Contesting Isan-ness: Discourses of Politics and Identity in Northeast Thailand*

DUNCAN MCCARGO and KRISADAWAN HONGLADAROM

(University of Leeds, Chulalongkorn University)

This paper discusses the idea of Isan (Northeastern Thai) ethnoregional identity, and its relationship with two major alternative ideas: Thai identity and Lao identity. Drawing on ethnolinguistic research, the paper argues that Isan identity is a problematic political construct, reflecting ambiguous self-understandings and self-representations on the part of Northeasterners. Northeasterners are engaged in a negotiation process about their relationships with Thai and Lao identities, relationships fraught with cultural, social and political ramifications. The study suggests a more nuanced appreciation of the ambiguities of Isan identity than has yet been proposed.

Northeast Thailand, or Isan, is an important site of contested identity. The word 'Isan' is of Pali-Sanskrit origin, meaning 'Northeast'. Virtually all inhabitants of this region are Thai citizens; the majority would view themselves as ethnically Lao,[1] and speak a version of Lao as their mother tongue. Yet most prefer to identify themselves, at least to Thai outsiders, as *khon isan* (Isan people or Northeasterners). This paper will examine three inter-related questions: Who are Isan people? Who do they imagine they are? And who do they say they are? This is a study based largely on how people resident in Isan describe themselves, in interviews, through group discussions and in writing. Earlier characterisations of Isan identity typically present it as an emerging construct, fostered by the Thai state, but now broadly accepted and welcomed by Northeasterners. The study argues that this view is

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1 Most sources would agree that the majority of people in Isan are of Lao ethnicity. See, for example, Volker Grabowsky, 'The Isan up to its Integration into the Siamese State', in Volker Grabowsky (ed.), *Regions and National Integration in Thailand 1892–1992* (Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1995), p. 108. He suggests that 'Ethnic Lao account for almost 80 percent of the northeastern population'. This view is disputed by Grant Evans in his 'Introduction: What is Lao Culture and Society?', in Grant Evans (ed.), *Laos: Culture and Society* (Silkworm, Chiang Mai 1999), pp. 1–24. Yet while critical of the way others use terms such as 'ethnic Lao' to describe a non-homogenous group (pp. 4–5), elsewhere in the same volume Evans acknowledges that between 1.8 and 1.9 million inhabitants of Laos are of 'Lao ethnicity'. See 'Ethnic Change in the Northern Highlands of Laos', in Evans (ed.), *Laos*, p. 125. We use the term 'ethnically Lao' here as an unsatisfactory yet convenient shorthand, in full recognition of the debates surrounding its meaning.

insufficiently nuanced to do justice to either the manifold identity confusions experienced by Isan people, or to their capacity to engage in creative processes of identity manipulation.

Our starting point is that identity is not fixed, and that assigning identity is not the prerogative of states, despite the fact that states may play a key role in identity formation. Rather, identity is consciously or unconsciously defined and constructed by groups and individuals, primarily by means of discursive strategies. As Nicholas Tapp has argued, the long-standing essentialism of Thai studies is now giving way to a new emphasis on:

> the extraordinary diversity of cultural identity which the modern nation-state of Thailand has controlled, and which it has largely been able successfully to disguise.[2]

This new emphasis differentiates between the 'Thai' people (living within the present state of Thailand), and 'Tai' peoples of related ethnicity, who may live within Thailand's borders, or may reside in neighbouring countries or regions such as Laos, the Shan states, Yunnan and Vietnam. As Keyes notes, 'The identities of Tai-speaking peoples are very much in flux as these people rethink their genealogies so as to situate themselves in worlds that have been radically changed.'[3] This plurality of cultural identities 'in flux' has thrived in Isan. The process of constructing identity is highly political, and identities are invariably created and mediated in constant counterpoint with 'imagined others'. For many Northeasterners, the most salient imagined others are central Thais (*khon phak klang*), or more specifically Bangkokians (*khon krungthep*). Discourses of identity thus frequently emphasise both the distinctiveness of the group in question, and that which explicitly differentiates the group from salient imagined others. At the same time, it should not be assumed that all Northeasterners share the same identity. This paper will also examine regional and ethnic differences between various kinds of Isan people; this internal differentiation is helpful both in defining Northeasterners and in locating them in relation to other groups.

The inherently political interplay between language and identity is hardly new; nor is it applicable only to Isan people.[4] Work has been done on the Karen, Akha and several other ethnic groups in Thailand who, under certain circumstances, prefer to call themselves ethnic Thais, or to stress their loyalty to the Thai state.[5] Yet given the considerable size and population of the Northeast, Isan is surely the most significant site of linguistic and political identity manipulations in Thailand: hence this study.

Isan: Some Background

Isan is the poorest part of Thailand. Bordering on Laos and Cambodia, it is home to people with a variety of ethnic identifications, including Lao (the majority), Khmer, Suay, Phu Tai and Vietnamese—as well as significant numbers of Thais from other regions and people of Chinese descent, most of whom have migrated to Isan in recent decades, or have been

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2 Nicholas Tapp, 'A New Stage in Tai Regional Studies: The Challenge of Local Histories', in Andrew Turton (ed.), *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States* (Curzon, Richmond, 2000), p. 353.

3 Charles F. Keyes, 'Who are the Tai? Reflections on the Invention of Local, Ethnic and National Identities,' in Lola Romanucci-Ross and George A. De Vos (eds), *Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict and Accommodation* (third edition) (Alta Mira Press, Walnut Creek, CA., 1995), p. 151.

4 Charles F. Keyes, *Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand* (Department of Asian Studies, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 1967). Keyes' 1967 study is the pioneer work, which addresses the important issue of Isan identity by tracing its origins and discussing the ambivalent attitudes of Northeasterners towards central Thais and vice versa. Yet neither this essay nor his later work on Isan ethnoregionalism addresses the interplay between language and identity. For the latter, see Charles F. Keyes, 'Cultural Diversity and National Identity in Thailand', in Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly (eds), *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific* (MIT Press, Cambridge MA., 1997), pp. 213–16.

5 For the best recent discussion of the Thai Karen, see Claudio O. Delang (ed.), *Living at the Edge of Thai Society: The Karen in the Highlands of Northern Thailand* (RoutledgeCurzon, London 2003).

posted there temporarily by ministries or companies. Prior to the eighteenth century, Isan was a buffer zone between the precursors of Laos and Siam. Most Isan people are of Lao descent, and migrated to Isan from areas that are now part of Laos between the mid-fourteenth and the late-eighteenth centuries.[6] Vientiane and Champasak were subordinated to the Siamese kingdom during the reign of King Taksin, and Isan was nominally ruled by Bangkok from 1827 onwards. In practice, this control was patchy until the late-nineteenth century, when King Chulalongkorn began to lay the foundation of today's centralised administrative system.[7]

Isan is the most populous region of Thailand, with 19 provinces and over 20 million inhabitants, a third of the population of the country as a whole. Many Isan people live outside the Northeast, working in the industrial, construction or service sectors in Bangkok or adjoining provinces. Some of these Northeasterners retain house registration and formal residence in their home provinces, typically returning for a few weeks each year to take part in labour-intensive rice-planting and harvesting, and at holiday times.[8] This combination of economic deprivation, ethnic minority status and seasonal residence patterns serves to enhance the self-image of Isan people as a marginalised and disadvantaged group which has missed out on the benefits of Thailand's remarkable economic growth since the early 1960s.[9] This sense of marginality is somewhat offset by a strong sense of ethnoregional pride.

Following Keyes, we adopt the term 'ethnoregional' to refer to the cultural differences of Isan people which make them a distinctive group, so producing their sense of being disadvantaged when compared with central Thais.[10] The latter enjoy more power and resources from the central administration, and their culture (along with their language) has been adopted to represent Thailand's culture. Regionalism is thus not solely a product of geographical distance from the capital.

While Bangkok relies upon Isan's labour force, so Bangkok-based politicians rely upon the votes of Northeasterners. Around a third of parliamentary constituencies are in Isan, and any political party that can win the bulk of those seats should be on course to form a government. The Banharn Silpa-archa (1996–97), Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (1996–97) and Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–) administrations drew heavily on Isan MPs for their parliamentary majorities; the failure of Chuan Leekpai's Democrat Party (which led administrations in 1992–95 and 1997–2001) to build a strong base in Isan during the 1990s was the key to its electoral vulnerability. Thus, the relationship between Bangkok and the Northeast is essentially one of inter-dependency, yet Bangkok has consistently preserved the upper hand in the relationship, subordinating Isan to the will of the centre.

This subordination has long generated considerable resistance. Isan has been a site of frequent rebellion and resistance, a challenge to the power of the Thai state. The history of Isan in the twentieth century was a long time of resistance towards domination from Bangkok, demonstrated in the millenarian movements of the early twentieth century (especially the Holy Men revolts of 1902), the dissenting voices of independent-minded leftist Isan MPs from the 1930s, the emergence of Isan as the main base of the Communist Party of Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s, and the Isan focus of much non-government

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6 Keyes, *Isan*, pp. 7–13. Of course, present day Laos and Thailand are political constructs that emerged only in the nineteenth century.
7 Keyes, *Isan*, pp. 14–21.
8 One interviewee remarked that he had retained his house registration in Isan while he worked in Bangkok for 15 years, ironically as a house registration official.
9 See Keyes, *Isan*, pp. 38–9; Keyes, 'Cultural Diversity', pp. 213–15.
10 See Keyes, 'Cultural Diversity', pp. 213–16.

organisation, peoples' organisation and protest activity from the 1980s onwards.[11] After the 1902 revolts, Bangkok viewed Isan as a potentially rebellious region, to be handled with considerable firmness. Northeastern forms of Buddhism were suppressed in favour of orthodoxies imposed from Bangkok.[12] The economic development of the region, which followed on from the construction of the Friendship Highway (funded by the US military) and the creation of Khon Kaen as a regional hub in the early 1960s, was driven largely by political considerations. Suppressing communism, exploiting the natural resources of Isan (especially forest resources) and incorporating Isan more effectively into the central Thai state were three inseparable objectives.

Somchai argues that the Thai state sought systematically to create a dominant ideology in Isan, suppressing regional identities by 'reforming' Buddhist traditions in the Northeast, and establishing the spiritual authority of the Bangkok-based sangha over Isan monks.[13] At the same time, concerted attempts were made to incorporate people in Isan within the newly created Thai identity.[14] Following the centralisation of provincial education at the turn of the twentieth century, all schools were required to teach only through the medium of Thai. Languages such as Lao and Khmer, formerly used in schools, were banned. Isan regionalism was an important political factor from the 1930s to 1950s, consistently articulated by groups of regionalist MPs.[15] While some undoubtedly exploited the discourse of regionalism for political ends, others were sincere in seeking a changed political order that would better address the needs of poor Northeasterners. Northeasterners played an important role in the Free Thai movement during the Pacific War; as well as being an anti-Japanese movement, this was also 'a political school for the peasant masses'.[16] From the 1950s onwards, conservative ideas about Thai identity centred on the monarchy and anti-communism were propagated throughout Isan through a variety of state-led programmes.

The net result was what Somchai calls a 'split identity' on the part of Isan people, a reinterpretation of the standard academic view of Isan identity first laid out in 1967 by Charles Keyes. Somchai begins with the statement by Keyes[17] that many Northeasterners had recently begun to refer to themselves as *khon isan*, as speakers of *phasa isan* and residents of *phak isan*:

> Actually, the word '*isan*' has two different meanings. The first meaning, the government usage, indicates the 'Thai-ness' of the region. It argues that although the people who live in Isan are different from the people in the Central Plain, they are Thai ('*thai isan*'), not Lao, This meaning is now commonly used by educated people and is very popular among the young generation, especially in urban areas, who do not want to identify themselves with the Lao of the underdeveloped region. Another meaning, which is employed by many social activists and progressive farmers, of '*isan*' not only implies an ethnic difference between the region and Bangkok, but also the struggle of underprivileged masses.[18]

The term 'Isan' has thus become highly politicised. The majority of Isan people are ethnically Lao, speak a form of Lao as their first language, and generally openly identify themselves as 'Lao' when they are in the presence of others from the same in-group: in

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11 Somchai Phatharathananunth, 'Civil Society in Northeast Thailand: The Struggle of the Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan' (PhD Thesis, University of Leeds, 2001), pp. 28–61.

12 Kamala Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1997).

13 Somchai, 'Civil Society', pp. 38–9.

14 On this project, see Michael Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand* (RoutledgeCurzon, London, 2003).

15 Keyes, *Isan*, pp. 26–7. On these MPs, see the very useful recent study by Dararat Mettarikanon, *Kanmuang Song Fang Khong* (*Politics on Two Banks of the Mekhong*) (Matichon Publishing, Bangkok, 2003).

16 Somchai, 'Civil Society', p. 46.

17 Keyes, *Isan*, p. 3.

18 Somchai, 'Civil Society', p. 52.

other words, those whom they believe would also identify themselves as Lao. Yet recently the Thai state has successfully popularised the idea of Isan, creating a sanitised ethnoregional identity firmly subordinated to Thai-ness, and one which is highly attractive to many Northeasterners (especially younger and more educated people).

The term *khon isan* is inclusive. It has the advantage of potentially applying to all Isan residents, including people whose first language is not *phasa isan* (Isan language). This does not mean that everyone accepts the label, however. Those of Khmer descent, for example, are often uneasy with it. Yet identifying oneself as an 'Isan person' allows one to assume a more modern identity than defining oneself as Lao. At the same time, farmers' leaders and other progressive Isan dwellers have sought to 'reclaim' the term *isan*, using it as a central plank of their struggle for social justice. In other words, choices made about words used to express identity are frequently political acts; motivations for such acts vary, and many individuals are able and willing to use different discursive strategies to manipulate their identities.

Note on Methodology

The paper is based on interviews and focused activities in which native speakers were involved as interviewees, and in some cases as an interviewer. We chose these methods because they allowed us to integrate local voices into our argument, and we believe that the combination of these methods enables us to see the complexity of the problem more clearly. We conducted fieldwork at Mahasarakham University (MSU) and at a village in Mahasarakham province in July 2000. MSU was chosen because of its central location in the Isan region, and because of our previous relationships with the lecturers there; only four of the 21 interviewees were natives of Mahasarakham province. They included natives of several other Isan provinces (Buriram, Kalasin, Khon Kaen, Nakhon Phanom, Roi Et and Ubon) as well as three Bangkokians, and three people from other parts of Thailand who had worked in Mahasarakham for many years.

The interviews, which were socio-linguistic in nature, were conducted, in both Thai and Isan, with lecturers, students and villagers. In addition, we arranged two workshops with students and asked them to write essays based on the following questions:

1. In your opinion, where is Isan located? Does it include Korat province? Why or why not?
2. What is isan-ness? Do you think of yourself as Isan, Lao or from some other group? Do you consider other ethnic groups such as Yo, Phu Tai to be Isan people? Why or why not?
3. What role(s) does the Isan language play in contributing to the notion of isan-ness?
4. What is the relationship between Isan and Laos?
5. What are the attitudes of Isan people towards central Thais/Bangkokians and vice versa? Narrate your related experiences.

After the essay-writing exercise, we asked the students to sit in small groups, discuss what they wrote with one another, and present their opinions to the class. We tape-recorded their discussions of, and verbatim reports on, the above questions. We also analysed the students' written assignments apart from these group reports. The essays and the data from the interviews guided by the same set of questions revealed interesting insights into discourses of politics and identity in Isan.

The Politics of Code Naming and Switching

In our view, Isan is not a distinct linguistic variety of Lao at all, since this implies an impossibly clear-cut notion of what constitutes 'standard' Lao. Rather it is a 'conceived variety', associated with those who are geographically and politically defined as Isan people.[19] Enfield has argued that 'Lao and Thai are for all intents and purposes dialects of a single "language" ';[20] Isan might therefore be classified as simply a zone within the Lao–Thai 'dialect continuum'.[21] Indeed, there are many varieties of Isan spoken in different parts of the region. There is no 'standard Isan'.

Choices about where to position oneself on this continuum are a constant feature of life in Isan, where code-switching is endemic. Many people alternate between Isan and/or another minority language plus Thai on a daily basis.[22] Factors determining language choice are numerous. For example, three young parliamentary candidates campaigning on the same platform in one Northeastern province during the 1995 general election addressed crowds of villagers in Thai, even though all three candidates were natives of the province and fluent in Isan. Their speeches were serious, resembling the speaking style of senior bureaucrats, or of MPs debating legislation in the Bangkok parliament. By contrast, seasoned veteran Democrat MP Suthat Ngernmoen, addressing a big rally in downtown Mukdahan province during the same election, wooed the crowds with a rollicking, comic performance in Isan, perhaps suggesting that the local language was more fit for humorous purposes.[23] It appeared that young Isan politicians preferred to demonstrate their fluency in Thai as a hallmark of their education, sophistication and modernity, while older politicians were more willing to appeal to villagers on the basis of a shared language and culture.[24] Younger politicians were caught in a 'split identity' trap. They sought to woo support on the basis of their familiarity with local people and local conditions yet disdained the first language of many constituents, preferring to adopt the accent and vocabulary of Bangkok power-holders.

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19 Chambers and Trudgill have argued that what they term 'dialect continua' frequently straddle borders and resist clear-cut classification. See J.K. Chambers and Peter Trudgill, *Dialectology* (2nd edn) (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 5–7. In a standard work, Hudson argues that 'there is no real distinction to be drawn between "language" and "dialect". In other words, the search for language boundaries is a waste of time'. See R.A. Hudson, *Sociolinguistics* (2nd edn) (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 36. That said, conceived, constructed or imagined languages such as *phasa isan* clearly hold considerable political salience.

20 N.J. Enfield, 'Lao as a National Language', in Grant Evans (ed.), *Laos*, p. 259. Elsewhere, Enfield argues that there are no objective, linguistic justifications for separating Thai, Lao and Isan. See N.J. Enfield, 'How to Define "Lao", "Thai", and "Isan" Language? A View from Linguistic Science', *Tai Culture: International Review on Tai Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1 (June 2002).

21 Enfield refers to 'Isan Thai' as 'the mix of Thai and Lao spoken in northeast Thailand' in Enfield, 'Lao as a National Language', p. 281. This could imply that Isan is more Thai than Lao; most Isan speakers would argue the opposite.

22 When discussing language (*phasa*), we use the term 'Thai' (*phasa thai*) in the sense of 'central Thai' (*phasa thai klang*), as it contrasts nicely with Isan (*phasa isan*) and Lao (*phasa lao*). Central Thai and standard Thai (*phasa thai matrathan*) with its special characteristics can be seen as two distinct varieties, as Smalley suggests. But we contend that the former is the one that enters into the primary dialogic relationship with Isan and Lao. Our use of Thai (or central Thai by implication) is thus similar to Diller's notion of central Thai, which has three interrelated senses: the variety spoken in the central region of Thailand; the normative variety imposed and controlled from the centre of authority; and the common or shared variety functioning as a *lingua franca*. Anthony Diller, 'What Makes Central Thai a National Language?' in Craig J. Reynolds (ed.), *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand, 1939–1989* (Silkworm, Chiang Mai, 1991), pp. 108–10; William A. Smalley, *Linguistic Diversity and National Unity: Language Ecology in Thailand* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994).

23 William A. Callahan, and Duncan McCargo, 'Vote-Buying in Thailand's Northeast: The July 1995 General Election', *Asian Survey*, vol. 36, no. 4 (1996), p. 385.

24 For a related discussion, see John J. Gumperz, *Discourse Strategies* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982), p. 66. He argues that the majority language is typically used for more formal purposes.

One of the students interviewed demonstrated a similar 'split identity'. She was living in a central Thai province, and at first identified herself as a central Thai.[25] However, when pressed as to the origins of her parents, she became embarrassed, and rather reluctantly admitted that she came from Khon Kaen. When our assistant tried to question her in Isan, she averted her gaze—turning to smile at a close friend who came from outside Isan—and declined to answer until the interviewer reverted to using central Thai. Having left Isan some years earlier, the student had partly rejected her Isan identity and first language, preferring to 'pass' as central Thai. At the same time, she argued that she had not parted company with other Northeasterners, and could still get along with them. She was particularly unwilling to use Isan within earshot of central Thais. She acknowledged, however, that she used Isan at home with her family, but tried not to use it with friends from other parts of Thailand. In effect, she had created a linguistic dichotomy between her persona as a family member and her public identity.

One informant argued that the education system and bureaucratic structures in Isan were aimed at suppressing the consciousness of Lao identity: Northeasterners were compelled to become Thai. As a member of a higher status family in his village, with an elder sibling who was a teacher, he had felt under pressure from his parents and siblings to become highly proficient in Thai. He had not wanted to feel embarrassed when going to study in Bangkok. Whereas many of his friends spoke clumsy, heavily accented Thai, he had to speak Thai clearly from childhood.[26]

The same informant explained that with some of the younger lecturers at his university who were also from Isan, he always spoke in Thai. The new generation of urban youth was reluctant to speak Lao (his term); even his own nephews and nieces refused to speak it with him at home, something that pained him greatly. Young townspeople preferred to use Thai, reflecting their upward aspirations. Yet even some university students from rural areas had a poor command of Thai, and poor Thai accents. This reflected the fact that some schoolteachers did not speak Thai well, and taught students using Isan, or a mixture of the two languages. According to him, there were thus now two classes of Isan people: those who had made Thai their first language, and those who had stuck with the local language. Even the informant, who displayed intense pride in his identity, admitted that:

> When I think in my heart I think in Thai. It's a funny thing. But I am trying to think in Lao. I am starting to do so a bit at the moment. It's because I was trained to think in a Thai language mode.

This ability to think in a 'Thai language way' (*baep phasa Thai*) was actually the key to educational and career advancement; yet many young people who had mastered it ended up wholly or partly rejecting their own culture and origins.

We-code, They-code

Using Isan was seen as more satisfying than using Thai. This satisfaction seemed to derive from a sense of 'ownership' of the language, a close emotional proximity to Isan, which is lacking when speaking Thai. By implication, Thai remained a more formal language, one to be studied, learned and mastered for educational and career purposes rather than for heart-to-heart communication. As another interviewee put it: 'Given the choice, I would speak Isan.'[27] Yet a Thai language lecturer (himself not from Isan) argued that use of Isan was gradually declining among students in favour of Thai. The lecturer claimed that, while

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25 Student interview 2, 14 July 2000.
26 Informant interview 2, 14 July 2000.
27 Student interview 7, 14 July 2000.

men continued to speak Isan, women were less enthusiastic about using the language.[28] Vail, who studied North Khmer speakers in the Isan province of Surin, found similarly that boys made far greater use of their own language, while girls were more inclined to use the standard dialect.[29]

One student essay nicely summed up the position for many respondents:

> Some people go to stay in other provinces. They speak Thai because they are afraid to be called *ban nok* [provincial]. We must know when to decide which tongue to speak—whether to speak our own dialect of Thai. We must think carefully. If we meet a friend of ours, we do not need to restrain ourselves. We can speak Isan at once.[30]

Respondents' views indicated that Isan was a language that could be used comfortably only among people from the same group, and was not to be shared casually with possible outsiders. Negotiating its use therefore involved subtle decisions about who constituted an outsider, and how outsiders were identified. That is, it performs the role of an in-group marker, the 'we-code', to use a term employed by Gumperz.[31] However, it is important to note that the we-code is meaningful only when compared with another alienated code, the 'they-code': in this case, Thai. As demonstrated in the following unusual code-switching incident, the we-code may be used to challenge the ideology and power imbalance embedded by the they-code. While mainstream socio-linguists such as Hudson tend to see language choices primarily as 'situational code-switching'[32]—based on habitual uses or expected behaviours for certain situations—here they are instead products of identity manipulations, sometimes serving as rebellious voices, reacting against dominant voices.[33]

Language differences create an immediate gap between Isan people and the great majority of senior government officials who administer the public sector in Thailand, most of whom are central Thais who cannot speak the regional language. Many less educated Northeasterns are unable to speak central Thai confidently, especially in the presence of Bangkok-based officials. Nor can all Isan people easily follow the often stilted and jargon-bound Thai used in bureaucratic speeches and announcements. Two-way communication between ordinary Northeasterners and their official 'superiors' is therefore potentially difficult.

These issues were vividly illustrated during a consultation workshop on the Eighth National Social and Economic Development Plan, held in Mahasarakham in January 2000. Officials from the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) in Bangkok travelled to Mahasarakham to meet representatives of civil society groups, and solicit their input into the forthcoming plan. The opening session was a large plenary, featuring speeches by the provincial governor and an NESDB official, followed by a video presentation on the national planning process. All of this session was conducted in Thai. The participants were then divided into small groups of around 15, and invited to offer their comments on salient issues. Facilitators summarised the workshop discussions on whiteboards, using diagrams and coloured pens. Many of the groups switched quickly into Isan

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28 Informant interview 3, 14 July 2000.
29 Peter Vail, 'Language and Northern Khmer Identity: Codeswitching, Polyglossia and Cultural Change in Surin, Thailand', paper presented at the Eight International Conference on Thai Studies, Nakhon Phanom, 9–12 January 2002.
30 Student essay 3.
31 Gumperz, *Discourse Strategies*, pp. 66, 73–5.
32 Hudson, *Sociolinguistics*, pp. 51–3.
33 In this way, our approach is similar to the one adopted in Hill and Hill in their study of the contest between the native voices expressed in Mexicano and the dominant voices conveyed by Spanish. See Jane H. Hill and Kenneth C. Hill, *Speaking Mexicano: The Dynamics of Syncretic Language in Central Mexico* (University of Arizona Press, Tucson, AZ, 1986).

language at the behest of the villagers and representatives from peoples' organisations, to the acute discomfort of the central Thais present.

In the afternoon, representatives from each group were invited on stage in a second plenary session to review the main points they had discussed. One of the representatives flatly declared that he was going to speak in Isan, urging those who could not follow him to 'ask the person next to you'. This statement was clearly directed at the NESBD officials, who were central Thais and would not be able to follow his comments easily. The unspoken subtext here was 'If you Bangkokians want to consult Isan people and find out our views, you need to start by using and understanding our language'. This stance reflected a new political climate, in which people were emboldened by the greater emphasis on rights and participation embodied in the 1997 constitution.[34] Such a bold stance would have been unlikely ten or even five years earlier. Previously, Northeasterners were obliged to communicate with Bangkok in Thai—if and when they were invited to communicate with Bangkok at all. The choice to switch into Isan at the NESDB workshop was clearly a political act, a turning of the tables on Bangkok, a reversal of roles. Through this act of identity manipulation, the participants sought to empower themselves and assert their rights. The NESDB officials were reported to be quite taken aback by the strength of feeling they encountered in Mahasarakham.

One of the lecturers who acted as a facilitator at the workshop explained that these were seasoned seminar participants, who felt frustrated at the tokenistic nature of consultation processes used by the state.[35] Arguably, the growing incursion of the Thai state into the daily lives of Northeasterners produced two contrasting reactions: a feeling of animosity towards the state, and a feeling of acquiescence. Feelings of acquiescence predominated, yet feelings of animosity also persisted and had become evident in the workshop. The choice between acquiescence and animosity was reflected in language choice: to use Thai was to defer to the state, while to use Isan was a verbal means of resisting state power.

For the time being, Isan remains mostly the language of personal communication for in-groups of Isan people, and not a language to be used with (or in front of) central Thais. This is clearly the case for many young Isan people, who seek to emulate the behaviour of their Bangkok counterparts, and whose use of local language was declining. Yet the potential for more assertive and self-confident use of Isan language in public settings is evident in some circles, particularly among social activists.

Deconstructing 'Isan-ness'

For one informant, the parameters of Isan were of no great importance, since he had never felt any sense of 'isan-ness'. He claimed that his sense of identity was based upon his Lao ethnicity rather than Isan regionalism.[36] He argued that the idea of Isan identity was fostered by the New Aspiration Party (NAP), which successfully promoted the idea of former Army Commander General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh as an 'Isan prime minister' in the 1995 and 1996 general elections. Prior to the rise of the NAP, there was no recent parliamentary attempt to mobilise Northeasterners along regional lines.

Do people in Isan think of themselves as Lao? Certainly, they may be reluctant to identify themselves as 'Lao' in front of strangers: 'When we talk among ourselves, we call ourselves Lao, but when we are speaking to people with whom we are not close, we say

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34 For discussions of the new constitution and its impacts, see contributions to Duncan McCargo (ed.), *Reforming Thai Politics* (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen, 2002).
35 Informant interview 2, 14 July 2000.
36 Informant interview 2, 14 July 2000.

we are Thai.'[37] For this informant, the salient choice for Northeasterners was between their Lao ethnicity and their Thai citizenship. This became apparent when Northeasterners visited Laos proper: some chose to present themselves as Thai (by implication, superior to the people in Laos), while others preferred to say that they were Lao (symbolising their friendship and commonality with the people in Laos). As the same informant explained, Northeasterners have: 'Two faces. Yes. It depends on what you choose. When to be Lao, and when to be Thai.' In other words, being a person from Isan was not a real choice: isan-ness had no proper meaning except as a means of comparing Northeasterners with people from other parts of Thailand. For him, *khwam pen isan* (isan-ness) was an empty signifier, a construct of the Thai state that notionally acknowledged the distinctiveness of the region, and yet denied the true identity of most of its inhabitants. Describing yourself as an Isan person was a means of obfuscating the real choice between being Lao and being Thai, of giving priority to your ethnicity and heritage, or giving priority to your legal nationality and citizenship. He suggested that Northeasterners could not invoke the identity of Isan people to explain themselves to people in Laos. This was an identity that served to badge them only within the borders of Thailand itself. At the same time, the informant's view that his 'true identity' was Lao is open to question: in such contested territory, truth is hard to come by.

Another informant argued that, when Northeasterners referred to themselves as 'Lao', they simply used a convenient shorthand not invested with derogatory meaning. Their use of the term 'Lao' simply reflected their lack of education and preference for informal language. She herself never used the word, having attended primary school in Bangkok, and found that other children used the designation 'Lao' as a way of making fun of Isan people.[38] This informant assumed another form of split identity, torn between her family ties to Isan (her father came from Mahasarakham) and her Bangkok upbringing: her understandings of 'Isan' and 'Lao' were close to those of central Thais. She preferred the term 'Thai-Isan'. While she always told her students she was from Isan, she was not certain they accepted her as a fellow *khon isan*. It is interesting to note that this term is prevalent in the students' essays. It is another label used by Thai officials to refer to Isan people. Although many people insisted they viewed themselves as Lao, the other-created term *khon isan* was readily adopted by the Isan youth who participated in our study.

One informant explained that people from various Isan provinces might refer to themselves by using 'thai' in a compound word with the name of their province, such as 'Thai-Sarakham' or 'Thai-Roi-Et'.[39] At first hearing, this sounds like an innocuous conjunction of nationality and province. In fact, it is another contested term. The original meaning of 'thai' here is similar to *chao* or *khon* (people) written without /y/ (*yo yak*), henceforth 'Tai'. Thus 'Tai-Sarakham' means 'people from Mahasarakham'. Similarly, 'Tai-Krungthep', used by Isan people, refers to Bangkokians.[40] However, the younger generation of Isan people is hardly aware of the original meaning of 'Thai' or 'Tai' in this context. For them, 'Tai' is spelled with /y/ (*yo yak*), and means something related to the Thai people and Thai state. Thus 'Thai-Isan' means Thai nationals who are living in Isan. Arguably, the Thai state had colonised the word 'tai', changing it from a generic term for people of Tai ethnicity, to a political term connoting citizenship and nationality. One

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37 Ibid.
38 Informant interview 9, 14 July 2000.
39 Informant interview 2, 14 July 2000.
40 For a detailed discussion, see Sujit Wongthes, *Jek Bon Lao* (*Chinese On Top of Lao*), *Sinlapa Wattanatham* (*Art and Culture Magazine*) special issue, June 1987, pp. 13–14.

informant argued persuasively that the term 'Thai-Isan' was used by people simply trying to avoid the word 'Lao'.[41]

'Why Do You Call Me Lao?'

One essay similarly criticised the term 'Lao' as a pejorative term used by central Thais and people from other regions:

> I like my isan-ness and am fascinated by it. For Bangkokians, the term 'Isan region' makes them think of 'Lao'. I'm one of the people who want to erase this word from Thai society. I oppose the word 'Lao', because Isan people are also Thais. But it's the stupid and wrong values of people from other regions who look down on those who come from the Northeast, despite the fact that everyone on Thai soil is Thai.[42]

Students with such views explicitly denied that many Northeasterners typically referred to themselves and their languages as 'Lao'.

As to whether they saw themselves as Isan people, students answered mainly in the affirmative. One insisted that she was not Lao.[43] A student from Buriram declared that even though she spoke Thai and Khmer, she saw herself as an Isan person.[44] One student stated that she would not hesitate to declare herself a native of Roi-Et (her hometown) or a native of Isan, since she could communicate with other people perfectly well and felt Isan people were on an equal footing with people from other regions of Thailand.[45] This defensive response seemed to imply her reluctance to admit she was from Isan. Another student stated that she was not reluctant to use the term *khon isan*, since she felt the meaning of this word was clearer than 'Lao': if she said she was Lao, people might think she was from Laos, whereas *khon isan* was 'more Thai'.[46] The only student reluctant to describe herself as an Isan person had moved to central Thailand some years earlier.[47]

Another informant argued that older people, those aged over 60, regarded themselves as Lao or Isan; whereas younger people increasingly regarded themselves as Thai.[48] A senior villager (aged over 60) was one of the few informants to declare himself 'pure Lao'.[49] In the past there was no difference between people on the two sides of the Mekong River. Yet these days even people who were really Lao brought up children who were more at home speaking Thai. A lecturer from outside Isan argued that his students had demonstrated less and less feeling for their home region as the years went by.[50] Two middle-aged senior villagers, however, insisted that they were 'Thai-Isan', not Lao. They asserted that people no longer described their identity or language as 'Lao'; a change that has come over time.[51]

In contrast, several student essays argued that Isan people were entirely Thai:

> Isan is in the Northeast of Thailand, but Isan people are scattered along various regions of Thailand. I think I'm a Thai who has Thai nationality and Thai ethnicity, who lives on Thai soil but in the Isan region.[52]

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41 Informant interview 10, 16 July 2000.
42 Student essay 1.
43 Student interview 3, 14 July 2000.
44 Student interview 4, 14 July 2000. Translation is complicated here by the fact that Thai has no plurals; *khon isan* may therefore be translated either as 'Isan people' or as 'an Isan person'.
45 Student interview 8, 14 July 2000.
46 Student interview 9, 14 July 2000.
47 Student interview 2, 14 July 2000.
48 Informant interview 1, 13 July 2000.
49 Informant interview 7, 14 July 2000.
50 Informant interview 3, 14 July 2000.
51 Informant interviews 5 and 6, 14 July 2000.
52 Student essay 2.

> I am Thai who lives in the Isan region. (Isan) has special characteristics and her own unique culture, though it is adapted from neighbouring cultures such as Lao and Khmer.[53]

> I think I'm Thai—a Thai-Isan who lives in the Isan region and speaks *phasa Isan*.[54]

Some students not only stressed that they were Thais, but also expressed their opposition to being called Lao. Two students respectively entitled their essays '*Khon isan are khon thai*' and 'Why do you call me Lao?'.

Internal Differentiation of Isan People

The category of 'Isan people' (used in common parlance by many people both inside and outside the region) was problematic, since it included people from minority groups who were not of Lao ethnicity. Leading historian Srisakara Vallibhotama has argued that the Siamese administrative division of Isan into four *monthon* reflected ethnic distinctions among Lao settlers in the area. He also cites eight different non-Lao minorities identified by Prince Damrong in 1906.[55] Student interviewees generally felt that people from minority groups such as Yo and Phu Tai should be considered 'Isan people' despite using different languages, simply because they live in Isan. One student noted that you would have to ask members of these minority groups where they came from: only if they came from Isan provinces should they be considered 'Isan people'.[56] Another student stressed that the differences between these minority groups were just minor differences between the villages they inhabited and their ways of life, and thus their members were included among Isan people.[57]

Thus *khon isan* was for many student interviewees a catchall category embracing everyone who lived in the region, irrespective of ethnic origin. The official discourse of 'isan-ness' was thus also a means of diluting Isan 'Lao-ness' as the potential focus of an alternative to Thai identity. It was also a totalising discourse that sought to downplay ethnic and language differences, and present Isan people as an homogenised group.

Not all those of non-Lao ethnicity were happy with their assigned identity as Isan people. A Khmer speaker from Surin employed at a luxury hotel in Khon Kaen explained that she felt alienated from the Lao-speaking *khon isan* with whom she worked: they did not include her in their social activities.[58] She preferred working at other hotels in central Thailand, and felt more comfortable with central Thais and even foreigners than with her 'fellow' Isan people, whom she regarded as cliquish. Two villagers who claimed Lao descent argued that Khmer speakers from provinces such as Surin were not 'real' Isan people (*isan thae thae*), although they did still count as *khon isan*.[59] Clearly, Isan was a contested entity. A more nuanced understanding of the region requires an analysis of its different component areas, and its different groups of inhabitants.

An informant who claimed Phu Tai descent explained that most Phu Tai reject the label *khon isan*—for them, this term meant Lao, and they did not have a positive view of Lao people.[60] Lao people generally looked down on the Phu Tai as 'coming from the forest'. At the same time, most Phu Tai were very proud of their identity as Thais, perhaps feeling

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53 Student essay 4.
54 Student essay 5.
55 Srisakara Vallibhotama, *Aeng Ariyatham Isan* (*A Northeastern Site of Civilization*) (Matichon Publishing, Bangkok, 2003) pp. 290–3.
56 Student interview 6, 14 July 2000.
57 Student interview 8, 14 July 2000.
58 Informal interview, 12 July 2000.
59 Informant interviews 5 and 6, 14 July 2000.
60 Informant interview 10, 14 July 2000.

that they were more Thai than other Isan people.[61] Phu Tai had more in common with the Yo than with Lao. Yet asked how he would feel if he was referred to as Lao, he responded:

> If someone called me Lao, I wouldn't be angry but I wouldn't like it. If someone called me Phu Tai, I wouldn't go so far as to say I liked it. If someone called me Isan I'd be indifferent. If someone called me Thai-Isan, I'd really like it.[62]

This reply neatly illustrates the identity splits experienced by many Isan people, who have found themselves faced with a raft of alternative self-designations that could serve different purposes and have met with different forms of response. The informant clearly preferred certain identity badges over others, for reasons not readily accessible.

In fact, 'isan-ness' is not an empty signifier. Instead, it is a politically charged term designating plural voices. To understand its meanings involves critically examining the interrelationship between at least three different contested terms: Isan, Thai and Lao. From the official perspective, it is a means of managing differences and thus a potential tool of oppression. From the local viewpoint, it is a solidarity marker that Northeasterners use in resisting suppression by the mainstream, or indeed in submitting to it.

Laos and Isan

Thailand and Laos have a troubled shared history. Keyes has argued that until recently, from a Bangkok perspective: 'the Lao have been seen as needful of the civilising influences the Siamese can provide; Lao, should, moreover be rightfully under Siamese domination'.[63] Only recently has Thailand really begun to come to terms with Laos as a legitimate and separate nation.[64] The relationship between Isan and Laos is a complex and ambiguous one. Turton writes of:

> Prince Damrong's deliberate policy of distancing the Lao within Thai national borders—the 'docile other' in Thongchai's terms—from those of Laos, referring to them as northeastern Thai (*thai isan*).[65]

On one level, this distancing has provided some Isan people with an important psychological crutch. Just as Bangkokians and people from other parts of Thailand habitually look down upon Isan, so Northeasterners have been able to look down on Laos. Isan today, for all its shortcomings, is far more developed and modern than Laos. Being from Thailand allows Isan people to assume a higher status than their cousins in Laos. One university lecturer explained that his Isan students always asked him why he kept travelling to Laos, telling him that there was nothing there (*man mai mi arai leui*).[66] Isan people were proud of having surpassed Laos, of being more sophisticated and civilised. Yet for him, the similarities between Isan and Laos were utterly pervasive: the idea that Isan and Laos are different had simply been propagated by the Thai state. When Isan people went to Laos, they could not help being struck by the fact that the food, music, language and even the feelings and moods of people shared similarities with theirs. Some informants referred to

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61 Srisakara accords the Phu Thai a special status, since they 'share with the Lao the distinction of having the highest cultural level, both having countries of their own: Sip Song Chau Thai (Chau Thai) and Lan Chang (i.e. Laos)', *Isan*, p. 293. This is an interesting wider point: for Isan people, an identity associated with an actual country (past or present) could allow them to validate their claims to higher cultural and social status.
62 Informant interview 10, 16 July 2000.
63 Charles F. Keyes, 'A Princess in a People's Republic', in Andrew Turton (ed.), *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States* (Curzon, Richmond, 2000), p. 206.
64 Keyes, 'A Princess', p. 220.
65 Andrew Turton, 'Laos: A Poly-ethnic State', in Andrew Turton (ed.), *Civility*, p. 203.
66 Informant interview 2, 14 July 2000.

two kinds of 'Lao': *lao fang ni* and *lao fang non* (Lao on this side of the Mekong river, and Lao on that side).

In contrast, some Isan people admired the culture of Laos.[67] One student explained that Laos was the mother country of Isan; that Isan was populated by people who migrated from Laos.[68] This was a more positive construct than the usual view that Thailand and Laos are *phi nong* (elder and younger siblings), which always carries the implication that Thailand is the elder. Chiang Mai was also Lao, but the people who settled in and around Chiang Mai were of a higher class than those who settled in Isan. To paraphrase, the student believed that Isan was originally a region populated by migrant Lao peasants, a less sophisticated version of Laos, which lacked a high culture. These views reflect a muddled mixture of facts and misconceptions.

Some respondents demonstrated ambiguous understandings of the relationship between Isan and Laos, as in this student essay:

> Isan ancestors came from Laos, right? No. They are from our Thailand. But because of the peculiar accent, it becomes the Isan dialect. As for the Suay and Phu Tai, their languages do not quite differ from our tongue.[69] Is it true that Thai people speaking Lao means that they come from Laos? This may be possible because Lao people speak Isan mixed with Lao.[70]

In this example, the distinctions between Thai, Lao and Isan have become hopelessly commingled and blurred, leading the writer into apparently contradictory statements.

How Northeasterners View Central Thais and Vice Versa

A persistent theme among students interviewed was that central Thais were more modern and had higher social status than Northeasterners.[71] They were *phu di* ('gentlefolk'). Bangkokians and central Thais were urban people of a higher class.[72] One Isan student used the word *hi-so* (derived from the English phrase 'high society') to describe the language used by Bangkokians.[73] She pointed out that Northeasterners had to learn the language of central Thais, and that it was sometimes difficult to grasp the meaning of new words, especially those coined by teenagers. Central Thais were better educated than Northeasterners, since people in the capital city were more prominent and up to date, and quicker to adopt new forms of culture.

An informant who had spent most of her life in Bangkok argued that Bangkokians looked down on Isan people as second-class citizens.[74] She claimed that Bangkokians thought of Isan as an extremely poor region rather like Ethiopia. She cited the example of a television commercial that showed a poor Isan child eating dirt, a reflection of the crude stereotypes of Isan held by central Thais. Most interviewees argued that Bangkokians and central Thais looked down on Isan people, seeing them as provincial, poor, low class, old fashioned and uneducated.[75] One explained that, in her experience, central Thais did not really want to get to know Northeasterners. Some of her friends from the central region were reluctant to talk to her after they found out she came from Roi-Et.[76]

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67 On the recent cultural relationship between Isan and Laos, see Peter Koret, 'Books of Search: The Invention of Traditional Lao Literature as a Subject of Study', in Grant Evans (ed.), *Laos*, especially pp. 229–36.
68 Student interview 8, 14 July 2000.
69 In fact, Suay is a Mon-Khmer language unrelated to Thai.
70 Student essay 3.
71 For example, student interviews 2 and 3, 14 July 2000.
72 Student interview 4, 14 July 2000.
73 Student interview 6, 14 July 2000.
74 Informant interview 9, 14 July 2000.
75 For example, student interview 4, 14 July 2000.
76 Student interview 7, 14 July 2000.

A Bangkokian who was living and working in Isan argued that the local way of life was much more different from life in Bangkok than might have been anticipated. Many friends in a similar position had quit after a few months, unable to adapt successfully.[77]

Another student suggested there was a generations gap; whereas some central Thais were really interested in the history and culture of Isan, teenagers tended to view Isan as dirty and deprived.[78] The one non-Isan student interviewed declared that while some of her friends looked down on Lao speakers (she used the word 'Lao'), she herself felt indifferent.[79] Other Isan students tried to assert that central Thais held rather positive images of Isan people, admiring their thoughtfulness (*namjai*), mutual self-help and peaceful way of life.[80] Another declared that central Thais were born to speak only Thai, but Isan people were blessed with many languages.[81] These highly positive constructs appeared to reflect attempts to project their own regionalist sentiments onto others.

Concluding Remarks

An exploration of the discourses of identity employed by and about Northeasterners reveals a wide range of alternative understandings, and of alternative terms. Northeasterners claiming 'Lao descent'[82] may be seen as: Lao; *lao fang ni*; Lao-Isan; Lao in conjunction with a place or province, for example 'Lao-Roi-Et'; Tai-Isan; Thai-Isan; *khon isan* meaning people proud of their regional differences; *khon isan* as loyal Thais; or simply as Thai. A similar range of options exists for those with other ethnic identifications.

This research has focused on informants' accounts of their own sense of identity. Comparing these self-depictions with informants' actual behaviour would involve substantial further research, ideally employing participant-observation or other ethnographic techniques. But the material gathered for this study has been sufficient to qualify widely held views about the inexorable rise of a distinctive Isan identity that is progressively replacing residual feelings of Lao-ness. The meanings of these terms are in flux, as well as the feelings they evoke.

The idea of Isan means different things to different people, reflecting differences of age, gender, education, occupation and class. Younger and better-educated people of Lao descent, as well as most non-Lao people, often preferred to see themselves primarily as Thai. Older people of Lao descent, especially farmers and villagers, were rather more likely to express pride in their regional identity. Young Isan women seemed more enthusiastic than their male counterparts about using the Thai language.

In part, the deployment of these terms and understandings appeared to reflect real confusion. Some Northeasterners, especially younger people or those who had spent significant periods outside the region, seemed at times genuinely unsure of who they were, or how to present themselves. The statements and essays of many students were particularly incoherent, denying their Lao-ness at one moment, and asserting it at another. Sometimes it was possible to hear several competing voices in their writings or utterances: the voices of school textbooks and state orthodoxies, mixed with half-remembered views from regionalist local teachers and personal experiences drawing on life in their own communities. We were also conscious that respondents might sometimes be framing responses in line

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77 Informant interview 8, 15 July 2000.
78 Student interview 10, 14 July 2000.
79 Student interview 1, 14 July 2000.
80 Student interviews 2 and 3, 14 July 2000.
81 Student interview 5, 14 July 2000.
82 There are clearly problems with the term, but our concern here is with how individuals define their own identity. The idea of 'Lao descent' is useful insofar as it fits with peoples' ethnic self-identifications.

with their views concerning our expectations as researchers, and our analysis of their discourse included a reflexive awareness of this issue.

Just as frequently, however, these alternative modes of identity appeared to be resources on which individuals could draw. Conscious choices were made to foreground particular aspects of identity in particular contexts. Many people clearly choose to present themselves as 'Lao' among friends of the same group, for example, yet to downplay or to disavow their Lao-ness to outsiders. Whether fully consciously or not, these individuals are pursuing viable linguistic and political coping strategies in order to mediate their ambiguous positions, as they face difficult and potentially hazardous social terrain.