

“*Lives of Hunting Dogs*”:  
Reconceptualizing Thai Masculinities  
Through an Ethnography of Muay Thai<sup>1</sup>

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“[After winning a silver medal from the 1984 Olympics Games  
in Los Angeles, USA, and returning home as a national hero],  
my life fortune reversed over night.  
Everything changed so quickly.  
I was almost unable to adjust myself.  
Whatever I’d never seen in my life, I’d seen it.  
Whatever I’d never eaten, I’d eaten it...”  
(Thawee Umpornmaha 1996:12).

“I’m a country boy.  
And like most country boys who are poor,  
otherwise, they wouldn’t go into boxing in the first place,  
I want to have a house of my own.  
So I poured more than Bt10 million into building my house.  
The asset is still there,  
but I don’t have a lots of cash around.”  
(Somluck Khamsing 2000)

### Thai Boxers as National Heroes

*Muay Thai* or Thai boxing has been considered a core part of modern Thailand’s national identity as well as part of everyday life in Thailand for centuries (Panya Kraikus and Pitisuk Kraikus 1988; Rangsit Bunchalor 2000; Rebac 1987; Vail 1998a:75-95; 1998b; 1999; Van Chuyver and Villalobos 2002). Most literature on the subject written by Thai authors shares strong nationalist and conservationist views of the sport, with sentiments such as, “Muay Thai...is uniquely Thai” (Banharn Silpa-Archa 1996 cited in Vail 1998a:91), “[T]he sport of *muai thai* arose with the nation of Thailand and is a sport of true Thai” (Posawat Sangsawan 1979 cited in Vail 1998a:91), “*muay Thai* is truly our national art, which is difficult for other nations to

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imitate" (Rangsit Bunchalor 2000:12), or "Thai men have an instinctive talent for Muay Thai or Thai boxing" (Suthon Sukpisit 1997 cited in Vail (1998a:91).

Vail (1998a:75) simply describes *muay Thai* as "a sport that may be accurately termed Thailand's national craze." It represents not only "the biggest spectator sport in Thailand" (National Statistic Office 1992 cited in Vail 1998a:75), but also the nation's most prestigious sport, which has produced a number of national heroes from the international sports competitions such as the Summer Olympic Games, the Asian Games, the Southeast Asian Games, and numerous international/world championship competitions sanctioned by world professional boxing organizations.<sup>3</sup>

In the last two Summer Olympics (Atlanta, Georgia, USA 1996 and Sydney, Australia 2000), Thailand gratefully welcomed and vigorously celebrated its first two gold medallists and national heroes of boxing.<sup>4</sup> In August 1996, the Thai Kingdom erupted with excitement and joy when 23-year old Somluck Khamying, the featherweight fighter from Khon Kaen province, won the first-ever Olympic gold medal for Thailand from the Atlanta Games (see "Weeraburut Olympics[The Olympics Heroes]" 1996:8-13). Four years later, in October 2000, Wijarn Ponglid, a young flyweight boxer from Sukhothai province, repeated Somluck's success by winning another boxing gold medal in the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games (see "Wijarn Sudyod Hero[Wijarn, the Greatest Hero] 2000). Prior to these two heroic events, Thai boxers brought home a silver and a few bronze medals from previous Olympic

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<sup>3</sup>I do not distinguish *muay Thai* (Thai-style boxing) from *muay farang* or *muay sakon* (international-style boxing), although they are organized and played differently. The keyword for the Thais is *muay* (boxing). It can be said that most, if not all, international-style boxers in Thailand both amateur and professional come from *muay Thai* background. Barring some sports-oriented high schools and physical education colleges, no boxing training camp or gymnasium in Thailand exclusively trains *muay sakon* boxers due to traditional and financial reasons. I agree with Vail (1998a:76) when he states that "[B]ecause international-style boxing has come to assume much the same cultural significance in Thai society that *muai thai* has done traditionally, for present purposes, I will treat *muai sakon* as effectually a subset of *muai thai*" However, I do not agree with him when he suggests that *muay Thai* and *muay sakon* represent "...a division of [cultural] labor, with *muai thai* being consumed domestically and *muai sakon* serving as a vehicle for international acclaim" (Vail 1998a:75-76). The way Vail sees the cultural division of labor in Thai boxing world is too black and white. Indeed, both *muay Thai* and *muay sakon* boxers have large domestic audiences. Thai boxers in both styles have been increasingly competing domestically and internationally in the past two decades, therefore, they can serve both domestic and international communities of boxing spectators, meanwhile they can simultaneously be employed as vehicles to acclaim professional and personal glories back home and abroad. With the growing recognition and popularity of *muay Thai* overseas and the booming international tourist and boxing business since 1980s, the border separating such a division of cultural labor in the Thai boxing world has blurred. Perhaps, many people inside the *muay Thai* circle/world (*wongkan muay*) are unlikely to perceive this kind of clear-cut labor division, since boxers and their promoters have a great degree of freedom to make the decision to switch from one boxing style to other. Currently, with intensive commercial coverage of professional boxing programs in the local mass media, Thai audiences, especially adult men, take immense pleasure in both boxing styles for various reasons e.g., everyday entertainment, popular sport, traditional martial arts conservation and education, gambling, building or maintaining social connections among men, or political and economic interests.

<sup>4</sup>In 1996, Wichai Rachanon (formerly known as Wichai Khadpo) also won an Atlanta Olympics bronze medal. It was the first time that Thailand won more than a single medal from the same Olympics games. In 2000, Kessraporn Sudta also clinched a bronze medal in women's weight lifting from the Sydney Olympics and became the first Thai woman ever won a medal from this most prestigious sports competition in the world. It was also the first time that Thailand won an Olympic medal from a sport besides boxing. In the Sydney Olympic, Thailand won a total of one gold from Wijarn Ponglid (boxing) and two bronzes from Pornchai Promburan (boxing) and Kessraporn Sudta (women's weight-lifting).

Games.<sup>5</sup> Somluck and Wijarn's<sup>6</sup> victories have established a new benchmark standard for national sports' competition and have opened up a new chapter in the country's historical sports landscape.

These two legendary boxers share common backgrounds in their paths to success. Both Somluck and Wijarn came from remote villages and poor families. As young boys, they learned their trade and earned their living as *muay Thai* fighters before deciding to switch to the international boxing style, which is locally known as *muay sakon* or *muay farang*. Both boxing champions have competed and worked for the most male-dominated governmental agencies; Somluck under the Royal Thai Navy and Wijarn under the Royal Thai Police. When they succeeded in their hard-earned efforts to bring home the Olympics Games' highest honors, both of them earned handsome rewards in terms of monetary payments and ranking promotions from their respective offices. It was widely reported in the press that each Olympic winner received more than Bt20 million in cash and kind.<sup>7</sup> Somluck was promoted from a petty rank to a naval officer, while Wijarn was awarded the rank of police captain. In short, their remarkable "social mobility" (Kirsch 1966; Vail 1997b) and the transformation in their personal life fortunes would have been impossible without their boxing careers and without their Olympic gold medals.

The honors, incentives and celebrity status,<sup>8</sup> given to these two Olympic champions by Royal Thai Government, private corporations, the mass media and the public are novel rewards for Thai boxers. Similar to winning the Miss Universe crown for young girls (see Reynolds 1999:261-274; Van Esterik 2000:129-158), the success stories of Somluck and Wijarn represent a "dream-come-true" fairy tale for young boxers in Thailand. They certainly exceeded similar honors and incentives gained by their predecessors and by contemporary Olympic medallist and national heroes.<sup>9</sup> These two national heroes' achievements are far from the real life struggles endured

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<sup>5</sup>Payoa Pooltharat (Bronze, Montreal, Canada 1976), Thawee Umpornmaha (Silver, Los Angeles, USA 1984), Phachon Moonsan (Bronze, Seoul, South Korea 1988), Arkom Chenglai (Bronze, Barcelona, Spain 1992), Wichai Rachanon (Bronze, Atlanta, USA), and Pornchai Thongburan (Bronze, Sydney, Australia 2000).

<sup>6</sup>The romanized transliteration of Thai names is rather confused and problematic. For Thais' names or words, if available, I follow the transliteration, which appeared in the popular English-language media despite their own inconsistencies. Otherwise, I adopt the spoken rather than orthographic version of original names or words.

<sup>7</sup>It is reported in the local and international press that Wijarn received Bt27.76 million and Somluck Bt21 million in cash and awards. They are also entitled to Bt20,000 monthly salary (Bt10,000 each from the Sports Authority of Thailand and Osothsapa (Teck Heng Yoo) Corporation, which lasts their lifetime (see "Wijarn Wealth Gets a Reality Check." October 11, 2000. Web Edition. <<http://www.members.tripod.com/thanong/10112000.htm>>)

<sup>8</sup>With wealth they gained, the local mass media have added the Sino-Thai honorific term "*sia*" (Teochiu word, roughly translated as "tycoon; see, Ockey 1993:48-77) before their names, indicating their new status. Somluck becomes "*Sia Bus*" (his nickname) and Wijarn "*Sia Wijarn*." They also became some of the most sought-after personalities in the country's advertising and entertaining business. The talkative and fun-loving Somluck, in particular, has enjoyed his newfound celebrity and fame. He appeared in numerous advertisement, TV series, and movies. The soft-spoken and shy Wijarn, who was originally against this kind of publicity, finally gave up and agreed to try his acting career in one of the Channel 3 series (see, "Changing Lanes Olympic Medallist a Knockout in TV Soapy." *The Nation*. February 16, 2003. Web Edition. <<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/page.arcview.php3?.clid=9&id=74158&date=2003-02-16&ursess=1>>)

<sup>9</sup> Prior to Payoa Pooltharat's bronze medal from the 1976 Olympics Games in Montreal, Canada, Thailand had never won any Olympics medal since its first participation in the 1952 Helsinki Olympics Games in Finland ("Weeraburut Olympics[The Olympics Heroes]" 1996:12).

by thousands of boys and young men who earn their livings in boxing stadiums and training camps throughout Thailand.

In contrast to the wealth and celebrity status of national heroes like Somluck Khamsing, Wijarn Pongid or Khaosai Kalaxy,<sup>10</sup> the popular image of Thai boxers is perhaps best understood through the self-described metaphor of “*maa lai neu*”<sup>11</sup> (the hunting dog), who is fed, trained and then sent out to hunt for their masters. This powerful metaphor for boxers has its roots in the traditional patron-client system, especially in the complex, social relationships between *nai-phrai* (master-servant), *hua naa-luk nong* (leader-follower), or *phu yai-phu noi* (senior-junior) (see Akin Rabibhadana 1969; Hall 1980:441-464; Hanks 1975). This metaphor connotes the lowest social status and rank in the Thai cosmology, since its perceived social status is literally comparable to a non-human servant, whose job is very dangerous, risky, and physically demanding. As a hunting dog, one owes a great deal of debt and gratitude (*bunkun*) to his master. A good hunting dog is a loyal, hard-working dog and an obedient asset to the master. His life is worthy to the master insofar as he can hunt and bring in wealth, power, and glory. Once the hunting dog passes his prime, his value drops dramatically and he can be dismissed or abandoned at will, depending largely on his fate and fortune at the end of his career.

Hunting dogs cannot live their own lives, at least during their active careers. They train, they sweat, they fight, but they have no control of their destinations. Their post-*muay Thai* future seems to be deeply vulnerable and uncertain. In many cases, the hardships and harsh living conditions suffered by most *muay Thai* fighters are comparable to what Asia Watch (1993) calls “a modern form of slavery.” Most Thai boxers regardless of their skill cannot exercise their own agency while serving their masters.

The life and experience of Payao Pooltharat, an unfortunate struggling Olympic boxing hero, is a prime example of the hunting dog model. Although he was the champion in both amateur and professional boxing worlds in 1970s and 1980s, after his retirement he ended up a poor, wounded and sick man in his late 40s. He insists that being an Olympic hero did not assist himself or his family at all. He once told a reporter the following story.

“Twenty years ago, there were only a few people to give me incentives after I won an Olympic medal. It was very lonely. After the Olympics [Montreal, Canada 1976], I won many medals from many international boxing competitions. I had never got money or any other rewards. Sometimes I did not even have money to pay for taxi when I returned home from the airport [after my missions to serve the country]. I was surprised with the *samakom muay* [Amateur Boxing Association of Thailand] in those days. They did not even apply any royal honors for me

<sup>10</sup>Khaosai Galaxy comes from a rural poor family from Petchaboon province and is arguably the most popular and admired professional, international-style boxing champion in Thailand’s boxing history. He had been the WBA junior bantamweight champion from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. Together with his twin brother, Khaokhor Galaxy, he set the world record for the twin brothers who were crowned the world professional boxing champions at the same time.

<sup>11</sup>This metaphor is popular both in Thai boxing cycle and Thai society at large. In my boxing fieldwork in Khorat, I learned about this metaphor and its practical implications through many local boxing gambling experts (*sien muay*), including *Sien Yai Khorat*, who told me repeatedly that “*nak muay pen meun ma lai neu*” (Thai boxers have been treated badly as hunting dogs, [especially by their managers and promoters]). (*Khorat Boxing Fielnote*. May 8, 2001, 10.00-10.35 pm.). I will discuss this point in details in the later part of this paper.

[as a national hero]. I had served the country as an amateur boxer for 7-8 years. I won a medal every time and brought home numerous glories and fame to our country, but I have never demanded anything.” (Payao Pooltharat 1996:12)<sup>12</sup>

In this paper, I do not want to tell the stories of Thai boxers as national heroes or their fairy tale paths to success with any kind of patriotic or nationalistic sentiment. It is not my intent to glorify or celebrate male heroism or the masculine aspects of Thai culture and national identities. *Rather what I intend to do is to use the stories of these national heroes/boxers as an entry point to explore the constructed discourses of masculinity in Thailand and its fluidity through the highly contested subject of Thai boxing.*

In this paper, I will frame my ethnographic narratives of Thai boxing within the literary contexts of gender and sexuality studies in contemporary Thailand. Against the current trend in studies of modern Thailand (e.g., Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Jackson and Cook 1999; Jeffrey 2002; Mills 1999; Van Esterik 2000) and in gender studies at large (Gutmann 2001:385-409), studies that overwhelmingly emphasize women, female gender, and homosexuality, my investigation will be concerned with the following questions. Why do Thai men receive less attention from both Thai and international scholars in studies of gender in contemporary Thailand? Where have all the Thai men gone in the world of Thai studies? What does Thai masculinity mean? What does Thai masculinity look like? How and why has masculine culture in Thailand been constructed and maintained?

I argue that *muay Thai* with its historical and cultural prominence presents itself as an ideal candidate for Thai studies' practitioners and students to rethink the culture of Thai men as well as to reconceptualize pre-existing knowledge and understanding of male identities and masculinities in contemporary Thailand. *Muay Thai* as a cultural subject and as a practice is embedded in very complex, diverse, dynamic, multiple, and “... at times contradictory” (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994:40) discourses of Thai gender and nationhood. As one of Thailand's favorite pastimes, *muay Thai* offers itself as a promising cultural space to explore the ideas of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1987, 1995; Donaldson 1993:643-657; Masserschmidt 1993) or “masculine domination” (Bourdieu 2001) and its ramifications in a postmodern world.

I will also argue that *the forms and practices of masculinity in contemporary Thailand are plural, fluid, highly contested, and contingent to specific historical and cultural contexts. There is no singular, fixed, over-generalized, negative, or oppressive “Thai masculinity”* as argued by many specialists and students of Thai gender and sexuality.<sup>13</sup> Like other types of gender identity and other forms of “poetics of personhood” (e.g., sexual desire, ethnicity, femininity), masculinity is neither a biological, nor a culturally “assumed given” (Geertz 1973:259). It is “learned, constructed and highly situated” (Brody 1999:3) in specific localities (e.g., border,

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<sup>12</sup>Life is full of ironies for the country's first Olympic hero. His success came a little before time, when the boxing success has captured the profit-making imagination of business corporations and advertisement industry. He nonetheless managed to use his boxing fame and connection to land a police job. Later, he quit and became a successful businessman before entering local and national politics. In the latest election in January 2001, he won an MP seat under the opposition Democrat Party (*pak prachadhipat*) in his home province of Prajauabkirikhan in upper Southern Thailand. After the election, his ill-fated life took a very serious turn when he became ill. He is now half-paralyzed.

<sup>13</sup>See further review of pre-existing literature on Thai masculinity in the following section.

class, ethnocultural lived experience, memory, nationhood, personhood, social space) and temporalities (e.g., historical timeframe, period, time).

I contend that *one of the most significant portions of Thai masculinity as seen through my ethnographic narratives of hunting dogs/muay Thai fighters is the culturally negotiated ideology and practical, disciplinary "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1977, 1988), which encourage men to work or perform their manhood.* In *muay Thai* and in stories of its "fighting dog agents," I will try to demonstrate what Connell (1995:28) suggests, as central to masculine identity, that "...being a breadwinner was a core part of being masculine." Together with the metaphor of "hunting dog," I believe that the ideas and self-perceived notions of being a "breadwinner" constitute a crucial part of "widely-held notions of what is to be a Thai man" (Brody 1999:4) as well as some masculine aspects in the making of Thailand as a modern nation state.<sup>14</sup> I believe that keywords indicating a sense of maleness in the Thai popular perception are "*luk phuchai*" (literally, manly son) and "*chai chatri*" (brave man, warrior), which is in many ways equivalent to the Western-originated idea of "*supab burut*" (gentleman). Being a manly man in Thai culture is governed by certain sets of masculine conducts like "*saksi*" (dignity, pride), "*liem*" (wit, trick), "*chan cheng*" (style, grace), and "*jai*" (heart, fighting/competitive spirit). Nowhere else in Thailand are these masculine performances produced, consumed and contested so openly in the public sphere than in the world of *muay Thai*.<sup>15</sup>

This paper is derived from ethnographic fieldwork focusing on *muay Thai*, which I carried out with my colleague at Suranaree University of Technology, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand from early 2000 to mid-2001. We carried out our field research in the provincial town of Nakhon Ratchasima, locally called Khorat and its adjacent districts. We took numerous trips to observe a number of major *muay Thai* competitions in both "standard" and "upcountry" stadiums<sup>16</sup> in Saraburi, Ayutthaya,

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<sup>14</sup>My argument here is informed by the proposition of ideal male in Buddhist society by Keyes (1986:66-96). Through his interpretation of the male initiation process in Northern Thailand, he argues that "[T]he ideal male in a Buddhist *social* order is one who acts in the world while having acquired detachment from worldly passions" (Keyes 1986:90—italicizing original). My position on male gender identities and masculinities in Thailand is that they vary from one set of lived experiences to the other. They are negotiated cultural products and consequences of "*nakleng-hood*" and "*monkhood*." Gender identities of Thai men are problematic and ambiguous as Keyes (1986) argues. I would like to add that an understanding of being a Thai man must include the real life negotiation process as "the one who acts in the world" (Keyes 1986:90), one who weaves himself in between these two contrasting ideal types of maleness.

<sup>15</sup>The large-scale public spheres for *muay Thai* [and *muay sakon*] practices include hundred thousands of boxing training camps and grounds around the country, all year-round boxing matches in annual temple/school/provincial fairs, and news and live competitions in electronic, wireless, printed and televised mass media. All TV channels in Thailand (CH 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, iTV, and UBC—the country's monopolized cable TV network) show Thai boxing competitions at least once a week in different portions of both day and night air-time throughout the week, so that they can have their own healthy market-shares. Needless to say, there are dozens of daily, weekly or monthly boxing and sports magazines. During the boxing fights in major stadiums in Bangkok, there are live reports, which specifically designed for gambling fans and operators to cover the movement of gambling rates inside the stadiums. It is therefore not an exaggeration, if one says "for the Thai, especially men, *muay Thai* as well as other forms of gambling] is in the blood." In 1978, William J. Klausner, a long time student and resident of Thailand, noted in one of his reflection essays on Thai culture that "[G]ambling, in a bewildering variety of forms, both legal and illegal, is very much a part of daily life of all levels of Thai society, from the wealthy socialites to the poorest of the trishaw drivers." (Klausner 1993:351).

<sup>16</sup>In the world of *muay Thai* in contemporary Thailand, there are generally two categories of boxing stadiums or arenas (*wethi muay, sanam muay*), namely, standard stadium (*wethi martrathan*) and upcountry stadium (*wethi phuthon* or *wethi muay ngan wat*). By standard stadium, it means the overall

and Bangkok. We observed a number of local *muay Thai* training camps in Khorat areas and interviewed young boxers, trainers, training camp owners, boxing promoters, managers, spectators, fans, gamblers, and parents. Our research site is well-known for its long history of distinguished *muay Thai* tradition. During the heyday of *muay Thai* in the decades following World War II, this Northeastern provincial town was dubbed as “Khorat--the City of *Muay Thai* Fighters” (*Khorat--muang nak muay*). The city had produced some of the country’s boxing legends and top-ranked fighters like Yaksuk Prasat-Hinpimai and Prayuth Udomsak, who were remembered as the perennial national *muay Thai* champions for years in 1960s and 1970s (see Chuchai Phrakhanchai 2000:39-48; Thawon Subongkot 1982:272-307; Thawon Subongkot and Sasithon Thanyaluksananon 1995:8-21).

Despite its regional differences and locally distinctive style, it is possible to attempt to understand “the big picture” (Connell 1993:597-623) of “poetics of manhood” (Herzfeld 1985) in contemporary Thailand through the general study of Thai boxing. I believe *Muay Thai* represents one of many “social spaces,” where Thai boys and men “...construct masculinities in accord with their position in social structures and, therefore, their access to power and resources” (Connell 1995:119).

In the following sections, I will trace the location and position of *muay Thai* and masculinity in the existing literature. *Muay Thai* as a subject of ethnographic and other social science research has been underrepresented, while Thai men and masculinity have been rather misrepresented and only tentatively explored. My ethnographic accounts of *muay Thai* from Khorat will support my argument for the reconceptualization of Thai masculinity.

### **Resituating *Muay Thai***

*Muay Thai* as a unit of analysis needs to be situated in an “approximate body” of relevant literature. My early findings after the existing literature concerning *muay Thai* can be described as follows.

First, *muay Thai* as a cultural subject has been surprisingly overlooked and understudied by scholars and students of modern Thailand. Since *muay Thai* holds a prominent place in the country’s everyday life, popular history and nation-building discourses, and is central to the sports and tourist industries, I was rather surprised that serious academic analyses and publications concerning the sociocultural or ethnographic aspects of *muay Thai* are virtually non-existent. Most of the research on *muay Thai* in Thai language publications appear as short articles in the popular media, private accounts and news reports, as well as a handful of master degree theses by graduate students majoring in physical education, economics, or mass communication.<sup>17</sup> In the English language literature, research by Vail (1994; 1996; 1997a; 1997b; 1998a; 1998b; 1999; 2001) represents the lone, pioneering,

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boxing competition, organization, and other components in this category of stadium are standardized, well-equipped, formally structured, and correspondent to rules and regulations set forward by particular professional organizations in charge. Traditionally, the standard *muay Thai* stadium exclusively refers to the Lumpini and Ratcha Damnoen stadiums in Bangkok. However, with the booming of televised boxing business in the past two decades, many television-based boxing stadiums in Bangkok suburbs and some stadiums in major provincial towns are added into the list of the standard one. In contrary, the upcountry boxing stadium loosely refers to any make-shift, occasional stadiums in the temple fairs or other kinds of annual fairs around the country, where a large number of *muay Thai* bouts is organized for entertaining, gambling and competition purposes each year.

<sup>17</sup>My colleagues and I at Suranaree University of Technology have compiled an annotated bibliography of *muay Thai* from the published Thai language sources more than 40 titles. This annotated bibliography will be included in our forthcoming final report (see Suriya Smutkupt et al, forthcoming).

ethnographic inquiries fully devoted to the subject of *muay Thai* from a wide range of perspectives such as, Buddhism, ethics, masculinity, mythology, politics, violence, and social mobility.

Second, as I noted at the beginning of this article, writings on the subject of *muay Thai* in Thai language publications have been dominated by cultural nationalist and conservationist sentiments. Most Thai authors confirm or reinforce the popular perceptions that *muay Thai* is the embodiment and agency of Thailand's nationhood and its male subjects. *Muay Thai* is the pride of the nation's independence and sovereignty, the land, and male subjectivity. Therefore, some frequently emerging discourses in the popular press point to concerns of (1) how to conserve and prevent this art of self-defense and national asset from being corrupted by outside influences, (2) how to teach it as a physical education subject to school children or how to lure the young generation to practice it as a genuine national art of self-defense and competitive sport, (3) how to disseminate it and teach it properly to foreigners both in Thailand and abroad, and (4) how to promote it as "a commodity" for international, kickboxing-crazed fans and tourists, which earns the country much-needed income and a positive reputation and image around the world.<sup>18</sup>

Third, Vail's "Tour de France" quest to uncover the sociocultural world of *muay Thai* has left open room for an in-depth analysis of some theoretically-engaged issues (e.g., Thai male gender, masculinity). In his 1998 article, Vail traces the boxing genealogy of "modern *muai thai*" through a selection of historical accounts, which he interprets as "mythology" or the "story the Thais are telling themselves about themselves" (Vail 1998a:77). Vail argues that the myth concerning *muay Thai* "is deeply intertwined with popular notions of Thai character and nationalism. *Muai thai* is taken to signify an inherent and definitive combination of warrior spirit, martial toughness, and perseverance that is supposedly shared among all males of all the Thai race" (Vail 1998a:75).

Vail's treatment of Thai historical accounts concerning *muay Thai* history as myths is effective. Historical texts pertaining to Phra Jao Sua, Nai Khanom Tom, Phra Pichai Dap Hak, and Mun Phlan are perceived by the Thai populace as historical legends more than historical facts. However, what Vail fails to show is the myth-making process and political plots behind the mythologization of *muay Thai* origins. These points might be out of the range of his article, but I would argue that the mythology of *muay Thai* "...is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely *there*" (Said 1978:4—italicized original).

I would also suggest that Vail's approach to understand a wide range of aspects concerning *muay Thai* can be supplemented by a theoretically-engaged, in-depth topical analysis, which is framed or situated in current theoretical and cultural contexts. In addition to Vail's written text-based interpretative approach, I believe *muay Thai* as a cultural text should also be seen as a performed, lived or experienced text. Taking *muay Thai* in its dynamic and discursive performative aspects illuminates the multidimensional and complex issues concerning the visibility of Thai masculine identities.

Finally, I would like to point out two possible explanations as to why the subject of *muay Thai* has been understudied in both domestic and international arenas of Thai studies.

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<sup>18</sup>See for example Kanokrath Singhaphong (1987:52-67) Kasikon Thai Research Center (2002:24) and Thanaboon Wutharasathien (1996:63-72).



For home-grown scholars, *muay Thai* has long been placed in a somewhat awkward position, where there exists an unofficial division of academic labor in the country, especially divisions between scholars specializing in social sciences and humanities and between Western-trained theoretically-engaged and Thai-trained, cultural conservation-oriented scholars. The former have intensively studied “hard issues,” like political economy, development policy and implementation, natural resources management, or politics of ethnicity while the latter have enjoyed some “soft issues,” like conservation, preservation, or restoration of traditional music, arts, dances, crafts or local historiography. In other words, Thai scholars might be generally classified as activist academics and traditionalist, conservationist scholars.

Stirred by its popular image as a masculine (violent, male-dominated, and gambling-oriented) sport or past time by men and for men, *muay Thai* does not neatly fit into any academic interest and agenda. Thailand’s embryonic state of interdisciplinary cultural studies, coupled with the current practice of cultural politics and intellectual hegemony dominated by elitist biases against popular culture (see Pattana Kitiarsa 2003), also help explain why Thai scholars have overlooked *muay Thai* and left it unattended in the country’s cultural backwater for decades.

*Muay Thai* also does not fit the bill for most international scholars working on contemporary Thailand. Perhaps some key reasons might point to ways that most non-Thai scholars select the subjects of their studies; these are typically informed and influenced by their own prior theoretical, political and personal agenda and interests. Issues concerning ethnicity, socioeconomic development and changes, politics, history, religion, gender, sexuality, or arts in Thailand have been “in the trend” for the generations of international scholars working in Thailand since 1960s. In their eyes, they have taken *muay Thai* for granted as an exemplification of an exotic subject “out there” ready-made for tourists or sport fans’ consumption. So, it has so little to do with “serious academic analysis” of dominating socioeconomic or political issues such as, social structure, underdevelopment, unequal modernization, democracy, peasant ideology, Communist resurrections, gender, religion, civil society and the like (see Ayal 1978, especially the articles by Keyes 1978:1-60 and Anderson 1978:193-247). The waves of feminism and postmodernism in 1990s and 2000s in many respects have also distanced many international scholars away from working on the apparently masculine and violent subject like *muay Thai*. For the most part, Thai men appear in the world of Thai studies as less attractive and less sexy than women and male and female homosexualities (see e.g., Jackson and Cook 1999; Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Jackson 1999; Sinnott 1999; Storer 1999).

### **Misrepresenting Thai Masculinities**

Gutmann (1997:386) argues that the concept of “masculinity” as used and defined by anthropologists deals with the combination and fluidity of the following notions: (1) anything that men think and do (male identity); (2) anything men think and do to be men (manhood); (3) some men are inherently or by ascription considered “more manly” than other men (manliness); and (4) anything that women are not (men’s roles).<sup>19</sup> Gutmann draws his argument from an intensive review of

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<sup>19</sup>Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994:11-12) summarizes the explicit and implicit premises deriving from the conventional usage of “masculinity” as follows: “First, masculinity and maleness are defined oppositionally as what is not feminine or female. Second, gendered identities implicitly depend on the acquisition of appropriate attributes. Third, anatomy, learned behaviour and desire are conflated so that ‘normal’ sexual orientation and identities are heterosexual. And lastly, through biological, sexual and

ethnographic studies on masculine cultures in a large number of cultures around the world. He proposes that most anthropologists focus their attention on the issues of "how men in different cultural contexts perform their own and others' manhood" (Gutmann 1997:386).

I would like to extend Gutmann's remark concerning men's performance of their manhood into the cultural contexts of contemporary Thailand. What do scholars and students of contemporary Thai society and culture find out about Thai male identities and masculinity? What are their major findings and arguments? And why?

In her wartime study, Ruth Benedict (1952:34-45) misunderstood and misrepresented Thai gender culture in her attempt to "see what consistency emerges and...how far certain patterns of Thai behavior can be stated" (p. ii). Without doing any first-hand fieldwork or background training in the area of what today call "Thai studies,"<sup>20</sup> she relied on secondary sources and some interviews with Thai people in the US in the early 1940s. She argued that the Thai[Siamese] cultural pattern is a male-dominated one. Her supporting evidence was drawn from some traditional proverbs (e.g., woman is rice, but man is paddy), kite-flying games, impromptu songs, Buddhist beliefs, myths, and some Siamese aristocratic values. In her summary, Thai men "gamble with pleasure, are indolent rather than hard-working and accept easily subordinate positions in a hierarchy...they greatly prefer jollity and relaxation" (Benedict 1952:44). Moreover, "[T]he high place of the male in the world is powerfully reinforced in real life by Buddhist teachings and by male prerogative of the monkhood, from which women are unconditionally excluded" (Ibid.). Like another controversial article, "Thailand--A Loosely Structured Social System" by Embree (1950:181-193), Benedict (1952:44) presents a highly stereotypical, psycho-sociological pattern of Thai behavior as "...cheerfulness, easy conviviality, and non-violence" which "is grounded in a long and remarkably permissive infancy."

My brief comments to Benedict's arguments are as follows. First, her accounts on psycho-cultural pattern of Thai culture do not include non-Siamese Thai. Second, she misinterpreted Siamese notions of gender, especially on the timeless and ethnocultural context-less issues of male dominance and Buddhist belief and practice. Her male-dominated view on Siamese gender culture was purely outsider's and poorly informed. Third, she should have been able to see some complementary aspects in Siamese gender relations and its complex dynamism, had she had a chance to conduct an ethnographic fieldwork in Thailand. And finally, her ahistorical findings speak more to the period of anthropological research in the US and Europe than realities and lived experiences in Thailand at that time.

Besides, Benedict's long-distance and tentative work, male identities as presented in other subsequent ethnographies concerning contemporary Thailand seem to be rather ambiguous, self-contradictory, and confused. In the 1960s and 1970s, Thai men's masculine outlooks or manly traits were subsumed under the "big picture" of lords (e.g., Akin Rabibhadana 1969), peasants (e.g., Keyes 1969), rural villagers or

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social connotations, the idea of masculinity is reified and universalized. Masculinity appears as an essence or commodity, which can be measured, possessed or lost."

<sup>20</sup>Van Esterik (2000:11) describes "Thai studies" as follows. "Thai studies is a particular way of knowing about Thailand, where Thailand is viewed as an object of knowledge. Only recently has it been possible to describe Thai studies as a definable entity. It flourishes in Thailand, North America, Australia, Europe, India, and Japan." In 1978, Benedict Anderson notes that Thai studies were misled by the country's historical and cultural "uniqueness." He points out that "...Thai specialists could—and did—proudly assume Thai uniqueness... And this uniqueness was typically celebrated, rather than studied or concretely demonstrated" (Anderson 1978:197—underlying original).

farmers (e.g., Hanks 1972; Kaufman 1960), village headmen (e.g., Keyes 1976), and Buddhist monks (e.g., Hanks 1962). It was very rare that Thai men as gendered persons and their masculine performances were substantially examined in the ethnographic writings of Thailand.<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, I wish to propose here some of the most powerful and influential models, which, I believe, represent some “partial truths” (Clifford 1986:1) on Thai men and Thai masculinity to date. Those influential models include (1) Buddhist monks; (2) *nakleng*; and (3) *jao pho*.

Tannenbaum (1999:241-260) reviews how both Thai and international scholars put forward their discourses on gender inequality between men and women around Buddhism on both a textual and ethnographic level since the 1960s. Drawing insights from Kirsch (1973), she argues that different views on gender and sexuality in Thailand, many of which point to (1) women-men sex roles and (2) men's superiority to and oppression of women as a consequence of Buddhist beliefs and practices, “has more to do with theoretical flaws and Western biases than anything inherent in the Thai construction of gender [or ethnographic realities]” (Tannenbaum 1999:241). One of the initial points concerning male gender culture which emerges from an intensive literature review by Tannenbaum (1999) states that Thai men were subtly presented as either the “passive objects” in the debates, or faceless, abstracted, presumably Buddhist Thai men rather than real, situated agents.

The most comprehensive and in-depth study of Thai male gender identities in Buddhist traditions by far is perhaps Keyes' (1986) interpretation of Buddhist ordination as an initiation process for young men in Northern Thailand. He argues that gender identities are problematic and ambiguous and for the Thai, “the ideal male in a Buddhist social order is one who acts in the world while having acquired detachment from worldly passions” (Keyes 1986:90). For Keyes, Thai men's lives are constantly predicated and complicated by cultural negotiation and tension between two extreme models of manhood, namely, *nakleng* and Buddhist monk.

Mulder (1995:89) also reflects on Thai gender ambiguity by stating that “While women seem to represent beauty and virtue..., men are supposed to be able to dominate the wider world and express their manliness in the brothel and the ring, in politics and religion... [T]he men also seems to have a strong need for other women to express their virility. They also box. And become monks.”

A broader view of Thai male initiation process can be seen in Kirsch (1966:370-378). He uses ethnographic cases from rural villages in Northeast Thailand to argue that being male and being masculine involve the learning and acquisition of cultural knowledge and experience outside the village world. Kirsch (1966) suggests that adult, single men from rural villages in Northeastern region and elsewhere in Thailand during the pre-development era used certain channels of social mobility and traveling (e.g., the Buddhist monkhood, official status, advanced secular education, and the familiar *pai thiaw* or “going around” pattern) to the world outside their own local worlds. He implies that traveling to pursue knowledge and gain more life experience beyond one's immediate locality were a crucial part in the making of manhood in rural Northeastern Thailand.

Turton (1991:155-182) explores masculinity through the local concept of invulnerability (*yukhongkapan/khong kapan chatri* in Central Thai or *kham* in Northern Thai) in his ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Thailand. People in

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<sup>21</sup>Putting this sentence into perspective, Tannenbaum (1999:244) states that “gender did not become a focal issue in Thai studies until relatively recently” [around early 1960s] (Tannenbaum 1999:244).

Northern Thailand regard the concept and practice of invulnerability as “the palpable or imagined reality of a human person being able to resist wounding, especially by animals or other humans” (Turton 1991:155). He argues that an individual possession of *kham* knowledge and the ability to travel alone confidently and boldly away from secure bases [e.g., home, home village, or one’s place] are closely related. This type of local knowledge demonstrates the local people’s ideas of “social space and mobility...of time and memory” (Turton 1991:175).

Although Turton does not openly discuss the gender aspects and connotations of this cultural knowledge and practice, it is possible to read in his argument some aspects in juxtaposition to Kirsch’s (1966). Both Turton (1991) and Kirsch (1966) discuss social mobility among adult men in the pre-development period in Thailand. Kirsch shows four channels of social mobility employed by men in rural villages in the Northeastern part of the country, while Turton illustrates a culturally-defined type of male knowledge, which helps facilitate their physical and mental movements across local and regional worlds. Both seem to argue that the poetical making of this-worldly manhood historically require certain types of knowledge, skills, and experience, which men have to obtain either inside or outside their own local worlds. In either case, it confirms both that manhood is not biological or culturally “*there*” or ready-made for them by birth, and that “the masculine experience is a challenge...” (Rochlin 1980:xii).

Other powerful and much-studied models of Thai masculinity include the figures of the *nakleng* and *chao pho/jao pho*. These two masculine ideals are closely related in terms of connoted meanings. Johnston (1980:91), citing historical sources, describes *nakleng* as follows. “Defined variously as a rouse, a rascal, a ruffian, a dishonest and unprincipled person, a knave, a scamp, a true sport, the *nakleng*, according to popular image, was noted for his manly bearing and couragem readiness to fight in single combat or in a riot, fidelity to friends, deep loyalty and respect toward feudal lords and parents.” Most scholars on this subject (e.g., Jonhston 1980:90-101; Ockey 1993:48-77, 1999:1033-1058; Pasuk Pongpaichit and Sungsidh Piriyaarangsana 1992, 1994), agree that *nakleng* is an important ideal type of Thai man, which is comparable to other macho ideals found cross-culturally (see Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994).

Ockey (1999:1038-1039) argues that modern *chao pho* differs from traditional *nakleng* because he does not have to be a man of physical prowess or demonstrate his “manly” virtues. A *Chao pho* or *sia* (in Sino-Thai terms) does not have to fight or kill or command knowledge of weapons. His power and influence lie in his economic wealth and control. This transition from physical power to economic power in the making of modern *chao pho* opens door for the possible emergence of *chao mae* or powerful female as well.

The ways in which the concept of *nakleng* is treated in Thai studies place too much emphasis on its historical and political economy implications. Johnston (1980) argues that *nakleng* is a key concept in understanding rural crimes in the 1890s and 1900s in central Thailand, where the authority of the central government in Bangkok was limited and challenged. Ockey (1993, 1999) sees *nakleng* as a traditional macho ideal type of Thai masculinity and argues that it is the foundation for the emergence of godfathers (*chao pho*) and godmothers (*chao mae*) dominating Thailand’s political scenes and underground economy in recent decades. Likewise, Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidh Piriyaarangsana (1992, 1994) see the influential *nakleng* and *chao pho* playing crucial roles in controlling the underground economy and politics. Adherence

to these masculine types of Thai gender culture has undermined the country's paths to democratic and civic society.

In the realm of Thai politics, Sarit Thanarat, Thailand's prime minister in the 1960s, emerged as a favorite individual representing the *nakleng*-type masculine influence and paternity in the country's paths to development and democracy. Thak Chaloemtiarana (1979 cited in Keyes 1986:87) argues that Sarit's personality and dominating roles in running the country's army and national politics derived from the traditional *nakleng*, which he characterizes as "a person who is not afraid to take risks, a person who 'lives dangerously,' kind to his friends but cruel to his enemies, a compassionate person, a gambler, a heavy drinker, and a lady-killer." Keyes (1986:87) summarizes by stating that "*nakleng*" as a masculine ideal "...epitomizes the man who accentuates desire for power, wealth, pleasure, and sexual domination."

In addition, Cooper (1995:201) provides detailed analysis of Sarit's *nakleng* personality and his success in Thailand's political scene in the 1960s as follows.

"Thais use the word *nakleng* to define a charismatic, swashbuckling type of leader, a successful taker of risks. Sarit fit this concept. He towered over early post-war Thai politics and dominated the Thai political scene for five years. His character was a combination of the ruthless gangster, the traditional lavish oriental despot and the shrewd judge of expertise. He was a man who appealed to the man in the street, and, without attempting to exclude the King, he fitted neatly the Thai concept of leadership based on the father-son relationship... Sarit saw himself as the father of the nation, yet his personal morals in relation to greed and womanising were at gutter level" (Cooper 1995:201).

Taking a brief look at the present state of literature concerning the studies of Thai gender and sexuality, we can come to the conclusion that we have not fully examined the cultural construction and representation of Thai men. The subject of Thai masculinity has received very little attention from scholars outside feminist circles. More importantly, it is apparent that current understandings and knowledge concerning Thai masculinity are rather stereotypical and marginal that ordinary men or common male cultures widely representative of contemporary Thai culture and society are excluded from the heart of analysis. This state of gender studies in Thailand, which largely focuses on gender differences and inequalities and see men as culturally-programmed agents of aggressive and oppressive acts against women, is similar to what New (1993:729-748) calls "the systematic mistreatment of men".

Following the Gramscian concept of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities developed by Connell (1987, 1995) and Masserschmidt (1993), the studies of Thai masculinities can be roughly classified into these two conceptual types. On the one hand, most studies regarding Thai masculinity have paid overwhelmingly attention to masculine behaviors or culture such as, *nakleng*, *chao pho/jao pho* (Johnston 1980; Ockey 1993, 1999; Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidh Piriyanangsan 1992, 1994; Thak Chaloemtiarana 1979), brothel goers (Brody 1999, Wassana Im-Em 1996), male sex workers (McCamish 1999; Wijngaarden 1999), heavy drinkers, smokers, gamblers, womanizers, extramarital sex-seekers (Chanpen Saengtienchai et al. 1999; Knodel et al. 1999).<sup>22</sup> Some studies present the hegemonic,

<sup>22</sup>Dr. Nongphanga Limsuwan, a psychiatrist from Ramathibodi Hospital in Bangkok, reports the findings of her recent survey on married Thai men's extra-marital sexual behaviors as follows. "I

masculine type as the dominant model of Thai men, who “have insatiable sexual appetites which must be satisfied to protect good women” (Van Esterik 2000:193; Brody 1999). The most essentialist view of Thai hegemonic masculinity might be Costa and Matzner (1998), where they interpret a selection of “abusing images” from the country’s most popular comic book, namely, “*khai hua raw*” (literally, selling the laughs). They argue that “[I]n the realm of Thai masculinity, social drinking and drunkenness are associated with visiting prostitutes and other forms of extra-marital sexuality” (Costa and Matzner 1998).

On the other hand, an increasing number of Thai and international scholars have also begun to expose the subordinated type of Thai masculinity, which appears or is subsumed under the practices of same-sex sexuality. Thailand’s recent AIDS epidemic, the large-scale heterosexual sex industry and the country’s high tolerance for homosexual behaviors open doors for scholars to study topics like, *Tom* (masculine woman) identities (Sinnott 1999) or masculine aspects of female and male homosexualities (see articles in Jackson and Sullivan 1999). The subordinated masculinity might be part of the discovery of what Cook and Jackson (1999:21) call “Western desires to know oriental bodies and exotic sexualities” as well as the emergence of, and contestation in, the ongoing changes concerning gender culture and sexualities in contemporary Thailand.

In reference to the aforementioned predicaments and flaws appearing in the current scholarship and knowledge Thai male culture, I believe *muay Thai* points to potentially promising insights toward a greater understanding of Thai masculinity in action. By taking it as a series of complex, multidimensional, and multivocal discourses in everyday life, it could reorient our thinking and understanding of the culture of Thai men and male gender in contemporary Thailand. Thai men and their masculine cultural construction and discourses are one of the “long-overdue and subtle areas,” which need to be explored and examined more seriously and substantially in both theoretical and empirical terms.

### **Into the World of Hunting Dogs: *Muay Thai* and the Production and Consumption of Masculine Culture in Contemporary Thailand**

Writing is a form of ethnographic storytelling. I intend to tell my “inherently partial--committed and incomplete” (Clifford 1986:7) *muay Thai* stories from the inseparable experience and standpoint of a Thai man who grew up within the culture of *muay Thai* and of a Western-trained, local ethnographer, who seeks to understand it as multidimensional sites of production and consumption of Thai masculinity.

I am the son of a former *muay Thai* boxer, referee, and promoter from Thailand’s northeastern countryside as well as a native anthropologist. I therefore cannot escape a sense of “self-conscious, serious partiality” (Clifford 1986:7) in my examination of *muay Thai*. I find it an extremely daunting task. My boyhood experiences keep coming back to haunt me. Memories of Thai boxing-style fights with other “buffalo-feeding” boys (*dek liang kwuay*) and friends in the rice field during the post-harvest season and at the Mekong beach during evening communal

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would say that around 25 to 30 percent of married Thai men maintain another wife, in another house. Men do not want to reveal the problem because it would no longer be accepted by most people in Thailand. Most adulterous husbands were businessmen between the ages of 30 and 50, while minor wives tended to be college graduates between the ages of 20 to 30” (“Quarter of Thai Men Have More Than One Wife.” 2001).

bath in the river in my home village are still vivid in my mind. When I was a rural schoolboy in Nongkhai province, I followed my father to watch *muay Thai* competitions in numerous winter temple and school fairs. In my fieldwork spaces (e.g., Thai boxing training camps, competition rings, boxers' residents, or managers' places) as well as in my university office, the strong smell of boxing oil and the sound of traditional boxing music seem to follow me everywhere. Sometime, it is difficult for me to separate between descriptions of "authentic ethnographic observation" and imagined narratives of my own lived experience.

When Gilmore (1990:10) argues that "manhood was an artificial product coaxed by austere training and testing," he implies that manhood is the prime goal, to which every boy, regardless of his cultural origin or social status, has to pursue through the rites of passage and gradual life courses. For Thai men, the "austere training and testing" may not be very physically and psychologically intensive in the Buddhist ordination as the primary initiation rites for Thai men (see, Keyes 1986, Swearer 1995). However, I would argue that for young boys from the countryside, who undertake their passage to manhood via *muay Thai* they have undergone through series of much "tougher" training, testing, and disciplining of their body and mind. This is the social domain of Thai men (*luk phuchai*) and the mundane world of Thai masculinity, where manhood is judged by the victorious conquest over opponents through physical superiority, tricky wit, and mental toughness and prowess.

Montien Muang Surin, a former famous *muay Thai* champion from Ratcha Damnoen Boxing Stadium in the 1970s and the native of Khorat's Sung Noen district, confirms the popular belief that "*muay Thai* is in the blood of the Thai." "You can easily prove it. When you meet a young boy, 3 or 4 years old, press your hand against his forehead and stay a little away from him. Look how he will react to you. A hundred out of a hundred, a Thai boy will kick or punch you back in the air, even though he knows that he is too small and too young to be your opponent. It's natural" (*Khorat Muay Thai Fieldnotes*. January 28, 2001). This supposed innate boxing quality in most Thai boys constitute rich skills and raw talents that are ready to be utilized in the training of future *muay Thai* fighters.

In my boyhood, it was normal for boys to fight or imitate *muay Thai* boxing during our past time. It was particularly true in remote, rural villages, where there was no electricity or other pastime distractions as could be found in urban areas. Poor country boys were particularly keen for and fond of *muay Thai*. They gradually learned through the experience of annual temple fairs that their boxing skills could earn them some much-needed cash. If they were brave, not easily frightened by opponents, and trained properly, they too can show off their *muay Thai* skills on the ring in front of their village neighbors. Most boy fighters had their fathers or male relatives as their coaches and corner men. During my childhood in the mid-1970s, young boy fighters were featured in the "pre-game show" bouts and each one could earn Bt30-50 for their three-round efforts. Of course, if one could not stand a fierce knockout, his fight was ended prematurely.

My father was very knowledgeable about and well-connected in the local world of *muay Thai*. He earned most of his high school payments from boxing. He even went to fight in Bangkok's prestigious Ratcha Damnoen Boxing Stadium a number of times in the early 1960s. When he became a village-school teacher in 1964, he went on to serve his school and local village committees as a boxing referee, competition organizer, and promoter for decades. However, he never taught or encouraged me to pursue a career in *muay Thai*. He simply said that it was too harmful and dangerous for a sport. One could easily become paralyzed or disabled

from this physical game. It was for those boys from a very poor families who had real talent and a genuine fighting spirit.

Wijarn Ponlid, the 2000 Sydney Olympic gold medallist and more then Bt 20 million prize winner as a national hero, once commented that "I love boxing, but I decided to hang up the gloves because I don't want to be punished for the money anymore. Many times I fell unconscious, but my instincts pushed me to fight on. Now I do not need to leave my family to attend the camp and suffer unbearable pain for money" ("Changing Lanes: Olympic Medallist a Knockout in TV Soapy" 2003). This is a painful reflection from a young man, who started his journey in the *muay Thai* ring when he was only 10. The pain he suffered from hundreds of *muay Thai* bouts, which were mostly decided by knockout, overshadowed his affection for boxing.

In contrast, I did not have to spend my young and adolescent days in the boxing camps or stadiums and was able to escape the world of "hunting dogs" via secular education, which my family was able to support in those days. Both the young national hero and myself are considered "lucky." I had my own choice, Wijarn did not, but he was remarkably successful in his journey into the boxing world. But what about the millions of young boys and men in the countryside who are raised and growing in the masculine tradition of "*muay Thai*"? Do they have choices in life? How has *muay Thai* come to firmly hold a place in Thai men's hearts and imagination as the most prestigious sport of "competing masculinities" (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994:18) in Thailand today?

**A Brief Look into Modern *Muay Thai* History.**<sup>23</sup> It has been obvious from the beginning that most skillful *muay Thai* boxers came from the poor rural or urban working class backgrounds. In the old days, peasant boys, men, and royal guards or soldiers practiced *muay Thai* skills and competed primarily in local festivals, but no one was able to earn a living from boxing alone. Only some warrior kings, princes, or elite acquired their *muay Thai* skills as part of their past-time or war-fighting drills and requirements (see Vail 1998:75-95).<sup>24</sup> Once *muay Thai* became a professional sport and industry, however, most, if not all, boxers have come from the countryside, especially from the Northeastern region of the country.

Rangsrut Bunchalor (2000:9-32) outlines the practices of modern *muay Thai* with a particular emphasis on the Rattanakosin (Bangkok) era (1782-present). Significant aspects in his chronological, handbook-style book involve (1) the transformation from traditional bear-hand boxing style to its modern form and (2) the professionalization of *muay Thai*. As a traditional past time for men and an art of self-defense for soldiers, the pre-modern form of Thai boxing was that of bear-hand boxing (*muay khad chaug*). There were no boxing gloves, nor rope-enclosed rings or stadiums. The boxers' hands were roughly wrapped around with hemp. Thai boxers prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century bravely and brutally fought without any protection on the marked ground, surrounded by a gathering of audiences. King Chulalongkorn was

<sup>23</sup>For the concise history and general description of *muay Thai* as the country's top spectator sport, see Cummings and Martin (2001:138-140).

<sup>24</sup>I will not cover the discussion of *muay Thai* history in this paper due to the limitations of scope and space. Works by Vail (1998a, 1998b) should provide the most detailed and systematic treatment of this issue, while the Thai language writings on this subject are also very limited. Most of them represent or repeated stories recorded in the royal chronicles and popular myths and legends (see Thiphakorawong, Chaophraya 1978[1869]. Vail (1998a:76) is certainly correct when he notices that "[*muay Thai*'s] origins [and history] are not well understood, [but they]...have been widely propagated and embellished upon through word of mouth, the print media, schoolbooks, movies, guidebooks..., and even on the Internet."



famous for his keen interests in boxing and other kinds of Siamese traditional past-times, e.g., kite-flying and fish/cock fighting. Toward the end of his reign in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Thai boxing was very popular and organized on a regular basis, especially in Bangkok. In 1919, *muay Thai* was transformed with the introduction of Western/international-style boxing (*muay farang/muay sakon*) into the kingdom's leading elite schools in Bangkok. It was the first time that Thai boxers wore gloves during their fights.

The professionalization of Thai boxing began in the late 1920s when the Department of Physical Education, Ministry of Education began to formulate official rules and regulations for *muay Thai* in accordance with *muay sakon's* international competition guidelines. In 1927, the Ministry of Interior promulgated the 2470 Gambling Act, legalizing certain competitive sports such as boxing and wrestling which were organized on a contemporary basis. In the 1930s, the Radcha Damnoen boxing stadium, the country's oldest and most prestigious boxing venue, was established. For generations, it has been the dream venue for boxers from all over the country to test their boxing skills and earn the highest salary for their unusually short careers (see Rangsit Bunchalor 2000:18-28).

Today Thai boxing requires each boxer to wear a pair of 4-ounce boxing gloves, red/blue trunks, groin protectors, hand wraps, and foot guards. Mouth-guard is optional. Many boxers also have their magical threads tied around their upper arm to boost their self-confidence and morale. In the ring, there is one judge supervising the fight on the stage, two assistant referees filing the scoring sheets, one timekeeper, and one medical doctor. Altogether they form a panel of judges, who are in charge of each boxing bout. A standard *muay Thai* bout is divided into a total of five rounds, each round lasts three minutes. There is a two-minute intermission between each round. Like its *muay farang* counterpart, Thai boxers are matched and paired based on their body weight. A knockout or a difference in points judges the winner from each bout. Unlike *muay farang*, *muay Thai* boxers are allowed to score by using more body parts as weapons, which include punches, kicks, knees, and elbows, to land at every part of the opponent's body, except the groin. Every well-trained and well-coached Thai boxer must follow the boxing rituals, which began with the *phiti wai khru* or the ritualized acts of paying homage to one's parents, teachers, and sacred spirits. The most beautiful part of it is known as the ritualized *Muay Thai* dance before the commencement of the actual fight (see Rangsit Bunchalor 2000:28-29).

**Dream Journeys of the Young Boys from the Countryside.** On March 3, 2001, I went to observe the boxing training sessions in the Tor. Silachai boxing camp, which is currently one of the most famous boxing camp in the city of Khorat. This boxing camp has produced some of the top-ranked *muay Thai* national champions, including Thongchai Tor. Silachai, the Most Outstanding *Muay Thai* Boxer of the Year 2001 from Ratcha Damnoen Boxing Stadium and the Best Male Professional Athlete of the Year 2001, voted by the Sports Authority of Thailand. This camp is currently owned and managed by a former Thai boxer-turned-air force petty-ranked officer, Vira Thaonao and located inside the residential compounds of the First Air Force Unit, Nakhon Ratchasima, opposite to the university campus, where I live and work.

The Tor. Silachai training facility is roughly built as an extended part of a military housing. It is composed of a one-story zinc-roof training ground, where a boxing ring is set up and marked by the four-cornered ropes stretched and tied around the posts. Boxing and workout equipment, like heavy bags, padded gloves, dumbbells, jump ropes, headgears, chest protectors, kicking pads and the like were

scattered around this one-room training facility. There are also three rag bedrooms and a separated bamboo hut for in-resident *muay Thai* trainees. The bathroom is located in the back of the bedrooms. As I was allowed to explore the facilities and talked to some of young boxers after their morning training session, I saw those young fighters' bedrooms, their clothes and other belongings. Mosquito nets, futons, blankets, and loin clothes (*pha khao ma*) were tattered but useable. I had read many stories about and viewed many pictures of some leading *muay Thai* camps in Bangkok from popular boxing magazines. However, I could not have imagined the harsh realities and living conditions inside one of the top training camps like what I witnessed that day.

Vira was reluctant when I approached him for an interview after he finished supervising the morning training session. As *muay Thai* is deadly competitive in the ring, so is its business version among parties involved. He was aware of the competitiveness from his opponents' camps and had to make sure that whatever he said not be beneficial to his opposition in the world of *muay Thai*. When I introduced myself, Vira asked me: "are you gathering information to set up your own boxing camp on the university campus?" "No, I am not. I am just a researcher, who wants to learn more about *muay Thai* in practice," I replied. He then told me that there were many people like myself who had visited his famous boxing camp and asked for similar information.

The everyday training routine in the camp is as follows. The morning session is set between 6.30-9.30 a.m., the afternoon 5.00-7.00 p.m. Each boxer is required to do a 10-kilometer jogging exercise for half an hour prior to both morning and afternoon training in the camp. After the jogging exercise (*wing*), the actual training session begins with air-punching exercise (*chok lom*) for 10 minutes, then full-contact kneeing drills in a pair (*plum*) for 40 minutes (a total of 5 rounds), kicking the heavy bag drills (*te krasop*) for 20 minutes, kicking pad drills (*lo pao*) 30 minutes and ending the days with a combination of workout exercises (*kay borihan*), like push-ups, weight-lifting and pull-ups. There is no difference between the morning and afternoon training sessions. But the standard practice of this camp is that a boxer must go through a strict and continuous training schedule for an approximate period of 20 days before each scheduled fight. Each will be given a total of 3 days rest before and after the bout to prepare or restore his physical and mental fitness. If a boxer is defeated by knockout or is heavily wounded or exhausted, the resting time is extended a little longer before he is required to resume his training routines. It also depends on the manager and trainer's judgement (*Khorat Muay Thai Fieldnotes*. March 3, 2001; 8.45-9.15 a.m).<sup>25</sup>

I also had a chance to talk to Sergeant Phong, the Tor. Silachai boxing trainer and an assistant to Vira. Phong is an army sergeant from the neighboring Suratham Pitak Military Base. He has been training boxers in this camp for more than 10 years. When I asked him the question: "what makes a *muay Thai* champion out of an ordinary young man?" "Trainer Phong" or "Phong the trainer," as he was proudly addressed by his *muay Thai* colleagues, pointed out 6 components, which were essential for everyone who wants to be successful in his *muay Thai* career.

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<sup>25</sup>When I looked through my fieldnotes and compared notes with my colleagues, it is revealed that the Tor. Silachai's training procedure is comparable to many camps in Khorat areas and elsewhere. The training camps I had observed during my fieldwork included Sit Phuangthong, Wor. Dechwanmit, and Tor. Muang Ong, whereas my colleagues visited a dozen more. Altogether, we ended up studying almost 20 *muay Thai* camps in Khorat areas.

First, training (*kan fugsom*). You must train very hard with a great deal of self-discipline, self-determination, and fighting spirit. You cannot be a good *muay Thai* fighter if you don't train diligently and consistently.

Second, experience (*prasopkan*). You must begin your *muay Thai* lessons at the early age. By lessons here, I mean the fighting lessons in the ring. You must box in village or temple fair boxing competitions to earn experience in at least 10 bouts. Then you can move on from "*muay wat/muay ban*" (temple boxer/village boxer) to "*muay khai*" (training camp boxer). When you weigh at least 100 pounds, you can fight in the standard stadiums in Bangkok as required by law.

Third, natural talent or gift (*ponsawan*). If you are talented, if you are gifted, it is not difficult to be trained. People who are gifted are usually intelligent. Good brain. Sharp remembrance faculties. Pick up lessons quickly. Able to improve oneself steadily. Just like in school.

Fourth, fighting spirit (*jai suu*) and luck (*chok wassana*). You cannot become a champion without an extraordinary spirit. Yet you cannot be famous or successful without luck or good fortune.

Fifth, good manager (*hau na di*). This is very important. If a manager is not fair, if a manager is not accountable, the boxer cannot survive. His morale will be low, especially when he does not get his payments after the fight. Everyone needs money, especially the boxer from a poor family. Many times the boxer gets involved in match fixing as a consequence of the manager's lack of accountability.

Finally, the parents are supportive (*pho mae sanap sanoon*). When the parents bring their child to a boxing manager, they must give full consent to the manager to train him to be good boxer. They are not supposed to intervene or disrupt their son's progress (*Khorat Muay Thai Fieldnotes*. March 3, 2001, 9.30-10.15 a.m.).

Choi Phuangthong, a veteran *muay Thai* camp manager and trainer in Khorat, also describes similar points to Trainer Phong's story. He contends that "unlike the fighting cocks, *nak muay* or Thai boxers are not required a line of genetically-built in quality (*sai pan*). In *muay Thai*, the "like father, like son" principle does not necessarily apply here. I do not believe in genetics. It is a matter of pure human investment and endeavor." (*Khorat Muay Thai Fieldnotes*. January 28, 2000; 9.30-10.00 a.m.) For decades of experience in local and national *muay Thai* business, he had trained his own sons and *other* boys to be famous champion fighters. Some boxers under his training camp earned as high as Bt 20,000-40,000 per bout in their prime. Choi believes that the most suitable age for a *muay Thai* beginner is 12 years old. He holds a very strong belief that "poverty always produces the great *muay Thai* champion." Why? Choi shares with me his lived experience as a veteran *muay Thai* trainer and manager as follows.

A 12 year-old boy is the best to begin his *muay Thai* training. At this age, the boy is obedient. He listens to and remembers whatever we instruct him by heart. If I have to start over my *muay Thai* camp again, I do not want to train a boy from the well-to-do family backgrounds. I want boys from very poor families. I believe poor boys take boxing more seriously than well-to-do boys. They are more perseverant and able to endure hardship and suffering. They see their parents' difficulties before their eyes, so they

will use their parents' real life lessons as incentives to train themselves harder and give every fight a fight for their living. I myself did not operate my boxing camp as a business unit. I remembered a poor boy boxer from Buriram. He was exceptionally good. When I ordered him to go jogging or forced him into extra sessions of hard training drills, he obeyed it without a second thought. He was 12-13 years old then. When you have many kids under your roof, they will compete against each other to death in order to be successful" (*Khorat Muay Thai Fieldnotes*. January 28, 2000; 9.30-10.00 a.m.).

Kanitkar (1994:185-186) discusses the "real true boys" or "sporting boy" as "[T]he upright, manly boy...who neglected neither physical fitness nor his schoolwork." I found Kanitkar's "real true boys" real life characters in many of my *muay Thai* boy informants. Among many, Takiang (literally, the lamp) Tor. Silachai, a thirteen year-old boy from Mahasarakham, is the standout. His life story through his wits and words during my interview easily make him a "real true boy." Takiang's life also speaks for hundreds of his young country boys, who decide to take, or are lured into, this journey of "tough, manly dream."

Like most Thai boxers, Takiang is an assumed name and identity, not a true, registered name. He is a native of Kosumphisai district, Mahasarakham province and a newly Prathom Six (Grade 6) graduate from his home village school. He currently studies Matthayom 1 (Grade 7) in the Suratham Pitak Secondary School, which is located inside the military compound near the boxing camp where he lives and trains. In March 2000, Takiang's boxing weight was 38 kilograms (but his regular body weight was 45 kilograms)<sup>26</sup> and he has already fought 15 times. He earned between Bt300-500 per three-round bout. His earning is divided half-and-half with his manager, who takes care of his food, daily training, and other costs during his stay. He came to the famous Tor. Silachai camp through his uncle's connection with Vira and Phong. His uncle, who is a great *muay Thai* fan and an amateur trainer, took him to train and fight under this camp when he was only 12 years old.

Takiang fits in the typical representation of young, poor boys from the countryside, who venture his future in this human cockfight world. He came from a rice-farming family. He is the eldest son and has a younger brother, who is 11 years old. Takiang told me that he made the decision on his own to enter *muay Thai*. He enjoyed watching *muay Thai* since he was 7 years old and studied in Prathom 2. When he saw young boys his age fighting in the ring, his

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<sup>26</sup>In *muay Thai*, the body weight control is among the most crucial factor to determine the fight's outcome. Everybody involved from the boxers, trainers, managers, promoters to gambling fans knows it by heart that: "if you want to win a bout easily, the secret is control your weight properly." You have to try to take advantage of your opponent by hiding your true, regular body weight and trying by all means available (feasting, dieting, sitting in the sauna, or using some medicines) to lower the body weight as much as possible on the weight measurement scale. I was told by many experienced trainers and managers that only the weight measured in the morning of the competition night counts. Only if you pass that weighing formality before the eyes of promoters and officials, you are allowed to fight in the ring. When the weighing formality is over, the boxers will have the whole day to take a rest and regain his genuine weight and physical strength. Many consider this weighing control as abusive and harmful in the long run for the boxers' health. Successful trainers and managers must have proper measurements to monitor and control the boxers' weight in order to help them perform up to his strength in the ring.

heart pumped very hard. He wanted to be out there with them and fight against them. His first fight came in August 2000. I myself was curious since I have never boxed in the ring before, so I asked him, "how did you feel in your first *muay Thai* fight in your life?" Takiang's answer was stunningly pure and simple. "Very shaky...frightened because there were too many spectators. Most of them were adults. But I was not afraid of my opponent. In my third or fourth bouts, I became calm, not excited at all. I told myself to box just like I did during my daily training drills."

"Did it hurt during and after the bout?" I was so curious since he was only a small boy in my eyes. How come he was so brave and so manly. Takiang said, "No. If you trained well and prepared yourself well, boxing won't hurt you that much. But, you got hurt badly when you were not fit enough or not have enough training." His answer was quite convincing and I felt that this young boy truly acquired the heart and soul of a *muay Thai* fighter.

Takiang's physique is quite remarkable for a boy his age. He is tall and skinny but muscular due to his intensive boxing exercises and workouts. His boxing drills pay off very well in school. He has done superbly in all physical education subjects. He plays soccer, track, volleyball, and basketball in school, while training in boxing on a daily basis. Sometimes his intensive training schedule causes him trouble in school, because he falls asleep during class. His GPA is 2.25. Since he left home at an early age, he has learned to be self-dependent. He does his own laundry, takes care of his homework after school, and reads comic books when he is free. He was impressed with the atmosphere in the Tor. Silachai training camp. He helps his senior boxers and other camp-mates to do daily chores. The boxers in the camp get along with each other very well. The intensive training, strict disciplines, and strong leadership from Vira and Phong help unite all boxers.

Takiang told me that he wishes to be a school teacher in the future. He understands that boxing career is short. Only a few can box beyond the age of 25. The prime age is between 15-20 years old. After that you have to do something else besides training and fighting in the boxing ring. "I will try to save money and help my family as much as I can," Takiang said. In his young career, he already gave Bt1,000 to his brother and his parents (*Khorat Muay Thai Fieldnotes*. March 3, 2001, 10.30-11.13 a.m.).

**In the Ring of Dignity.** In the website *Muay Thai 2000*,<sup>27</sup> one of thousands of popular websites concerning Thai boxing in cyberspace, the webmaster and owner of the site, who is a Thai and a devout *muay Thai* fan, furiously defends what he calls the "dignity of *muay Thai*." He launched a series of articles, aiming to contest biases, misunderstandings, or mistakes concerning the facts about *muay Thai* in the perception of the international martial arts community.<sup>28</sup> He is annoyed with the

<sup>27</sup><http://members.aol.com/Thaiboxing2000/>. See also [www.muaythai.com](http://www.muaythai.com)

<sup>28</sup>See, for example, Buller and Lawler (2002:1) describes *muay Thai* as part of "kickboxing." "Thai boxing, also called *Muay Thai*, began in what is now Thailand. Its origins are unclear, but it may have come from China, which had martial artists called "boxers," who performed traditional martial arts techniques such as hand strikes, throws, and kicks. *Muay Thai* is considerably more brutal than the kickboxing performed in other part of the world, and the average career of a *Muay Thai* kickboxer is less than five years." Or "This[*Muay Thai*] is only for the hardcore kickboxer. Thai kickboxer wear gloves and that's about it. (Groin protectors are for the men are required). Mouthguards are optional. Rounds last three minutes and there are five rounds per match with two minute rests between each round. Knee and elbow strikes are allowed. Any target area is legal, except the groin" (Ibid.:136). In *The Dictionary of Martial Arts*, Farkas and Corcoran (1991:152) explain Thai kickboxing or *Muay*

numbers of self-proclaimed world champions or experts in kickboxing or other self-advertised full-contact martial arts. He feels that those claims have insulted the integrity and dignity of muay Thai, which he regards as one of the ultimate arts of self-defense in the world. After years of silence and non-response from the muay Thai community in Thailand, he argues that the time is ripe to stand up and fight back against those pseudo-kickboxing champions. He argues that muay Thai boxers win their championship belts and honors through genuine fights in the ring, not by training in gymnasiums. As the “ultimate hand-to-hand fighting” (Cummings and Martin 2001:139), muay Thai boxing techniques, composed of four components, namely, (1) punches, (2) knees, (3) elbows, and (4) kicks, are the most effective, powerful, and devastating. More importantly, muay Thai fighters begin their training at a very young age. When they reach their prime in their late teen or early 20s, they become formidable fighters.

This muay Thai webmaster may be considered over-reacting or ultra-patriotic, but he makes some well-argued points concerning the practices of muay Thai in contemporary Thailand. For every muay Thai boxer and for many ordinary Thais, muay Thai rings are culturally sacred domains, traditionally reserved for men and their fight for masculine dignity (*saksi luk phuchai*). Fierce, full-contact strikes in muay Thai, which are considered “brutal” or “devastating” by many foreigners (Buller and Lawler 2002:1; Farkas and Corcoran 1991:152), are highly valued as the core symbols of the “true game of true men with dignity and pride” by the Thais at the expense of poor boys and men from the countryside.

In the local world of muay Thai in Khorat and elsewhere in Thailand, the rice-harvesting or dry season, beginning in late October and continuing to the month of May or June in the following calendar year, is considered the busiest time of the year. Villages or communities throughout the land take these months to hold their numerous annual festivals and celebrations, in which muay Thai has traditionally been organized as one of the favorite local entertainments. The annual peak of muay Thai competition in the countryside usually falls within the month of April, especially during the Songkran Festival.

The overall organizing process of a muay Thai competition relies heavily on the social connections among men in local or national boxing circles. In my fieldwork, most muay Thai matches I observed were organized by “big men” in the Subdistrict Administration Organization (known in Thailand as Or. Bor.Tor), village schools, lay committee of the local Buddhist temple, or cooperation between a group of local interests (e.g., policemen, military personnel, school teachers, local business operators, underground lottery operators, prominent bar or restaurant owners). In one of the biggest local boxing events I observed, the honorary promoter was Mr. Song Kanchanachusak, a famous Sino-Thai businessman and influential boxing promoter in Bangkok’s Ratch Damneon stadium. He used the muay Thai competition in Ban Khok Makok, Sungneon district, Nakhon Ratchasima as a venue of fundraising to help the local temple build a new preaching hall. Organized on the night of March 31, 2001, Song invited Somlcuk Khamsing, the national boxing hero, as the guest of

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Thai as “the national pastime of Thailand... Fights are often brutal and contestants are frequently injured. This is mainly because the rules permit blows with knees, feet, knees, and elbows. Particularly devastating are the full-power kicks permitted to the legs, knees, and thighs.” In *the Lonely Planet’s Guide to Thailand*, Cummings and Martin (2001:138) write “Almost anything goes in this martial sport; both in the ring and in the stands. If you don’t mind the violence (in the ring), a Thai boxing match is worth attending for the pure spectacle—the wild musical accompaniment, the ceremonial beginning of each match and the frenzied betting throughout the stadium.”

honor in his large-scale fundraising event. He brought in high-profile boxers, who earned high salaries from leading boxing programs in Bangkok to come and fight in the make-shift ring in Ban Khok Makok temple fair. He also advertised this merit-making boxing program on the national television during his own TV boxing show, which promised some extra lucky drawings for those boxing fans who bought the tickets to join the event. As a result, this boxing competition drew the largest gathering of local boxing fans of the year. I roughly estimated participants in Song's boxing competition to be close to 10,000 and the temple was able to raise more than Bt1,000,000 for its construction project (*Khorat Muay Thai Fieldnotes*. March 31, 2001; 8.30-12.25 p.m.).

One of the most crucial stages for a successful *muay Thai* fight is the matching or pairing of boxers, which is widely known as "*preub muay*." The match organizers or promoters must carefully check the profile information of each boxer (e.g, weight, height, experience, records, and current fitness, payment requested). In Bangkok stadiums, the organizers have all the information they need plus their assistants and experts to help determine who will fight against whom. However, in the world of village *muay Thai*, boxers come from different training camps in different areas, sometimes from different provinces and they do not know each others' strengths and weaknesses. They all have one thing in common; that is, trying to gain an advantage over opponent boxers by hiding their identities. They attempt to deceive the promoters and their opponents into thinking that they are inexperienced novices. In most temple fair boxing events, the pairings are often done by inviting young boxers to take off their shirts and face each other, so that the promoters, their respective trainers, their parents in some cases, and the boxers themselves can negotiate and decide whether they will make a competitive pair.

At Wat Nong Wa temple fair (Tambon Khok Kruad, Muang District, Nakhon Ratchasima), I observed that the boxing pairing was determined by the following factors. First, boxers themselves agree to fight one another. They might or might not know about each other's boxing skills. Second, after standing side by side, bare-chested, the parties involved (boxers, trainers, managers, and organizers) agree that the pair is more or less in of same height, size, and shape. Third, both boxers carry more-or-less the same weight on the scale. Fourth, they agree to place a required amount of cash for the bet (e.g., the minimum of Bt 500). Fifth, their trainers' consent is important. The trainers can judge any boxer's skills and experience through their trained eyes. They can distinguish a novice boxer from an experienced one simply through a first glance. Finally, the organizers agree upon the pair. Organizers or promoters have to make sure that they get competitive boxers in their competitions, otherwise, the fans and gamblers would turn against them (*Khorat Muay Thai Fieldnotes*. March 10, 2001; 12.10-13.00).

Most temple fair *muay Thai* matches take place at night in make-shift rings on the temple grounds. The competitions usually began after 8.00 p.m. and continue until every match is completed. Sometimes a boxing competition can last until dawn. It depends on how many boxing bouts are arranged, usually there are between 10-12 bouts involving 20-24 boxers. The standard ring is a 7.3-square canvas-covered floor with rope retainers supported by four padded posts. A pair of boxers is assigned to the red or blue corner. When the ring's announcer calls them into the ring, the match begin with the "*wai khruu*" (paying homage to one's teachers/trainers, parents, and sacred spirits) and "*ram muay*" (boxing dance). Cummings and Martin (*Ibid.*) describe the boxing dance as follows.

“The ram muay ceremony usually lasts about five minutes and expresses obeisance to the fighter’s guru (*khruu*), as well as to the guardian spirit of Thai boxing. This is done through a series of gestures and movements performed in rhythm to the ringside musical accompaniment of Thai oboe (*pii*) and percussion. Each boxer works out his own dance, in conjunction with his trainer and in accordance with the style of his particular camp” (Cummings and Martin 2001:139).

During the fight, the ring announcer plays a key role stimulating the boxers to score by landing more weapons on the opponents’ body and generating cheers and reactions from the audience. He provides live narratives, comments, as well as moderation throughout the match. He usually works closely with referees and timekeepers to supervise the match. In temple fair boxing, though the qualities of boxers can not compare with boxers in major stadiums in Bangkok, their boxing skills are considered highly entertaining by local boxing fans. They are encouraged by the announcer, promoters, and fans to punch, kick, knee, or elbow from the first until the fifth final round, while their trainers and corner men shout at the top of their lungs for their boxers to deliver deadly tricks or strategies. Each match is lively, noisy, and contested both on and off the ring.

A veteran trainer from the Wor. Detwanmit boxing camp in Khorat told me that it is impossible for boxers to attack the opponent on a non-stop basis throughout the fight. They have to be patient and wait for their own “*rythm*” (*jang wa*), while paying strict attention to the strategic plan and advice from their trainers. The fight pattern usually goes this way. In the first two rounds, it is usually called garbage time. Boxers use these rounds to “study” each other for each other’s weaknesses and strengths. The actual fight moves into high gear in the third and fourth rounds. Boxers will do whatever they can in these rounds in order to decide the fight. If the match turns out to be a very close one, the fifth final round will serve as the decisive round, where both have to outwit or outscore, or outplay the opponent in order to emerge as the victor. In a one-sided battle, the fifth round will usually be reserved as a formality for the winner (*Khorat Muay Thai Fieldnotes*. May 17, 2001. 2.30-3.15 p.m.).

While the boxers fight in the ring, the managers, trainers, relatives, and fans are busy betting and negotiating in the stands. Gambling is heated and intense as the match progresses. The familiar gambling scenes surrounding temple fair boxing rings are not far from the descriptions of boxing gambling in Bangkok by Klausner (1993). He writes that “[t]here are two major boxing stadiums in Bangkok where both Thai and international style boxing can be seen throughout the year. The illegal but pervasive betting is almost ferocious as the kicks and punches [progress]. Not only does one bet on the victor, but side bets are made on each round and even whether the first blow struck will be the foot or hand, and the right foot or left hand at that” (Klausner 1993:351--added mine).



Together with the boxers' contest for physical and mental superiority in the ring, the most obvious masculine aspects in the world of village boxing can be understood through the following linguistic terms during the match and in the Thai boxing world in general.

First, the concept which makes *muay Thai* so masculine is *luk phuchai* (manly son). The ring announcer repeatedly reminds people that boxing is a sport by men and for men. On many occasions, the audience hears similar phrases over the ring's public address system, that only men can box and fight so bravely.

Second, every *muay Thai* boxer must uphold his own dignity and pride (*saksi*) as that of a sportsman and as a Thai man who maintains the continuity of this traditional sport. When the occasional and controversial case of match-fixing occurs, the suspected boxer is often stamped with a life-time stigma as the betrayer of his own profession and the man who fails to protect his own integrity.

Third, for the Thais, wit or intelligence (*liem/lak liem*) is the core part of the concept of the ideal boxer. A boxer's intelligence or wit is regarded as a valuable asset. He must hide it from his opponent and be able to pull it out to score or finish off his opponent in the right place and at the right time. In the ring, one cannot be outwitted or outsmarted even in detailed motions and movements. When the pair goes into full-contact wrestling and lands on the canvas-covered floor, the wiser boxer would try to position himself on top, so that he looks smarter in a command position. He must not show any weaknesses or flaws that the opponent could exploit.

Fourth, Thais love a boxer with class and style (*chan cheng*). In a close match, class and style are decisive factors for which the referee picks a winner. Class and style refer to a well-trained and well-coached boxer, who can maintain his composure even when he is under heavy attack from his opponent. This concept distinguishes a great fighter or a great champion from a mediocre boxer.

Fifth, the concept of *kraduk* refers to bones. Sometimes it is simply described as skillful or experienced in boxing (*pen muay*). This concept comes close to the term shell or skin in western sport culture. A boxer's bones is an abstracted concept. It refers to a boxer's overall appearance, which has been shaped by the years he has spent in training and in actual fights. This concept is very important to the promoters and gambling fans. A novice boxer with less than a 10-fight record can never match the strengths and skills of an opponent with 25-fight record, even though the pair are in the same weight division.

Sixth, one of the most important characteristics of a successful Thai boxer is a fighting or competitive spirit, or heart (*jai*). People in the world of Thai boxing judge a boxer from the heart, which is evident during tough training sessions or facing a superior opponent. The concept of *jai* includes qualities such as bravery, toughness, unstoppable force, or disgust of being a loser. Many people in Khorat's boxing circle simply describe an ideal boxer as the one who has a great fighting spirit (*jai dee*).

Finally, the concept of match-fixing (*lom muay*) is a very controversial and sensitive one, especially in a sport where gambling played an influential role. Managers or trainers are very careful in dealing with their boxers prior the fight to prevent influential gamblers from sneaking in and offering large sums of money to the boxers in exchange of a match result. Thailand has promulgated the 1999 Boxing Acts, supervised by the Sports Authority of Thailand, to establish match-fixing as a criminal act.

## Conclusion:

### Reconceptualizing Thai Masculinities

In the beginning of this paper, I set off to contest the essential, stereotypical, and overwhelmingly negative views concerning Thai masculine culture. I also intended to reconceptualize the notions of masculinity in contemporary Thailand through my ethnographic case study of Thai boxing. My arguments are formulated around the issues of (1) the breadwinner as *luk phuchai*'s dignity and pride of masculinity, (2) *muay Thai* is the prominent site for the production and consumption of such hegemonic masculinity, and (3) *muay Thai* represents both the poetics of manhood as well as nationhood.

Let me go back to where I began. I consider two quotations made by the country's two Olympic national heroes/boxers as the epitome of how two exceptionally successful "hunting dogs" talked to themselves about their lives and careers. When Thawee Umpornmaha said, "Whatever I'd never seen in my life, I'd seen it. Whatever I'd never eaten, I'd eaten it," it reveals the dream of a young man from the countryside who really felt that he was reaching the "promised land" after years of hardship and struggle. I assume that these objects of desire included exotic countries or fairytale-like places (e.g., Los Angeles and other countries where he travelled to box representing Thailand's amateur boxing team) and expensive food and goods, of which he could have can only dreamt about without his Olympic triumph.

Somluck speaks about his childhood dream so genuinely when he states that, "...like most country boys who are poor, ...I want to have a house of my own." For a young man, who earned a living and supported his family by sweating in the canvas-covered rings of *muay Thai* since he was 10, boxing brought him to the place where his dream was finally fulfilled. Owing his own house, especially a Bt10 million house in Bangkok, must be very special for a country boy who spent most of his adolescent years away from his parents in the boxing camps' rustic accommodations.

I argue that these heroes' remarks are deeply reflexive statements reflecting the themes of masculinity in the cultural context of contemporary Thailand. *They clearly reveal masculine sensitivities of successful working men or "hunting dogs," who dream or imagine themselves as proud breadwinners for their immediate families.* The masculine modes of pride and dignity, as possessed and articulated by young boxers and other working class men in other professions in Thailand, are comparable to those of "salarymen" in modern Japan (Roberson and Suzuki 2003) or "working class white men" in the US and elsewhere. *Through my ethnographic cases of muay Thai boxers, I believe that it is the dignity of men as "breadwinners" that constitutes the foundation in the concept as well as in the poetical practices of Thai masculinity.* This is what Thai working class men, whether they are boxers or not, are yearning for, wishing of, dreaming to achieve, despite the fact that each of them has to struggle in difficult ways.

I fashion my understanding of Thai masculinity in *muay Thai* by focusing on the stories of "being good at being a man," rather than "being a good man" (Herzfeld 1985:16). This is "...a stance that stresses performative excellence, the ability to foreground manhood by means of deeds that strikingly speak for themselves" (Ibid.). What does it mean to be good at being a man in the world of *muay Thai*?

The local worlds of *muay Thai* in Khorat and elsewhere are certainly not a place to produce the spirits of sportsmanship or fair play. Yao Phayathai, a veteran boxing gambler, repeatedly reminded me that "the world of *muay Thai* sucks and is dirty. It is the place where everybody tries to take advantage of everybody. It is not a

sport anymore. It is a kind of gambling. Boxers are victimized in most cases. They are hunting dogs. Some managers cheated them by refusing to pay full wages. The gamblers threaten them. Sometimes, the boxers themselves get involved in the match fixing. There are tons of tricks in the world of *muay Thai*. If you are not tough enough, you don't belong here" (*Khorat Muay Thai Fieldnotes*. May 8, 2001; 22.00-22.35 p.m.).

*Muay Thai* is a prominent site for the production and consumption of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Thailand. This is one the most ironic and self-contradictory elements of *muay Thai*. As the national pastime "by men and for men" from different classes and socioeconomic backgrounds, *muay Thai* is a place where poor young men, dutiful trainers, managers, promoters and sport gamblers earn their easy, quick money by trying to outwit, outsmart, or out-hustle other men in the name of fundraising for civic projects in their community. This is the place where people talk about the dignity and pride of Thai [gentle]men and the Thai nation, while they enjoy the violence, the gambling, and the masculine entertainment. This is the place where human cockfights and the large-scale gambling take place within the same compounds as Buddhist temples and the compassionate teachings of the Buddha.

By thinking through these contradictory elements of *muay Thai*, I am still convinced that it is a site where Thai men's "masculine dilemma" (Rochlin 1980) is negotiated, produced and consumed as hegemonic masculinity. In every *muay Thai* event I observed, I was less amazed with the amounts of money that gamblers bet on their favorite fighters than by the language discourses that were produced, exchanged and circulated throughout the night-long boxing competitions (e.g., in the temple or school fairs). Sets of keywords like *luk phuchai* (manly son), *saksi* (dignity/pride), *jai* (fighting spirit), *liem* (wit, trick), *kraduk* (experience) or *chancheng* (style) are spoken repeatedly, understood profoundly, and used to describe each boxing bout as their perceived realities. The boxing commentators in each competition are especially authoritative. They provide live play-by-play narratives, comments, and reflections from beginning to end.

I argue that it is boxing jargon and discursive practices, not devastating knee or elbow strikes, that help mark and transform the masculinity from the state of ideological abstraction (e.g., values, norms, beliefs) to the state of really real in the people's everyday life. Contained in these discursive practices are "...power relations among men...[They demonstrate that]...certain men (in terms of class, race, and sexual preference, for example) possess greater power than other men" (Masserschmidt 1993:28). These discursive practices can also be frequently found in other male dominated domains (e.g., politics, military, government agencies).

I believe that Thai boxing exemplifies a hegemonic type of Thai masculinity, in which men dominate men or men exploit men in hierarchical gender structures in contemporary Thailand. In other words, men in the world of Thai boxing interact with one another to produce and consume their own masculine culture and identities, while they also suffer the consequences. Masserschmidt (1993:80) sums up this point as follows. "Through interaction, masculinity becomes institutionalized, and men draw on such existing, but previously created, masculine ways of thinking and acting, to construct a masculine identity in any particular situation. The specific criteria of masculine identities are embedded in the recurrent practices where by social relations are structured"

My final argument shows that *muay Thai* represents the poetics of manhood as well as of nationhood. *Muay Thai* opens up ways that people can imagine their

individual as well as collective identities. While *muay Thai* deals primarily with how young boys, men, and male adults fans weave meanings of their manhood through viewing or practicing it, boxing also links the notion of masculine gender from something personal or individual to something more institutional and communal in the larger scale. Reynolds (1999:261-274) points out that gender is one of the subjects, which has been discursively omitted in Thai historiography. I believe that this is the place, where *muay Thai* can help fill in the void, especially on issues concerning masculine aspects of nation-building project.

Tracing the history of *muay Thai* and thinking through the recent successes of Thai boxers in the international boxing competitions, one might be stunned by the monologues of patriotic and nationalist sentiments in its narratives. The Thais seriously regard *muay Thai* as part of their national heritage and current assets. However, the point I want to make here is that, like the international beauty contests for Thai women (Van Esterik 2000), *muay Thai* has demonstrated the masculinity of the Thai nationhood for centuries. In other words, narratives and plots in most pieces of *muay Thai* historiography are inseparable from official and popular nationalist discourses of "Thainess" or Thai national identities. It is deeply rooted in the Thais' consciousness and mentality that *muay Thai* is a representation of genuine Thainess identities. It certainly makes the "geo-body" (Thongchai Winichakul 1994) of the modern nation state of Siam/Thailand look more muscular. It has long been essentialized as a unique body of knowledge and set of skills, which the Thais invented and employed to defend the sovereignty of their nation. In other words, the nationhood of modern Thailand will certainly look softer, weaker, and vulnerable without *muay Thai*. Thai men would have had a less prestigious place in the national-building narratives. For centuries, *muay Thai* has provided Thai men a profound sense of self-assurance in responding to the question: "what does it mean to be Thai men?"

In addition, I believe that my ethnographic case study of *muay Thai* also serves as a series of "complex voices," aimed at deconstructing the stereotypical myths of "Thai male behaviors" (e.g., heavy drinker, womanizers, brothel goers, extra-marital sex seekers, *nakleng*, *chao pho*, or corrupted *kharatchakan*). By deconstruction, I do not mean destruction. I simply intend to add another layer to the myth-making stories. Doty (1993:7) describes how the "myths of masculinity" and its myth-making technique work by asserting that "We can voice masculinity more richly and broadly by including a larger range of experiential knowledge, passed along through myths, than we are accustomed to recounting in a society that seems to have lost its ability to remember even the most recent historical development" (Doty (1993:7).

Beyond my central arguments, I am aware that writing on the subject of masculinity is not neutral or objectively academic. Indeed, it is a political act, which is conditioned by my own following intentions and limitations.

First, I contend that stories of *muay Thai* practices contribute to a certain extent of the understanding of the "pig picture" or a fuller description of Thai masculinity.

Second, the fuller accounts of Thai masculinity must be concretely demonstrated through specific case studies in its cultural and historical contexts. Masculinity must be narrated and examined, not tentatively assumed.

Third, studies of masculine culture should be viewed in reference to their feminine counterpart. Because "[M]asculinity and femininity are relational construct... One cannot understand the social construction of either masculinity or femininity without reference to the other" (Kimmel 1987:12 cited in Cornwall and

Lindisfarne 1994:18). I am aware that I do not cover my *muay Thai* male subjectivity in relation to women's perspectives and experiences.

Finally, I have to state it clearly that my stances here do not go against feminism, nor women studies. I just wish to see studies of gender culture in contemporary Thailand in a more balanced and multidimensional fashion. I also agree with Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994:10) when they state that "...the conflation of the notions male/men/masculinity and female/women/femininity in western constructions of difference must be investigated and documented historically and ethnographically" (see also Roberson and Suzuki 2003:2). This is one of the most important points, which future studies on Thai gender culture must take into consideration seriously, constructively, and creatively. After all, we have to remind ourselves that, gender is just "one of the grand metaphors of the human condition... [And] gendering is an imaginative construction" (Doty 1993:29).

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