and Khmer subsequently passed these down, forming what would become the socio-cultural identity of greater present-day mainland Southeast Asia.<sup>26</sup>

Evidence of early travel, trade and cultural-interchange between India and Southeast Asia was also discovered in Thailand's lower central region.<sup>27</sup> Ships from Southern Indian coasts sailed eastward to Southeast Asian ports where Indian merchants bartered cotton dry goods, ivory, and other desirable items to Chinese merchants, who then transported these trade goods by sea back to China.<sup>28</sup> In turn, Indian merchants acquired tea and spices that they traded elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> In the process, Indian merchants from the high Brahmin caste established colonies in Southeast Asia along their trade routes. These included settlements among the pre-Cambodian Mon and Khmer peoples who inhabited the greater Southeast Asian mainland at the time.<sup>30</sup>

George Coedes mentions these early traders in his illuminating work, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Brahmin merchants, eager to establish trading outposts, settled in Southeast Asia in the general area that was to become the Khmer kingdom, bringing their

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<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>India had been influenced over the centuries through contact and trade from Western Europe and China. This contact brought prosperity to the seaport cities of India's southern region. Leaving southern Indian ports were ivory, onyx, cotton goods, silks, pepper and other spices, and from the Roman empire the Indians imported tin, lead, antimony and wine. Intrusions and invasions included those from the Persian and Median Empires, Alexandria of Greece, and possibly Rome, with whom India conducted trade.

<sup>27</sup>Roman coins and other metal objects dating back to the second or third centuries A.D. have been unearthed in present-day Nakhon Pathom province, located west of Bangkok—the general vicinity of the Dvaravati Kingdom—most likely having been carried there by Indian traders. These findings testify to the passage of foreign travelers and traders throughout the area during that period and later.

<sup>28</sup>Indian ships sailed south to Lanka and then east to Southeast Asian ports, where Indian merchants sold cotton cloth, ivory, brass wear, monkeys, parrots and elephants to Chinese merchants, who transported their goods by sea to China.

<sup>29</sup>India and China also established trade routes across Central Asia by camel caravan, across what would become known as the Silk Road's northern route.

<sup>30</sup>These Brahmin trader-settlements were established along the Burma coastal lands, the Malay peninsula, and in what is now Cambodia, as well as Bali, Sumatra, Java and the Philippines, where their culture and worldview became influential to varying degrees.

culture and worldview with them, including their Brahmin religion.<sup>31</sup> Through prolonged and expanded trade, many of these expatriate Indian merchants became wealthy. Their presence and that of their extended families introduced their religious and cultural values into Southeast Asia. Consequently, in the same way that Western culture spread by trade and colonization, Indian ideals and concepts were carried to Southeast Asia through these merchants.<sup>32</sup>

Hindu Brahmin-class trader-settlers intermingled with the Khmer society and eventually intermarried. Their colonies became states, ruled by descendants of the original Indian settlers. Thus, their language, art forms, beliefs and cultural heritage spread throughout present-day Southeast Asia, dating from this earlier era. Buddhism also filtered into the area somewhat later.

The Khmer Empire was thus influenced by Indian cultural forms, from which it adopted Hinduism, as well as Buddhism.<sup>33</sup> One historically significant site from this era is the ruins of Angkor Thom, located in north-central Cambodia, the capital city of the Khmer Empire. It was established circa 800 A.D. by King Jayavarman II (770–850).<sup>34</sup> Similar structures can be found in Northeast Thailand at Phimai and Phanom Rung, near the Cambodian border, reflecting ancient Indian culture and art form. They also testify to the extent of the Khmer Empire, whose dominion extended north and west hundreds of miles into present-day Laos and Thailand, including Thailand's Northeast or Isan Region.

### ANCIENT CULTURES AND KINGDOMS OF THE CENTRAL MEKONG RIVER BASIN

The Mon culture was dominant in the region of Thailand from the sixth century A.D. until the eleventh century A.D. when they were supplanted by the Khmer, ancestors of today's Cambodians. The Mon settled in the Mekong River Delta, in the Central Plains, and

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<sup>31</sup>Coedes, 36–96.

<sup>32</sup>Frank E. Smitha. "Civilizations, Philosophies and Changing Religions." (1998). Retrieved Apr. 15, 2000 from <http://www.eureka.net/~fsmitha/h1/ch13.htm#st3>.

<sup>33</sup>Bethany World Prayer Center. "The Central Khmer Thailand." (1997). Accessed Aug. 20, 2005 from [www.global12project.com/2004/profiles/p\\_code2/1883.html](http://www.global12project.com/2004/profiles/p_code2/1883.html).

<sup>34</sup>Encyclopedia Britannica Online. "Cambodia." (2000). Accessed March 12, 2000 from <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=19054&tocid=1039#1039.toc>.

to the north in Thailand's Lamphun province, once the capital of one of their more-significant northern kingdoms.

The Mon brought Buddhism, Sanskrit, and many other Indian influences and art forms into the area. The Dvaravati-style Thai art form is named after the Mon. Mon art was mainly religious in nature, i.e. Buddhist. They produced Buddhist statues and other art forms featuring characteristics typical to the region: broad noses, deeply lined mouths, single bow-like eyebrows, and a gentle, albeit slightly fiendish-looking, smile. Besides bronze and stone, stucco was one of their preferred materials.

The Mon were the dominant culture until the eleventh century A.D. when they were eventually supplanted by the Khmer, a related people whose descendants still inhabit parts of modern Cambodia. The Mon lasted longer in the north (or Lanna), where they were dominant until the end of the thirteenth century.

The Thai-Lao peoples, by some accounts, migrated into the Indo-Chinese peninsula from China, starting around 400 B.C. There, they merged into the Mon empire, the prevailing culture at the time, approximately from the fifth century A.D. onward. According to some sources, Khmer began to migrate into the area around the tenth century A.D., eventually superseding the Mon, so that the Thai came under the rule of the Khmer.<sup>35</sup>

### Funan (Mon) Kingdom

The urbanization of Southeast Asia began circa 100 B.C. From the latter part of the first century A.D. through the mid-sixth century, a conglomeration of significant kingdom-states that the Chinese called *Funan*<sup>36</sup> arose along coastal South Vietnam and Cambodia. At its peak, *Funan* became a regional power and saw its fiefdom states' influence extend westward into parts of central Laos and beyond. These kingdoms included the successor-state of *Chenla*. They also were influenced by Indian culture, evidenced by traces of Hinduism and Buddhism that evidently coexisted there during that period.

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<sup>35</sup>Nantana Ronnakiat, *History of Thailand* (Bangkok, Thailand: Kasem Banakit Press, 1963). Accessed Mar. 10, 2001 from <http://thaiarc.tu.ac.th/thai/thaiwrt.htm>.

<sup>36</sup>*Funan* is understood to be a Chinese mispronunciation of *bnam* or *panom*, a pre-Khmer word meaning *mountain*, referring to the mountainous region and kingdom that they observed in the area where Cambodia now exists. The word *panom* is still in use today by the Khmer, Thai, and Lao, and still means mountain.

### Third Century B.C.—Buddhism in Southeast Asia

There is no agreement on dates as to when Buddhism was first introduced into Thailand and Laos. One source links Thailand's Northeastern region with India and Buddhism, as having arrived in the area after the fifth century A.D. Artifacts have been found from this *Dvaravati* time period, including stone boundary markers, Buddhist images, and temple relics.

Conversely, in the third century B.C., the Indian emperor *Ashoka* is said to have dispatched his Buddhist missionaries, *Sona* and *Uttara*, to the general area known as *Suvannabhumi* (*Su-wan-na-pume*), or "Land of Plenty," to establish a Buddhist outpost among the locals. These locals were mainly animists that practiced folk religions and healing arts, some of which are still practiced today, syncretized in with Buddhism

Although Buddhism later became firmly established throughout the whole region, its initial spread was doubtless rather slow and tedious. This was due to difficulties in travel and a comparatively unresponsive populace, steeped in their own animistic practices, folk religions and worship of nature. Thus, it may have been several hundred years after the introduction of Buddhism before it was widely accepted and practiced in the region.<sup>37</sup>

### EARLY DEVELOPED POWER CENTERS

From around the first century A.D., a number of localized mini-states or fiefdoms began to develop in the middle Mekong Valley. They were based on wetland rice cultivation and associated with the pottery and bronze culture of Ban Chiang. Ban Chiang is an inconsequential village located in Udon Thani province in north-central Isan where remains of pre-historic human remains, pottery, weapons and tools were unearthed, definitive evidence of a Bronze Age civilization that flourished in Isan between five to six thousand years ago.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Peter Rogers, *Northeast Thailand from Prehistoric to Modern Times: In Search of Isan's Past* (Bangkok: Thailand: DK Books, 1996), 33–37.

<sup>38</sup>Ban Chiang: an archeological site of historical significance located at the village of Ban Chiang, approximately 40 miles (60 kilometers) due east of Udon City in the province of Udon Thani, Northeast Thailand.

Later, Indian-Brahmin influence expanded into sparsely populated neighboring areas through trade, marriage, and warfare. Various kingdoms and fiefdoms emerged as a result, assimilating the cultures of the Cham and Mon peoples that previously resided in the region. These administrative spheres or mandala were Indian-styled power centers, occupying the central Mekong valley region. Later, trade, marriages, and rivalries between rulers further aided in the expansion of these *mandalas*.<sup>39</sup>

#### SRI KOTRABUN: MON KINGDOM- SETTLEMENT IN THE UPPER ISAN REGION

One of the earliest settlements in the Upper Isan area was Sri Kotrabun, a *mandala*-style fiefdom or vassal state, thought to have been founded between the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. Sri Kotrabun, purported to be the capital of the Mon Empire, was originally located at the mouth of the Sri Bangfai river, on the west bank of the Mekong.<sup>40</sup>

The ancient Sri Kotrabun kingdom was located in Isan's present-day province of Nakhon Phanom, situated approximately 500 miles (750 kilometers) northeast of Bangkok, along the western banks of the Mekong River at one of its widest points. The province was officially named "Nakhon Phanom" in 1782 by King Rama I, founding monarch of the Chakkri dynasty. Upon visiting the area, the king was so impressed by the majestic panorama that greeted him that he named it Nakhon Phanom, an ancient Khmer term meaning "city of mountains." The city was so named because of its location, facing the jagged limestone mountains that line the eastern banks of the Mekong River, in Laos.

Both mountains and river form a substantial natural geographic barrier, helping to protect the area and limit any influence or threats from the east. However, Sri Kotrabun later relocated further westward to avoid the expansion of the Champa empire, another Indianized State on the coast of present-day Vietnam, founded in 192 A.D.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Mandala, a term meaning orb, circle, group, collection, or company, was an Indian-styled geopolitical term which referred to systems of variable-sized, expanding and contracting spheres of influence centered around a ruler, his palace, and the religious center from which he drew his legitimization.

<sup>40</sup>St. Martin's College. Division of Religion and Philosophy, "Overview of World Religions, South-East Asian Religions." (n.d.). Accessed retrieved Aug. 8, 2005 from <http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/seasia/geness.html/>.

<sup>41</sup>The Library of Congress, "A Country Study: Laos," 1.

## EARLY CULTURES, RELIGIONS, AND ART FORMS IN ISAN

Movements and migrations of people in the past are often reflected in modern-day culture and art forms. This is true in Isan where they substantiate the pre-existence of highly refined cultures, once prevalent in the area.

The Mon, for example, brought Buddhism, Sanskrit, and many other Indian influences and art forms into the area. For instance, the Dvaravati-style art form, which is mainly religious, i.e. Buddhist, in nature. The Mon first produced what today have become archetypal Buddhist statues featuring the characteristic broad, flat nostrils, deeply lined mouth, thin arched eyebrows and a gentle impish smile.

Throughout the centuries, various Dai-speaking peoples, predecessors to the modern-day Lao and Thai, along with ethnic Mon and Khmer groups, migrated across the Mekong River to settle in the Sri Kotrabun kingdom region. This is reflected in the numerous minority-groups still living in the area, with their diverse dialects and customs.<sup>42</sup>

This diversity is typical throughout the entire Isan region, where many unique art forms and cultural folk dances still exist. One example is the Sri Kotrabun dance, associated with Isan's Nakhon Phanom province. It is still performed today on auspicious occasions in celebration of the area's long-standing history and past glories.

Likewise, numerous ancient temples and sacred religious monuments are located within present-day Nakhon Phanom province, as they are throughout Isan. Phra Thaat Panom, located in southern Nakhon Phanom province, is one of the earliest and most venerated Buddhist shrines, revered by both Thai and Lao. The actual date and origin of this shrine has not been successfully determined, but authorities speculate that initial construction dates range back to around 500 A.D. This approximates the period of the Sri Kotrabun Kingdom, which was situated in the same vicinity.

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<sup>42</sup>The majority of the people in the area consider themselves to be *Kalerng*, obviously a Dai-speaking people group. Some of the other various Dai-speaking peoples in the area are the Phu-Thai, who trace their roots to Hue, Central Vietnam; as well as the Nyaw, Saek, Yoi. Other peoples are the So, Bru, Kui (Sui), Tri, and Northern Cambodian, which represent the Mon-Khmer language family.

## OTHER EARLY KINGDOM-SETTLEMENTS

### Champa Kingdom (Cham, Sui)

The Sri Kotrabun Kingdom shifted westward, yielding to the expansion of the Champa kingdom, a more-powerful and more-advanced Indianized state, located on the central coast of Vietnam. Descendants of the Champa Kingdom settled Champasak in southern Laos, beginning in the fifth century A.D.

### Khmer Kingdom (Khmer)

Succeeding the Funan kingdom, Khmer was one of the best-known and longer-lasting Indianized kingdom-states in the area. The Khmer kingdom, centered at Angkor, was prevalent in the area prior to the coming of the Thai or the Lao. D.G.E. Hall, a notable authority on early Southeast Asian History, dates the Angkor kingdom to as early as 800 A.D. under the Monarchy of King Jayavarmin II.<sup>43</sup> The Angkor kingdom continued to exist, albeit with a decline in influence and power, due to weakened leadership, until its collapse in the mid-1400s at the hands of Thai invaders from Ayutthaya.<sup>44</sup>

### Candapuri Kingdom (Mon)

The ancient Mon kingdom of Candapuri, another Indian-styled *mandala* state, is similar in name to the neighboring modern-day province of Say-Ya-Buri. Candapuri is said by some to be the original name of Vientiane, the present-day capital of Laos.<sup>45</sup>

Both the Sri Kotrabun and Candapuri Kingdoms appear to have had a hierarchical social class structure, with an aristocracy, a commoner class, and a slave class. This class-conscious social structure, still evident in many Asian societies today, was at least partially attributable to the influence of the Indian enculturation process that George Coedes speaks of in *The Indianization of Southeast Asia*.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Hall, 874.

<sup>44</sup>The Library of Congress. "A Country Study: Cambodia." (1987). Accessed Aug. 20, 2005 from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/khtoc.html>.

<sup>45</sup>Candapuri (*Can* or *Jan* means moon, *puri* or *huri* means city), Vientiane, pronounced Viang Jan (*Viang* means city, *Jan* means moon)

<sup>46</sup>Coedes, 36–96.

Thinking themselves as being superior, the Thais' critical view and demeaning treatment of the people of the Isan region may be due in part to this influence. However, the Indian-style caste structure was never fully accepted or adapted by Southeast Asians. Apparently, its polarizing effects were too alien and contrary to suit local socio-cultural norms. These were more Confucian and Patriarchal in philosophy, geared to a strong central figure to rally around.

Further evidence that refutes the adoption of India's caste system in Southeast Asia lies in the fact that perhaps certain successor ruler-princes or *panya* came from the commoner class. This indicates that some form of upward mobility was practiced, based on a general consensus among the populace. In contrast, no upward mobility was possible in the caste system and commoners had little voice in the matter. Ironically, the oppressive way in which the Isan are treated by their Thai cousins is reminiscent of the lack of opportunity for upward mobility associated with the Indian caste system. This would cause one to speculate whether the caste system was rejected in its entirety in Southeast Asia.

### Dvaravati Kingdom (Mon)

The Dvaravati Kingdom (Mon) was centered in the lower Chao Phraya river valley region, beginning in the fifth century. Known for its Buddhist-styled art forms, it has been suggested that Theravada Buddhism reached into upper Isan, and across the Mekong River into Laos in the seventh and eighth centuries through the expansionist efforts of this Mon kingdom.<sup>47</sup>

### Khmer Domination

The Khmer Empire, which flourished between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, encompassed present-day Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and southern Vietnam. Its power declined when the Thai and Vietnamese conquered the Khmer, restricting them to the area now known as Cambodia.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Library of Congress. "A Country Study: Thailand," 1.

<sup>48</sup>Bethany World Prayer Center, "The Central Khmer Thailand," 1.

Migrations in the seventh century continued to expand the various influences and the cultural mix of the region. By the eighth century, the earlier Mon *mandala*-states found themselves under Khmer authority, which continued for three to four centuries until the arrival of the Thai-Lao tribes from the north.

### Tenth Through Fourteenth Centuries

From the tenth to the mid-thirteenth centuries, the Khmer exercised cultural influence and political control over Isan, Northeastern Thai's Korat plateau region. Both Buddhist and pre-Buddhist edifices of Hindu origin and related relics associated with early forms of Khmer-styled worship located throughout the Northeast attest to this fact.<sup>49</sup> Many of these ancient Khmer ruins are found in Isan's lower region, just north of the Khmer kingdom's seat of government, *Angkor Thom*, located just across the Cambodian border to the south.

### Thai Advent—Twelfth Century

Traditional historians and socio-linguistic scholars concur that Dai-speaking Thai-Lao peoples migrated south from the Nan Chao kingdom of Yunnan province of southern China. The likely impetus was Kublai Khan's raiding Mongol hordes. The timeframes associated with these two events also coincide. They settled in what is now the Northern regions of Thailand and Laos in a subservient coexistence under the Khmer of Angkor, who were their predecessors in the area.

### Sukhothai Kingdom (Thai)

The early kingdom of Sukhothai arose as a Thai or possibly Thai-Lao Chiefdom while under the dominion of the Khmer Empire. This is reflected in early Sukhothai architecture, which is noticeably Khmer in its derivation.

Around the mid-thirteenth century (circa. 1238 A.D.), in an attempt to exert influence over a wider area, the Thai and Lao banded together under the leadership of two chieftains, attacking and overrunning an outlying Khmer outpost settlement. Some accounts say one of the chieftains challenged a Khmer officer to a one-on-one combat astride war elephants and

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<sup>49</sup>Some of these pre-Buddhist Hindu-style stone palace-temples or *prasat hin* are found at Panom Rung in Buriram province, on the Cambodian border and at Phi Mai, further north in Ubon Ratchatani province.

won. Whatever the actual situation, Sukhothai, said by Thai to mean "Dawn of (Thai) Happiness."<sup>50</sup> Literally translated as happy Thai or happy freedom, Sukhothai became the capital of the first autonomous Thai state, about 1238 A.D.<sup>51</sup>

The conquering Thai chieftain became the first ruler of Sukhothai, formally ending Khmer rule of the area from far-away Angkor Thom. This Thai chieftain became known as King Sri Inthrathit. His successor and son, King Ramkhamhaeng, known as the benevolent king, is doubtless one of the most celebrated monarchs to have ruled the over Sukhothai Kingdom. He is still highly venerated in modern Thai society, having numerous things named after him, not the least of which is Ramkhamhaeng University in Bangkok.

The other chieftain was quite possibly the head of a clan of Dai-speaking Lao predecessors who migrated eastward to establish Lan Chang (Vientiane) and nearby Isan, early Lao kingdom-settlements.

Concerning the long-standing Thai and Lao sibling rivalry, the Thai often describe themselves as the older siblings, and their Lao cousins as their younger siblings. This is a comparison the Lao don't care for, as it suggests that the Thai are superior or more advanced. The Isan, being derived mainly from Lao stock, seem to fit under the "younger sibling" category in the eyes of the Thai, evidenced by the way they are treated. Actually, a comprehensive and unbiased study of both Thai and Lao roots may prove the opposite is true, i.e., the Lao being the elder and the Thai the younger. This would be evidenced in which kingdom was actually established first, Thai or Lao, or which chieftain was older. The facts become blurred, depending on traditions and versions of oral history, Thai versus Lao.

### Thai-Lao Scripts and Writing Systems

Of notable historical significance is the similarity between the Thai and Lao writing systems and scripts, strongly indicating common roots and cultural relationships between the Thai and Lao.<sup>52</sup> The Thai King Ramkhamhaeng is credited with having developed the

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<sup>50</sup>Historical data compliments of Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand.

<sup>51</sup>Even though there were other Thai states in the general vicinity, such as *Lanna* and *Phayao*, the Thai take great pride in this victory at Sukhothai and consider it to be the genesis point of their nation. This is a continuing source of national pride.

<sup>52</sup>According to Dr. Cooper, the Mon-Khmer writing systems include Thai, Lao, Burmese (even though Burmese is in the Tibeto-Burmese group), Khmer, and various minority languages. They originated in the

original Thai script circa A.D. 1293.<sup>53</sup> However, in actuality it is an innovative adaptation of the older Mon and Khmer scripts, whose roots were the Indic-based Brahmi writing system,<sup>54</sup> brought over from India by Brahmin traders and merchants.<sup>55</sup> This further suggests that the Indianized Mon and Khmer inhabited the vicinity prior to the advent of the Thai and Lao, subsequently influencing their cultures and writing systems.

It is entirely reasonable to assume that the strong similarity between the two scripts shows that: (1) the Lao cohabited with their Thai cousins under Mon and Khmer rule and later separated around the Sukhothai period, taking what would become their version of script with them; (2) the Lao were under supervision of the Thai and broke free to establish Lan Chang, taking the writing system with them; or (3) the Lao, as a nearby related people, were influenced by the Thai, subsequently adopting their writing system.<sup>56</sup>

Both Sri Inthrahit and his son Ramkhamhaeng were warrior kings and extended their territories far and wide. By the early 1300s the Khmer were driven back towards Angkor, leaving Sukhothai to enjoy sovereign control over the entire Chao Phya River basin to the south, including the entire Malay Peninsula, and westward into Burma towards the Bay of Bengal. Sukhothai was referred to as "the land of plenty" by King Ramkhamhaeng. It is remembered for its material prosperity, its art forms and architecture, as well as for its religious significance and political achievements. In short, the Thai consider Sukhothai as being the dawn of their identity as a nation and a people.

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Grantha script, which was the southern form of the ancient Indian Brahmi writing system. The northern branch of this split, Devanagari, is the basis of many modern Indian alphabets. Mon and Khmer diverged first, then Burmese came from Mon. The earliest Thai/Lao scripts were derived in the latter part of the thirteenth century from cursive Khmer writing. Thai has changed somewhat over the centuries, while modern Lao has many similarities to the early Thai script. All of these writing systems share certain characteristics: spaces are not necessarily used to separate words, and vowels appear before, over, under, or following consonants. Alphabetical order is typically consonant-vowel-consonant, regardless of the letters' actual linear arrangement. Dr. Doug Cooper, Center for Research in Computational Linguistics, Bangkok, Thailand:.

<sup>53</sup>Nantana Ronnakiat. "The Thai Writing System." (1997). Accessed Aug. 20, 2005 from <http://thaiarc.tu.ac.th/thai/thaiwrt.htm>, 1.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*

## Isan Region Not Incorporated in the Sukhothai Kingdom

Ramkhanhaeng is said to have used his considerable power to transform Sukhothai from a localized state into a regional power. However, according to many historians, the Isan region does not appear to have ever been included in the old Sukhothai kingdom. This seems to indicate that Sukhothai never held jurisdiction over Isan or its inhabitants. Instead, small multi-ethnic fiefdom-like communities were scattered over the area.

### Lan Chang Kingdom—Forerunner to the Isan Region

Beginning in the thirteenth century, Sukhothai began to wane in power and influence as Mongols from the north enjoyed increased supremacy in the middle Mekong Valley region. This led to the eventual decline of Sukhothai and later the founding of the Lao Kingdom of Lan Chang. Towards the mid-fourteenth century, the Thai state of Ayutthaya located further south began to emerge in political and economic power, challenging and eventually superseding Sukhothai's weakened authority.<sup>57</sup>

After the decline of Sukhothai, two other kingdoms became prominent; the Thai or Siamese Kingdom of Ayutthaya, located on the Chao Phraya River, fifty miles north of present-day Bangkok, and the Lao Kingdom of Lan Chang—or Land of a Million Elephants—situated much further north on the Mekong River at Luang PraBang, Laos.

### Laotian and Khmer Kingdoms—Isan's Heritage

The first recorded history of Laos began in the mid-fourteenth century as the Kingdom of Lan Chang under the leadership of Fa Ngum,<sup>58</sup> a Khmer military officer from Angkor. Fa Ngum ruled from 1354 until 1373 from Luang Prabang, the first sovereign capital of Laos. The territory that became Laos had previously been ruled by the Khmers from Angkor, then by the Thais from Sukhothai.

King Fa Ngum declared Buddhism the de facto religion of the land. He also extended the Lan Chang kingdom to include all of present-day Laos as well as parts of what would

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<sup>57</sup>By the fifteenth century Sukhothai was incorporated into the Ayutthaya kingdom as a province. The focus of Thai history and politics now moved to the central plains of present-day Thailand, where Ayutthaya was establishing itself as a centralized state, its power outstripping all neighboring states.

<sup>58</sup>Pronounced *fah ngoom*.

become Northern Thailand. Fa Ngum later expanded Laotian influence and rule over the northern part of the Khmer empire which was originally held as a shared territory between the Khmer and the Lao. This area eventually become Northeast Thailand. Lan Chang maintained these approximate borders for another three centuries.<sup>59</sup>

### Decline and Fall of the Khmer Empire

By the close of the thirteenth century, the old Khmer empire of Angkor was drawing to a close, finally ending with its capture by King Uthong, founder of the Thai Kingdom of Ayutthaya. From then on, skirmishes with the Khmer occurred on a recurring basis with the Thai. To commemorate the final victory of the Thai over the Khmer, a mock battle is staged during the *Elephant Roundup Festival*, held annually in Isan's Surin province.

A subgroup of Northern Khmer who speak a dialect of Mon-Khmer still inhabit the lower Isan provinces bordering Cambodia. There are also pockets of Thai-Lao minorities within Cambodia, descendants of earlier immigrants or remnants of prisoners taken in the many skirmishes between the Khmer and the Thai over the centuries.

### Northeast Thailand Develops Its Own Identity

By the fourteenth century, the inhabitants of Isan began to build an affinity and socio-cultural identity with the Laotians, whose Kingdom of Lan Chang was growing and expanding. Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Laotian people had moved into the region in small groups. Initially the Lao settled in the northern Isan region, in the vicinity of Udon Thani and Nong Khai provinces directly south of Vientiane. Beginning in the early eighteenth century, Laotian migration was directed primarily into southern Isan from the Champasak area of Laos. From there, settlers spread deep into Isan via the Mun and Chee rivers.

Although Lao migration into the Isan region occurred in spurts and waves over several hundred years, the Dai-speaking Lao eventually populated the entire Northeast. The

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<sup>59</sup>In 1700 Laos broke up into three separate kingdom states: Luang Prabang in the north, Vientiane in the central portion, and Champasak in the South.

region south of the Mun River remained inhabited primarily by the Northern Khmer and various Mon-Khmer speaking minority groups.<sup>60</sup>

Ramathibodi was crowned monarch of the Ayutthaya kingdom in 1350, marking the beginning of the second recognized Thai kingdom, which lasted over a four-hundred-seventeen-year period. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the whole region underwent substantial change. Three decades after Ramkhamhaeng's death, Sukhothai was merged with Ayutthaya as the northern capital city. Constant strife characterized the Ayutthaya kingdom period because of a continuous quest to extend power and control in all directions, both westward towards Burma and eastward towards Laos, Isan and the defunct Khmer kingdom.

### 1500s and 1600s

Due to the jurisdictional void left in the Northeast after the demise of the Khmer kingdom, there was little to prevent the Lao culture and people from spreading throughout the Mekong valley region and out across Isan's Korat plateau. This expansion, in part, was a politically motivated attempt to raise Lan Chang to equal status with other major kingdom-states such as Lanna to the southwest and Ayutthaya to the south.

To strengthen Lan Chang's influence in the entire area, Prince Setthathirat—under the direction of his father, King Photisarath—occupied the throne of the Lanna kingdom, located in present-day Chiang Mai, Thailand, approximately 200 miles (360 kilometers) southwest of Luang Pra Bang, Lan Chang's capital city. By 1547, upon King Photisarath's death, both the Lanna and Lan Chang Kingdoms experienced increasing unrest, forcing Prince Setthathirat to rush back to Luang Pra Bang to maintain the Lan Chang kingdom, his central power base in the region.

The death of King Setthathirat of Lan Chang gave rise to problems of succession. The Burmese seized the opportunity, stepped in and deported the rulers of Lan Chang to Burma. As a result, Lan Chang was again plunged into turmoil, calmed by the ascension of King Surinyavongsa.

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<sup>60</sup>These Mon-Khmer speaking ethnic groups include the: Kui, So, Bruu, and Trii peoples.

King Surinyavongsa's rule marked a grand period in Lao history. A very popular monarch, he was skillful in delegating and sharing power among different factions. Although he enjoyed a reputation as fair-minded, he was capable of being extremely harsh, executing his only son for adultery.

After King Surinyavongsa's death, the country of Laos once again fell into disarray. By the early eighteenth century, the formerly prosperous kingdom of Lan Chang was divided into three separate states, not always on good terms with one another. Lan Chang eventually fell under Siamese rule.

### Isan Peasant Revolt

Near the end of the seventeenth century, Korat was the scene of a peasant revolt. A "Holy Man" by the name of Bun Khwang tried to liberate Isan from the Siamese and to make it independent. Assembling four thousand men, a hundred horses and almost as many elephants, he marched through the hills to Ayutthaya, to the west. He was intercepted and killed only sixty kilometers from his destination.

At that time, Ayutthaya's control did not extend beyond Korat. The revolt was conceivably more an expression of Lao expansion, having spread throughout the Northeast during the Lan Chang period. This was the first of a number of rebellions that would shake the Northeast periodically up to the twentieth century. These upheavals contributed to the general consensus among its inhabitants that the Isan region should not be part of Siam, as it was constantly oppressed and exploited by the central authorities.<sup>61</sup>

### 1700s to 1800s

Burmese forces had blockaded and attacked Ayutthaya in the late 1540s, albeit unsuccessfully. Other sporadic attempts followed. In 1767, the Burmese successfully attacked and sacked Ayutthaya, attempting to merge it with their kingdom before Siam recovered. General Taksin later regained power and established a new Siamese capital at Thonburi, on the west banks of the Chao Phraya River, across from present-day Bangkok. He then brought the former Ayutthaya kingdom under his control.

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<sup>61</sup>Rogers, 33–37.

Within three years Taksin was crowned Monarch. He then annexed the Cambodian cities of Battambang and Siem Riap. In the next decade he was also able to bring the Northern Kingdom of Lanna under his control, expelling the Burmese after heavy fighting. Thus Taksin was able to secure the borders of Siam as never before. Eventually, Taksin became mad and was killed. General Chaophraya Chakri, known as Rama I, took the throne as King of Siam, moving the palace location to the eastside of the Chao Phraya River when it remains today at Bangkok.

The last quarter of the eighteenth century was an important transition period for Isan. For the first time, Thai or Siamese authorities in Bangkok began to take a wider interest in the area. Until this time, provinces beyond Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat) and most of the Korat plateau were considered outer territories with no obligations to Bangkok, other than an annual tribute. By the time of Rama I's death in 1809, many of the Isan provinces had accepted an increase in central government control. This was achieved mainly by promising local rulers security and protection in return for tribute and the provision of manpower when required. The authorities allowed the rulers of these areas to use the title of Phraya and ranked them as governors.

Early in the reign of Rama III, a monarch not known for his diplomatic finesse, a crisis erupted in the tributary state of Vientiane.<sup>62</sup> The ruler there, Phraya Chao Anu, revolted against Rama III, feeling that he had not been given the honor he deserved by Siam. Acting on rumors that the British Royal Navy was about to bombard Bangkok, Anu mounted a three-pronged attack against Bangkok using the Northeastern city of Korat as a base. The rebellion was eventually subdued by the Siamese. In retaliation, the Lao capitol of Vientiane was completely razed and most of the remainder of the kingdom of Vientiane was brought

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<sup>62</sup>King Nang Klao or Rama III (1824–1851), the 3rd monarch of the Chakri Dynasty was not known for his diplomacy. In dealing with Cambodia and Laos, Siam came into conflict with Annam, or Vietnam, in Rama III's reign, though the Annamese Emperor Gialong, who founded a new dynasty, had sought and received the protection of Rama I. Cambodia recognized Rama I as her master and transferred the provinces of Battambang and Siemrap to him, but she learned more and more on Annam afterwards. Annam also granted asylum and support to a Laotian leader, Anuwon, who took up arms against Siam. Bitterly enraged with Cambodia for having adopted such a policy, Rama III sent in an army with the mission of clearing of the Annamese troops, thus causing a Thai-Annamese war to break out in 1833. The war dragged on for fourteen years and eventually peace ensued. Assumption University Department of Historical Studies, Thanapol Chadchaidee. "Essays on Thailand." (1994). Accessed Aug. 20, 2005 from <http://sunsite.au.ac.th/thailand/chakri/rama3.html>.

under Siamese rule, divided up into separate districts. Some forty new muang or districts were created, which directly or indirectly paid tribute to Bangkok. The destruction of Vientiane was accompanied by the forced migration of the population, transferring ethnic Lao into areas they had not previously occupied, including the central Chao Phraya river basin area.

### Early 1900s—The Monthon System and Rebellion

The next serious internal disorder occurred in 1901–1902 when rebellion caused a series of uprisings throughout the Northeast, involving virtually all the Northeastern provinces at that time. The revolt seems to have begun in French Laos in 1901 as a messianic movement, later moving across the Mekong into Thailand's Northeast Region.

Bizarre prophecies were circulated that gravel would turn into gold while silver and gold would become gravel. People claiming to be holy men were arrested on the grounds they were swindling people out of their money in exchange for protection against the prophesy.

The rebellion was essentially against administrative changes, i.e., the setting up of the *monthon* system ordered by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). The *monthon* system was opposed because people believed it would deprive them of their livelihood, also because the officials implementing it were corrupt and petty, and because some masqueraded as holy men.

In 1902 the rebellion spread quickly and bands of rebels attacked government representatives throughout the Northeast. However, these aggressive acts brought immediate reprisals. Their end marked the successful administrative incorporation of the Lao in the Northeast by the Siamese central government.

In 1912, the Siamese authorities described Isan as having "poverty of the soil" and "adverse climatic conditions," which rendered it unproductive. It was said to be of no redeeming value, containing no marketable timber and huge swamplands with defective drainage.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Rogers, 33–37.

This description has remained unchanged throughout the twentieth century. Isan is still the poorest region in the country, due to neglect and the admittedly limited efforts of generally indifferent successive Thai governments.

### POVERTY AND NEGLECT

Poverty and neglect became standard bywords for Isan. Even such important events as the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 were of little relevance to the population there, locked in the constant struggle to scratch a living from the soil. The *monthon* system of governing finally ended in Isan after 1932. As in other areas of Thailand, a new dawn of representative democracy was begun.

The harsh realities of life in Isan, the disparity between living standards there and in the other two-thirds of the country, and the apparently callous indifference of the central authorities, contributed to numerous incidents of defiance. Uprisings occurred in 1924, 1936 and 1959, but the scale of these disturbances was too small and limited to cause the government serious concern. The expansion and reform of the educational system became an important nationwide edict. In the Northeast, the reform included Central Thai and the Thai writing system, which became compulsory for the Isan, who had used the Lao language and script until that time. This brought its advantages, but was interpreted by some Northeasterners as another attempt to destroy their cultural identity.

### COMMUNIST ACTIVITY

The first communist activity in Thailand seems to have occurred in the late 1920s with a visit by Ho Chi Minh to the ethnic Vietnamese community living in the Northeast. With the advent of World War II, Prime Minister Phibun began harassing and arresting opponents of the government. Popular Northeastern politicians drew particular attention. Many were charged with plotting to secede from the rest of Thailand to become part of a communist-leaning Indochina. These were arrested and later shot "while attempting to escape," further aggravating the prevailing sense of alienation and oppression of Northeastern political leaders by the central government. Because of such actions by the central government, by the 1950s the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) was able to gain a greater foothold and support among Isan villagers.

In 1958, General (later Field Marshal) Sarit Thanarat took control of the central government. Sarit was born in Bangkok, but his maternal roots were Laotian, hence much of his early life was spent in Thailand's Northeastern Region. These cultural links to the Northeast were reflected in some of the development programs he sponsored later in his term. Under Sarit, leadership was provided by the Army and validated by the King. Upon his death, the prime-ministership passed to General Thanom Kittikachorn.

### PRESENT PERIOD

At this point of the saga, the stage had been set for the Isan people's upcoming emergence from their traditional agrarian-based economic roots into becoming migratory laborers, and part of Thailand's mainstream, market-based economy.

During the 1960s and early 1970s the United States engaged in a rapid build-up of forces aimed at halting North Vietnamese efforts to absorb South Vietnam. Strategic U.S. bases were established in the nearby Isan Region, enabling the United States Air Force to attack targets more directly. In exchange for permission to set up these bases, the U.S. guaranteed the independence of Thailand and greatly increased the level of its military assistance. This led to considerable improvement of the infrastructure in the Northeast in terms of road links for transportation. These employment opportunities for the Isan also led to direct contact with thousands of American servicemen and their Western ways and ideals, of which the impact on the people of Isan has yet to be fully realized.

### CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

Although many have attempted to give an extensive overview of early Southeast Asian history, experts agree that because of sparse and conflicting historical accounts over the centuries, our present understanding of the region remains sketchy at best. To paraphrase D. G. E. Hall, the genesis of the people and the region remain shrouded. Consequently, no one historical authority has been able to pin-point the origins and early interrelationships between the forerunners of today's Lao-Isan people and their Thai cousins.

Consequently, barring the discovery of any new substantiated evidence, the origins and early interactions between the Thai-Siamese progenitors and those of their Lao-speaking neighbors who settled the Isan region will likely remain vague. With that in mind, this

chapter has not been an attempt to improve on scholarly work that has already been done, which would likely prove similarly inconclusive. Rather, it is an endeavor to indicate and discuss the various possibilities of the origins of the Isan peoples, as well as their interrelationships with their neighbors, namely the Central Thai, the Khmer and the Lao.

### REVISIONIST HISTORY AND OTHER DISCREPANCIES

Most internationally recognized historians and socio-linguists trace the thread of the Thai and other Dai-speaking people's origins back to Yunnan province in southern China—having been forced southward during thirteenth-century Mongol raids. Some recent Thai historians, proud of their ethnicity and national tradition, prefer not to think of themselves as having been forced out of anywhere, and have proposed a revisionist approach that states their forefathers were always in Thailand. As proof, they point to the bronze age civilization unearthed at *Ban Chiang* in Udon province and the cliff paintings at *Pa Taem* in Ubon province, both of which are located in the Isan region.

Correspondingly, recent changes have taken place in the government owned and sanctioned Thai Tourism Authority's (TAT) official policy and attitude towards Isan. Previously, conspicuous by its absence, Isan has never received even a cursory mention in any of their travel literature. Now, realizing the tourism potential they were missing, the TAT is exploring innovative ways to profit on the Isan region, declaring 1998 "Amazing Isan," or the year to visit Isan. Moreover, they now assert in their promotional brochures and videos that Isan is "the true face of Thailand and the Thai people."<sup>64</sup>

This reversal in TAT policy lines up with the newly promoted notion by the historical revisionists that the Isan region is the origin of the Thai people. However, given the fact that area cultures promote respect for one's elders, it does not explain the pretentious attitude held by many Thai towards the people of present-day Isan and Laos.

In promoting this revisionist approach to Thai origins, many questions are raised. If the Thai ancestral line originated in the Isan region as advocates claim, why do the Thai not esteem their Isan cousins, who would also have been direct descendants of their claimed progenitors? Furthermore, if the Thai people originated in the Isan region, as claimed by

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<sup>64</sup>Held in a major five-star hotel in Khon Kaen, Northeastern Region, Thailand.

some revisionists, treating the Isan as they do contradicts their own cultural mores, which promotes honor and respect for one's own elders, ancestors and all things ancient.

Second, if the Thai ancestral line came from the Isan region, would they not have been under Khmer rule there as well, since (according to Khmer, Indian, and Chinese chronicles) the Khmer held suzerainty over the entire area, including Isan? Subsequently, if the Thai were such capable warriors, and if they were in Isan, why weren't they able to overthrow Khmer domination there, previous to the Sukhothai period?

Third, if the Thai ancestral line first appeared in the Isan region, why was Sukhothai's location westerly, far removed from Isan and in a direct southerly route downstream from Yunnan province, Southern China, which reinforces that this was likely their course of migration? Sukhothai generally would have been upstream from the Isan region if traversed by water, or across mountain ranges if traversed by land (see Appendix, map 1).

Fourth, if the Dai-speaking Thai ancestral line originated in the Isan region, why are there Dai-speaking peoples of a similar cultural and linguistic imprint living in Yunnan province in Southern China, hundreds of kilometers upstream on the Mekong River, who conceivably are the sibling-cousins of the Thai, Lao and Isan? Following this line of thinking, revisionists claim that the Thai migrated up into southern China, and not the other way around. This seems highly unlikely, since it would mean they would have been migrating upstream, as well as into the arms of Kublai Khan and his raiding Mongol hordes.

A more plausible explanation for the presence of Dai-speaking Thai, Lao, Isan and related minority sub-groups in present-day Thailand and Laos, is that the predecessors of these interrelated groups migrated in a general southerly direction down the Mekong River from China's Yunnan province, continuing down tributaries, across headwaters, following more-easily traversed river valleys and overland routes to eventually settle in their present-day locations in Thailand and Laos.

Luang Pra Bang, capital of the earliest Laotian kingdom of Lan Chang,<sup>65</sup> is located directly on the Mekong River near the Ohn River; whereas Sukhothai, celebrated as the Thai's first kingdom-state, is located further southwest between the Yom and Nan Rivers.

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<sup>65</sup>Meaning "kingdom of a million elephants."

Both of these migration routes are in a direct downstream line on major rivers from China's Yunnan province, a few hundred miles to the north (see Appendix, map 1).

### DICHOTOMOUS RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE THAI AND ISAN

Despite when and how the various migrations might have occurred, available evidence suggests that early Dai-speaking settlers of the Isan region (along with Khmer-speaking minority groups from Angkor) probably never came under the direct dominion of the burgeoning Sukhothai kingdom. Instead, they remained small and provincial despite Sukhothai's campaign for territorial expansion during the reign of Ramkhamhaeng and afterwards. If this hypothesis is accurate, it establishes an important precedent, which forms the standard for Thai and Lao-Isan relationships throughout their parallel histories.

Even though the Isan region later became a part of Thai holdings through Ayutthaya's skirmishes with various Lao kingdom-states; in the minds of the Thai, Isan settlers were always considered outsiders, never having been part of the original Sukhothai kingdom.

The Thai government's biased policies, cronyism and favoritism is readily observable, likely a holdover from the longstanding Thai-Lao dichotomy. Its many assistance and development programs have long supported other more-prosperous regions of the country, while failing to adequately address the impoverished living conditions of the citizens in the Isan region. This began to change as democracy developed. The Isan populace became more influential as a voting bloc, backing and electing local individuals as their own parliamentary representatives.<sup>66</sup>

In conclusion, without the stop-gap measures taken during the Vietnam War to stem the spreading communist infiltration—covered in Chapter Three—Isan would arguably still remain neglected and underdeveloped. This, to the detriment of national harmony and political unity, as well as the wellbeing of the people of the Isan Region of Thailand.

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<sup>66</sup>To be fair, there are many government employees and civil servants not of Isan heritage who have selflessly invested their lives towards the betterment of the Isan people.

## CHAPTER 3

### EXPLORING CATALYSTS FOR SOCIO- ECONOMIC CHANGE (1960 ONWARD)

#### FOREWORD

Traditionally, the Isan region of Thailand was an area of very limited opportunity for economic advancement and personal betterment. The 1960s witnessed the dawning of a new era that brought new-found freedom and needed economic change for the village-dwelling Isan people of rural Northeast Thailand. In this section, catalysts for socio-economic change in Northeast Thailand will be explored, along with its origins, causes and effects.

The people of the Isan region numbered approximately ten to twelve million during the 1960s—roughly one third of Thailand's then thirty-five million population. In later decades they began to rise from their impoverished condition to gain a place of recognition in Thai society as the country's emerging prime labor source. As such, the Isan are also becoming a formidable political voting block to be catered to and reckoned with as democracy gains a greater foothold in the land.

Once the opportunity for economic advancement and personal betterment was in place, the ongoing development process was attributable mainly to the efforts of the Northeastern Thai people themselves. However, various external factors combined in synergistic fashion to provide a suitable environment in which the process could more-easily occur. This brought the Isan people a sense of personal initiative and nourished their desire to arise and advance.

This chapter endeavors to explore the various events, circumstances, and conditions, along with their underlying origins and causes, that affected one of the largest peasant self-betterment movements in Thai history as it continues into the third millennium. Several events had a major supportive role (either directly or indirectly) in contributing to the development process as the Northeastern Thai people seized various opportunities while

facing adverse circumstances, setting out on the journey to improve their own socio-economic condition.

## THE REGION AND THE PEOPLE— GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

### The Land

The Northeastern Thai Region, or Isan, is the largest and most populous region in the country, comprising a continual 1:3 population aspect ratio, or approximately one-third of the nation's entire population. Isan occupies a landmass of 65,000 square miles (nearly 171,000 square kilometers), roughly one-third of Thailand's total-area landmass.<sup>67</sup>

Isan is positioned along the borders of Laos and Cambodia. Located in the geographic area known as the Korat Plateau, it derives its name from the ancient Khmer settlement of Korat, the predecessor of the provincial capital city, Nakhon Ratchasima, located approximately 130 miles northeast of Bangkok.

By the year 2000 Isan comprised nineteen provinces. Due to regional favoritism and cronyism, the impoverished living conditions in Isan had been neglected by the central government for many decades as funds were channeled into less-needy regions. Because of this, the Northeast was extremely poor and under-developed in comparison with Thailand's Northern, Central and Southern regions.

So backward and deplorable were living conditions in the Isan region that Thai government officials considered an appointment there somewhat like being banished to Siberia. In short, it signified the stagnation of their careers, as if they were being reprimanded, discarded or snubbed.

Agriculturally, much of the land is typically flood-prone and often difficult to cultivate and maintain. Its semi-fertile soil has a high rate of acidity and is nutrient-depleted from over-use and under-replenishment. Frequently suffering from unpredictable floods during the rainy season, the dry season in November through January brings clouds of dust that blanket the landscape. Much of Isan's lowlands and lower valley slopes are impractical

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<sup>67</sup>Bunge and Reiehart, 3–47.

for wet-rice and other forms of agriculture, remaining unused due to rainy-season flooding. Hence, only a small area of the potential land area is actually utilized for farming.<sup>68</sup>

### The Mekong River

The term *Mae Nam Kong* (or its shortened form *Mekong*) means “*Mother of Waters*” in the Thai, Isan and Lao languages. The Mekong starts in Tibet and empties into the South China Sea, 2,800 miles away. As it wends southeastward, the Mekong forms the border between northeastern Thailand and Laos for a distance of approximately 600 miles. As such, the Mekong also serves as the main watershed for the entire Northeastern region (or Korat Plateau). Its inland tributaries such as the Moon, Chi, Song Khram and Seka, all drain into the Mekong River (see Appendix, map 1).

### The Climate

The climate in the Northeast is distinct from other regions of the country. This is partly because of the mountain ranges that prevent the southwesterly monsoons from reaching the area. Nevertheless, the Northeast still receives rainfall from the many thunderstorms that blanket the area, originating in the South China Sea. The amount of rainfall varies from section to section, causing agricultural productivity to be unpredictable. The region is typically hot and dry in the summer, although cold northeasterly winds from Siberia and China chill the area during the cold season.<sup>69</sup>

Among the crops normally planted in Isan are: wet-land glutinous rice (the staple food of the area), field and regular rice, along with sugar cane, cassava root (tapioca), tobacco, cotton, watermelons and other various locally-consumed items. As pastoral farmers, Northeastern Thai villagers raise domesticated animals (either for use or consumption) such as water buffalo, oxen, pigs, chickens and ducks.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup>The Library of Congress, “A Country Study: Thailand,” 1.

<sup>70</sup>Karnchanapee, *Thai Politics*, 7–8, 84.

## REGIONAL INEQUITIES OBSERVED BY OUTSIDERS

As validation that the people of Northeast Thailand are an oppressed and neglected people, one expatriate visitor to the region, Edward W. Mill, observed disparities between the Northeast and other regions of Thailand. He wrote in 1970:

. . . One of the chief subjects of concern for the Thai government in recent years has been the economic and social disparities between the different regions of the country. The Northeastern region, traditionally an area of less economic opportunity, has received special focus. Where the per-capita income for the Central region is around \$240 annually, for the Northeast it is only \$70 per annum. Soil and water conditions, poor communications, and lack of adequate roads have contributed to this predicament.<sup>71</sup>

Along with these inequities, Mill also pointed out other areas of concern and corresponding development programs, writing that:

. . . the government has organized a vast array of programs designed to help the region. A comprehensive regional development plan, known as the National Economic Development Board (NEBD), has been worked out to coordinate efforts and achieve goals in this area. Working with the support of the United States Operations Mission (USOM), the Thai government is carrying out significant programs in rural development, road building, communications improvements, and education, as well as expanding the range of government services for the Northeast. [ . . . ] Two years ago (1968) much of this governmental activity seemed to be largely on paper. Today, there is concrete evidence of increasing accomplishment [ . . . ] long talks with community development workers operating at grass-roots levels revealed a new sense of confidence and dedication to the tasks at hand.<sup>72</sup>

Concerning the association between the national economy and national defense, Mill went on to say that the Thai government is taking steps to ready itself for national defense emergencies. In doing so, it is linking economic stability and military readiness, with emphasis on economic stability.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Edward W. Mill, "Thailand Looks to the Future," *Le Democrate* (Bangkok), Mar. 23, 1970), 2.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup>Mill, 4.

## Communist Threats and Government Reaction

At the time Mill penned his article, communist subversion was on the rise throughout many remote areas of Thailand's Isan Region. Communist subversive elements sought to gain inroads by playing off of socio-economic disparities. Villagers were indoctrinated into the cause, influenced by promises to aright the impoverished conditions. Those who did not acquiesce or assist were persuaded by various means.<sup>74</sup>

One can only speculate as to the actual underlying motives for the Thai Government's sudden heightened interest in the welfare of the Isan villagers, and in initiating development programs throughout the region. It appears that the motivation to step in and help was done more out of concern for national security purposes, in the face of Communist subversion, than for the rural Isan people's welfare as fellow-citizens. Even so, whatever the underlying motivational factor, various rural development programs were initiated by the Thai government. These were designed to diminish poverty in the Northeast, and in so doing, to win the Isan back.

## Political-Related Activity in the Northeast

The first communist-related activity in Thailand appears to have occurred in the late 1920s with a visit by Ho Chi Minh to the emigrant Vietnamese, living in Thailand's Northeast region. By World War II, because of political phobia, anyone suspected of opposing the Thai Central Government found themselves marked and under suspicion. Some popular Northeastern Thai politicians were arrested, charged with plotting a communist separatist movement, and were later killed "while attempting to escape" from Thai authorities. This action further aggravated Isan's feelings of alienation from the central government. Later, in the 1950s, continued repression of Northeastern political leaders opened an opportunity for the fledgling Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) to extend its support-base further into remote Isan villages.

Meanwhile, the prevailing government policy was to dismiss Northeast Thailand as an agriculturally-poor and economically-depressed area about which little could be done in

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<sup>74</sup>Communist subversive activities abound in remote areas of Northeast Thailand. See U.S. Department of State. "Foreign Relations, 1964-1968." (n.d.). Accessed Aug. 20, 2005 from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/johnsonlb/vii/21897.htm>, 1.

the way of assistance. Successive governments poured the nation's resources into developing Bangkok and other "more promising" areas, such as Thailand's Southern Region. The people of Isan were left to fend for themselves as best they could in their backward and impoverished state.

### Turning of the Tide

Ironically, political events beyond the Thai government's control concerning one of Thailand's arch rivals, Vietnam, soon changed all this with the advent of the Vietnam War, also known as the Indo-Chin conflict. The war forced the central Thai government to implement urgent rural development programs in a concentrated effort to draw the Isan people back into the fold, as they were being tempted and wooed by Communist propaganda and subversive activity.

This seems to be a typical example of the Thai government's normal *modus operandi* when faced with external threats and internal discontent where its own citizens had suffered neglect. Throughout recent history, when national threats have arisen, the Thai government, in typical non-confrontational fashion, has initiated internal appeasement policies, along with compromise and deal-making with whoever posed the greatest threat or held the most power at the time. This often included launching modernization programs to appeal to dissenters and suppress internal discontent.

For example, in the 1850s, when Burma and Malaysia were occupied by the British and Indochina by the French, King Mongkut (Rama IV) faced the threat of foreign domination. While making diplomatic gestures towards Siam's potential colonizers, Mongkut also launched conciliatory internal modernization efforts in an attempt to appease and squelch any potential internal discontent, previously deemed unimportant. Mongkut was credited with political prowess and internal modernization efforts, but the question poses itself, would he have been so quick to affect internal change if there was no potential external threat forcing the issue. A century later, the onset of World War II found Siamese authorities accommodating Japanese occupational forces, and even giving mouth service to 'declaring war' on the U.S. and Allied Forces, in hopes of appeasing the Japanese and insuring lenient treatment.

## The Vietnam War Period and Foreign Investment

Beginning in the 1960s, when the Thai government began to face internal instability due to the imposing threat of Communism at their borders, they made a concessionary arrangement with the United States. The U.S. was engaged in a build-up of forces in the Southeast Asian arena, aimed at halting North Vietnamese Communist aggression towards South Vietnam. In conjunction with U.S. containment efforts, Thailand allowed the U.S. to establish Air Bases in strategic areas in Isan in exchange for aid and assistance<sup>75</sup> (see Appendix, map 2).

In exchange for permission to set up air bases in Thailand's northeastern region, the U.S. guaranteed Thailand's safety from external aggression, while increasing its level of military and developmental assistance programs. This arrangement was mutually beneficial in that it enabled the U.S. to attack strategic enemy targets only minutes away from their new forward bases in Thailand. Permitting the USAF bases in the Isan Region afforded numerous benefits for Thailand, and the Isan region in particular. These included rural development assistance and modernization of the transportation and communication infrastructure in the Isan area, all done at U.S. expense. One major improvement was the construction of the Friendship Highway that spanned the entire region, to be discussed below.

### U.S. Air Force Bases in Northeast Thailand

The advent of the Vietnam War in the early 1960s brought with it an era of transition and socio-economic change, as well as a unique opportunity for the people of Isan. Considered hopelessly ignorant, inferior and an embarrassment to their fellow countrymen, the Isan were provided new employment opportunities with the advent of the Vietnam War. These opportunities improved their low standard of living and eventually their position in Thai society.

This was the beginning of a protracted journey for the formerly impoverished Isan people, who were in a redefinition process from their subsistence-level agricultural roots to achieving the position of the emerging labor force of the country. However, the process took approximately three decades before the Isan experienced any real measure of national

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<sup>75</sup>USAF bases in Thailand's Northeast were built in Korat, Nakon Panom, Udon, and Ubon provinces.

awareness or recognition of worth. Ironically, for all the suffering and turmoil the Vietnam War inflicted on the Indo-Chinese region,<sup>76</sup> it brought benefits for the rural inhabitants of Thailand's Isan region.

The resultant opportunities bettered their circumstances by providing, for the first time, fair-paying jobs in the U.S. Air Force forward bombing bases. These bases were situated at four locations around the Isan area, as well as one location in Central Thailand and another in Thailand's eastern seacoast region (see Appendix, map 2).

Due to the Vietnam War and the resultant U.S. presence in Northeast Thailand, thousands of jobs were created within the five air bases spread throughout the region. Even though these were mostly low-skilled labor jobs, they were a godsend for the Isan people.

Other employment opportunities became available in the many and varied local businesses that sprung up to cater to the U.S. servicemen. Along with the benefits, there were also problems. Some citizens complained of the negative conduct of many of the GI's. However, most merchants in adjacent cities and communities appreciated the Vietnam War days because of the economic boost it brought, so they were more than willing to overlook any unpleasantries.

In early 1969, when troop withdrawals began, there were approximately 50,000 American servicemen stationed in Thailand: thirty-six thousand in the Air Force, twelve thousand in the Army, along with approximately one thousand military advisors. The bases were all abandoned by 1975 at the close of the War, and were handed over to the Thai military.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

<sup>77</sup>The Thai-Lao-Cambodia Brotherhood. "The Thailand [USAF] Bases." (1998). Accessed Aug. 20, 2005 from <http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org/bases.htm>, 1–12.

## CHAPTER 4

### DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS AND FOREIGN AID

The first major Thai government improvement programs specifically designed for the Northeast came during 1961–1962, when the government proclaimed a five-year plan for the development of the region with the following objectives:<sup>78</sup>

1. Improve water control and supply.
2. Improve highway and communication systems.
3. Assist villages in increasing production and marketing.
4. Provide an environment for regional industrial development, including bringing electric power to rural areas.
5. Encourage private industrial and commercial development.
6. Promote community development, educational facilities, and public health programs at the local level.<sup>79</sup>

This five-year development plan, although not the Thai government's first effort to deal with the problems of the Northeast, was the first government-sponsored plan designed and implemented specifically for the Isan region and not part of some larger national development scheme. When the plan was first made public, the government announced that it would be spending three hundred million Baht over the next five years (1962 through 1966). A large part of the money to finance such an undertaking was to come from United States aid grants.<sup>80</sup>

After the five-year development plan was first published in 1961, a Northeastern committee in the National Economic Development Board of the Prime Minister's office was given charge of supervising, coordinating, and carrying out research in the Northeast region

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<sup>78</sup>Karnchanapee, *Thai Politics*, 15–16.

<sup>79</sup>Office of the Prime Minister, Committee on Development of the Northeast, *Thailand* (Bangkok: Office of the Prime Minister, 1961), 1.

<sup>80</sup>Karnchanapee, *Thai Politics*, 16.

in order to coordinate the plan with existing conditions. The Ministry of National Development was given responsibility to coordinate the program. The United States Operations Mission to Thailand (USOM, a part of USAID) devoted a large share of its resources to assisting the various Thai governmental agencies working on the Northeastern development plans. Unfortunately, the implementation of the Thai government's rural aid program was divided between a number of bureaucratic agencies, departments, and ministries.

## VARIOUS RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

### Road Building and Other Development Programs

Doubtless one of the greatest boons to Northeastern development was the inter-linking system of U.S.-built Friendship Highways or *Tanon Mitraphap* that dissected the region. Many of these routes, previously semi-improved gravel roadways linking province and district centers, were replaced by heavy-duty blacktop two-lane highways, constructed by U.S. Construction Battalion engineers. They formed a vital overland supply link between the deep-water Naval port at Satahip Bay on the southeast tip of the Gulf of Thailand and the various USAF forward bombing and fighter reconnaissance bases located throughout the Northeast Region (see Appendix, map 2).

The Friendship Highway system, both trunk-line and branches, continues to be the main commercial transportation route in and out of the Northeast, linking it with Bangkok and neighboring regions. It has been maintained and upgraded to four-lane along many heavily traveled or strategic sections.

Other lesser road building and surface-improvement programs were initiated by the Thais as a means of promoting rural, economic, and communication development, as well as for internal and national security reasons. Since Communist subversion tactics and activities depended heavily on the lack of roads into isolated remote regions, road building programs promoted government allegiance and helped thwart the Communist's game plan. This interdiction measure also helped to make it easier to deter further communist infiltration. Networks of new roads were constructed to link isolated villages with main highways. These

road systems provided easier access to Bangkok, where rural dwellers would eventually wend their way seeking better paying employment opportunities.<sup>81</sup>

### Health, Medical, Welfare and Other Assistance Programs

Along with the advent of better roads came expanded public health, as well as welfare and educational programs in Isan's hinterlands. To assist in getting these programs initiated, local provincial officials were given greater autonomy and authority to coordinate and execute strategies to bring rural development activities down to a grassroots level. They were also provided with additional staff as well as designated funding for needed equipment. One of the means used to implement these programs was the MDU, or Mobile Rural Development Units.<sup>82</sup>

### Mobile Rural Development Units (MDU)

The Mobile Rural Development program was established to meet immediate village needs through programs in the fields of health, education, public works, as well as various forms of community development.<sup>83</sup> These mobile medical teams, staffed by Thai medical personnel and in cooperation with the Accelerated Rural Development Program (ARD), treated about one million persons in the Northeast over the period they were implemented. The United States also assisted the rural health training programs financially, graduating about one thousand field workers each year. In addition, U.S. assistance was also given for family-oriented nutrition and health programs, including promoting continued research and natal and child-rearing guidance to four million women by 1970.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup>The importance of this will be seen later as rural Northeasterners flood to Bangkok in cyclic migratory patterns to find work.

<sup>82</sup>Karnchanapee, *Thai Politics*, 12.

<sup>83</sup>Daniel Wit, *Thailand: Another Vietnam?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 175.

<sup>84</sup>William H. Itoh, "Letter From Bangkok." *SAIS Review* 18, no. 2 (Summer-Fall 1998): 135–151. Accessed Aug. 20, 2005 from [http://muse.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/access.cgi?url=/journals/sais\\_review/v018/18.2itoh.html&session=91978876](http://muse.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/access.cgi?url=/journals/sais_review/v018/18.2itoh.html&session=91978876).

## DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

In the mid-1960s, the Thai government began exploring more ways to help develop the Northeast and to better secure the region against the Communist threat, a menace that threatened not only the Northeast, but the nation as a whole. Among other things, the Accelerated Rural Development Program (ARD) was instituted in 1964 to help deter further Communist encroachment and subversive activity. The primary objectives of the ARD plan for the Northeast were:

1. Improve the quality of life and raise living standards.
2. Mobilize the people into action by encouraging and promoting self-motivation and personal enterprise.
3. Increase local-area income at a prescribed rate of growth.
4. Strengthen allegiances with Bangkok (central government) and the rest of the country as a whole.
5. Utilize natural resources in the process.

Program efforts were concentrated in the six most needy of the then sixteen Northeast provinces of central Isan, a part of the Lower Mekong Basin area (see Appendix, map 2). These were important and necessary goals, in light of the deep inroads Communism had made into the various rural villages and districts by that time.

In accordance with the ARD program, the Thai and American governments cooperated in providing funds, personnel, and equipment for the initiation and completion of the various projects, which were designed to bring tangible improvement to the area. Provincial governors were authorized to make decisions, allocate funds, and oversee follow-through. This was done in accordance with the wishes of the rural Northeasterners, and with the cooperation of regional officials. Consequently, the ARD program was relatively productive, being free of the delays and entanglements associated with the central bureaucracy.<sup>85</sup>

Nonetheless, many bureaucratic-minded officials involved in the programs were not without their personal biases, showing favoritism and a perfunctory interest, rather than actual concern for the people. This indifferent demeanor was exhibited on the provincial and

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<sup>85</sup>Wit, 175–185.

district levels by officials who were more committed to furthering their own careers than improving the plight of the locals.

Also, because regional favoritism continually plagued the central government, ARD did not do as well as expected in addressing the inequities between the regions and improving the quality of life of the rural Northeasterner, as was originally hoped.<sup>86</sup>

In rural assistance projects, timing was an essential element. This was another major problem facing government agencies involved in rural development, because financial aid was slow in coming, due to bureaucratic red tape. Therefore, it was rarely possible for the government agencies involved to provide assistance, funds or services on schedule, or in time to meet the need.<sup>87</sup>

### THE ROLE OF THE THAI MILITARY

In addition to the Mobile Development Units, the Thai military also was involved in the village-level development programs. These units, composed of military personnel, doctors, government agents and an occasional American observer or participant, went into villages in selected areas. Medical treatment was given, economic development workshops were held, along with lectures about the destructive objectives of Communism, combined with the government's wishes for their wellbeing. These special units were usually located in the most sensitive areas of the Northeast.

### Programs to Improve Communications

In addition to the Mobile Rural Development Units (MDUs), mobile information teams and new radio stations emphasized the virtues of an independent Thailand and the serious nature of the Communist threat. Buddhist monks also helped by traveling from village to village, teaching the villagers about Buddhist doctrines and current events.<sup>88</sup>

To insure Isan villager loyalty while implementing economic improvement programs, the Thai government realized it was necessary to increase communication. To accomplish this, they built radio and television stations in the key Northeastern provinces of Khon Kaen,

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<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup>Karnchanapee, *Thai Politics*, 11–14, 73.

<sup>88</sup>Wit, 175–185.

Ubon, Udorn, Sakon Nakhon, and Khorat to insure a greater sense of belonging for the Northeast populace. The United States helped fund this project, creating a powerful new radio station to cover the whole area, called "Radio Free Asia." Conventional approaches promoting local education and administrative systems also were implemented.<sup>89</sup>

By the early-to-mid 1970s, most villages were becoming more aware of the reality of Communist threats to their wellbeing. Previously, many showed a mere perfunctory concern, feeling their lives would be the same, no matter who was at the helm of the government.<sup>90</sup>

Most local radio stations were (and still are) owned and operated by various branches of the Thai military. Radio has been the media of choice for most villagers, and every household owns at least one or two inexpensive battery-powered portable AM radios. Since electricity (and with it television) was slow in coming to most village areas not located along a main thoroughfare, radio was the main link to the outside world. They could enjoy it both while in their fields or in their villages.<sup>91</sup>

Each morning and evening the Thai National Anthem was played on the air, followed by the official Thai national news, relayed from Bangkok. This continues to be a favorite of all who want to keep abreast of current national and international news events and economic forecasts. Whenever there was a coup d'état in Bangkok, every available radio would be tuned in to hear the "official" version of events. Now that electricity has been brought into the villages, and with it television, TV news broadcasts are replacing radio news.

In addition to the Thai national news, each province had its own local radio personality, akin to an Isan "Paul Harvey," adept at putting a countrified spin on special-interest stories and events, news and local issues. This provided locals and villagers with a further sense of belonging. Thai soap operas, dubbed "putrid plays" in the vernacular, usually filled the mid-morning and mid-afternoon time slots. Write-in music request shows filled in the interim period. Local DJs read letters over the air and played requests, bringing a further

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<sup>89</sup>Charles F. Keyes, *Isan: Regionalism in Northeast Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 56–58.

<sup>90</sup>Information gained by research and personal interaction between the author and villagers while living in Ban Na Nai, a remote village in the Tha-U-Then district of Nakhon Phanom province (1974–1980).

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*

sense of inter-village and inter-district social unity and camaraderie for the younger generation.<sup>92</sup>

### Agricultural Improvement Programs

Thailand is divided into four major regions: the Central, North, South and Northeast. The main geographical feature of the Northeast region is an expansive plateau, which rises approximately 330 meters (1,000 feet) above the Central plains region. This is called the Korat plateau and covers about one third of the country. Droughts in the dry season and floods in the wet season, being a normal occurrence in many areas of the plateau, are the underlying cause of systemic abject poverty.<sup>93</sup>

Irrigation and flood control projects on the Mekong River and its area tributaries have been implemented in an attempt to bring a better quality of life and alleviate poverty due to poor agricultural conditions in the region. To accomplish this goal, agricultural programs were initiated, designed to assist and enable farmers to shift from subsistence level rice cultivation to other crops better suited to regional soil and water conditions.<sup>94</sup>

### EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS

During Edward W. Mill's visit to Thailand's northeastern region, he observed some key educational disparities between the Northeast and other regions of the country. He wrote in 1970:

. . . education [in the Northeast] has been only minimal. It has been estimated that only 4.4% of the children of the high school age [attend high] school; the majority of children spend not more than four years in village schools. This economic and social imbalance has made the region a prime target for Communist infiltration and propaganda.<sup>95</sup>

The Thais, along with their Isan counterparts, increasingly consider education to be an important element in social and economic development. The rate of literacy reported averages 70 percent, but the standards for education are not uniformly high. Although many

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<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup>Bunge and Reiehart, 3–47.

<sup>94</sup>Karnchanapee, *Thai Politics*, 23–27. <sup>95</sup>Mill,

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schools exist, teacher training is perhaps one of the most important long-range objectives of the education program in Thailand.

Regarding the overall quality of education in Thailand's northeastern region, socio-cultural anthropologist Charles F. Keyes, in his work *Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand*, made observations concerning teachers stationed in the rural district villages in Maha Salakhm province, where he was doing research. He noted that teachers seemed far more interested in their own career advancement, than in the educational and social wellbeing of the Isan children laid to their charge.<sup>96</sup>

In addressing this lethargic condition, the Thai government reduced central control over education to encourage local school officials to exercise greater personal initiative. This was in recognition of the fact that attitudes toward education in the Northeast remained deeply rooted in traditional socio-cultural patterns and mindsets. Educational goals could be better met when local school officials were given more freedom and greater responsibility.

In 1964 the *University of the Northeast* was established on the outskirts of Khon Kaen province's provincial capital, considered the "gate-way" to the region. It later became known as Khon Kaen University (KKU) by royal decree. As part of a decentralization plan for higher education, this localized university-level research center provided inhabitants of Thailand's northeastern provinces with a sense of ownership, while lessening their dependence on Bangkok's institutes of higher education.<sup>97</sup>

Khon Kaen University offered quality agricultural and vocational training for qualified young people from the Northeast provinces, along with Engineering, Sciences and the Arts. As it grew, other schools were added, offering graduate and post graduate degrees in fields such as Medicine and Health, the Humanities, Veterinary Medicine, Computer Sciences, etc.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>Keyes, 86.

<sup>97</sup>Although there and now a myriad of universities and colleges establishing branch campuses throughout the Northeast, Khon Kaen University, located in Isan's Khon Kaen Province, is the oldest, most well-established institute of higher learning in Northeast Thailand. It is also very modern and highly regarded education-wise, as well as being dedicated to the education of the Northeastern Thai (Isan). Khon Kaen University. "Home Page." (2003). Accessed Aug. 20, 2005 from <http://www.kku.ac.th/eng1/>.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*

Although particularly related to the Northeastern community and its specific needs, the university has become internationally-recognized for quality higher education. Its student body is drawn from within the country and beyond. Its agricultural research programs have helped to provide a better way of life for the rural populace throughout the Northeast.<sup>99</sup> Hybrid strains of higher-yielding and more flavorsome glutinous (sticky) rice have also been developed.

In addition to educational developments at the university level, the government initiated localized district-level vocational training programs for village youth, who had completed primary school. Three-month occupational training was offered in vocations such as tailoring, dressmaking, barbering, hairdressing, as well as various industrial and construction-related skills, etc.

## EXPANDING THE RANGE OF GOVERNMENT SERVICES

### Localized Hydroelectric Power and Irrigation Programs

Thailand's National Economic Development Board produced the country's first economic development plan during the 1960s. It was an extensive six-year program for the period 1961–1966, and was to be implemented in two stages. Subsequently, a second plan was created for the period 1967–1971.

The Thai government, again using American aid funds, began the construction of irrigation and multi-purpose dams as part of a large international program whose goal was the eventual harnessing of the power of the Mekong River and its tributaries. This was a joint undertaking under the auspices of an association called the Mekong River Project, of which Thailand was a member. Two of the most important hydroelectric dams constructed in Northeast Thailand at the time were: (1) the multi-purpose Nam Pong Project in Khon Kaen province—expected to provide both water control and electrical power for provinces of the region, and (2) the Lam Pao Project in Kalasin province.

On March 14, 1966, the present King of Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej, opened the Nam-Pong dam project, some fifty kilometers to the north of Khon Kaen. Electricity from the

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<sup>99</sup>Karnchanapee, *Thai Politics*, 20–21.

power plant soon began supplying several provinces in the Northeast. By the end of August 1968, the Nam Pong (renamed the Ubon Ratana Hydroelectric Power Station) was supplying electricity to Vientiane and to the Nam-Ngum dam-site in Laos. When the Nam-Ngum project in Laos was completed, Laos returned the favor by supplying electricity to Thailand.<sup>100</sup>

It was hoped that this plan would raise the living standards for the Northeastern Thai by mobilizing and utilizing local natural resources to help achieve an accelerated rate of economic growth.<sup>101</sup>

### Mekong River Project: Thailand's Participation

Later, in the mid-1960s, the Mekong River Project was established. The Project sought ways to develop water resources in the Lower Mekong Basin region of Southeast Asia (including mainstream and tributaries) by converting it into electrical power by means of new hydroelectric generating facilities. This, along with other economic-related development undertakings, was designed to benefit all dwellers of the general Lower Mekong Basin, including those of the Isan region.

A total of thirty-four Mekong River tributaries were surveyed. The first of the Mekong Committee-sponsored tributary projects to be completed was the Nam Phung in Sakhon Nakhon province, Northeast Thailand. It was opened by King Bhumibol Adulyadej on November 14, 1965. Work toward achieving the objective of generating electricity covered a wide range of activities: definition of the overall plan, investigation, construction, cataloging components, financing, and management of individual projects, which made up the Mekong River Project.<sup>102</sup> The Mekong Committee was formed to solve and overcome whatever problems might occur inherent with an international river development project.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>Karnchanapee, *Thai Politics*, 29; "Thailand: Another Vietnam?" *New York Times*, Dec. 17, 1968, 2.

<sup>101</sup>Wit, 175–185.

<sup>102</sup>United Nations Technical Assistance Mission, headed by Lt. General Raymond Wheeler, Program of Studies and Investigations for Comprehensive Development, Lower Mekong Basin (TAA/AFE/3, Jan. 1968). Thai National Mekong Committee, Mekong River Commission. "The Story of Mekong Cooperation: 1957– 2002." (n.d.). Accessed Aug. 20, 2005 from [http://www.mrcmekong.org/about\\_mekong/history.htm](http://www.mrcmekong.org/about_mekong/history.htm), 1–3.

<sup>103</sup>For more details, see Mekong Committee, *Annual Report 1965*. (Mar. 1966). (United Nations Document C/CN.11/714 (E/Cn.11/WRD/MKG/L.159, Article IV, Committee for the Coordination of

The Mekong River water development project benefited Thailand as a member of the Mekong Committee and the Northeast in particular, with two dams built in the Northeast Region. Thailand also benefited from the construction of the first mainstream project spanning the banks of the Mekong between Thailand and Laos, connecting Nong Khai province with Vientiane, Laos. Through these combined efforts, hydroelectric power generated by the Nam-Ngum dam-site facilities in Laos is sent across the Mekong on multiple sets of hi-tension lines, servicing the northeast region as well as other parts of Thailand. (More about this subject later under Industry.)

### Agriculturally-Based Localized Industry

Northeast Thailand, although slow to develop, has begun to generate more localized industry, coming first in the form of agricultural-oriented enterprises.

Being essentially an agrarian-oriented region, rice production is a major source of income for the Isan people. Small-scale rice mills are a popular form of locally-owned enterprise on the village-level. Most of these are small, diesel-powered units that do custom milling for the locals. Large-scale commercial rice mills are common in the better-irrigated parts of the provinces where rice is grown for market. The larger mills provide both custom milling and are collection points for rice exporters in Bangkok.<sup>104</sup>

Cassava and sugar cane processing is becoming another important industry. Large mills and processing centers slice and dry the cassava before making feed pellets as well as processing sugar cane for shipment. A whole range of secondary, light industry and commercial establishments have grown out of these industries, which provide employment opportunities and contribute toward the local economy.

### GOVERNMENT AID AND ASSISTANCE—AN OVERVIEW

Prosperity typically lags behind in the Northeast. This is due to a substantial disproportionate amount of, and access to, government development assistance programs.

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Investigation of the Lower Mekong Basin;and Mekong Committee, *Annual Report 1967*. (Oct. 1968). (A Brief Account of the Activities of the U.N. and the Specialized Agencies in Thailand.)

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*

The division separates urban and rural areas, as well as regions, with the Northeast being one of the poorest and most neglected of all other regions.<sup>105</sup>

The northeastern provinces were neglected by the central government for many decades.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, starting in the sixties and seventies, the Thai Government began to inaugurate various health, education, social welfare and economic-oriented rural development programs throughout the Northeast provinces to help reduce the poverty level of the rural Northeasterners.

Ironically, according to data in *A Comparative Study On Migration, Urbanization And Development In Thailand*, the money spent per capita on rural government assistant programs in the Northeast during the 1970s averaged consistently less than in all other regions of the country.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, government assistance did increase throughout the period despite remaining lower than in other areas of the country.<sup>108</sup>

#### DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IMPLEMENTED IN RURAL ISAN

While many programs were implemented, the facts reveal that government aid to the Northeast was less per capita than in other regions of the country. Development programs implemented in the region included: free distribution of an Asian-style lavatory fixture for every household to promote better sanitation habits; agricultural and seed testing stations; fertilizer distribution programs to increase crop yield; irrigation and flood control projects on the Mekong River to bring a better agricultural life-style to the region; the *Chon Pratan* land irrigation projects to route water to needier areas; fish pond and reservoir projects to promote new methods of income and provide irrigation resources; the *Isan Khiaw* or “Green Isan” agricultural and environmental projects; agricultural-coop programs to bypass scalpers and provide a market outlet for crops, produce and livestock at reasonable prices; government-

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<sup>105</sup> Along with the Isan or Northeastern region, the Hill Tribe vicinity—situated in the northern-most sector of Thailand’s Northern region—is also extremely poor. This is according to an ESCAP report by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), *A Comparative Study on Migration, Urbanization and Development in Thailand* (New York: United Nations Press, 1982), 84.

<sup>106</sup> Karnchanapee, *Thai Politics*, 7, 72, 93.

<sup>107</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 81.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

sponsored rice-purchase programs at current market rates; and most recently, capital lending programs to encourage entrepreneurial investment.

In conclusion, although not entirely without merit, the downside of most of these projects was that they failed to produce the intended results. They were often incapacitated or stalled due to a variety of reasons, not the least of which were: bribery, corruption; nepotism, and bureaucratic red tape; as well as distrust and dishonesty on the part of the recipients. Deeply ingrained habits and traditions, as well as antiquated methods of operation also greatly impeded any potential good that could have been gained. (Northeasterners are typically slow to abandon antiquated mindsets and traditional methods in exchange for new concepts and ideas, even if they comprehend their worth.)

## CHAPTER 5

### ISAN BECOMES PROACTIVE

#### FROM PEASANT FARMER TO WAGE EARNER

The Isan traditionally lived off their family-owned rice paddies, living out their lives under the influence of ancient belief-systems and traditions passed down from generation to generation. More often than not, they were willfully ignorant of the modern world that had grown up around them. However, in the late 1960s and 1970s, conditions occurred whereby they began to undergo a socio-economic transformation.

The momentum for change increased in the 1980s and 1990s as Thailand modernized and turned from being a predominantly agrarian-oriented economy to an industrialized exporting economy. Living standards in the Isan region began to rise as Northeasterners sought work to support their new-found wants, tastes and accompanying lifestyles.

The introduction of U.S. Air Force bases to the Northeast and the economic boost it brought to the area was part of the catalyst that brought about this change. It brought an influx of U.S. dollars into the local economy, along with new technology and a modernized transportation system. Tens of thousands of jobs were created in the process. After the USAF bases closed in the mid-1970s, many Northeasterners migrated to Bangkok, seeking work to support their new-found life-styles.

This cumulative dynamic set in motion the processes that eventually lifted the once economically destitute Northeasterner into becoming Thailand's working-class mainstay.

#### MIGRATORY WORK PATTERNS OF THE ISAN

##### The Influx of Rural Northeasterners to Bangkok

To alleviate their impoverished circumstances, the Isan traveled to nearby cities and beyond to seek employment and income to meet family needs back home, of which Bangkok was the place of choice. This occurred before overseas employment became readily

available, and traveling to work abroad became popular among the Isan.<sup>109</sup> Subsequently, a substantial number of Bangkok's taxi drivers are from the Northeastern provinces. These, as well as most lower skilled hired help, shop, factory and construction workers, all hail from the Northeast. Many who sought employment in the expanding tourist industry in various locales around Thailand were also from the Northeast.

### Imported Foreign Industry

In recent years, the Board of Investment of Thailand (BOI) has made a concentrated effort to de-localize foreign industry that had grouped itself around Bangkok and the surrounding area. This included incentives for foreign-owned industry to locate in the provinces. So far, a share of these, including Seagate Computer Hard Drives, Adidas and Nike Sportswear, are among the more recognized names to move into the northeast. In doing so, they not only lowered their operational costs, but also brought much-needed jobs and income to their employee base.

### THAI POLITICS AND THE NORTHEAST

Thailand's political focus appears to be swinging towards the Northeast Region. The rural Northeastern Thai people, heretofore lagging behind urban areas in economic growth and modernization, are now also emerging as a political force to be reckoned with. This was evidenced in the July 1995 election when the opposition Chart Thai Party (Thai Nation Party), led by Banharn Silpa-archa, defeated Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai's ruling Democrats to win the general election, ninety-two seats to eighty-seven seats.<sup>110</sup>

Banharn, an old-style political deal-maker, formed a six-party coalition government that defeated the Democrats' rule. His party's strength came from Thailand's rural central

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<sup>109</sup>An entire industry of overseas employment agencies grew up around the need to supply low-cost labor to large corporations in middle-eastern Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Libya, Iraq, Iran, etc.), and later in Asian countries (Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Brunei) Many scandalous profit-raking tactics were utilized by less than honest Thai middlemen in the rush to supply labor to these countries. Fueled by greed, fraud and overcharging of the uninformed peasant class workers ranked among the highest offenses committed. Many people lost their family fields, which they had to put up for collateral, for the "right" to work abroad. Others lost their wives to infidelity during their long absences. Nevertheless, the majority made comparable fortunes, which they sent back home to build new, western-styled homes or start "mom-and-pop" businesses.

<sup>110</sup>"Thai Opposition Wins, Forms Coalition," *San Diego Union Tribune*, July 3, 1995, A-22.

plains and the Northeastern Region, while Democrat support has traditionally come from Thailand's more-prosperous, better-educated Southern Region. However, approximately ninety percent of Thailand's voters live in the countryside, which has fallen behind urban areas in economic growth and modernization.<sup>111</sup>

General elections were held in November 1996 to elect 393 Members of Parliament. The outcome of the nation-wide elections saw the New Aspiration Party, headed by former military officer General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, emerge as the largest political party. General Chavalit gained much popular support throughout the Northeastern Provinces by emphasizing his Isan heritage. There is little doubt that the rural voters of Isan helped sweep General Chavalit into the Prime Minister's office, along with his New Aspiration Party.<sup>112</sup>

### OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Rural life in Northeastern Thailand, by and large, has been shaped by government policies and projects from Bangkok, in the attempt to integrate the Northeast into the Thai nation-state, while promoting economic development.

Development in the Northeast turned out to be different than what was expected. The first project was instituted in 1961. These would include agricultural, medical, educational, commercial forestry, and hydro-electric projects, originally initialized by the concern over Communist insurgency during the Vietnamese War era. Even though the degree of success was less than what was anticipated by Bangkok's technocrats, it must be acknowledged that most rural Isan dwellers have benefited economically by government-sponsored development projects, which contributed in various ways to economic growth in the area. However, there are opposing views among Isan villagers toward government-sponsored development programs. Many have protested Bangkok's development projects as having an underlying agenda, maintaining that they were designed to benefit the government, not necessarily meet the needs of the villagers.

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<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup>Matthew Fletcher and Julian Gearing, "Now It's Up to Him," *Asia Week*, Nov. 29, 1996, 3. Accessed Aug. 20, 2005 from <http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/96/1129/nat1.html>.

## CHAPTER 6

### THAILAND'S ECONOMIC MELTDOWN—1997

#### CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF THAILAND'S ECONOMIC MELTDOWN

From 1988 through to the onset of the 1997 economic crisis, foreign investment increased, industrialization expanded, exports grew in quality and quantity, all resulting in a flourishing Thai economy. During this period, the Gross National Product (GNP) of Thailand grew at a record rate of eight to twelve percent per year. This "economic miracle" created a large class of newly-wealthy Thai citizens, as well as provided many new employment opportunities for the Isan people. These opportunities were both in Bangkok and other Thai Urban industrial centers, much closer to home than the Middle East or nearby Asian Tiger nations. However, the sense of prosperity would prove to be short-lived, as it turned out.<sup>113</sup>

The continual increase of foreign investment and industrialization created an environment where the free-flowing influx of foreign capital afforded numerous get-rich-quick opportunities. As more land was needed for industrial expansion, speculation buying and investment caused land prices to increase by one-hundred to two-hundred percent per year. The huge increase in real estate prices encouraged many middle-class Thais to join in on the investment craze, of which many became wealthy in a short period of time. This condition is known as a "bubble economy," where, in a risk-taking environment, assets increase rapidly in value, due primarily to speculation buying and selling.

Thailand's predicament was exacerbated by hesitancy on the part of Thai officials to adjust the flagging value of the Baht (which had typically been loosely-tied to the US Dollar). They preferred to prosper on a large on-going scale and gamble on the potential consequence of hyperinflation—the alternative being losing face on a national and global scale, a fate that eventually befell them. Had the value of the Baht been realistically adjusted

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<sup>113</sup>Asian Tiger Nations typically include those emerging third-world nations with strong economies and GNP, i.e., South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and others. Japan is not normally considered an Asian Tiger nation, since it has grown beyond that scope.

to reflect local indicators, the economic collapse would likely not have occurred, or would have been greatly lessened in scope and consequence. To compound the situation, over-zealous lending institutions, coupled with speculative borrowers and investors, added to the problem through loans made using inflated land values when initially assessing land-worth as loan collateral. Then, if in the event that these loans went into default (a normal practice among speculators and contractors), lending institutions were left with title deeds for land that was essentially worthless when comparing the assigned loan value, to the actual or residual market value of the land.

Hence, the need to devalue the Thai Baht, as well as the uncurtailed speculation borrowing and investment frenzy, ultimately crippled the Thai economy, since it was being pushed beyond its limits, and could no longer endure its over-extended condition. Like a balloon inflated beyond its point of maximum elasticity, the Thai economy was unable to withstand the pressures exerted on it, and essentially burst wide open. This set off a "ripple-effect" crisis that soon spread throughout Asia, affecting some countries, like Indonesia, much worse than Thailand.

### Urban

In Bangkok and other urban centers, numerous shops and factories were forced to close. Many shop-keepers and business owners were in worse shape, having nothing else to rely on and being devastated by the crisis, fell into bankruptcy took their own lives, while others down-sized and made do as best they could. As one street-wise businessman stated, *"the truly rich will survive with no problem, since they have the resources to sustain themselves, while the pretenders will not be able to survive for the duration."*<sup>114</sup> Due to the dwindling lack of means among many of the heretofore wealthy, lifestyles drastically changed, including modes of transportation. Normally crowded Bangkok streets became nearly empty as fuel priced . Weekend markets that usually featured small-ticket items and other miscellaneous goods, now offered luxury German automobiles, sacrificed by their owners at bargain prices to gain a bit of working capital. Expensive automobiles were repossessed, and taxi use greatly decreased in favor of public transportation.

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<sup>114</sup>Comment made by a successful Thai-Chinese business owner, Nakhon Phanom Province, Aug. 1997.

## Rural

Meanwhile, as the economic crisis spread across Thailand's urban landscape, thousands of Northerners, who had been employed in Bangkok and other locales, flocked home in reoccurring waves to return to their former lives in their respective rural communities. The effect on the Isan-area residents was notable, albeit manageable for many, since they could fall back on their agrarian economy, and thereby lessen the impact. However, other Isan families had come to rely on their newly-acquired economic freedom. These found it difficult to readjust to former austere conditions as economic hardships set in. Of these, many were forced to make difficult priority choices

The question arises: to what was the Thai-based economic crisis attributable? Was it due to a scramble for liquidity by creditors that brought down the banking system and as a result, brought the region's much-vaunted 'economic miracle' to a near standstill? Or, were long-neglected fundamental problems hiding beneath the surface? Each of these views has its supporters and detractors. Some claimed that the so-called economic miracle was a myth, and that the synergistic mix of businessmen, bankers and bureaucrats, in their individual efforts to ride the crest of the wave to achieve personal wealth, had created a thinly-veiled bubble economy with overvalued assets and over-extended investments. Others chose to accept the ever-popular conspiracy theory that placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of foreign-based currency brokers, who in their buying-and-selling profiteering, had been the sole reason for the unfortunate dilemma that befell the Thai citizenry and their booming, albeit apparently somewhat-delicate economy.

### The International Monetary Fund and World Bank

Thailand joined the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in May of 1949, and has more recently been a subscriber to their Special Data Dissemination Standard (SDDS). Established in 1996, the purpose of the SDDS was to provide guidance for countries in their access to international capital markets in the dissemination of economic and financial data to the public.

In an attempt to address the problem in a timely manner, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) stepped in to assess the situation. They then proposed a series of measures designed to salvage and redirect Thailand's now-crippled economy. Thai

authorities, realizing that drastic measures were required, agreed on implementing a series of comprehensive policies, or economic stimulus package to reverse the negative trend and regain lost ground.

One of the first measures that was employed, intended to reverse the outflow of government liquidities, was to assess a ten percent Value Added Tax (VAT) on all goods sold.

## CHAPTER 7

### ISAN—2000 AND BEYOND

Until the advent of the financial and economic crisis that erupted in July 1997, Thailand, as Asia's fastest growing new "Tiger,"<sup>115</sup> appeared well set on a path that would enable it to cross the threshold of a new century with confidence and high expectations. The crisis has eroded this confidence and, as this report is written, the Kingdom of Thailand is seeking ways out of its predicament. However, the difficulties that currently beset the nation should not be allowed to detract from three decades of progress that have witnessed the economic transformation of the nation and significant increases in the levels of wellbeing and welfare of the vast majority of Thailand's sixty-one million people. This chapter briefly reviews this progress as well as some of the costs it has entailed.

Although 1997 was a bad omen, in that it brought about Thailand's economic collapse, the new millennium brought the dawning of renewed hope and expectation for the Isan people. A significant degree of healing and restoration had taken place by the year 2000, and signs of promise and new potential spanned the uncharted horizon of the new millennium. Once quieted and subdued by the economic collapse, Bangkok and Thailand in general has begun to bustle once again as economic recovery has brought new employment opportunities and better wages in the fields of construction, industry, transportation, tourism, etc., from both foreign-owned and locally-owned businesses.

This paper has discussed the Northeastern Thai, or Lao-Isan people, their historic roots, their struggles, along with their own sense of ethno-regional identity and its intertwined association with three alternatives: Thai identity, Lao identity, and to a lesser degree, Khmer identity. Drawing on input by ethnic Isanians, the Isan identity is a problematic political construct, reflecting subtle ambiguities of self-expression and understanding on the part of Northeasterners. Northeasterners are engaged in an internal

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<sup>115</sup>Until the advent of the economic collapse, Thailand had averaged a GNP growth rate of between eight and twelve annually for the previous decade.

negotiation as to who they are, and external negotiations about their Thai versus Lao identities, relationships fraught with cultural, social and political ramifications. Looking rearward, they are of Laotian heritage (or Khmer); looking forward, their future is inevitably Thai, yet they are caught between the two—integration into the Thai community versus retention of their Isanian heritage and identity.

Insofar as the Isan people have come a long way since the beginning of their struggle for identity and acceptance, they still have not fully arrived concerning their true sense of individuality, distinctiveness, or purpose, as well as acceptance by both the Thai and the Lao.

As one Lao emigrant refugee whose father was Isan-born posed the question: "Should the people of Isan say they are Lao or Thai? Over and over again, one hears both Lao and Thai 'disowning' the Isan people. They claim the Isan are either too-Lao and not Thai enough, or too-Thai and not Lao enough."<sup>116</sup> Thus, the question remains, are they Thai, Lao, Isan, or in some instances Khmer? The somewhat complicated answer is, they are all.

Another Laotian refugee emigrant, whose father is of Isanian descent, recalls the dilemma her father faced over his own Isan identity, and with that knowledge she gained for herself a measure of ethnic pride and ownership, which helped resolve dilemmas she experienced over her own personal identity. She recalls:

My father is Isan and always made a point to mention it whenever the question of nationality would arise. I grew up hearing so many prejudices against people of his background that to this day, I still react a little too defensively to class-conscious mentalities.

I'd like to thank you for writing your paper on the Isan people. It's been difficult to find any info about the [Isan] region up to recently. Works like yours, which some might say cater to too narrow of a niche, have their place and their reason to be, even if that reason could be nothing more than helping a daughter recover some lost ancestral pride.<sup>117</sup>

A part of national identity is that of one's own language or dialect. Of Laotian derivative, the Isan language is often called Lao-Isan, and at other times Thai-Isan. This is another indication of the identification quandary in which the Isan people find themselves—Thai versus Lao versus Isan.

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<sup>116</sup>An excerpt from correspondence written to the author by P. P., U.S.A., to Ronald L. Myers, Mar. 2004, letter in the hand of Ronald L. Myers.

<sup>117</sup>An excerpt from correspondence written to the author by N. S., Canada, to Ronald L. Myers, Mar. 2004, letter in the hand of Ronald L. Myers.

Although Lao or *Isan* is the long-standing *lingua franca* spoken throughout Thailand's northeastern region—as well as some *Northern-Khmer* in some areas of the border provinces adjoining Cambodia—these local-area languages and various related minority dialects are slowly being replaced with Central Thai due to the advancing influence of the more-dominant Thai society.

As a result, Isan villagers find themselves embarrassed to converse in their own language in the presence of their more urbane-oriented and socially-aware Central Thai cousins. However, change is on the horizon as many progressive-thinking Isan throughout the region are beginning to adapt the Central Thai language, and use it exclusively while communicating with their children. Furthermore, Isan children are often discouraged from speaking their own local dialects in the schools, sometimes being punished by teachers for doing so.

One now-educated Isan emigrant, living as a professional in Australia, yet reared in a rural Isan village, attests to this dichotomy as he experienced it, and the compulsion for change. He recalls the days of his youth:

I was born during the heaviest campaign of the Communist Party of Thailand in 1975, in the then Nongbualamphu district of Udon Thani province. My mother being a primary school teacher, and my father a teacher turned local politician, I was fortunate to gain a middle-class status. However, much of my childhood was spent with my grandparents in the ever-disappearing subsistence-level Isan village society. My grandparents, and the whole clan of relatives with whom I grew up, had toiled Isan's soil for generations. I believe that my generation is the last to have experienced that life style.

I spoke only Lao-Isan until I was twelve years old, at which time I moved to Udon Thani province to attend secondary school. There, I spent the next five years seeking to master the Central Thai language, and toiled to eliminate any trace of my Lao-Isan accent, which was not so easy. I was considered the fool of my class for some years before I completely got rid of my Isan accent.

I had always been taught that the Bangkokian disdain for Isan people is acceptable, that the Thai cultural superiority is a norm, and that Isan people will never reach the status of economic prosperity and social acceptance if they retain their Isanian identities. I believe if the Thai government's perceptions toward Isan change, and new approaches are adopted, we shall eventually see a new Isan in a decade or two.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup>An excerpt from correspondence written to the author by K. T. W., Australia, to Ronald L. Myers, Mar. 2004, letter in the hand of Ronald L. Myers.

## AGRICULTURE

In times past, when one traveled from Central Thailand into the Isan Region, the change in landscape was very obvious. Villages, homes, and field-house structures were noticeably more antiquated and destitute-looking. Water buffalo and teams of oxen were everywhere, as these were used almost exclusively to pull hand-hewn plows and carts.

Presently, it is not uncommon to see modern, two-story concrete homes, patterned after European styles, located either in villages or in a plot alongside the road in the edge of a rice field. Now, fewer buffaloes and oxen are seen, having been replaced by motor-driven garden tractors for cultivation of fields, and small pick-up truck for transportation and hauling of goods. Keeping a reproducing group of these animals was also the local form of prosperity in their agro-based economy. Being the default form of banking, the more one possessed, the richer one was. Nowadays, this form of banking remains, but to a lesser degree, as they transition to a market economy.

As families grow and increase in size, many are forced to seek other forms of income as land inheritance size decreases. Others who own a share in the fields, and a substantial source of outside income, are outsourcing or hiring their fields done, both planting and harvesting. Some entrepreneurs are even starting outsourcing service businesses—essentially custom planting & harvesting.

Rubber trees (an idea imported from south Thailand) are now being successfully grown and harvested in Isan, mostly along the Mekong river-valley regions. This is becoming quite popular and appears to be a wave of the future.

## PROFESSIONS

With new opportunities in education abounding, reflected by the increasing number of Universities establishing branches throughout the Isan region, many younger-generation Isanians are now choosing careers in professional fields of medicine, science, business, and telecommunications, to name a few, over those in the traditional blue-collar arena.

For instance, various major hospitals in Bangkok are training and employing registered nurses from the Isan region. One hospital nurse, upon being asked, responded by saying that a majority of the nurses in her department were fellow-Isanians, she herself being from Isan.

In the field of communications, Northeastern Thai cable channels now carry programming specifically in the Isan dialect, with Isan-oriented programming, as well as Isan-speaking talk-show hosts and news commentators. The idea is to preserve the rich cultural heritage and proud ethnic identity of the Isan people, while thoroughly integrating into the Thai society as equal citizens enjoying equal rights and privileges.

This concept is accepted among those of other regions of Thailand, be it North or South. Why, then, it has been asked, are the Isan expected to abandon and adopt a disparaging view of their rich historical heritage and language? In this development, Thai society is adapting a more multi-cultural view, realizing that citizens can be fully Thai without abandoning their own roots.

## TOURISM

The Isan region previously received little or no mention in the Thai Tourism Authority's excursion literature or tour packages, almost as if this part of their own country did not exist (at least in the minds of some). However, a paradigm shift has begun to take place. A few locally-based, albeit foreign-owned, tour agencies listed Isan and neighboring Laos as two of their major destinations, and they are receiving premium prices and a thriving and satisfied clientele. The Thai, with their ingrained aversion for anything having to do with Isan, finally conceded as they realized that foreign tourists didn't have the same inherent mindset, and that they were missing a lucrative, untapped potential. Riding the wave, the government-owned Thai Tourism Authority finally recognized the Isan Region as a viable tourist destination, and 1998 was declared the "Year of Isan" in their brochures. This development has further helped to bring recognition and prosperity to the area, as well as helped to change the Thai's negative mindset towards the people and region of Isan.

## LOCALIZED COTTAGE INDUSTRY

As tourism developed and began to increase in Isan, local-area cottage industry also increased as the Isan villagers produced saleable handicraft items to supplement their heretofore-meager income. These included hand-woven textiles (mainly home-grown and hand-dyed cotton and silk products), scene paintings, intricate woodcarvings and miniatures, as well as traditional Isan items, such as musical instruments, wickerwork and basketry, and

decorative triangular pillows. These items are sold to visiting tourists outrightly on village excursions, or to middlemen, who in turn make a profit reselling them to tourist-oriented shops located in upscale shops in the major cities and in hotels. Other enterprising individuals, often foreigners with an interest in Thailand, start overseas import-export business that focus on village-made hand crafts, further increasing the income potential of Isan villagers.

At the start of the new millennium, in an attempt to encourage local-area initiative and pride, a new nation-wide Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) promotional theme was introduced: "One District, One Product" or *nueng tambon, nueng plitpahn*.<sup>119</sup> The concept was designed not only to strengthen family incomes, but also to give locals a sense of pride of craftsmanship, as well as personal wellbeing and empowerment. These government-funded programs included the construction of buildings and infrastructures throughout Thailand, including the Isan region. This reflected the objectives and purposes for existence of the SME, which was to grant assistance, support and promote small and medium-sized Thai enterprises.

The One District, One Product promotional enterprise, or OTOPs, was in effect an extension of the home-based cottage industry concept. As goods were marketed, proceeds went back to the families involved in the initial production. Outlets for premium goods were often large hotel lobbies in major cities, and even as far away as overseas, exported by enterprising Thai and foreign investors.<sup>120</sup>

### RECENT FOREIGN-OWNED INDUSTRY TRENDS

As important as the success of sustained cottage-industry growth is to the economic wellbeing of Isan families, the influx of foreign-owned industry into the area is probably equally as important, if not more so. This is due in part to the fact that the Isan mindset, by and large, seems to be geared more towards working for others than managing their own businesses.

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<sup>119</sup>Thaksin Shinawatra, the present-day Prime Minister, is credited with initiating the idea.

<sup>120</sup>One Thai-American owned OTOP shop is located in the San Francisco Bay area. "Thai Tambon." (2005). Accessed Aug. 10, 2005 from [www.thaitambon.com/otopthai1.htm](http://www.thaitambon.com/otopthai1.htm).

Isan is becoming an ever-brightening landscape economically as foreign investment capital is being directed away from Bangkok to the provinces, not the least of which are the outlying provinces in the northeastern sector. This is happening under the direct supervision and planning of the Thai Board of Foreign Investment (BOI).

To advance their strategy, the BOI is offering various incentives to encourage foreign investors to move out of Bangkok into outlying provinces and regions, including the Northeast. This will lessen congestion in and around Bangkok and help develop and provide local jobs in other regions of the country. Northeastern provinces are gearing up for this by developing industrial parks and other programs to make relocation into Isan more attractive.<sup>121</sup>

The BOI reported sizable increases in foreign-owned and funded business projects for the Isan region for the year of 2003 over 2002. Sixty-one different projects received approval in 2003, a thirty-six percent increase over the same period in 2002, resulting in slightly over eighteen thousand new jobs spread throughout the region.<sup>122</sup>

## POLITICS

Thailand's political climate appears to be doing well. As head of the Thai-Rak-Thai party, present-day Prime Minister Thaksin, the telecommunications tycoon, was swept into power with a decisive election victory in the painful aftermath of Thailand's 1997 financial crisis. Although he is not without his detractors, Thaksin's admirers are quick to explain that they appreciate his no-nonsense business-like style of leadership. They point out that those who would criticize him, do so mainly because they say he is too strict--meaning that they do not like him, since they no longer enjoy the freedom they once had to benefit from shady or illegal activities as before, while under more lax administrations.<sup>123</sup>

As Democracy develops in the Northeast, the days of open vote buying are not as widespread or prevalent as in years gone by. There are three basic reasons for this. First, there

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<sup>121</sup>BOI incentives include tax breaks and requirement concessions.

<sup>122</sup>“Business Trends in Northeast Thailand for 2004,” *The Korat Post*, n.d., 1–2. (The article is a compilation of materials, translated largely from local Thai language announcements, seminars and news releases.) Accessed May 5, 2005 from <http://www.thekoratpost.com/businessisan.html>.

<sup>123</sup>“Thai Opposition Braced For Election Defeat,” *Financial Times*, Feb. 3, 2005. Accessed Aug. 20, 2005 from <http://news.ft.com/cms/-s/10f24136-75a8-11d9-8833-00000e2511c8.html>.

are better safeguards in place to counteract voting fraud and corruption, and second, the general Isan populace is beginning to see itself with a higher degree of dignity; thus, to allow themselves to be bought off would contradict their newfound self-respect. Part of this dignity and self-respect is reflective of the fact that they now realize that they enjoy an equal voice, and equal representation, in the Parliamentary Halls in Bangkok, right alongside their more urban, class-conscious Thai cousins. Third, the same maturing process is also taking place in the mindsets and behavioral traits of elected representatives, those whom the Isan populace elected to office by the decision power of their own votes. One of these elected officials is Mr. Attasit Sapayasit, MP and representative for the people of the Nakae district of Nakhon Phanom province, Northeast Thailand, where he was born and raised. Formerly a local-area educator, Attasit takes his responsibilities as a representative of his constituents very seriously.<sup>124</sup>

#### PROGRESS—MARGINALIZATION ADDRESSED

In the fall of 2000, the United Nations sponsored a "Millennium Summit" in New York where 189 nations, including Thailand, attended and endorsed what is called the "Millennium Declaration." In doing so, they adopted an agenda for the twenty-first century to promote global-wide human development, as well as reduce disparities and inequalities.<sup>125</sup>

They arrived at a set of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to be achieved by 2015. These goals, which contain a series of targets that are monitored through various preset indicators, are as follows:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Thailand's central government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, has pledged its support for these goals as a commonly-shared vision. Her first

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<sup>124</sup>The author has been personal friends with Mr. Attasit for over twenty years.

MDG report lays out sizable contributions in a results-oriented approach to development that exceeds those agreed to at the international level. Achieving these goals, especially alleviating the areas of greatest need, will require cooperation on all levels of Thai society.

Thailand's first MDG Report (2004) presents a story of success and ambition in that Thailand has made substantial progress in meeting or exceeding many of the internationally-set targets, including, poverty, hunger, gender, and disease. Notable progress is being made towards achieving the goals for education, mother-child wellness, as well as environmental sustainability. Designed to improve the quality of life, Thailand's approach has been to extend the coverage of social services, human development, and poverty reduction in needy and destitute rural areas.

However, in spite of these admirable goals and achievements, major long-standing challenges remain, which need further work—essentially localized disparities in areas that are lagging behind the rest of the country. These include on-going regional disparities and inequities among marginalized and vulnerable people groups, including the rural Isan populace in Thailand's Northeast.<sup>126</sup>

Along with this, the United Nations Human Development Report (UNHDR) for Thailand, for 2003, is very revealing, showing that of Thailand's seventy-three provinces, the nineteen northeastern provinces consistently fell behind as the worst performers in almost all categories when compared to the other provinces and regions. These categories or indexes include health, education, employment, income, living conditions, transportation, communications, as well as a sense of wellbeing.<sup>127</sup>

Whereas these UNHDR indicators further reflect the need for improvement, the upside of this is, Thailand has assented to being firmly committed to its Millennium Development Goal (MDG) obligations to the international community, as well as to its own citizens, essentially Isan.

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<sup>125</sup>Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, *Executive Summary, Thailand Millennium Development Goals Report 2004* (Bangkok, Thailand: Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2004), xi.

<sup>126</sup>Other problematic areas include the marginalized hill tribes in the remote highlands of the North, and the three predominantly Muslim, politically-volatile, southernmost provinces bordering Malaysia.

<sup>127</sup>United Nations Development Program, *Thailand Human Development Report* (Bangkok, Thailand: United Nations Development Program, 2003), 85, 89.

### SUMMARY: POSITIVE ANTICIPATION FOR THE FUTURE

Almost everyone one might meet on the streets of Bangkok, be it Thai or Isan, has a new positive outlook towards the future of the Isan populace as regards to their acceptance and interaction in the society as a whole. Not that there aren't challenges to face, hurdles to cross, and setbacks to overcome, after a four decade struggle, it appears that the tenacious Isanians have been able to gain the acceptance they sought as full-fledged fellow members of the Thai society in the eyes of their Thai cousins.<sup>128</sup>

Of a truth, the village-dwelling Isan people of rural northeast Thailand are winning in their struggle for personal identity and self-advancement, as well as their desire for respect and acceptance by the Thai. The initiatives they have taken and tenacity they have exhibited over the years have proven successful. They have made great strides in emerging from their poverty-stricken agrarian roots and lowly social position and have become the formally-recognized labor class of Thailand in the eyes of their fellow countrymen. They now enjoy equal opportunity in both education and parliamentary representation, as well as an established place in Thai society. Subsequently, as new generations are born, the future is ripe with anticipation, bringing both hope and expectation for the Isan people and their posterity.

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<sup>128</sup>The author engaged over fifty people in casual conversation, both Thai and Isan, in a recent two-month trip to Thailand (June–Aug. 2005) and found this was the overall consensus.

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APPENDIX

MAPS

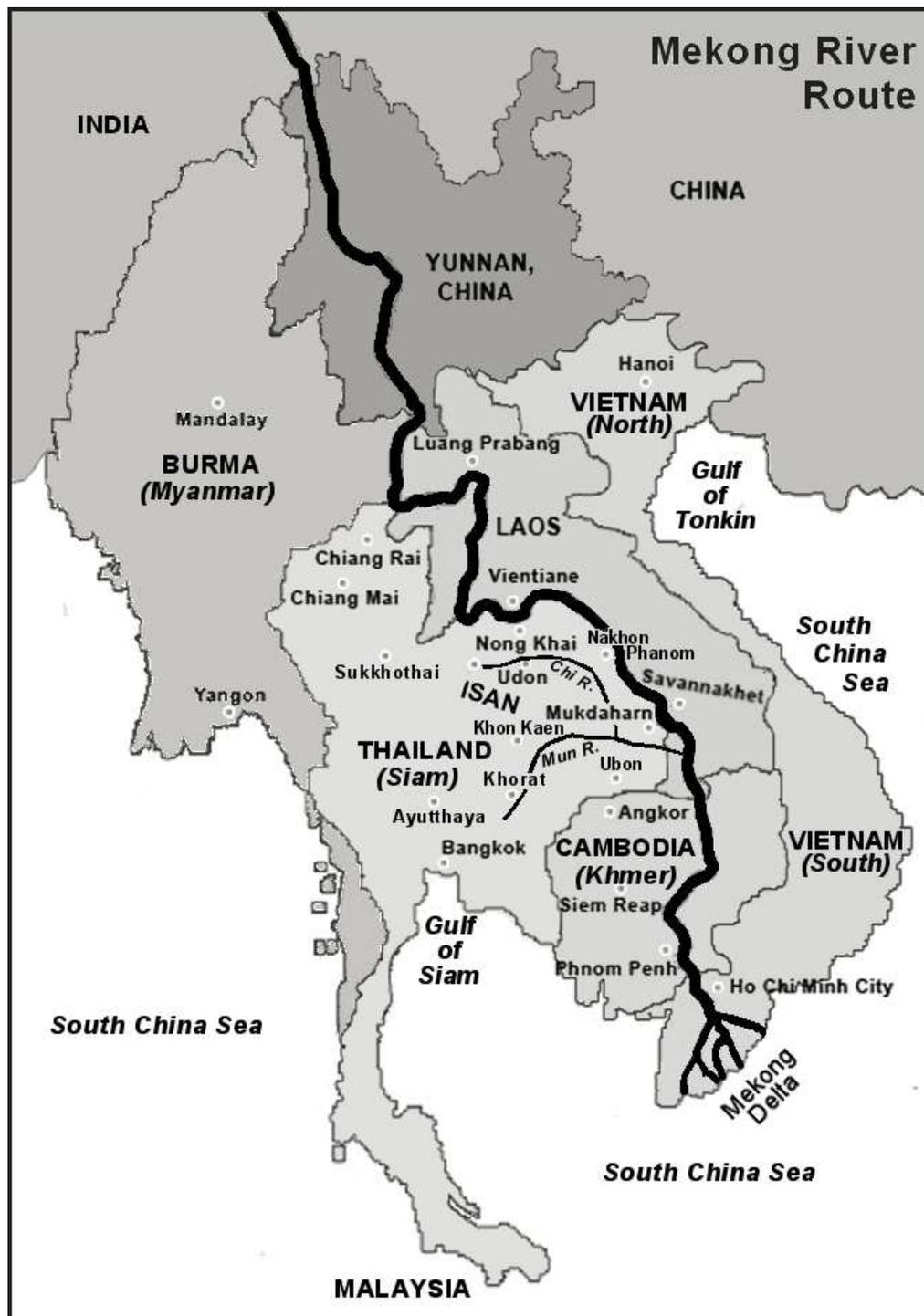


Figure 1. Southeast Asia, Mekong River, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

Adapted from "Full Map of the Mekong Express Countries." (n.d.). Accessed Sept. 25, 1999 from [http://www.mekongexpress.com/map\\_lrg\\_all.htm](http://www.mekongexpress.com/map_lrg_all.htm).

Mekong River: 

Mun and Chi Rivers: 

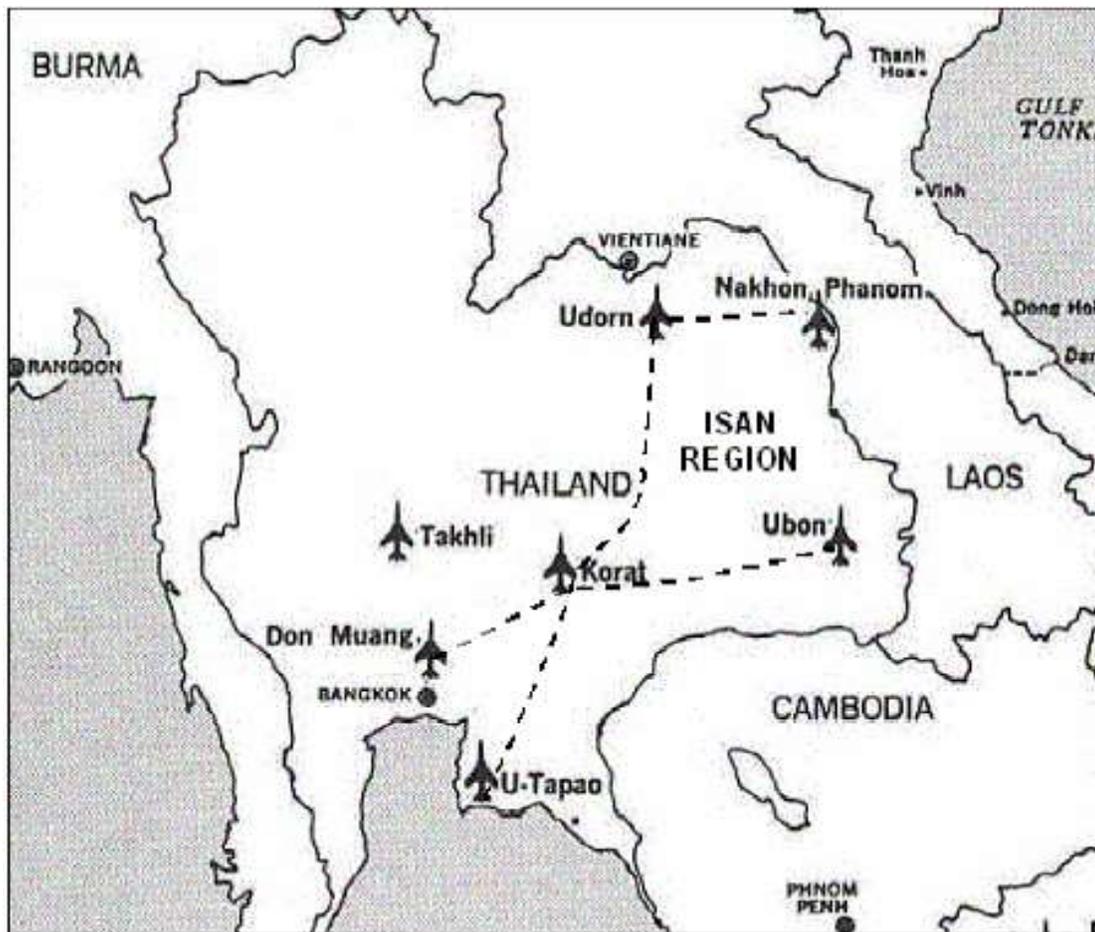


Figure 2. U.S. Air force bases located in Thailand during the Vietnam War period. Adapted from John “Spoons” Sponauer, “USAF bases in Thailand.” (1999). Accessed Sept. 25, 1999 from <http://www.sponauer.com/rasimus/index.html>.

Friendship Highway: \_\_\_\_\_

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The village-dwelling Isan people of rural northeast Thailand are in an ongoing struggle for personal identity, prosperity, and equality, as well as a desire for respect and acceptance by their fellow countrymen. Presently over twenty-one million in population (as of 2004), the Isan people have taken the initiative over the last several decades to seize various opportunities and are currently emerging from their poverty-stricken agrarian roots and lowly social position to becoming the formally-recognized labor class of Thailand.

This ongoing process is occurring despite long-standing economic exploitation and neglect, as well as hindrances placed in their way by their more urbane, status-conscious Central Thai cousins, who have customarily dismissed the Isan dwellers as being simple-minded and ignorant. Notwithstanding, their progress is now clearly evidenced by an increasing acceptance by the Thai, together with enjoying a greater significance on a national scale in socio-cultural, economic and political terms.