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Thai Boxing and Embodiment: The Construction of Masculinity through Sportsmanship

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Abstract:

Masculinity is one of the most overlooked topics in cultural studies concerned with Thailand; studies of gender and sexuality have been dominated by research concerned with women and with homosexuality. Through an investigation of cultural practices related to Thai boxing, this paper employs the study of masculinity in an effort to understand the ways in which "maleness" is constructed and embodied in accordance with social, economic, and cultural circumstances.

The paper explores the idea of a technology of the body and physical powers pertaining to the way in which masculinity is constructed. Through a study of boxing manuals and real life practices in training camps, the paper portrays the construction process of masculinity in relation to Buddhist ideology and patriotism. Via a close look at the life course of trainee boxers, the paper also illustrates the work and lives of Thai boxers as they struggle to meet social expectations as ideal boxers while trying to ensure their own economic survival. Framed by the sociological study of sport, the paper also explores the dynamics of boxing as a cultural enterprise. Rituals as well as economic and ideological considerations surrounding boxing will be scrutinized in an effort to illuminate the social process of attaining manhood.
Masculinity is one of the most overlooked topics in cultural studies concerned with contemporary Thailand; studies of gender and sexuality have been dominated by research concerned with women and homosexuality. This paper is an attempt to break the impasse in gender studies by looking at the physical roles of men in relation to their devoted physical practice of the national martial art, Thai boxing, which serves not only as a source of pride in being a patriotically masculine man but also benefits their own endurance. Through an investigation of cultural practices related to Thai boxing, this paper will address the topic of masculinity in an effort to understand the ways in which “maleness” is constructed in accordance with social, economic, and cultural circumstances. The paper presents an ethnographic study that looks into the work and lives of Thai boxers in their training as they struggle to meet social expectations as decent boxers while also endeavoring to ensure their economic and physical survival. Framed by the sociological study of sport, the paper also examines the wider context of boxing as a cultural enterprise in which masculinity is constructed and embodied through physical training and the pedagogical practices of the boxers under camp training and competition. Rituals as well as economic and ideological considerations surrounding the boxing activities will be scrutinized in an effort to illuminate the social process of attaining manhood and the articulation of Thailand’s masculine ideology.

*Muai thai* or Thai boxing is an internationally well known sport that represents a kind of martial art originated in Thailand. This entertaining, and at the same time aggressive, art of fighting is generally perceived as a fight on a prize ring canvas with boxers having their fists in thick boxing gloves and using their feet as major weapons, in addition to their elbows and knees. Nine weapons (*nawa awut*) from one’s body—namely two hands, two elbows, two knees, two feet and a head—are manipulated as potential fighting tools to attack and to defend against one’s opponent. The boxing, however, is more than an act of fighting or an entertaining spectator sport in today’s tourist, recreational and gambling business (Trisdee 1993). For the Thais, the boxing has often been viewed as embodying their great courage, nationalism, historical achievements, performing arts and literatures, rituals and spiritual expressions, and representing their social norms, hierarchy, ethics and ideology. The following sections explore Thai boxing in the forms of written text, physical practices and social process to understand the way in which masculinity is embodied into Thai boxing through different means.

**The Manual and Manner of Masculine Ideology**

Historically, Thai boxing has closely been linked to heroic and nationalist sentiment. Knowledge about Thai boxing articulated in the spirit of idealistic manhood as national fighters and individual brave men can be easily found and reproduced both for Thai and foreign audiences. There are several means by which the knowledge and ideology of Thai boxing has been prometed, including the production and reproduction of historical narratives, textbooks and training manuals, rituals and cultural symbolic representations, movies, and the organization of boxing events in contemporary modernist style (Pattana 2007). Here the paper will briefly touch upon the aspects of Thai boxing found in written text and physiographic representation to depict how the ideal masculinity is embodied into boxers through the process of physical and social controls.
Figure 1: Reproductions of various Thai-boxing manuals over time

**Legends of Muai Thai and the Depiction of Heroism**

Thai Boxing has long been considered by Thais as their nation’s martial art and culturally and historically significant sport. Despite these generic claims, however, it is difficult to trace back with sufficient evidence how boxing itself first emerged and through time became one of the prides of the nation. Historical archival research shows that there are few systematic records of boxing activities before the Ratanakosin era and much knowledge concerning Thai boxing comes from a diverse and juxtaposed range of traditional literatures, chronicles from
the palace, oral histories and folk scriptures. The common theme found in the depiction of Thai boxing often relates the activity with warfare, capable and fearless fighters, and the expression of patriotism against others. Prince Damrong, a key figure in Thai history, named Thai boxing as one of the 18 branches of arts taught in the pre-modern court of Siam to the king before he could lead his armed forces against obtrusive enemies. In a popular narrative of Thai history, several kings and local heroes have been described as being potent fighters, equipped with boxing skills and tactics, who rescued the country from falling prey to the enemy’s menacing weapons and strategies. Whether this popularized historical narrative is justified, Thai boxing has already been generally perceived and employed to serve national pride in the ability of the Thai man to fight for his motherland and for righteousness. Throughout history, this grand narrative of national heroes has often been recalled and reproduced in different times and contexts to suit various purposes covering nationalism, tourism, masculine stereotypes, and the life struggles of rural inhabitants (Pattana 2005 and Vail 1999).

Figure 2: Physiographic narration of body movements in Thai boxing

Formalizing Manhood in Written Texts

Like its diverse legends, Thai boxing has a varied range of manuals written as a medium in training boxers. Despite the fact that most boxing training since ancient times has been conducted in a person to person manner, texts and choreography of body gestures have often been written and drawn so as to record and fix the ideal type of traditional body configuration in place. Most of the texts start with the historical and cultural significance of Thai boxing in relation to the kingdom’s legends of warfare and heroism. Some texts also carry folk narratives of how different localities invent and reinterpret the history of muai thai to serve their own local narration. The main parts of the texts, however, are comprised of pictures of the body in various postures. These series of physiographic narrations of body movements illustrate boxing patterns and techniques articulated mostly in the traditional style of Thai boxing (see figure 2). Some of the postures are named by matching them with distinctive charismatic animals in Thai literature such as monkeys, horses, elephants, deer, and crocodiles while some are called by different names of gods and deities in Thai folktales.
Some postures are also referred to by making an analogy with natural surroundings such as waves of water. These series of body manipulations in boxing training, however, come after the process of selecting a suitable young man as a trainee boxer under the mentorship of a master. In the manuals, the criteria used in selecting a good young man to be trained as a boxer have often been cited as an initial step for the successful creation of an eminent boxer. These criteria are as follows: genetics, body configuration, conviction to boxing, diligence, physical competence, basic skill in boxing, devotion of time, patience, and the need to enter into boxing (Phosawat 1997).

The boxing manual does not only deal with physical manipulation of a man’s body but also instructs on how mental and ethical issues in boxing-related activities and the everyday life of the boxer should be carried out. The process of both training in the camp and boxing in prize rings of either outdoor or indoor stadiums usually involves several kinds of rituals and spiritual activities to give courage and protection to the boxers. These supernatural demeanors require scrupulously strict codes of conduct in which the ideologies of decent manhood are embedded. The performance of the wai khru dance prior to the start of each fighting round is one example representing the symbolic relationship between the boxer and his master. During the dance, the boxer wears a mangala, a blessing garland placed on the head, to ward off all bad luck, to provide the boxer with good spirits and to recognize the contribution of his mentor. The head garland is usually made from sacred white robes and consecrated by incantations and charms. It is strongly believed that women are prohibited from touching the mangala as this will result in the deterioration of all its sacredness (Jiraporn 2004: 32-33). Some boxers also have exquisite talismans and other sacred symbols tattooed on different parts of their bodies. The talismans consist of Thai-styled figures, drawings of mystical animals and ancient alphabets, and are elaborately placed on particular positions to embody the magical power within the body and mind of the boxer (see figure 3).

![Figure 3: Sacred codes of charms tattooed on the bodies of boxers](image)

**Ethics and Identity of Manhood**

It has often been assumed that men equipped with boxing skills have an advantage over other men and therefore tend to seek direct physical encounters when personal conflicts with other men arise. However, among the boxers and those who are closely related to the boxing circle it is well recognized that such a claim is not the case. Since the beginning, a man entering
into boxing training has to accept, take an oath, and strictly follow the rules designated by his master. The rules often cover a wide range of behavioral and ethical conduct such as (Panya and Pitisuk 1986: 31):

- The boxer promises to keep his body clean, strong, and to live his life with a clear mind and to live honestly
- The boxer promises not to harm those who are more vulnerable; he has to care for and help others in need
- The boxer promises to make contributions for the benefit of others and his country
- The boxer promises to avoid conflict in any situation
- The boxer who does not keep these promises will be cursed with having bad fortune throughout his life

The promises, the regulations, and the strict schedule of boxing training and body management lead to the formation of an ideal configuration of masculine identity which the boxers are expected to embody. This ideal type of masculinity is closely linked to the ideology of Thai and Buddhist men in which the notions of honesty, filial devotion, obligation to society and nation, and purity of mind and body are integral.

Women are also considered harmful to certain aspects and periods of boxing. First of all, women are prohibited from touching all kinds of sacred entities that belong to the boxer such as amulets, charms, mangala, and even boxing pants. It is considered a great misfortune to the boxer if this actually occurs. In most of the boxing camps in Thailand, there is a general rule that bars women from outside to enter without getting permission from the camp manager. Of course this kind of rule is set up in order to keep the boxers away from sexual
distraction and allow them to fully concentrate on their physical training. The boxing ring, however, is a more serious space of male territory. Women are forbidden to climb up and enter the boxing ring. Doing so is strongly believed to cause injuries to the boxers. In many boxing camps today, even though more women are trained to become amateur and professional boxers, this belief in the separation of gender space still prevails in most of the camps. Having two distinct rings in the camp, one for males and one for females, is thus the solution. This practice of having separate rings is also applied to most of the professional stadiums. Only in the case that setting up two separate rings is not possible, woman boxers then are halfheartedly allowed to share the same ring with their male counterparts. In this situation, the woman boxers can only enter the canvas by bending under the boxing ropes, while men can jump over the ropes onto the canvas with their dignity (Jiraporn 2004: 33).

Boxing Camp: Training One’s Body, Coaching One’s Mind

Boxing enterprises and boxers do not exist in isolation, but rather are always being transformed by the changing conditions of society. The changes in the enterprise of boxing and the practices of contemporary boxing training, to a certain extent, reflect the change in economic and social conditions as well as the alteration of the body to serve multiple aspects of sport in our contemporary world. This section explores the business of boxing camps to understand the relationships between the economics of sport, social expectations, and the manipulation and regulation of the bodies of trainee boxers as well as the position of boxing camps in the wider context of sporting enterprise.

It is estimated that today there are more than 100,000 boxing camps operating throughout the country. There are many categories and various sizes of boxing camps. Some camps are set up to train amateur boxers to fight in standard stadiums located mostly in Bangkok and big cities; some are aimed at delivering a short course for foreigners; while some are dedicated to bring up young children and train them to be future boxers. Here the paper looks into a typical boxing camp in Bangkok as a case study to explore into its beginning, its structure and management, and the activities it provides in order to sustain its own business and create capable boxers for tournament fighting.

Kru (teacher) Ped is the owner of Det Rat boxing camp located in the Nongchok district north of Bangkok. He is also a lecturer in one of the universities in Bangkok where he teaches physical education and athletic training. Since his childhood, Kru Ped has been closely involved with boxing activities and in particular he followed and learned some basic skills from his uncle who was a boxer back then. Kru Ped also boxed for a few years before deciding to go into the business of boxing camps. Det Rat camp was set up in 1981 simply by using two trees near the house to hang sandbags and tinned pads as a partition. Most of the trainee boxers at first came through personal connections and several of them were rural dwellers seeking a place to stay in Bangkok. Despites several offers from businessmen to sponsor his camp, Kru Ped insisted on building his own training regime based on his own financial capacity as he wanted to maintain his freedom in his business and teaching style. Concerning the management of the boxing business and his boxers, Kru Ped said that:

“Working as a lecturer makes too little income. Now I have my own camp, I can earn a lot more money. But when the camp has income, we have to be very careful of how to manage our money. I have been in this business for a long time and have seen a lot of boxers. I can say that only 0.05 percent is really successful. I have always told to my trainee boxers
that they have to be careful in using their earned income. Some spend a lot when they get a big chunk from the fight, some use their money to invest into other businesses but they have no skill to operate them, some like to live daydreaming about their future success that will never come, and some are so crazy with girls that they cannot keep their money and body in shape.”

The money used in camp management comes from a 50 percent deduction from the earnings each boxer receives when entering into competition. This money will cover the cost of food, travel, and accommodations within Kru Ped’s house. His home-based camp today hosts 10-15 trainee boxers and all reside in the camp. The camp also receives a few foreigners who are interested in taking short training courses from time to time. The charge will be around 30,000 baht (1,000 USD) per month which also covers training costs, food, travel and accommodations. The overall cost to manage the camp is usually around 50,000 baht per month but the income varies depending on the success of his boxers in the fighting ring.

**Becoming a Boxer**

The path of becoming a Thai boxer is often depicted as a hard road of individuals struggling against poverty and social constraints imposed on rural Thai men (Pattana 2007, 2009 and Vail 1998, 1999). However, there is a study suggesting that the motivation of Thai men to become boxers is also influenced by self-inspiration, the attempt to develop one’s physical capacity and health reasons (Dusit 1996). In other words, aside from external factors related to social and economic aspects, there is also an internal drive that has significant influence on a decision to enter into this prize-ring activity. Here I use study cases from two boxers in Kru Ped’s camp to illustrate their life paths in becoming Thai boxers.

Bao came from Songkhla province in the south of the country to become a boxer in Kru Ped’s camp when he was 16 years old. He was accepted into the camp because his uncle, a sports reporter, and Kru Ped are friends. Now Bao is also attending the last year of high school but he admits that he often misses class due to fatigue from his tight training schedule. Bao prefers boxing to study. Over the past 3 years, he has fought in more than 70 contests, both in Bangkok and in outside provinces. Bow considers fighting in Bangkok stadiums more demanding than when going out to rural competition. He said that “boxing in Bangkok stadiums is difficult. In provincial matches sometimes you get a weak and unprepared opponent and you don’t get to challenge yourself much. In Bangkok, boxers have to study their opponents prior to the match to be able to arrange their techniques and strategies.” The only downside from fighting in a standard stadium is that the boxer is prohibited to box in any competition again within a 3 week period after the match. This rule is to allow the boxer to fully cover from the exhaustion and minor injuries he might receive from a big match. Bao now earns 33,000 baht per match. His income has recently been increased by his fame from winning three standard competitions in a row. While provincial and not-so-official contests provide less income (about 3,000 baht in prize money), they are sometimes preferred by young and poor boxers so they can avoid the 3 week restriction and participate in matches as often as their bodies and managers allow.
Dai is another boxer in Kru Ped’s camp. He is a 21 year old boy from a small district in Phrae province in northern Thailand. He started boxing when he was in the fourth grade, roving provincial events earning 500-1,000 baht for each match. Dai entered into serious training and competition when he was in the twelfth grade. Unlike Bao, Dai had moved in and out of several training camps after he first came to Bangkok at the advice of his relatives. Dai came to Kru Ped’s camp through the introduction of his manager who had ‘bought’ him from another camp in the suburb area of Bangkok. Now it has already been a year under the supervision of Kru Ped and he is not sure where his boxing life will lead him. “The life of boxer is similar to professional football players, it is uncertain. It depends on the money and who will be interested in buying you,” Dai commented.

Training styles and rules imposed on boxers vary from camp to camp. In Kru Ped’s camp, the training schedule is stricter and expectations are higher than the one Dai had previously been to. The last camp, according to him, tended to focus on tactics, but for Det Rat camp physical capacity and endurance are given priority. When there is a competition coming, Dai will be in controlled practice for ten to fifteen days. During a normal training schedule, Sunday is considered a day off, but as a fight approaches, Sunday is also a training day. This tight and restrictive training schedule within the camp leaves Dai with little free time during the week. Because of this, it is difficult for him to spend time with other friends outside the camp, and his boxing colleagues have slowly become his new close friends.

Over the past year, Dai has fought several times at Lumpini and Ratchadamnoen, the two most recognized stadiums in the country. He is now being paid around 23,000 baht per match and this prize money will be raised 3,000 baht each time he wins a match. When asked about how he perceives himself in relation to his boxing career, Dai replied that, “I have chosen to be on this path, so I have to make it through. I know there will be a certain point where I can no longer box and it has already been many years that I have walked this path. What will happen, will happen, I guess.” Even though the time frame for giving up boxing is somewhat undecided, Dai has a strong interest in continuing his education, and he is determined to
apply for a university this year. The money for his tuition will come from the earnings of his labors during the past few years.

Body at Work

At Det Rat Camp, the compounds around Kru Ped’s house have been turned into a space for physical training. The boxing ring is located in the area formerly used as a garage. Four sandbags are hung from the beam of the garage and all the equipment is kept behind the house. Normally Kru Ped will act as a coach supervising all the trainee boxers by himself unless he has a class to teach at the university or has to take a boxer for a competition. Kru Ped also has a few other assistant trainers who can help as practice partners for the boxers to develop skills and techniques. The daily training schedule is divided into two parts: morning, used for a warm-up, and afternoon, which is aimed at physical endurance and technical development. The training often starts with 30 minute jogging (around 5-10 kilometers), followed by rope jumping and weight lifting for another half hour. The trainee boxers then put the gloves on or use a white cloth wrap around their fists and began their session with their boxing partner, trainer, or coach. Any boxer who has an important upcoming match will be closely trained and supervised by Kru Ped. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday there are mock fights using exactly the same rules and duration of real matches in the standard ring. One match consists of 5 rounds; each round lasts for 3 minutes with a 2 minute break between the rounds. Below is a table showing the daily schedule of trainee boxers in Det Rat Camp:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.00-8.00</td>
<td>Jogging, Rope Jumping, Weight Lifting, Sit-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.00-11.00</td>
<td>Boxing training (shadow boxing, sandbag, moving target, counter boxing, tactic development)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.00-15.00</td>
<td>Rest (mostly sleeping)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.00-16.00</td>
<td>Jogging, Rope Jumping, Weight Lifting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.00-19.00</td>
<td>Boxing training (practice with partners, trainers or coach)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.00-07.00</td>
<td>Personal and resting times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Training approaches and programs vary among different boxing camps and boxers under training. This is due to several factors such as the physical state and capacity of the boxer trainees, their mental state, skills and strategies, the competition schedule, opponents, as well as the resources and the management of the boxing camps. The mental state of the boxer trainees is one of the crucial factors impacting the way in which the training progresses. Many newly arrived boxers, almost all of them from rural provinces, often feel home sick after a few weeks away from home. Some feel that they have lost their youthful freedom and are trapped by the imposed rules and strict discipline. This is not to mention the lack of private space and the adaptation to a new environment and friends. The fatigue from hard training also discourage these young ones from continuing on this physically demanding path. The level of skill each boxer has also marks the differences in training style and expectations. Some trainee boxers have never been in a boxing ring before entering the camp while some have boxed for several years without proper training. Another factor is the
duration of training time before a match. If a boxer is scheduled to be in a standard competition, then serious training, weight control, and the study of the opponent’s movements, skills and advantages will be observed.

![Figure 7: Kru Ped coaching his young boxers](image)

**Conclusion: Embodying Sportsmanship and the Ring of Manhood**

Once a man has walked into a boxing camp and has been accepted by the camp owner or his coach, he has allowed his body to be recreated and manipulated by others around him. In other words, the trainee boxer acknowledges that his body will no longer be his own, but will be managed by the process of boxing training and wider sporting enterprises. Some say that one of the key factors for the success of a boxer is his “compliance” with his master’s instructions and how well he manages his life under discipline. Being in a boxing camp is similar to being in a military barrack where the leader commands and the followers only comply (Jiraporn 2004: 135). There is also a set of prohibitions and punishments to make sure that each boxer avoids activities that might lessen his physical capacity and create problems with others. With all these attachments the boxer has with his camp and his camp master, it is not surprising to see that in Thai boxing circles it is typical that each boxer will be provided with a boxing title referring to himself as “a son of...(camp’s name)” or “a pupil of...(master’s name)...”. This is like a genealogy of the boxing regime that represents not only the background training each boxer has but also the personal identity and the social attachment one can expect from the boxer.

The process of training the boxers, traditionally or contemporarily, also closely engages with mental adjustment and control. As we have seen from the boxing manuals and the real life practices of trainee boxers in the training camps, the mentality of being patient, disciplined, honest, loyal, and full of fighting spirit are always crucial in the success of boxer. When I talked to one of the training boxers from Kru Ped’s camp and asked about what has changed
in his life since he started to box, he said, “I have grown up and learnt not to give up easily. To be a man is to fight; fight for your survival, for your betterment and also fight for people that you love.” It is these series of “fights” that he has learnt from his physical training and embodied into his ideology of being a man.

References


