

MODERN MUAI THAI MYTHOLOGY

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This paper examines historical references to muai thai (Thai kickboxing), the Thai national sport, to analyze its significance and meaning in Thai culture. Focusing on four explicit royal chronicle references to boxing, and several others popularly construed to be about boxing, the paper shows how these accounts serve to define boxing's role in Thai national culture, and how boxing itself 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 the Thai race. Moreover, historical links between muai thai and the Thai royalty encourage the perception of boxing as a viable means of upward social mobility for commoner practitioners.

Introduction

Boxing is by far the biggest spectator sport in Thailand (National Statistic Office 1992). There are few days one does not encounter it in some form or other, whether it be a blaring contest on a TV at the market, a raucous live match at a temple fair, a video recording in someone's house, or a vivid pictorial in a magazine. Fights are televised every day, sometimes more than once a day, and there are numerous weekly and biweekly magazines devoted to the sport, as is the world's only daily boxing newspaper, *Muai Siam Rai Wan* ("Siam Boxing Daily"). Great champions like Khaosai Galaxy and Namkhabuan Nongkiipahayuth, whose names are known in households across the country, are notable representatives of a sport that may accurately be termed Thailand's national craze.¹

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¹ Boxing fans will recognize that while Namkhabuan competed in *muai thai*, Khaosai was an international-style boxer (*muai sakon*). The two styles are actually closely related in Thailand in a way suggestive of a division of (cultural) labor, with *muai thai* being consumed domestically and *muai sakon*

A significant aspect of the boxing phenomenon in Thailand is the degree to which *muai thai* has become historicized as an integral part of modern Thai culture despite the fact that its origins are not well understood. Most of accepted *muai thai* history derives from only four references in the royal chronicles.² That there are so few accounts is not surprising, given the political focus of the chronicles. But since the chronicles are seen as important legitimators of Thai national history, the fact that boxing is mentioned at all goes far in explaining the meaning and cultural significance of modern *muai thai*. Moreover, it is remarkable how very well known these few boxing stories are throughout Thailand. They have been widely propagated and embellished upon through word of mouth, the print media, schoolbooks, movies, guidebooks (especially outside of Thailand), and even on the Internet. They have also been retold—reconstructed even—by modern writers using pseudoscientific methods and theory *du jour*—historical, anthropological, and even genetic—to explain why Thais box (see, for example, Posawat 1979; Panya 1988; Suthon 1997; Charusin 1968; and Miller 1990). Thus, although historical references are limited, there has developed around *muai thai* a rich and continuous history that is shared by nearly all members of the national culture.

My purpose in the present paper is to analyze the notions of boxing history that prevail in contemporary popular Thai culture. I will do this by reviewing the four main chronicle references to *muai*

...serving as a vehicle for international acclaim. In recent years, Thais have won international-style professional and amateur boxing titles from numerous different sanctioning bodies, including the Olympics. Somlak Khamsing (featherweight) won Thailand's first gold medal in the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. Several other Thais have also medaled: Phayao Pooltarat in 1976 (bronze; light featherweight), Thawee Umphonmaha in 1984 (silver; light welterweight), Akhom Chenglai in 1992 (bronze; welterweight) and Wichairachanon Khadpo in 1996 (bronze; bantamweight). Professional international-style Thai boxers include such legends as Phon Kingpet (Flyweight champion in the 1960s), Chatchai Chionoi (flyweight champion mid-1960s to mid-1970s) and the great Khaosai Galaxy (WBA junior Bantamweight champion, from the mid-1980s until the early 1990s). Because 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*.

² There may be other, more detailed stories extant in collections or archives. If so, these stories are known only among devout boxing aficionados and do not constitute a part of mass consciousness of Thai boxing. For this reason, I restrict my present analysis to the four chronicle sources mentioned, which *have* entered into the Thai mass consciousness.

thai and comparing those accounts to versions of the same stories offered by modern writers. By examining the ways the stories have been recast, and particularly by analyzing various added embellishments, I will highlight the meanings *muai thai* has been invested with in modern Thailand. In theoretical terms, I will be analyzing the sorts of cultural “work” *muai thai* performs in modern Thailand—or as Clifford Geertz terms it, the sorts of stories the Thais (in this case) “tell themselves about themselves” (Geertz 1973:448) through their boxing mythology.

But first, Geertz’s notion of a “cultural text” requires some prior explanation, for as a way of understanding the social semantics of culture, it begs certain questions: How is a “cultural text” constituted or manifested? Who produces it? What does it say? And who “reads” it? After all, not all Thais box, and not all attend matches. Some don’t even like boxing. Nevertheless, all Thais, whether or not they consider themselves individually as fans, are aware of what *muai thai* is, and nearly everyone who attends a *muai thai* bout knows the basic structural elements, the “rules,” that define it functionally as a stable “social frame” (Goffman 1974:8-9). They know that it will consist of five rounds; that boxers will be kicking and punching one another; that there will be a winner declared in the end; and so forth.³ This sort of shared knowledge of performative structure I find relatively unproblematic. But most Thais also share certain deeper cultural assumptions about how *muai thai* informs, and is informed by, the abstract concepts of “Thainess” and Thai national identity, and I find these assumptions much more interesting. It is therefore the cultural meanings inherent in this “story”—the story the Thais are “telling themselves about themselves” through their boxing history—that I am after in this paper; and the key texts from which to begin such an analysis are the four well known boxing-related stories found in the chronicles.

³ This was not always the case, however, since such rules have only been standardized in the last 50 years or so. The homogeneity of rules has implications for the cultural understanding of *muai thai*. Suffice it to say at this point that standard rules enforced in Thailand enable *muai thai* to be part of a national culture for the very reason that everyone in Thailand knows what to expect and everyone knows that all Thais fight *muai thai* in the same fashion.

Phra Jao Sūa

The oldest unequivocal Thai account of a boxing competition comes from the royal chronicles of Ayutthaya. In this story, the King of Siam, Sorasak (also named Phra Jao Sūa, the “Tiger King,” r. 1703-1709), goes to compete *in cognito* at a rural village festival:

Now His Holiness changed his holy clothes and transformed himself into a poor person, and his Majesty went in disguise with only four or five policemen and pages, original crown servants who were confidants He trusted his Holy heart, to prevent anyone from suspecting who he was.

Just at that time, the lord of the fair had the boxing contests held. Thereupon a holy royal order was issued deputing a crown servant to say to the person who was the master of the arena, “At this moment one of the boxers from the Capital has come out. He would like to come in for a match and box in Your Worship’s arena.”

Thereupon the Holy Lord of the Realm and that boxer accordingly began to fight against one another. Now the skills of both parties were nice and equal to each other; they did not make mistakes with each other and their strength was enough to make it a fair contest. Now the various people who were watching them accordingly praised the skill of both parties and loudly gave shouts of “Ha” continually on every beat.

When they had managed to compete together for about half a round, his [the opponent’s] strength began to be reduced and he lost position, made a mistake and was hit handily in a vital spot. Being hurt to excruciation for many beats he lost through His [the King’s] constant condition of merit in that round. Thereupon the master of the arena accordingly dropped their rewards—one baht to the winner and two saleung to the loser—following the habit of the outer villages. (Cushman 1973: 895-898)

This is a peculiar entry by *phongsawadan* chronicle standards, because rather than dealing with affairs of state—wars or struggles for succession—it provides a glimpse of life beyond the court and palace. Although the text clearly associates the informal title “King Tiger” to Sorasak’s penchant for violence and abuse, popular sources typically attribute it to the king’s boxing prowess, thereby associating *muai thai* with royal charisma, karma, and (since old kings were generally regarded as warriors) martial spirit.⁴ The story is commonly cited in boxing literature because the association of *muai thai* with royalty and kingship legitimates the sport as an organic part of Thai history.

Subsequent retellings (and there are many, for there is some mention of Phra Jao Súa in virtually every popular history of *muai thai*) also tend to present the story as one episode of a larger pattern of behavior. Panya, for instance, writes that “He [Phra Jao Súa] would be so keen on Thai boxing that he would *often* disguise himself in order to participate in matches” (Panya 1988:17, italics added). This version makes *muai thai* appear as a widespread phenomenon. Other rewrites further exacerbate this slight liberty, one of them suggesting that because of Phra Jao Súa’s penchant for the sport, “Thai boxing became the favorite pastime of the people, the army and royalty” and that “[r]ich, poor, young, and old all flocked to the camps to join in the action” (Miller 1990:50).⁵

⁴ Not all sources attribute his name to boxing. Some, such as Panya (1988), admit he was a horrendous king and earned the name because of his penchant for gratuitous violence.

⁵ That the chronicle depicts boxing as a common form of entertainment at rural festivals is interesting, since this is still very much the case today. Then as now, boxing existed in the form of prizefighting. Evidence from premodern law also makes passing reference to boxing at festivals. Mengrai’s laws treat boxing as a form of entertainment and therefore exempt it from the poll tax and allow gambling (Khamthorn 1978:1-27). Later Ayutthayan law also treat boxing as a form of entertainment and, as such, protect participants from litigation in the case of injury or death:

Item 117 Clause 1

If two people agree to box or wrestle, that is fine. Perhaps one gets hurt or even dies. This is not punishable by law. If someone [i.e. a promoter] incites them to fight or offers a prize to box or wrestle, that is fine. The promoter cannot be punished because he, the promoter, had the intention of providing entertainment. It is the fate (karma) of the participant. (Phraphuttayotfa 1962:160)

The Phra Jao Sūa story, then, associates boxing with royalty (and hence military), village festivals, a warrior spirit, and, to some extent, an ambivalent sense of honor, violence, and even cruelty. Such ambivalence is still associated with a particular Thai cultural persona known as *nakleng*, loyal but dangerous rural “bigmen” who in the popular mind are associated in many ways with the boxing world.

Nai Khanom Tom

By far the most famous (and most embellished) boxing story is that of Nai Khanom Tom, a legendary hero allegedly taken prisoner and removed to Rangoon after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. Some time after being taken captive, on an occasion when the king of Ava decided to include boxing as part of a religious festival, Nai Khanom Tom entered the competition and succeeded in beating nine or ten of the top Burmese boxers. Seeing this, the king is reported to have said that “he [Nai Khanom Tom] fights as though he had venom on his hands; had the nobles [of Siam] fought like him, Ayutthaya would never have fallen.” The story is immensely popular. Virtually every school child in modern Thailand knows it even though few may know precisely where it originated. Nai Khanom Tom is the subject of medallions, amulets, statues, plays, and, most recently, a TV miniseries starring Olympic medallist Somlak Khamsing. The country’s most popular regularly promoted fight series is named after him (*Muai Nai Khanom Tom*, a weekly event staged by Songchai Rattanasupan, the ‘Don King’ of Thailand), and March 17 is “Nai Khanom Tom Boxing Day” at boxing venues.

Although based on only eight lines from a Burmese chronicle and later retold in the chronicles of Ayutthaya, modern versions of the story typically are embellished with an enormous amount of added detail. Here, for example, is an excerpt from one such retelling in a popular magazine:

Nai Khanom Tom began to get tired because of all the kicks he threw and he decided he should rely more on punching. He faked a left and then hit the Burman in the eyes with a hard right, until the Burman was incapacitated. Nai Khanom Tom could then toy with him before the Burman gave up in the second round. After just a moment’s rest, the fifth Burman came in to fight. He was short and strong, and moved in trying to

get a clinch so he could tire Nai Khanom Tom out. Nai Khanom Tom faded back and waited for an opening. As soon as he saw one he fired a left followed by a hard right, hitting the Burman in the cheek and knocking him out of the ring. The Burman wouldn't fight anymore. Nai Khanom Tom asked for time to rebind his fists; because he had punched so many Burmese boxers the wraps were coming off. When the sixth Burman came, Nai Khanom Tom was rested. But he acted tired so the Burmese would rush in. Nai Khanom Tom threw a spinning heel kick hitting the Burmese boxer so hard he could not breathe—and he gave up. (Charusin 1968:30)

In addition to making the story more appealing overall, the embellishments serve several specific functions. First, by making mention of tactics commonly used today—the spinning heel kick, the clinch—the author legitimizes those techniques as canonically *muai thai* even though it is uncertain whether they date as far back as the 18th century. Thus, a link is established between current practices and ancient ones, and the present becomes inextricably a part and product of Thai history. Secondly, the pattern of embellishments in this particular story is consistent with a kind of literature that Sunait describes as nationalist rewritings of chronicle history (1990:53-66). Sunait documents how historians and writers like Prince Damrong and Luang Wichit Watthakan have essentially rewritten segments of the chronicle record so as to have a markedly nationalistic slant. The enemy in most of these rewritings, including the one presented here, is Burma. As Sunait explains: “In the past, the Burmese were basically understood as the enemy of Buddhism, but in the nation-building period they came to be characterized as an enemy of the Thai nation” (1990:44). He also discusses how national histories credit commoners with being national heroes and heroines.⁶ Nai Khanom Tom, a common soldier, is a clear case in point. In defeating ten Burmese fighters by virtue of his prowess as a Thai boxer, he is credited with embarrassing the enemies of the Thai state. In the process, the combative techniques of *muai thai* become a

⁶ The first instance of this is the purported heroism of Bang Rachan villagers during the fall of Ayutthaya. See Sunait 1990:50.

specifically Thai art form, linked to reified notions of the Thai race, nation, and masculinity.⁷

Phra Pichai Dap Hak

Another story that draws heavily on an anti-Burmese stance is that of Nai Thong Di Fan Khao (Phraya Pichai Dap Hak), a commoner who rose through the military ranks to become a general renowned for his military exploits against the Burmese and for his allegiance to Taksin.⁸ In addition to his other merits, Nai Thong Di apparently had considerable skill as a boxer. The following brief biographical summary is taken largely from Posawat (1979).

Nai Thong Di (Phra Pichai Dap Hak) began boxing as a child, having left his position as a temple *dek wat* to reside with several different boxing masters. He faced numerous obstacles, often in the form of envious rivals, and eventually became an extremely talented pugilist. Upon reaching manhood, he entered a village boxing contest that Phra Taksin (then governor of Tak province) was also attending, and there he managed to beat not only the top contender but also Taksin's own boxing instructor. Taksin forthwith took Nai Thong Di as a soldier, possibly a *thanai liiak*—a royal guard (Posawat 1979:52-65).⁹ Rising through the ranks, Nai Thong Di became a war hero and was eventually elevated to the position of *cao müang* 'governor' of Phichai. During his term as *cao müang*, he tracked down his long lost mother and promoted his former boxing instructors to headmen of their respective villages. Phra Phichai Dap Hak himself was eventually promoted, first to general and ultimately to governor of Phichai. He earned the name *Dap Hak* 'Broken Sword' in a particularly fierce battle against the Burmese during which his sword broke yet he kept on fighting. Phra Pichai was so loyal that he allegedly insisted on being executed along with Taksin rather than serve a different master. In Uttaradit, there is now a statue commemorating him as a national hero, one of many statues

⁷ Not surprisingly, Burmese viewers protested against the television Nai Khanom Tom mini-series on the grounds that it took a jingoistic stance towards Burma (Royal Thai Embassy 1996).

⁸ Taksin and Naresuan of Ayutthaya are often cited as two national heroes because they restored the Thai state after defeats at the hands of the Burmese (Sunait 1990:58).

⁹ There is some evidence to suggest that hiring boxers as soldiers and royal guards was indeed common practice. Skillful boxers were chosen to serve as palace guards and royal boxing instructors.

celebrating commoners who have risen to help the nation in times of crisis.¹⁰

Although the story of Phra Phichai Dap Hak is somewhat less well known than the first two cited, it nonetheless reveals much about the *muai thai* mythos. For one thing, the anti-Burmese tone of the account, as in the tale of Nai Khanom Tom, reflects popular modernist constructions of Thai nationhood. The story also reinforces *muai thai*'s association with royalty, often conflated with "warrior" in the premodern period. The idea of the "man of prowess," central to many cultures in Southeast Asia (see Wolters 1982), became less practicable (though not entirely eclipsed—see Sunait 1990:159) after institutional reforms by King Trailok of Ayutthaya brought about a more rational, bureaucratic system of government. These reforms, together with the increasing number of guns in the region, meant that the "man of prowess" became more cultural model than practical warrior. The type lives on to this day in the form of boxers, whose public persona draws heavily on premodern images of the warrior spirit, most notably the one-on-one elephant duel. Finally, the Phra Phichai Dap Hak story presents boxing as a viable—and prestigious—avenue by which commoners can become associated with royalty and the higher ranks of the military. This is still true, for boxing remains an extremely important avenue of upward social mobility for commoners, with generous (and quite public) support from military figures and from royalty perpetuating the link between boxer and lord. Boxers fight for money and fame, and many are able to cultivate connections with wealthy patrons and thereby ensure for themselves some sort of work after their boxing careers are over. Another historical association between boxing and royalty—that in which boxers are employed as palace guards—can be found manifested in today's popular magazines, where boxers are often pictured dressed as premodern soldiers or *thanai liiak*.

Mün Phlan

The fourth (and last) story from the chronicles is another unique—peculiar even—episode that takes place during the reign of Rama I. The story concerns a pair of French brothers who come to

¹⁰ Such statues serve as strong reminders of nationalist sentiment (Mosse 1975) and are in some cases associated with boxing. Some boxers draw on the (religious) efficacy of such statues (Suthon 1998).

Bangkok in 1788 and propose a boxing match. The king is persuaded by his brother, the heir apparent, that he should agree to hold the match in order to protect Siam's international reputation. The king's brother chooses a boxer named Mūn Phlan from the front palace and arranges to have a venue constructed west of the Phra Sirattanasatsadaram Temple. On the day of the fight, Mūn Phlan is prepared, and many members of the royal family are in attendance. The chronicle report proceeds as follows:

Mūn Phlan and his white opponent entered and saluted the king. They both stood up and were ready to box each other. The white man reached out to seize Mūn Phlan and break his collarbone. Mūn Phlan raised up his arms to prevent that and struck out at the white man while moving backwards. The white man was hit but did not fall, and kept reaching for Mūn Phlan, who in turn kept stepping backwards while hitting. Thus the white man could not get at and seize him. The white man's elder brother saw this, leaped up, [and] went over and pushed Mūn Phlan so he could not backstep any further and avoid his opponent. At this, the king's younger brother, the Heir Apparent Kromphraratchawang Bawon Sathanmongkhon, became angry. He said they were fighting a wager match one to one, and asked why then the other should help, making it two on the other side. The prince quickly jumped off the platform, brought his foot up and kicked the elder white man, who tumbled down. The referees there rushed in and began fighting with the two white brothers. Both brothers were badly hurt. Their subordinates then carried them back to their ship.

The king ordered that governmental medical doctors and masseurs go to their ship and treat them. After the two white men recovered, they asked the interpreter to have Phraya Phrakhleng inform the king that they asked to take their leave. They departed, moving their ship down from the capital city and going out the river mouth at Samutprakan. Once they reached the sea, they used their sails and sailed away. (Thiphakorawong 1978:146-149)

That this story is so highly touted as part of *muai thai* history is somewhat peculiar considering that the Thai fighter did not actually win and the match ended up in mayhem. But some later accounts make Mūn Phlan the winner. Panya, for example, says that “On the appointed day, the Thai boxer won easily, greatly shaming the two French boxers” (1988:23). Others, like Posawat, retell the story as it appears in the chronicle but then somewhat incongruously claim it as proof of the efficacy of *muai thai* (1979:95). Posawat goes so far as to say that the guards who joined the fray were all skilled in *muai thai*, and that the fact of the two Frenchmen being injured was clear indication of *muai thai*’s effectiveness. Beyond this, however, the story is important because it depicts a *muai thai* bout against foreigners who are not just *not* Burmese but are French, and who therefore represent the country that supplanted Burma as the greatest immediate threat to Siam’s interests during the period of nation-building in the first half of the 20th century (See Thongchai 1994 for an extensive discussion).

The story of Mūn Phlan has an important addendum to its role in shaping Thai national identity in the present day, and I will return to it momentarily. First however, I will look briefly at a few stories that are not about boxing but which are often referred to as boxing stories. These also have important ramifications for how boxing is intertwined with the construction of national identity.

Non-boxing Boxing Stories

There are several chronicle accounts that are often retold in the popular media as boxing stories but which on closer inspection of the original sources turn out to be accounts of sword or elephant duels. Such is an episode from the Chiang Mai Chronicle, retold in a popular martial arts magazine as follows:

The Chiang Mai annals tell the fifteenth century story of two Muay Thai champions. In 1411 king Sen Muang Ma died leaving two sons and two claims to the throne. One too many. The sons Yi Kumkan and Fang Ken started a grueling war for the throne. Neither could get the upper hand and the war dragged on inconclusively. Fang Ken suggested that they follow the traditions of the past and that the succession issue be settled by a single Muay Thai combat. Yi Kumkam agreed. Both princes stated