

# **Of Men and Monks: The Boxing-Buddhism Nexus and the Production of National Manhood in Contemporary Thailand**

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## **Abstract**

In Thailand, boxers and Buddhist monks share many common characteristics. Most of them started their respective careers as poor young boys from the countryside. Emerging from humble family backgrounds, they are attracted to two different extreme masculine ideals. One is deemed physically violent and deeply involved with masculine contests and worldly activities, while the other offers an ideal path to renunciation of the world and engagement in religious asceticism. How could Thai boxing (*muai Thai*) and Theravada Buddhism coexist and be widely practiced without significant tension in contemporary Thailand? How and why could Thailand possibly be home to two such seemingly contrasting cultural modes of masculine expression?

In this paper, I argue that boxing and Buddhism are taken by the Thais as parts of a hegemonic cultural nexus, in which they form a basis for everyday gendered ideological practices and social institutions. In and through the boxing-Buddhism nexus, a certain style and a certain sensitivity of Thai national manhood are produced and sustained. Indeed, both Thai boxing and Buddhism have traditionally served as deep-seated foundations of modern Thailand's national patriarchal models of “*nak muai*” (fighter/boxer) or “*nak leng*” (rogue/tough guy) and “*nak buat*” (priest/monk). Participating, respectively, in a dominant national pastime and following a path of detachment, boxers and monks are two idealized masculine figures, whose lives and works have been narrated in the patriotic language of nation building, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century. At the pinnacles of their respective careers, men in each calling are expected to become national heroes, whose bodies and minds bear the traces of a patriarchal nationalistic ideology at both the individual and national levels.

## **Introduction**

In late Spring 2003, I was invited to give a seminar entitled, “*Lives of Hunting Dogs: Rethinking Thai Masculinities Through an Ethnography of Muai Thai*” (Pattana 2003, 2005), at the Southeast Asia Center of the Jackson School of International Studies of the University of Washington, Seattle. Members of my audience posed a set of thought-provoking questions relating to the cultural practices of Thai-style boxing (*muai Thai*) and Theravada Buddhism in contemporary Thailand. The questions were straight-forward but rather complex ones: How could boxing and Buddhism coexist and not be widely perceived to be in significant tension with each other in contemporary Thailand? How and why could Thailand serve as a physical and spiritual home to the two seemingly contrasting cultural modes of masculine expression? And how could people embrace them both without confusion or contradiction?

My immediate answers were intellectually shallow, as I found myself struggling in such a face-to-face, impromptu interaction. I relied heavily on the magic work of culture in responding that both boxing and Buddhism were historically embedded in and practiced together in the same templates of everyday life culture. They had been invented and heavily

represented as key markers of Thai national cultural heritage and identity. Most Thai people rarely put them in antagonistic positions or judged them purely on the basis of superficial preferences and values, such as physical violence as opposed to meditative, peaceful or calm characteristics. Boxing and Buddhism each constituted an integral part of everyday life in modern Thai society, where physical pastimes and religious activities had been flexibly merged. Despite the fact that they belonged to two separate realms of social existence, boxing competitions around the country had traditionally been organized on the grounds of Buddhist temples. It was not uncommon, my answer continued, to encounter monks who are active boxing trainers and enthusiasts. Some ex-pugilist monks even opened their temple grounds as make-shift boxing training facilities for poor, young boys living under their supervision or living in the vicinity of their temples.

Boxing and Buddhism should not be viewed apart from one another. Nevertheless, I have always felt that I gave a rather weak answer to my audience in Seattle. Over the years, I kept thinking about how to respond to the questions raised that day in a more coherently organized and intellectually sensible manner. In this paper, I bring together lives and worlds of boxers and monks, the two most influential masculine cultural figures—and representatives of traditional social institutions—in contemporary Thailand. Both social categories and institutions are worthy of an analytical comparison. They must be studied as a “critical hegemonic cultural nexus”, tied by complex, institutional interlinkages and connections, which traditionally define for boys and men—and socialize them to—their dominant, hierarchical roles and places in the society. With the questions posed in Seattle in mind, I argue that, in order to understand the co-existence of boxing and Buddhism, sociological perspectives on sport and on masculine-gendered aspects of physical culture are needed.

Boxing and Buddhism are perhaps the most crucial traditional masculine institutions in Thailand, instrumental in the country’s nation-building process and in everyday life. Boxers and monks are the key popular masculine figures, sharing common backgrounds, positions, and roles in defining and serving Thailand’s male-oriented stratified nationalistic ideology. As social institutions, boxing and Buddhism have long produced and sustained ideological models. Together, they create, respectively, Thai men’s worldly and religious ideals in the complex arena of social action. As key male personalities, the boxer and the monk exemplify the materiality of Thai national manhood on the ground. Both boxers and monks are always present in responses to the questions, “Who are modern Thai men. What

makes them men? How do they become men? And what motivates them to fulfil their masculine intentions and expectations?”

Data discussed in this paper are drawn from my ethnographic fieldwork on Thai boxing in the Northeastern province of Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand, in 2001. Funded by a small research grant from the Institute of Research and Development, Suranaree University of Technology, my colleagues and I traced the rural boxing farms, observed the training camps and numerous competitions, and interviewed people involved in local boxing circles, or “*wongkan muai*”. While I rely here on secondary sources on aspects of Thai Buddhism, my previous work on Thai popular Buddhism and my own experience serving as a monk in a forest temple in Nong Khai Province, Northeastern Thailand frame my view of Buddhism as a physical cultural system.

With their long, glorious histories and prominent cultural standing in Thai society, both boxing and Buddhism carry with them multidimensional cultural meanings. It is my intention to emphasize the area of overlap, or the boxing-Buddhism nexus, where they have practically as well as ideologically converted. I am aware that I cannot cover all aspects of the sociology of boxing and Buddhism. Such a task is simply too enormous and laborious. Although boxing and Buddhism have many aspects and layers of complexity, I would limit my interest here to some of their comparable, physical and social components. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe or discuss boxing and Buddhism in exhaustive detail. In other words, I emphasize only a selected spectrum of comparison as my key approach to boxing and Buddhism.

In addition to my ethnographic approach, my theoretical approach is sociological by nature. Although I prioritize boxing in this paper, I suggest that studying boxing as a stand-alone sporting event or modern spectator sport is rather incomplete; it is an attempt to remove the sport from of its social roots and context. As Nixon and Frey (1996:2) remind us, any social analysis of sporting events and religion, such as boxing and Buddhism, requires what the sociologist C. Wright Mills calls “sociological imagination” or “the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, and in the process to build up an adequate view of a total society and of its components” (Mills 1959:8). The sociological imagination not only helps us gather data and build up files, but it also lends meanings to facts. It is the art of making sense of a given social phenomenon by situating oneself properly and carrying out a careful social analysis through the contextualization process. Taking the sociology of sport as an organized system of meaning, Nixon and Frey (1996:2) suggest that the sociological imagination

“allows us to understand where individuals are located in society and in history, how their circumstances are like or unlike those of similar others in their society and historical period, and how human experiences are structured and made meaningful by the larger social forces of their society, world and period”.

### **Proposing the Boxing-Buddhism Nexus**

I view boxing and Buddhism as examples of “forms and traditions of physical culture” (Burstyn 1999:15). In the context of modern Thai society, boxing and Buddhism do not exist as worlds apart, as their generally stereo-typed images and reputations would suggest. They both belong to the physical, social, and imagined realms, which are fundamental to the making of Thai men’s culture. As prominent sites or venues of the production of tradition as well as of national manhood, boxing and Buddhism must be viewed together in one critical cultural nexus despite the fact that they are exemplary cultural models deriving from different cosmological roots. Strongest of all ties and links within the cultural practices of Thai boxing and Buddhism are masculine values, styles, and sensitivity. In short, both boxing and Buddhism concern what Burstyn (1999:11) calls “the engendering process of boys and men”. In and through boxing and Buddhism, Thai “boys and men are [traditionally] socialized into masculinity in a gender order” (Ibid.:11).

For generations, boxing and Buddhism have formed a critical engendering nexus for boys and men in Thailand. By the “boxing-Buddhism nexus”, I mean multi-dimensional cultural complexities and inter-linkages, which form the frame of masculine reference to understand the grammar of everyday power relations in the context of modern Thai society. Such a nexus is centered on and around men’s largely exclusive role, performance, ideology, and hierarchical organization. The social function of the boxing-Buddhism nexus is to produce and sustain masculinity as a cultural system, mobilizing and integrating men from different social classes into the hierarchical national community through the physical and ideological practices of masculinity. The boxing-Buddhism nexus also involves systematic attempts to dominate or exclude women from such privileged organized venues.

I intend to construct the boxing-Buddhism nexus as my critical framework for understanding “the big picture” of the ideological practices of masculine culture in Thailand. My purpose is to contribute an ethnographically informed knowledge of masculinity through a case study of the cultures of boxing and Buddhism. In doing so, I have encountered

theoretical and empirical constraints and limitations, which condition my interpretation of these two key social institutions by men and for men.

Theoretically speaking, the boxing-Buddhism nexus can tell us much about the social life of Thai men and their roles in the society. It illustrates the fact that masculinity does not emerge and come to exist by itself. Instead, masculinity is made or produced by certain forces and institutions in order to produce certain types of men and their social life. In boxing as well as in Buddhism, men have to contend with privilege as well as exploitation or suffering. As a product of power relations and struggles in a hierarchical organization or society, boxing and Buddhism reflect the dynamics of masculine culture in Thailand.

The masculine culture displayed in the boxing-Buddhism nexus can be viewed through a number of theoretical approaches. A historical functionalist approach is quite a common start. Boxing can be discussed for its social functions, as in the work of Sugden (1996), who provides comprehensive histories of boxing and its social roles in Cuba, Northern Ireland, and the United States. Boxing can be further studied as a bounded system of meaning, in which ideology and identity are translated into everyday life actions. In this case, Alter (1992) shows that the culture and institution of wrestling in India have become a way of life for groups of men across a range of caste and socioeconomic backgrounds. He suggests that “the wrestler is eminently concerned with such complex questions as the relationship between moral and physical strength, abstinence and celibacy. As such wrestlers are concerned with wrestling as a way of life that defines the boundaries of their everyday actions” (Alter 1992:19). In addition, studies of how the body is trained and exploited in boxing are another important style of analysis. Inspired by theoretical concepts from Bourdieu and Foucault, Waquant (2004) draws on his fieldwork among boxers in the ghettos of Chicago to argue that bodily capital is crucial to revealing the secret life of prize fighters in the US and elsewhere. Excellence in boxing (as well as in Buddhism) requires training and hard work to bring “techniques of the body” (Mauss 2009:78) to perfection. Finally, a geographical approach appears to be a current trend in studying masculine culture. Heiskanen (2012) employs a geographical approach to studying the “spatio-bodily conundrum” in boxing with a focus on how power, body, and space have interacted in the world of professional boxing. She argues that “... the body is considered both a product and an agent of power and various spatial locations within the sport as sites of for [power] negotiations” (Heiskanen 2012:3).

There has to date been no extensive empirical study of the boxing-Buddhism nexus. Boxing and Buddhism have never been studied together before, perhaps because each of them has strong merit as a key traditional institution with deep social roots and history. Each of them also commands very significant scholarly attention by itself. A number of recent English-language publications on the topic of *muai Thai* suggest that boxing is a potential source of ethnographic knowledge for unlocking the world of Thai men. Vail (1998) takes Geertz's interpretative approach in his study of the myth-like history of *muai Thai*. He argues that the mythology of *muai Thai* is indeed the stories which Thai men tell themselves about themselves. My own work (Pattana 2003, 2005, 2012) shows the hard lives of *muai Thai* boxers as hunting dogs, who are inspired by an ideology of the breadwinner but exploited in climbing up their career ladders, as they are among the powerless and lowly ranked men in the society. It is arguable that the work of Reynolds (2011) is perhaps the closest attempt that brings rural masculine culture and beliefs in folk Buddhism and magic together. Even though, boxing is not the subject of his study, he argues that the culture and personality of male leadership in the Thai countryside, especially in the post-Second World War era, were embedded strongly in folk Buddhist and magical beliefs and practices as men faced the need to fight crime and handle governmental affairs in remote places where law enforcement and other modern forms of state power were limited.

### **The Social Roots of Thai Boxing and Buddhism**

Some key aspects of the reality of the boxing-Buddhism nexus are exemplified in the compelling story of Sombat Banchamek, a great boxing champion from Surin, Northeastern Thailand, known by his stage name of Buakhaw Por Pramuk. His boxing career fits very well what I call elsewhere the "lives of hunting dogs" (Pattana 2005). The journey of this boxing champion demonstrates the classic pattern of a poor young boy taking boxing as an escape route from rural poverty. Buakhaw came from a very humble background. His family was poor and had many children. He could not go to school beyond the compulsory Primary 6. When he was 12 years old, he left his home village to become a boxing trainee under supervision of his current boss, Pramuk Rojanatan, in Chachoengsao in the eastern region of the country.

Buakaw won many matches and honours in Bangkok, including national championships at the Lumpini and Siam Omnoi Stadiums. In the early 2000s, he began to fight overseas, where his gym saw the possibility of larger sums of prize money. He did very

well in the K-1 World Championships in Japan, where he was in the finals four times and managed to win the crown twice, in 2004 and 2006. But the body of a hunting dog usually betrays its owner when he enters his late career in his 30s. The ageing body is the most powerful testament to the decline of his fighting prowess.

To the outside world, Buakaw's life seemed to be happy under the management of Por Pramuk Gym. However, nobody outside the Por Pramuk family knew much about his finances. Nobody knew much about the impact of years of training and fighting on his ageing and worn-out body. Nobody knew much about his injuries until it was reported in the media that Buakaw ran away from Por Pramuk Gym. Where did he go during this rebellious flight? What did he do during the holdout? Buakaw returned to where his heart belongs – his rural home village in Surin. And, at the height of legal fight against and negotiation with his boss, Buakaw decided to take another venue, open to all Thai men, by temporarily entering the Buddhist monkhood.

The website [www.fighteronlymag.com](http://www.fighteronlymag.com) reports on Buakaw becoming a Buddhist monk as follows.

. . . Buakaw has taken vows and entered Buddhist holy orders. This is a traditional part of the culture in Thailand and most Thai males will spend at least some time as a monk in their lifetime. Often the move is undertaken as a kind of coming-of-age process, although there is no barrier to entry at any age. Nor is there a minimum period one must remain a monk.

While he is a monk, Buakaw will not be allowed to have any physical contact with women whatsoever and the material world of money and [dispute over the] contracts with his boss is off limits to him.

### **Inside the Boxing-Buddhism Nexus**

What draws my attention to the ongoing saga surrounding Buakaw's fight for free agency is that he chose to go back to his rural home village and enter the monkhood for two weeks. From his rural stronghold and support from his family and fans, he launched his attack against the powerful men and structures of authority that control the boxing community in Thailand.

Choosing to serve temporarily in the monkhood, Buakaw sent out a bold message that he is not a poorly educated fighter from the countryside, but a wise person with some taste in religious wisdom. With Buddhist symbolism and a public image as a monk, he can claim himself as a truly mature boxer and a grown-up man, ready to take charge of his own destiny. He does not need protection and guardianship from the owner of Por Pramuk Gym anymore.

The case of Buakhaw reveals tangible links in the boxing-Buddhism nexus. Boxing and Buddhism are closely related. There are at least five aspects of boxers and monks that are strikingly comparable.

First, both boxing and Buddhism are male-oriented institutions. Both boxing and Buddhism are for and about boys and men. They exclude girls and women. As venues for social privilege and honor, they do not accept female participation. Both boxing and Buddhism stimulate competition and encourage hierarchy. In *Masculinities*, Robert Connell (1995:35) reminds us that “when boys start playing competitive sport they are not just learning a game, they are entering organized institutions”.

Second, as social institutions, boxing and Buddhism have long produced and sustained masculine ideological models. Together, they define Thai men’s worldly and religious ideals, as these ideals are relevant to their social actions. Boxing and Buddhism promote the ideological practices of masculinity, which encourage as well as inspire men to work and to become “breadwinners”. Again, Robert Connell (1995:33) suggests that “the cultural function of masculine ideology is to motivate men to work...” He believes that “being breadwinner was a core part of being masculine” (p.28). Therefore, a man must earn a living not only for himself, but his family and society in order to fulfil his masculine responsibility.

Third, boxing and Buddhism offer avenues of social mobility for boys and men from the countryside. In the Western world, as John Sugden (1996:40) shows us in *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis*, “boxing was and continues to be the product of urban poverty”. However, in the Thai context, it is rural poverty that drives boys and men to search for their survival in boxing and Buddhism. Both boxers and monks are fighters against rural poverty and working-class under-privilege. Poor young boys and men from the Thai countryside choose either boxing or Buddhism not only as means of livelihood, but also pathways to social and economic mobility.

Fourth, since both organized boxing and organized Buddhism are competitive, hegemonic, and hierarchical, they lay the groundwork for what Pierre Bourdieu (2002) calls “masculine domination” in Thai society. Outside governmental organizations and structures of power relations, boxers and monks are perhaps the most important actors in the country’s ritualized theatre of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1995).



Finally, boxing and Buddhism integrate rural boys and men into the national hierarchical structure through the cult of national heroism. Being involved in boxing and Buddhism give poor boys and men chances to become national heroes. In the book, *Sinlapa Muai Thai* [The Art of Thai-Style Boxing], the Office of the National Culture Commission (1997:62) states that “*muai Thai* is a national martial art. It is arguable that all Thai men have possessed the art of *muai Thai* in their blood”. The Thai state has continuously promoted boxing and Buddhism as national cultural heritage as well as markers of Thai identity at national and international levels. Both boxing and Buddhism embody the ideological construction of Thainess or being Thai in the modern world. They are strongly associated with the nation, overcoming the local, the regional or other primordial differences in identity. The ideology of creating national heroes and identities through physical culture is highly masculinized. In *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport*, Varda Burstyn (1999:8) argues that “the institutions of sport, as the guardians of masculinist ritual, are among the most important regenerating sources of individualist, competitive, and coercive values and behaviours today”.

### **The Production of Thai National Manhood**

I wish to argue further that the boxing-Buddhism nexus makes Thai national manhood, which I define as styles and a sensitivity of manliness, widely accepted as men’s cultural value and behavior in the Thai context.

How have the notions of being men in Thailand been produced over the generations? How have boxing and Buddhism been well placed to produce modern Thai men?

In boxing, boys and men are known as “*nak muai*”, whose social identity is embedded in the model of being a learned, patriotic gentleman. Any boxer’s career starts with bodily work. In her widely read book, *On Boxing*, Joyce Carol Oates (2002:5) argues that “a boxer is his body and is identified with it”. Boys and young men are trained with specialized sets of “techniques of the body” (Mauss 1977). Their bodies are imprinted with power and discipline. The training camp and the ring offer them not only the space in which they learn the arts of fighting. They also represent the entry point into the hierarchical and organized worlds of men fighting, oppressing and exploiting men for prize money and honor.

In Buddhism, boys and men are ritually and socially transformed into monks (*nak buat*). They come under strict monastic rules. They have to live in tight hierarchical structures within the community of clergy of different ranks. They are also assigned different monastic

responsibilities and tasks within their temples. Most importantly, they are expected to learn and practice meditation and other Dhammic practices. Monks need different techniques of the body as well as mind. Priests have to negotiate with their bodily needs and desires. The body is the great paradox for monastics. On the one hand, the body is considered the negative subject with filthy desire that should be suppressed. On the other hand, the body is a necessary vehicle for Dhammic practices. Without blood and flesh, monks can never achieve the state of enlightenment.

I suggest that boxing and Buddhism work to engender and groom men on at least three levels: those of the individual, of the society, and of the nation. On the individual level, boxers and Buddhist monks are trained to be experts in cultivating capable bodies with “techniques of the body” (Mauss 2009). Their male bodies serve as the canvas of and for disciplinary power and effective techniques. They inspire and encourage boys and men to work hard. On the societal level, boxing and Buddhism are the modes, venues, and stages of expressing or performing masculinity. They are viewed as venues of socioeconomic mobility. On the national level, boxing and Buddhism are the pinnacles of masculine ideals, where the dream of boys and men could come true as they become national heroes. Boxers and Buddhist monks are the icons of national heritage as well as identity. Boys and men have to earn their places through participation in cultures of competition, rules, and hierarchies. As the veteran *muai Thai* master Yotthong Senanan put it, “I am a boxer, not a rogue” [*Ku pen nak muai mai chai nakleng*] (quoted in Plainuam Na Khelang 2011:52).

The Canadian sports sociologist Brian Pronger argues that “the athletic world of power, speed, and pain is an expression of the masculine ideals of our culture” (Pronger 1990:3). In Thailand, the world of Buddhism is another such expression. *Nak muai* and *nak buat* are two popular passages to Thai hegemonic manhood. Dynamic arenas of Thai masculinity include body and agency; the production, performance, and transmission of masculine culture; nationalization; and commercialization.\*

## Conclusion

Boxing and Buddhism should not be understood apart from one another. In this paper, I bring together lives and worlds of boxers and monks, the two most influential masculine cultural masculine figures—from the two most influential traditional social institutions—in contemporary Thailand. Boxing and Buddhism are instrumental in the country’s nation-building process and everyday life. As demonstrated in the story of Buakaw Por Pramuk,

boxers and monks are the key popular masculine figures, who share common backgrounds, positions, and roles in defining and serving Thailand's male-oriented stratified nationalism. As key male personalities, they exemplify the materiality of Thai national manhood from the ground. The nexus of boxing and Buddhism shows us that there are integral hegemonic modes and venues of masculine expression in each human society. The social functions of these modes and venues are to engender boys and men and groom them for the hierarchical structures of leadership and membership in the society. Boys and men have to work hard and earn the glorious privilege, or suffer the pain or shame, that comes along with such a masculine ideology.

In examining the boxing-Buddhism nexus, we also learn that, although forms and traditions of physical culture are general phenomena across human societies, it is particular cultural and historical processes that provide powerful meanings and profound understandings of human experience.

**Dr Pattana Kitiarsa presented this paper at the International Conference on “Mega-Sporting Events in the Age of New Developmentalism: Perspectives from Asia” at the Enyuu Gakusya, Hokkaido University, organized by Faculty of Education, Hokkaido University, Japan, 28-29 July 2012.**

#### **Editor's Note**

\* These three sentences are drawn from Dr Pattana's notes for the paper. They introduce points that he intended to develop further in the final version of the paper.

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