

## Muay Thai: Inventing Tradition for a National Symbol

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Muay Thai is the national sport of Thailand and one of its major cultural exports. Scholars have paid little attention to Muay Thai in its role as national sport or to the cultural politicking that attends it. As Muay Thai becomes increasingly popular internationally, conservative proponents of the sport in Thailand are reifying its history and inventing tradition to ensure that its Thai cultural trappings are not eroded. On the basis of a slim set of historical references, several Thai institutions — including government ministries and universities — characterize *muay* as an integral part of royalist national history, and concretize those characterizations in the form of museums, academic institutionalization and the registration of Muay Thai as intangible cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** *muay*, Muay Thai, Muay Boran, invented tradition, Thailand, nationalism, historiography.

A handful of nations around the world enshrine indigenous martial arts as their national sports. Iran, for example, salutes traditional wrestling in the form of Varzesh-e Bastani; Brazil, Capoeira; Japan, Sumo; Korea, Taekwondo; and Thailand, its violent and raucous form of full-contact prize-fighting pugilism, Muay Thai. Each of these martial sports is widely regarded in some way as *de facto* emblematic of the national culture from which it has emerged, and each may enjoy some sort of *de jure* governmental recognition or sponsorship in addition to its cultural popularity. In Thailand, Muay Thai is clearly accepted publicly as the traditional sporting face of the nation, and it enjoys strong if problematic governmental support in its guises of both modern sport and cultural heritage.

In its martial-sport form, Muay Thai allows the use of kicks, punches, elbow- and knee-strikes. It is typically fought in five-round matches, accompanied by traditional *sarama* music, and preceded by a ritual *ram muay* dance in which boxers pay respect to their teachers. Relatedly, Muay Boran, or “ancient muay”, is what may be called the martial-art rather than the martial-sport form.<sup>1</sup> Muay Boran is a collection of non-sporting forms of *muay* purported to represent the origins of Muay Thai. It includes techniques presumed too dangerous for the modern ring version of *muay*. The relationship between the two forms thus has similarities to that between the sport of Judo and the more dangerous Jujitsu. Muay Boran also retains stylistic differences reflecting regions and lineages. Generic forms of Muay Boran also exist, particularly in the form of school activities commonly arranged by the Department of Physical Education. In these activities, children learn the *ram muay* and basic movements of *muay* in a non-combat format, while dressed in premodern boxing garb.

In recent years Muay Thai has garnered fervent international attention. It ranks among Thailand’s most prominent cultural exports. At the same time, some argue that Muay Thai is now experiencing a steep decline in domestic interest, even as it has become increasingly iconic of Thailand internationally.<sup>2</sup> Proponents of Muay Thai find themselves caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, they are enamoured of, and in many cases well-served financially by, the fact that *muay* puts Thailand on the map as the progenitor of a lucrative international martial arts craze. On the other hand, they fear that Muay Thai will lose its close identification with Thai culture as a result of its international popularity. The desire to keep *muay* distinctively Thai has sparked a barrage of cultural politicking in recent years. At the centre of this politicking has stood a debate over the role of *muay* as an international sport and a profitable business sector and its role as national cultural heritage. Perhaps the most palpable reflection of this debate has been the recent “revival” of Muay Boran, and its connection to particular versions of Thai history and heritage. This article argues, that while *muay* has long served as a symbolic tool for the exhibition of royal power, the



**FIGURE 1** Schoolchildren, wearing traditional Muay Boran apparel, compete in a *ram muay* contest staged by the Department of Physical Education, March 2013, Ayutthaya, Thailand. Photograph taken by the author.

modern sport of Muay Thai and its Muay Boran antecedents have been deliberately connected to a specifically royalist-national history through the invention of tradition in order to safeguard *muay* as an inexorable component of Thainess. At the core of this process

of invention lie ideas about the existence of regional traditions of *muay* and a conception of *muay* as the embodiment of a presumed warrior spirit.

Central to the cultural politics of *muay* is its evocation of Thai nationalism. As the purported fighting art of historical Siamese kings, *muay* is imputed to embody what I have previously characterized as Thailand's national "warrior spirit" (Vail 1998b), and it consequently plays a pronounced role in the Thai national ethos. Pervasive mythologizing about *muay* in virtually every extant description of it relentlessly evinces this connection. For example, on the website of one of the international governing bodies for amateur Muay Thai, one finds,

Many different versions of the history of Muaythai exist, but all sources agree that Muaythai was the primary and most effective method of self defence used by Thai warriors on the battlefields of conflicts and wars that occurred countless times throughout the history of the nation now known as Thailand.... For the military, it has always had use for the close combat fighting skills, the martial art of the battlefield. When a Thai soldier fights hand to hand he uses Muaythai. But then so does every Thai person, male or female. (IFMA n.d.)<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, former Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-Archa suggested,

Muay Thai is an art of self defense that is uniquely Thai. It is a cultural legacy that arose long ago and has been passed on ever since the birth of the Thai nation. Ancient Thai warriors used the art of Muay Thai, together with other kinds of weapons, to fend off their enemies and maintain the independence of the Thai nation. The art of Muay Thai is therefore a demonstration of the wisdom and the prowess of our Thai. (Banharn 1996)

Many years ago, I wrote an article which suggested that, because historical sources that refer to *muay* are so few and far between, much of the popular history of *muay* consisted of embellishments of that thin historical record (Vail 1998b). Now, as the sport becomes increasingly popular internationally, various stakeholders in the *muay* world are working to establish an authentic history for it. But this paucity of sources means that that history is largely taking

the form of an “invented tradition” of Muay Thai and Muay Boran (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), one constructed to serve the needs of Thai nationalism in the present. The ongoing invention of *muay* tradition relies chiefly on the remembrance of a particular match held a century ago, in which *muay* was conspicuously connected to royalty and theatre state politics at a time when the threat of colonial encroachment beset Siam.

Despite its ubiquity in Thai society and the current popularity that it enjoys internationally, Muay Thai remains woefully understudied in academia, especially as a cultural phenomenon.

The vast majority of published works on Muay Thai in English examine aspects of its physical praxis. They take the form of innumerable pseudo-academic instructional manuals proffering advice on the correct deployment of the Muay Thai techniques (e.g., Delp 2004; Somphon et al. 2010; Charadet 2005) and of academic articles addressing subjects like biomechanics and injury rates (e.g., Gartland et al. 2001; Crisafulli et al. 2009). Other disciplines barely address the sport. Classical observers and ethnographers of Thailand all but ignore it (Vail 1998a, pp. 271–80) and even today anthropological studies of Muay Thai either focus more on marginal matters than on the sport overall or are somewhat constrained by their use of Muay Thai as a case for the exploration of such theoretical interests as, for example, masculinity and gender (Pattana 2005, 2007), transgender (Renneson 2005) and the Thai “social body” (Renneson 2011). While these latter are certainly valuable studies, teaching us much about assorted facets of *muay*, they do not focus on *muay* in broader terms.

Thai academia has addressed *muay* more comprehensively and historically. Indeed, it constitutes an important locus of the invention of tradition discussed below. But even in Thailand most attention is likewise directed to topics like biomechanics and studies of participation in *muay*.

Similarly, documentary films focus largely on the stale rags-to-not-quite-riches narrative that *muay* evokes (e.g., Matthews and Colville 1997; Kellstein 2012), while recent Thai feature films have

depicted *muay* in the mytho-historico-cultural guise that typifies Thailand's "New Wave" cinema. It depicts *muay* as an expression of what is *thai thae*, of genuine ur-Thainess, most famously in the *Ong Bak* series of films starring Thailand's answer to Jackie Chan, the acrobatic "Tony" Jaa Phnom (for a discussion, see Pattana 2007). All the while, it ignores the manifestation of *muay* as an organized competitive sport.

With the exception of a few Thai-language theses, discussed below, none of these studies or films — in English or Thai — accounts for Muay Thai as a field in its own right. None, that is, critically addresses its role as a structured, rationalized sport, both professional and amateur, that is inexorably linked to cultural politicking attending its role as a national symbol.

#### Premodern *muay* and Theatre State Politics

While it is entirely accurate to call Muay Thai a martial sport, the term "sport" itself merits a short digression. Physical contests staged for entertainment have been a feature of human society throughout recorded history, but it is only in relatively recent times that sports have been rationalized into the forms familiar to us today (Guttmann 1978; Elias 1986a), in which notions of sportsmanship and fairness structure the culturally constructed "frame".<sup>4</sup> Pugilism in its myriad forms presents an especially interesting case, as the main continuity between premodern and rationalized forms of pugilism is the focus on *wertrational* violence that each engenders. Each celebrates violence for its own sake, rather than deploying violence as a means to attain other goals. Moreover, the domestication of martial practice into sport, in which the practical consequences of warfare have been removed, represents a "courtization" of the warrior class (Elias 1986b, p. 151). Muay Boran, a term of rather recent coinage, is today posited as the premodern, pre-sport form of Muay Thai actually used by royal warriors. In the past, however, that term was not used, and Muay Thai was simply called "*muay*". The appendage of "Thai" only came in the context of distinguishing *muay* from British-style boxing in the early twentieth century, and the use of "*boran*" only emerged



when the writings of Khet Siyaphai began to historicize *muay* in the 1970s. These points will be elaborated below.

Concrete evidence for what *muay* was like in the premodern period is sparse, but there are enough allusions to it in various historical sources to enable us to discern its broad characteristics. While modern proponents depict Muay Boran as the battlefield predecessor to the martial sport of Muay Thai, early records explicitly mentioning *muay* in any form only record that *muay* served as entertainment in the form of prizefighting, that it was accompanied by betting, and that it was typically performed at ritual occasions sponsored by local elites or royalty. These occasions included funerals, festivals, and merit-making events. Legal codes like the Ayutthaya-period Three Seals Code indicate this frame for *muay* when they address the matter of liability for matches that end in death.<sup>5</sup> A handful of episodes in Thai chronicles and travellers' accounts also attest to this frame for *muay* contests and the connection to the court. For example, one chronicle episode relates that Somdet Phra Sanphet VIII — also known as Phra Chao Suea or the Tiger King (r. 1703–09) — once boxed incognito at a rural temple fair (Cushman 2000, pp. 385–86). Similarly, during the reign of Rama I (r. 1782–1809), two Frenchmen came to challenge the Siamese court to a boxing match. The Siamese, afraid of looking weak in the eyes of the foreigners, accepted the challenge and chose Muen Phlan, a “boxing official” from the Front Palace, as their fighter. The bout quickly devolved ignominiously into mayhem, and there was no winner. But what is important to note is the involvement of the Siamese king and high court officials to begin with, and the fact that the Siamese fighter held the royally bestowed title of *muen* (Thiphakorawong 1978, pp. 146–49). Outside observers corroborate the link between royalty and sponsored *muay* contests. James Low (1836, pp. 386–92) mentions — disparagingly — that the king and local nobility sponsored matches, and C.E.W. Stringer (1888, p. 7) mentions that *muay* was performed at a funeral for the “chief” of Nan. Even Simon de la Loubère ([1693] 1986, p. 49) witnessed *muay* at a royally sponsored festival in 1687, although he admits

that he did not pay much attention to it. One may view the enduring cultural frame of *muay* as prizefighting with royal connections “a story [Thais] tell themselves about themselves” (following Geertz 1973, p. 448), in which male prowess, perseverance and agility are measured in the ring, while luck and fate are measured among the ubiquitous bettors outside of it. As *muay* was typically sponsored by, and performed in front of, royalty, we must also examine those connections and ask how *muay* related to notions of royal display.

Writing about public self-representation and the self-generated “regime of images” in the past, Peter Jackson (2004, p. 224) remarks that “the fact that until the end of the nineteenth century all royal male children and senior military officers were trained in both dance and martial arts” demonstrates “[t]he political importance of dramatic performance in premodern Siam”. He goes on to elucidate the changing role of dance performances during the time of Mongkut (r. 1851–68) and Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910). Jackson does not elaborate on the other half of his initial observation, relating to training in martial arts and its changing role in the “performative state”. Yet martial arts as cultural self-representation among the “courtisized” warrior class — in the frame of a contest as described above — played an equally important albeit somewhat different role. It continues to be important today, as it has in modern times eclipsed in many ways traditional dance performances as an iconic representation of Thai national identity.

Jackson’s important insights about traditional dance performances revolve around their role in the “theatre state” (Geertz 1980). In the premodern period, Jackson (2004, pp. 235–37) argues, *lakhon* dance was a symbolic expression of royal dominance used to consolidate political power among the population. The same cultural logic was naturally deployed when Siam confronted Western intrusion.

The royal dance-dramas so often staged for the benefit of Western embassies to Siam were not mere after-dinner entertainments. They were carefully staged displays intended to impress foreign visitors with symbolic representations of the authority, legitimacy, and power of the Siamese court. (Jackson 2004, p. 225)



Performance, in other words, indexed, and perhaps even manifested, political power. Dance troupes, as coveted cultural capital, were tightly controlled by the court, with female performers and certain styles of dances restricted exclusively to the inner palace. But, as Siamese political concerns shifted from internal legitimacy to managing external threats of colonization, the role of traditional dance changed. In the new political context, Siam needed to evince high culture, to demonstrate to foreign colonial powers in palpable ways that the country did not need additional civilizing imposed from the outside. Jackson writes,

From a legitimacy regime of power designed to elicit and focus local support for the monarchy, the forms of the theatre state were redeployed towards the project of securing the political autonomy of the Siamese monarchy in the emerging system of world imperialism. (Jackson 2004, p. 236)

Concern about appearing civilized went hand-in-hand with new forms of historiography. Thongchai Winichakul discusses the emergence in late-nineteenth-century Siam of a new type of historiography, which mixed royal chronicle history with nascent formulations of essentialized nationalism. As Thongchai (2001, p. 2) writes, this “royal-national” history focused on

- ... the struggles for independence of the country under the leadership of great kings. In general, the plot of this story is quite simple.
- The peaceful country was under threat by alien enemies (even though Siam was never aggressive against others).
  - The brave kings led people to fight for independence.
  - Independence was saved or was recovered. The country and its prosperity resumed.

Today, the narrative of national independence under royal leadership further boasts that Siam was never colonized; of course, in the late nineteenth century this was not a foregone conclusion. Modern versions of royal-national history attribute avoiding colonization to the shrewd politicking of Siamese kings, in particular Rama IV and V, Mongkut and Chulalongkorn (see Hong 2008, pp. 320–22). And

*muay* is explicitly linked to this royal version of the national history, since it is imputed to play a central role in the three main thrusts of the narrative that Thongchai describes. That is, *muay* is regularly depicted as a “national” martial art that inculcates peacefulness, whose practitioners only resort to aggression when attacked; as the fighting art of historical kings who led the struggle to maintain independence; and as a form of martial prowess presumably innate to Thainess and therefore instrumental in maintaining national independence. Virtually every extant account of *muay* parrots this national “history”. I have not come across a single exception. Two examples — the publications of former Prime Minister Banharn (1996) and the IFMA (International Federation of Muaythai Amateur) (n.d.) — are cited above, and additional examples abound. The Department of Cultural Promotion of the Ministry of Culture, for example, described Muay Thai in this way when registering on Thailand’s own list of the nation’s intangible cultural heritage.

Muai Thai is important to the Thai individuals, communities, society and nation. It has played an important role in maintaining Thailand’s independence from the past to the present. In the past, all young men — the kings, princes, high-ranking military officers and commoners alike — were trained in Muai Thai for self-defense and for national defense. (Department of Cultural Promotion n.d.)

So close is this account of *muay* to the narrative of royal-national history as Thongchai describes it that it reads almost like a caricature.

Much recent scholarship sought to deflate some of the hagiographical claims of royalist historiography, both those concerning the perspicacity of the kings and the veracity of Siamese independence. Modern scholarship has pointed out that legal and economic capitulations such as the 1855 Bowring Treaty, which inaugurated extraterritoriality for European subjects, rendered Siam a “semi-colony” (Hong 2004) or a “crypto-colony” (Herzfeld 2010). This scholarship shows that such treaties weakened Siam politically, even if they backhandedly helped consolidate royal power and wealth domestically. It became crucial for Siam constantly to reaffirm its

status as a legitimate participant on the world stage, and part of this reaffirmation was to show that it was, indeed, *siwilai* — that is, civilized (Thongchai 2000). Starting with Mongkut, but gaining steam under Chulalongkorn and Wajirawut, this public display took the form of blending modernity and tradition in everything from fashion to architecture to administration to military forces (Peleggi 2002). As will be seen, *muay* was no exception.

At the same time, while recasting Siam as a “semi-colony”, scholars have also observed that during the colonial period in Southeast Asia, Siam itself acted as a colonial power in its hinterlands, consolidating its control over people and territory using administrative technologies copied from the West, especially the United Kingdom (Vickers 1970, pp. 873–75; Thongchai 1994; Loos 2010, pp. 82–83). These technologies included, in addition to the traditional modes of exercising power through pageantry and demands for tribute, political reforms, infrastructural development, a professional standing army, mapping, mass media and the imposition of state schools. The offerings of those last included, importantly, sports and physical education. It is in this context of Thailand both imperialistically consolidating its own territories and having constantly to negotiate its status as civilized and independent in the face of Western colonial encroachment — being both traditional and modern at the same time — that we can discern and understand the nature of the invented historical tradition for Muay Thai.

#### The Origins of Today's Tradition: Royal *muay* Titles

Unquestionably, the event that proved seminal for today's invention of *muay* tradition — and even illustrating the Siamese monarchy's appropriation of *muay* for its royal-national historical narrative — occurred in 1909–10, during the reign of Rama V. In September 1909, one of Chulalongkorn's sons, Uruphong Ratchasomphot, died at the age of fifteen. Chulalongkorn instructed several officers of the court — including the governor of Chumphon, Kham Sriapai, and the governor of Khorat, Phra Mesamahan — to bring skilled fighters

from the outlying provinces to compete in front of the throne as part of the funeral (Chanchai et al. 2010, p. 132). As noted above, such a competition was a common practice of theatre state politics. On 20 May 1910, interior minister Prince Damrong Rachanuphap issued a written request to King Chulalongkorn to grant the title of *muen* to three noteworthy fighters who had dominated the bouts at the funeral.<sup>6</sup> Damrong's letter alluded to Chulalongkorn's apparent concern that *muay* had been fading in quality and noted that granting such titles to fighters would be a way to reinvigorate its practice. Chulalongkorn responded two days later consenting to the request.<sup>7</sup> Three fighters received titles, carrying a modest 300 sakdina points and comparable to a rank of *prathuan*, corresponding roughly to a non-commissioned officer (Chanchai et al. 2010, p. 19). Deliberately chosen to represent different geographical regions, Daeng Thaiprasoet, from Khorat in Monthon Nakhon Ratchasima in the Northeast, became Muen Changat Choengchok; Klueng Tosa-at from Lopburi in Monthon Krungkao on the Central Plains became Muen Muemaenmat; and Prong Chamnongthong from Chaiya in Monthon Chumphon in the South became Muen Muaymichue.<sup>8</sup>

*Changatchoengchok* translates roughly as "effective style or tactic of punching", while *muemaenmat* and *muaymichue* mean roughly "skilful punches", that is always right on target, and "*muay* with a reputation", suggesting an elegant boxing style, respectively. The bestowal of these titles purportedly charged the three *muay* masters with maintaining stables of fighters in their hometowns and with training fighters for future bouts before the throne (Chanchai et al. 2010, pp. 16, 131; Khet 2007, p. 119), although these charges do not appear explicitly in the letters between Damrong and Chulalongkorn.

This single episode serves as the foundation for Muay Boran today. The fighters who received the titles each represented regions to which the king had convenient *muay* connections through his appointed officials, including the governors of Chaiya and Khorat. Those regions were by no means the only ones in Thailand in which *muay* was practised. Rather, they represented regions whose fighters had the political connections and could travel in a reasonable time

from outlying provinces to be recruited to compete at Urupong Ratchasomphot's funeral.<sup>9</sup> From this set of matches, and echoing the titles granted, a sobriquet emerged about the different regional varieties of boxing (Channathat 2007, p. 200; Phosawat 1979, p. 100):

Lopburi, clever strategy.  
Chaiya, good style.  
Khorat, hard strikes.<sup>10</sup>

These three purported regional styles, together with a few later additions, were eventually hypostatized into today's Muay Boran.<sup>11</sup>

A number of important nuances colour this invented characterization of the different *muay* styles. First, it metonymically links a specific attribute of one fighter to the *muay* of a particular region, thereby reifying that latter *muay* as a discrete regional style. Second, it puts these styles of *muay* into a synecdochal relationship in which each style of fighting becomes a constituent of the greater whole, "*muay*", belonging to the nation, contained in what Thongchai (1994) calls the "geobody". While strategy, hard strikes and style were noted as characteristics of the fighters who earned royal titles, they are in fact rather fundamental or general aspects of *muay* in all its myriad forms. But a salient element of each fighter's style was deliberately conflated with his region of origin, and diverse and contrasting *muay* "traditions" were thereby metonymically invented.

We may discern clearly that the regionalism thus imputed to *muay* was invented if we consider the origins of Muay Chaiya, one style about whose history we have reliable details. Kawi (1982, p. 17) relates that in the early nineteenth century a monk from Bangkok, Than Ma, moved to Chaiya and began teaching boxing there. According to Kawi, the style of *muay* that he taught was from Bangkok. In other words, those fighters who later fought at Prince Uruphong's funeral, and who were subsequently celebrated as proponents of Muay Chaiya, were in fact reintroducing what was originally a Bangkok style to begin with.

Linked to regionalism, *muay* became a symbolic means of consolidating Siam's *monthon* under the authority of the Bangkok

court. Damrong's *monthon* or administrative "circle" system, begun in 1897 but only fully implemented in 1910 after a series of rebellions against it, was an administrative system designed to subordinate local leadership to Bangkok (Wyatt 1984, pp. 209–14). The three *monthon* represented by the titled fighters of 1909–10 — Nakhon Ratchasima, Chumphon and Krung Kao — were among the first and best established. In the logic of the theatre state, the court's appropriation and public elevation of *muay* became symbolic of its appropriation of masculinity and prowess — much as *lakhon* served as an appropriation of aesthetics and beauty — and perhaps of control over the means of violence. As the titles were granted in 1910, it is likely this *muay* regionalism played into a general concern about the consolidation of *monthon*, each under the control of an appointed governor.

The symbolic control of *muay* may well have had a practical dimension, too. As *muay* fighters at the time were often *nakleng* — embedded in and perhaps controlling networks of young, potentially violent, males — appropriating *muay* was a means of bridling such men. Khet Siyaphai alludes in several articles to the *nakleng* network of boxers of that period (for example, Khet 2007, p. 479). In other words, the subordination of *muay*, unlike that of dance, to the Siamese court may have had the practical benefit of co-opting young males capable of violent rebellion. The risk of rebellion represented an enormous concern of the court at the turn of the century, when a number of rebellions challenged its reforms, including the introduction of the *monthon* system. The *muay* network that emerged from this pivotal episode, in which the *muen muay* organized stables of boxers to fight in Bangkok as part of a ritualized spectacle, eventually developed into the boxing camps that proliferate throughout the country today (Chanchai et al. 2010, p. 17). It brought male violence under symbolic — and maybe the practical — control of the court, and it fostered connections between fighters from geographically distant regions to make *muay* a discrete sphere of activity linked to the geobody. Thus, *muay* first emerged as a specifically national activity through the same process that saw it positioned ideologically



in the royal-national narrative that Bangkok used to consolidate royal power in its pursuit of internal colonization.

#### Muay and British Boxing

If in the period of Rama V, *muay* served as a symbolic means of consolidating royal power in a way comparable to *lakhon* dance, it lacked comparable utility in expressing Siamese civilization to encroaching European powers. Unlike the high art of *lakhon*, Europeans looked on *muay* as rather barbaric and inscrutable. James Low (1836, p. 388), for example, wrote,

The king if present, or if he is not, some one of his courtiers regulates the barbarous sport, and rewards the victors. It is not favorable to the formation of a good opinion of Siamese advancement in civilization, to find at such exhibitions the king, his family and his household of both sexes, with the courtiers, and the populace, women and children including.

It could be argued that a disdain for pugilism generally coloured Low's attitude, for, at the time, bare-knuckle boxing in Britain was also held in contempt as both bloody and savage. But these derisive attitudes towards *muay* persisted well into the time that saw sanitized, amateur British boxing become a popular sport. For example, a Bangkok-based correspondent to the *Straits Times* wrote in 1923 that,

Siamese boxing is entirely different to what you are accustomed to. Those who know only the English style cannot imagine a game in which the feet play probably a more important part than the hands. There is something unsporting in the idea. Yet in the case of our boxing here they do. A good deal of skill is required, but somehow or other there is always the disposition to think of a foul when one sees a foot dashing out and landing and [*sic*] effective left.

(*Straits Times*, 6 December 1923, p. 9)

The allusion to "something unsporting" here is of special interest. For European colonizers, especially the British in the late nineteenth century, pugilism was only civilized if conducted within the frame of rationalized sport that had emerged in the late 1800s and that

grew to be a major component of British imperialism (Sheard 2004, pp. 49–51; Bairner 2001, p. 26; Stoddart 1988; Perkin 1989). Sport is today a fundamental and accepted locus of nationalism, but its roots as a symbolic technology lie in British imperialism. Benedict Anderson (1991, p. 163), revising a crucial part of his central thesis on nationalism, links its origins to technologies of colonialism, writing,

the immediate genealogy [of nationalism] should be traced to the imaginings of the colonial state. At first sight, this conclusion may seem surprising, since colonial states were typically anti-nationalist, and often violently so. But if one looks beneath colonial ideologies and policies to the grammar in which, from the mid nineteenth century, they were deployed, the lineage becomes decidedly more clear.

Few things bring this grammar into more visible relief than three institutions of power which, although invented before the mid nineteenth century, changed their form and function as the colonized zones entered the age of mechanical reproduction. These three institutions were the census, the map, and the museum...

A worthy addition to this list of influential “institutions of power” would be sport, the modernization — and the amateurization — of which in the mechanical age represented what Elias (1986b, pp. 151, 163) termed a “civilizing spurt”, one central to the ethos of British imperialism and clearly of concern to the Siamese court, too. As Brownfoot (2002) shows, for example, sport in colonial Malaya became a social technology used to spread civilized British values, to reduce tensions among different populations in a pluralistic colony, and supplant local sports with British ones. The crucial dimension of sport’s power lay in the fact that the cultural frame in which athletes participated — that is, the sport itself, its rules and the values that that frame inculcated — derived from Britain and its ideas of civilization. Athletes could come and go, but the game and its rules perdured, and these were invented, imposed and controlled by Britain. If sport represented a sort of theatre politics in the colonial period, a technology for and a yardstick of civilization, Britain controlled both its form and content (see, for example, Stoddart 1988, p. 651).<sup>12</sup>

The “civilizing spurt” of British boxing began after 1867, the year in which the Marquis of Queensbury rules began to be adopted for what had previously been rough-and-tumble bare-knuckled Western pugilism. Early in the twentieth century, boxing became an enormously popular sport in Britain, the empire and the world (Gorn 1986, p. 248; Tranter 1998, pp. 17–19; Gray 1987, pp. 60–62; Sheard 2004, pp. 46–48). By the latter years of Chulalongkorn’s reign (1868–1910), boxing numbered among the “civilized” sports that Britain actively fostered in its Southeast Asian colonies, and in the years thereafter — especially the 1920s — boxing became a massive worldwide spectator sport. In 1926, just sixteen years after Chulalongkorn’s death and around the time that *muay* was first experimenting with the use of Queensbury rules and boxing gloves, 120,000 fans attended the American fight in which Jack Dempsey lost his title to Gene Tunney, and *millions* more listened to it on the radio (Gorn 1986, p. 248). Boxing in the colonial era was no marginal pursuit. It was mainstream public spectacle, one linked in Southeast Asia to British and, via the Philippines, to American imperialism (Brownfoot 2002, p. 132; Aplin and Quek 2002, pp. 87–89; Dasgupta 2004; Sheehan 2012, pp. 448–50; Gems 2002, pp. 34–39).

In Siam, early nationalism was not a force at odds with either internal colonialism or semi-colonial status, but quite specifically a product or elaboration of them, one that endures in the royalist-national history still dominant in Thailand today. The history of *muay* thus offers an especially fertile and robust illustration of what Anderson argues about the colonial origins of nationalism. It also clarifies the role that *muay* plays in contemporary Thai nationalism.

If during Chulalongkorn’s reign theatre state politics expanded its function from consolidating royal power domestically to negotiating with encroaching Western colonial powers, *muay* too saw changes in its role and practice in those turbulent times. Chulalongkorn’s successor, King Vajiravudh, continued his predecessor’s embrace of British administration and modern culture, and he is remembered for cultivating a nascent Thai nationalism by carefully combining tradition

with modernity. As Vella (1978, p. 176) describes Watchirawut's approach, "In the choice of Western cultural elements, discretion had to be rigorously and constantly exercised so that Thai culture would not be swamped and destroyed."

But the introduction of British boxing to Siam did not change the practices of *muay* to make it a hybrid of the "modern" and "traditional". That would come later. Instead, it supported a sporting division of labour, in which *muay* served internal interests, while boxing served international ones. As *muay* already encompassed many punching and defensive techniques resembling those of British boxing, *muay* fighters discovered they could cross over to British boxing without much difficulty. Government schools began to teach boxing, and Siamese fighters began competing in British boxing tournaments in Malaya, and especially in Singapore. By the 1930s, Siam fielded a number of talented boxers, including the popular Nai Sompong, all of whom crossed over from *muay* — a pattern which continues today. British observers were impressed with Siamese pugilists, one stringer for the *Straits Times* remarking, "The promoters are certainly infusing the proper spirit into the lads, and after having seen so many of them at work, I am convinced that Siam will yet produce a fine class of boxer" (*Straits Times* 1923).

#### British Boxing and the Rationalization of *muay*

British boxing proliferated with Siamese government support in schools based on the British preparatory model, most notably Suan Kulap School, founded by Chulalongkorn in 1882. Such schools were dedicated to training civil servants for the new British-imperial-style administration being imposed to further Bangkok's internal colonization of the rest of the country. Suan Kulap erected the first permanent boxing ring in Siam and used it for both *muay* and boxing (Chanchai et al. 2010, p. 237). While moving towards a modernized secular system of education and sport, Suan Kulap nevertheless perpetuated the association between *muay* and royalty. The first fight at Suan Kulap (according to Khet 2007, pp. 392–96) was a famous grudge-match between the aging *muen muay* of Lopburi, by then about 60 years old, and Phong Prapsabok, a son of the *muen muay*'s

defeated opponent at the time of Prince Uruphong's funeral. With youth on his side, Phong won the fight, and, because it occurred at what would soon be the country's first dedicated boxing ring, it marks for boxing aficionados the end of the premodern period of boxing and the beginning of *muay* as rationalized ring sport.

Educational reform in Thailand included physical education, which in turn included both *muay* and British boxing. Suan Kulap introduced British boxing into its curriculum as early as 1913, much to the satisfaction of British observers at the time. By 1919 Suan Kulap offered *muay*, boxing, and Judo; *muay* and boxing were offered together as one sport (Chanchai et al. 2010, p. 236). In 1923 one observer, backhandedly insinuating contempt for *muay*, wrote that the Siamese boys boxing at Suan Kulap, while not yet "great", showed "potential" and "pluck", and added, "The boys have yet much to learn of the art, but it is no mean achievement to have lifted them out of the national style [*muay*] and placed them under the Queensbury rules" (*Straits Times* 1923). Suan Kulap is also known as the venue that first experimented with boxing gloves in *muay* bouts (Chanchai et al. 2010, p. 237), although rope-binding, or *khat chueak*, was also still practiced. That changed, however, in December 1928, after a *muay* bout held at the *lak mueang* or city pillar in Bangkok ended in the death of one of the fighters. Chia Khaek Khamen died from head wounds inflicted by his opponent Phae Liangprasoet from Tha Sao in Uttaradit.<sup>13</sup> Rama VII's government subsequently passed a decree requiring the use of gloves in *muay* from then, although this did not have an immediate impact on bouts held outside the capital. Khorat, for example, did not start using gloves regularly until about 1942 (Chanchai et al. 2010, p. 73). Gloves, and the addition of a point scoring system and other rules derived from British boxing, represented a "civilizing spurt" in Elias's sense (Elias 1986b), although not an unproblematic one.<sup>14</sup>

#### From *muay* to Muay Thai

Because Suan Kulap hosted both *muay* and British boxing, and because both are referred to in Thai with the same term, *muay*, additional linguistic refinements emerged to distinguish them. In this



period, “*muay thai*” and “*muay sakon*” (international or universal boxing), and sometimes “*muay farang*” began to be used as terms to refer to the two styles of pugilism. In English, *muay* was largely referred to as “Siamese Boxing”. Chanchai et al. (2010, p. 236) argue for an exact year in which the name Muay Thai emerged: 1913, both because of the introduction of British boxing and because the name Muay Thai was concretized as such in the physical education curriculum at Ratburana school, later renamed Suan Kulap. By 1919 that curriculum distinguished among Judo, *muay thai*, *muay sakon*, and sword forms. The “*thai*” in *muay thai* did not carry quite the same thorough-going nationalistic connotations that it does today, but because it was used to distinguish *muay* from British boxing, and Chinese boxing,<sup>15</sup> and because it thereby began to be associated with the nation, it exemplifies the early roots of pre-dictatorial Thai nationalism described by Terweil (2002, p. 110).<sup>16</sup>

In sum, if concern over the “regime of images” and the logic of the theatre state compelled Siam to represent itself as modern and traditional at the same time, pugilism in the forms of both *muay* and boxing served this end in two different ways.

The first was through a division of labour, in which *muay* was a performance almost entirely for local consumption, for local interest and the symbolic consolidation of elite power. Boxing, on the other hand, allowed Siam to display many of the same inherent semiotic meanings — that is, expressions of masculinity and martial prowess — on the world stage in the “civilized” frame of British sport. Boxing served as a venue for Siam’s participation in international “civilized” sport in a way that still encoded the martial and masculine meanings of *muay*.

The second way in which pugilism became a simultaneous representation of both traditionalism and modernity was for *muay* itself to take on “civilizing” elements of British boxing, in particular the use of gloves, a point-scoring system, and timed rounds derived from Queensbury rules. While the introduction of gloves purportedly stemmed from the official effort to make *muay* appear more civilized after the death of Chia Khaek Khamen in 1928, their relatively fast proliferation and uptake may have stemmed from the fact that they



made fights last longer and thus become more exciting. Interviews among a group of nonagenarian boxing fans suggest that *khat chueak* bouts rarely lasted very long, with one side either being knocked out or conceding after less than a minute or two.<sup>17</sup> Gloves allowed fighters to be more aggressive, and to absorb more punishment, making bouts last longer and thereby gratifying spectators. While there is no clear evidence for exactly when gloves and point systems were adopted universally throughout the provinces, by the time of the completion of Bangkok's Ratchadamnoen Stadium in 1947, gloves, points, and timed rounds appear to have been entirely integral to Muay Thai bouts.

#### The End of the Absolute Monarchy and Nationalism

As the present article specifically addresses the role of *muay* in royal-national history, it requires only a brief sketch of the period after the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932, highlighting a few salient points. If Rama VI initially fostered an elite nationalism in Siam, the spread of popular — and militant — nationalism is widely attributed to Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram and his chief propagandist, Luang Wichitwathakan, in the late 1930s and early 1940s (Charnvit 1974; Wyatt 1984, pp. 252–60; Barmé 1993). Phibun deliberately suppressed the popularity of the monarchy. His goal was for a racialized, modernizing nationalism that, among other things, brought a change in the name of the country from the ethnically neutral “Siam” to the ethnically loaded “Thailand”. Drawing inspiration from European fascists and especially from the militant Japanese, Phibun propagated a moral code called *wiratham*, deliberately emulating Japanese *bushido* and emphasizing militancy, male prowess and loyalty to the nation (Thamsook, 1978, p. 240; Terweil 2002, pp. 110–12; Thak 2007, p. 92). And, as symbolic practices, *muay* and boxing perfectly encapsulated all of these attributes.

*Muay* served Phibun's nationalism in much the same way that it served the royal-national narrative, by celebrating martial prowess and masculinity. Like those of all symbols, the meanings expressed by *muay* are malleable, and in the Phibun years the heroics of the

Thai Everyman fighting in the ring were foregrounded. While this period in the history of *muay* lies beyond my scope here, it merits a few brief comments.

While *muay* and boxing did not lose their connection to royalty, for a period the rapid spread of vernacular press and mass media overshadowed that connection. The many champions who emerged in this period, and who were glorified in emerging popular press,<sup>18</sup> exemplified the “Everyman” image. They included the fearsome *nakleng*-like Suk Prasathinphimai, Prasoet So So, the heart-throb Chuchai Prakanchai, Prayut Udomsak, and many others. Phibun was strongly supportive of both *muay* and boxing. His construction of the first national boxing stadium, Ratchadamnoen Stadium, as part of his elaborate architectural transformation of Bangkok described by Koompong (2011) most concretely illustrated this support. Work on the stadium started in 1941, but it was only completed after the Pacific War because of a dearth of building supplies (Ratchadamnoen Stadium n.d.). Both *muay* and boxing expanded rapidly in the Phibun period, facilitated by mass media and higher mobility between the capital and the provinces. So thoroughgoing was the growth of pugilism that by 1955, even before the construction of Bangkok’s most famous boxing stadium — Lumpini — in 1956, Filipino boxer and author Little Nene (Singapore Free Press 1955) reported that Bangkok had become “the Mecca for boxing in the Far East, and probably one of the most flourishing cities in the world as far as boxing is concerned”. The rise of chauvinistic Thai nationalism in the Phibun period also invested the name “Muay Thai” with specifically nationalistic overtones that it had not had before. It soon became a point of pride that *muay* was associated with the Thai nation. When Japanese martial artists appropriated *muay* techniques and popularized them internationally as “kick-boxing” in the 1960s, self-proclaimed stewards of Muay Thai complained loudly that they had defiled and stolen Thai culture (for example, Khet 2007, p. 558). The sting of that experience in fact still shapes cautious attitudes towards the internationalization of *muay* today.

By the late 1950s, under the rule of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the monarchy was deliberately brought back into the public eye,

re-established as the nation's central public symbol by means of a variety of public spectacles (Thak 2007, pp. 208–14). In 1961, while reasserting the visibility of the monarchy, and on the heels of Thailand's first world boxing championship, won by flyweight Phon Kingphet, Bhumipol Adulyadej (Rama IX, r. 1946–present) began sponsoring King's Cup matches in both *muay* and boxing. He thereby re-established the link between pugilism and royal patronage.

Business aspects of *muay* also grew. What were then emerging new media — newspapers, magazines, radio and somewhat later television — marketed the sport. In 1953, the management of Ratchadamnoen Stadium was privatized. In 1956, Lumpini Stadium opened, in a project driven by the man who would soon serve as Field Marshal Sarit's minister of interior, General Praphat Charusathian. The opening of these two stadiums not only entrenched Muay Thai as the national sport but also accelerated its transformation into a modern business and merged the never-all-that-distinct *muay* and boxing worlds. With the commercialization of boxing, a reduction in the number of fighting techniques deployed under Queensbury-based rules, and the growing problem of fixed fights, old school *muay* proponents complained that *muay* had ceased to be a martial "art" and was now simply a "sport" (Khet 2007, pp. 223–24).

#### International Interest in *muay*

The symbolic division of sporting labour, in which *muay* served exclusively domestic interests while boxing gave Siam and then Thailand an added international presence, continued in large part until the 1990s. While there were a number of foreign *muay* fighters in Thailand in the 1970s and 80s, the sport's popularity only really took off in the mid-to-late 1990s. While I cannot fully elaborate the rising interest in Muay Thai overseas here, a few general remarks clarify issues germane to the present analysis. Westerners have had a long-standing interest in Asian, especially Japanese, martial arts, but their popularity exploded in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was fuelled by screen icons like Bruce Lee and others in Hong Kong cinema — Jackie Chan and Jet Li, for example — as well as by muscle-bound Western stars like Jean-Claude Van Damme and

feature films like *The Karate Kid*. Cinema generated a juggernaut of martial arts enthusiasm that translated into high rates of participation and eventually into martial arts tourism. And while the practical benefits of martial arts — exercise, self-defense, discipline — served as strong motivation for Westerners to take them up, there is little doubt that the aesthetic, mystical and culturally exotic dimensions of martial arts and their connections to Asian religious philosophies also numbered among the principal forces behind their rapid growth (Min 1979, pp. 102–3; Skidmore 1991, pp. 140–46; MacFarlane 2001, pp. 157–66). By the 1990s, however, after several generations of instructors and schools, the first wave of Asian martial arts became largely demystified. Disenchantment stemmed from their development into rationalized sports. Judo and Taekwondo, in particular, while still enormously popular worldwide, have lost much of their cultural exoticism and become routinized (Carr 1993; Goodger and Goodger 1977, pp. 21–25; Frühstück and Manzenreiter 2001, pp. 81–88). Muay Thai, a relative late-comer to the martial arts boom, has yet to be demystified, and it still serves the demands of a Western public that wants to consume exoticized culture. Even a cursory survey of the websites of Muay Thai schools reveals that every one of them maintains a section on the history of Muay Thai explicating its presumed close connections to a mythical Thai warrior spirit and Thai culture generally.

In conjunction with the rationalization of and with disenchantment with Northeast Asian martial arts and the relative exoticism that still colours Muay Thai, the West has experienced a trend of growing hyper-masculinization, perhaps linked to rising militarism in the United States especially. This trend has created conditions under which a new form of engagement with martial arts emerged. This form is so called Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), whose popularity began with the establishment of the “Ultimate Fighting Championship” (UFC) in 1993. The UFC was initially predicated on comparing the efficacy of different martial arts by pitting their practitioners against one another in a no-rules cage-fighting format. The UFC had its roots in Brazilian *vale tudo* (“anything goes”) bouts, and used the

reach of cable television and the power of new media to showcase Brazilian Jujitsu, especially that of the Gracie family, in the lucrative U.S. martial arts market (García and Malcolm 2010, p. 45). MMA has emphasized violence, hyper-masculinity, efficacy and winning in the ring over other benefits commonly attributed to martial arts practice, like character-building and philosophical introspection and bodily awareness (see, for example, Holthuysen 2011, pp. 125–34; Channon 2012, pp. 111–13). The interest in MMA may also be a reaction against the attenuation of martial arts as they are debased through excessive commoditization (in, for example, “McDojos”), or, as my colleagues used to term it, “martial arts and crafts”. As MMA developed and itself became routinized, two fighting styles emerged as staples of the training regimen: Brazilian Jujitsu, for its grappling techniques, and Muay Thai, for its standing techniques (García and Malcolm 2010, p. 40). While Muay Thai has garnered a strong following among MMA practitioners, it has in the process also started to lose its cultural connections, since in MMA *muay* is simply one part of a broader fighting strategy rather than something pursued for its own sake.<sup>19</sup> MMA today, unlike the UFC of the early 1990s, deliberately subsumes and effaces the cultural identities of the individual arts that make up its eclectic repertoire. It is now firmly about the individual in the ring and not about a particular martial art, and only secondarily about nationalism in any form.

These two trends in foreign interest in Muay Thai — one centred on the continued cultural mystique of *muay* and the other on its prominent but subordinated role in MMA — are two external forces shaping the vigorous invention of tradition taking place in *muay* today. In addition, the push to expand Muay Thai as an international sport, one with prestige just for *being* a sport in international competition, also poses a challenge to those who would keep Muay Thai specifically Thai.<sup>20</sup>

#### Inventing Tradition in Muay Thai

Because *muay* no longer serves exclusively domestic interests, its cultural trappings have become matters of contention. There is a



clear anxiety that the Thainess of one of Thailand's most conspicuous and lucrative cultural exports, one that plays such a central role in state-sponsored nationalism, will erode. Experiences in the late 1960s, when Japanese martial arts promoters appropriated many of the techniques and trappings of *muay* as kick-boxing, and later as K-1, but discarded the cultural connections to Thailand, further stoked these fears. Thais were incensed by this injury to national pride, and there is a strong resistance to letting it happen again with the rise of MMA. Indeed, in 2012, the Sports Authority of Thailand asserted that MMA contravened the 1999 Boxing Act, arguing — with no hint of irony — that the sport was too violent. An interest in protecting Muay Thai's reputation and Thainess through what *muay* columnist Patrick Cusick (2012) terms a "Fortress Thailand" mentality has also made itself clear. Proponents, including many state officials, are highly proprietorial towards Muay Thai. They seek to establish everything from exclusive rights to the broadcast of particular matches to intellectual-property control over *muay* generally. The drive to keep Muay Thai specifically Thai, and to keep it connected to royal-national history, has been especially strong in the face of the internationalization of *muay*. In concrete terms, it has led in recent years to a dizzying array of invented tradition, cementing *muay* not just as the national sport but also quite specifically as the royal-national sport.

Three sites of such invented tradition stand out: the Institute for Muay Thai Preservation (*sathaban amurak muay thai haeng chat*), housed at the National Stadium in Bangkok and operating under the Ministry of Sports and Tourism; Muban Chombueng Ratchaphat University (MCRU), a regional university in Ratchaburi Province; and the Department of Culture Promotion, a division of the Ministry of Culture, formerly called National Culture Commission and forming part of the Ministry of Education. Vast numbers of other agents and agencies, both public and private, contribute in their own way to the continued nationalization of Muay Thai, but these three play the most salient role in the invention and proliferation of *muay* tradition discussed.



#### The Institute for Muay Thai Preservation

Established by the Physical Education Department of the Ministry of Sports and Tourism, the Institute for Muay Thai Preservation maintains a museum and training facility at the National Stadium in downtown Bangkok. The museum offers displays on the history of Muay Thai and Muay Boran, highlighting the historical figures who appear in chronicle history and the kings who sponsored *muay*. The institute also houses the International Muay Boran Academy, and, since 2003, a *khru muay* association whose goal is to formalize *muay* instruction and instructor certification. It is also the headquarters of one of the chief amateur Muay Thai associations — the International Amateur Muay Thai Federation, subsequently renamed the World Muay Thai Federation (WMF, *sahaphan muay thai lok*).<sup>21</sup>

The Ministry of Sports and Tourism has, since the early 1990s, used the institute and partner organizations to host international amateur bouts in Muay Thai at the national stadium. The bouts are held each year around 17 March, celebrating Nai Khanom Tom day, named for the man regarded by many as the patron saint of *muay*.<sup>22</sup> The amateur competition includes a vast ceremony, held most recently in Ayutthaya, in which hundreds of foreign *muay* practitioners dress in Muay Boran outfits and take part in a mass *wai khru* ritual to pay respect to Muay Boran masters assembled onstage. The celebration of Nai Khanom Tom Day and the institute's museum at the National Stadium concretize *muay* as a key symbol of royalist-national history and strive to keep the cultural trappings of *muay* integral to its practice.

#### Muban Chombueng Ratchaphat University

Under the leadership of university president Chanchai Yomdit, MCRU has developed a degree programme in Muay Thai studies, offering bachelor's, master's degrees and even doctorates. Chanchai asserts that what motivated him to champion *muay* and elevate it to a subject of academic study was purely a love of the sport; he wanted to shore up the cultural history of Muay Thai by channelling it through



**FIGURE 2** International Muay Thai students participate in a wai khru ceremony on Nai Khanom Tom Day, March 2012, Ayutthaya, Thailand. Photograph taken by the author.

academic discourse. While none of the programme's students have yet completed a doctorate in the programme, the master's theses and their authors are of particular interest here. The chief Muay Thai advisor to the programme, Charadet Ulit, is a well-known Muay Boran instructor from the Department of Physical Education and an important figure in the Nai Khanom Tom day *wai khru* ceremony. He has authored multiple works on *muay phalasueksa* (PhysEd *muay*), and is widely regarded as an authority on Muay Boran, the ritualized pre-fight dance called *ram muay* and other historico-cultural dimensions of *muay*.

Chanchai and Charadet recruited a number of other well-known Muay Boran masters, mostly from the Department of Physical Education, to undertake degrees at MCRU, including Phosawat Saengsuwan, Chao Wathhayotha, and Channathat Mongkonsin. Students were selected specifically because they could represent Muay Boran, and they were impelled to write masters theses on the histories of their respective styles. Thus Chao, a physical education instructor at Mahasarakham University, wrote a history of Muay Khorat as his 2007 master's thesis; Channathat (2007) wrote a history of Muay Lopburi. Phosawat's earlier Chulalongkorn University master's thesis (Phosawat 1979) served as a framework or model — and a source — for these theses. Phosawat is in turn now among the doctoral students in Muay Thai at MCRU.

Each thesis elaborates on the seminal event of Uruphong's funeral in 1909 by further reifying the styles that emerged from that event. The theses further served as the basis for a compendium of Muay Thai history assembled by MCRU for the Department of Physical Education (Chanchai et al. 2010; also Chanchai 2009), in which Chanchai's research team synthesized the information from all the students' work into one volume.<sup>23</sup>

There is an enormous amount of overlap among the theses because they all draw on a small set of identical historical sources — the fleeting mentions in chronicle history; the historical "fathers" of *muay*, especially Nai Khanom Tom; the correspondence between Prince Damrong and King Chulalongkorn designating titles for

boxers; the writings of Khet Siyaphai; Phosawat's 1979 thesis; and the few other sources alluded to earlier. The theses then flesh out the basic histories with interviews conducted among older boxers and boxing aficionados and detailing the venues and practices of boxing "back in the day". Such ethnography is valuable, of course, but the framework nevertheless serves to hypostatize the restricted set of *muay* styles that now constitute Muay Boran and thereby to entrench the 1909 match as indisputable evidence of the primacy of those purported styles. Without wanting to sound too cynical, I argue that the purpose of writing these histories in an academic format is deliberately to make them authoritative and further to entrench them in royal-national history. They all refract the same tautological narrative, thereby canonizing Muay Boran as the exclusive set of premodern Muay Thai styles.

Department of Cultural Promotion, Ministry of Culture

Perhaps the most blatant case of inventing tradition has arisen over just the last few years and stems from Thailand's efforts to list *muay*, among other cultural practices, as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). It has pursued this goal in a way that can only be described as overzealously nationalistic and chauvinistic. Thailand is not a signatory to the UNESCO convention on ICH, but the Department of Cultural Promotion (DCP) of Thailand's Ministry of Culture has begun a national registry of its own, on which it listed Muay Thai — which it romanizes as "Muai Thai" — in 2010.

In a baffling and heavy-handed manner, the DCP registers various practices as ICH not so much in the effort to foster fading cultural practices as to control the form and meanings of those practices and to claim "copyright" (*likkhasit*) over them. The DCP is currently drafting a bill that would require those performing arts listed as ICH to cite an art's cultural roots (Article 39) and would even criminalize the improper use of ICH in ways reminiscent of Thai law governing *lèse majesté*. Article 40 of the bill states,

It is prohibited to disseminate registered intangible cultural heritage for the purpose of defaming the monarchy, impacting

religion, impacting national security or that goes against public order and morality, or causes damage to cultural intangible heritage.<sup>24</sup>

Article 45 states that punishments for violating Article 40 include up to two years in prison and a fine of 50,000 baht.

At the same time that they insist on maintaining the integrity of ICH as cultural capital, the leadership of the DCP is ardently devoted to entrenching *muay* in a narrative of royal-national history through some historical embellishment of its own. For many years Thailand has celebrated *muay* with a “Nai Khanom Tom Day” every 17 March, the day that Nai Khanom Tom purportedly defeated ten Burmese boxers in a row. But the DCP decided that Nai Khanom Tom was not a suitable “father” for Muay Thai because he was a commoner. To truly be enshrined as part of royalist-national history, *muay* needed a more aristocratic “father”. The DCP thus called a meeting of various *muay* stakeholders in 2011 to select a new historical “father” — one with royal connections. Several *muay* instructors who attended — and who also wish to remain anonymous — reported to me in interviews that the meeting was chaired by well-known and highly decorated Professor Prasert Na Nakhon of the Royal Institute.<sup>25</sup> They further reported that most *muay* instructors at the meeting were sceptical, in no small part because — as representatives of the Department of Physical Education — they had been the driving force in celebrating Nai Khanom Tom Day in conjunction with the department’s annual international amateur Muay Thai competition. But it quickly became clear to them and other participants that the DCP was championing Somdet Phra Sanphet VIII, or Phra Chao Suea, an Ayutthaya-era king who reigned during 1703–9. A short episode in the Ayutthayan chronicles — and the oldest source explicitly to mention *muay* — relates Phra Chao Suea’s having gone to fight incognito at a local temple fair (Vail 1998b, pp. 78–79; Cushman 2000, pp. 385–86). Unfortunately, Somdet Phra Sanphet is also distinguished in the chronicles for his outrageous paedophilia and gratuitous violence (Cushman 2000, p. 391). This explains the reluctance among many Muay Boran proponents to enshrine him as the patron saint of boxing.



Nevertheless, the DCP confirmed him as the new “original” father of Muay Thai and designated 6 February, the date of his ascension to the throne, as Muay Thai Day (The Nation 2011). It was approved by the Thai cabinet on 3 May 2011.

To concretize this bit of invented tradition, the DCP inaugurated a *wai khru* celebration and other cultural activities dedicated to *muay*. In 2013, the DCP also began sponsoring, and essentially appropriating, “Thai Fight”.<sup>26</sup> This heavily promoted professional Muay Thai event features a number of well-known fighters, especially international sensation Buakhao Banchamek, in a format that pits Thai fighters against foreign fighters in a high-tech, glitzy stage production.

In February 2013, at the first Thai Fight that the DCP sponsored, representatives from the Ministry of Culture, including Minister of Culture Sonthaya Khunpluem, took to the stage to propagate the narrative that Somdet Phra Sanphet was indeed the father of Muay Thai. The event featured a large stage from which boxers emerged as they crossed a walkway to the boxing ring. The stage featured two enormous portraits, one of the currently reigning King Bhumibol at stage right and the other of Somdet Phra Sanphet at stage left. In the event’s early, non-televised bouts, boxers mounted the stage and paid obeisance to Bhumibol’s portrait before dancing and skipping their way to the ring. Once the telecast began, however, boxers were required to prostrate themselves to both images, while the event’s narration “reminded” the Thai audience that Somdet Phra Sanphet had always been the father of Muay Thai.<sup>27</sup> The politics surrounding decreeing February 6 Muay Thai Day and the DCP’s appropriation of Thai Fight has created substantial controversy within the *muay* community, but because the upper echelons of the Royal Institute and the DCP precipitated these moves, no one has challenged them publicly.

## Conclusion

While in many ways the Institute for Muay Thai Preservation, the Muay Thai studies programme of Muban Chombueng Ratchaphat





**FIGURE 3** A Muay Thai competitor pays respect to an image of Somdet Phra Sanphet VIII before ascending the ring, February 2013, Ayutthaya, Thailand. Photograph taken by the author.

University and the Department of Cultural Promotion have competing agendas, and while internecine rivalries divide them, their activities and goals nevertheless have important points of overlap. Each seeks to reify Muay Thai by locating it firmly within the framework of Thai royalist historiography and calling attention to so-called Muay Boran as evidence of the premodern origins of *muay*. Each wants to shield the cultural trappings of Muay Thai from what it views as the corrosive effects of its internationalization, and to see *muay*, as cultural signifier, validate royalist-national history every time that it is staged. This invented tradition has an odd resonance for those international consumers of martial arts looking for cultural exoticism and martial tradition: the arch-conservative Thai-ization of *muay* is, somewhat ironically, precisely what appeals to its international adherents.

In 2000, when Wichan Phonlit won the Olympic gold medal for boxing in the flyweight division, he famously celebrated by wrapping himself in the Thai flag and holding aloft a portrait of the king during his victory dance. The episode serves as a stark reminder of how pugilism in Thailand, whether *muay* or boxing, is a powerful symbol. It literally embodies a connection between traditional vernacular practice and Thai royalist nationalism, between the body and the body politic. It is the preservation of this connection that motivates proponents relentlessly to formalize *muay* as part of that royalist-national history, whether in a museum, as authenticated academic knowledge or as official intangible cultural heritage. In the past, sponsoring *muay* matches was a form of theatre politics, projecting royal patronage and legitimacy into vernacular practice. In the present, such sponsorship retains that connection and adds another — the substantiation of royalist historiography itself, through the physical instantiation of muscular royal nationalism projected every time a Muay Thai match is fought.

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#### NOTES

1. For the distinction between martial art and martial sport, see Green (2001, p. xvi) and Filipiak (2010, pp. 40–45).
2. One gauge of the declining interest in *muay* is the value of the purses that boxers receive, which has decreased substantially since the late 1990s and early 2000s — a frequent complaint among boxers today. Boxers and other *muay* proponents attribute this financial decline to a shift in sporting interest among the public from *muay* to international football. A markedly different perspective, which I first heard voiced by editors at *Muay Siam* magazine, is that there are now simply too many matches being televised, thus spreading betting money — and thus purses — too thinly over too many fights. Changes in the scale of betting and other economic aspects of *muay* are not the focus of this paper, but I can affirm that there is a very common discourse in circulation among boxers and prominent proponents of the sport that domestic interest is waning, and that it is this belief that informs some of their actions to be discussed here.
3. Note the spelling of “Muaythai” as one word here. This is an ungainly attempt by the IFMA-International Federation of Muaythai Amateur to manipulate nomenclature. Part of IFMA’s mission is the acceptance of Muay Thai as an Olympic sport, but it faces the problem that the International Olympic Committee is not likely to accept a sport named after a particular country. By writing the name of the sport as one word, the IFMA hopes to circumvent what it regards as a technicality while still retaining in its name specifically Thai origins of *muai*. See the comments of Dr Sakchye Thapsuwan, president of IFMA (Sakchye n.d.).
4. The notion of “frame” here draws on the seminal work of Gregory Bateson (1972, pp. 138–47), and Erving Goffman’s elaboration of that work (1974, esp. pp. 56–57). The notion refers to the configuration of meanings that shapes our understanding of an otherwise ambiguous phenomenon. For example, while *muay* quite clearly engenders violent struggle, it is not an ethological violence. Rather, it is a socially regulated violence, performed — and understood — as entertainment, imbued with a scripted sense

of fairness, and embedded in a wider context of cultural and symbolic meanings, meanings which can be deployed for political, ritual, or other ends. The frame, in short, is culturally constructed.

5. For example, Article 117, Clause 1, of the code reads: 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 (Chulalok 1962, p. 160).
6. In the pre-1932 period, *muen* was the lowest non-hereditary rank. See Wales [1931] 1992, p. 22.
7. See Royal Gazette no. 27, 19 June *ro so* 129 (1910), p. 489, for the announcement of the titles. The letters are available on microfilm at the Thai National Archives, Damrong Letters 46/1803 (dated 20 May *ro so* 129), and 59/222 (dated 22 May *ro so* 129). All are reproduced in two sources, Chao (2007, pp. 229–31) and Channathat (2007, pp. 245–51).
8. The boxers did not have surnames at the time they were awarded titles. Chanchai et al. (2010 [2553], p. 16) mention that Prong Chamnongthong, for example, received his surname during the reign of Rama VI.
9. Khet (2007) frequently mentions in passing how difficult it was for provincial boxers to travel to Bangkok, dissuading many from going.
10. In Thai the sobriquet goes: *mat di khorat / chalat lopburi / tha di chaiya* — หมัดดีโคราช ฉลาดลพบุรี ท่าดีไชยา.
11. At least two additional forms of *muay* have become canonized as Muay Boran. These are *muay tha sao* from Uttaradit, purportedly of the lineage of Phraya Phichai Dap Hak, one of King Taksin's top generals; and *muay phalasueksa*, that version of *muay* propagated, specifically as a sport, in public schools by the Siamese state beginning in the reign of Rama VI. For *muay tha sao*, see Somphon et al. (2010). For *muay phalasueksa*, see Charadet (2005) and Khet (2007, pp. 224–43). In fact *muay tha sao* is included as a fourth form of Muay Boran in later renditions of the three-line sobriquet about *muay* regionalism; its style is purported to be characterized by speed.
12. For accounts of how British colonial sport progressed from imperial to national, see Perkin (1989) and Dyerson (2003).
13. Oddly, the *Straits Times* reported that the death blow in the match was a knee to the abdomen, and not a punch to the head as Khet described it (*Straits Times* 1928). This widely reported episode is also the likely reason for the recognition of *muay tha sao* as another Muay Boran style.

14. See Sheard (1997, pp. 48–53) for a discussion of pugilism in terms of Elias's "civilizing process", addressing boxing gloves and the dangers that they conceal.
15. Early matches at Suan Kulap included bouts between *muay* fighters and Chinese boxers.
16. Today, one central concern is distinguishing *muay* from other, nearly identical, martial arts in the region, especially those found in Laos and Cambodia and to some extent Burma. Regional distinctiveness does not appear to have been a concern at the time, however.
17. Unlike bareknuckle boxing as practised in Britain or America, which could go on for an interminable number of "rounds", *muay* was not fought bare-fisted. Instead, hands were wrapped with stiffened rope tied in elaborate knots which protected the fragile bones in the hands, allowing fighters to strike each other with great force.
18. Especially magazines devoted to sports and boxing, including, among others, *Kila banthueng* (starting in 1948), *Kila muay* (started 1950) and *Muay raisapda* (started 1949). While symbolic connections to royalty were not absent from these publications during the Phibun years, they were far more concerned with elevating to celebrity status commoners fighting in the boxing ring.
19. In MMA, fighters do not perform a *ram muay*, and they do not wear the ritual accoutrements like the *mongkhon* headpiece or *pha phrachiat* on their arms. The fighting style of *muay* also changes because the repertoire becomes subsumed into a sport with an even broader range of allowable techniques, notably grappling. *Muay* purists often cite the Japanese appropriation of *muay* techniques as an analogy to explain their dissatisfaction with MMA. In the 1960–70s, Japanese promoter Osamu Noguchi popularized internationally a diluted version of *muay*, under the name of "kick-boxing", which removed the Thai cultural aspects from the sport and also reduced the allowable techniques by disallowing elbow strikes and sweeps (Khet 2007, p. 558; Garcia and Malcolm 2010, p. 44).
20. The dream of many has been to get Muay Thai into the Olympics. While the international prestige associated with *muay* becoming an Olympic sport is universally coveted in Thailand, it carries the risk that *muay* will lose its close connection to Thai nationalism, since Olympic sports are intended to be inherently international. The Olympics, however, are a complex signifier. The sports included in the games are meant to be non-national, but of course many derive from British sports of the past. The Olympic Games themselves are also a strong locus of nationalism, as it is nations that field teams, and competitors are relentlessly identified by their country. Nevertheless, the



Olympic charter tries to negate the emphasis on nationalism by asserting that the games are chiefly about individual athletes, and that the format of the games — focused on the cities in which they are held rather than the country — is chiefly cosmopolitan in scope; see, for example, Roche (2002). In any event, the chances of Muay Thai becoming an Olympic sport are slim. Previous martial sports to have been accepted — Judo (1964) and Taekwondo (1988) — only achieved Olympic status because Japan and Korea hosted the Olympic games in those years. Moreover, Thailand's stubborn insistence on naming the sport Muay Thai rather than simply *muay* associates it too strongly with overt nationalism. Cambodia once argued for grouping the various regional styles under the collective name "Suvanaphum Boxing", but this was roundly rejected by Thailand, which regards the connection of *muay* to Thai culture as both a point of pride and a source of revenue. Cambodia boycotted the 1999 King's Cup Muay Thai competition in protest (*Hurriyet Daily News* 1999).

21. There is acrimonious internecine conflict between organizations representing amateur Muay Thai — in particular between the WMF, housed at the National Stadium, and IFMA, housed at the Sports Authority in Hua Mark.
22. Nai Khanom Tom, a Siamese prisoner of war in Burma after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, was alleged to have beaten ten Burmese fighters in a row at a match sponsored by the Burmese king. On Nai Khanom Tom as the "father" of Muay Thai, see Vail (1998b, pp. 80–81). Sunait (2000, p. 54) provides a concise translation of the chronicle episode in question: "During the time that the King of Ava stayed in Yangon and participated in the royal ceremony of placing the golden umbrella atop the Shwedagon Pagoda, a Burmese minister informed him that a skillful Thai boxer lived in the city. The king then ordered the minister to bring him in. Nai Khanom Tom, a talented boxer from the old capital (Ayutthaya) was brought before the King of Myanmar who immediately delivered an order to arrange for a Burmese boxer to fight his Thai counterpart. Nai Khanom Tom knocked him down before the end of the first round. Then 9–10 boxers were quickly sent into the ring one after another just to be defeated by the Thai boxer. The King of Ava, in great surprise, placed his hand against his chest, and complimented him with words saying the Thai boxer had a powerful charm over his entire body. This enabled Nai Khanom Tom, without any weapons, to knock down 9–10 challengers. The reasons that the kingdom had been lost to the enemy were due to the fact that their rulers were not good. If they had proved to be good, the Thais would not have lost Ayutthaya. He then gave Nai Khanom Tom some rewards."

23. Interestingly, MCRU does not address *muay tha sao* from Uttaradit. While its scholars accept that *muay tha sao* is indeed a Muay Boran style, despite its not having representation in the 1909 fights at Prince Uruphong's funeral, in interviews with me they frequently alluded to unspecified "conflicts" with proponents of *muay tha sao* and especially with Somphon Saengchai, who has published extensively on it.
24. The URL for the draft bill is unstable. As of 15 December 2013, a copy can be found at the DCP's website here: <http://www.culture.go.th/subculture4/attachments/article/71/draft%20ICH%20Act.pdf>
25. Author's interviews, November 2012 and February–March 2013, Chonburi, Ayuthaya and Bangkok.
26. Fieldnotes, 23 February 2013.
27. In nearly every one of the matches the foreign fighter was not just beaten, but outclassed, ensuring victory for the Thai fighter. Several of the older *muay* masters who had been cajoled into participating in the cultural events preceding the bouts declined to stay and watch, complaining to me on their way out that what was being presented was not sport, but rather theatre intended as a vehicle for atavistic nationalism. Tellingly, there was no betting among the audience, legal or surreptitious — a reliable indicator of mismatched fights.

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