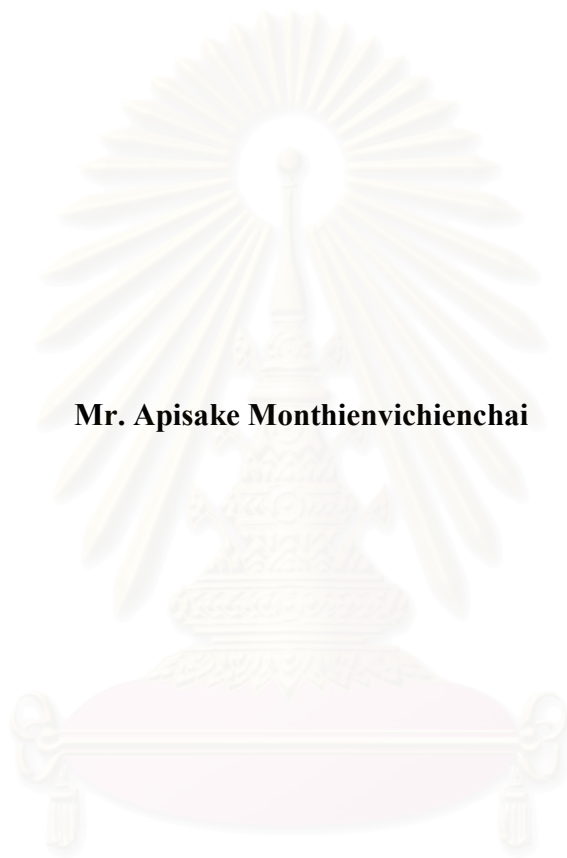


THE CHANGES IN THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF MUAY THAI,

1920-2003



Mr. Apisake Monthienvichienchai

สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

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วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้ได้สืบตามรอยการพัฒนาของกีฬามวยไทยตั้งแต่ปี ค.ศ ๑๙๒๐ – ๒๐๐๓ (พ.ศ ๒๔๖๓ – ๒๕๔๖) โดยมีจุดประสงค์ของการศึกษาคือเพื่อพิจารณาว่าความคิดแบบตะวันตกและแนวคิดทางธุรกิจได้มีผลกระทบอย่างไรบ้างกับบทบาทและความสำคัญของมวยไทยในสังคมไทย วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้ได้ใช้วิธีค้นคว้าทางประวัติศาสตร์ และได้ใช้หลักฐานทั้งหลักฐานชั้นต้นและชั้นรองในการวิจัย

ผลของการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่า มวยไทยมีอยู่ บทบาทสำคัญด้วยกันทั้งสิ้นถึง ๘ บทบาทกล่าวคือ เป็นหนึ่งในวิธีการฝึกทหาร เป็นเครื่องส่งเสริมให้เกิดความก้าวหน้าทางสังคมและฐานะทางเศรษฐกิจ เป็นหนึ่งในองค์ประกอบของงานพิธี เป็นสัญลักษณ์ของชาติ เป็นกีฬาอดนียมระดับชาติ เป็นสื่อกลางการพนัน เป็นกิจกรรมที่ดึงดูดนักท่องเที่ยว และที่สุด เป็นกีฬาที่ก้าวขึ้นสู่ระดับนานาชาติ ซึ่งที่ผ่านมามวยไทยมีบทบาทปรากฏตามกล่าวในบางด้านมาแต่ก่อนปี ค.ศ ๑๙๒๐ ขณะที่บทบาทบางส่วนได้พัฒนาขึ้นในภายหลัง และได้สืบทอดอยู่ตราบนับปัจจุบันสมัย

สถาบันวิทยบริการ
 จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

ลายมือนิติต

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APISAKE MONTHIENVICHICHAI: THE CHANGES IN THE ROLE AND
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The thesis traces the development of Muay Thai from the year 1920-2003 (BE 2463-2546) with the objective of studying the effects of westernisation and commercialisation on the sport's role and significance in Thai society. It takes a historical approach, using both primary and secondary resources.

Its findings are that there are eight major roles that have been played and continues to be played by Muay Thai: as a form of military training, a vehicle for social and economic advancement, a method of commemoration, a national symbol, a popular domestic sport, a medium for gambling, a tourist attraction, and finally as an international sport. These roles either existed before 1920 or emerged thereafter and continue to exist today.



Student's Signature:

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Advisor's Signature:

Academic Year: 2004

Co-advisor's Signature:

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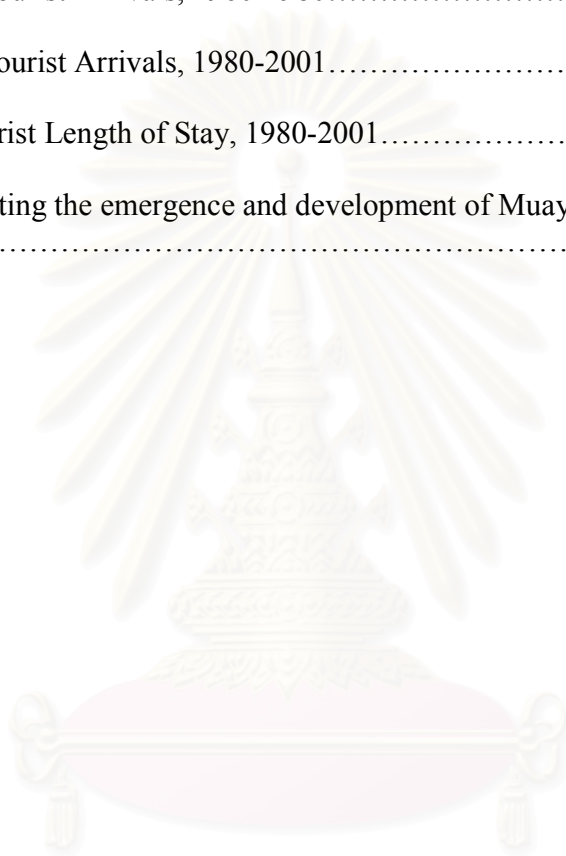
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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

*'A Sport that may be accurately termed Thailand's national craze.'*¹

- Peter Vail

The above is a description of Muay Thai given in 1998 by Peter Vail, a prominent scholar of Muay Thai and its anthropological aspects. With regards to the validity of his comment, it can also be said that today, the 'national craze' has spread far beyond the borders of its country of origin. Indeed in the age of mass global tourism and at a time where in 2001 tourism receipts were valued at 300,000 million baht as opposed to just over 100,000 million baht eleven years earlier,² no tourist guidebook to Thailand would be complete without a short section detailing the art and popularity of Muay Thai. The popular *Rough Guide* series reinforces Vail's claim, describing the sport as a 'national obsession'³ where matches are 'well worth attending as a cultural experience even if you have no interest in the sport itself.'⁴ Similarly, the famous and trendy *Lonely Planet* series that is ubiquitous amongst young travellers and backpackers give the following recommendation: 'If you don't mind violence (in the ring), a Thai boxing match is worth attending for the pure spectacle – the wild musical accompaniment, the ceremonial beginning of each match and the frenzied betting throughout the stadium.'⁵

¹ Pattana Kitiarsa, *Lives of Hunting Dogs: Rethinking Thai Masculinities through an Ethnography of Muay Thai*, (Nakhon Ratchasima: Suranaree University of Technology, 2003), p. 2

² Alpha Research, *Pocket Thailand in Figures 2003*, (Bangkok: Alpha Research, 2003), p. 172

³ P. Gray and L. Ridout, *The Rough Guide to Thailand*, (London: Rough Guides, 2001), p. ix

⁴ P. Gray and L. Ridout, *The Rough Guide to Thailand*, p. ix

⁵ J. Cummings, S. Bao et al, *Lonely Planet: Thailand*, (London: Lonely Planet Publications, 2003), p. 112

Furthermore, the martial art has been intricately woven into the fabric of Thailand's nationalist and monarch-centric history. One king, Prachao Sua (1703-1709) is said to not only have been an avid follower of the sport, but he was also an extremely competent practitioner of the art, where it is claimed that he even fought (and won) incognito in matches across the villages in his kingdom. Later kings of Bangkok, most notably King Chulalongkorn, were said to have been partial to the occasional match of Muay Thai fights. Less royal but no less nationalistic is the story of Nai Khanom Thom, a native from Ayutthaya who was captured by Burmese forces following the second fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. The myth tells of his prowess at defeating several Burmese challengers in a row, thereby winning his freedom as well as proving the effectiveness of Muay Thai for the first time in a foreign arena. The story has recently been made into a television series as well as a feature length film, whilst the traditional date of the fight, 17 March has been officially declared as Muay Thai Day during which commemoration ceremonies are held in Nai Khanom Thom's hometown, Ayutthaya.

Thus, from the brief snapshot given above, it can be quite safely assumed that Muay Thai can be regarded as quintessentially Thai. Or can it? It is clear that even after a superficial examination that Muay Thai is not as Thai as it appears to be. Accessories seen in the ring such as boxing gloves and even the roped and raised ring itself can be seen as products inspired or directly taken from western practices, or in other words, westernisation. It is notable that the introduction of most of these modern accessories occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a period of unprecedented western influence in Thai history. An arguable off-shoot from the process of westernisation was the process of commercialisation, where for the first time Muay Thai

became a marketed commodity for a mass audience that allowed those in control to rake in an unprecedented amount of windfall. It is these two interlinking forces: westernisation and commercialisation and their effect in shaping the role and significance of Muay Thai in its more recent history that will form the main foci of the thesis.

1.1 Objectives

The following are the main objectives of the thesis:

1. To study the changing role and significance of Muay Thai in a modern historical context.
2. To study the effects of westernisation and commercialisation on the development of the sport.

1.2 Literature Review and Definition of terms

There is something of a dearth in serious academic literature regarding Muay Thai. The most widely available literature on Muay Thai, in both English and Thai, is mainly concerned with the methods of training as well as mastering the techniques of the martial art rather than directly with its history. Nevertheless, most manuals are considered to be incomplete if they do not include at least a page or two on the traditional history of Muay Thai. For the most part, they largely follow the narrative of the art emerging from an unknown origin out of warring tribes, to its role in the wars of Siam, its integral role in the national identity of Thailand, and finally (at least in the more recent works) its current and growing popularity amongst the Thai as well as foreign communities. It would seem that these accounts are reflecting the more nationalist and

conservative values associated with Muay Thai, whilst their newer incarnations remain essentially the same but in addition are reflecting the successful effort to globalise the sport.

Academically speaking, much more work has been done on the anthropological and ethnographical aspects of the sport, particularly in the rural areas of the northeast. Scholars such as Peter Vail have written on the sport's role as 'the road to Bangkok' or, in other words, economic prosperity for the rural poor,⁶ whilst Pattana Kitiarsa, Suriya Smutkupt, as well as others have conducted, and continue to conduct, ethnographical surveys on the sport vis-à-vis the male gender and identity.⁷ These accounts are also supplemented by numerous accounts, both personal and impersonal, in various forms of media. The English-language media in particular, tend to focus on more modern issues such as the involvement of women or foreigners in the sport.

A small number of academic theses have also been written on the various aspects of the sport. The topics of these theses are quite wide-ranging and include subjects such as women's participation in the sport, the problems faced by professional boxers, animism's influence on the art,⁸ its role as facilitator of upward social mobility, and the marketing of the sport on television. Most of them fall into the physical education, economics, or mass communications categories. The most useful of these, with regards to the objective of this thesis, is Posawat Saengsawang's 1979 M.Ed. thesis titled

⁶ See also P. Vail, "Ethics and Politics in the Art of Thai Boxing", (Paper presented at Miyazaki: Miyazaki International College, 2000) and P. Vail, "Boxing as an avenue of Social Mobility", (Paper presented at Cornell Southeast Asia Programme, New York: Ithaca 1997) and "Modern Muay Thai mythology" in *Crossroads*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 1998)

⁷ See forthcoming Suriya Smutkupt, Pattana Kitiarsa, Chintana Kaewla, Siriporn Chailert, Nattawut Singkun, and Preecha Srichai, *Muay Thai: Thai Men and Thai Nation* (Working title)

⁸ See for example Amnart Saichalard, *A Study of Using Animism and Beliefs in Superstition of Muay Thai Boxers*, Master's Thesis, Department of Physical Education, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University, 1994.

‘Development of Thai boxing.’⁹ The thesis is extremely detailed in its narrative of the major developments of Muay Thai, for which reason this thesis will not be as detailed since it will be merely repeating what has been already said. Although the thesis is extremely detailed in narrating the developments of Muay Thai, there are two major limitations to the work. It lacks a strong analytical approach, where the developments described are never really placed in the context of the developing Thai society. The other limitation is due to the fact that the thesis was published in 1979, it obviously cannot take in the more recent developments of the last two decades that have been quite dramatic.

Indeed, there is a gap in the literature where the broad developments in the history of Muay Thai have never been critically evaluated in its historical context. Pattana Kitiarsa, one of the researchers at the forefront of Muay Thai research, goes so far as to say that ‘serious academic analyses and publications concerning the socio-cultural or ethnographic aspects of Muay Thai are virtually non-existent.’¹⁰ Furthermore, he notes the failure of other researchers, such as Peter Vail, to show ‘the myth-making process and political plots behind the mythologization of Muay Thai origins.’¹¹ The thesis, therefore, aims to fill in some of this gap.

Consequently, rather than focusing on one aspect of Muay Thai or on a ‘grand narrative’ as with previous studies, the thesis will take a more holistic approach in order to capture a fuller picture of Muay Thai’s broad developments in its socio-cultural and political context. Of course, the inevitable problem with this approach is that a certain level of detail will have to be sacrificed. There will be no lists of champions or who won

⁹ Potsawat Saengsawang, Development of Thai Boxing, Master’s Thesis, Department of Physical Education, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University, 1979

¹⁰ Pattana Kitiarsa, Lives of Hunting Dogs, p. 13

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15

which fight in which year in the thesis, since this has been done before. Nevertheless, the thesis should still form a useful contribution for those who are searching for an account of the broad developments of Muay Thai in the past century that reaches beyond the ‘cultural nationalist and conservationist sentiments’¹² of standard accounts. The originality of the thesis will lie in its interpretation and contextualisation of developments in Muay Thai, rather than any newly gathered data. If that had been the original intention, it would have conducted an ethnographical survey, in which case it would be doubtful whether it would be able to contribute anything useful to the conclusions already reached by Kitiarsa, Smutkupt, Vail, and others.

It is perhaps worth mentioning at this point that there are some conflicts among the literature and scholars with regards to the terminology of Muay Thai. The conflict can lead to some confusion, especially for those unfamiliar with Muay Thai. Some of the terms also have a tendency to change their meanings over time. The thesis will therefore set out clearly the meaning of the terms that have been commonly used both in the past and present.

Muay Chronologically, this term is arguably the oldest. Before the term ‘Muay Thai’ came into the common usage, it was used to refer to essentially the prototype of Muay Thai before the period of westernisation (Muay Kad Cheuk). The common perception is that ‘Muay’ referred to the way boxers tied their hair into a ‘Muay’ or a knot before they fought. Yet, paradoxically, it is also a new term where in the modern day since ‘Muay’

¹² Pattana Kitiarsa, *Lives of Hunting Dogs*, p. 14

has also become a generic term for both Muay Thai and western-styled boxing (Muay Sakon).

Muay Kad Cheuk Also sometimes referred to as **Muay Boran** (literally ‘Ancient Muay’), it can be said that this was the prototype of Muay Thai. Western boxing accessories such as trunks, gloves, and the metallic groin protector (*gra-jab*) are noticeably missing. Instead, boxers wrapped their hands in hemp ropes (hence *kad cheuk*, which literally means ‘to wear rope’) and wear the traditional *panung* (sometimes called a langouti in foreign accounts)¹³ whilst fighting on the bare earth. There is also a significant difference in the techniques available to the boxer, in particular those related to gripping opponents. Although its practice continued into the 1920s when western boxing accessories were introduced, live fights of Muay Kad Cheuk are extremely rare in the modern day due to safety concerns. After the introduction of boxing accessories from the west (such as gloves), Muay Kad Cheuk was used as a term to distinguish the old style from the new style (Muay Thai). However, choreographed displays of Muay Kad Cheuk are more commonly seen and can take place anywhere from a television studio to a stage or ring at a local temple fair.

Western Boxing Also known plainly as **Boxing** in the west, this term refers to the modern European style of boxing where kicks, knees, and elbows are illegal. The term is helpful in separating ‘Thai Boxing’ and ‘Western Boxing’ from each other.

¹³ Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, Description of the Thai Kingdom or Siam, (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2000), p. 102

Muay Sakon Literally meaning ‘International Boxing,’ this is the Thai term for Western Boxing. There is no difference in terms of rules and techniques used.

Thai Boxing This term was originally used to give foreigners who were unfamiliar with Muay Thai a cultural reference point. However in recent years, the term Thai boxing has ran an increasing risk of being misinterpreted to mean the practice of Muay Sakon in Thailand or by a Thai.

Kickboxing Often mistaken for Muay Thai outside of Thailand, kickboxing was actually a recent ‘invention’ by Osamu Noguchi, a Japanese entrepreneur in the 1970s. It combines elements of western boxing, karate, as well as Muay Thai. Most notably, competitors are not allowed to use knees, elbows, and are not allowed to kick above a certain height (this regulation varies from country to country). Due to the successful marketing strategy of Noguchi, the sport became more well-known in the west than Muay Thai. Consequently, there have been misunderstandings in the west along the lines that Muay Thai originated from kickboxing whereas, in reality, it was actually the other way round.

Thai Kickboxing This term came to be largely used following the commercial success of Noguchi’s kickboxing in the west, since it again gave foreigners a familiar point of reference. Like the term ‘Thai boxing’ it can also be misinterpreted as kickboxing being practiced by a Thai or in Thailand.

Muay Thai The term came into wide use in Thailand following the name-change from Siam to Thailand in 1939, although it could have been used by the populace of central plains before this period. In the modern context, the term refers to the style of boxing that utilises modern boxing accessories and regulations whilst allowing the use of punches, kicks, elbows, and knees with little restrictions on where one can strike.

Furthermore, there are two more terms worth defining for the sake of clarity. The first is westernisation. The difficulty of defining the term in general is evident. Technically speaking, Thailand has had to confront the forces of westernisation ever since Buddhism arrived on its shores from India, which was of course to the west of Thailand. Thus the thesis will formulate a relatively restrictive definition for its purposes where ‘westernisation’ will be defined as changes in the country that was inspired by ideas or practices in the west, loosely defined as European countries and/or the United States. Westernisation as a term, however, can potentially encompass all aspects of society, thus it may be more accurate to utilise the term modernisation instead, where this can be applied more specifically to government. Central concepts of modernisation include concepts such as the centralisation of government and the creation of a systematic, standardised bureaucracy, which in turn encourage development along a similar vein in other sectors of society. In the case of Thailand, it can be seen that much of this new data or technology that enabled the country’s modernisation, were inspired by western examples and ideas. As such, the term modernisation and westernisation may be interchangeable in some limited cases.

The second important term is globalisation. The term is difficult to define at the best of times, but with regards to Muay Thai it should be regarded as its attempt to market itself in the global marketplace, in terms of both as a cultural icon and as a product. In recent years the process has led to Muay Thai being practiced in many countries across the continents. However, the process is by no means one-way and it is arguable that in time, the original product may actually be changed through this process both in terms of its cultural as well as economic nature. The changes and their implications will be discussed in detail later in the thesis.

1.3 Scope, Approach, and Limitations

Although the history of Muay Thai can be traced back for quite a long period into Thai history, real, hard facts regarding the history of Muay Thai is hard to come by. This difficulty has been attributed to the fact that many potentially valuable historical sources were lost following the sacking of Ayutthaya in 1767 by the Burmese. Of course, matters are not helped by the Thai tropical climate which has inevitable and adverse effects on the preservation of practically every historical source. Thus historians of Muay Thai are left with sparse references across a variety of mainly foreign sources such as Burmese and Cambodian accounts of warfare, European accounts, and the Lanna chronicles, none of which focus directly on Muay and its development.

The thesis aims to bypass these difficulties altogether by not dwelling too much on the distant and rather nebulous history of Muay Thai in the past centuries. Instead, it will focus on the more 'modern' developments of Muay Thai that began to have a significant impact in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Furthermore,

instead of providing a blow-by-blow account of the developments, which has been done before,¹⁴ it will instead use a political economic approach in explaining how state policies, particularly with regards to the economy have affected the development of the sport. Although Muay Thai is essentially an intangible product, the development of its economic aspect has arguably reflected the development from a self-sufficient (or even barter) economy to that of a capitalist, cash based system in the general macro-economy, where it will be seen that this change directly came about through government policies. The changes in the macro-economy have led to opportunities for Muay Thai to develop from a local commodity to a marketable product in both the domestic and international markets. It should be noted here that the term ‘commodity’ is used loosely since Muay Thai is essentially an intangible product, whilst its most valuable aspect (i.e. gambling) is more of a by-product.

At the same time, it has to be kept in mind that all aspects of Siam were undergoing radical changes within this period. These aspects range widely from changes in the political and administrative system, the economy, and even the dress of the common Thai. Although the transformation of Muay Thai is only a small part of this, its development could arguably be seen as a microcosm of the development and the influences that have affected Thailand in the past century or so.

In order to gather more modern data the author also spent a full week at a Muay Thai camp in the vicinity of Bangkok with regular visits (at least five times a week) for two months thereafter. However, it has to be noted here that the promoters, boxing camp owners, as well as sometimes the boxers themselves were understandably nervous at

¹⁴ For such an account, see Potsawat Saengsawang, Development of Thai Boxing for the developments of Muay Thai from the pre-Ayutthaya period to 1979.

formal interviews. Accurate financial information as well as more in-depth information on gambling are particularly sensitive topics to broach. An unorthodox approach therefore had to be taken, but this in itself has imposed limitations in that the data gathered is more anecdotal in nature rather than scientific. For this reason, the material gathered was not originally going to be incorporated into the thesis but after the review by the thesis committee, the impressions gathered have been included in the appendix.

The approach taken by the thesis is a novel one, with regards to Muay Thai, considering the fact that previous academic works that have dwelt on either the anthropological or ethnological aspects of Muay Thai or had an emphasis on creating a ‘grand narrative’ of Muay Thai from its vague history from the time of the first tribes to its modern incarnation. To the author’s knowledge, no work has been done before on the impact of national politics and economics on Muay Thai as well as the result of these impacts had on the national consciousness, or the Thai sense of identity as well as the role and significance of Muay Thai, which underwent dramatic changes during this period. As such, the thesis is the first to examine this issue in some detail.

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1.4 Detailed Outline

The following is a brief outline and summaries of the chapters in the thesis, which should be useful for researchers and readers who do not have time to read the whole thesis in searching for the relevant information or those who find the abstract insufficient for their needs.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The first chapter explains the aims, approaches, and objectives and also outlines the basic contents and arguments of the main chapters of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Westernisation

The chapter concerning the effects of westernisation will be split into three parts. Although the time period divisions are purely arbitrary, they arguably best reflect the stages of development of the sport.

2.1: Martial Tradition, Pre-1920

The first sub-chapter will examine the status of Muay Thai prior to the twentieth century when the effects of westernisation began to exert a significant impact for the first time. It will argue that while Muay Thai existed its prototype form of Muay (known variously today as Muay Boran or Muay Kad Cheuk) as a sport, it was significantly more

varied and rare in practice. The most significant development during this period was arguably the transformation of Muay from being purely a method of military training to a peace-time sport and spectacle supported particularly by the peaceful nature of the period as well as by the personal passions of the monarch, in particular King Chulalongkorn, as well as by the populace.

2.2: Transformation, 1920-1939

This second sub-chapter will examine how the status of Muay Thai had changed in response to and with inspiration from the forces of westernisation as well as its development into a popular sport. The major developments during this period were the establishment of the Suan Kularb stadium in 1920,¹⁵ the first of the permanent arenas, reforms geared towards improving the safety of the boxers, as well as the unconscious homogenisation of the style of Muay Thai, reflecting the trend towards centralisation during this period. The latter include the introduction of western-style accessories such as boxing gloves that effectively transformed Muay Boran into what a modern audience would recognise as Muay Thai. Arguably, these changes were enacted along western lines and ideas.

¹⁵ LD Junlakan, *Muay Thai: A Living Legacy*, (Bangkok: Spry Books, 2002), p. 54

2.3: Nationalisation, 1939-1959

The third and final sub-chapter sees the further development of Muay Thai according to the nationalist agenda as well as the continuation of previous developments, one of the most notable being the establishment of the Rachadamnoen stadium in 1945. One of the more controversial arguments of the thesis will be the introduction of the gender taboo. Although other studies have and continue to be conducted regarding the status of women within the sport in more recent years, the thesis will argue that the gender taboo was arguably introduced during this period where historical evidence points clearly to the involvement of women in Muay in the past. The development was a direct result of the adoption of monogamy by Rama VI as well as the modernisation of the state, which no longer required so much labour from its male populations. Subsequent nationalist policies would only serve to reinforce gender identities.

Chapter 3: Commercialisation

Although the third main chapter is titled 'Commercialisation' this concept is arguably the continuation of the process of westernisation and modernisation, albeit in the economic rather than political sense, although it can be said in the case of Thailand that the two are practically inseparable. The heart of the chapter will be the effects of national economic development and its positive and negative impact on Muay Thai.

3.1: Aristocratic Patronage, Pre-1932

The first sub-chapter will establish the fact that gambling had existed in one form or another in Thai society prior to the creation of the first permanent arenas. However, it will also argue that the establishment of permanent arenas allowed for the first time regular bouts of Muay Thai rather than matches that were based around festivals or solemn occasions. The result was effectively the creation of the opportunity for regular, and thus potentially (at least for the organisers) lucrative revenues, both legitimate and illegitimate, although this was not realised until quite some time later.

3.2: Over Table, Under Table, 1932-1980

The second sub-chapter will examine the effects of the increasing economic prosperity during this period, particularly under the Sarit regime on the sport. The chapter will argue that the climate of economic stimulation and commercialisation that prevailed during this period essentially encouraged the rise of gambling through the availability of new sources and levels of income that had previously been unavailable to the majority of the populace during the preceding periods. It will also argue that the commercialisation and development of gambling was facilitated by technological factors, such as the introduction of the radio and in particular, television.

3.3: Tourism and Globalisation, 1980-2003

The final sub-chapter will examine the emerging role of tourism in shaping the role of the sport as a lucrative tourist attraction, particularly in the last decade. The commercialisation aspect has also led to a certain extent of internationalisation of the sport by foreigners who come exclusively to Thailand to train in the practice and methods of teaching the sport. These foreign boxers occasionally fight in local tournaments, but more often than not, return home to set up their own gym and thus spread the practice far beyond the national borders of Thailand.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The final chapter will conclude the thesis and draw together the findings of the preceding chapters. It will argue that although the thesis has effectively argued that Muay Thai may not be as Thai, or perhaps more accurately, Siamese as commonly thought, due to its close role in mirroring the political, social, and economic life of the country in its most turbulent period of development, it has effectively (and should continue to be) accepted as a quintessentially Thai sport.

CHAPTER 2 WESTERNISATION

*'There will be no more wars with Vietnam and Burma. We will have them only with the West. Take care, and do not lose any opportunities to them. Anything that they propose should be held up to close scrutiny before accepting it: Do not blindly trust them.'*¹

- Rama III

The above quotation was part of a warning reportedly given by King Rama III on his deathbed. It is therefore ironic to see that in the following decades after the death of the king that all aspects of Siamese life had been touched in one way or another by the forces and ideas of Europe. Westernisation has occurred to the extent that, although Thailand was able to escape colonisation by the west, it could be said to have been effectively 'culturally colonised.' Furthermore, although Rama III was referring to the future unbalanced treaties that were to be proposed by European colonial powers, the warning that 'Anything that they propose should be held up to close scrutiny before accepting it' seems to be a striking premonition of the recklessness of the Phibunsonkhram government that effectively aimed to make Thailand a carbon copy of so-called 'civilised' Europe; whatever that meant. It also seems to be an echo of the advice the Buddha gave at Kalama to consider matters in full before adopting or dropping them.²

Muay Thai was by no means untouched by these forces, indeed one can even go so far as to argue that the sport in its present and popular form partly owes its current existence as a popular sport to the forces of westernisation encouraged in part by the

¹ DK Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1984), p. 180

² WS Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, (New York: Grove Press, 1977), p. 3

monarchs and subsequent dictators. For example, common objects found in the modern Muay Thai matches, such as gloves, can be seen to be a direct import of western ideas.

The study of the changes in the role and significance of Muay Thai is effectively a study of the evolution and reaction of a Thai institution during a period of extreme changes and pressures, both internal and external. Arguably, the changes came through a process of evolution rather than a revolution, where in most cases the changes were more gradual than sudden. Thus, the dates that have been set as the headings for the sub-chapters are purely arbitrary but nevertheless arguably best reflect the ‘phases’ that Muay Thai underwent.



Figure 2.1: *Before Westernisation.* Depictions of boxers in traditional attire performing traditional moves from a boxing manual compiled during the reign of Rama III

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2.1 Martial Tradition, Pre-1920

*'Thailand's history has been so plagued with warfare that the history of Thai martial arts is, in a sense, also the history of the Thai people.'*³

- Michael Mackenzie

It should be noted here that there are virtually no accurate chronicle sources that deal directly with the history of Muay Thai, especially in the pre-Rattanakosin period. Its true origins are essentially unknown. At best, there are indirect references in disparate stories and legends such as the story of Sri Thanonchai, the trickster and those associated with the exploits of Nai Deua, the alias of King Sūa who was wont to travel incognito to villages and fight against local champions.⁴ There are also some references in law codes, but these are not wholly conclusive in establishing the existence of Muay Thai in the Sukhothai and early Ayutthaya periods.⁵ The dearth of evidence also covers western sources, which are considered to be generally more reliable than indigenous sources, although they do have their own attendant problems and prejudices. The closest that any westerner during the Ayutthaya period came to describing Muay Thai is in Fr. Guy Tachard's account of his visit to Siam in 1685. The Jesuit priest was present at a celebration in honour of the coronations of the kings of England and Portugal, and amongst many other performances, was a witness to a peculiar dance:

³ M. Mackenzie, "The Martial Art of Muay Thai in Thai Society", in MC Howard (ed.) et al, Traditional Thai arts in Contemporary Perspective, (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998), p. 213

⁴ Satién Sapaong, Muay Thai: The Art of Self-defence and Exercise, (Bangkok: Songserm Kunapap Shee-wit Company, 1990), pp. 2-3

⁵ Committee for National Culture, The Art of Muay Thai, (Bangkok: Kurusapa, 1997), pp. 14,16

Betwixt the Chinese and the Laos there was a Troop of Siamese Men and Women, cast into a Ring, who danced after a pretty odd manner, that's to say, with their hands as well as feet, making as many Figures with the one as they did with the other.⁶

The above description by itself, seems to suggest that Fr. Tachard was witnessing a display of Muay Thai. Indeed, from an uninformed western perspective, a choreographed demonstration of Muay Thai (which allows a demonstration of prowess to a certain degree without the risk of serious injuries to participants), with its unique musical accompaniment, could conceivably be construed as a 'pretty odd' dance by the uninformed. Indeed, a more modern observer of Muay Thai, Michael Mackenzie goes so far as to say that 'Muay Thai is a martial art that is similar in some ways to dance and drama.'⁷ The involvement of women in the spectacle is also noteworthy and will be discussed further below. However, the line following the description seems to muddy the waters a little, as Tachard described how the people 'sang a little in the Nose, joyned to the noise they made with their Hands, regulated all the cadence.'⁸ The conclusion seems to be that either what Tachard witnessed was a Muay Thai demonstration accompanied by singing or chanting, which is certainly untraditional or Tachard may have wrongly remembered the course of events and mixed one exotic performance with another. The third alternative is of course, that it was not a martial demonstration at all, but a different type of dance altogether. In any case, the fact that the words 'Troop' (as opposed to an unorganised and undisciplined crowd or a rabble) and 'Ring' (as opposed to stage) are

⁶ Guy Tachard, *A Relation of the Voyage to Siam, 1685*, (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 1999), p. 185

⁷ M. Mackenzie, "The Martial Art of Muay Thai in Thai Society", p. 214

⁸ Guy Tachard, *A Relation of the Voyage to Siam, 1685*, p. 185

used in the account to describe the situation, is certainly suggestive to the fact that whatever dance it was it had more of a martial rather than a gentle nature.

Although Muay Thai, in its present form, is largely homogenous with few acceptable regional variations, this had not always been the case. Prior to the standardisation of rules and match specifications introduced in the early twentieth century, there were distinctive regional styles of Muay Boran, or ancient Muay Thai. The most prominent styles were Muay Korat, Muay Lopburi, Muay Pra Nakorn, and Muay Chaiya where the styles were named after the cities where they were popularly practiced. The variation has been attributed to the isolation of communities that had been common prior to the reign of Rama V due to poor communications.⁹ Consequently, the separate communities were able to develop their own styles, techniques, and nuances according to their own strengths with little or no influence from other communities. Thus, the styles became quite distinct from each other, for example, the dance style of northern boxers, who were generally larger with stronger legs was more stiff, firm, and heavy in style. In contrast, the style of southerners was more smooth and soft, reflecting their preoccupation with dexterity, evasion, and self-protection.¹⁰ Furthermore, there were also styles that were affiliated with prominent personages in Thai martial history, for example, Phaya Pichai¹¹ or even King Sūa.¹² The variety that prevailed during this period was to contrast greatly with the more or less homogenous styles that prevail in the modern style

⁹ LD Junlakan, *Muay Thai: A Living Legacy*, p. 33

¹⁰ M. Mackenzie, “The Martial Art of Muay Thai in Thai Society”, p. 230

¹¹ See for example Somporn Saengchai, *Muay Thai: The Art of Muay Thai according to Phraya Pichai Dabhak of Uttaradit*, (Uttaradit: Rajabhat Institute, 2002)

¹² See for example ‘Yotreungsa,’ *Prachao Sua style Muay Thai manual*, (Bangkok: Sermwitbanakan Publishing, 1981)

of Muay Thai, although past differences is reflected in the different styles of the *wai khru*, where each Muay Thai camp have their own styles and routines that, among other things, mark their affiliation.

The format and regularity of the matches were also radically different. There were no formal weight divisions and the arrangement of matches was based on the willingness of the boxers to combat each other. Furthermore, there were no regularly scheduled matches. Instead, they were usually scheduled for festivals or special occasions such as funerals. Indeed, one of the most famous matches was held at the funeral of Marupongsiripat, a high-ranking army commander that was held in 1898.¹³ Boxers from all over the country came to demonstrate their skill at the royally-sponsored funeral in the presence of King Chulalongkorn.

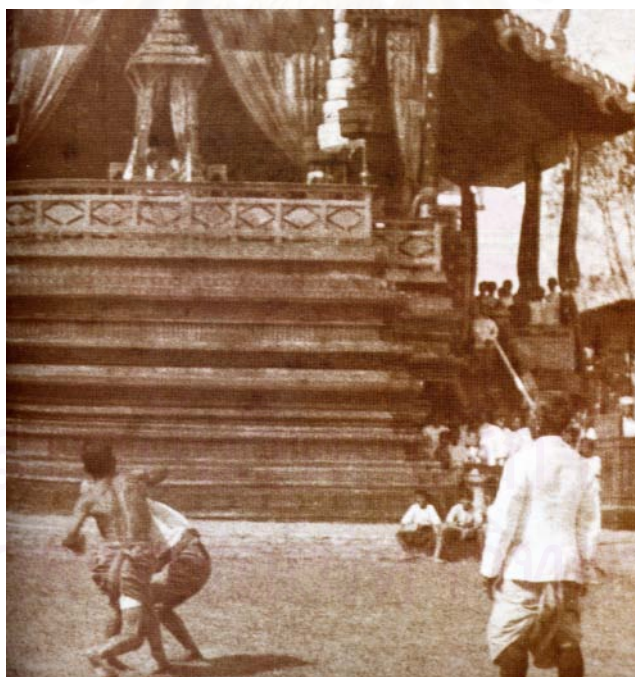


Figure 2.1.1: Muay Boran or Muay Kad Cheuk at the funeral of Marupongsiripat. Note the royal balcony from where the king was able to watch each fight as well as the bare, unbounded earth ring.

¹³ LD Junlakan, *Muay Thai: A Living Legacy*, p. 30

At the conclusion of the funeral, three men were given military promotions and the following honorary names: *Muen* Cha-ngad Choeng Shok, *Muen* Muay Mee Chue, and *Muen* Mue Maen Mud. The three men were also proponents of one of the different regional styles mentioned earlier. The fact that their styles prevailed seems to indicate the existence of ‘lesser’ regional styles that were likely dropped and therefore lost after their defeat. In another match that was held during the reign of Rama I a prize of 50 chang (around 4,000 baht),¹⁴ not an insignificant amount in that period, was offered for the victor. The match at the funeral of Marupongsiripat can also be seen as part of a trend towards centralisation during this period where the boxers who participated in the match came from across the country to fight before the king in Bangkok. However, at this point in time, it was more of a symbolic rather than actual centralisation of Muay Thai.

Thus, instead of fights being staged for pure entertainment or for commercial purposes, the few matches in the pre-1920 period were truly tests of the individual boxer’s skills as well as a method for honouring a special occasion or the dead. From the promotions that were given to the victors, it can also be argued that Muay was also a method of social and economic advancement. However, like winning gold at the Olympics today, it is questionable as to how much of the population were able to take advantage of this route to greater prosperity due to two reasons. The first is that, despite the popularity of Muay Thai, it is nevertheless conceivable that not many amongst the population would be sufficiently skilled to be noticed and promoted as in the case of the

¹⁴ Panya Kraitus and Dr. Pitisuk Kraitus, *Muay Thai: The Most Distinguished Art of Fighting*, (Bangkok: Film Process, 1988), p. 23

three men at Marupongsiripat's funeral. The second is that the contests were relatively rare since they were centred on major festivals, between which there were long gaps of inactivity, or significant occasions, which were and are somewhat unpredictable. Thus, it can be argued that the number of people who can benefit as well as the opportunities were rather limited. At the same time, it is also unlikely that many boxers could feasibly support themselves on the irregular income from Muay alone during this period.

The major role and significance of Muay Thai, at least prior to the mid-nineteenth century was undoubtedly military. As indicated in the deathbed warning of Rama III, before the encroachment of western imperial powers became the state's main concern, it was Burma, Cambodia, and Laotian aggression or rebellion had been a foremost concern of the Siamese government. Muay Thai (or at the time, its ancient form) was effectively one of the many tools that could be employed to literally combat the problem. During the Ayutthaya era, the practice of Muay allowed the talented to climb the social ladder, which arguably set the precedent for practices during the early Bangkok period and thereafter. At Ayutthaya, it is known that there existed platoons of royal guards going by a variety of names such as *Gong Tanai Luak*, *Dhamruot Luang*, or more obviously *Grom Nak Muay*, where those who excelled at the art could be admitted and, in theory, be promoted depending on the level of their skill. However, in actual battle it is doubtful whether these guard platoons or regiments wholly relied on their unarmed combat abilities. It is more likely that the techniques were used in conjunction with other conventional weapons such as swords, lances, and spears. Of particular use would be the *mai sork*, a weapon that could be easily crafted totally from readily available wood and fitted along the length of the arm. Its design would have allowed the execution of Muay

manoeuvres without cumbersome weapons, whilst at the same time protecting the wielder from edged weapons.

However, with the progress in technology as well as a general settlement of Southeast Asia under the European powers, wars that required the services of hemp-fisted warriors became less frequent and less viable. There was after all, limited use for such skills against the might of a fully-armed European gunboat. Indeed, if anything, the 1893 incident at Paknam where French gunboats were able to effectively force their way through Siamese defences¹⁵ and impose unjustified and humiliating terms on the government reinforced the point that Siam could no longer depend on traditional mindsets, never mind the traditional martial arts, to survive as an independent, sovereign nation into the twentieth century. The period of unprecedented peace effectively meant that Muay Thai either had to adapt to its new environment or vanish altogether into oblivion.

It can be seen that Muay Thai took the former course; adapting to suit the new emerging environment. Thus the main development that occurred with regards to Muay Thai during this period was that of an evolution from a purely ceremonial or military role (although these roles continued to a certain extent) to that of a popular sport with regular matches being held in permanent arenas. Indeed, the most important development in this regard was the establishment of the permanent arenas, a practice which began in the 1920s which was continued thereafter with mixed results. Nevertheless, prior to the establishment of these arenas, the 'rings' in which Muay Thai matches were held,

¹⁵ DK Wyatt, Thailand, p. 203

consisted of nothing more than an area of bare earth, around which the audience congregated creating a rough area in which the fighters can move.¹⁶ The advantage of this arrangement was that matches could be held almost anywhere. However, it also meant that there were no permanent areas where fights were regular or where the skills of boxers were guaranteed. In effect, there was practically no universal standard and practices can and did vary from place to place. In addition, the nomadic rings also made any attempt at standardisation extremely difficult.

Furthermore, it can be argued that Muay Boran or Muay Kad Cheuk came to be called Muay Tai or perhaps even Muay Thai during this period, i.e. sometime in the mid-Bangkok period.¹⁷ Although it would be a few decades before the name Siam was changed into Thailand, by some accounts, the term ‘Thai’ may have been in common use amongst the populace prior to the changeover. According to Professor Charnvit Kasetsiri, although the terms ‘Siam’ and ‘Siamese’ were used by the ruling elite to refer to themselves and the country in relation to western countries, the reality may have been different lower down the social scale. According to the Thai-French-English dictionary compiled in 1896 by Bishop Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, the terms ‘Thai’ and ‘Siamese’ were defined in the following manner:¹⁸

ไทย	Thai	libre	free
ไทย	Thai	les Thais, les Siamois	the Thai, the Siamese

¹⁶ LD Junlakan, *Muay Thai: A Living Legacy*, p. 54

¹⁷ Panya Kraitus and Dr. Pitisuk Kraitus, *Muay Thai*, p. D

¹⁸ Charnvit Kasetsiri, *From Siam to Thailand: What's in a name?* in *Asian Review 1998*, v. 12, (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1998), p. 36

เสียม	Thai	Siam, les Siamois	Siam, the Siamese
		(mot hors d'usage)	(term out of use)

Thus Pallegoix's dictionary seems to indicate that by the late nineteenth century, the usage of the terms 'Siam' and 'Siamese' was somehow 'out of date', an observation that probably rang more true amongst the general population of the central plains around Bangkok (although the situation may be slightly different with regards to the population residing outside the central plain) rather than amongst the ruling elite. There is also evidence to suggest that the usage may have been common even as early as the late seventeenth century.¹⁹ Thus, it can be concluded that as far as the term 'Muay Tai' is concerned, the evolution may have occurred as far back as the seventeenth century amongst the commoners of the central plain, but is more likely to have occurred some time in the late nineteenth century. However, it is likely that the term Muay Thai came into universal use (i.e. both inside and beyond the central plain) only after the name change in 1939.

Thus it can be seen that the role and significance of Muay Thai, or Muay as it was then known, had undergone major changes within this period. At first it was primarily a military tool employed in defence of the community or the 'state,' such as existed at the time. Its secondary function was as a method to honour special occasions and festivals, where at the same time it could also be used as a method for social and economic advancement, albeit in a rather limited manner. Nevertheless, by the end of the

¹⁹ Charnvit Kasetsiri, *From Siam to Thailand: What's in a name?*, p. 36

nineteenth century it became increasingly clear that the military application of the martial art was going to be limited (but by no means rendered completely obsolete) by the advances in technology. The casualty figures from the Paknam incident alone, where only four Frenchmen were killed as opposed to 31 Siamese sailors,²⁰ seems to suggest at the time that Siam needed to rely on something else other than Muay Thai to defend its sovereignty.



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²⁰ WEJ Tips, Siam's Struggle for Survival: The 1893 Gunboat Incident at Paknam, (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1996), p. 84

2.2 Transformation, 1920-1939

*'It would be said that no Thais in all the capital could fight. Our reputation would suffer. The dishonour would spread abroad.'*²¹

- Rama I, 1788

Despite the death of King Chulalongkorn in 1910, Muay Thai continued to be modernised and increase in popularity, and Rama I would have had no reason to think that his fear would be realised. One of the most significant developments was the establishment of the first permanent arenas. The first of these was the Suan Gularb arena which was established in the grounds of the Suan Gularb School in 1920.²² As a result of this development which had a significant impact, the year 1920 should be considered as a viable watershed that separates the traditional era and the start of the modern era. However, it should be noted that despite the establishment of the permanent arena, traditional practices, notably the continuation of the *kad cheuk* style of boxing, continued to be practiced until new regulations were introduced.

Further arenas including the Tar Charng, Lak Muang, Suan Sanuk and Suan Jao arenas were also to be established in Bangkok within the following decade.²³ The Tar Charng arena, established by Lieutenant-General Phraya Thephasdin, had a stronger ring with stronger corner pillars as well as larger boundary ropes.²⁴ Although most of these arenas do not survive into the modern day (the Suan Gularb arena, for example only existed for a total of about ten years) they were a significant development since their

²¹ M. Mackenzie, *The Martial Art of Muay Thai in Thai Society*, p. 219

²² LD Junlakan, *Muay Thai: A Living Legacy*, p. 54

²³ Ibid., p. 55

²⁴ Yutthana Wongbandu, *Amateur Boxing Rules and Regulations*, Department of Physical Education, 1995, (Bangkok: Department of Physical Education, 1995), p. 3

establishment allowed for the regular contests outside of the usual festivals and special occasions. In the case of Suan Gularb, it was every Saturday night. It is arguable that the establishment of this and the other arenas that followed, contributed greatly to the popularity of the sport since it allowed for regular matches to be held in one place as opposed to constantly moving around venues of temple festivals and fairs. The establishment of these arenas within the vicinity of Bangkok also emphasises the increasing role and influence of the capital in the running of the state's political and economic systems. In effect, the centralisation that in the previous period had been largely symbolic had now become reality.

The appearance of the ring was also changed to be more similar to the boxing rings found in the west during the same period. Initially, bare earth ring continued to be used even in the permanent arenas. However on one occasion at Suan Gularb, some overenthusiastic spectators invaded the fighting area which led to the arena's ruling committee to introduce a raised ring constructed around 120cm above the ground marked out with parallel ropes with mats on the floor and steps leading up to the ring. The introduction of the new ring format seems to be a pragmatic solution to an immediate problem, but one cannot help but speculate that the format might have had a degree of inspiration from the western mode of thinking, as indicated in the training of physical education teachers in both Muay Thai and gymnastics at Suan Gularb School in 1913.²⁵ This strange combination between east and west was to become quite common in Muay Thai as well as in other aspects of Thai society in subsequent periods.

²⁵ Yutthana Wongbandu, Amateur Boxing Rules and Regulations, p. 5

Undoubtedly, the most significant cosmetic change within the sport involved the new safety regulations that were introduced as well as legislation to generally regulate the sport. Boxing gloves that previously had been more commonly seen in western boxing, for example, were introduced during this period. Like the changes to the ring, the measure can be seen as a pragmatic response to a problem, this time arising from a tragedy. In 1926 a boxer by the name of Jia Kaegkhmen died in the ring of the Lak Muang Arena. Jia had been critically hit by his opponent, Pae Lieng Prasert, but refused to concede the fight. Consequently the referee who acted according to the rules at the time was unable to discount him with the ultimate result of Jia's death. The reaction to the tragedy is intriguing. It is interesting that, rather than immediately reforming regulations to allow the referee to stop a fight regardless of the attitude of the boxers, boxing gloves and socks were introduced instead, most likely as a concession to the martial (if somewhat reckless) spirit that continued to survive. An alternative interpretation is that the introduction of these safety measures, especially with regards to the gloves, formed a part of the continuing attempt of the government at the time to portray the Thais as 'civilised' people by conforming to and adopting western standards.

Despite the fact that the gloves would necessarily interfere with traditional Muay gripping techniques, it seemed that the safety measure managed to survive to the modern day, unlike the socks which satisfied neither the boxers nor their fans. Furthermore, the introduction of gloves had the unforeseen consequence of extending the popularity of the sport from the domain of the professional to much more of the population at large. The consequence of this can evidently be seen with the establishment of new arenas such as the Suan Sanook stadium on 9 November 1929, which further improved the condition of

the ring. The Suan Sanook ring was covered with canvas and bounded by three ropes. The standard red and blue corners were also used here, as well as the position of timekeeper and referee who would intervene as necessary and judge the ultimate outcome of fights. Victory now could also be decided by points. Fees were collected at the gates and the sum was divided between both the winner and the loser, with the winner getting the larger share.²⁶

In contrast to the gloves, although the socks were understandably introduced as a safety measure to soften the impact of kicks, they severely interfered with boxing techniques, often resulting in boxers slipping and losing their balance. Following a match where fans were particularly dissatisfied, since the boxers constantly slipped and stumbled uncontrollably throughout the match, the practice of wearing socks was discontinued. However, other measures were more enduring. Bouts were limited to five three-minute rounds separated with a two-minute break, and a ten-point-per-round scoring system was introduced so that each round could be judged decisively without resorting to the physical domination of one party. Furthermore, weight divisions were introduced, where at the time these were based on the 16 international classifications that ranged from mini-flyweight to light heavyweight.²⁷ However, in more recent times, the divisions have been expanded to 19 divisions. Although some of the measures, such as the introduction of western-style boxing shorts were purely cosmetic, most of them were arguably geared towards increasing the safety of the boxers. The issuing of safety measures from the centre also seems to reflect the general trend of centralisation that occurred during this period.

²⁶ Yutthana Wongbandu, *Amateur Boxing Rules and Regulations*, p. 4

²⁷ J. Cummings, *Muay Thai*, (Bangkok: Asia Books, 2003), p. 17

The safety development seems to echo that of the developments in western boxing whose history could be traced back to the classical period in European history. Mural paintings in Crete at Knossos portray children sparring with gloves whilst various Greek art objects attest to the existence of boxing, notably as one of the original Olympic sports. Noteworthy is also the existence of the pankratium, another original Olympic sport, which was essentially an unrestrained, anything-goes fight. The technique used was a combination of boxing, wrestling (another original Olympic sport) as well as other more unorthodox techniques.

The next point of reference should be the development of pugilism in Britain. Like Muay Thai, pugilism was a popular spectator sport (second only to horse racing, by some accounts)²⁸ in early nineteenth century Britain. Essentially, it was similar to the modern version of western boxing but with less regulation and notably, the fights were also conducted without gloves and were invariably long and bloody affairs, which ended only with the capitulation of one party. Also contemporary to pugilism was the French *savate*, (also known as *chaussons* in the Marseille area) which is essentially similar to pugilism except from the fact that it allows kicks. Unlike Muay Thai, kicks with the tibia (the shin) are not used. Although knees, elbows, as well as other unorthodox techniques were not allowed in its formalised version introduced by Michel Pisseux and Charles Lecour, its early version which originated from street fighting technique was more flexible. It was also because of its street origins that the sport did not acquire respectability until the early twentieth century when it was introduced as a demonstration

²⁸ N. Yapp, The British Millennium, (Köln: Konemann, 2000), p. 602

sport in the 1920 Olympics. Even then, the English were particularly against kicking, regarding the technique as unsportsmanlike, foreign, and cowardly. Nevertheless, the sport continues to be practiced today and is generally known as *savate boxe française*. Its survival into the modern day arguably assisted in the successful introduction of kickboxing to Europe.

Furthermore, like Muay Thai matches today, the matches of pugilism also provided opportunities for participants to profit economically. For example, the fight between the English champion Tom Spring and Irish challenger Jack Langan that took place at Worcester on 7 January 1824. Spring eventually won and retired four years later to become the landlord of the Castle Tavern in Holborn, arguably a nineteenth century parallel for the use of Muay Thai by modern boxers for economic advancement. However, due to the popularity of the sport and the dangerous consequences that occurred, the sport eventually developed into the safer version better known today with gloves and strict regulation, the most significant of which were the Marquis of Queensbury Rules, which still exert considerable influence today. Furthermore, the creation of the first stadium at Suan Gularb School could be linked with the role boxing played in the elite, and in particular, British public schools such as Eton and Rugby in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Figures 2.2.1, 2.2.2, and 2.2.3: In the West, it can be seen that boxing underwent its own evolutionary phases, similar to Muay Thai. The Greeks who included boxing as a sport in the original Olympic Games²⁹ had hand bindings that are remarkably similar to the Muay Kad Cheuk style (Top) while Minoan children trained with gloves (Bottom Left). In nineteenth century England, a display of boxing, or pugilism as it was known contemporarily, was both popular and lucrative, as can be seen in the case of Tom Spring and Jack Langan (Bottom Right).

Although in the present day it is no longer as widely practiced as before due to safety concerns, boxing (along with other challenging sports such as rugby) was seen as a

²⁹ C. Freeman, *Egypt, Greece, and Rome: Civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 182

sport that could improve not only the athlete's physique, but also his spiritual side or the all-important 'character' of the student. It thus comes as no surprise that the development occurred during the reign of Rama VI who was the first Thai monarch to have an extensive western education, including a stint at Oxford University and Sandhurst Military Academy in England.³⁰ Whether the monarch enjoyed the experience is another matter, but in the light of Rama VI's background, the establishment of the Suan Gularb stadium in the grounds of a school for Thailand's new elite can be interpreted as being an influence from the western public school, albeit with a distinct Thai flavour added to it.

Nevertheless it is noteworthy that to this day in the West, questions still remain as to whether boxing as a sport is safe enough, especially for participants in the heavier weight divisions.³¹ Some, such as the British Medical Association (BMA) are even calling for the sport to be banned altogether on medical grounds.³² It may be that in the future, Muay Thai which allows the boxers a wider and arguably deadlier arsenal including knees, elbows, and kicks may face similar questions, especially if the average Muay Thai boxer increases in weight in the future. The questions may be raised especially by foreign practitioners of Muay Thai, particularly those from Europe and the United States, where practitioners from these areas generally weigh more than the average Thai Muay Thai fighter and are more used to stringent controls and safety concerns and standards.

³⁰ DK Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 224

³¹ BBC News (Online), "Boxing" 24 September 1999. Available from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/medical_notes/363957.stm [2004, September 24]

³² BBC News (Online), "BMA Calls for Boxing Ban" 3 May 1998. Available from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/87267.stm [2004, September 24]

In June 1932, the political landscape of Siam was changed for ever. The political revolution, which was inspired by examples of the West was to profoundly affect Muay Thai, amongst many other aspects of Thai society, in the years that followed. Nevertheless, it can be said that most of the significant safety and cosmetic reforms introduced to modernise Muay Thai had occurred by this time. The period was, by no means, the end of the evolution, since reforms were still required and indeed, continued to be introduced even after this period. However, it can be argued that the reforms introduced during this period were in response to the development of the martial art from a purely military role to a popular spectator sport that became increasingly available and accessible to the general public, rather than an effort to consciously shape the sport into a symbol of a new nation and the aspirations of its people, as it was to become.



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2.3 Nationalisation, 1939-1959

*'The sport of Muay Thai arose with the nation of Thailand, and is a sport for true Thais.'*³³

- Posawat

On 23 June 1939, Siam was officially renamed Thailand, thereby formally establishing the Thai claim to the political, economic, and social life of the kingdom whilst at the same time shaking off the last vestiges of the aristocratic past as well as Chinese, or according to the perception of those in power at the time, foreign, economic domination. As the modern comment above indicates, the nationalistic obsession was to have far reaching effects on many aspects of Thai society, including Muay Thai. Indeed, further strengthening the need for a name change, Vichit Vadhakarn had argued that the name 'Siam' had been invented by those early regional imperialists, the rulers of Angkor, and was later adopted by foreigners, namely the Chinese and later the Europeans.³⁴ Significantly, the day after the change was declared to be the new National Day as opposed to the old one which traditionally fell on the King's birthday. It was clear that a new regime with novel, if somewhat unoriginal, ideas was now running Thailand, but how would this pursuit of nationalism specifically affect Muay Thai?

Undoubtedly, the most prominent development was the wider use of the term 'Muay Thai'. Although the transition may have taken place amongst the lower classes prior to this period, the transformation of Siam into Thailand would necessarily have

³³ P. Vail, "The Hard Road to Bangkok: Boxing, Masculinity, and National Culture in Thailand", Paper presented at the 7th International Conference on Thai Studies, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, July, p. 7

³⁴ JA Stowe, Siam becomes Thailand: A Story of Intrigue, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1991), p. 122

encouraged, or rather completed, the development. Indeed, the change would have been in line with the policy of the Phibun government for Thais to reclaim their ‘rightful place’ (whatever that may be) in every sphere of society and the construction of the Thai identity, a process that had arguably begun during the reign of King Vajiravudh.³⁵ The development could be construed as an effort by the central government to place a Thai claim on a traditional activity as a part of its effort to reinforce the identity of the newly created Thailand, as well as to follow the ideas, notably fascism, that were ‘in vogue’ in the 1930s and 1940s amongst the developed European and Asian nations such as Italy, Germany, and especially Japan.

Indeed, the reinforcement and promotion of national identity was one of the most significant features of the government policies issued during this period. Although the forces of nationalism were already at work prior to 1939 in King Vajiravudh’s various campaigns, as can be seen in slogans such as ‘Nation, Religion, and King’ which was likely to have been derived from Tsar Nicholas I’s 1830s notion of *narodnost* or nationality principle (whose slogan of ‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality’ seems to be the prototype of the Thai slogan)³⁶ the 1930s introduced a new brand of nationalism. This new nationalistic phase was particularly inspired by German, Italian, and especially Japanese ideology and examples³⁷ that ultimately culminated in the conclusion of an alliance with Japan, which lasted more or less as long as the Phibun government and its new brand of ultimately misguided nationalist policies. The most prominent examples of

³⁵ Chaiyan Rajchagool, The Rise and Fall of the Thai Absolute Monarchy, (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994), p. 150

³⁶ P Neville, Russia: The USSR, the CIS and the Independent States, (London: Phoenix Paperback, 2000), p. 123

³⁷ BJ Terwiel, “Thai Nationalism and Identity: Popular themes of the 1930s”, in CJ Reynolds (ed.), National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand Today, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002), p. 109

the influence of these ideas are the series of edicts known as *ratthaniyom* or Cultural Mandates. Most of these were concerned with defining and controlling what can or should and should not be considered ‘Thai’, even though some measures that were introduced, such as Western dress were most definitely not Thai in origin. Of most relevance to the development of Muay Thai is the fourth Cultural Mandate that was issued on 2 August 1939 which discouraged the use of terms such as northern Thais, north-eastern Thais, southern Thais, and Islamic Thais in favour of merely ‘the Thais’.³⁸ In effect, the cultural mandate was an attempt to homogenise the traditionally diverse culture of Siam into a new, homogenous, monolithic ‘Thai’ entity. The inevitable result was of course, the end of naming the distinctly different regional styles of Muay Thai such as Chaya and Lopburi by name; they were now all Thai by default.

Furthermore, to examine the effect of the government’s policy in the construction and reinforcement of Thai identity during this period, one needs to only examine the evolution of the story of Nai Khanom Thom, the Ayutthaya boxing hero of the late eighteenth century. Controversially, in some quarters, the story is regarded as truth, whilst in academic circles, the story is more of a myth. In either case, the story is a keystone in the mythologisation of Muay Thai as something quintessentially Thai. Regarding this matter, the account of the chronicles is sufficiently succinct to allow it to be quoted here in full:

During the time the King of Ava stayed in Yangon and was in the royal ceremony of placing the golden umbrella on top of the Shwedagon pagoda, a Burmese minister

³⁸ CJ Reynolds, “Introduction: National Identity and its Defenders”, in CJ Reynolds (ed.), National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand Today, p. 5

informed him that there existed a skilful Thai boxer in the city. The King then ordered the minister to bring him in. Nai Khanomtom, a talented boxer of the old capital, then, was brought before the King of Myanmar who immediately pressed an order to arrange a Burmese boxer to fight against the Thai counterpart before his eyes. Nai Khanomtom knocked him down before the end of the first round. As a result, 9-10 boxers were quickly sent into the ring one after another just to be defeated by the Thai boxer. The King of Ava with great surprise put his hand against his chest and had words of compliment that the Thais had the power of harm all over their body. Nai Khanomtom, without any weapon in his hand, could possibly knock down 9 to 10 challengers. The reason that the kingdom had been lost to the enemy was due to the fact that their rulers were not good. If they proved to be good the Thai would not lose Ayudhya. He then gave Nai Khanomtom some rewards.³⁹

Despite the brevity of the original account, in subsequent years, the story has been substantially expanded to include even a tragic childhood as can be seen from the historical novel written by Khomtuan Khan-Thanu, a SEA Write winning author upon which a recent television series was based. In a further heroic and nationalistic link, the Olympic hero, Somluck Kamsingh also starred as the hero in one television version of the story. The story is directly concerned with shoring up nationalistic values. The story of Nai Khanom Thom effectively contributes to this process by glorifying the achievement of the Thais (despite the momentous loss of Ayutthaya), whilst at the same time establishing the superiority of Thai cultural assets in the face of overwhelming odds. It

³⁹ Sunait Chutintaranond, "Historical Writings, Historical Novels and Period Movies and Dramas: An Observation Concerning Myanmar in Thai Perception and Understanding" in *Asian Review*, 1998, pp. 12-13

also reinforces the Thai identity by defining ‘the other,’ (in this case the Burmese) an element that is necessary for a separate identity to fully emerge.

Furthermore, there is also an anti-royal sentiment, where the story dwells on the failure of the Ayutthaya leadership, although this is a little ambiguous. It can thus be argued that the story of Nai Khanom Thom, regardless of whether the events really occurred or not, was effectively a parable of Thai survival in the face of overwhelming odds both in the past, such as the Burmese, the French and the British, as well as in the present. In effect, the main revelations of the story are, in the narrow sense, the superiority of Muay Thai as a martial art in the region, where this has the wider implication that the people practicing it are also superior. It was in this way that Muay Thai became a brick in the nationalist myth.

Nevertheless, despite the effects of the nationalist agenda of the Thai government in the 1930s, developments in Muay Thai that were seen during the preceding periods continued during this period. Indeed, during the Second World War, four more arenas were established, namely the Ta Prachan, Pattanagarn, Sri Ayutthaya, and Thonburi arenas.⁴⁰ The majority of these arenas were set up in movie theatres on the demand of Muay Thai fans who wished to see fights despite the fierce fighting raging in the Pacific.⁴¹ Furthermore, after the war, two of the most famous surviving arenas were established, firstly the Ratchadamnoen stadium which opened to great commercial success in December 1945. The stadium employed the first version of the rules set up by the Physical Education Department (1937) and its commercial success highlighted the

⁴⁰ LD Junlakan, *Muay Thai: A Living Legacy*, p. 58

⁴¹ Yutthana Wongbandu, *Amateur Boxing Rules and Regulations*, p. 4

fact that boxers could now feasibly box professionally rather than part-time.

Consequently, numerous Muay Thai training camps were set up, such as the Muay Tiem Kamhaeng, Sorn Daeng, Sorn Prasert, Wong Tay Wej, and Yontrakij camps. The management of the stadium was also instrumental in the drafting of the first set of professional rules that was promulgated in 1955, as well as being the first to televise a match on the now non-existent Channel 4.⁴² The commercial success of Rachadamnoen arguably spurred the Royal Thai Army to establish the world famous Lumpini stadium, which was opened and run by the Royal Thai Army in 1956 during a period of immense economic progress and military dominance of both national politics as well as the economy.

However, unlike the previous two periods, the most significant ‘reform’ that was enacted during this period involved ideology rather than concerns regarding safety or malpractice. The most prominent example of this is the issue of women’s involvement in the sport. Many recent studies have been conducted that suggests that currently, the practice of Muay Thai, particularly in the rural areas, continue to be one of the methods for males within the community to display their masculinity to the full.⁴³ Although the more recent ‘progress’ of women in the sport has met with some controversy, it is arguable that they are technically making a *re-entry* into the sport, since the involvement of women in Muay Thai already has a precedent in Thai history.

It can be clearly seen from historical sources that women have been involved in Muay for at least as far back as the late eighteenth century, and perhaps even further

⁴² Yutthana Wongbandu, Amateur Boxing Rules and Regulations, p. 4

⁴³ Pattana Kitiarsa, Lives of Hunting Dogs, p. 30

back. This fact is indicated to a certain extent in Tachard's account that has already been presented, but far more conclusive evidence can be found in an anonymous poem written in tribute to King Taksin (late 1767-1782), where verse 66 runs:

สุดสิ้นอาวุธสิ้น	ขบวนมือ
มวยหมัดจัดพจัญมือ	หมัดหมั่น
มวยหญิงยิ่งหยิ่งกา	ชายเปรียบเสมอแฮ
เทียนคาดคู่ถันคั่น	แปลกเบื่องขบวนชาย ฯ

*Next to men fighting with arms were
A series of boxing matches using fists with powerful punches.
Women boxers gave a fighting demonstration that was comparable to that of men.
They had a robe tied to their breasts differentiating them from men boxers.⁴⁴*

The poem seems to indicate that women were active participants in the sport and their performances were equal to the men, at least during the reign of King Taksin. The only difference between the men and women being the attire they wore during the contest. Although she and others may have embellished her account of her role at court, Anna Leonowens also noted the popularity of boxing at ceremonies as well as the fact that both sexes took part in the sport as well as in the training of young children in the art.⁴⁵

Thus it can be concluded that the entrance of women into the sport in more recent times should be regarded more as a re-entry rather than a new foray by the female sex into a previously unexplored male frontier. It is worth noting, however, that the practice may not be so widespread since the women involved were likely to have been trained in

⁴⁴ Anonymous, "A Poem in Tribute to King Taksin of Thonburi" in Anthology of ASEAN Literatures, Volume 3A, (Bangkok: Amarin Printing, 2000) p. 53

⁴⁵ Anna Leonowens, The English Governess at the Siamese Court, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 171

the martial art for a specific purpose rather than as a pastime, as is the case today. As such they may have been a part of an elite and rather exceptional group of women rather than reflecting a wide-spread practice.

Furthermore, sceptics could argue that in the wartime climate of King Taksin's reign that the involvement of women was a necessary rather than a normal measure that had to be adopted in the face of Burmese aggression. Indeed, considering the disastrous loss of manpower following the loss of Ayutthaya, the introduction of such a measure would have been logical considering the fact that according to one account the Burmese had taken 'more than thirty thousand prisoners of war',⁴⁶ including the royal family of Ayutthaya. Nevertheless, there is evidence that some members of the female population must have been given some form of martial training. The first are the stories of the Thai heroines, notably Queen Suriyothai, where her involvement in battle suggests a certain degree of military training. Logically speaking, it is inconceivable for queens, never mind ordinary women, to be allowed to mount elephants and enter a battle without at least a small degree of martial training. The second, and perhaps more relevant to the general population, is the existence of the *taharn ying* or female soldiers evidenced in the Three Seals Law Code that were employed to guard the women's quarters in the king's palace, a task that would necessarily have entailed some degree of training in more forceful methods of persuasion.

Thus, if the participation of women in Muay Thai occurred during the past, when did they make their exit? It is arguable that the process began during the first period of nationalism during the reign of King Rama VI. It has been argued that the economic

⁴⁶ Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, Our Wars with the Burmese: Thai Burmese Conflict, 1539-1767, (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2001), p. 356

modernisation that occurred during this period brought with it 'bourgeois patterns of sex-segregated work'⁴⁷ that was inextricably linked to the notion of nationalism, particularly the more virulent types. However, some would argue that even before this period of modernisation under western influence Thai society was already overwhelmingly patriarchal. Examples include the prominent fact that, with the exception of extremely short regencies, the monarchs of Siam as well as the members of their administration have all been male. Laws promulgated during the Bangkok period also indicate that married women had a particularly low status in society, being the property of their husbands.

Yet, the male-dominated nature of the administrative and legal structures does not seem to be totally reflected in the reality observed by foreigners in the nineteenth century. It seems strange that many of the observers who had travelled to other Asian countries such as China, Japan, or India noted the relatively privileged position of women in Southeast Asia. Bishop Brigandet, a Roman Catholic who lived for forty years in the Shan states at the beginning of the nineteenth century, for example, wrote that:

In Burmah and Siam... women are not so universally confined in the interior of their houses, without the remotest chance of ever appearing in public. They are seen circulating freely in the streets; they preside at the *comptoir*, and hold an almost exclusive possession of the bazaars... They may be said to be men's companions, and not their slaves. They are active, industrious, and by their labours and exertions, contribute their full share towards the maintenance of the family... In spite of all that has been said by

⁴⁷ PA Jackson and NM Cook (ed.), Genders & Sexualities in Modern Thailand, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), p. 158

superficial observers, I feel convinced that manners are less corrupted in those countries where women enjoy liberty, than in those where they are buried alive by a despotic custom in the grave of an opprobrious slavery.⁴⁸

In addition, Bishop Pallegoix had similar observations:

In general, Siamese women are treated well by their husbands. They have a lot to say in running the family. They are honoured, enjoy great freedom and are not relegated to dark rooms like in China. They appear in public, go to the market, engage in business, pay and receive visits, walk to temples in the city and countryside, and have nothing to fear from the jealousy of their husband. There are no unfortunate ones among them except those who fall into slavery.⁴⁹

Bishop Pallegoix also wrote in the same passage that although the husband has the right to sell his wife, he may not sell one that has brought a dowry. Furthermore, if he contracts debts without his wife's knowledge or consent, he may not sell her to free himself. It is a different story if both the husband and the wife assented to the loan, in which case the husband can sell his wife.⁵⁰ Thus, it can be concluded that despite the seemingly inferior position of women in the household, in reality it was well within the rights of the wife to simply refuse to consent to dubious loans. Furthermore, Sir John

⁴⁸ Kamala Tiyanich, The Buddha in the Jungle, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003), pp. 338-340

⁴⁹ Pallegoix, Description of the Thai Kingdom, p. 117

⁵⁰ Pallegoix, Description of the Thai Kingdom, p. 117

Bowring also observed that ‘On the whole, the condition of women is better in Siam than in most Oriental countries.’⁵¹

One must therefore presume that either patriarchy did not play as large a role in reality as it does in the government administration, or that the contemporary observers were mistaken in their perceptions of the condition of Thai women. Whatever was the case, it was clear that up to the reign of Rama VI, women were definitely employed in the defence of the harem. It was arguably the women involved in this line of work that were most likely to be involved in boxing matches and training as described in the Poem in tribute to King Taksin and the account by Anna Leonowens. The adoption of monogamy by Rama VI, therefore, effectively made these women redundant since there was no longer a need for a palace harem. Thus, although the adoption of monogamy went some way in improving the lives of married women, it also closed down a career path for women. The *taharn ying* were no longer required, and therefore it was no longer necessary for women to have military training at all. It is therefore not surprising to see the disappearance of women’s participation in Muay Thai.

In addition, the modernisation of the Thai administration and economy may also have contributed to the changes in the role of women. In 1822, John Crawford observed that heavy labour ‘fall naturally to their [the women’s] share, and are the necessary consequence of corvée labour.’⁵² However, the replacement of labour obligations by a taxation system, as well as the large influx of Chinese immigrants meant that women no longer had to bear the burden of heavy labour by themselves since men were no longer obliged to give their labour to the state. Consequently, the increased number of men

⁵¹ Kamala Tiyavanich, *The Buddha in the Jungle*, p. 340

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 340-341

freed from state obligations arguably resulted in the position of women being re-evaluated in society.

The development does not necessarily mean that women now had to concern themselves with only matters of the household. However, the reinforcement of existing patriarchal values (which had previously been unofficially suspended by necessity rather than policy) by subsequent regimes, most notably that of Field Marshal Phibunsonkhram greatly contributed to the construction of a more rigid gender identity. The contributions of Phibun are particularly significant since the measures were part of the regime's wider effort to construct a national identity, an identity that has penetrated deeply into Thai culture. Slogans such as 'Men are the fences of the nation, and women are its flowers' are reminiscent of contemporary fascist ideas in the west, and their success in penetrating and reinforcing the until-then dormant patriarchal ideas in the population would certainly explain why the women who began to fight again in the 1970s were condemned as 'un-Thai.' Furthermore, the fact that the Phibun regime was successful in regulating even the dress of women, a policy ridiculed to great effect in historical novels such as Kukrit Pramoj's *Si Phandin*,⁵³ did not help matters.

It can thus be seen that the modernisation of the state had a direct impact on women's role in Muay Thai. The almost simultaneous and subsequent modernisation of society along western lines only had the effect of reinforcing existing patriarchal values that had previously lain dormant out of necessity. Undoubtedly, the rough *taharn ying* of the past would no longer fit the new picture of the ideal Thai woman with her European

⁵³ Kukrit Pramoj and Tulachandra (trans.), *The Four Reigns*, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003), pp. 592-3

style of dress and hair. In the meantime, the physical development of Muay Thai that occurred in the previous periods continued, underlining even further its popularity as a sport.



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CHAPTER 3 COMMERCIALISATION

*'It appears more and more that both boxers and audience do not consider the "sport" an important aspect.'*¹

- Khru Ratkae Muangsurin

Although developments that can be said to be the effect of westernisation continued beyond 1959, these were arguably not as significant in the face of the single factor that was to have a dramatic transformation effect on the sport: commercialisation. Although in the 1920s and 1930s, the money-making potential of Muay Thai matches was evident where a match was held to raise money for various causes including the purchase of a battleship, the economic, social, and technological conditions at the time did not allow the full economic benefits of the sport to fully manifest itself as it did from the 1960s onwards. These economic and social conditions include the undeveloped nature of the Thai economy, especially in contrast to the impressive economic developments in the 1960s. The disadvantageous economic conditions in the 1920s were further exacerbated by the disastrous world-wide depression that followed the 1929 Wall Street Crash, as well as by the World War that followed only a decade later. As a result of these terrible economic conditions, a large middle class population was unable to emerge. Furthermore, the exclusion of the Chinese, who were natural entrepreneurs in various sectors of the economy, only served to make the economic as well as the social situation worse. Indeed, in the previous century Rama V had acknowledged the importance and place of the Chinese with regards to the Siamese economy:

¹ M. Mackenzie, "The Martial Art of Muay Thai in Thai Society", p. 231

It has always been my policy that the Chinese in Siam should have the same opportunities for labour and for profits as are possessed by my own country-men. I regard them not as foreigners but as one of the component parts of the kingdom and sharing in its prosperity and advancement.²

The reversal of this open-minded policy by Rama VI as well as by the policies of the subsequent fascist regime only served to undermine further the shaky economic situation of Thailand.

However, following the conclusion of World War II and the emergence of a new global political and economic landscape of capitalism versus communism, the social and economic conditions of Thailand underwent a radical change. Undoubtedly, the major reason for this was the fact that Thailand, especially under the regimes of dictators such as Phibun, Sarit, and Thanom, placed itself firmly in the camp of the capitalists, or perhaps more specifically, the United States. The governments of the United States too, especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s, were openly enthusiastic in their support of virtually any foreign regimes that could oppose the growth of communism regardless of their despicability, Thailand under a dictatorship being one of many that easily qualified. The economic consequence of this relationship was an unprecedented amount of financial aid being injected into the Thai economy, as well as the military, which were arguably inseparable entities during this period.

² Chaiyan Rajchagool, The Rise and Fall of the Thai Absolute Monarchy, p. 152

By the end of the century, there would be over 60,000 full-time Muay Thai boxers fighting in arenas up and down the country.³ According to the Tourist authority of Thailand, nowadays most major urban centres in the country will also have one or more permanent Muay Thai stadium,⁴ not to mention the countless temporary, 'seasonal' rings that are still erected for various festivals and auspicious occasions. The very existence of the latter confirms Muay Thai's continuing role as a commemorative device in the modern era. Only a fraction of the boxers that fight in these arenas would make it to the lucrative stadiums of Bangkok, but even those who do not reach the capital still manage to augment their income through fights on the temple festival circuits or in the permanent arenas of upcountry urban centres.

In the meantime the unprecedented economic development also encouraged the growth of a long-standing contributor to the illegal economy, namely gambling. It is probably sufficient to say at this point that gambling was definitely a part of Thai society in the past and indeed in the present, and it is this element of Thai society in particular that would play a major role in the next developmental phase of Muay Thai.

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³ J. Cummings, *Muay Thai*, p. 18

⁴ Tourist Authority of Thailand (Online). Outdoor Activities: Muay Thai. Available from: http://www.tourismthailand.org/adv_act.php?module=special_act&tile=special_act03 [2004, September 24]

3.1 Aristocratic Patronage, Pre-1932

*Gambling, in a bewildering variety of forms, both legal and illegal, is very much a part of the daily life of all levels of Thai society, from the wealthy socialites to the poorest of the trishaw drivers.*⁵

- William Klausner

The two major developments occurred during the 1920s where gambling with regards to Muay Thai became legal whilst it also became increasingly possible for boxers to box professionally rather than part-time as previously. The newly introduced safety measures effectively allowed more people to participate in the sport, whilst more matches could be held in the same places to please audiences without the same high risk of death and major injuries as previously. Although the rapid economic development of the country combined with this new regularity of matches arguably created the conditions that allowed Muay Thai to become a viable full-time profession, undoubtedly major problems remained in this profession, even to the present day. Nevertheless even if the conditions were by no means perfect, they were a significant improvement from the past where matches were irregular, unsafe, and unregulated.

It should also be noted that the patronage of the aristocracy, in particular the Chakri monarchs, played a key role in the popularisation of the sport especially in its early stages. Rama I provided monetary rewards for the boxer who beat the French challengers in a match. At the Marupongsiripat funeral, the Muay display was arranged for Rama V who had a keen interest in the sport. Indeed, the key establishment of the Suan Gularb arena came under the auspices of Rama VI. Overseas-educated nobles too, played a key role in sports development, where for example it was Prince Viboon

⁵ WJ Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, (Bangkok: Siam Society, 2000), p. 351

Sawatwang Sawatkun who introduced western-style boxing to Thailand after being educated in England. The popularity of Muay Thai, both under the patronage of the nobility as well as in the general population would play a key role in its successful commercialisation.

A prominent feature of the development of Muay Thai in the face of unprecedented economic development was its association with gambling. Undoubtedly, the 1927 Gambling Act that legalised competitive sports such as boxing and wrestling facilitated the development. It is probably a futile endeavour for a historian to try and find the origin of gambling in Thai society. Suffice it to say that gambling was evidently practiced as early as the nineteenth century (most likely even earlier), where Bishop Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix observed the practice with cock-fighting, and an unexpected connection with Muay Thai:⁶

The Thai possess some kind of passion for cock fights despite the King prohibition's and the fine inflicted on delinquents. When there is a cockfight somewhere, the crowd goes there eagerly. Some bet against others in such a way that everybody has an interest in the game which often ends in quarrels so that, after having seen the cocks fight, they end up seeing fighting between men.

Carl Bock, a Norwegian naturalist and travel-writer who was also a resident in Bangkok in the late nineteenth century noted the existence of gambling dens in the

⁶ Pallegoix, Description of the Thai Kingdom, p. 123

capital.⁷ The fact that these practices were so prominent as to come to the attention of foreign residents seem to underline the openness and popularity of the pastime, whilst more modern observers, from foreigners to the prime minister, still note that gambling continues to be a popular and profitable (at least for some) albeit somewhat undesirable pastime amongst the Thais.

Yet, despite its popularity, it can be imagined that, with a few exceptions, the revenues generated from gambling during this period was still relatively small, especially in comparison with the figures of today. The small revenue can be attributed to the fact that there were still relatively few permanent arenas in operation, the professional boxer was still a fledgling entity, and the economic atmosphere was not as conducive to gambling profits as it is now. The financial structure is also simple, at least in comparison with what was to come, with the nobility or the local powerful figures channelling monetary rewards directly to the local organisers as well as victorious boxers, as well as a small amount to those who lost. Outside this structure were the gamblers who, as will be seen, will be instrumental in the popularisation as well as commercialisation of the sport.

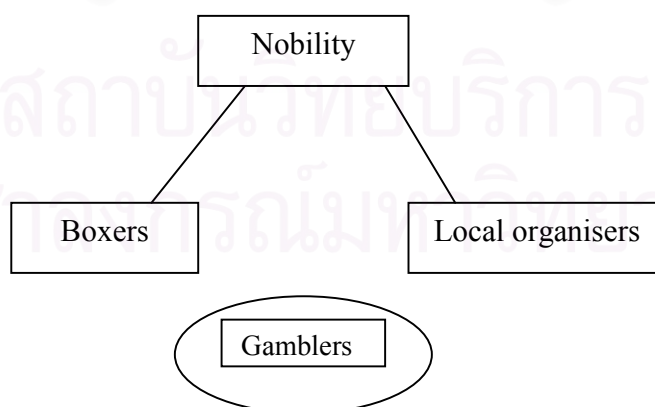


Diagram 3.1.1: Early Financial structure of Muay.

⁷ M. Smithies, *Old Bangkok*, (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 65-6

3.2 Over Table, Under Table, 1932-1980

*'Gambling is part of Thai culture. Two raindrops slipping down a window-pane are fair game for a bet.'*⁸

- Gerry Ohmert

As mentioned in the earlier chapters, the improved economic conditions that emerged after the Second World War as well as the continuing popularity of Muay Thai, in spite of the war allowed new permanent arenas to be set up, including the Rachadamnoen stadium. However, by this point, Muay Thai was now seen by the state as well as the private sector as a profitable business. Indeed, the construction of the Rachadamnoen stadium was sponsored by the government who saw Muay Thai as a lucrative source of income, where the stadium had to pay tax before it allotted the money to the boxers,⁹ around 17 per cent in the 1970s. At the same time, permanent stadiums were also being constructed up and down the country. It has to be emphasised, however, that there are two aspects to the development that occurred during this period: those that occurred over the table (i.e. legal) and those that occurred under the table (i.e. illegal).

Although gambling is officially condemned by the Thai government, nevertheless it has made concessions to the prevailing realities. While casino-related games such as baccarat, slot machines, and hi-lo dice were and are strictly prohibited under the 1935 Gambling Act, the authorities are more lenient towards other games, such as Muay Thai. For a small licence fee, temporary licenses can be issued by the police to allow gambling. However, the location and time are strictly delineated whilst the license itself lasts a

⁸ G. Ohmert, "Lumpinee Fight Night", in Muay Thai: Thai Championship Boxing, v. 1, (Bangkok: Artasia Press, 1990), p. 27

⁹ Yutthana Wongbandu, Amateur Boxing Rules and Regulations, p. 4

maximum of one day, usually less.¹⁰ Although the regulations make it quite difficult for organisers of other games, the license seems to have been tailored to Muay Thai, whose matches do not generally last for twenty-four hours and take place in quite specific locations.

Of particular interest to the state was the revenue generated ‘under the table’, particularly from gambling. The development throughout Thai society was encouraged by the state through its facilitation of gambling in other areas, such as the state lottery, which continued to be more widely practiced than ever. An indicator of this is the fact that in 1977 alone, 2,300 million baht (approximately 115 million dollars) were spent by Thais on lottery tickets.¹¹ It is worth noting too that the lottery during this period was regarded to be particularly corrupt (and those in charge of it particularly powerful), as indicated by the fact that one of the buildings most frequently targeted during Thailand’s political revolution during this period was the State Lottery Bureau. The figure, of course, does not account for the illegal or underground version of the lottery that was also prevalent during this period. The question has to be asked however, as to where did Thailand and its population suddenly get these massive and unprecedented amounts of money to spend on gambling?

The improved economic condition can be partly attributed to the dramatic injection of financial aid, both economic and military, into the Thai economy by the US government in its efforts to stem the rise of communism in the developing world. The

¹⁰ Pasuk Phongpaichit, Sungsidh Piriyarangsarn, and Nualnoi Treerat, Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja: Thailand’s Illegal Economy and Public Policy, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), p. 216

¹¹ WJ Klausner, Reflections on Thai Culture, p. 352

chart and table below outlines the amount of economic and military aid rendered by the US government during the period 1958-1967, the height of the Indochina war:¹²

Year	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967
Economic	25.9	58.9	25.9	24.3	47.6	21.9	15.1	41.4	60.4	37
Military	19.7	18	24.7	49	88	71.8	35.2	30.8	42.3	59

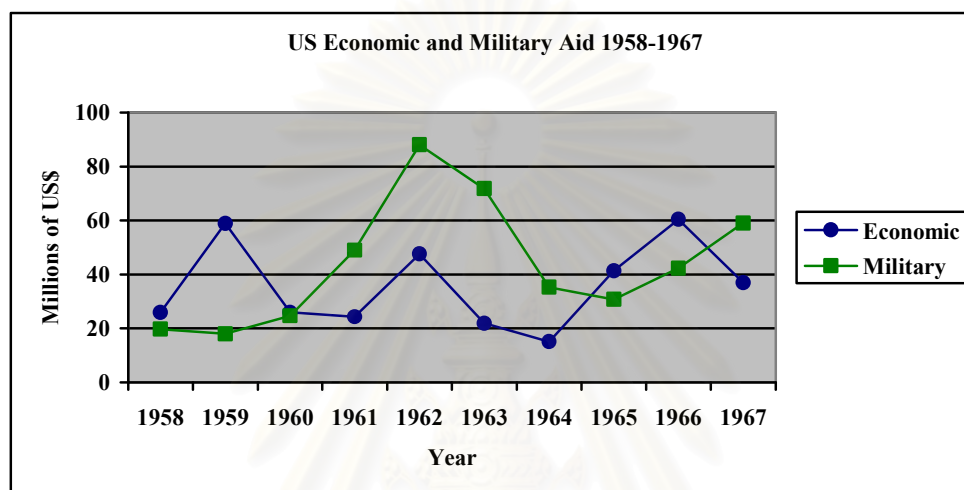


Table and Chart 3.2.1: US Economic and Military Aid, 1958-1967

As can be seen from the economic data presented above, the amount was massive and rose greatly in the late 1950s to the early 1960s. However, it should be remembered during this period that the military and economic aid arguably ended up at the same destination, namely the pockets of the military leaders and their followers, who had absolutely no accountability to the public which they claimed to serve. Indeed, the overwhelming US concern at the time was to prevent the ‘Domino Theory’ from taking effect in Southeast Asia, no matter the cost in terms of human lives, democracy, and finance. In the words of S. Jayanama, the US during this period sought to create ‘An

¹² DK Wyatt, Thailand, p. 284

Empire *for* Liberty rather than an Empire *of* Liberty.¹³ Nevertheless, corruption aside, the amount that was left after the siphoning was still sufficient for the country to become significantly more developed than previously, in terms of both infrastructure and the economy.

Furthermore the economic data above clearly illustrates that the military aid rendered by the US to Thailand at times significantly outstripped the economic aid (1960-1964 and 1967), a not too subtle indicator of where US interests and priorities really were during this period. The data reflects the interest of the US at the time the aid was given, where its involvement in the Indochinese theatre of war was the overwhelming concern. The military aid was arguably used to consolidate the position of an ‘acceptable’ regime to the US, which invariably meant a sum that could be siphoned off by the dictator in power. Sarit Thanarat, for example managed to siphon off an estimated 2,874,009,794 baht, not including other assets, according to some accounts.¹⁴ The level of corruption perpetrated was unprecedented in Thai society and it is also telling that the extent of the corruption was not revealed until after the death of Sarit, indicating the dictator’s solid grip on power while he was alive.

From the appearance of the economic data, as well as the political situation at the time, it is therefore not surprising to find that the military was heavily involved in all aspects of society, particularly its commercial side, Muay Thai included. Indeed, Muay Thai would be quite a natural domain for the military to enter and promote. The most

¹³ S. Jayanama, “‘Stacking the Chips’: Rethinking the Origins of Thai-US Special Relationship”, in Santi Pracha Dhamma: Essays in honour of the late Puey Ungphakorn, (Bangkok: Santi Pracha Dhamma Insitute, 2001), p. 221

¹⁴ Thak Chaloemtiarana, Thailand: The Politics of Despotism, (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 1979), p. 337

significant example of this is the establishment of the now famous Lumpini Stadium. The stadium was notably established by the military, under the supervision of Praphas Charusathien, who was to become one of the infamous ‘Three Tyrants’ that were driven from office in the October 1973 revolution. Nevertheless, despite Praphas’s ultimate demise, the stadium continues to be run by the Royal Thai Army to this day. The heady combination of Muay Thai, the military, government, and economic development arguably provided an atmosphere where gamblers could thrive. Although Lumpini stadium serves ostensibly to promote Muay Thai amongst the populace, the concrete advantage of the stadium for the military is undoubtedly economic rather than cultural in nature.

Indeed, the network of financial interests has expanded well beyond the aristocratic patronage as in the past, as can be seen in the diagram below:

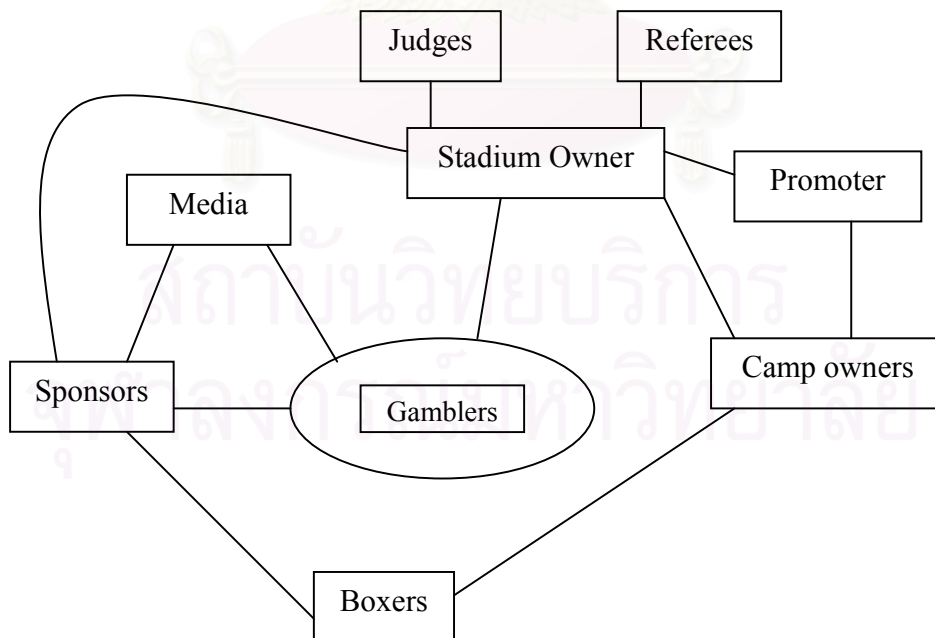


Diagram 3.2.1: The Muay Thai Financial network

Overall, the benefits gained and given are mutual in nature. There is also a small sub-network between the stadium owner, the promoter, the camp owners, and the boxers. The key to this sub-network is arguably the promoter since the element acts as a liaison between the camp owners and the stadium owner. Boxers only become more important if their skills are widely recognised, but this could only occur if both they and the promoter have been successful in the past. For the stadium owners, it is especially important to have well-known boxers in the ring in order to attract a large crowd and thus a correspondingly large income from ticket sales. Thus, it is the practice of the larger arenas to have multiple promoters. For example, Lumpini and Rachadamnoen stadium currently have 13 promoters operating for them. It should also be noted that judges and referees are not independent and are usually under the pay of the stadium owners. The relationship is significant since if unscrupulous stadium owners intended to cheat, they could easily pressure or offer incentives to the officials under their pay to skew their results.

The camp owners, meanwhile, can improve their reputation (since it is the usual practice of boxers to adopt the name of the camp when they step into the ring) thereby increasing their ability to attract new talents. In addition, they also get a cut from the winnings of their boxers, 40 per cent in the 1970s.¹⁵ Yet, unless they have already built up their own reputation and connections with the stadium owners, they also have to rely on promoters to promote and establish their boxers.

¹⁵ Potsawat Saengsawang, Development of Thai Boxing, p. 135

However, the key to the wider part of the financial web is undoubtedly the gamblers. Due to the popularity of gambling in practically all spheres of Thai life, gamblers form the crux of an elaborate financial structure that manages Muay Thai, and it is questionable whether Muay Thai would be able to survive without them. Arguably, gamblers provide the main source of income for several key sectors of the Muay Thai industry. First, is of course the stadium owner and the promoter, who derive a major part of their income from ticket sales to both sports fans as well as gamblers. In order to gain a better idea of how much money is involved during this period, a match held in February 1951 netted Rachadamnoen stadium 25,975 baht in ticket sales.¹⁶ Following the expansion of the stadium's capacity, the amount had doubled by the end of the year to 57,740 baht in December,¹⁷ and by July of 1952, the stadium was able to net a record 221,750 baht from one match alone.¹⁸ Bearing in mind the effects of inflation, these figures would amount to millions in today's money. The lucrative nature of the enterprise as well as Muay Thai's popularity (for whatever reason be it gambling or art) naturally led to the construction of permanent stadiums across the country. By 1979, most urban centres had a Muay Thai stadium, and there were at least 56 stadiums across the country.¹⁹

Second is the media, particularly the printed media such as boxing magazines and newspapers that provide accurate analyses of boxers' past performances and possible factors that may affect future performances, such as weight advantages. Needless to say, the information provided would be quite valuable to gamblers, since they can be used to

¹⁶ Potsawat Saengsawang, Development of Thai Boxing, p. 115

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 115

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 118

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 133-4

even the odds for the informed gambler. Thus the media profits from both bona fide fans of Muay Thai as well as gamblers. Furthermore, their coverage can also boost the boxers' profile, and thus make them more valuable to promoters as well as the camp owners, which in turn make them more financially attractive overall.

Third are the sponsors, who are able to advertise their products on both the media as well as at the actual match itself, either through advertisement boards on the ringside (which benefits the stadium owner) or by presenting their products to boxers as gifts, prizes, or both. In this way, gamblers are effectively exposed to the marketed products. There is also a possible link between boxers and gamblers, where the latter could turn the odds in their favour by offering incentives for boxers to throw their fights. Furthermore, the lines between gamblers and the other elements can also be blurred, where camp owners as well as other groups, for example, can and do often augment their income through betting on the fighters they are confident of. In this regard they certainly have an advantage and it could be said that this practice is the equivalent of a more uncertain version of 'insider trading' in Muay Thai finance.

Another significant development during this period is the growing number of tourists that began to visit the country at the end of this period. Following the humiliating defeat of US forces in Vietnam, the US government effectively withdrew its troops as well as support for Thailand. Most important, is the withdrawal of financial support that had effectively succoured the Thai dictatorships for so long. Indeed, it was arguably the withdrawal of financial support that resulted in the loss of popular support by the Thanom-Prapas dictatorship that was ultimately toppled by the disgruntled

middle class in 1973. The resulting brief democratic regime was thus left with the problem of dealing with the lacklustre economy without substantial external support. However, it can be seen that to some extent, this lack of US support was somewhat mitigated by the rising number of tourists arriving throughout this period. Exact figures can be found in the appendix, but the chart below displays the approximate values and trend during this period:²⁰

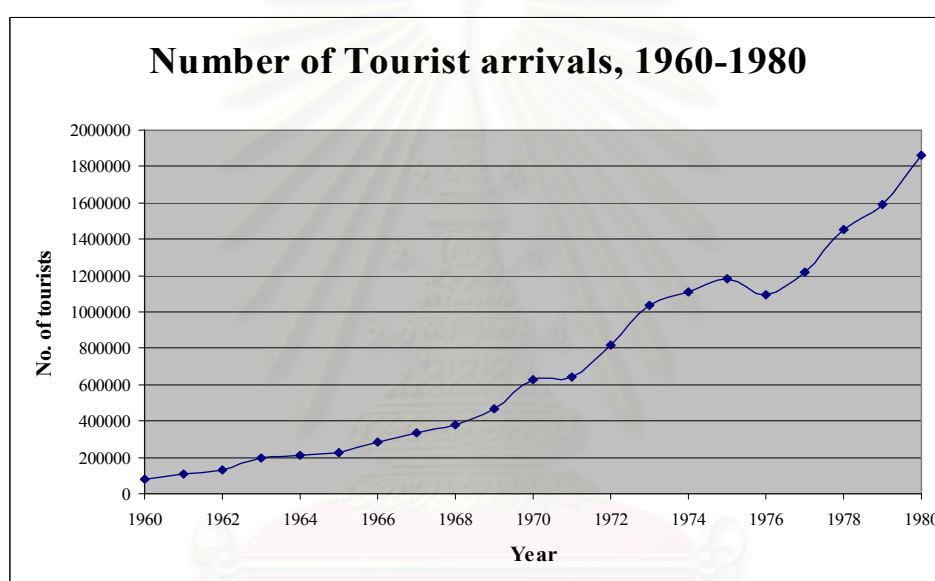


Chart 3.2.2: Number of Tourist arrivals, 1960-1980

It can clearly be seen that there was a steady rise in the number of tourists from 1960 onwards, with the few interruptions attributable to political instability. As a footnote in Muay Thai history, it is noteworthy that one of the tourists that arrived during this period was Osamu Noguchi, a Japanese entrepreneur with an interest in western boxing. His exposure to Muay Thai eventually led to the development of kickboxing which was effectively a fusion of several styles of martial arts, including Muay Thai

²⁰ Alpha Research, *Pocket Thailand in Figures 2003*, p. 176

although its major influence was arguably Karate. The art became popular and commercially successful and in 1964, Noguchi was even bold enough to return to Thailand with a group of Japanese kickboxers to challenge Muay Thai fighters²¹ and set up a boxing gym, the first in Thailand that was owned by a foreigner.²² It should also be noted that special fights between Muay Thai fighters and practitioners of other martial arts such as Kung Fu and Karate (April 1977 in Los Angeles) were also held during this period.

From then on, kickboxing was introduced into Japan and Europe and grew in popularity, whilst at the same time sowing the misconception that Muay Thai and kickboxing are the same thing or even that Muay Thai developed from kickboxing. The misunderstanding was exacerbated by the fact that, flushed with his success, in 1972 Noguchi maintained that he was the inventor of kickboxing, without elaborating on the fact that his main influence was karate rather than Muay Thai. The results were death threats being directed towards Noguchi and midnight attacks on his gym, leading to his leaving of the country shortly thereafter. Nevertheless, death threats aside, the success of kickboxing in the western world seems to be a positive augur for the success of its inspirer, Muay Thai, in the future.

Significantly, the threats to Noguchi indicate the extent to which Muay Thai had seeped into the public imagination as a symbol of their national identity. It is noteworthy in the volatile political atmosphere embodied in the polarisation of the left and right political wings, Muay Thai was seen especially by the right wing as something particularly Thai (despite the profound influence of westernisation already demonstrated).

²¹ LD Junlakan, *Muay Thai: A Living Legacy*, p. 45

²² M. Mackenzie, "The Martial Art of Muay Thai in Thai Society", p. 221

Thus, it can be seen that right wing newspapers such as *Dao Siam* had prominent and regular coverage of Muay Thai results nestling amongst their incendiary commentaries, whilst it is rarer for left-wing papers such as *Prachatipatai* to have such coverage integrated into the main paper.²³ Of course, during this period, there were also other papers and magazines, some of which still exist, such as *Thai Rath*, *Daily News*, *Siam Rath*, *Ban Muang*, *The Ring*, *Sport*, and many others that had daily coverage of the movement in Muay Thai.

The most significant development however, was undoubtedly technological in nature. Prior to the invention of the television, the radio allowed broadcasts of match results across the country. The result was that gamblers no longer had to travel in person to stadiums in order to gamble. Instead, as long as they had a radio and good reception, they could gamble anywhere in the country. However, a far more dramatic development can be seen in the introduction of television. For the first time during this period, Muay Thai matches were broadcasted on television, first in black and white and then in full colour. Indeed, one of the reasons for the re-entry of women into Muay Thai was the television broadcast of the Ali-Norton bout in 1973 that exposed Thailand once again to the possibilities of female boxing. Since then, and to this day, Muay Thai has occupied a permanent slot on the weekend programmes of several television stations as well as on weekdays.

The development had two major implications. The first is that for the first time, matches could actually be seen by a far wider audience, far away from the locale where

²³ Author's personal observation while conducting research for The Making of a Political Crisis: 6 October 1976 and the Thai Newspapers, Bachelor's Thesis, Faculty of History, Oxford University.

the fights are taking place, thereby making boxers better known than at any period previously. The fact that matches could be visually seen not only made it more attractive than the radio, but it also opened new opportunities for gambling. For example, gamblers could now more easily bet on the first move of a match, whilst the more cautious amongst them would be able to ascertain the conditions of the boxers for themselves rather than rely on commentators as previously. It has been established earlier in the thesis that Muay Thai matches were sometimes an ‘advertisement’ or expression of wealth and power by the affluent, but during this period, the role of Muay Thai changed to that of showing sponsors. Politically speaking, Peter Vail has also argued that politicians can and do use Muay Thai matches as political and public forums.²⁴ Moreover, for the first time, it was possible to gamble on a Muay Thai match from virtually anywhere in the country.

The second implication of the development of television broadcasting in Thailand effectively allowed businesses to capitalise on the popularity of Muay Thai amongst the Thai population by being allowed to show their logos on the ringside or broadcast advertisements of their products during the breaks between the rounds. Aside from gambling, this aspect of Muay Thai is probably the most lucrative ‘over table’ aspect of its commercialisation. The products that stood to gain were those that were boxing related, such as boxing oil, soap, and in more recent years, energy drinks such as M-150, Red Bull, and Carabao Daeng. Thus stadiums that were able to obtain regular television coverage or field popular or talented boxers could become exceedingly wealthy. The businesses involved also often contribute to the prize money and other goods awarded to

²⁴ See P. Vail, “Ethics and Politics in the Art of Thai Boxing”, (Paper presented at Miyazaki International College, Miyazaki, 2000).

boxers involved in the fight, although how much of this actually gets to the boxers is another question altogether. The result, essentially, was that the bourgeois as well as the media were integrated into the elaborate financial structure of Muay Thai involving the stadium, the promoter, the sponsor (politicians, businessmen, and the aristocracy), the camp owner, the boxer, and the referee.²⁵ It can also be argued that the businesses were replacing and perhaps even surpassing the traditional aristocratic patronage that had so long supported Muay Thai in the preceding centuries. It could be said therefore, that the middle class had effectively mounted a bourgeois revolution in Muay Thai, where it had effectively utilised the favourable economic climate of the 1960s as the launch pad.



²⁵ Somkiat Yangsheunsawat, Marketing of Thai Boxing on Television, Master's Thesis, Department of Communication Arts, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University, 1994.

3.3 Tourism and Globalisation, 1980-2003

*'Promoting vice is never my idea...But Thai society undeniably still indulges in gambling.'*²⁶

- Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra

The final period of commercialisation brings the thesis to the contemporary period of Thailand and its conclusion. In many ways the period continues the trend established in the post-1950 period, where the main difference is in extent rather than substance. Gambling continues to exist, as evident to anyone visiting a Muay Thai match at both the 'famous' stadiums such as Ratchadamnoen and Lumpini as well as the less glamorous venues in the rural temple fairs and urban centres up and down Thailand. However, amongst the professional promoters of the sport the negative effects of gambling on the sport were beginning to become more and more evident. Besides the expected social problems caused by excessive gambling, the practice began to have a direct and negative effect on the sport where the traditional, spiritual qualities of the sport are becoming marginalised by economic concerns.

An example of this is the perception of the *wai khru* (literally 'paying homage to the teacher') ceremonial dance that occurs at the beginning of all matches. Traditionally, this ceremony was seen as a gesture of thanks to the boxer's parents, teachers, and monarch as well as an invocation of protection from the guardian spirit of the ring. It is said that if a boxer could perfectly execute a *wai khru*, his fighting techniques would also be equally perfect. In the past, there was also an animistic element where sometimes boxers would recite *katha* (spells) as they danced to intimidate their opponents. The

²⁶ *The Nation*, 2 June 2004

more scientifically inclined suggest that the elaborate stretching movements of the boxers provide an excellent warm-up before the actual match.

However, increasingly, the dance is often utilised as a method to determine which boxer will win the match as indicated in the fact that it can be noticed that the frantic betting really begins once the dance is over. Furthermore, traditionalists bemoan the new attitude of ‘winners take all’ where previously the prowess of both the winner and loser was valued. The development has partially been encouraged by the cash incentives offered by sponsoring companies where it is not uncommon to hear announcers proclaiming a 50,000 baht prize for a knock-out by a specific type of kick or a few thousand baht for a knockout in the first few rounds.

The earnings during the first part of this period up to the 1997 economic crisis also mirrored the stunning economic growth seen at this time. According to an interview with Ajarn Yutthana Wongbanku who has been involved in the Muay Thai business as well as being responsible for writing Muay Thai regulations, the *ka tua* (literally ‘body price’ or the appearance fee of the boxers) ranged from 800 baht for beginners and up to 120,000 baht per match for the more famous fighters. Following the economic crisis, the amount has dropped to a more modest 60,000 baht.²⁷ It should be noted that the amount depends on the ranking of fighters, where they can be classified in the Beginner, C, B, and A categories, with A being the highest. Beyond these categories are what could be dubbed the ‘Superstars’ of Muay Thai, such as Pol Prapadang, Sook Prasarthinpimai, Choochai Prakanchai, Prayuth Udomsak, Adul Srisothorn, Apidej Sithiran, Vicharnnoi Porntawee, Poot Lor Lek, Poodpardnoi Worawoot, and Dieselnoi Chor Thanasukarn.

²⁷ Interview with Yutthana Wongbandu, Department of Sports Development, 14 September, 2004

These are usually those who were listed at the top of various rankings based on factor such as regional, weight category, or even generational. The result is that sometimes, these fighters can fetch a greater *ka tua* per fight. For example, Wicharnnoi Porntwee had a *ka tua* of between 200,000-300,000 baht.²⁸

Stadium owners who manage to procure the appearance of famous and skilful boxers also managed to earn an even larger income. Although stadium owners are loath to give up more accurate details, nowadays it is generally supposed that stadiums who managed to obtain fighters in the A category can expect to earn around 800,000-1,200,000 baht per match from ticket sales. Those who obtain B class fighters can earn up to 600,000 baht, and C class fights usually draw in 400,000 baht. Even at the beginner level, stadium owners can expect to earn up to 200,000 baht per match.

At the same time, the illegal economy continues to grow. According to Pasuk Phongpaichit's study of the illegal economy, even conservative figures are incredibly and disturbingly large. During the period 1993-5, it is estimated that the illegal economy generated around 286-457 thousand million baht of value-added per year, which is equivalent to 8-13 per cent of the GNP.²⁹ A further telling statistic is that it is estimated that there are currently 2 million young people addicted to gambling.³⁰ The lucrative nature of the enterprise has also tempted numerous people to cheat. Although this is heavily condemned by everyone involved in the sport, its occurrence does not surprise many considering the stakes involved. One of the most prominent and recent cases

²⁸ Potsawat Saengsawang, Development of Thai Boxing, p. 135

²⁹ Pasuk Phongpaichit et al, Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja: Thailand's Illegal Economy and Public Policy, p. 7

³⁰ *Bangkok Post*, 2 June 2004

occurred in 2003 where a renowned boxer of Lumpini stadium was found guilty of throwing a fight.³¹

The main development during this period was the impact that tourism was beginning to have on the sport. Although Thailand had played host to tourists since the 1960s, the figures during this period are nothing compared to the figures in the 1990s, which continued to increase steadily:

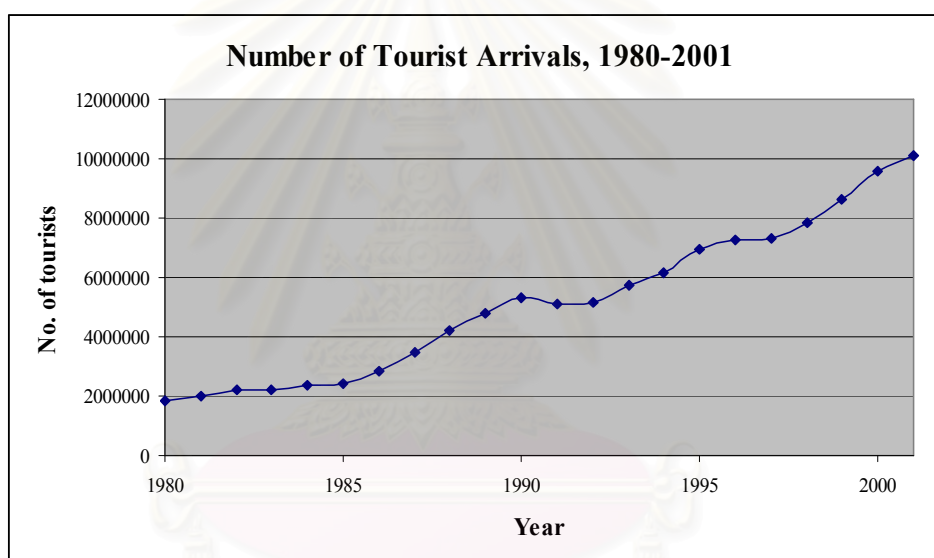


Chart 3.3.1: Number of Tourist arrivals, 1980-2001

As can be seen from the chart above, the number of tourists increased steadily with a few minor hiccups from a mere 1,858,801 in 1980 to more than 10,000,000 in 2001. It can also be seen that the length of stay also increased significantly during this

³¹ *Bangkok Post*, 7 August 2003

period, thereby further increasing the probability that more people would have more time to visit Muay Thai matches:³²

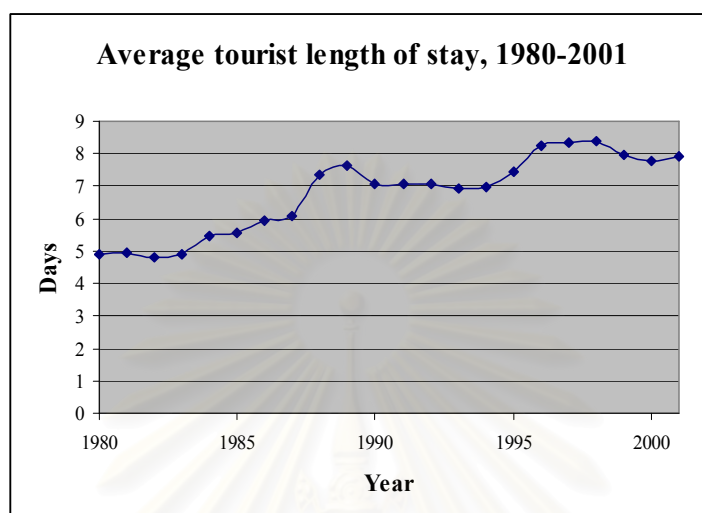


Chart 3.3.2: Average tourist length of stay, 1980-2001

Although there are no accurate statistics as to how many of these millions of tourists actually visited a Muay Thai match, it can be concluded from the statistics given above that, by the rules of probability as well as the mention of Muay Thai in guidebooks popular amongst the more adventurous tourists that the numbers increased during this period. The subsequent success of Muay Thai internationally seems to back this assumption.

According to Ajarn Yutthana, it was observed that there are three main groups of foreigners involved in Muay Thai. The first is from the lower middle class, whose general aspiration is the same as that of most Muay Thai boxers, i.e. the hope of economic advancement through fame in the ring. The second is from the middle to upper middle class, where these are generally educated and are quick to grasp concepts and willing to concentrate on perfecting techniques. The third form a general audience, but it

³² Alpha Research, *Pocket Thailand in Figures 2003*, p. 176

has been observed that the number has somewhat dwindled in recent years due to an increased awareness in the sport's heavy association with gambling as well as the general negative images of Muay Thai as a violent and sport for the lower class.

It was also during this period that women's participation in the sport became more accepted, although in the 1970s the female matches were condemned as 'unladylike', even by ardent supporters of the Women's Liberation Movement, claiming that it was against Thai tradition, culture, and moreover degrades women.³³ Despite the historical evidence pointing to their involvement, there is still a strong taboo against the participation of women. These taboos focus on the idea that a woman's presence on the ring is supposedly unclean and inauspicious. Relics and other sacred objects such as amulets may have their 'charge' drained by the presence of females, whilst otherwise benevolent spirits may suddenly turn vengeful, resulting in an unusual number of bad accidents and even deaths in the ring. Thus, the re-entry of women into the sport has been widely hailed as a mark of progress within the sport. Indeed, Thai newspapers, particularly the English-language dailies frequently cover such intrepid forays by women. One such is the case of the versatile Nipaporn Pangoun, a sixteen year-old female boxer, student, and Luk Thung singer.³⁴ Nipaporn is particularly remarkable since, at the time of writing (2004), she is the national champion in the pin-weight (45kg) class and has recently launched a successful music album.

³³ H. Stockman, Muay Thai: The Art of Siamese Unarmed Combat, (Duang Kamol, Bangkok, 1979), p. 20

³⁴ *The Nation*, 29 March, 2004



Figure 3.3.1: Nipaporn Pangoun in action.

On the other hand, the involvement of women have also introduced an element of scandal where some, especially amongst the more conservative observers and participants, may feel that they violate an ancient taboo where women were not allowed on the ring.³⁵ Some organisers have side-stepped this sensitive issue altogether by constructing separate rings for male and female bouts. Negative feelings regarding the participation of women are not helped by negative publicity, one of the more recent involving two female boxers fighting topless in a bar ring (see Figure 7).³⁶

In 1995, Muay Thai was introduced as a demonstration sports in the 18th SEA Games in Chiang Mai as part of the campaign to sell the sport as a tourist attraction as well as an international commodity with the ultimate objective of its admittance as an Olympic Sport. In effect, it was an effort to globalise the sport. In this regards, perhaps it is not too surprising to find that Thailand has a combined Ministry of Sports and

³⁵ LD Junlakan, *Muay Thai: A Living Legacy*, p. 92

³⁶ *Thai Rath*, 2 November, 2003

Tourism. The international profile of Muay Thai has also been helped by the success of films such as *Ong Bak* and the *Beautiful Boxer*. *Ong Bak* not only showcased spectacular stunts but it also amply demonstrated the capabilities of Muay Boran. *Beautiful Boxer*, on the other hand, tackled a more difficult topic but was arguably part of a wider campaign to market the success story of a champion as well as an icon of Muay Thai.



Figure 3.3.2: In an unorthodox demonstration of Muay Thai that was universally condemned, two topless women fight in a bar ring.

However, in some cases, the publicity was not always positive or tasteful, as can be seen with the case of the Orang-utan fights at Safari World.

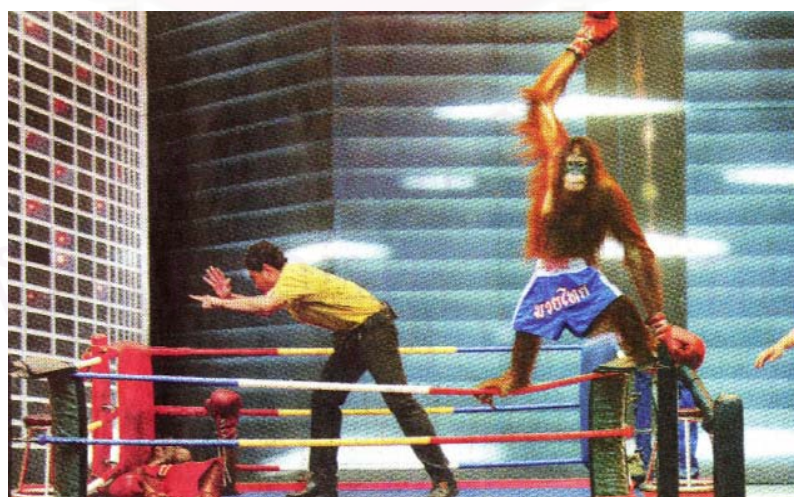


Figure 3.3.3: *Questionable Publicity?* Muay Thai Orang-utan style at Safari World. The practice has recently come under fire from animal rights group, and at the time of writing has been suspended.

Nevertheless, the campaign is already meeting with some success as Muay Thai gyms are being opened in countries such as Japan, the Netherlands, France, England, the US, Russia, and Brazil. The cause of Muay Thai was helped by the fact that the government came to realise the potential that the sport had in the international market (both economically as well as in nationalistic terms), and thus began to set up various supporting organisations. The most significant, with regards to the promotion of international Muay Thai is the International Amateur Muay Thai Federation (IAMTF), which was set up in 1995 with the cooperation of the Ministry of Education. The federation has an international office in Manchester, England and by 1998 had registered 54 countries. It also organises annual world championships, the first one being held in 1995. However, the organisations have been plagued by largely petty and childish infighting.³⁷ One controversy even led to a Russian attaining the title of international champion since, due to some wrangling in the regulations, the Thai contingent was not allowed to attend. This has been mitigated somewhat by the fact that in 2004, the IAMTF merged with the International Federation of Muaythai Association, creating the World Muay Thai Federation. It remains to be seen how effective the new organisation will be.

³⁷ *Bangkok Post*, 9 April, 2004



Figure 3.3.4: *Muay Thai goes International.* A Polish soldier receives lessons from Thai soldiers stationed in Iraq.

It should be noted here that there are two perspectives that need to be considered with regards to the globalisation of Muay Thai: the Thai perspective and the foreign perspective. Although superficially, the ultimate Thai objective in promoting Muay Thai is intertwined with the promotion of Thailand's rich cultural heritage, the question has to be asked as to what does Thailand gain from this campaign? The answer seems to lie again in the economic benefits. The campaign, if successful, would necessarily raise the international profile of Thailand and thus ultimately generate additional revenue either through the increase of normal tourists, tourists who wish to view the cultural display, train and open their own gym in their own country. The effort has not always been undertaken by foreigners however since some of the more famous Thai gyms have managed to establish successful overseas branches. An example of this is the Fairtex

gym, which in the past has sent numerous fighters to the stadiums of Bangkok, now has a branch in the San Francisco bay area.³⁸

On the other hand, although monetary considerations also play some part in the foreign perspective, their ultimate objective is mastery of a different martial art rather than to become financially rich through it. Furthermore, martial arts that had been considered 'exotic' in previous decades, such as Judo, Karate, and even Tae Kwon Do, have now been largely accepted into the mainstream. Consequently, the 'newer' martial arts such as Aikido, Capoeira, and even Muay Thai have become increasingly sought after and are popular alternatives for those not content with being in the mainstream.

The problems occur when the two worlds of interests clash, and could lead to a catastrophe should the monetary concerns of the state and other official organisations outweigh the cultural aspect. A possible scenario is one that has just occurred to Tae Kwon Do where its chief promoter for its successful admittance to the Olympics has just been arrested for corruption charges. The case was a serious embarrassment to the Korean Tae Kwon Do organisation.

Furthermore it can be seen that the tradition of bestowing large rewards on boxers who performed exceptional feats seems to continue to this day, although this is more evident in Muay Sakon than in Muay Thai, as can be seen in the cases of Somluck Khamsing and Wijarn Ponlid after their Olympic victories at Atlanta in 1996 and Sydney in 2000. Both reportedly received more than 20 million baht each in cash and in kind and both boxers, who had been working in government agencies, were subsequently

³⁸ Fairtex San Francisco (Online). Available from: <http://www.fairtex.com/home.asp> [2004, September 24]

promoted.³⁹ Somluck who had been a petty officer in the navy before Atlanta was promoted to a full officer rank whilst Wijarn was promoted to the position of police captain. Thus it can be seen that although the gold medals were the first ones ever for Thailand, the practice of rewarding and promoting athletes was not by any means new, but the continuation of a long tradition. The only difference between the Muay Thai boxers of the nineteenth century and the current Olympic heroes is arguably in the scale of the rewards they received.

However, one has to bear in mind the fact that the rewards heavily depend on the society's definition of what constitutes an 'exceptional feat'. For example, Payao Pooltharat who as well as being an Olympic medallist in the 1976 Montreal Olympics also achieved the remarkable feat of being a champion boxer in both the amateur and professional boxing worlds in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, despite these impressive achievements he ended up destitute and in ill health by his 40s. In 1996, he told a reporter:

Twenty years ago, there were only a few people giving me incentives after I won an Olympic medal...After the Olympics, I won many medals from many international boxing competitions. I had never got money or any other rewards.⁴⁰

The misfortune of Payao can arguably be attributed to the political situation in Thailand where 1976, and indeed the period after, was too full of turbulence for the Thai people to pay attention to anything else. Furthermore, in comparison to the cases of

³⁹ Pattana Kitiarsa, *Lives of Hunting Dogs*, p. 4

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7

Somluck and Wijarn, the Thai situation was also arguably radically different. In the case of Somluck, the economic bubble in Thailand was at its height where the gold medal served to confirm Thailand's place as an ascending contender in the world. Wijarn's victory, on the other hand, occurred during a time when Thailand's confidence had been badly wounded but was recovering. In this case, the medal served as an excellent national morale booster as well as confirming that, despite its economic woes, Thailand could still at least remain an Olympic contender.

Domestically, Muay Thai also has support from two organisations: the World Muay Thai Council (WMTA), which promotes excellence in Muay Thai and organises the ranking system. The second organisation is the Amateur Muay Thai Association of Thailand (AMTAT), which is royally endorsed and has been involved in the promotion of matches since the 1960s. However, a significant problem, particularly with the amateur organisation is that they have been accused of catering more to the needs of the middle class rather than the genuine needs of the poor, who make up the majority of the population of professional boxers.

Indeed, recent studies into this aspect of Muay Thai have highlighted the role of Muay Thai as one of the ways for the rural poor to escape poverty.⁴¹ Thus there was outrage in 1999 when well-intentioned senators tried to introduce a 'Professional Boxing Bill' requiring boxers to be a minimum age of 18 (later changed to 15). Ostensibly, the bill was designed to protect children from the dangers of boxing. However, the legislators did not take into account the difficult fact that the rural poor depend, in part, on revenues generated by the child boxers, even if the amount seems to be meagre to the

⁴¹ P. Vail, "The Hard Road to Bangkok: Boxing, Masculinity, and National Culture in Thailand"

wealthy senators. Indeed, it is often observed that most professional boxers are from the rural poor, particularly from the northeast, where economic concerns are paramount. Problems also extend to adult life, where boxers face the possibility of being exploited by camp owners. For example, before the passage of the 1999 Boxing Act, camp owners can effectively cheat their boxers by underreporting the purse. The camp owner can then proceed to pay the standard fifty percent of the reduced purse, whilst pocketing the difference.

Furthermore, there are still not enough organisations to support Muay Thai, some boxing camps are unregistered, boxers have inadequate incomes, and some venues are uncovered. There is also a lack of welfare for the disabled, most of the existing support coming from NGOs rather than the government, despite the fact that they have heavily utilised Muay Thai in their marketing campaigns. Although, to be fair to the government, there have been efforts to tackle these problems, in the form of the 1999 Boxing Act. The law is significant in that apart from setting up a Boxing Sports Fund (Article 52) as well as providing insurance and medical provisions before and during matches (Article 14), it also imposed severe penalties on malpractices. For example, camp owners can no longer cheat boxers of their earnings, where according to Article 15 boxers must now get not less than fifty per cent of their earnings. Those who don't comply will face up to three years in prison, a 60,000 baht fine or both.

Furthermore, practices such as offering bribes to boxers, judges, and referees (Articles 48-51) can now lead to five years in prison, a 100,000 baht fine or both. A particularly heavy onus is placed on the referees and judges, where they can face up to ten years in prison and a 200,000 baht fine or both if they are caught accepting bribes. Of

course, the problem with these measures is that the only way these laws can be enforced is if the culprits are caught. Although the law significantly improves the condition of boxers, there are some who suggest that the new and beneficial provisions are still little understood by the people involved in the business.⁴² Nonetheless, it could be argued that the latest effort to tackle the darker side of the Muay Thai business was in line with the Chuan government's as well as the 1997 Constitution's agenda of promoting transparency and 'good governance.'

The successful internationalisation of Muay Thai is also indicated in the latest media to become available to the general population: the World Wide Web or the Internet. A search on 'Muay Thai' on Google, the popular search engine, currently elicits 172,000 hits. The results indicate that the term 'Muay Thai' is becoming increasingly popular in the on-line community, especially in the light that a search on 'Thai Boxing' elicited only 113,000 hits whilst 'Thai kickboxing' only received a paltry 17,000 hits. It would be impossible to list and review all of them here, but it can be said that these websites cover practically everything regarding the practice of Muay Thai, both at home and abroad, from the latest news from Rachadamnoen to the latest match results from Las Vegas. Nevertheless, the on-line presence of Muay Thai is still small compared to other martial arts. A search on 'Karate' on the same search engine for example, managed to generate 3,250,000 hits, whilst 'Judo' got 2,660,000 and 'Taekwondo' 1,320,000.

One website, Muaythai2000.com also had a list of Muay Thai camps across the country, giving the information in English, as well as other information in Thai ranging

⁴² Visuth Thippong, Study of State and Problems of Developing Muay Thai for Professionals, Master's Thesis, Department of Physical Education, Graduate School, 2001.

from the history of Muay Thai to a copy of the latest relevant law. From a quick analysis of the list of camps, it can be seen that the majority of Muay Thai camps are actually in the central area, with the largest concentration being in Bangkok. Second is the Northeast region, followed by the North, South, and East. In total, the site has 968 camps listed. However, it is arguable that these cater more towards the needs of foreigners and do not take into account the small, local village camps.

In the media of the real world, competition also remains fierce, with magazines, radios, newspapers, and television competing with each other to provide the best and most accurate coverage of pre-match statistics. One radio station, Sport Radio 99FM, has such regular reports and even has a dedicated hotline for those seeking advice. The very existence of these services indicates that Muay Thai had changed from being merely a sport to a regular and popular attraction for gamblers. It also highlights the media's key role in enabling gamblers to gamble anywhere in the country that can receive a radio or a television signal. As the technological infrastructure of the country becomes more developed, it is inevitable that the Internet will spur further competition in the media. The website Muaythai2000.com, for example, provides comprehensive and up to date results of matches,⁴³ thereby potentially facilitating the ability for people to gamble overseas. It has to be noted however, that there is no immediacy to this medium, where the information conveyed in this manner is largely static, unlike the live telecast of matches on television.

⁴³ Muay Thai 2000.com (Online). Available from: <http://www.muaythai2000.com> [2004, September 24]

Moreover, there are already questions being raised by practitioners both inside and outside Thailand about the negative effects of commercialisation, especially with regards to gambling, on the sport. The fact that the stakes have been raised by the involvement of the media as well as the elaborate financial network already described has certainly made matters difficult. An increasingly common complaint is that gambling is affecting the techniques being displayed in the ring. According to Christoph Delp, a foreign practitioner of Muay Thai:

The situation has changed. Now the audience in the stadiums and those watching on TV are mainly interested in betting. The focus is on who wins, not on a large variety of attractive techniques. The amount of money in bets has an influence on the competitors' purse, which is the reason why the competitors do not really attempt to show their technical skills but conduct very hard and energetic fights.⁴⁴

Many Thai practitioners and experts have the same opinion. Ajarn Kyet Sriyapi commented that the modern Muay Thai match 'looks like two dogs biting at each other' whilst Panya Kraitus despairs that 'Now Muay Thai is for gambling. Not for sport, not for culture'.⁴⁵ One old time boxer even goes so far as to conclude that: 'Compared to our days, Muay Thai has become soft. The boys don't really know how to fight any more.'⁴⁶ Informal conversations with others that had been involved in the business even described the process of professional Muay Thai as a 'war.' It is clear from these comments that Muay Thai is being adversely affected by the ravages of gambling.

⁴⁴ C. Delp, *Muay Thai: Advanced Thai Kickboxing Techniques*, (Frog, Singapore, 2004), pp. 3-4

⁴⁵ M. Mackenzie, "The Martial Art of Muay Thai in Thai Society", p. 222

⁴⁶ H. Stockman, *Muay Thai: The Art of Siamese Unarmed Combat*, p. 10

Thus, by the dawn of the twenty-first century, Muay Thai finds itself in a difficult dilemma. For the first time in its history, the martial art had evolved into a popular sport domestically, accompanied by vast and unprecedented revenues derived from gambling and advertisement rights. However at the same time, money had arguably corrupted the form and traditions of the sport and its focus on the perfect execution of techniques. Furthermore, the dark image of gambling and its inevitable companion, corruption, has clearly cast a dark shadow on the budding international future of the sport. Even if Muay Thai managed to be admitted as an Olympic sport, it will have a difficult time maintaining its position if it is perceived that there are problems in its home country. In the worst case scenario, it may even be dropped in the same way as sports such as rugby and Tug-of-war, which were Olympic events but were later dropped.



Figure 3.3.5: *Tug-of-war at the Olympics.* The sport was dropped after the 1920 Olympics, where Great Britain was the last nation to win at the sport.

Whilst Muay Thai grapples with these distinctively modern problems, it also has to tackle the difficulty of balancing its component elements. On the one hand, it is seen as the embodiment of Thai art and culture, but equally, it can also be seen as a sport and a

lucrative business opportunity. The two camps are in constant conflict; the traditionalists accusing the businessmen of corrupting the core traditions of the sport, whilst the innovators reply that the traditionalists are stifling the future of Muay Thai. To some extent, both camps are right. However, the ultimate fate of Muay Thai will essentially rely on how effectively the two opposing camps can be balanced and reconciled with each other.



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CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION

*'Muay Thai no longer brings Thai people together, but divides them into spectator and boxer, rich and poor.'*¹

- Michael Mackenzie

It can thus be seen that Muay Thai had developed from an indigenous self-defence martial art to a sophisticated albeit somewhat commercialised self-defence system. In the past two centuries, it was affected by western influences through reforms inspired by or taken directly from the west. Significantly, the changes that occurred in the sport seem to closely mirror the political, social and economic situations of the period. Thus, the importation of western-style safety measures echo the westernisation that was occurring throughout Thai society in the 1920s, the emphasis in one single Muay Thai reflected the nationalistic mood of the government in the late 1930s and 1940s, the growth in commercialisation in the 1960s and 1970s reflected the country's dramatic economic progress, whilst the era of globalisation and mass tourism in the 1990s and the first years of the new millennium is reflected in the effort of Muay Thai to go international. It can thus be concluded that Muay Thai was and is, in a way, a mirror to the developments of Thai society.

The roles that Muay Thai have played in Thai society during this time have essentially been shaped by these forces. In all, there are eight major roles that have been and, to a certain extent, continue to be played even today. The eight roles are: as a form of military training, a vehicle for social and economic advancement, a method of

¹ M. Mackenzie, "The Martial Art of Muay Thai in Thai Society", p. 233

commemoration, a national symbol, a popular domestic sport, a medium for gambling, a tourist attraction, and finally as an international sport.

In the past, especially in the period before the nineteenth century, the primary role of Muay Thai was military. Undoubtedly, it was an effective method for individuals or entire communities to defend themselves against foreign encroachment. However the role underwent a transformation by the Paknam incident of 1893 it was clear that the martial art had been outrun by advances in western military technology. Nevertheless, it was never rendered obsolete and continues to be an effective self-defence system, both in terms of individual physical fitness and self-defence as well as in its military applications when used in conjunction with more modern weapons.

The second role of Muay Thai, as a means for social and economic advancement, was relatively weak during the pre-1920 period. Although it was entirely possible for people to advance economically and socially during this period, the opportunities were severely limited whilst it was impossible to live on the income from Muay alone. However, following subsequent reforms in the 1920s, the sport became safe and viable enough for a greater part of the population to participate both at amateur as well as the professional levels. Indeed on an individual basis, this role has become so essential in some sectors of society that there was outcry when the senate tried to limit boxing to those above fifteen years of age where poor rural families would be denied a small yet important source of income. Furthermore, it has also become a vehicle where business sponsors can also expose and sell their products to the masses.

The third is its role of commemoration, which is closely linked to patronage. The example of the funeral of Marupongsiripat has already been cited in detail. In modern

terms, the practice still continues as can be seen at the numerous temple and city hall fairs across Thailand. However, the patrons have largely changed hands. Whereas previously, the aristocracy would provide the patronage, their place has now been mainly replaced by middle class boxing promoters and sponsors.

The fourth role of Muay Thai, as a national symbol, really began in earnest after the country's name change in 1939. Although the martial art had existed in the countries of South-east Asia in the preceding centuries, for the first time it was being claimed by a single country for its own. This claim was essentially a part of a process of a new state, including Thailand, to form and define its own identity. A further consequence was the homogenisation of the regional styles where these diverse styles were now labelled with a universal title of 'Thai'. With regards to Muay Thai, the claim has largely been successful as the Thai version of Muay has overshadowed the boxing of other countries in the region, such as Burma and Cambodia.

Although Muay Thai existed as a sport prior to the 1920s reform, its matches were insufficiently safe or regular to allow the majority of the population to participate. The changes introduced in the 1920s made matches more regular as well as safer. Consequently, the sport was able to develop its popularity amongst the population through its regularity, whilst the public itself was able to participate due to the increased safety measures. However, its increased popularity has also given rise to gambling as well as making it a tempting target for nationalist governments to exploit for ideological purposes.

The sixth role, as a vehicle for gambling, is possibly one of Muay Thai's most important. Its association with gambling, probably from the beginning, is both a blessing

and a curse. It is a blessing in that it maintains the sport's popularity among the gambling masses. At the same time, it has cast a dark shadow over the sport where concerns have been raised regarding its corrupting influence on both society as well as the form of the martial art itself.

Muay Thai has also played a small role as a tourist attraction. Tourism, as the statistics have shown, became an increasingly important source of revenue that grew significantly in the 1980s and 1990s. It has been noted in the introduction that the sport features in most, if not all, tourist guidebooks available today. However, it is arguable that Muay Thai is really a part of a greater package, where it essentially embodies what most Thais would think was quintessentially Thai.

Muay Thai's last and latest role stems from its continuing role as a tourist attraction. Although the process of globalisation had begun to a limited extent before 1997, the occurrence of the economic crisis led to an increased reliance on the revenues generated by tourism, which continued to be massive. The difference here is that the superficial interest of tourists has transformed into a real interest where foreigners have begun to take up the sport as well as export it to their home countries across the world. In Thailand itself, the state has set up various organisations to oversee the campaign and even to introduce Muay Thai as an Olympic sport. However, the success of these ventures will always be limited until Thailand manages to reconcile the many conflicts of interest that still exist among the official organisations as well as other groups, both domestic and foreign, that are involved in the sport.

None of the roles totally disappear, however. Instead, they tend to overlap each other. Thus the development of the eight roles over the period covered can be summarised in the table below:

Table 4.0.1: Illustration of the emergence and development of Muay Thai's role c.1920-2003

<i>Role</i>	<i>Pre-1920</i>	<i>1920-1939</i>	<i>1939-1959</i>	<i>1959-1980</i>	<i>1980-2003</i>
International Sport					
Tourist attraction					
Popular domestic sport					
National Symbol					
Vehicle for Gambling					
Vehicle for Social/Economic Advancement					
Commemoration					
Martial, Self-defence purposes					

<i>Strength of Role</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Weak</i>	<i>Emerging</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Full Role</i>
Legend					

The strongest role has undoubtedly been the martial aspect of the martial art, followed closely by its commemorative and economic role. Previously weak roles such as its role as a vehicle for gambling, can be seen to be developing in tandem with other roles, notably its increased popularity as a domestic sport. The more recent roles, as tourist attraction and international sport also display a similar synergy.

With the clear effects of westernisation, it seems that Muay Thai is stuck in a cultural limbo. The question has to be asked, is Muay Thai really Thai? On the one hand, its essential elements developed from indigenous antecedents, namely Muay Boran or Muay Kad Cheuk, whilst on the other many of its more recognisable modern aspects

were developed with significant inspiration from the west. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Muay Thai has and continues to be closely integrated with the national identity, where it can be argued that some part of this identity was constructed only recently and on a western ideological model. In the light of this, can it be said that Muay Thai actually isn't Thai? The answer to this question depends heavily on the definition of 'Thai', a word which many would have trouble defining. If 'Thai' is defined as something that stretches back through time back to before the Sukhothai period, then Muay Thai could not really stand amongst other Thai martial arts such as Krabi Krabong, which has not undergone such radical changes or been subject to as much influence from the west. However, if 'Thai' is defined as the national identity constructed by the nationalist regimes of the 1930s and 1940s and upheld thereafter by subsequent regimes, then Muay Thai is unmistakably Thai.

Yet is this mixed cultural status necessarily bad? Of course, Muay Thai would be very Siamese (even if the art could be claimed by a single country since it also exists in alternative forms in neighbouring countries; after all, who did Nai Khanom Thom fight?) if the gloves, the rings, and all the other modern accessories were to be removed. Such a measure would make fights much more exciting and far more dangerous (especially for the boxers!). It has to be remembered that it was the introduction of western-inspired measures that increased the safety of the boxers, and thus increased the feasibility of the boxing as a long-term profession. Furthermore, the introduction of accessories such as gloves allowed a greater number of the general population to participate in the sport. A return to 'true' Thai or Siamese roots would entail a return to a more dangerous as well as inaccessible time.

The question is, is there a way out of this cultural limbo? The solution to this question lies within the answer to another question: what does it take for a concept or an art to truly become a part of the national identity? Many aspects of Thai society that today are seen to be unquestionably Thai can be seen to be originally foreign concepts. The best example of this is Buddhism, which was originally a double import from India and Sri Lanka, albeit at least a thousand years ago. Yet, does it necessarily take a full millennium for a concept to become a part of the national cultural identity? Perhaps instead of interpreting culture in terms of academic semantics or along political lines, in the case of Muay Thai its integration into Thai culture should be based on its evolution and ultimate survival during the most traumatic periods of Thai society. These included the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 and the resurrection of Siam as a state, the colonial ambitions of the west in the nineteenth century, the ravages of a nationalist state, two World Wars, a world-wide economic depression, and the commercial booms and busts of the late twentieth century. Arguably, by its sheer ability to survive and maintain its popularity at the grassroots level throughout these destructive and traumatic periods, Muay Thai truly deserves a place in Thai culture, despite the undoubted significant impact of the west on the sport.

The final question that will be addressed by the thesis is, where does Muay Thai go from here? What role could it or should it play in the twenty first century? From the last chapter, it is clear that Muay Thai is on its way to greater commercialisation and, following the latest economic trend of globalisation, is well on its way to make its presence known beyond the borders of Thailand. The increasing involvement of foreign practitioners is a double edged sword, presenting both unprecedented opportunities and

perils. If trained properly, foreign boxers would essentially be cultural conduits who could spread the practice and traditions of Muay Thai across the world. However, the danger is that some foreigners may opt to completely ignore the spiritual aspect of Muay Thai, such as the *wai khru* in favour of the physical aspect, and this has caused some worry. Consequently, in such a case, even though the technique of the individual may be perfect, it will be devoid of its unique spirituality and thus be no better than a technique for bar brawling.

Arguably the ultimate symbol of global acceptance for a sport is a place in the Olympics. It can be anticipated that since the next Olympics (2008) is, as many people say, 'coming to Asia' that there will be a renewed campaign for Muay Thai to be admitted into the Olympic line-ups, perhaps as a demonstration sport. Once again, there are opportunities and pitfalls. The opportunities include the fact that Muay Thai may be given a high profile and may be given a boost internationally, similar to the 'Tae Kwon Do effect' after the Seoul Olympics. Where prior to its showcasing at the Olympics, the sport had been relatively obscure internationally, several years after the Olympics, it is relatively easy to find a Tae Kwon Do training gym even in small-town America, whilst distinguished figures here in Thailand, notably Her Majesty the Queen, bemoan the lack of interest of younger generations in practicing Muay Thai.² According to my interview with Ajarn Yutthana,³ the prevailing market forces stemming from the negative image associated with Muay Thai in the middle class are mainly to blame for this development. According to him, most middle class parents are quick to associate Muay Thai with the violence in the ring, the lower class, as well as all the negative implications of gambling.

² *The Nation*, 24 February, 2004

³ Interview with Yutthana Wongbandu, Department of Sports Development, 14 September, 2004.

In addition, he added that upon his branching out into the Tae-kwon-do business, his client list had increased tenfold. He attributed this to the safer image that Tae-kwon-do has, as well as its international reputation enhanced no doubt by its Olympic status. Moreover, in direct contrast to Muay Thai, parents were more willing to allow girls to participate, thereby doubling the potential market. In the light of these facts, it may be necessary for Muay Thai to be accepted internationally (i.e. at the Olympics) in order to trigger a renaissance at home, or at least among the middle class.

However, such a move would have a two-fold effect on the sport. The first is that decisions regarding international standards may now be taken away from the complete control of the Thai authorities, where international bodies may have a greater influence on the matter. This influence can range from additional safety measures as well as even the name of the sport. According to the Olympic charter, no Olympic sport can bear the name of a country,⁴ thus Muay Thai's name may have to be changed in order to be admitted. Would this affect the cultural values associated with the sport? What would be the Thai reaction if foreigners came to dominate the sport, as in the case of Tae Kwon Do? This is clearly a possibility as can be seen in the success of the French-born Murad Sari who became the first non-Thai to win a weight-class championship belt at Lumpini. This will clearly have to reconcile themselves to the foreigners may come to dominate certain divisions of Muay Thai should it be admitted into the Olympics. In effect, the emphasis would have to shift from the word 'Thai' to 'Muay.' Whether Thais will be able to do this is outside the scope of this thesis to find the answer to these questions, but perhaps time will ultimately tell.

⁴ LD Junlakan, *Muay Thai: A Living Legacy*, p. 48 and the *Olympic Charter*: http://multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en_report_122.pdf

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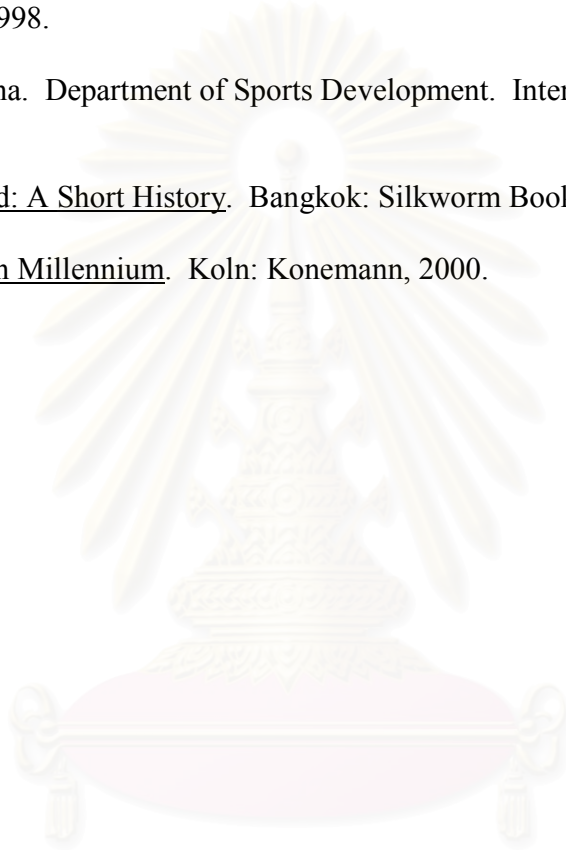
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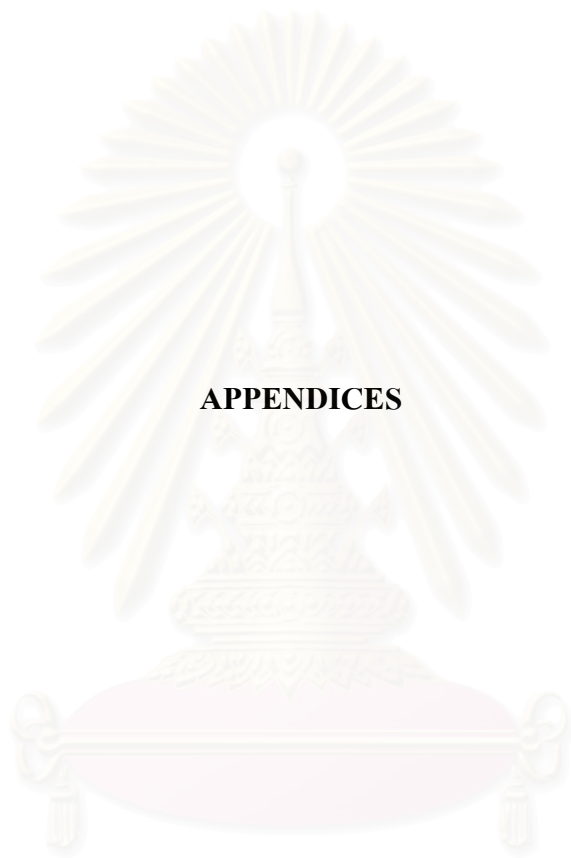
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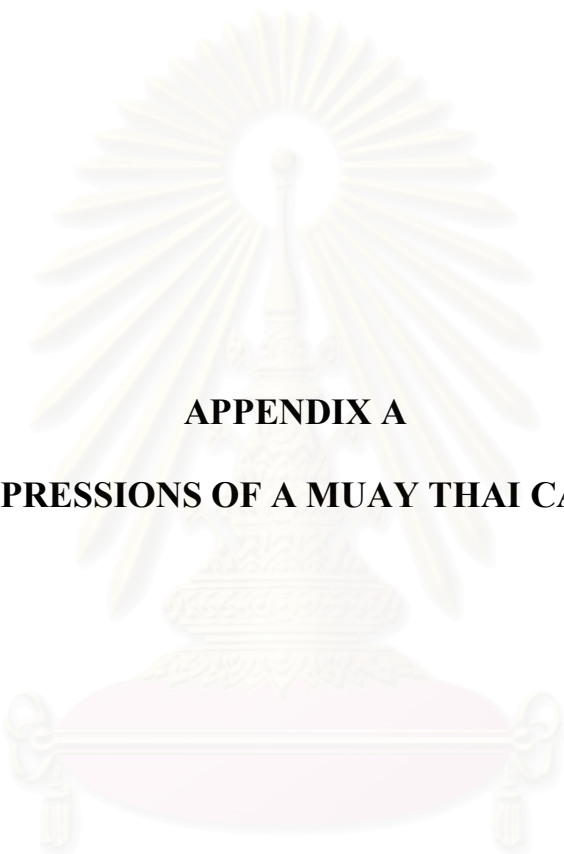


สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย



APPENDICES

สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย



APPENDIX A
IMPRESSIONS OF A MUAY THAI CAMP

สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

I stayed at a Muay Thai camp in the vicinity of Bangkok for a full week during May 2004, where I was able to observe the daily routines of boxers and the camp. My stay was followed up by regular visits for the next month or so. The camp has an international reputation, as well as a stadium attached to its training facilities. It has modest gym facilities as well as living quarters. Nevertheless, from my survey of the available literature by those who had gone through similar experiences, its basic facilities are probably considerably better than other camps outside Bangkok.

My intention was not to conduct fieldwork per se, since early direct interviews with the camp owner yielded little useful results. As I said in the introduction to the thesis, apart from an acknowledgement of gambling being a general problem for the sport, the camp owner was extremely reluctant to divulge specific details. It cannot be emphasised more that the gambling industry is something that cannot be meddled with easily and without consequence. Therefore, I decide to adopt a different and frankly more natural approach. I enrolled on a basic Muay Thai course, with the intention of both improving my own physical fitness as well as providing myself the opportunity to converse informally with any of the other students. There is a range of courses available, including those regarding instruction as well as judging and refereeing. For the Martial art itself, there are four levels.

I arrived on a Saturday afternoon and was invited to attend a Muay Thai match that was taking place in the same afternoon. The match was televised and there was a heavy police presence at the stadium. Notwithstanding the police presence, the crowds were still large and boisterous. All of the students at the camp are highly encouraged to attend so that they can become used to the atmosphere of a match as well as may be gain

a pointer or two on techniques. The matches are held and televised regularly on Saturday afternoons.

The next day's training began in earnest at seven in the morning. The usual schedule of training is two hours in the morning from 0700-0900hrs, although some opt to go for a run before training. This is followed by a long break for lunch. The second session begins again at 1500-1700hrs. In the second session, it was not unusual for the training to run into over time, some times for up to an hour. Furthermore, the training is usually followed by a stint at the gym before dinner. It is not unusual to find trainers having dinner together with the trainees, whilst on special occasions the camp owner may even treat everyone present for a meal outside the camp. The actual training sessions consists of warm-ups and stretches specifically designed to increase flexibility. It is usually followed by footwork and punching practice, bag work, and depending on the level of the trainee's proficiency, sparring with pads on the ring. The last half-hour of the afternoon session is sometimes used to train for the elaborate *wai khru*.

During the course of the training, I was able to observe international students at the camp. Most, if not all of them, were already proficient in one or more martial art prior to their arrival at the camp. In the course of my studies at the camp, there were two Korean nationals, one male and the other female, who were staying at the camp for six months as well as a few Chinese from Hong Kong. The camp has a strong connection with a gym in Hong Kong, and the expertise of its trainers is regularly exported there. Although the instructors have little grasp on English, sign language is usually sufficient to convey instructions as well as advice on specific techniques. Since it was the summer holidays, there were also many Thai children at the camp of all ages, ranging from eight

to fifteen years old. However, once school began again, the numbers were noticeably lower. In one case, there was a Thai boy who was about to go study abroad on an exchange programme. It was his choice to come to the camp to study the basics of Muay Thai, and in particular the *wai khru* so that he could demonstrate a distinctive Thai heritage at cultural events. The attitude fits in with the thesis's argument that Muay Thai has become one of the defining elements of Thai culture.

The cases of the Korean students also seem to confirm the theory that Muay Thai is becoming increasingly globalised. The female Korean in her thirties is the daughter of a prosperous landowner in South Korea. She was training from the basic level (1) to the professional level (4) as well as taking the referee courses. By the end of my time at the camp, she was already moving onto level 4. I can personally report that her knee is particularly vicious. Her aim is to set up a Muay Thai stadium in Korea.

The male Korean on the other hand, also in his thirties, has spent a considerable period in the United States. Previously, he had been involved in jiu-jitsu as well as wrestling and ran a successful gym in the US. However, he was injured in the course of a competition and as a result had to close down his instruction business during recovery. He plans to set up a gym in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. During our informal conversations, he highlighted the increasing popularity of martial arts other than Tae-kwon-do amongst adults in Korea. He also added that Tae-kwon-do is commonly regarded by some as a sport for children since it was widely practiced by schoolchildren.

I was also privileged to meet with a remarkable champion boxer. She was a female, in her thirties, and is a mother of two. Moreover, she still boxed. In the media, she has featured in a number of newspaper articles, as well as in a documentary made by

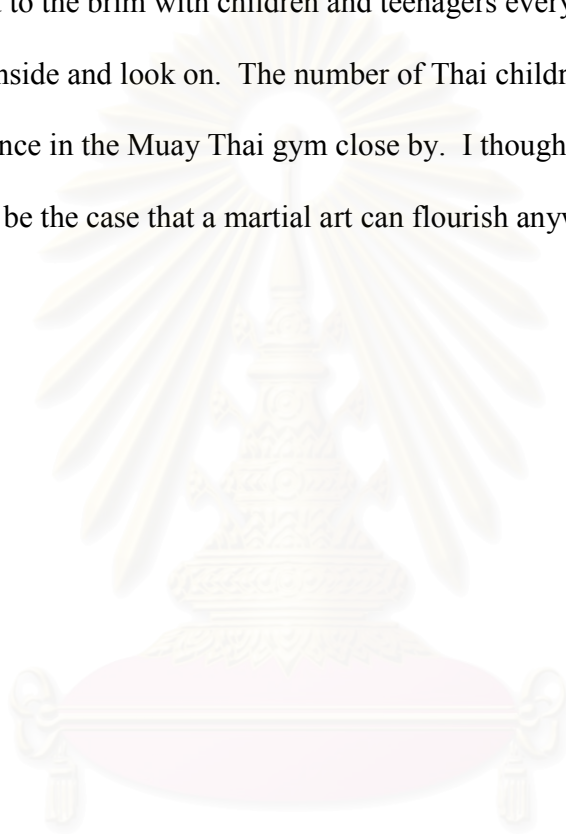
the National Geographic Channel. I was able to attend one of her matches, which was going to take place at a fair in Nonthaburi. The weigh-in took place several days before the actual match, and the training was hard and constant until the final day before the match. For this day, she was allowed to relax but still gave instruction at the camp. After the end of the afternoon session, practically everyone left the camp to see her fight.

The match was to take place late at night at around nine or ten in the evening. The ring at the fair was a temporary one, and was nestled away from the main stage where a concert was being held. The crowds, once again, were significant. Around this area, there were various food stalls where everyone indulged in some food and alcohol. Meanwhile, matches were being held at the ring where competitors' age ranged from small children to adult men. However, after waiting for two hours, it was finally revealed that the opponent, for reason of being ill, had withdrawn. The camp owner, trainer, as well as the boxer were understandably upset that they had not been informed earlier, and attributed it to the opponent's unwillingness to fight rather than her ill health. The disappointment was palpable amongst the group, but the various attractions of the fair provided enough distractions for the rest of the night.

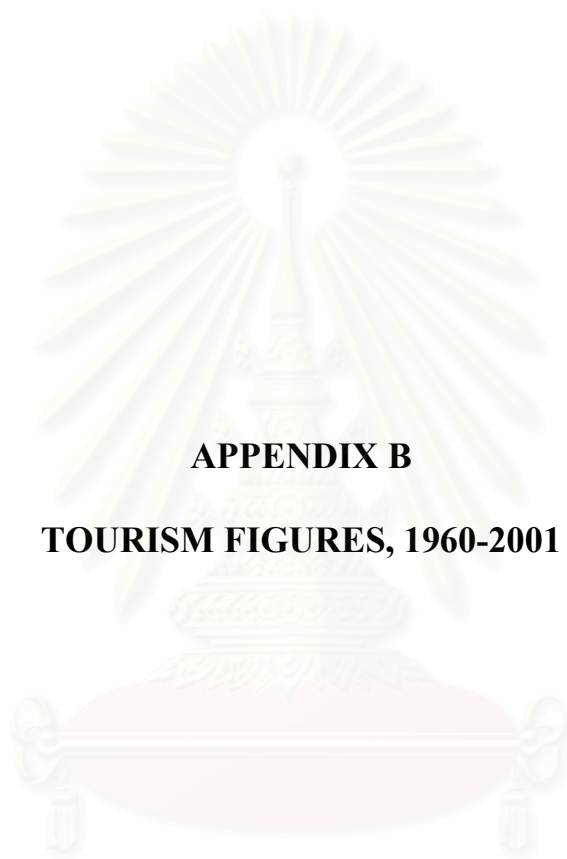
With regards to gambling, it was clear that some members of the crowd at Nonthaburi had high stakes on certain fights. However, amongst our group there was a general reluctance to gamble on boxers that were not known to us. On the other hand, there was considerable enthusiasm to gamble on the victory of our own champion, although I was warned that bets should not be placed before the opponents could be seen and assessed. Before we knew about the match's cancellation, there was talk about

putting money in the *khan glang*. However, since the match did not take place I was unable to observe directly how this system worked.

On leaving the camp I noticed that right outside its entrance was a small studio that specialised in teaching Tae-kwon-do. It was nearly always the case that the small room would be filled to the brim with children and teenagers every evening, whilst their parents sit at tables inside and look on. The number of Thai children inside was a marked contrast to their absence in the Muay Thai gym close by. I thought to myself whether in the future that it will be the case that a martial art can flourish anywhere except its own country?



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APPENDIX B

TOURISM FIGURES, 1960-2001

สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

Year	Number of tourist arrivals
1960	81340
1961	107754
1962	130809
1963	195076
1964	211924
1965	225025
1966	282117
1967	335845
1968	377262
1969	469784
1970	628671
1971	638738
1972	820758
1973	1037737
1974	1107392
1975	1180075
1976	1098442
1977	1220672
1978	1453839
1979	1591455
1980	1858801

Year	Number of tourist arrivals
1981	2015615
1982	2218429
1983	2191003
1984	2346709
1985	2438270
1986	2818092
1987	3482958
1988	4230737
1989	4809508
1990	5298860
1991	5086899
1992	5136443
1993	5760533
1994	6166496
1995	6951566
1996	7244400*
1997	7293957*
1998	7842760*
1999	8651260*
2000	9578826*
2001	10131509*

* Figures include number of overseas Thai

Source: Pocket Thailand in Figures, 2003, p. 176

สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย



APPENDIX C
AVERAGE TOURIST LENGTH OF STAY, 1960-2001

สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

Year	Average length of stay (days)	Year	Average length of stay (days)
1960	3	1981	4.96
1961	3	1982	4.79
1962	3	1983	4.91
1963	5.7	1984	5.47
1964	4.5	1985	5.58
1965	4.8	1986	5.93
1966	5	1987	6.06
1967	4.6	1988	7.36
1968	4.2	1989	7.63
1969	4.8	1990	7.06
1970	4.8	1991	7.09
1971	4.8	1992	7.06
1972	4.9	1993	6.94
1973	4.7	1994	6.98
1974	4.8	1995	7.43
1975	5	1996	8.23
1976	5	1997	8.33
1977	4.51	1998	8.4
1978	4.84	1999	7.96
1979	5.09	2000	7.77
1980	4.9	2001	7.93

Source: Pocket Thailand in Figures, 2003, p. 176

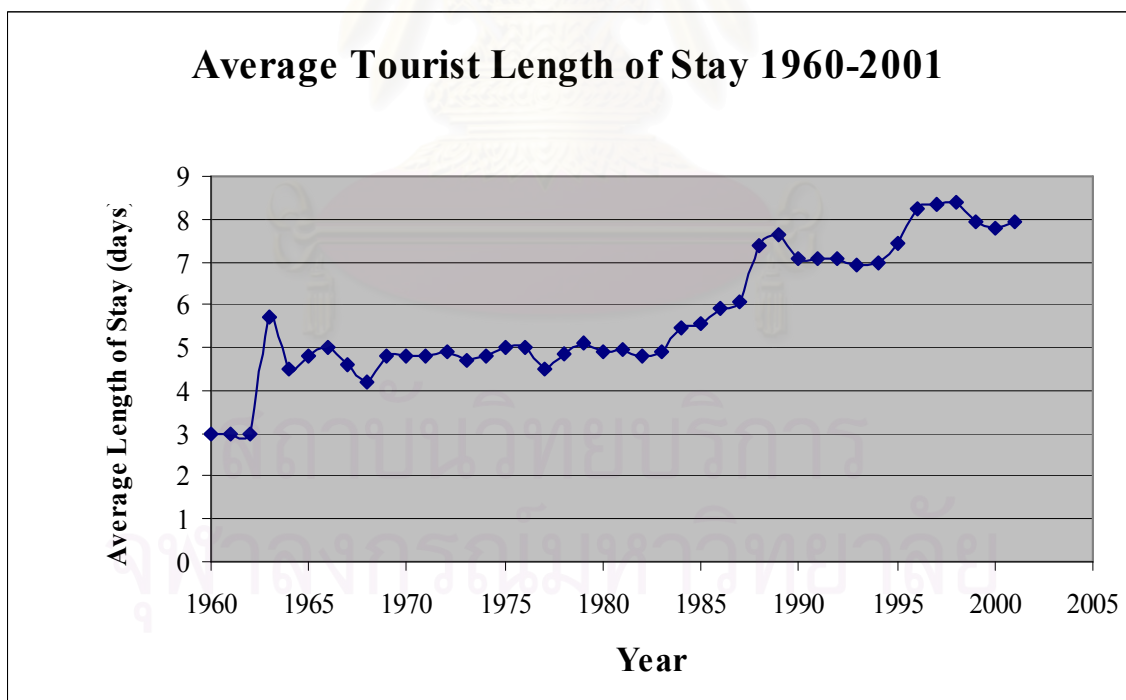
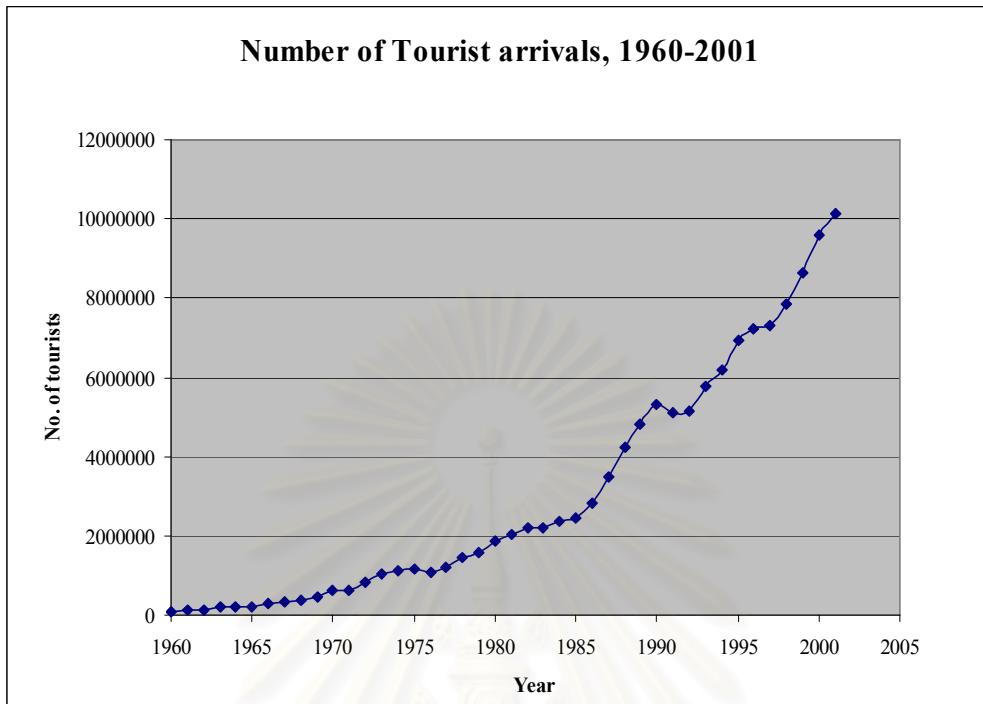
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จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย



APPENDIX D

**CHARTS DISPLAYING TOURISM FIGURES AND TOURIST
LENGTH OF STAY 1960-2001**

สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย





APPENDIX E

**NUMBER OF MUAY THAI CAMPS ACCORDING TO
MUAYTHAI2000.COM**

สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

Province (Central	# of camps
Kanchanaburi	0
Chainart	0
Suphanburi	1
Angthong	4
Singhบุรี	0
Lopburi	5
Saraburi	2
Rachaburi	8
Nakhon Pathom	15
Ayutthaya	2
Pathum Thani	10
Nakhon Nayok	2
Nonthaburi	17
Bangkok	253
Samutsakhon	8
Samutprakan	22
Samutsongkhram	1
Petchaburi	13
Prachuabkhirikhan	29
Total	392

Province (Northeast)	# of camps
Loei	8
Nongkai	1
Udon Thani	2
Sakhon Nakhon	12
Nakhon Phanom	0
Kon Kaen	36
Maha Sarakam	21
Kalasin	17
Mukdahan	0
Chaiyaphum	1
Nakhon Ratchasima	3
Roi Et	33
Yasothon	12
Amnat Charoen	2
Buriram	1
Surin	17
Srisaket	18
Ubon Ratchatani	26
Nongbua lampu	5
Total	215

Province (East)	# of camps
Prajinburi	4
Sakaew	0
Chachoengsao	10
Chonburi	40
Rayong	12
Chantaburi	1
Trad	1
Total	68

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Province (South)	# of camps
Chumpon	27
Ranong	22
Surat Thani	3
Pangnga	13
Nakhon Sri Thammarat	1
Krabi	21
Trang	22
Pattalung	1
Phuket	18
Satun	0
Songkhla	24
Pattani	0
Yala	0
Narathiwat	2
Total	154

Province (East)	# of camps
Prajnaburi	4
Sakaew	0
Chachoengsao	10
Chonburi	40
Rayong	12
Chantaburi	1
Trad	1
Total	68

Province (North)	# of camps
Chiang Rai	0
Chiang Mai	34
Maehongson	0
Payao	0
Nan	7
Lampang	27
Lamphoon	7
Prare	8
Tak	5
Sukhothai	10
Uttaradit	18
Pitsanulok	6
Kampaengphet	1
Phijit	0
Petchaboon	4
Nakhon Sawan	12
Uthaihani	0
Total	139

Source: Muaythai2000.com: <http://www.muaythai2000.com/muaythai2000/mapEn.php>

The total number of camps is 968, with the largest concentration in the Central region, and the lowest in the East.

สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

BIOGRAPHY

Apisake Monthienvichienchai was born on 11 July 1981 in Bangkok. His education began at Saint John's Kindergarten at the tender age of three. Four years later, he left the Thai education system and since then, has been in the United Kingdom for the majority of his life. He spent ten years at Ampleforth College, a boarding school in North Yorkshire before going up to read for a BA/MA in Modern History at St. Benet's Hall, Oxford University in October 1999. During this time, he was able to travel to and around many countries in Europe and Asia including France, Spain, Italy, Egypt, Myanmar, Japan, Cambodia, Mexico, the Philippines, and the United States among others.

Having completed his studies at Oxford in 2002, he returned to Thailand and suffered a ruptured appendix, which he barely survived, as well as severe complications two months later that forced him to undergo major surgery again and remain in Thailand for at least another year. The fact that he lost over ten kilograms of weight in the course of the two surgeries also somewhat sabotaged his plans to join the military for the time being.

Instead, the studies for the MA in Thai Studies at Chulalongkorn University were conducted during this recovery period which lasted for just over one year. Upon completing his studies in Thailand, he will be returning to England once more to read for an MPhil in Chinese Studies at St. Catharine's College, University of Cambridge in October 2004.



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