

# Proud to be Thai: The Puzzling Absence of Ethnicity-Based Political Cleavages in Northeastern Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

Underneath the veneer of a homogenous state-approved Thai ethnicity, Thailand is home to a heterogeneous population. Only about one-third of Thailand's inhabitants speak the national language as their mother tongue; multiple alternate ethnolinguistic groups comprise the remainder of the population, with the Lao in the northeast, often called Isan people, being the largest at 28 percent of the population. Ethnic divisions closely align with areas of political party strength: the Thai Rak Thai Party and its subsequent incarnations have enjoyed strong support from Isan people and Khammuang speakers in the north while the Democrat Party dominates among the Thai- and Paktay-speaking people of the central plains and the south. Despite this confluence of ethnicity and political party support, we see very little mobilization along ethnic cleavages. Why? I argue that ethnic mobilization remains minimal because of the large-scale public acceptance and embrace of the government-approved Thai identity. Even among the country's most disadvantaged, such as Isan people, support is still strong for "Thai-ness." Most inhabitants of Thailand espouse the mantra that to be Thai is superior to being labelled as part of an alternate ethnic group. I demonstrate this through the application of large-scale survey data as well as a set of interviews with self-identified Isan people. The findings suggest that the Thai state has successfully inculcated a sense of national identity among the Isan people and that ethnic mobilization is hindered by ardent nationalism.

**Keywords:** ethnic identity, ethnic mobilization, nation-building, nationalism, Thailand

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Over the past two decades, a clear political schism has emerged in Thailand. Recent electoral maps present bright red in the north and northeast, strongholds of the Pheu Thai Party, and deep blue in the Democratic Party's bastions of Bangkok and the southern provinces,<sup>1</sup> signalling the apparent rise of a two-party system.<sup>2</sup> These boundaries closely align with economic divisions, where the north and northeast are relatively poor compared to the central and south regions.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, party and economic cleavages correlate with ethnolinguistic maps that lump the people of the north and northeast together as speaking languages closely related to Lao in contrast with the Thai-speaking populations in the central plains and the south.<sup>4</sup> Political party lines seem to have converged geographically with these ethnic boundaries, showing a confluence of socioeconomic divisions, ethnicity, and party.

Despite these overlaps, ethnicity remains largely outside the realm of Thai political discourse. Owing to a long history of central government domination and unification,<sup>5</sup> such cleavages appear apolitical. Even so, scholars continue to identify the importance of ethnic distinctions, especially those of *Isan*, a term applied to the northeast region, its inhabitants who are ethnically Lao (*khon Isan*), and the local version of the Lao language (*phasa Isan*).<sup>6</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, "Reviving Democracy at Thailand's 2011 Election," *Asian Survey* 53, no. 4 (2013): 625. See also Duncan McCargo, Saowanee T. Alexander, and Petra Desatova, "Ordering Peace: Thailand's 2016 Constitutional Referendum," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39, no. 1 (2017): 79–85.

<sup>2</sup> Somewhat expected following the institutional engineering of the 1997 constitution. See Allen Hicken, *Building Party Systems in Developing Democracies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 127–136; Allen Hicken, "Late to the Party: The Development of Partisanship in Thailand," *TRaNS* 1, no. 2 (2013): 202–203.

<sup>3</sup> Somchai Jitsuchon and Kaspar Richter, "Thailand's Poverty Maps," in *More than a Pretty Picture: Using Poverty Maps to Design Better Policies and Interventions*, eds. Tara Bedi, Aline Coudouel, and Kenneth Simler (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2007), 244, 247; see also UNDP, *Advancing Human Development through the ASEAN Community* (Bangkok: UNDP, 2014), 63–64.

<sup>4</sup> Suwilai Premrirat et al., *Phaenthi Phasa khong Klumchatphan Tang-Tang nai Prathed Thai* [Ethnolinguistic maps of Thailand] (Bangkok: Mahidol University, 2004), 16, 33–60; ADB, *Greater Mekong Subregion Atlas of the Environment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2012), 56.

<sup>5</sup> David Streckfuss, "An 'Ethnic' Reading of 'Thai' History in the Twilight of the Century-old Official 'Thai' National Model," *Southeast Asia Research* 20, no. 3 (2015): 305–327; Amy H. Liu and Jacob I. Ricks, "Coalitions and Language Politics: Policy Shifts in Southeast Asia," *World Politics* 64, no. 3 (2012): 497–501.

<sup>6</sup> Charles F. Keyes, *Finding their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State* (Chiang Mai: Silkorm Books, 2014); Saowanee Alexander and Duncan McCargo, "Diglossia and Identity in Northeast Thailand: Linguistic, Social, and Political Hierarchy," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 18, no. 1

differences, though, do not appear regularly in national political discourse or campaigns. Although their support bases align with distinct regions, political parties refrain from making explicit ethnic appeals, instead relying on economic or personalistic overtures.<sup>7</sup> This poses a puzzle, as research has shown that when ethnic groups, especially those that align with socioeconomic inequalities, are excluded from political power, there is high potential for the emergence of ethnic campaigns.<sup>8</sup> Why, with a sufficiently large and coherent Isan population, do we not see ethnicity-based political mobilization?

I contend that ethnic mobilization remains minimal because of the extensive public adoption of a government-approved Thai identity. Over a century of state-directed nation-building efforts have convinced the Lao people of northeastern Thailand of their “Thai-ness” (*khwampen Thai*), wherein ethnic identities have been subsumed within a national narrative. Indeed, the fact that alternate tongues, including phasa Isan, are today referred to as “regional dialects” rather than distinct languages is a symbol of the state’s achievements.<sup>9</sup> Broad-scale pride in being Thai has precluded ethnicity-based mobilization.

This essay builds on a growing literature concerning Isan identity as well as the theoretical literature on ethnic peace, arguing that the process of Thai nation-building has subsumed ethnicity within a broader nationalist narrative. I provide expanded evidence of the breadth of Isan people’s adoption of the Thai identity by drawing on multiple rounds of large-scale surveys conducted in Thailand. These surveys demonstrate that Isan people have a very positive view of their Thai identity, ranking their feelings of Thai-ness higher than their counterparts from other regions. Furthermore, I present findings from a series of semi-structured interviews among self-identified khon Isan to gain greater leverage on their perceptions of identity. Both the quantitative and qualitative evidence suggest that Thai nationalism can trump ethnic identity and hinder mobilization.<sup>10</sup>

These findings provide two main contributions. First, recent work in political science has approached ethnic conflict through the alternate channel of ethnic peace, emphasizing factors such as nationalism that allow

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(2014): 60–86. Throughout this essay I refer to ethnically Lao citizens of Thailand as Isan people, or khon Isan, as there are strong negative social connotations associated with the term Lao. Although many Isan people refer to themselves as Lao, the word has frequently been employed as a derision or insult when used by central Thai speakers.

<sup>7</sup> Charles F. Keyes, *Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1967), 43–48; James Ockey, “Variations on a Theme: Societal Cleavages and Party Orientations through Multiple Transitions in Thailand,” *Party Politics* 11, no. 6 (2005): 728–747.

<sup>8</sup> Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min, “Why do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis,” *World Politics* 62, no. 1 (2010): 94–96, 109; Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 102–104, 209–210.

<sup>9</sup> Streckfuss, “‘Ethnic’ Reading,” 311–312.

<sup>10</sup> See Volha Charnysh, Christopher Lucas, and Perna Singh, “The Ties that Bind: National Identity Salience and Pro-Social Behavior Toward the Ethnic Other,” *Comparative Political Studies* 48, no. 3 (2015): 270–275.

for the stable coexistence of ethnic groups.<sup>11</sup> Isan people's embrace of the Thai national identity demonstrates the capacity of a determined state to tame alternate identities and inculcate a belief in homogenous nationhood. In other words, the integration of Lao ethnics in Thailand provides some insights into one path toward ethnic peace. Second, a growing literature in Thai studies investigates the incorporation of Isan people into the Thai nation, but scholars somewhat disagree as to the effectiveness of the state's nation-building efforts, with some highlighting Isan people's quiet resistance to the state<sup>12</sup> and others suggest a more successful incorporation.<sup>13</sup> The empirics presented here provide additional evidence, demonstrating the breadth and depth of Isan people's assimilation as Thais.

The remainder of this essay is structured as follows: I next discuss the theoretical foundations of the argument and provide a brief overview of Thailand's ethnic environment before turning to a discussion of the Thai state's extensive efforts to unify all citizens under a single Thai identity. I then demonstrate the success of these government policies, through both quantitative and qualitative data. I conclude the essay with a discussion of the implications of these findings.

### **Conditions for Ethnic Mobilization and the Northeastern Context**

A classic question in political science concerns which societal cleavages become politically salient, whether these be based in religion, ethnicity, class, ideology, or some other societal division.<sup>14</sup> Ethnic cleavages figure prominently in the literature, and many scholars consider ethnicity a relatively easy arena for political mobilization: "In general, ethnic identity is strongly felt, behavior based on ethnicity is normatively sanctioned, and ethnicity is often accompanied by hostility toward outgroups."<sup>15</sup> Political conduct based on ethnic cleavages includes both violent acts like riots and secessionist

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<sup>11</sup> Charnysh, Lucas, and Singh, "The Ties," 288–290; Andreas Wimmer, *Nation Building: Why Some Countries Come Together While Others Fall Apart* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018): 28–32.

<sup>12</sup> Saowanee and McCargo, "Diglossia," 79–80; Saowanee Alexander and Duncan McCargo, "Exit, Voice, (Dis)loyalty? Northeast Thailand after the 2014 Coup," in *After the Coup: The National Council for Peace and Order Era and the Future of Thailand*, eds. Michael Montesano et al. (Singapore: ISEAS, 2019), 90–113; Duncan McCargo and Krisadawan Hongladarom, "Contesting Isan-ness: Discourses of Politics and Identity in Northeast Thailand," *Asian Ethnicity* 5, no. 2 (2004): 219–234. See also Catherine Hess-Swain, "Speaking in Thai, Dreaming in Isan: Popular Thai Television and Emerging Identities of Lao Isan Youth living in Northeast Thailand," (PhD dissertation, Edith Cowan University, 2011), 187–188.

<sup>13</sup> Keyes, *Isan*, 36–49; Keyes, *Finding their Voice*, 175–194; Patrick Jory, "Political Decentralisation and the Resurgence of Regional Identities in Thailand," *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 34, no. 4 (1999): 348–349. See also Pamela DaGrossa, "The Meanings of Sex: University Students in Northeast Thailand" (PhD dissertation, University of Hawaii, 2003), 37–40.

<sup>14</sup> Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan, "Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments," in *Party Systems and Voter Alignments*, eds. Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan (New York: Free Press, 1967), 1–64.

<sup>15</sup> Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 7.

movements<sup>16</sup> as well as more peaceful political participation, such as involvement in political parties or voting as an ethnic bloc.<sup>17</sup>

A variety of circumstances encourage ethnic mobilization. Ethnic groups that are perpetually excluded from both socioeconomic advancement as well as government representation of their ethnic interests are more likely to organize politically.<sup>18</sup> Coherent ethnic boundaries also encourage the emergence of ethnic parties, as a well-defined group can serve as a source of party loyalty as well as a shortcut for identifying the policy and material interests of its members.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, if an ethnic group is large enough that its support can ensure participation in the governing coalition, especially when geographically concentrated, then it is likely to be an attractive source of backing for politicians.<sup>20</sup> Rational political entrepreneurs would choose to campaign on ethnic terms in order to take advantage of this potential pool of voters. If a country contains an ethnic group that is adequately populous to provide a viable voting bloc, sufficiently distinct, and suffers economic and political disadvantages, then conditions are ripe for ethnic mobilization in the political sphere.

At a theoretical level we can apply these conditions to northeastern Thailand and evaluate the extent to which we might expect ethnic mobilization to occur. First, if we consider population size and concentration, Isan people fit the characteristics of a potential power base for a political leader. Despite perceptions that Thailand is largely homogenous, the country houses a diverse population, with the most prominent indicator of ethnicity being language.<sup>21</sup> Slightly less than 40 percent of the population speaks central Thai at home; of these almost one-fourth are ethnic Chinese who have adopted the language.<sup>22</sup> Of the remaining population, the largest alternative ethnic groups are the Lao people of Isan (28 percent of the population), Khammuang speakers in the north (10 percent of the

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<sup>16</sup> Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups*, 233–236; Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 87–111.

<sup>17</sup> Alberto Alesina, Reza Baqir, and William Easterly, “Public Goods and Ethnic Divisions,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114, no. 4 (1999): 1243–1284; Johanna Birnir, *Ethnicity and Electoral Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Joel Selway, *Coalitions of the Well-Being* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Birnir, *Ethnicity*, 9–11; Cederman, Wimmer, and Min, “Why do Ethnic,” 114; Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary*, 102–104.

<sup>19</sup> Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups*, 293–296.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel N. Posner, “When and why do some Social Cleavages become Politically Salient rather than others?” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 12 (2017): 2002–2004.

<sup>21</sup> Joel Sawat Selway, “Ethnicity and Democracy,” in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization*, ed. William Case (New York: Routledge, 2015), 148.

<sup>22</sup> Paul M. Lewis, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig, “Ethnologue: Languages of Thailand,” in *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, vol. 18, eds. Lewis et al. (Dallas, TX: SIL International), 29; Charles F. Keyes, “The Politics of Language in Thailand and Laos,” in *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia*, eds. Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 193; William A. Smalley, *Linguistic Diversity and National Unity: Language Ecology in Thailand* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 369.

population), and Paktay speakers located in the south (9 percent of the population).<sup>23</sup> Making up almost one-third of the population and being geographically concentrated in a specific region means that the Isan population, if mobilized to vote along ethnic lines, would provide an important block of seats for a parliamentary coalition. Indeed, as Joel Selway has demonstrated, similar electoral rules to Thailand's 1979–1997 block vote system resulted in enduring ethnic mobilization in Mauritius.<sup>24</sup> After 1997, the creation of single-member districts throughout the country as well as the party list system would have also allowed for an Isan-based party to successfully obtain approximately 30 percent of parliamentary seats. Thus, ethnic mobilization would have made some sense in the Thai context based on group size and geographic concentration.

Second, an Isan identity has persisted and strengthened, counter to the official Thai discourse.<sup>25</sup> While Isan people must negotiate their identities within the official requirements of the Thai state, “being Isan” became more prominent during the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>26</sup> The identity is sufficiently coherent that Isan linguistic appeals have been shown to be more effective in garnering political support than overtures in central Thai.<sup>27</sup> While it is difficult to establish a threshold strength for ethnic mobilization, it does appear that the Isan identity is strong enough to serve as a base for electoral politics.

Third, Isan people have experienced both economic and political exclusion from the Thai state. The region lags behind the rest of the country's economy. State interventions to alleviate poor economic outcomes in the northeast were historically driven primarily by security concerns, especially the potential rise of communism during the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, rather than an interest in the welfare of Isan people.<sup>28</sup> The Thai state pushed development projects to win the hearts and minds of the people, but this strategy was relatively ineffective in promoting economic growth. Instead many locals suffered both implied and real slights at the hands of government officials from central Thailand.<sup>29</sup> As Thailand's economy boomed in the 1980s and 1990s, the northeast trailed behind. Although poverty fell dramatically, it became regionally concentrated, especially in the northeast, where “poverty incidence was at least 50 percent in excess of the national average.”<sup>30</sup>

Politically, Isan people have not fared much better. The idea of a regional political party was floated in the late 1950s, but this was suppressed by

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<sup>23</sup> Suwilai et al., *Phaenthi*, 17; Lewis, Simmons, and Fennig, “Ethnologue,” 29–32.

<sup>24</sup> Selway, *Coalitions*, 95–99, 161–165.

<sup>25</sup> McCargo and Krisadawan, “Contesting Isan-ness,” 219–234.

<sup>26</sup> Jory, “Political Decentralisation,” 341–342.

<sup>27</sup> Jacob I. Ricks, “The Effect of Language on Political Appeal: Results from a Survey Experiment in Thailand,” *Political Behavior* (2018): 12–16, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-018-9487-z>

<sup>28</sup> Keyes, *Finding Their Voice*, 99–102, 115–118.

<sup>29</sup> Somchai Phatharathananunth, “Political Resistance in Isan,” *Tai Culture* 7, no. 1 (2002): 123–125.

<sup>30</sup> Somchai and Richter, “Thailand's Poverty Maps,” 247; UNDP, *Advancing*, 63–64, 116–118.

successive military regimes, which saw a politically active Isan as a threat to the Thai nation and responded with counterinsurgency programs and suppression rather than inclusion in the body politic.<sup>31</sup> Promising Isan leaders who gained political reputations in the 1940s were silenced by the state, with multiple members of parliament from the region being executed between the late 1940s and early 1960s.<sup>32</sup> Other political movements have failed to take root, with the most long-lasting political organizations being based on prominent families and personalistic appeals, such as the Chidchob clan in Burriram, rather than ethnic mobilization. In the 1990s, an attempt to build the New Aspiration Party in the region failed to take on an Isan character.<sup>33</sup> Both the Thai Rak Thai and Pheu Thai party organizations, which relied heavily on Isan people for support, displayed few Isan leaders. Even the Red Shirt movement, with a strong northeastern following, is piloted by non-Isan political figures.<sup>34</sup> Appeals to the Isan people do not rely on descriptive representation, and an Isan identity remains absent from national politics.

Under these conditions it would seem that the region is primed for ethnic mobilization. Yet it has not occurred. This is certainly not due to any devolution of power or regional autonomy,<sup>35</sup> as the Thai state remains highly centralized. Nor can we completely blame the design of electoral rules.<sup>36</sup> Instead, the answer to a lack of ethnic mobilization can be found in the Thai state's nation-building process.

### **Homogenizing Thailand**

Research on peaceful multi-ethnic societies has recently highlighted the role of nation-building in surmounting potential ethnic cleavages, as strong feelings of nationalism can overcome ethnic boundaries and decrease demands for ethnicity-based benefits, reducing the propensity for ethnic conflict.<sup>37</sup> Two key components to this process are social closure as well as linguistic homogenization. First, social closure refers to the degree to which an ethnic group's boundaries are exclusive and impermeable.<sup>38</sup> Higher

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<sup>31</sup> Keyes, *Finding Their Voice*, 88–89, 101–102.

<sup>32</sup> Saowanee and McCargo, "Exit," 95–96.

<sup>33</sup> Duncan McCargo, "Thailand's Political Parties: Real, Authentic, and Actual," in *Political Change in Thailand*, ed. Kevin Hewison (New York: Routledge, 1997), 127–129.

<sup>34</sup> Saowanee and McCargo, "Exit," 111.

<sup>35</sup> See Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups*, 601–628; Chaim Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars," *International Security* 20, no. 4 (1996): 150–151, 158–159.

<sup>36</sup> Ockey argues that party membership rules from 1979–1997 reduced regionalism in parties, but he then acknowledges that these rules allowed the Democrat Party to engage in southern regionalism. Selway shows that similar electoral rules in other contexts have resulted in ethnic parties. Post-1997 electoral rules were more favourable to large parties, but that does not necessarily preclude ethnic mobilization. See Ockey, "Variations," 738, 741–742; James Ockey, *Making Democracy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 34–35; Selway, *Coalitions*, 95–99, 161–165.

<sup>37</sup> Chamysh, Lucas, and Singh, "The Ties that Bind," 288–292.

<sup>38</sup> Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary*, 83–86.

degrees of social closure, especially between the metropole group and minorities, translate into stark divides and social and political exclusion of alternate ethnic groups. Social closure can encourage conflict between ethnic groups while porous identities encourage peaceful coexistence. Second, monolingualism serves as a powerful component of nation-building.<sup>39</sup> If “the entire population is schooled in the same curriculum with the same underlying nationalist message, irrespective of the actual languages spoken by the population,” nation-building will be more effective in overcoming the centripetal forces of ethnicity.<sup>40</sup> In essence, a centralized nation-building process including low levels of social closure as well as standardized language training can circumvent the propensity for ethnic mobilization.

Thailand’s experience echoes these claims. The Thai state has been very careful to standardize and centralize language training as well as officially refrain from social closure by absorbing alternate ethnicities into Thai-ness.<sup>41</sup> This process began in the 1890s, when the Thai state initiated a century-long series of government policies designed to assimilate populations located within Thai borders under a single, government-approved Thai ethnicity.<sup>42</sup> The Thai elite, a relatively homogenous group, used their social position and dominance over the political system to reward those who adopted and embraced their version of Thai-ness through creating an “official nationalism,”<sup>43</sup> which operated via a few mechanisms, including the creation of an ethnic and linguistic hierarchy wherein the state-approved Thai identity enjoys higher status and recognition than any other identity. The hierarchy, though, was permeable. Those who wished to become Thai could do so by abandoning previous ethnic affiliations. This held for both Chinese immigrants as well as native inhabitants of the country; those who surrendered their former ethnicity in favour of Thai-ness enjoyed upward social mobility.<sup>44</sup> Kukrit Pramoj, a member of the elite who also served briefly as prime minister, explained the fluid nature of Thai-ness:

A Thai is not a person who is born by blood ... if you do something to yourself, then you become a Thai. [This] means you accept Thai values, Thai ideals, mostly you become a Buddhist ... you are loyal to the king and ... to the Thai nation...<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Amy H. Liu, *Standardizing Diversity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 23–24, 29–32.

<sup>40</sup> Wimmer, *Nation Building*, 30–32.

<sup>41</sup> With exceptions. See Duncan McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Liu and Ricks, “Coalitions,” 497–501; Joel Sawat Selway, “Turning Malays into Thai-men: Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Economic Inequality in Thailand,” *Southeast Asia Research* 15, no. 1 (2007): 82–83. Streckfuss, “‘Ethnic’ Reading,” 306–313.

<sup>43</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 99–101.

<sup>44</sup> William G. Skinner, “Change and Persistence in Chinese Culture Overseas,” *Journal of the South Seas Society* 16 (1960): 86–100.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Smalley, *Linguistic Diversity*, 322–323.

The hierarchy placed being Thai at the pinnacle of society, but the gates of Thai-ness were hypothetically open to all who conformed to the requirements.

Crucial to the hierarchy was language, and central or Standard Thai became privileged above the alternative languages which served as the primary indicators of ethnicity.<sup>46</sup> The Thai state spread Standard Thai throughout the country via a centralized curriculum, reducing the perception of the language's exclusivity. Learning and speaking Standard Thai became a vital component of being Thai.<sup>47</sup> Acting as a carrot for alternate ethnicities within the Thai geo-body, the high status of the Thai ethnicity encouraged its adoption, primarily through language.

On the other hand, creating "Thai-ness" involved identifying non-Thais as a threat to national security, and, as such, the cultural diversity found within the boundaries of the Thai state was a danger to be overcome and defeated.<sup>48</sup> Consolidation of Thai identity began under the centralizing reforms of King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910) and continued after the fall of the absolute monarchy, in large part thanks to successive military governments. Policies included forced standardization of language, religion, social practices, and even changing the name of the country from Siam to Thailand to better align the Thai ethnicity with the country's boundaries.<sup>49</sup> Regional movements were also crushed, including the brutal quelling of the northeast's Holy Man rebellion in 1902<sup>50</sup> as well as suppression of Buddhist movements in the north, most famously the large following of Khruba Sriwichai.<sup>51</sup> Later, as mentioned above, under military dictatorship in the late 1940s and the 1950s, political leaders from the northeast, as well as other regions, were brutally murdered by the state to reduce challenges to the centralized Thai authority.<sup>52</sup>

Punishments for not being satisfactorily "Thai" continue today. The current military dictator Prayuth Chan-ocha, frustrated with a lack of support for his policies, has accused both adversaries and skeptics of not being Thai.<sup>53</sup> Such allegations are dangerous, as "being defined as non-Thai can have fatal

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<sup>46</sup> Anthony Diller, "What Makes Central Thai a National Language?" in *National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand Today*, ed. Craig J. Reynolds (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002), 84–88.

<sup>47</sup> Smalley, *Linguistic Diversity*, 340.

<sup>48</sup> Pinkaew Laungaramsri, "Ethnicity and the Politics of Ethnic Classification in Thailand," in *Ethnicity in Asia*, ed. Colin Mackerras (New York: Routledge, 2003), 161.

<sup>49</sup> Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Thailand's Durable Premier: Phibun through Three Decades, 1932–1957* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 110–129.

<sup>50</sup> Somchai, "Political Resistance," 109–113.

<sup>51</sup> Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand," *Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 3 (1971): 554–559.

<sup>52</sup> Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 59–62, 127–130.

<sup>53</sup> "Big Tu Siachai Khon Bangkok Mai Khaochai Panha Thaem Chobprachan Prathed Tham Pen Khon Thai Rue Plao?" [Big Tu, disappointed that some don't understand problems and abuse the country, asks are you Thai?], *Matichon Online*, 17 March 2017, [https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news\\_499177](https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_499177).

consequences.”<sup>54</sup> The Thai identity can also threaten alternate political camps. To be castigated as being insufficiently Thai has become a political weapon.

The omnipresent force of Thai-ness has found its way into both political and societal discourses. Indeed, politicians effectively used appeals to national unity as part of their efforts to encourage political support. Prominent examples include the naming of Thaksin Shinawatra’s political party “Thais Love Thais” (Thai Rak Thai) and its successors “For Thais” (Pheu Thai) and “Thais Save the Nation” (Thai Raksa Chart).<sup>55</sup> On the opposite side of the political spectrum, Suthep Thaugsuban also called on national pride during his “Shutdown Bangkok, Restart Thailand” campaign, adorning himself with flags and calling on “Thai brothers and sisters” (*phinong chao Thai*) to stand up against the absent Thaksin. Beyond politics, the embrace of Thai-ness has been popularized, evidenced in a broad swath of musical numbers, including the rock group Carabao’s well-known chorus, “Are you Thai?” (*khon Thai rue plao*).<sup>56</sup>

Thus, the Thai state created an absorbent Thai national identity, allowing for assimilation of alternate ethnic groups. This was reinforced by homogenizing the national language through a centralized education curriculum. Enforcement included the castigation, both political and social, of alternative identities using violent means. Over a century’s worth of government policy has been designed to neutralize challenges from alternative ethnic groups and promote a uniform, state-sanctioned Thai-ness. Now we turn to the data to better understand the impact of these efforts.

### **Being Proud to Be Thai**

Scholars of Thailand have debated the magnitude of Isan people’s integration into the Thai state. Charles Keyes depicts Isan people accepting their Thai-ness largely in response to top-down policies by the state education system to define them as Thai as well as their own efforts to engage in the broader economy.<sup>57</sup> As the Isan population has become an active force in Thai politics, especially in recent decades, their involvement has been based on economic

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<sup>54</sup> Pravit Rojanaphruk, “How ‘Are you Thai?’ Accuses and Deflects Dangerously,” *Khaosod English*, 25 March 2017, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/opinion/2017/03/25/insidious-identity-politics-thai/>.

<sup>55</sup> The use of nationalistic terms in party titles, such as Thai or *chart* (nation), is not limited to the Thaksin-affiliated parties.

<sup>56</sup> Other well-known musical acts promoting a unified Thai-ness include Sek Loso’s “Thai Together” (*ruam pen Thai*) and “Thai Blood” (*sai luead Thai*) and the collaboration with Amphol & Micro, Big Ass, and Bodyslam titled “Thai’s United Heart” (*khon Thai huachai diawkan*). This is not to mention General Prayuth Chan-Ocha’s own musical contribution of “Returning Happiness to Thailand” (*khuen khwamsuk hai prathed Thai*).

<sup>57</sup> Keyes, *Finding their Voice*, 110–111, 140–149.

claims rather than ethnic or regional mobilization.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Somchai Phatharathananunth's research into radicalism in the Isan found that, despite the growth of an ethno-regional consciousness and continued resistance to the Thai state, "Bangkok was able to secure the loyalty of Isan people to the Thai nation."<sup>59</sup> Saowanee Alexander, Duncan McCargo, and Krisadawan Hongladarom have offered a different perspective, contending that the Lao people of the northeast are engaged in defining and redefining their identities, frequently in opposition to the Thai state.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the literature exhibits a nuanced division, acknowledging that the Lao people of the northeast have integrated as Thai citizens, but differing in their interpretation of the degree of Isan people's acceptance of Thai national identity.

Building on this literature, I use large-scale surveys to further investigate these claims. Appealing to a series of surveys that have been conducted throughout Thailand, I demonstrate that Isan speakers, in general, exhibit even higher levels of national pride and identification with the Thai identity than their compatriots. The scale and representativeness of these surveys give added credence to the claim that Isan people are proud to be Thai. These findings also suggest that one reason ethnic mobilization doesn't occur is that Isan people adhere so strongly to Thai-ness that purely ethnic appeals may struggle to gain traction.

The data collected in the surveys, though, fails to tell us much about the interaction between the Thai and Isan identity, as well as the propensity for Isan people to gauge the strength of one identity over the other. As such, in addition to these surveys, I turn to a series of semi-structured interviews carried out with khon Isan, examining how these individuals perceive the Thai identity.

### *Surveys*

Between 2007 and 2014, the Asian Barometer (AB)<sup>61</sup> and the World Values Survey (WVS)<sup>62</sup> conducted four large-scale surveys in Thailand, recording the primary language spoken at home by their respondents, allowing us to identify speakers of central Thai and phasa Isan, as reported in table 1. By comparing responses to survey questions between different ethnolinguistic groups in Thailand, we are able to test the extent to which the Thai state's nation-building efforts have been successful. For instance, if we see that phasa Isan speakers consistently score feelings of national identity lower than their central Thai-speaking counterparts, as one might expect from an economically

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<sup>58</sup> Keyes, *Isan*, 36–49; Keyes, *Finding their Voice*, 175–194.

<sup>59</sup> Somchai, "Political Resistance," 129.

<sup>60</sup> Saowanee and McCargo, "Diglossia," 79–80; McCargo and Krisadawan, "Contesting," 229–230.

<sup>61</sup> Fu Hu and Yun-han Chu, *Asian Barometer: All Rounds* (Taipei: National Taiwan University, 2017), [www.asianbarometer.org](http://www.asianbarometer.org).

<sup>62</sup> Ronald Inglehart et al., eds., *World Values Survey: All Rounds – Country-Pooled Datafile* (Madrid: JD Systems Institute, 2014), [www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org).

disadvantaged group,<sup>63</sup> then we might question the degree to which integration efforts were successful. On the other hand, if we see that Isan people respond to questions of national identity similarly to central Thai speakers despite the economic and social disadvantages they face as Thai citizens, we can be more confident that Isan people have integrated Thainess as part of their identities.

*Table 1*  
*Distribution of speakers in Asian Barometer and World Values Survey*

	Central Thai speakers	Phasa Isan speakers	Khammuang speakers	Paktay speakers
AB wave 3 (Aug-Dec 2010)	772 (51.06)	450 (29.76)	63 (4.17)	161 (10.65)
AB wave 4 (Aug-Oct 2014)	539 (44.92)	414 (34.50)	147 (12.25)	87 (7.25)
WVS wave 5 (June-July 2007)	641 (41.79)	494 (32.20)	106 (6.91)	175 (11.41)
WVS wave 6 (September 2013)	560 (46.67)	403 (33.58)	81 (6.75)	106 (8.83)

*Note:* Percent of total responses in parentheses.

*Sources:* Hu and Chu, *Asian Barometer*; Inglehart et al., *World Values Survey*

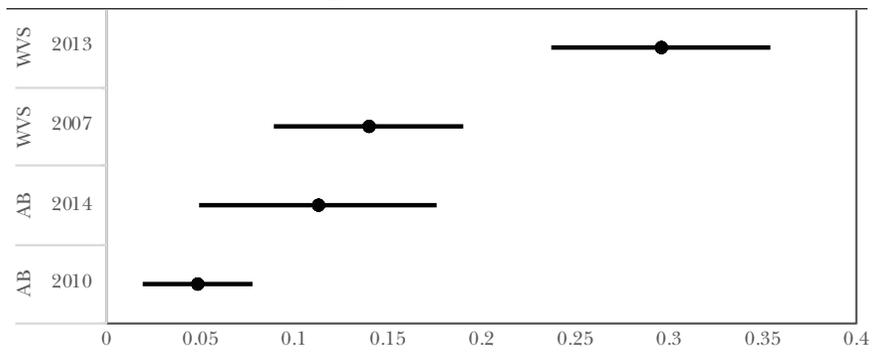
While neither the AB nor the WVS is expressly concerned with national identity formation, both surveys ask several questions that can be used to gauge feelings of national integration. The most prominent of these is a question about a respondent's level of pride in being a citizen of Thailand, which was asked in all four surveys.<sup>64</sup> Thais in general are quite proud of their nation, with over 80 percent of respondents scoring themselves as "Very Proud" to be Thai. Even so, there is a small amount of variation between the language groups. By dividing the sample between those who speak central Thai and those who speak phasa Isan at home, we can test whether there is a statistically significant difference between their responses. In all four of these survey rounds, phasa Isan speakers, on average, ranked their pride in the nation as higher than native central Thai speakers. Difference of means scores are shown in figure 1 along with their confidence intervals, demonstrating that the gap between phasa Isan speakers and central Thai speakers is statistically significant. Further data analysis also shows that Isan

<sup>63</sup> Karl W. Deutsch, "The Price of Integration," in *The Integration of Political Communities*, eds. Phillip E. Jacob and James V. Toscano (Philadelphia: JP Lippincott, 1964), 143–178.

<sup>64</sup> In AB this question took the form of "How proud are you to be a citizen of Thailand?" In the WVS, the question was phrased slightly differently, as "How proud are you to be Thai?"

people scored significantly higher on these responses than the other ethnolinguistic groups (Khammuang and Paktay).<sup>65</sup> While degrees are small due to the overwhelmingly positive feelings of Thais about their national identity, the results demonstrate that Isan people, despite their history of exclusion from the Thai body politic, feel positively about their Thai national identity. Indeed, from all four surveys, only a total of nine phasa Isan speakers indicated that they were less than proud to be Thai, with eight of these responses occurring in 2014 after the most recent coup wherein Yingluck Shinawatra, who was very popular in Isan, was deposed by the military. Such a small swing of only eight respondents indicates the strength of national pride among Isan people. The remaining 1,748 Isan language-speaking respondents spread throughout all four surveys claimed that they were either very proud or quite proud to be Thai.

*Figure 1*  
*Difference of means between phasa Isan and central Thai speakers for responses to “How proud are you to be Thai?”*



*Note:* Average score for central Thai speakers serves as the base (0), bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

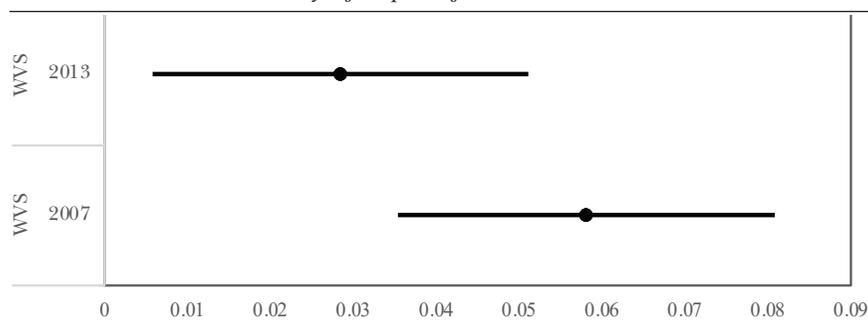
*Source:* Hu and Chu, *Asian Barometer*, waves 3 and 4; Inglehart et al., *World Values Survey*, waves 5 and 6.

Other questions in the surveys provide additional insights into feelings of national identity that vary between ethnic groups in Thailand. In both waves of the WVS, respondents were asked the degree to which they agreed with the statement, “I see myself as part of the Thai nation [*khit wa toneng*

<sup>65</sup> A Kruskal-Wallis H test with post-hoc Dunn’s tests indicate that in AB wave 4, phasa Isan speakers had ranked their pride in the Thai nation significantly higher than their counterparts who spoke central Thai, Khammuang, and Paktay. In both AB wave 3 and WVS wave 6, phasa Isan speakers ranked their pride in the Thai nation significantly higher than the central Thai and Paktay speakers but there was no significant difference between phasa Isan speakers and Khammuang speakers. In WVS wave 5, phasa Isan speakers scored significantly higher than central Thai speakers, but there was no significant difference between them and speakers of both Khammuang and Paktay. These results are available in the appendix.

*pen suannueng khong chat Thai*].” The overwhelming response among respondents was to either strongly agree or agree with the statement; in wave 5 the scores totaled 96.4 percent of responses and in wave 6 the number was 95.8 percent. In both cases, though, Isan people again showed their identification with the Thai nation, with 99.4 and 98.5 percent of phasa Isan speakers providing affirmative scores to the question in the respective waves. Across both waves of the survey, only nine out of 897 phasa Isan speakers expressed the feeling that they were not part of the Thai nation. Again, when compared with central Thai speakers using a difference of means test, phasa Isan speakers were statistically more likely to either strongly agree or agree that they were part of the Thai nation, related in figure 2.

*Figure 2*  
*Difference of means between phasa Isan and central Thai speakers for responses to “I see myself as part of the Thai nation.”*



*Note:* Average score for central Thai speakers serves as the base (0), bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

*Source:* Inglehart et al., *World Values Survey*, waves 5 and 6.

The third and fourth wave of the AB surveys included a set of questions that allow us to develop a composite variable measuring feelings of nationalism.<sup>66</sup> The creation of this continuous variable gives us another opportunity to test the degree to which Isan language speakers exhibit commitment to Thailand and the Thai identity relative to all other survey respondents. I do this through a simple linear regression model, which included control variables for gender, age, education level, income level, and whether the respondent lived in an urban area. The results demonstrate that respondents who speak phasa Isan at home exhibit higher levels of

<sup>66</sup> The index included the following four responses: (1) How proud are you to be a citizen of Thailand?; (2) Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government; (3) A citizen should always remain loyal only to his country, no matter how imperfect it is or what wrong it has done; (4) Given the chance, how willing would you be to go and live in another country? These were reordered to reflect higher values corresponding with higher commitment to Thailand before using factor analysis to create a predicted nationalism variable. I also conducted the analysis with an index variable with similar results.

identification with the Thai nation than their compatriots who speak other mother tongues, even when controlling for a set of demographic variables.<sup>67</sup> In other words, this test gives us greater confidence that being a phasa Isan speaker is positively correlated with higher levels of nationalistic feeling.

The data from these large-scale surveys support the claim that the clear majority of Isan people have internalized the Thai state's efforts to imbue all citizens with a sense of Thai-ness. If the government's efforts to inculcate a Thai identity into the people of northeastern Thailand had not been successful, we would have expected these survey results to exhibit lower levels of national pride among phasa Isan speakers in comparison with those who speak central Thai at home. The results, though, show the opposite: Isan people display greater commitment to the national identity than native speakers of central Thai. Even though these differences are small, they provide strong evidence that Isan people are proud to be Thai.

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

To better understand this phenomenon, during three short research trips to Thailand in December 2016, and April and July 2017, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with 23 individuals who identify as khon Isan.<sup>68</sup> As my goal was to speak with respondents from a variety of life circumstances, interviewees were chosen through two methods. First, I approached personal contacts who identified as Isan people to obtain their feedback and, via a snowballing process, obtained respondents. Second, I used street-contacting to identify Isan-language speakers and to invite them for an interview.<sup>69</sup> Interviewees included highly-educated and relatively wealthy individuals as well as those with only a primary school education in the lowest income bracket; four interviewees were living in Bangkok while the remainder were based in the northeast.<sup>70</sup> Interviews were conducted in central Thai, with some phasa Isan phrases sprinkled throughout, and were recorded before being translated and transcribed in English by the author.<sup>71</sup>

Confirming the findings of the large-scale surveys, all interviewees expressed a strong and abiding commitment to the national Thai identity. I adopted the same question as the large-scale surveys, "How proud are you

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<sup>67</sup> The relationship between speaking Isan at home and feelings of national identity was positive and statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) in the data for both AB wave 3 and wave 4. These results are available in the appendix.

<sup>68</sup> Interviews followed IRB protocols (SMU-IRB Approval Number: IRB-16-130-A134[1216]).

<sup>69</sup> Similar to previous work. Yoshinori Nishizaki, *Political Authority and Provincial Identity in Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>70</sup> Interviewee demographics are available in the appendix.

<sup>71</sup> Interviewees were immediately aware that I am not a native speaker of either Thai or phasa Isan; as such there is potential that responses were biased in order to give a more positive impression of Thai-ness than interviewees might give to a co-ethnic researcher. While I acknowledge this, it was my impression that most interviewees were earnest in their responses as they took the opportunity to instruct an outsider on what they perceive it means to be Thai.

to be Thai? (*khun rusuek phumchai nai khwampen/sachat Thai thueng phiang dai*),” before asking them to explain. Typical responses included the following:

I’m very proud. Because I have read about our history as a nation coming from our ancestors. We were never colonized. Even though we’re not very wealthy, we are very proud ... . I believe it’s very lucky that I was born in Thailand ... . I am from Sisaket, which is almost in Cambodia, so I was almost born a Cambodian. But I was born in Thailand and am Thai.<sup>72</sup>

I am *extremely* proud of being Thai (*phumchai mak thisut*) ... because I was born under the 9<sup>th</sup> monarch of the Chakri Dynasty!<sup>73</sup>

All interviewees expressed feelings of Thai nationalism, and some repeatedly highlighted their efforts to express their Thai identity over their Isan-ness (*khawmpen Isan*). Others incorporated their Isan-ness within a broader Thai identity.

This was, in part, due to the positive benefits interviewees perceived to come from being Thai rather than khon Isan. For instance, one respondent spoke of avoiding using phasa Isan due to his career. As a teacher, he argued, he should only use formal language to set a good example for others and maintain the respect of his students. His Isan-ness needed to be subsumed within his Thai-ness during work and other formal interactions; only when with close friends or family did he feel he could be fully khon Isan.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, a financial manager for a law office explained that he used Isan language in a strategic fashion. During everyday interactions, he might use phasa Isan,

... but when I need to give [subordinates] instructions for work, then I give instructions in Thai. That’s more formal and clear. Then they know that they must do the work. So, it depends on the situation. Usually if someone speaks phasa Isan with me, I’ll use phasa Isan with them, except when we need to talk about something formal. I ... switch directly to Thai. People who work at the office, they know that I’m the boss, so they will only speak Thai with me. It’s like from the time we were in school. Students always had to use Thai with the teacher, even when the teacher was khon Isan. Anything formal in life needs to be done in Thai.<sup>75</sup>

Most respondents explained that they used Isan language throughout the majority of their daily interactions, but they would switch to Thai when

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<sup>72</sup> Respondent 1, interview with author, Bangkok, 14 December 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Respondent 11, interview with author, Khon Kaen, 6 April 2017. It is important to note that such responses came from individuals across the economic and educational spectrum. For instance, respondent 1 was a well-educated public-school teacher living in Bangkok, while respondent 11 had only a primary school education and worked as a mechanic in Khon Kaen.

<sup>74</sup> Respondent 1, interview, 14 December 2016.

<sup>75</sup> Respondent 4, interview with author, Bangkok, 16 December 2016.

contacting government officials or conducting any official business. Thai identity and language thus become symbols of education, wealth, refinement, and higher social status. This is evidence of the effect of positive inducements developed by the Thai state wherein the government-approved Thai identity sits atop a hierarchy of potential identities.

The positive inducements or necessities of adopting a Thai identity result in efforts by Isan people to limit the use of their own mother tongue. A Bangkok-based taxi driver from Maha Sarakham explained:

... whenever we need to communicate something, we must use Thai. Phasa Isan is only our regional language. Old people use the language, but some of the younger people today almost can't speak phasa Isan... in Bangkok, we must use Thai. In my family, between husband and wife, we use phasa Isan, but with our children we try to promote Thai. Sometimes our children will speak to us in phasa Isan, and they understand it. But they don't speak it like in the past.<sup>76</sup>

Another respondent related that his parents had taken pains to only speak central Thai with him as he grew up:

My parents speak phasa Isan, but they don't speak it with us [children] ... you'll often see urban Isan people try not to speak phasa Isan with their kids ... If a child starts speaking phasa Isan they'll have an accent. You can distinguish them and tell because they won't speak clear and proper central Thai. [Fear of an accent] might be the reason.<sup>77</sup>

Some respondents observed that fewer young people were speaking phasa Isan in their public lives and some had completely abandoned it in favour of central Thai. One young woman planned to speak primarily central Thai with her future children:

They need to be prepared to do well in school using Thai ... schools use central Thai, and I want [the children] to follow the same pattern as their classmates. I don't want them to have problems in their life ... So it's better to use the central language in childhood.<sup>78</sup>

Many Isan people, then, are striving to embrace the Thai identity to access the economic and social benefits that come from being Thai.

At the same time as positive inducements encourage the adoption of the Thai identity, negative repercussions of being khon Isan also deter the growth of the identity. Such adverse effects include broad narratives that Isan people are socially less desirable than the metropolitan central Thais of Bangkok. These narratives were adopted by some respondents. An entrepreneur born

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<sup>76</sup> Respondent 2, interview with author, Bangkok, 15 December 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Respondent 9, interview with author, Khon Kaen, 5 April 2017.

<sup>78</sup> Respondent 16, interview with author, Khon Kaen, 19 July 2017.

in Roi Et who had relocated to Bangkok and had supported the yellow shirt movement explained that Isan people were poorly educated and easily led about by politicians.<sup>79</sup> Multiple respondents acknowledged that there was a negative stigma assigned to being khon Isan. One related:

I know that some people from other regions look down on phasa Isan speakers ... They'll call them Lao or *siao*, and I know they're being insulting. In reality most Isan people are Lao. But central Thai people won't say it to your face.<sup>80</sup>

Negative social shaming has a powerful effect on the feelings of Isan people and their willingness to publicly identify as Lao. Another interviewee further explained:

Most of us don't want to be called "*ai lao*." People call us that. It's not very nice and the central Thai people call us that. They also don't speak proper or polite central Thai with us ... They like to look down on other regions.<sup>81</sup>

Interestingly, one woman from Maha Sarakham claimed that the individuals who engage in the greatest social shaming are people originally from the northeast who have moved to Bangkok and adopted the Bangkok identity and subsequently mock their former home: "Isan is not developed and is full of yokels (*khon bannok*)."<sup>82</sup>

Even so, this shaming did not result in any retaliatory claims that Isan people's rights to speak their native language or identity as khon Isan were being violated. Instead, respondents accepted this as a fact of life and echoed the government's calls for unity among all Thais. One argued, "We need to try and be united. We're all Thai people, we can all use Thai together. We can't force [central Thais] to speak phasa Isan ... we can try to get them to accept our Isan-ness. That's better than getting angry."<sup>83</sup> Another claimed that any tension between Isan people and central Thais was the result of politicians trying to stir up support rather than any violation of Isan people's identity or rights. Indeed, tensions between the northeast and the central region, according to the respondent, were because "khon Isan will sometimes easily believe things."<sup>84</sup> Among all interviewees there were no discussions of rights for Isan people to use the Isan language or identify publicly as khon Isan. When asked whether phasa Isan should be taught formally in schools, the majority of respondents replied with a resounding no. There was, though, an undertone of resentment during some discussion about the treatment of

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<sup>79</sup> Respondent 3, interview with author, Bangkok, 16 December 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Respondent 2, interview, 15 December 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Respondent 20, interview with author, Khon Kaen, 19 July 2017.

<sup>82</sup> Respondent 13, interview with author, Khon Kaen, 6 April 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Respondent 1, interview, 14 December 2016.

<sup>84</sup> Respondent 3, interview, 16 December 2016.

Isan people. One explained that during his younger years working in Bangkok, he was frequently subject to insult and ridicule by central Thais for being khon Isan, but the only response available was to “be quiet and just endure it.”<sup>85</sup> One young man from Udon Thani province explained:

I think it's Isan that pays [for the happiness of Thailand]. First, we see that Isan people are the most populous of the country. Second, Isan people are the ones who go to work everywhere else in the country. The region that benefits the most is central region. First, they are the bosses. Second, they have a nice life already. If we go and work for them, we don't have the right to oppose or cause problems because we are employed by them.<sup>86</sup>

These feelings of resentment, though, appear to simmer beneath a cover of Thai unity, and importantly, all respondents were quick to reassert their Thai-ness.

Despite both the positive inducements to adopt central Thai and the negative connotations of Isan-ness, respondents all expressed some degree of pride in their Isan identity. One native of Kalasin said, “My Isan identity is stronger than my Thai identity ... Isan-ness is part of being Thai, but [Isan] is where I'm from and I feel it deeper.”<sup>87</sup> The feelings of unity and closeness among Isan people were reinforced by the use of Isan language, a love of Isan food, and belief in common Isan practices which differed from those of the central Thais. Interviewees argued, though, that there was little separating Isan and Thai identity. A street vendor in Khon Kaen, who laughed as she declared herself to be “authentically Lao (*lao thae thae*),” also repeatedly affirmed that she was proud to be Thai and felt herself part of the Thai nation.<sup>88</sup> A native of Sakon Nakhorn, when asked to gauge whether she was more proud of being Thai or being khon Isan, retorted:

I have to explain to you that Isan people are Thai. There's not a separation. If we are proud of our Isan-ness, we are also proud of our Thai-ness because Isan people are Thai people.<sup>89</sup>

She was not alone in this belief. Other respondents explained that they were distinct from the Lao across the Mekhong, despite acknowledging a shared history. The use of the term “Isan” became important in these discussions, as being Isan allowed respondents to differentiate between themselves as Thais and the Lao living in Laos. While many acknowledged speaking Lao, most insisted that they were Isan people. The ethnic identity of Lao has been

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<sup>85</sup> Respondent 23, interview with author, Sakon Nakhon, 24 July 2017.

<sup>86</sup> Respondent 14, interview with author, Khon Kaen, 19 July 2017.

<sup>87</sup> Respondent 5, interview with author, Khon Kaen, 5 April 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Respondent 12, interview with author, Khon Kaen, 6 April 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Respondent 21, interview with author, Sakon Nakhon, 24 July 2017.

largely set aside in favour of an Isan identity which is subsumed within the Thai identity.

Finally, I also spoke with respondents about the use of Isan language in political messages to gauge their feelings about potential ethnic mobilization. Respondents were split on their support of the use of phasa Isan in political discourse. Most acknowledged that using the tongue would be electorally beneficial in local campaigning, and many expressed the belief that a politician who spoke phasa Isan would be more familiar with voters' challenges and concerns. At the same time, though, almost all respondents who answered the line of questions quickly turned to a discussion of national needs for clear communication across regions. A native of Udon Thani offered a typical response:

We have six regions in Thailand, and each uses a different language. They are very different languages. If you just use phasa Isan, then not everyone can understand... People need to use the central language. There's something that is necessary to pull everyone together, and that's Thai.<sup>90</sup>

Multiple respondents further argued that on the national stage, ethnic language as well as a focus on the region was inappropriate, instead emphasizing the needs of the Thai nation rather than the needs of the Isan region; a young woman explained, “[members of parliament] are supposed to represent the entire country.”<sup>91</sup> While phasa Isan could be used locally, respondents felt that at the government level the identity should give way to a national focus, and communication between Thais was more important than promoting Isan-ness.

The data gathered from these interviews largely confirms the claim that the efforts of the Thai state to impose a Thai identity upon Isan people has been a success. Respondents have accepted and adopted the Thai identity in an effort to gain the economic and social benefits that come with using Thai as well as avoid the negative social stigma associated with being assigned an alternative ethnic identity. In effect, the Thai state's social engineering has worked.

## **Conclusion**

Ethnic conflict motivates a great deal of academic research.<sup>92</sup> Ashutosh Varshney argues, though, that “until we study ethnic peace, we will not be

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<sup>90</sup> Respondent 14, interview, 19 July 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Respondent 16, interview, 19 July 2017.

<sup>92</sup> Examples include Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups*; Cederman, Wimmer, and Min, “Why do Ethnic”; Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary*.

able to have a good theory of ethnic conflict.”<sup>93</sup> As such, the ethnic Lao people’s espousal of the Thai identity and the absence of politicized ethnic cleavages provides an important contribution to the understanding of how state action can result in peaceful cohabitation. While research on the conflict in Thailand’s Deep South demonstrates the state’s weakness in assimilating that population,<sup>94</sup> it is the successful incorporation of the Lao in the Northeast that gives us greater insight into the capacity of states to defuse ethnic tensions.

The ethnically Lao people of Isan have become proud to be Thai. Statistically, on average, they are more proud of being Thai than native speakers of central Thai. This strong identification with the Thai nation is a result of the century-long effort by the Thai state to encourage adoption of the government-approved central Thai identity in conjunction with the brutal suppression of alternate systems of identification within the boundaries of the Thai state. As such, there has been little room for political appeals that might threaten this unified Thai identity, including political parties or movements based on regional identities. In other words, the demand for such political activities has been largely absent from modern Thai politics.

This demonstrates the capacity of states to shape identity. Through nation-building and homogenizing language instruction, the Thai state has convinced the vast majority of the Lao people within its boundaries to ascribe to the Thai nation. In doing so, they reinforce the ethnic hierarchy of the state-approved Thai identity. Those who have moved into the upper classes adopt Standard Thai when addressing their social subordinates, demonstrating their closeness to the metropole. Isan people who inhabit the lower rungs of the social ladder strive to help their children speak the Thai language and adopt the central accent to be more fluent as Thais. Combined with the social ostracism and political threat that may come from being labelled “non-Thai,” these pressures reduce the demand for ethnicity-based political mobilization. Thus, the peace between the Lao and the Thai is a success story in achieving ethnic harmony, albeit one partly based on a history of violent suppression of alternate ethnic identities that continues today.

The current strength of Thai nationalism potentially provides space for regional identities to flourish without them turning into centripetal forces leading to balkanization. While recent work suggests that possible tensions may emerge between khon Isan and the Thai state,<sup>95</sup> the findings presented here show that Isan people continue to incorporate their ethnic identity within the Thai hierarchy, indicating that Isan mobilization will likely remain constrained by ardent nationalism. As such, concerns over separatism are

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<sup>93</sup> Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict*, 6.

<sup>94</sup> McCargo, *Tearing*, 187–189; Selway, “Turning Malays,” 85–87.

<sup>95</sup> Duncan McCargo, “Things Fall Apart? Thailand’s Post-Colonial Politics,” *Suvannabhumi* 9, no. 1 (2017): 85–108; Ricks, “The Effect,” 16–18.

largely overblown.<sup>96</sup> Isan people are proud to be Thai, and they imagine themselves as part of the Thai nation. They are also proud of their Isan-ness. Although their identity is coherent and distinct, Isan people see it as naturally fitting within the broader Thai identity, and, as such, it is not a threat to the Thai nation. Indeed, counter to the fears of a paranoid military, the aggregation of political demands from Isan derives from the desire to obtain political voice combined with a strong loyalty to Thailand rather than any attempt at a secessionist exit.<sup>97</sup>

*Singapore Management University, Singapore, March 2019*

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<sup>96</sup> Charlie Campbell, "If There's Going to Be a Thai Civil War, Isaan Will Be Its Front Line," *Time*, 2 July 2014; Thomas Fuller, "Thailand's Political Tensions are Rekindling Ethnic and Regional Divisions," *New York Times*, 12 April 2014.

<sup>97</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 98–105, 120–126; Saowanee and McCargo contend that many Isan people are not necessarily loyal to the Thai state and are engaged methods of quiet defiance ("Exit," 103–105); 110–112. I would argue, though, that even among those who are unhappy with the Thai state, there are no serious demands for secession; instead the aspiration is to gain representation on equal footing with ethnic Thai elites. See also Somchai, "Political Resistance," 126.

*Appendix: Proud to be Thai*

*Appendix Item 1  
Demographic information of interviewees*

No.	Home province	Sex	Age	Primary employment	Highest education level	Annual income range (in baht)	Interview date and location
1	Sisaket	M	28	Public school teacher	BA degree	150-300 k	14 December 2016, Bangkok
2	Maharakham	M	53	Taxi driver	Technical school	< 150 k	15 December 2016, Bangkok
3	Roi Et	F	35	Entrepreneur	MA degree	500-750 k	16 December 2016, Bangkok
4	Ubon	M	35	Financial manager	MA degree	>1 million	16 December 2016, Bangkok
5	Khon Kaen	M	33	Un-employed	BA degree	150-300 k	5 April 2017, Khon Kaen
6	Kalasin	F	*	Farmer/ street vendor	Primary school	< 150 k	5 April 2017, Khon Kaen
7	Khon Kaen	F	20	Street vendor	High school	< 150 k	5 April 2017, Khon Kaen
8	Khon Kaen	F	55	Street vendor	Technical school	150-300 k	5 April 2017, Khon Kaen
9	Khon Kaen	M	39	Office worker	MA degree	300-500 k	5 April 2017, Khon Kaen
10	Kalasin	M	42	Farmer/ employee	High school	< 150 k	6 April 2017, Khon Kaen
11	Nong Khai	M	42	Mechanic	Primary school	< 150 k	6 April 2017, Khon Kaen
12	Khon Kaen	F	38	Restaurant owner	Primary school	150-300 k	6 April 2017, Khon Kaen
13	Maharakham	F	40	Nurse's assistant	Technical school	150-300 k	6 April 2017, Khon Kaen
14	Udon Thani	M	22	Student	High school	< 150 k	19 July 2017, Khon Kaen
15	Khon Kaen	M	21	Student/ part time	High school	< 150 k	19 July 2017, Khon Kaen
16	Udon Thani	F	21	Student	High school	< 150 k	19 July 2017, Khon Kaen
17	Surin	M	21	Student	High school	< 150 k	19 July 2017, Khon Kaen

*Appendix Item 1 - Continued*  
*Demographic information of interviewees*

No.	Home province	Sex	Age	Primary employment	Highest education level	Annual income range (in baht)	Interview date and location
18	Khon Kaen	M	21	Student	High school	< 150 k	19 July 2017, Khon Kaen
19	Chaiyaphum	F	24	Student/part time	BA degree	< 150 k	19 July 2017, Khon Kaen
20	Loei	M	30	Civil servant	MA degree	300-500 k	19 July 2017, Khon Kaen
21	Sakon Nakhorn	F	40	Entrepreneur	BA degree	*	24 July 2017, Sakon Nakhon
22	Nakhorn Phanom	F	47	Street vendor	High school	< 150 k	24 July 2017, Sakon Nakhon
23	Nakhorn Phanom	M	38	Street vendor	Primary school	< 150 k	24 July 2017, Sakon Nakhon
* Not reported							

*Appendix Item 2*  
*Regression results for feelings of national identity*

As mentioned in footnotes 66 and 67, I created a composite variable measuring feelings of national identity. Once this was completed, I ran a simple regression model, with the results reported below, which shows that speaking Isan at home was positively correlated with higher scores in the composite variable across both AB wave 3 and AB wave 4.

	AB wave 3	AB wave 4
Speaking Isan at home	0.159** (0.059)	0.374*** (0.066)
Gender	0.146** (0.052)	0.097 (0.061)
Age	0.008*** (0.002)	0.005 (0.003)
Highest education level completed	-0.012 (0.014)	-0.096*** (0.018)

*Appendix: Proud to be Thai*

Income quintile	0.103** (0.031)	0.136*** (0.027)
Urban	-0.617 (0.089)	0.126 (0.076)
Constant	-0.507 (0.156)	-0.271 (0.194)
Observations	1,303	933
Adjusted R-squared	0.098	0.114

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Robust standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.05$

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

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*Appendix Item 3*  
*Kruskal-Wallis H test results*

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As the dependent variable (pride in nation) is ordinal, I used the Kruskal-Wallis H test with the post-hoc Dunn's test to analyze the pairwise comparisons between language groups rather than an ANOVA test. Results are displayed below.

**Asian Barometer wave 3**

The Kruskal-Wallis H test compared the differences in responses to the question "How proud are you to be a citizen of Thailand?" across four populations: (1) central Thai speakers ( $n = 766$ ); (2) Khammuang speakers ( $n = 63$ ); (3) Isan speakers ( $n = 449$ ); and (4) Paktay speakers ( $n = 155$ ). The test showed that differences between the groups were statistically significant, Chi-squared (3) = 20.509,  $p = 0.0001$ .

This test was followed by a Dunn's pairwise comparison resulting in the following comparison statistics (based on difference of means). Positive values for the difference of means indicate that the first group average was larger than the second group average, and vice versa. Ordinal rankings for higher feelings of national pride were smaller numbers (1 or 2), while larger numbers indicate low feelings of national pride (3 or 4).

<b>Pairwise comparison</b>	<b>Sign of difference</b>	<b>Z-test statistic</b>	<b>P value</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
Central Thai–Isan	+	2.780248	0.0027	Isan speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than central Thai speakers.
Central Thai–Khammuang	+	0.561365	0.2873	There was no statistically significant difference between central Thai speakers and Khammuang speakers.
Central Thai–Paktay	-	-8.519631	0.0000	Paktay speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly lower than central Thai speakers.
Isan–Khammuang	-	-0.681381	0.2478	There was no statistically significant difference between Isan speakers and Khammuang speakers.
Isan–Paktay	-	-9.828343	0.0000	Isan speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than Paktay speakers.
Khammuang–Paktay	-	-5.514449	0.0000	Khammuang speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than Paktay speakers.

#### Asian Barometer wave 4

The Kruskal-Wallis H test compared the differences in responses to the question “How proud are you to be a citizen of Thailand?” across four populations: (1) central Thai speakers (n = 512); (2) Khammuang speakers (n = 116); (3) Isan speakers (n = 411); and (4) Paktay speakers (n = 84). The test showed that differences between the groups were statistically significant, Chi-squared (3) = 33.038, p = 0.0001.

This test was followed by a Dunn’s pairwise comparison resulting in the following comparison statistics (based on difference of means). Positive numbers mean that the first group average was larger than the second group average, while negative numbers are the reverse. Ordinal rankings for higher feelings of national pride were smaller numbers (e.g. 1 or 2), while low feelings of national pride were larger numbers (3 or 4).

Pairwise comparison	Sign of difference	Z-test statistic	P value	Interpretation
Central Thai–Isan	+	3.321245	0.0004	Isan speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than central Thai speakers.
Central Thai–Khammuang	-	-2.186185	0.0144	Central Thai speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than Khammuang speakers.
Central Thai–Paktay	-	-6.077639	0.0000	Paktay speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly lower than central Thai speakers.
Isan–Khammuang	-	-4.230334	0.0000	Isan speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than Khammuang speakers.
Isan–Paktay	-	9.828343	0.0000	Isan speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than Paktay speakers.
Khammuang–Paktay	-	-3.424747	0.0003	Khammuang speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than Paktay speakers.

### World Values Survey wave 5

The Kruskal-Wallis H test compared the differences in responses to the question “How proud are you to be Thai?” across four populations: (1) central Thai speakers (n = 639); (2) Khammuang speakers (n = 105); (3) Isan speakers (n = 494); and (4) Paktay speakers (n = 174). The test showed that differences between the groups were statistically significant, Chi-squared (3) = 19.152, p = 0.0003.

This test was followed by a Dunn’s pairwise comparison resulting in the following comparison statistics (based on difference of means). Positive numbers mean that the first group average was larger than the second group average, while negative numbers are the reverse. Ordinal rankings for higher feelings of national pride were smaller numbers (e.g. 1 or 2), while low feelings of national pride were larger numbers (3 or 4).

Pairwise comparison	Sign of difference	Z-test statistic	P value	Interpretation
Central Thai–Isan	+	5.833495	0.0000	Isan speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than central Thai speakers.
Central Thai–Khammuang	+	4.637475	0.0000	Khammuang speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than central Thai speakers.
Central Thai–Paktay	+	4.368903	0.0000	Paktay speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than central Thai speakers.
Isan–Khammuang	+	1.292127	0.0982	There was no statistically significant difference between Isan speakers and Khammuang speakers.
Isan–Paktay	-	-0.273399	0.3923	There was no statistically significant difference between Isan speakers and Paktay speakers.
Khammuang–Paktay	-	-3.424747	0.0003	There was no statistically significant difference between Khammuang speakers and Paktay speakers.

### World Values Survey wave 6

The Kruskal-Wallis H test compared the differences in responses to the question “How proud are you to be Thai?” across four populations: (1) central Thai speakers (n = 558); (2) Khammuang speakers (n = 81); (3) Isan speakers (n = 403); and (4) Paktay speakers (n = 106). The test showed that differences between the groups were statistically significant, Chi-squared (3) = 50.234, p = 0.0001.

This test was followed by a Dunn’s pairwise comparison resulting in the following comparison statistics (based on difference of means). Positive numbers mean that the first group average was larger than the second group average, while negative numbers are the reverse. Ordinal rankings for higher feelings of national pride were smaller numbers (e.g. 1 or 2), while low feelings of national pride were larger numbers (3 or 4).

Pairwise comparison	Sign of difference	z-test statistic	p value	Interpretation
Central Thai–Isan	+	10.244830	0.0000	Isan speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than central Thai speakers.
Central Thai–Khammuang	+	5.482308	0.0000	Khammuang speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than central Thai speakers.
Central Thai–Paktay	+	1.694022	0.0451	Paktay speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than central Thai speakers.
Isan–Khammuang	-	0.146720	0.4417	There was no statistically significant difference between Isan speakers and Khammuang speakers.
Isan–Paktay	-	-4.491112	0.0000	Isan speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than Paktay speakers.
Khammuang–Paktay	-	-3.200807	0.0007	Khammuang speakers, on average, ranked their feelings of national pride significantly higher than Paktay speakers.