Class, Culture, and Martial Arts in Thailand

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Venture through the streets of any city in Thailand, and you are bound to come across signs advertising taekwondo lessons. Taekwondo dojangs have in recent years sprung up across the country like mushrooms, and it is not uncommon to see children in the evening wearing doboks and dragging hogu out into the street to catch their rides home. The sudden proliferation of taekwondo is quite a new phenomenon in this rapidly developing Southeast Asian country, and the aim of the current paper is to outline the cultural significance taekwondo plays in modern Thailand. This paper is based on observations —not formal research—by an anthropologist who has both researched and practiced martial arts for many years, and conclusions should be regarded as preliminary and tentative.

Taekwondo has actually been taught in Thailand for decades, but it is only in recent years that it has dramatically expanded in popularity. Thailand's first taekwondo school opened in about 1967 and became popular initially among American soldiers stationed in Thailand during the Vietnam war. By 1976, Thailand had a taekwondo association with a regular school on Ploenchit Road in Bangkok. At present it is impossible to assess with any degree of accuracy how many Thais are participating in taekwondo, due in part to the rapid proliferation of dojangs in recent years.

Although growing, taekwondo is still a relatively marginal activity in Thailand, especially when compared to sports such as soccer or indigenous martial arts. Nevertheless Thailand is fielding a team of four fighters at the Olympics in Athens this year. Furthermore, the official Thai taekwondo website[1] mentions that Thailand hopes to host the World Championships in 2005 and the Asian Championships in 2006.

Muay Thai

Thailand of course has a rich and popular martial arts tradition of its own—muay thai—and the sudden popularity of taekwondo must be seen in the context of Thailand's national combative sport. Muay thai figures greatly into the cultural mythology of the modern Thai nation-state and is tied closely to Thailand's most successful Olympic team, international style boxing. Muay that is practiced widely throughout the country, enjoys royal patronage, is taught in physical education classes in public schools, comprises part of military training, and has been one of the chief cultural products of Thailand to have been successfully propagated to the non-Thai world. Indeed, as far as popular culture goes, muay thai is one of the things for which Thailand is best known worldwide. Given the integral role muay thai plays in Thai culture, it is of some interest to examine just how taekwondo has managed to become so popular so quickly.

The primary question to be addressed can be framed this way: why would Thais train in taekwondo

when muay thai is so accessible and such a prominent part of national culture? To answer this question, we must look more closely at who is actually training.

Muay thai boxing is the sport of Thailand's underclass.[2] Those who box are overwhelmingly from poor rural backgrounds and they train and compete for one primary objective: money. There are other reasons they decide to fight in muay thai, but were it not for money, the number of boxers would decrease dramatically, and the sport as it is now structured would cease to exist. By and large there is no significant amateur circuit in Thailand, in the sense that muay thai boxers do not fight as amateurs before they turn professional. From their very first fight, a muay thai boxer makes money. He will likely be anywhere from eight to fourteen or fifteen years old at the time of his first fight, and he will fight in a bout in a countryside Buddhist temple festival. For his first fight, he may make anywhere from 50 to 200 baht ($1.10 to $5.00 at current exchange rates) win or lose, although he always faces the outside chance that the local promoter will abscond with the prize money and pay him nothing. A young fighter showing promise may be sent to train—and live and eat—at a boxing camp, and it is these children/young men who are recognized as 'boxers' (nak muay) in Thai society. Normally they live at the camp permanently, training twice a day, and fighting once a month. By law, boxers split their winnings fifty-fifty with the camp owner; the camp owner uses his cut to pay for the camp expenses. Younger boxers who are not yet earning much money thus effectively depend on older boxers for their maintenance until such a time as they

themselves earn a high purse (kha tua). High purses are in the tens or even hundreds of thousands of baht per fight—a high salary even if they net only half of the purse. Camps are often found in urban areas, especially in Bangkok, but the boxers residing there are typically from rural areas (or a boxer's parents may be recent migrants to the city).

Although muay thai is predominantly a prizefighting sport, there is a small amateur muay thai circuit as well. The International Amateur Muay Thai Federation (IAMTF), based at the National Stadium in Bangkok, has the goal of internationalizing muay thai. To this end, the IAMTF hosts fights in which muay thai boxers from countries all over the world come to compete. Because there is no prize money involved, boxers from poor backgrounds are not attracted to fighting in this circuit. And since nearly every boxer is from a poor background, the amateur circuit in Thailand remains relatively small. Amateur muay thai fighters tend to come from Thailand's middle class, including university students. Many of these fighters compete because they like the sport itself and its cultural significance, and because they wish to avoid the seedier world and more dangerous conditions of paid muay thai. Some professional muay thai boxers end up competing in the amateur circuit, but the only ones who have done so to my knowledge are boxers who have been banned from the professional ring for a period of time and need to stay in fighting shape for a planned return. Boxers are often banned from the professional rings because they are suspected of fixing fights. This is not to be taken as proof that they actually have taken a

dive—simply suspicion on the part of the referee is enough to get them banned for six months or a year. This is all a result of the muay thai economy, which depends on gambling. Heavy wagers are placed on professional fights, and so any hint of impropriety is dealt with harshly.

Women also train in muay thai, but realistically not very many participate. Girls may learn muay thai as part of their physical education training in school, and a very small number of girls may prizefight at temple festivals upcountry. In Bangkok there is one boxing ring at Rangsit stadium dedicated to women's boxing —women generally cannot box in the same ring that male boxers will use due to certain religious beliefs about the corrupting influence of women on male power/potency, but such restrictions may be overlooked in the countryside. Male boxers I have interviewed in the past endorse the idea of a woman's right to box in principle, but would not want their own girlfriends or sisters to box, and feel that it is in any event very unfeminine. Muay thai is, by and large, a male sport and the boxing world is an extremely masculine culture. Exceptions to male boxing—such as women's boxing or the case of Nong Tum, the transvestite boxer who became famous for saving his prize money for a sex change operation (which s/he has since had)—are regarded largely as carnivalesque exceptions to the otherwise masculine model of violent male combat.

In addition to money, boxers fight for fame, cultural values, and for social connections. They can get their pictures in boxing magazines, they can meet influential people who may be of use after they retire

(typically around age 25 or so), and their status as boxers—something which affords them a high degree of symbolic and cultural capital in the countryside—can get them girls. Much conversation in the boxing camps revolves around two topics: fights (either upcoming or past) and girls (the restrictions of living at a boxing camp limits a boxers' access to girls, for which boxers seem to compensate by discussing them constantly). Camp boxers are typically regarded as good students in rural schools—not because of their grades necessarily (which are often terrible), but because of their athleticism, discipline, and their dedication to an extremely harsh training regimen. They are by any measure professional athletes, and their training schedule largely precludes them from getting mixed up in drugs or gang violence, two major scourges of contemporary Thai schools and society at large.

There are also cultural values involved with boxing which should not be underestimated. Rural children, for example, who may only box once or twice in their lives, are typically entreated to do so by a friend, relative, or even a parent. By training for a fight and getting into the ring, a young boy learns important rural cultural values including fortitude, determination, and—all alone in the ring—the ability to help oneself (kan chuai tua eng)—a highly valued masculine trait throughout rural Thailand. As an activity, muay thai inculcates these values into the boys and young men who box; as a public performance, muay thai celebrates these values in a public sphere and as such constitutes what anthropologist Clifford Geertz might call 'a story

[Thais] tell themselves about themselves'.[3]

Taekwondo

Taekwondo is strictly an amateur sport and as such is not pursued in the form of prizefights. In Thailand, taekwondo is rarely found in the countryside, being restricted almost entirely to urban areas. Because there is no money to be made in taekwondo as there is in muay thai, it has little hope of attracting the class of rural males who dedicate so much time and energy to muay thai training. Taekwondo is targeted at the urban middle class, who are eager for their children to pursue extracurricular activities, and who have surplus cash to spend on instructional activities. One of the great differences between muay thai and taekwondo in Thailand is economic: whereas muay thai is a paying career, one must pay for taekwondo lessons. The middle class (perhaps more descriptively termed the leisure class) can afford to pay for such lessons, where as the rural class boxes in order to earn money.

The difference in economics is closely linked with a difference in class or status group. The middle class is loathe to send their children to learn muay thai because it associated with the country's lower class—this despite the fact muay thai is closely bound up with a sense of Thai national identity. Muay thai is a powerful symbol of Thai national identity even for those such as the middle class who don't actually box. The operative word here is symbol: the middle class does not actually want to box or to have anything to do with the boxing world itself, but as a symbolic

expression of Thai martial abilities, they are nevertheless eager to invoke (and commodify) it when interacting with the non-Thai world.

From the perspective of the middle class, being poor in Thailand is a social stigma. The poor are thus derided by the middle class, who work to actively distinguish themselves from the lower classes in as many ways as they can. Some of the common features deployed to mark this difference include lighter skin and associated skin-lightening treatments (the rural poor must often work in the agricultural sector and as a result become quite dark—light skin is thus a mark of an urban job or a leisurely lifestyle), international branded clothing, higher grades and brands of alcohol, cars (as opposed to pick up trucks, motorcycles or no vehicle at all), conspicuous consumption of international consumer products, and a command of a foreign language, especially English. Many of the lower classes can speak English also, but a difference in class is still marked by the 'correctness' of the English of which they are capable. Middle class English tends to be more formal grammatically, suggesting official schooling (and thereby once again the spending of money), whereas lower class English—even if more fluent— tends to be grammatically unsophisticated and learned 'on the job', thereby once again involving the earning of money.[4]

Taekwondo, because it costs money, is another way in which the Thai middle class distinguishes itself from the lower class. It is in socioeconomic terms, in contrast to muay thai, a leisure activity, and one associated with a foreign country, Korea. Middle class

urban Thai society strives to be cosmopolitan in its consumption patterns, drawing on the access they have to foreign products and cultures and thereby taking part in a more global culture. Nor is taekwondo the only sport in which this is done. International football (soccer) is enormously popular in Thailand, and has indeed supplanted muay thai as the country's most popular spectator sport. Thailand is even intending to buy a large stake in the Liverpool Swans football team, in order to feel like a legitimate participant in the international football world. Urban 'Thainess', in other words, revolves around appropriating foreign cultural capital into Thai society, whether in the form of consumable items, language, or activities such as international travel, entertainment, and sports events.[5] Taekwondo allows its participants (and/or their parents) to distinguish themselves from the lower class and simultaneously to associate themselves with the more cosmopolitan, internationally-oriented consumption patterns and 'style'. Taekwondo, in other words, is a status marker expressing the prestige of international cultural appropriation and distinguishing its practitioners from the lower stratum of domestic society.

Taekwondo has other appeals stemming from its status as a source of international cultural capital. First of all, taekwondo is an Olympic sport, and Thailand is intensely interested in competing in large international sporting events. Thailand has on more than one occasion attempted to become a host country for the Olympics (although Bangkok did not fare well in the selection process), and has hosted and regularly participates in the Southeast Asian Games.

But there are few Olympic sports in which Thailand can field teams. Thailand fields athletes in weightlifting, tennis (aided greatly by current tennis star Paradorn Srichaphan) and shooting events. But by far their most successful entries are in international style boxing (the only sport in which they have won gold medals), and this is due in large part to the fact that some muay thai boxers can cross over rather readily from muay thai into international style. Nearly every international boxer in Thailand comes from a muay thai background, and the Olympians who brought home medals received enormous national support—as mentioned, everyone likes to take part in national symbology, whether they actually compete or not. But the fact remains that there are few if any members of the middle class actually boxing, and thus taekwondo offers the opportunity not only for Thailand to achieve fame in a sport other than boxing, but for members of the middle class themselves to become valorized. This year they will send four taekwondo competitors to Athens, the best of whom (Kriangkrai Noikerd) is a crossover athlete after a very successful muay thai career.

There are other class markers distinguishing taekwondo and muay thai, the foremost of these being the role of money in class morality. For the lower class, winning money is highly valorized and there is no ambivalence about fighting for it. Among the middle class—and this is not restricted to Thailand—money is perceived of as a corrupting influence on sport—especially amateur sports. The 'purity' of amateur sport would be 'corrupted' were money brought into play. Taekwondo, as a strictly amateur

sport, thus gives the middle class access to such conceptual purity in a way that muay thai can not. The same sense of purity extends into the physical realm —the higher 'class' the sport, the less physical contact it actually entails. Muay thai, fought in nothing but shorts and a thin coating of oily boxing liniment— entails close corporeal contact, and thus potential bodily pollution, whereas in taekwondo physical contact is mediated by the cloth of the dobok and the hogu. It is interesting to note, that in amateur boxing and amateur muay thai, amateurism associated as it is more with middle than lower classes, fighters must wear shirts (see also Bourdieu 1991).

In addition to the international cultural capital it affords, taekwondo is also much more accepting of female participants. The training atmosphere of taekwondo is far less gendered, far less masculine, and as a result middle class parents are less anxious about sending their young daughters to learn taekwondo than they would be sending them to learn muay thai. It is also perceived of as being less dangerous, since muay thai competition tends to be very brutal physically. In muay thai, unlike taekwondo, no protection is worn besides a cup; knee and elbow strikes are permitted; there are no proscribed targets except the groin; and blows to the back (if an opponent were to turn around) are not penalized as they would be in taekwondo.

Like muay thai, taekwondo is regarded as a good way to inculcate positive values in children, in particular fortitude, respect, and discipline, and as a way to keep them away from drugs and other bad influences. Unlike muay thai, taekwondo in Thailand

is a part-time, after school activity, in stark contrast to muay thai which, for all but the 'occasional' fighters out in the villages, entails a full time job, in which the boxer resides at the camp permanently and whose income derives from the collective fortunes of the boxers at that camp.

Although the moral lessons are similar for both sports, they serve vastly different sectors of the Thai social scene. Muay thai is the sport of the rural poor, supported by the wagers and money of urban (but not cosmopolitan) middle and upper class gamblers. The sport is pursued primarily for money and even celebrates the role of money as a public part of its performance. Taekwondo is the provenance of the cosmopolitan middle class—especially the children—and is part of a larger cultural aggregate of conspicuous consumption, status marking, and cosmopolitan worldview that the urban middle class deploys to both construct its internationally-oriented identity and to distinguish itself from the country's lower class.

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Endnotes

1. Thai Taekwondo Association Website: http://www.thaitkdasso.org/index.html.
2. Vail, 1998.
3. Geertz.
4. For works on consumerism in Thailand, see: Kasian; Mills; Watthana; Vail, 2004.
5. Kasian.