

Muai Thai Cinemas and the Burden of Thai Men

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Abstract

Competing cultures among Thai men have not yet been fully explored in the studies of Thai films released after the economic crisis in 1997. In this article, I purposefully choose to work on a selection of four *muai Thai* cinemas, entitled, *Muai Thai*, *Nai Khanom Tom* [Mr Khanom Tom: A *Muai Thai* Legend] (2003), *Ong Bak* (2003), *Tom Yum Goong* [The Protector] (2005), and *Beautiful Boxer* (2004) in order to examine gendered tensions and changing cultures among of Thai men in the post-1997 economic crisis. I argue that Thai men are consciously and emotionally eager to shoulder the nation's economic development failures and cultural chaos, which the globalization of the economy and the transnationalization of culture have brought about since the 1960s. Messages from the movies convince their audiences that it is, and should be, men's historical burden to defend the country. *Muai Thai* cinemas illuminate Thai men's desire to reclaim their patriotic heroism, which is needed to restore the country's troubling image and its struggling ventures on the global stage. They speak strictly about what it means to be Thai men in the cultural and economic globalizing situation. I further argue that *muai Thai* as a once-exclusive male cultural domain has found itself under some emerging challenges in the names of feminization, commercialization and internationalization of this national pastime. Feminized and internationalized *muai Thai* could also be employed as a coherent vehicle to express aspects of contemporary Thai masculine selfhood beyond its convention. In other words, *muai Thai* cinema is as nuanced as other cinematic narratives despite accusations from the critics of its poor and unsophisticated plots.

Keywords: *Muai Thai* cinema, Thai boxing; Cultures of Thai men; Thai masculinity

บทคัดย่อ

ในบทความนี้ ผู้เขียนศึกษาการนำเสนอวัฒนธรรมบุรุษเพศสภาพร่วมสมัยของไทยโดยการเลือกวิเคราะห์และตีความหมายมวยไทยที่ปรากฏอยู่ในภาพยนตร์ไทย 4 เรื่อง ได้แก่ มวยไทยนายขนมต้ม (2546) องค์บาก (2546) ต้มยำกุ้ง (2548) และบิ๊ตตี้ฟูลบ็อกเซอร์ (2547) ภาพยนตร์ทั้งหมดนี้ได้รับการนำเสนอต่อสาธารณชนภายหลังสถานการณ์วิกฤติเศรษฐกิจครั้งสำคัญของประเทศในปี พ.ศ. 2540 ผู้เขียนนำเสนอว่า ภาพยนตร์ทั้ง 4 เรื่องได้ตอกย้ำภาพสะท้อนวัฒนธรรมบุรุษสภาพของสังคมไทยผ่านมวยไทย ซึ่งเป็นศิลปะการต่อสู้ประจำชาติอย่างเข้มข้น ผู้ชายไทยซึ่งถูกนำเสนอผ่านมุมมองของผู้สร้างภาพยนตร์ไทยกลุ่มหนึ่ง ได้แสดงความปรารถนาอย่างแรงกล้าที่จะแบกรับภาระและรับผิดชอบต่อความล้มเหลวของการพัฒนาเศรษฐกิจ และสังคมทั้งในระดับปัจเจกบุคคลและสังคมส่วนรวม ผู้ชายไทยอาศัยมวยไทยเป็นสื่อวัฒนธรรมในการแสดงตัวตนความเป็นลูกผู้ชาย

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The competing cultures among Thai men have not yet been fully explored in the studies of Thai films released after the economic crisis in 1997. Students of the Thai cinema in the post-economic crisis period have witnessed the revival of a "new film movement" (Anchalee Chaiworaporn, 2002, p. 457) and are rather optimistic and enthusiastic about the healthy future of the Thai film industry. Many of them argue that the re-emergence of the Thai cinema, marked by its commercial success and acceptance from critics both at home and abroad, owe a great deal to the 1997 economic crash and its subsequent turbulence, which deeply affected the Thai economy and society (Amporn Jirattikorn, 2003; Anchalee Chaiworaporn, 2002; Cummings, 2004; Knee, 2003; Lewis, 2006). Economic meltdowns have featured the most visible signs of anxiety, chaos, and frustration in Thai social life. Filmmakers have conspicuously reflected these themes in a series of internationally-acclaimed movies. Knee (2003) takes Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Fun Bar Karaoke* (1997), *Sixty-nine* (1999), and *Mon Rak Transistor* (*Transistor Love Story*) (2001) as the cinematic reflection of the Thai economic crisis. They are "the gendered resonances of Thailand's turn-of-the-millennium cultural and economic upheavals, while also addressing the place of Thai tradition in relation to these upheavals" (Knee, 2003, p.102). Knee argues that men and women negotiate the upheavals differently and the 1997 economic crisis has reaffirmed their expected traditional gender structures and roles. Amporn Jirattikorn (2003) shows how Thailand has hybridized and commodified its nationalistic sentiments through *Suriyothai* (2001), the most ambitious Thai-language film ever made. She too reads this film against the backdrop of the 1997 economic crisis and cultural crisis in Thailand. In many respects, *Suriyothai* represents well-designed Thai nationalistic responses to the destructive forces of globalization, at the same time projecting the official version of Thainess (*khwaam pen thai*) to the world. Commentaries on Thai men and women as gendered beings and their problematic discourses are also featured prominently in some post-1997 films, such as a faithful lover ghost in *Nang Nak* (1999) (Anchalee Chaiworaporn, 2004), macho gangsters in *2499 Dang Bailey and Young Gangsters* (*2499 Anhapan Krong Muang*) (1997) and *Fa Talai Jone* (2000) (Harrison, 2003), and a famous transvestite volleyball comedy *Satree Lex* (*The Iron Ladies*) (2000) (Ingawanij and MacDonald, 2005). Nonetheless, the discourses on Thai gender, especially the masculine side, in the post 1997 cinematic representations have not drawn enough serious attention from students of the Thai cinema, who have begun to make a strong contribution to scholarship, which Harrison (2005, pp. 5-6) calls "new directions in Thai cultural studies."

The Muai Thai cinema, specifically referring to films featuring aspects of Thai-style boxing and its surrounding masculine cultures, present themselves as an ideal subject for the discussion of the dynamic cultures of Thai men. Among diverse stories and themes of the post-1997 Thai cinema, *the muai Thai* action genre augurs

formed a core part of pre-modern military knowledge and skill. Young Thai men had to acquire these skills to help defend their localities against the invading Burmese as well as their rivalries from different localities. Together with sword and other traditional martial skills, *muai Thai* was a requirement for young men who wished to have a career as prestigious royal guards (*thahan luang*) serving the Kings of Ayutthaya. Like the notoriously publicized and commercially successful *Bang Rajan* (2001), *Muai Thai, Nai Khanom Tom* tells a story of village groups in Central Thailand fighting the mighty Burmese army with limited manpower and local resources available to them. It depicts *muai Thai* as practiced by Siamese peasant villagers of the Central Plain in the years prior to and after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. Although most young Thai boys learned and sharpened their fighting skills from their peers and older village folks, serious practitioners had to take advanced *muai Thai* training under the supervision of recognized masters (*khru muai*), who opened training grounds and accommodated young village men as their pupils (*luksit*).

Muai Thai, Nai Khanom Tom, like its predecessors, *Bang Rajan* (2001) and *Suriyothai* (2001), is an instance of "period films" (*nang yon yuk*) (Amporn Jirattikorn, 2003; Ingawanij, 2004), retelling, rewriting, and reconfirming the royally-oriented, nationalistic, "popular history" (Hong, 2004; Thongchai Winichakul, 2001) in Thailand. It features two important themes in this movie genre. First, it glorifies the popular myth of *Nai Khanom Tom*, who put up a legendary fight against the Burmese boxers during his days as a war captive, and who became the most important reference of contemporary *muai Thai* genealogy (Vail, 1998). As the film was produced based on the novel of the same title by *Khomthuan Khanthanu*, Thailand's winner of the 1983 Southeast Asia Writers' Award, rather than the royal chronicles, what unfolds is the fictitious status of this *muai Thai* heroism from below. It serves as an effective time-machine to bring to life a mythical Ayutthaya period *muai Thai* hero and teach some historical lessons to contemporary generations of Thai audiences. Secondly, the film reflects a strong intention to revive and conserve "the old school of *muai Thai*" (*muai boran*), which represents the genuine and valuable cultural knowledge and skill. In recent decades, there have been considerable efforts from *muai Thai* masters, former champions, official authorities, and educational institutes to save this traditional martial art from being over commercialized and internationalized. *Muai Thai* is indeed in a stage of decline as a spectator sport and as a form of sophisticated martial arts (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2005; Vail, 1998).

Men as productive and protective forces were very instrumental in the pre-modern Thai peasant villages. Men were expected to lead their family and village, especially during the times of war. They were vital forces in the village rice farming and local subsistence economy, while traditionally they were also expected to serve the Buddhist monkhood. In the time of war, men, together with capable women, became peasant warriors using their boxing and fencing skills to defend their families

women in the country's engendering representations of images in the international media, indeed want to make their voices heard and their presence felt. Thailand has emerged as a highly feminized subject in the Western/international media as a peaceful Buddhist society with famous tourist destinations and service industries (Lewis, 2006; van Esterik, 2000). Besides Thai Buddhist monks, Thai boxers, and male migrant workers, Thai men do not have any other stereotypical masculine image in the international community. The internationalization of *muai Thai* is designed to match Thailand's feminized images with its noted masculine reputation and representation. Both *Ong Bak* and *Tom Yum Goong* further reinstate the fact that the international image of Thainess is highly stereo-typicalized. Buddhism, elephants, sex workers, food, drugs and tourist attractions are chosen to feature in both movies as conscious attempts to market some familiar Thai images to the world.

Ong Bak and *Tom Yum Goong* display two determined, young men (Bunthing and Kham) from the Northeast Thai countryside on two separate fight-back missions to reclaim their cultural heritage, which is taken away from their villages by urban and international gangsters. Both of them are skillful practitioners of classical *muai Thai* styles, namely, *muai khat cheuak* (a boxing style using bare hands wrapped around with threads) and *muai khotchasan* (a militant boxing style to protect the royal elephants in pre-modern wartimes), which they have inherited from their elders. These traditional boxing knowledge and their skills are claimed to have higher ascetic and spiritual values than the current form of the highly commercialized, professional *muai Thai*. Both Bunthing and Kham are seeking revenge as well as revealing a pattern of die-hard determination in their search for justice. *The ban nok* (country bumpkin) cultural outlook, including rustic manners, codes of dress, and countryside style of face-to-face or 'tit-for-tat' confrontation, are their common trademarks. They are ready to risk their lives to bring back their respective stolen cultural heritages. Both *Ong Bak* and *Tom Yum Goong* represent ordinary action cinema full of "emotions rather than psychological motives" (Lewis, 2006, p.147). They share a common goal in idealizing Thai rural villages and their people as conservers and protectors of genuine cultural heritages. They depict a world where genuine culture is no longer found in urban areas. Urban and foreign threats at home (Bangkok) and abroad (Sydney, Australia) are singled out through criminal gangsters with their international networks. Capable tough fighting men and valuable cultural heritages are represented as well-groomed and still practiced in rural villages, especially in the Northeastern (Isan) region of the country, which for many decades has been known as the most impoverished and underdeveloped region in Thailand. In the Thai countryside, the continuity of a romanticized past unrealistically prevails and is assumed as unbroken or uncontaminated by the germs of urban or Western materialistic greed and vice.

Tony Jaa asserts a Thai masculinity in the medium of international film. The culture of Thai man is predominantly characterized by their ethnocultural origin and

invested and cultivated as the "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985) in order to earn their claim to livelihood and social honor. The Thai masculine subaltern modes of speaking and fighting through *muai Thai* is best unveiled in the metaphor of "lives of hunting dogs" (*ma lai nuea*) (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2003; 2005). The hunting dog metaphor signifies its true underdog socioeconomic position. Young boys and men trade their sweat and flesh for money in an extremely short boxing career, as most of them learn their trade in their early teens and finish in their mid 20s. If their path towards earning wealth and social glory as *muai Thai* champions fails, they simply become spent bodies, who have to struggle to cope with life's uncertainties on their own.

Muai Thai with its monotonous tough hunting dog image is challenged by the occasional arrival of some feminized fighters. None of the films in my selection shows the inner life of the hunting dogs better than *Beautiful Boxer*. This film depicts an extraordinary life-time struggle of an extraordinary boxer in his childhood who achieves his much-desired status of a newly assigned female gender in his post *muai Thai* career. This cinematic narrative exhibits some stunning contradictory and paradoxical dramatic, real-life episodes. This *Beautiful Boxer*, emerging from a very poor family background from Northern Thailand, developing his 'heart' for feminine attachment and sensibility, yet joining his male peers to adopt boxing to fend off poverty and support his family, fights extremely hard to make his life-time desire a reality. Freeing his 'female self' from being imprisoned in the male body and being caught up in some hated masculine environment, 'he' has finally become 'she' through the advancement of medical technology (sex reassignment surgery -- SRS) and her emotionally traumatic journeys.

Beautiful Boxer offers a rich-text, critical narrative of the media-saturated feminization of *muai Thai*, the cultural domain of which traditionally and exclusively honors men and marginalizes women. The life story of Parinya Charoenphon, widely known by his popular nickname, Nong Tum, illuminates the multiple acts of transgression of male and female categories, biological and social bodies, and masculine and feminine cultures. It confirms an argument that the Thai construction of gender is rather "ambiguous" and "fluid" (Keyes, 1986; Jackson and Cook, 1999; van Esterik, 2000), meaning that being male or female is not biologically given or fixed, but culturally constructed. *Muai Thai* offers a tough way out of poverty for poor, young boys from the countryside and from urban working class backgrounds. It also provides them with a Geertzian "model of" and "model for" (Geertz, 1973) appropriating, emulating, or even rejecting (for someone like Nong Tum and her peer-transvestite boxers) Thai male gender construction. *Beautiful Boxer* is an instance of the latter case of how emotionally and culturally difficult it is to relinquish one's biological male given-ness and culturally-constructed-ness as much as to how

Nong Tum's "first-person narrative" (Oradol Kaewprasert, 2006) shows that life as a transvestite is far from smooth and that it is not openly accepted in Thailand. It begins with his excessive fondness of "beautiful things" during his formative years. As a young boy, he fell in love with the highly feminized characters in the *likae* performance, adored the contestants in the temple fair beauty pageant, and admired female characters (female friends, a former transvestite beauty queen, and mother). He grew up dreaming female dreams. He always wished to have long hair, wear women's dresses, wear women's makeup, and imitate women's manners. He hated rough play and bullies, which he received from his male friends and had a distaste for fierce boxing in the temple fairs. However, boxing engaged him deeply in a love-hate relationship throughout his life. He became a *muai Thai* trainee under *Phi Chat's* supervision in his teenage years and saw it as a viable way to earn cash for his poverty-stricken family. In the training camp and in the fighting ring, he never found himself at home among boys and men. He was uneasy and uncomfortable throughout his days in the boxing camp as he had to hide his privacy from the curious and prejudiced gaze of his male colleagues. He usually took refuge by confiding and sharing his secret dreams with *Phi Chat's* wife in the kitchen. Despite his boxing talents, Nong Tum's effeminate identity as *nak muai kathoei* (transvestite boxer) exposed him both as the passive subject of embarrassing jokes by the men surrounding him and as the target of gender discrimination in the male-exclusive boxing world. Among many embarrassing incidents which Nong Tum suffered were the two embarrassing moments including the daily communal bath-time when he had to take a bath among groups of half-naked male boxers and the weigh-in procedure prior to a fight in Bangkok, where every boxer is required to step on the weighting machine nude in front of a curious crowd of male on looks. Nong Tum broke into tears and insisted on retaining his underwear for this important pre-match ritual of Thai boxing. Nong Tum was repeatedly the subject of double-standard treatment and insults from his opponents in the ring and people (e.g., corner man, trainer, former boxer, and gambler), who wanted to defend the boxing world as the traditional domain of male dignity and honor. They were offended to fight or witness a transvestite boxer, wearing makeup and performing a woman-like *wai khru* (boxing ritual dance to pay homage to teachers/masters) on the ring. Many opponents looked down upon his feminine personality, which sharply contradicted *muai Thai's* tough manners, before they suffered defeats at hand of this *nak muai kathoei*, who was determined to outfight and outwit the male bias against him.¹

¹ Nong Tum confirms male prejudices against his identity as *nak muai kathoei* in the boxing ring in the following interview. "When you like a woman, to fight like a man is very difficult. you're a woman doing the manliest thing. When men fight with other men, it is different from when they fight with me and lose. And that makes them fight extra hard. They were yelled at by their coaches. Their friends told to quit fighting because they lost to a transvestite. they thought I was less than them. That was why I kissed the opponents whom I defeated. When I won, I could see that my opponents were crestfallen. I would go up to them, say sorry' and kiss them on the cheek. And I apologised sincerely. I didn't kiss them because I thought they were cute" (Amitha Amranand 2006)

his SRS was required by law, his father's eventual approval had a profound effect on his morale. Nong Tum was always haunted by a sense of lifetime guilt toward his father, who had struggled to make sense of the fact that he would forever lose his biological male heir after his SRS. Nong Tum's decision to part ways with his male body and masculine self can never guarantee a smooth transition to a female gender, but rather a new problematic logic of selfhood, that is, how will 'she' live her rather masculine *saksi* and *heart* in her newly-acquired female body? Would it become a continuation of her imprisonment and struggle, which 'she' had fought to escape throughout her life as a male? This dilemma is solved once Nong Tum retired from boxing and became at peace at last within his newly crafted body and selfhood away from the rigid and suppressive masculine world.

In conclusion, all *muai Thai* cinemas in my selection strongly connote the persistence as well as the transformation of contemporary Thai masculine culture. *Muai Thai* is by far the most prominent cultural embodiment of Thai masculinity. In the post 1997 economic crisis and the rebirth of Thailand's new cinema, *muai Thai* cinemar witness Thai men's contentious desire for a heroic return to glory at the national and international level. Thai manhood is not given by birth, but culturally made up and *muai Thai* offers itself as a channel for man-making in the Thai cultural tradition. Thai men have carried some historical burdens to defend Thai cultural honor and dignity. Men's rights and privileges to defend their national and cultural identities are no longer automatic. Thai men in the four cinematic representations of *muai Thai* consciously fight hard to earn their honors to represent their masculine Thainess on the world stage, where the symbolic patterns of *luk phu chai* (manly son) are intensively contested. However, *muai Thai*'s authority to monopolize the masculine side of Thainess is significantly contested by the feminization and internationalization of this professional sport. *Muai Thai* has finally arrived at a complicated junction, where it can mean many things to many people. Through the years of his drastic *muai Thai* career, Nong Tum became a new, sexually-reassigned person and achieved her life-time desire.

There are at least three ways in which Thai men's historical and cultural burdens are formulated and expressed in *Muai Thai Nai Khanom Tom*, *Ong Bak*, *Tom Yum Goong*, and *Beautiful Boxer*. Firstly, through the cinematic representations of *muai Thai* as a monumental marker of national cultural heritage, Thai men impose their heroic statements and inscribe their nationalist sentiments for their audiences. *Muai Thai* as a lethal weapon can always incite excitement from local and international audiences and weave itself into the popular historical imagination. Secondly, through the cinematic representations and commodifications of *muai Thai* as a movement "toward retrieval and renewal of important cultural and historical traditions in danger of being lost" (Williams, 1997, p.74), *muai Thai* has suddenly become an exotic full-contact contestation worthy of attracting tourists and

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