

## Thai Boxing

### Networking of a Polymorphous Clinch

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Thai Boxing or Muay Thai is among the biggest and most important cultural industries in contemporary Thailand.<sup>1</sup> Our question here regards the “professional practice” (*muaj achi:p*, lit., professional boxing) of Muay Thai that encompasses close to all of the boxers in the kingdom of Thailand, except for a few amateur clubs where the upper class practices a traditional local form of self-defense. The modern sport of Muay Thai, heir to a long martial tradition, is largely a matter of prize fighting since pugilists going into the ring, even beginners from six years old on, are paid a sum of money, referred to as *kha: tua* (price of the body).<sup>2</sup>

Muay Thai is organized around networks of boxing camps or gyms, *khriia khaj* (group of descent), that are structured according the evolution of mutual and reciprocal relations between camp owners and competition promoters. These networks are mainly oriented from rural areas toward the capital and thus reproduce the typical spatial hierarchy of Thai territory favoring Bangkok as the single valorized center. Every camp owner at the regional level is linked to local ones in the countryside through privileged relationships. The same system prevails between gym owners in the capital and in the main towns of the province. The whole organization is headed by important promoters in Bangkok who maintain connections with a clientele of camp owners in the capital and rural areas.

The world of professional Thai boxing is highly integrative since it links together many of Thai society's hierarchical stratum. The peasantry supplies the majority of the professional fighters, nearly half of whom are from the Northeast. While most rural camp owners are civil servants, chiefly teachers, the greatest gyms and stadiums both in the rural areas and big cities are headed by top military and police officers, businessmen and politicians, who are predominantly of Chinese descent.

In addressing the circulation of ideas that goes together with the geographical movements of Muay Thai boxers in Thailand, we shall principally consider Thai professional prize fighters coming from the Northeastern part of the country (*Pha:k Isa:n*).<sup>3</sup> Thai fighters have been traveling all over the country at least since the late nineteenth century. During this period of time the process whereby Muay Thai was becoming a competitive sport accelerated. The circulation of boxers is designed to facilitate their confrontations in the ring and relates to two types of boxers' movements. First the

boxers travel with some members of their gym from their training place to the stadiums in order to fight with boxers from different networks. Locality and membership in a network tend to converge in order to underlie the principle of what can be called the “fighting exogamy”: one cannot fight another boxer with whom one may be “intimate” (*sa'nikan*), since this situation would result in a lack of fighting spirit from both sides. The application of this rule promotes a steady circulation of the camps' members to numerous sites of competition to look for suitable opponents. The second type of circulation of boxers concerns their exchanges within networks mainly from the numerous rural boxing camps to the big gyms and stadiums of Bangkok following their gradual acquisition of fighting skills. Once in the capital, they may be given a chance to face the best fighters of the country or be selected to represent their nation against foreign boxers. Thais refer to this kind of circulation by the expression *doen sa:j*, meaning to “walk along the line.”

My key argument here involves questioning the pugilists' bodies as a convenient starting point from which to map the Thai social body, and by doing so, negotiate an outline of social groups. [Bernard Formoso \(1987 and 2001\)](#) has shown how the Thais, the Isans in particular, imagine social groups at every level following metaphors of the human body. This notion represents a useful tool of discrimination in the analysis of the boundaries of the social and cultural bodies. It should be emphasized that the Thais place great importance on the human body as a means to manage their relations to foreigners.<sup>4</sup> Following the boxers we shall scrutinize their circulations and analyze their functioning as an instrument that enables the endless making and remaking of their bodies and of the nation at the same time.

### Boxer or Fighter? Answering a Question to Appropriate a Pupil

When camp owners and their trainers welcome a new apprentice to the camp, the first weeks are dedicated to a kind of divinatory exercise in order to qualify the novice's aptitude to Muay Thai and identify his “boxing style” (*pra'phae:t muaj*) through practice.<sup>5</sup> This process is regarded as a test of a student's potential. A diagnosis is made when the parents of the newcomer first come to the camp to get the owner's approval to train their offspring. Remarkably, the trainers let the beginner exercise along with more experienced pugilists and they provide very little feedback. Without inciting the novice to surpass himself, they intend to test his resistance to effort and his will to endure the painful training required daily to prepare a boxer.

In the beginning an apprentice will only be explicitly asked to perform a “shadow boxing” (*muaj lom*) exercise for the trainer. The trainer will observe the novice closely to decipher what singular relation the boy can essentially nourish with the art of Muay Thai, that is to say, to figure out what is his personal style. The idea is to ascertain whether he is an “artist” (*muaj fi: mü:, muaj choeng*, or *boksoer*) or an “attacker” (*muaj buk*, *muay tho'ra'ö:t*, or *fajthoer*, from the English *fighter*) and so be able to personalize the training.<sup>6</sup> Two boxing methods are distinguished: on the one hand are pugilists who use counterattack, model their rhythm and tactics upon that of their opponent, fight smartly by dodging and side-stepping, and master the Muay Thai techniques with style; on the other

hand are boxers who move unyieldingly forward, relying instead on their stamina and strength by enduring many blows, and whose technical register is more limited than those of the artists. The boxing stance of the “artists” refers to the notion of “art” (*sinla’pa*) that underlines the civilized nature of Thai Boxing and its place within the national cultural heritage; the style of the “artists” belongs to the realm of beauty, and what is beautiful is virtuous, and what is virtuous from a Buddhist point of view is Thai. The “attacking” alternative makes sense as a less sophisticated practice of Muay Thai associated with the margins of the kingdom, at least according to the stereotypes used in the world of Thai boxing, representations that should not be underestimated.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, the two boxing categories also refer to morphological types. The “artist” option is generally assigned to tall and slender boxers, while the “attacker” version applies to stocky fighters. In fact, the majority of the pugilists affirm this relationship between physiognomy and boxing styles through the tactical stance they favor during their fights. Since trainers don’t have much information about the boxing qualities of newcomers, they try to connect the type of moves they see during early training sessions with morphological characteristics.

It is worth noting that corporal stereotypes, present especially in the mass media, nurture the image of the Isans (the economically and culturally marginalized population of the Northeast) as dark skinned with a stocky, muscular build. In the microsociology of daily interaction, discriminations are sustained by distinctions in physical appearance that refer to different ways of life.<sup>8</sup> Whiteness of the skin suggests less exposure to sunlight, indicating an occupation that does not relate to farming, building, or factory tasks. A pale complexion and a slender build bring to mind urban Chinese and Sino Thai populations, symbols of economic success that indicate a say in the consumption model that tends to impose itself upon Thai society.

The stereotype of the Isan body stands in opposition to the pale and slender aesthetic ideal. In the grammar of discrimination, the physical characteristics of the Isan peasant make him a suitable beast of burden for tiresome agrarian duties, unrewarding tasks in industry, and the boxing ring because the Isan body is molded by the hardships of life. Even though all Isan fighters do not correspond to this cliché, the recurrent identification of Northeastern boxers with the “attacking” boxing style seems to cultivate the negative *a priori* stereotype that Isans suffer in Thailand, where it is believed that because they are uneducated, they can derive benefit only from their body and physical strength. Muay Thai, through a reverse rhetoric, bestows an opportunity to turn the Isan body into a hero: the Isans’ innate physical qualities, shaped by harsh conditions generation after generation, make these Northeastern peasants fearsome and wonderful boxers. Indeed they are much appreciated by promoters at large because of their presumed great stamina: the more spectacular and dramatic confrontations of these “attackers” are highly valued by spectators because of the exciting betting opportunities they afford. As such, Isan boxers represent a favored investment, since they are a reliable and profitable labor force that attracts a large popular audience.

As symbols of “attackers” Isan boxers embody in bold outline the moral values, such as courage, tenacity, and self-composure, that reflect the dominant, largely Buddhist, Thai ideology. These values, which constitute both goals and tools during the socialization process of the boxers in the

camps, are closely linked to Buddhist ideals such as “detachment” (*khwa:m choej*), and the Buddhist spiritual goal of surpassing the self. From an empirical perspective, one cannot deny the fact that Muay Thai is indeed a violent sport: the whole body is engaged and can be used both as a weapon—gloved punches, elbows, knees, chins, and feet—or a target (except the head and the genitals, for which the only protection used is a groin guard).<sup>2</sup> In addition to exchanging blows, boxers can also wrestle with the upper part of their body. Throughout training sessions and while in the ring, boxers therefore must be “courageous” (*caj khla:*) and make no show of the suffering they endure so as not to “lose one’s boxing form” (*sia ru:p muaj*), a specific criterion upon which decisions are made by referees. As much as such skills are required for every pugilist, the “attackers” symbolize them best.

The identification of the newcomer at the camp involves negotiating and mastering the neophyte’s environment of origin. The whole process of inquiry, much debated between the camp members, is a way to acknowledge the new boxer as a whole person. Actually this is what parents seek when they entrust their child’s education to a camp owner. Everybody hopes for a total reformation of the pugilist’s person that is not strictly physical: the young boy should also be morally enhanced through hard training. The role of the “master of boxing” (*khru: muaj*), who is either the “trainer” (*phu: fuk sòm*) or the owner of the camp and often the same person in small rural institutions, like any master in Thailand, occupies a role ideologically closely linked to and legitimized by Buddhism. Considering the characteristics of Muay Thai, a boxing master exerts a peculiar moral influence. Trained and nurtured by a master, the boxers are thought to be shielded from becoming criminals. Boxers thus come within the scope of the lineage along which Muay Thai *savoir-faire* is transmitted. At the top of the legendary version of that lineage one finds Phra Narayana, the mythic founder of the national self-defense art and an avatar of Vishnu, followed in the late eighteenth century by two military figures linked to the protection of national freedom: Nai Khanom Tom, a fighter who restored the kingdom of Siam’s honor by beating nine Burmese soldiers in a row at Muay Thai, and Phra Pichai Dap Hak, a famous soldier who helped General Taksin free the kingdom of Siam from Burmese occupation. Thanks to what is widely considered in Thailand as its special martial skills, the Thai Nation (an anachronism before the beginning of the nineteenth century that means literally the “nation of freemen,” *cha:t thaj*), has been able to keep at bay its foes and stay independent.

Moreover, from a synchronic perspective, the boxers are entangled in a web of moral obligations that oblige them not only toward their masters and parents but also toward the Buddha, the king, and the nation, the three pillars of the contemporary ideology that holds the whole population as one unit. This semiological stratigraphy is most visible during the “oath ceremony to the masters” (*waj khru:*), which is particularly represented by a “boxing dance” (*ra:m muaj*) that the pugilists perform in order to officialize the link with their master at the beginning of the transmission process and also as a prelude to each fight. The first oath ceremony generally signifies the confidence that the master puts in his pupil. The *ra:m muaj* ritual display shows that the boxer is fully in the grip of the master. Considerations of the neophyte’s origin or style are then no longer pertinent, at least in the camp, unless a serious problem of performance occurs, like several punishing defeats in a row. Indeed, the fighter’s results commit both the boxer and the camp owner toward the parents of the fighter who wait for their son’s career to grant money and prestige. On the basis of an unproblematic

functioning, the style of the boxer is therefore not a structuring debate to the socializing process of the camp. The polarization between “attacker” and “artist” tends then to be forgotten as boxers become known by their instructors and progress toward mastery of the basic combative moves and techniques. The polarizing schemata are almost unused in the camps since the staff have already identified the boxers and, consequently, appropriated them from a sporting point of view. As a matter of fact, if the results of a fighter are not subject to heavy criticism, the fighter is clearly bound to the master. The relation to their parents and their environment of origin will now show up in a different context, the contests.

### The Sociobiologization of the Boxers' Profiles: How to Dramatize the Fights

The style of the boxers materializes the bond between the spectators and the boxers. The conversation translates from the opposition in the ring toward the feelings of belonging to social forms that are activated through the specialized terminology that we previously discussed. The use of polarization by the camps' training personnel and contest promoters is therefore essentially utilized in communicating a perspective in order to promote the boxers' image while they are circulating. The “attacker” and “artist” categories are often heard in three types of discourses: in discussions among members of the same network about fights and exchanges of their boxers; between boxing events' organizers and the boxers' managers when the negotiations to match fighters and to set up boxing programs are at their height; and the schematic distinction that finally appears when used by the events' speakers, especially as they announce before each fight the profile of the two opponents. What I would like to emphasize here is that Muay Thai contests embody oppositions between social groups through interpersonal challenge.

In small rural contests, the two sides competing behind the two fighters often don't belong to the same social background. The question here is of the many situations when a small rural camp owner challenges an important urban camp owner through his pupil. Even if the two sides don't differ that much, comments around the ring and back at the gym after the contest take shape as an opposition between rural and urban areas on a regular basis. I recall a rivalry between two camps situated in a single village at the time of a bout that brought together two of their boxers during a locally organized boxing contest. The fight was broadly discussed before it took place, throughout the contest, and long afterward. Some of the villagers reproached the owner of the second gym, a businesswoman of Vietnamese origin married to an influential member of the village's council, for having too roughly withdrawn her son from the first camp a few years ago. They said she didn't show enough respect to the owner of the first gym, the headmaster of the village's primary school, and broke the most elementary rules of courtesy by doing so. Her manners were of a businesswoman focused only on the sole perspective of fame for her son and she was careless of the local values that emphasize a strong and indestructible bond between a pupil and his master. Others, on the contrary, stated that the school's headmaster lacked ambition in the management of his boxing camp. He hadn't taken note of the trading dimension of present-day Muay Thai. The headmaster considered honoring tradition and having a good time around the ring as being of more

importance than the cautious preparation of his boxers to achieve great victories in the famous stadiums of Bangkok. The atmosphere around the ring during that specific fight was tremendously strained. The fervor ignited by the bout that night revealed a division of the local populace into two more or less porous sides.

Let us focus now on the conversations among intimates in the camps about the competitions in which the local boxers are involved. Before and after the fights, an amplification of the confrontation in the ring takes place through comments that seek to demonstrate the superiority of a certain social group as compared to others. According to Ajan Wichit (Master Wichit), the headmaster of a small rural Northeastern camp, for example, the “Isan body,” sculpted generation after generation by the environment, is the best symbol of the local specificity that makes the inhabitants of the Northeast countryside a model to be followed by the whole Thai nation. Each victory of his boxers over pugilists from big city camps, “bred with jasmine rice and Chinese noodles,” is an opportunity to celebrate with his boxers' parents a kind of “Isaness.” Victory is thought to result from a harmonious relation to nature, or more precisely, as the consequence of one's adherence to nature's law, a notion that here refers to the Thai “natural order” (*thamma' cha:t*). *Thamma'* stands for “order or law” and *cha:t* for “what is”: everything or the world by extension. *Cha:t* may also be used with a collective connotation to name a common origin from the point of view of an ethnic group's geopolitics.<sup>10</sup> Nature here opposes not culture but disorder. Drawing on an environmentalist discourse initially developed by urban and educated Thais who invested in NGOs favoring various grassroots contesting movements, Ajan Wichit states that the Isan nourish a relationship with their “natural environment” (*singwaetlom*) and their “human environment” (*sangkhom*) that is characterized by a Buddhist morale of higher quality when compared to other Thai conceptions, especially that of the inner-city Sino Thai population. Through the consumption of goods offered by their local natural environment, the Isan would as such be more respectful of the natural environment than are the politics of successive governments that have not considered the basic needs of the peasants when they decide, for example, to install hydroelectric dams to exploit the natural resources and dramatically modify the rural way of life. Thus Ajan Wichit sees the Isan people, and Isan boxers in particular, as a marker for a Thailand trapped in a largely Westernized modernization process that he regards as a dramatic loss of the ethic nurtured traditionally in Buddhism.

Such a point of view looks quite similar to those of the organizers of Muay Thai training courses meant for clients who mainly come from the big cities and belong to the well-to-do. All their clients share a kind of identity crisis and they seek the practice of a genuine Thai activity to shore up their “Thainess” (*khwa:m pen thaj*). The motto of these training courses lies actually in the reproduction of Thai peasants' ancestral gestures in their agrarian activities. According to the organizers, there is a natural relation between the timeless gestures of the peasants and the moves that characterize Muay Thai. The argumentation is based on a common acknowledgment of a specific Thai way of moving that “follows Thai people's nature” according to the local idiom (*ta:m thamma'cha:t khon thaj*). Such ideas are shared among numerous Thai people, beyond the restricted circle of the clients of these training courses. The notion of a Thai nation is naturalized and as such can be broadly used as an input medium through which to express reifying remarks.

Thus it becomes visible that through discourses and practice Muay Thai enables one to come within the scope of a specified “nature” (*thamma'cha:t*), Thai or Isan culture accordingly, and of a “national culture” (*wa'ta'na'tham thaj* or *wa'ta'na'tham hae:ng cha:t*). Nature and culture come into view as ways to rationalize one's relation to the world. Agricultural and martial techniques would then participate in the “Thai culture” while the gestures that materialize them would take part in the “Thai nature.”

The reification of the two boxing styles undergoes a significant slide in the context of international boxing bouts, whether in Thai or English boxing, when Thai fighters meet foreigners. The local pugilists are either identified as “artists” who represent the entire skillfulness and elegance of the Thai aesthetic, or are identified as “attackers” who demonstrate the strength and martial potential of the Thai nation, or as both simultaneously. The situation is quite ambiguous when it comes to nominate the best representative for Thailand. Sorting out the different components of the population the borderlines are not only blurred, but there is a competition as to which would be the best compromise of the two styles to represent the Thai way of boxing. Finally, once the choice is made, everybody agrees on the fact that real pugilistic excellence depends upon a harmonious combination of the two styles. Such a symbiosis refers to the unity of the Thai people and marks the perfect boxer, whatever his regional origin, as an ideal representative for the country. The quintessence of Thai boxing cannot be achieved without the “attacker” face of the coin, provided by fighters originating from the Northeast of the country.

Every international boxing program in which Thai nationals are engaged is an opportunity to openly celebrate the Thai nation, all the more so when the television presenters struggle with the classification of foreign opponents. Any hesitation or difficulty in identifying the fighter's style according to the traditional dichotomy may subsequently provide a comforting salve to soothe the possible disappointment accompanying the defeat of the local fighter.

Thanks to the travels of former famous Thai boxers around the world to teach their art and to the many foreigners, essentially “Westerners” (*fa'rang*), who since the 1970s have come to Thailand to study Muay Thai at its roots, the reification of an essential discrepancy between Thai boxers and foreign pugilists—through the comparison of their bodies, their athletic abilities, their fighting styles, and what kind of cultural orientation they embody—is not exclusively elaborated around the regularly organized mixed fights. Aside from a few cases when Westerners stay long enough in the country's camps to practice Muay Thai in a similar manner to their hosts, the difference of approach is such that it is possible to draw a clear boundary.

Every fight is indeed an opportunity to situate oneself in a social hierarchy that comes within the framework of the national territory. But one has to add that the boxing contests produce this kind of stereotyped opposition in a different way following each exact circumstance. Thanks to the gap that keeps apart the two fighters' sociological environment, fight observers indulge in tuning the distance between them, getting closer to some and moving away from others. This process is quite adaptable to each situation. Indeed, the feelings of distance and proximity produced during the fights take root in the handling of the stereotypes, which provide a convenient mechanism to mediate personal

situations and to idealize large social units that are not often in the direct purview of the spectators' daily life experience.

The objectification operated through the polarization of the styles occurs at key events in the world of Muay Thai, essentially when the rationale is to reify the links that the fighters potentially personify. It is worth noting that the boxing aficionados are not fooled by their own simplifications. They admit to an awareness of the reifying effect proposed by the "artist/attacker" scheme as each of the two expressions refers to a corpus of sporting and physical characteristics wide enough so that it is almost impossible to acknowledge a single boxer who could meet purely one or the other type. As a matter of fact, every pugilist is an original mixed profile. All the more, in order to satisfy the circumstances of each single fight, or over the course of one's career, a fighter can be driven to develop skills against his own nature.

In the competitive context, the reifying sociobiologic connection established by these categories between physical characteristics, sporting behavior, and membership to groups embedded in natural and social environments serves to quite conveniently dramatize boxing events. It nourishes the events by extending the potential of meanings rooted in the boxers' action in the ring and indisputably rewards the investment of the spectators.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the same boxer can be defined quite differently following the very context in which he is to fight. Considering the sociological situation of a given bout, a boxer can be classified under a category he is not used to, in the limits of his morphological and technical characteristics. Actually, what differs from one event to another is the way the manager, promoters, and journalists will promote the fighter in a program. The process begins with the negotiation of the bout to match up of a pair of boxers, followed by the weighing in session that results in the accentuation of the different characteristics of two boxers as a whole, in the perspective of an original clinch. The definition of the fighters' qualities is first subordinated to the imperatives of the promoters. The two boxers' profiles can be twisted a bit by the announcer during the contests and/or in the prognostics of the journalists before the fight to make the bout looking more exciting. First, whether they need to reify a style contrast or do the opposite and close the gap, the promoters exploit the qualities needed, omitting the others that don't match the plan. Second, and what may be even more important, is the fact that when one enters the details of the prognostics, one can notice that the characteristics of the fighters are not only constructed in mirror-like relation one to another, but also require a rich parallel description that stands out clearly from the simplifications of the boxing material through the use of the "attacker/artist" polarization. Once again, a journalist will pick up the qualities that enable him or her to draw two pugilistic portraits that can enhance boxing aficionados' appetite for exciting bouts. As was the case at the camp, the manipulation of stereotypes around the ring means more about organizing an original sociability around several pairs of fighters. The relevant unit of analysis is thus the clinch, definitely not the boxer, a statement that is ultimately backed by the vocabulary used to refer to boxers at training and during the contests. In both contexts, as a matter of fact, two opponents are called upon either individually (boxing partner) and together (boxing pair) with the same expression: *khu: muaj*, literary "boxing pair," as if a single



fighter would mean nothing, and wouldn't be able to personify Muay Thai alone.<sup>11</sup>

Through their circulations within competitive networks, boxers are given the possibility to climb the ring's hierarchy and, through fighting, to represent larger social units as they slide toward Bangkok. The feelings of belonging to the particular groups they embody is not the only variable according to the geographical context of each fight. We refer here to the very nature of the opposition that is proposed in every singular contest. And since the boxers are not merely isolated individuals but social agents holding a sociocultural background that can be discursively manipulated, it invites us to evade the boxer's body as a unit of meaning to invest the more dynamic heuristic perspective of the confrontation of two of them in a polymorphous clinch.

The so-called sporting criteria that define the two boxing styles are intimately intertwined with cultural, social, and environmental considerations that permeate the contemporary political discourse in Thailand. As such, they contribute through their circulations to bring into being shallow borders between different sociocultural and socioeconomic groups in the country and more sharp ones between a naturalized Thai nation and foreigners, especially Westerners. The question haunting boxing fans more or less openly is: to what degree is Muay Thai representative of "Thai" social identity. This uncertainty inflects each event, including such areas of signification as the boxer's physical appearance, the particular aspects of style, and many other aspects of the competitive bouts. Establishing the dynamic clinch as a heuristic concept in place of the single body, one can avoid several kinds of misunderstanding. An exploration of the specific circumstances of the boxers enables us to appreciate the broader sociological implications of the Muay Thai network. Pugilist's bodies, however imagistically striking, do not offer meanings that can be taken for granted—the boxer's body is a temporary state. Rather than reify the martial art, it will be more useful to study the patterns of adaptation.

## Notes

1. Curiously, Muay Thai in its country of origin doesn't seem to arouse anthropologists' interest that much, apart from studies carried out by Catherine [Choron-Baix \(1995\)](#) and [Peter Vail \(1998a, 1998b\)](#). I am indebted to their previous fine analyses.

2. The redaction in this article has been mainly enabled by the support of the Quai Branly Museum, which granted me a postdoctoral fellowship in 2007–2008.

3. The Isan boxers represent nearly half of the 70,000 or so professional fighters in Thailand. The vast majority of them come from impoverished peasant families. This is one of the reasons why I chose to complete my fieldwork in the Northeast region during almost two years (three months in 1999, twelve in 2000, three in 2002 and 2003). Professional Thai boxing represents the overwhelming majority of the Thai boxing activity in the kingdom. The few hundred amateur boxers in the major cities contrast with the 70,000 professionals embedded in a modern sport-business system.

4. According to Peter [Jackson \(2003\)](#), we have to acknowledge the human body in the Thai context as marked by gender behavioral performative norms.

5. The camps where I completed my fieldwork host only men, like the very great majority of them. Only a few camps are specifically dedicated to the training of women. If girls are more numerous than before in the professional Muay Thai, the national martial art remains a masculine occupation.

6. The same binary classification of boxers exists in the world of English Boxing, where distinctions are made between stylists, boxers or counter-punchers, and brawlers. The Thai version has been analyzed anthropologically

by Peter Vail (1998a) and Stéphane Rennesson (2005).

7. Concerning the heuristic value of stereotypes see Michael Herzfeld's work (1992 and 2004, among others) or, in a Thai context, Bernard Formoso's analysis of Chinese and Thai relations in a small Isan town (2000).

8. Isans, Northeasterners, account for a third of the kingdom's inhabitants (67 million). Though the population has been under Siamese control for a couple of centuries, it is still culturally linked to the Lao of the eastern bank of the Mekong.

9. One should note that if a gum shield is chiefly used in the big events in Bangkok by confirmed pugilists it is rarely encountered in the numerous competitions organized in rural areas.

10. For example: an existence in the cycle of reincarnation (*cha:t*), an ethnicity (*cha:t wong*), a lineage (*cha:t phan*), a nation (*cha:t* or *pra'the :t cha:t*). According to Thongchai Winichakul's "geo-body" thesis (1994), the word *cha:t* has been used since the beginning of the twentieth century to refer to the idea of the nation. Combined with the notion of "territory" (*pra'the:t*) the word *cha:t* stands for the concept of *pra'the:tcha:t*, which means a people living within limits geographically defined.

11. Interestingly, the live comments and the reports after the contests leave less room for these kinds of rationalizations, which predominantly employ a narrative style in order to stick as much as possible to what is or has been going on between the ropes.

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