The Sociocultural Context of Thai Boxing

This paper aims to provide a general account of the sociocultural conditions faced by Thai boxers in the world of Muai Thai boxing. Beginning with a discussion of the boxing environment, I will look at the typical background of a Thai boxer, the conditions and culture of the training camp, the training regimen, the nature of competition, retirement, and post-retirement career options. The paper will end with some general conclusions regarding the viability of boxing as an avenue of social mobility in modern day Thailand.

Muai Thai, a full contact, combative martial sport, is the national sport of Thailand, practiced widely throughout the country. Televised daily on several different channels, and with live bouts nearly every night of the week in many locals, it is also by far the most popular spectator sport among both genders in Thailand.

Boxing stadiums exist in every province. The two most famous, Ratchadamnoen and Lumpini, are both located in downtown Bangkok, and hold a legal monopoly of stadiums in Bangkok. Moreover, they are the only two permanent venues in Thailand of any sort at which gambling is legal. If the Bangkok stadiums represent the apex of boxing in Thailand, the regional boxing stadiums form the path to get there. Often military owned and operated, regional stadiums dot the countryside, and provide a place for boxers to improve their skills and get noticed by Bangkok promoters. Beyond the regional stadium there are temporary venues, appearing in virtually every district and village at festival time, and disassembled after the festival is over.

There are hundreds of boxing camps throughout the country, training the thousands of boxers who compete in the aforementioned stadiums. Most Thai boxing is pursued professionally (i.e. prize fighting). A small amateur contingent does exist (and is gaining some international stature); the military fields many amateur boxers. But only professional boxing constitutes the national sport that captivates the attention of the Thai audiences.

The current social hierarchy of Thai boxing reflects to a large extent the underlying economy of betting. Betting always accompanies boxing in Thailand. Some have even argued that betting forms the supply side of the Thai boxing economy, driving the entire boxing industry. Whether legal gambling (at Lumpini or Ratchadamnoen) or illegal gambling (everywhere else, with some irregular exceptions), the amount put into gambling must be maximized for participants-- from promoters to fighters-- to reap the most profit. Promoters are the ones immediately responsible for arranging fights that will draw large numbers of bettors. Bettors and bookies prefer closely matched bouts between light fighters because of the higher possibility for an upset in a late round. Thus promoters must have keen matchmaking skills or they will not attract the betting public. If they fail to attract bettors , they will lose their fight quota (the amount of fight slots they are allotted per month) from the stadium.

Since there are a limited number of fight slots at any stadium (limited simply by time constraints), there is also a limited number of promoters. Thus it becomes imperative that the camp owners maintain good relations with promoters, because they need to get their fighters into lucrative matches at popular stadiums-- preferably in Bangkok. Camp owners are constantly cultivating relations with promoters, in order to curry favor. If a camp owner crosses a promoter (for example, by having one top fighter fight for more than one promoter) he runs a high risk of being blacklisted and thus ostracized from the boxing community.

Boxers, around whom the whole boxing world revolves, ironically have the least autonomy, and are at the bottom of the boxing hierarchy. They are “owned” by the camp at which they train, and may only change camps with the permission of the camp owner. If they change against the wishes of the owner, they may be blacklisted. They would no longer be promoted for any lucrative fights, in effect ending their careers.

Thus in order to ensure that money flows through the system, tenuous relations between promoters, camp owners, and boxers must be kept in tact. They are kept in check by virtue of the tight knit boxing community, and

transgressing rules, whether written or implicit, is punishable by unofficial black listing resulting in a *de facto* end to a career.

Boxing spectators come from every imaginable socioeconomic class and geographic area in Thailand. Boxers, however, are almost exclusively from poor, rural areas-- especially the impoverished northeast. They often come from broken homes, and have little in the way of assets or opportunities. Boxing provides a possible avenue of social mobility to young men who would otherwise have little or no opportunity for socioeconomic advancement at all.

Although boxers come from every province of Thailand, the majority come from the southern half of the northeastern section of the country. The heaviest concentrations are in Buriram and Surin provinces near the Cambodian border, and fading north of Khon Khaen, roughly speaking. Although this area corresponds to Khmer and Suai speaking areas of the northeast, my research has shown no over representation of ethnic Khmer or Suai in Thai boxing.

Many boxers also come from the south (esp. Chaiya) and central (esp. Lopburi) regions of Thailand; however they were known as boxing regions more in the past than they are today.

A number of fighters from the south are Muslim., but by and large *Muai Thai* boxers are nominally Theravada Buddhists. They practice a syncretic form of Buddhism typical of Thailand as a whole, in which Brahmanism and spirit worship are combined with Theravada Buddhism to form what may be called “Thai religion”.

Boxers typically start their careers young, at about age 9-12. In order to start training, potential boxers must be accepted by the boxing instructor. In a ritual similar to (and in fact modeled on) being accepted to the Sangha (Buddhist monkhood), the boxing initiate must present ritual items including incense, candles and flowers to ask the instructor’s permission to join the camp. He will be required to take an oath, based on Buddhist precepts, promising to

uphold the ethical requisites of the camp. A Buddha image may be brought out as witness.

Once they take up residence at the camp, young boxers must adhere to strict rules. These include curfews, prohibitions on drinking and women (obviously more directed at somewhat older boxers), and most must attend school during the daytime. There appears to be a general consensus among camps to raise the standard of education from Prathom 6 (similar to our 6th grade) to Mathayom 3 (roughly our 9th grade), reflecting popular trends in national standards.

In addition, young boxers are responsible for chores around the camp. They must keep their quarters clean and orderly, they must maintain the training area and surroundings, they must do the cooking, and any other chores required of them by the owner of the camp. In return they receive room, board and, of course, boxing lessons.

Boxers of all ages report that what they like least about boxing are the restrictions necessitated by training. The prohibition on women was the most disliked, followed by alcohol, and general freedom. At the same time, all boxers I interviewed loved the sport, and felt that the advantages far outweighed the disadvantages.

New recruits will train for 1 to 2 years before they begin to compete, learning basics. Other boxers practice basics, advanced technique and sparring. There are typically two training sessions per day, one in the morning and one in the late afternoon, and all boxers are required to attend both. Boxers with an important match coming up (e.g. a fight in Bangkok) have more rigorous training schedules than the others fighters.

Morning workouts are weighted towards cardiovascular fitness. Starting with a run of 10k or more, the boxers also jump rope, practice footwork with truck tires, and do several sets of push-ups and sit-ups. Workouts tend to last 1-3 hours.

The boxers have the rest of the day off. Younger boxers must go to school, and older boxers typically lounge around the camp or errands. Boxers who need to lose weight may take advantage of the midday heat to sweat off extra pounds.

Evening training begins about 4 or 5pm, and stresses ring training and technique. Boxers split into groups: some work heavy bags while others work with trainers. Slowly they rotate through until everyone has several rounds with a trainer, and several rounds of bag work. Typically a training round is 5 minutes, with 2 minutes breaks for water and push-ups. Bag work consists primarily of roundhouse kicks, knee strikes, and punching. Working with a trainer involves kicking heavy targets wielded by the trainer, in order to incorporate footwork, combinations, and strategy. After about 2 hours of training, another hour may be devoted to working the clinch.

All boxers must also learn and practice a *Ram Muai*, a ritual pre-fight dance paying respect to the Buddha, various Brahmanical gods (esp. Narayana/ Rama), and the instructor. The *Ram Muai* is performed by every boxer before every fight, and is considered a ritually vital part of the bout.

The fights I am concerned with in this paper are all professional, in the sense that they are compensated (through winnings) and that the boxer has no occupation outside boxing. Thus I will not discuss the amateur circuit, which is in any event restricted more or less to military circles and a handful of international players.

Between the ages of 12 and 14, the young boxer will have his first fight. The purse is typically no more than 100 Baht (about $4 USD), and such fights are usually local, held at temple festivals or other local celebrations. Even at this low level, the boxer must relinquish half of his winnings to the camp owner. Most young boxers are proud to give up this money: after all, they have been supported at the camp for several years, and now they can begin to pay their own way. This system of support-- in which boxers in effect support each other by contributing half of their winnings to camp upkeep- builds powerful lateral relations between boxers that often outlast the participant's boxing careers.

Once they begin their fighting careers, boxers fight about once a month. Most of these fights are local, especially early in a career, but as they gain experience, fighters begin to get larger purses at better venues. If a boxer has a consistently losing record, the camp owner will either persuade the boxer to quit, or simply force him to.

Sooner or later the camp owner will take a promising fighter to a regional venue, such as Surin or Saraburi, where the stakes are higher and the promoters send scouts to look for new talent to fight in Bangkok. If noticed here, a scout may contact the camp owner to arrange a fight.

Regional venues have high stakes betting, typically between camps. Sometimes this betting is legal (the provincial governor may grant permission) and sometimes it is an open secret. Bets between camps fielding fighters may be in the millions of Baht (tens of thousands of dollars), and the inside line is always 1:1. Outside betting is dependent on the odds made by bookies at fight time, and may vary even during the fight. Fighters see very little of the betting proceeds, although purse winnings may be quite good.

Once a fighter begins to establish a reputation, he will start to look to Bangkok. If he is picked up by a promoter, his first Bangkok fight will usually gross him on the order of 2000 Baht (about $80 USD), netting him half that amount. If he shows promise, his winnings will increase by at least 10% per fight. At this point, other camps (located in Bangkok) may try to entice him, or may try to get the camp owner to “sell” him. If they are successful, the boxer moves to a new camp in Bangkok, which is typically much more convenient for competition and often better equipped than poorer countryside camps.

It is for this reason that there exists the system of “ownership” of boxers. A camp owner must invest about 5 or 6 years in boxers before they become profitable-- that is, before the purses they earn are large enough to outweigh the costs of maintenance. However, it is precisely at that point the boxers are enticed to richer Bangkok camps. If they were able to leave freely, the countryside camp could not stay in business. Thus camps have ownership

claims on the boxers to prevent them from leaving and thereby protect their investment.

The reality falls between these two poles: boxers often do leave without permission and avoid getting blacklisted by having powerful friends. Also, camp owners are for the most part genuinely interested in seeing the young boxers succeed, and are thus loathe to hold them at a camp that may stymie their potential. More often than not, camp owners let a boxer change camps if they request permission to do so.

If a boxer wins frequently, he can expect more lucrative (and more regular) fights. But winning is not enough: he must be involved in closely matched fights to keep the bettors happy. Several fighters, such as the legendary Diesel Noi, were too good for any of the competition fielded, and thus they did not do as well financially as other, less skilled fighters. The reason being that the fights were too one sided, and thus it did not attract bettors. Diesel Noi retired at age 23 because he could not find an opponent that was a close match.

Top fighters may fight until they are in their late 20s, or perhaps 30 years old. Most fighters, however, retire from mainstream competition when they are about 25. By that time, they no longer have the physical stamina to compete with younger boxers. Unlike international style boxing, Thai boxing takes its greatest toll not on the head but on the legs and knees. (In fact, most Thai boxers that I interviewed cited punch drunkenness as one of the most important reasons they would not cross over into international style boxing.)

After retirement, boxers face a major problem. They have spent a decade or more of their life boxing, and have not learned any usable skills. Top fighters may have made enough to retire on, but most make more modest amounts. Moreover, they may have sent much of their money home to support family, or they may have squandered it. Once they finish their fighting career, few boxers have the luxury of permanent retirement and must think of a new career. There is little in the way of planning beforehand-- according to my research results, few boxers give serious consideration to their post boxing career choices until those choices are imminent.

Some may stay in boxing in some capacity-- as trainers, scouts, or other roles. Others may use their boxing skills to land jobs as security guards, or less savory applications of their skills such as legbreakers and bodyguards for local organized crime. Most leave boxing and assume petty jobs, selling merchandise or farming. *Muai Thai* has come under much fire from urban middle class critics, who charge that boxers squander their youth and are left with no future.

I would argue, however, that this is an unfair assessment boxing as a career choice. Firstly, since most boxers come from disadvantaged backgrounds, they have limited career choices anyway, and little hope for realistic upward mobility. Furthermore, they often come from problematic and/or broken homes. Life at the boxing camp provides them a structured and disciplined environment that builds strong lateral and hierarchical relations necessary in Thai society at large. It offers them the opportunity of achieving fame and fortune based on merit and personal accomplishment, rather than nepotism or birthright. For many it provides the stability necessary to attend school, and thereby increases the likelihood that they will, in fact, finish Prathom 6 or even Mathayom 3. This is in sharp contrast to many poor children in the countryside who must work or farm to survive and thus don't have the opportunity to go beyond Prathom 3. And lastly, they live in a social and cultural context that builds character and emphasizes ethics and morality based on Buddhist precepts-- the cornerstone of Thai society.