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**Muai Thai Cinemas
and the Burdens of Thai Men**

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Muai Thai Cinemas and the Burdens of Thai Men

Pattana Kitiarsa¹

“Fuck *Muai Thai!*,” a ferocious *farang* (Westerner) fighter hurled this insult at Bunthing, a young *Muai Thai* practitioner from the countryside of Northeastern Thailand, in an attempt to provoke him into a fight. He accompanied his curses with a rude finger gesture in the face of the young Thai. This confrontation is part of many spectacular scenes in the internationally-acclaimed film, *Ong Bak* [*Ong Bak: Muay Thai Warrior*] (2003). Bunthing, representing *Muai Thai* fighters as well as Thai men in general, has to confront numerous international martial arts specialists in, for example, Kung Fu and Kickboxing, as well as *farang* street fighters. He had at first no intention of fighting the foreigners in the Bangkok underground gambling ring -- his concern being merely to reclaim some donation money given to him by the people in his rural village community in support of his quest to bring back to the village temple the stolen head of a sacred Buddha statue. Hamlae, also known by his Westernized name as “George”, his village friend turned Bangkok petty criminal, had stolen the money to place a bet in a human cockpit, an arena where human fighters face off each other like fighting cocks. When Bunthing goes there to investigate, he is challenged by the blood-thirsty *farang* fighter mentioned earlier, who adds injury to insult by harassing a young Thai waitress. Her male colleague tries to rescue her but in vain, and both are severely injured. The onlookers condemn Bunthing, the only opponent capable of matching the tough foreigner, as he appears reluctant to use his skills to save his fellow Thais. This scene effectively displays a critical moment, in which Thai men’s toughness as well as the country’s masculine pride are at stake. One Thai woman is harassed, one countryman severely beaten up, and *Muai Thai*’s reputation besmirched: all by a vicious Westerner on home-turf. It is up to Bunthing, the young *Muai Thai* warrior, not only to save himself but also to defend the pride of Thai men, an important factor embedded historically and culturally in the domain of national identities (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2006; Vail, 1998).

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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 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 future health of the Thai film industry. Many of them argue that the re-emergence of Thai cinemas, marked by its commercial success and the praise of critics both at home and abroad, owe a great deal to the 1997 economic crash and its subsequent turbulences, which deeply affected the Thai economy and society (Amporn Jirattikorn, 2003; Anchalee Chaiworaporn, 2002; Cummings, 2004; Knee, 2003; Lewis, 2006). The economic meltdown has made visible the anxiety, chaos, and frustration in Thai social life. Filmmakers have highlighted these themes in a series of internationally-acclaimed movies. Knee (2003) takes Pen-ek Ratanaruang’s *Fun Bar Karaoke* (1997), *6ixtynin9* (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 traditional gender structures and roles. Amporn Jirattikorn (2003) shows how Thailand has hybridized and commoditized its nationalistic sentiments through the most ambitious Thai-language film ever made, *Suriyothai* (2001). She too reads this film against the backdrops of the 1997 economic crisis and cultural crisis in Thailand. In many respects, *Suriyothai* is a well crafted Thai nationalistic response to the destructive forces of globalization, at the same time also projecting the official version of Thainess (*khwan pen thai*) to the world. Commentaries on Thai men and women as gendered beings and their problematic discourses are also featured prominently in the 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 Anthaphan 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 gender, in the post 1997 cinematic representations have not drawn enough serious attention from students of Thai cinema who are contributing to what Harrison (2005, pp. 5-6) calls “new directions in Thai cultural studies.”

Muai Thai cinema, that is, films featuring aspects of Thai-style boxing and its masculine environment provide fertile ground for analyzing the dynamic aspects of Thai male culture. Among the diverse stories and themes of the post-1997 Thai cinema, the *Muai Thai* action genre is especially conducive to a study of Thai masculinity. I have purposely chosen to focus on four *Muai Thai* films, *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 the gendered tensions and changing cultures of Thai men in the post-1997 economic crisis. Although these cinematic stories deal with different periods of history and connote different aspects of male gender construction and contestation, I believe that the films give a true picture of what it means to be Thai men at present. They make comments along the line of the Foucauldian “history of the present” (Foucault, 1977, p.31), especially concerning the social realities of the country in the period after the 1997 economic crisis, rather than the reliving of the nostalgic past.

My argument is that Thai men are consciously and emotionally eager to shoulder the burden of the nation’s economic failures and the cultural chaos brought about by the globalization of Thailand’s economy and the transnationalization of its culture since its incorporation into the global economy in the 1960s. As exemplified in the 1997 economic crisis, Thailand, under its male-dominated leadership, has declined. The movies I am discussing in this paper attempt to convince their audiences that it is, and should be, men’s historical burden to uphold and defend the country. To make this masculine mission possible, *Muai Thai* is actively depicted by a group of Thai filmmakers as the ideal form of cultural knowledge and skill to help Thailand revive, recover, and reclaim its dignity and pride through face-to-face confrontation and contestation. *Muai Thai* cinema illuminates Thai men’s desire to reclaim their nationalistic heroism, which is needed to restore the country’s troubled image. However, neither *Muai Thai*, nor the culture of Thai man is homogeneous and unproblematic, at least during the country’s cultural and economic upheavals. *Muai Thai* itself has to endure challenges from both outside and inside, whether it is employed as the indigenous lethal weapon to fight the nation’s enemies, like the Burmese in the 18th century, or the urban and Western vices that threaten it in the present. I also argue that *Muai Thai* is itself being challenged as an exclusive male cultural domain by the feminization, commercialization and internationalization of this national sport. *Beautiful Boxer* problematizes and challenges the traditional images of both *Muai Thai* and the overall culture of Thai masculinity. Feminized

and internationalized *Muai Thai* could also be employed to express aspects of contemporary Thai selfhood beyond its conventional form. In other words, *Muai Thai* cinema is as nuanced as other cinematic narratives despite criticism of their poor and unsophisticated plots.

Muai Thai, Nai Khanom Tom [*Mr. Khanom Tom: A Muai Thai Legend*] presents the traditional martial art in historical context when it formed a core part of pre-modern military knowledge and skill. Young Thai men had to acquire these skills to help defend their villages against the invading Burmese as well as their rivals from different localities. Together with sword and other traditional armored skills, *Muai Thai* was a requirement for young men who wish to take up prestigious careers as royal guards (*thahan luang*) serving the Kings of Ayutthaya. Like the 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 using 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 schools and accommodated young village men as their pupils (*luksit*).

Muai Thai, Nai Khanom Tom, like its predecessors *Bang Rajan* (2001) and *Suriyothai* (2001), is a “period film” (*nang yon yuk*) (Amporn Jirattikorn, 2003; Ingawanij, 2004) retelling Thai history as “popular history” (Hong, 2004; Thongchai Winichakul, 2001). It features two important themes. First, it glorifies the popular myth of the warrior 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 is based on the novel of the same title by Khomthuan Khanthanu, Thailand’s winner of the 1983 Southeast Asia Writers’ Award, rather than on the royal chronicles, what unfolds is a fictitious version of *Muai Thai* heroism seen from the point of view of the common man. 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 seeks to revive and conserve “the old school of *Muai Thai*” (*Muai boran*), which represents a genuine and valuable cultural knowledge and skill. In recent decades, there have been considerable efforts by *Muai Thai* masters, former champions, official

authorities, and educational institutes to save this traditional martial art from being overly commercialized and internationalized. Contemporary *Muai Thai* is indeed in a stage of decline as a spectator sport and a sophisticated martial art (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2005; Vail, 1998).

Men were important as productive and protective forces in pre-modern Thai peasant villages. They were expected to lead their families and villages, especially during times of war, playing vital roles in village rice farming and the local subsistence economy. They were also expected to serve as Buddhist monks. In times of war, men, together with capable women, became peasant warriors using their boxing and fencing skills to defend their families and villages. Local territorial units, such as *bang* (a settlement unit based on the waterway) and *khung* (a settlement unit based on the river bend) were more real to the protagonists than an abstract centralized kingdom-hood. These local settlements were their birthplaces, which were worth the sacrifice of one's life. The movie also shows the negative side of Thai men. Even though they are men of pride and dignity (*saksi*), they were also full of prejudice and arrogance (*thi thi*), often engaging in rivalry and factionalism rather than cooperation and unity (*khwam samakkhi*). Fierce rivalry and competition for personal gain, power and fame turn friends into foes. In the worst cases, some morally corrupted men abandon their own people in order to ally themselves with the enemy, causing pain and fatalities. Resentment and revenge among men, disunity among Thais, are recurrent themes in most popular accounts of history and politics in contemporary Thailand.

The life journey of Khanom Tom is portrayed in the heroic mode of representation. It tells the remarkable story of a young boy who emerged from his traumatic past (his parents and sister were killed by the Burmese, and he was brought up by the two most important paternal and moral figures in the Siamese tradition: a Buddhist abbot and a wandering master), to become the famous legendary boxer who defeated the Burmese boxers in the presence of their King and won the King's royal pardon to release the Thai war captives. Khanom Tom overcame threats and dangerous conflicts with his boxing skills, in the process reaffirming his patriotic commitment to his people. The film also symbolizes the historical struggle of the Siamese in overcoming problems such as weak leadership, factional rivalry and defeat at the hands of their traditional foe, to regain their strength, and reestablished their autonomous polity. "Ayutthaya has never run out of heroes" (*krung sri ayutthaya mai sin khon di*), goes the

popular old saying. *Muai Thai* through the agencies of a few good Thai men is time and again cited as a reminder of how the old generations of Thais fought and defended their homeland.

The heroic journeys brave Thai men undertake are echoed in *Ong Bak* and *Tom Yum Goong*, which consciously situate *Muai Thai* warriors in the global cultural arena. Both movies make efforts to glorify male heroism in protecting and saving the symbols of religious identity and cultural heritage of Thailand (Buddha statues in *Ong Bak* and elephants in *Tom Yum Goong*). Exploiting the phenomenal talent of Tony Jaa (Phanom Yeerum), both films reemphasize and re-instate the supremacy of *Muai Thai* to the world's martial arts audience. As *Muai Thai* operates through the bodily and representational agencies of Thai men, they unavoidably speak to the world in a masculine voice and with authority. Thai men, who have been less visible internationally as compared to Thai women in the country's representations of images in the transnational cultural flows, indeed want to make their voices heard and 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 own other stereotypical masculine poster in the international community. The internationalization of *Muai Thai* is designed to counteract Thailand's feminized images with masculine ones. Both *Ong Bak* and *Tom Yum Goong* further reinstate the fact that the transnational flow of images and information concerning Thai-ness are highly stereotyped. Buddhism, elephants, sex workers, food, drugs and tourist attractions are featured in both movies as conscious attempts to market some familiar Thai images to the world.

Ong Bak and *Tom Yum Goong* portray two determined, young men (Bunthing and Kham) from the Northeast Thai countryside on missions to reclaim their cultural heritage, taken away from their villages by urban and transnational 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 elephant in the pre-modern wartimes), which they have inherited from their elders. These ancient boxing knowledge and skills claim to have higher ascetic and spiritual values than the current form of the highly commercialized, professional *Muai Thai*. Both Bunthing and Kham set out to seek revenge and justice. The *ban nok* (country bumpkin)

cultural outlook including rustic manners, codes of dress, and peasant style of face-to-face or ‘tit-for-tat’ confrontation, are their common features. 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 tendency to idealize Thai rural villages and their people as conservers and protectors of genuine Thai cultural heritage. 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 depicted in the form of criminal gangsters and their transnational networks. On the other hand, authentic Thai culture and values are represented by tough fighting men and traditional practices 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, a romanticized past prevails, seemingly unbroken or uncontaminated by the germs of urban or Western materialistic greed and vice.

Tony Jaa asserts a Thai masculinity in the medium of the international film. The culture of Thai men is predominantly characterized by their ethnocultural origin and class, not by the state’s definition based on the official discourse of citizenship. *Ong Bak* and *Tom Yum Goong* depict the passage to Thai manhood of men from the countryside and working-class background. In both films, Tony Jaa epitomizes the ideal good man from the countryside. His *Muai Thai* talent and strong moral commitment redefines Thai men’s toughness and courage to fight for justice on the global cultural stage. He glorifies the rural working class man’s heroic path from his rural, working class roots and distinctive ethnocultural background (a Thai-Lao-speaking village young man/boxer and a son of Kui-speaking elephant mahout from a rural village in Northeastern Thailand). He makes his country proud through his ferocious *Muai Thai* skills, putting them into practice with discipline and morality. Moreover, his passion to fight is not driven by pride in his own *Muai Thai* skills. Rather, he is humble because of his ethnocultural and class origins when he displays his rural Thai bumpkin identity. His motivation to fight stems from his deep obligation and affection for his village cultural heritages (symbolized by Buddha statues and elephants). In other words, his ethnocultural roots paved the way for his fateful adventures from the peripheral countryside to the marginal segments (underground gambling dens, low-end tourist area, and Chinatown)

of the cosmopolitan centers in Bangkok and Sydney. His skill in old-style *Muai Thai* allows him to fight his way through.

Brutal *Muai Thai* fights in both movies are always about the protagonist defending his livelihood and survival. Viewing Tony Jaa's roles from a local standpoint, his masculine heroism is based on instinctive acts of self-defense against attacks and exploitation by urban, transnational criminal networks. His village as well as his own family's spiritual well-being and livelihood are as important as the honor and pride of *Muai Thai* and nationalistic Thainess. A sacred Buddha statue is vital to the community spirit of the village and its subsistence because its entire rice harvest depends on the rainmaking power and ritual symbolism surrounding the holy statue. For elephant-owning families in rural Thailand, the giant mammal is not merely an endangered species, but a cash earner through its incredible strength and intelligent performance of tasks. Keeping an elephant is an enormous economic and social investment for its owner. It is a livelihood involving several individuals and households. In this respect, Tony Jaa's roles confirm one of the principal facets of what it means to be a man. He has put his life in the service of his family, as breadwinner, and his village, protector of the local heritage. In both movies, he battles to defend his family and village folks' hard-won sources of livelihood and well-being.

Both movies show how "the subaltern" can speak up (Spivak, 1993) and fight for their existence from their marginal positions. Subaltern male heroism often demands a certain degree of bodily sacrifice. Young men's bodies are heavily 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* are best expressed through the metaphor of "lives of hunting-dogs" (*ma lai nuea*) (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2003; 2005). The hunting-dog metaphor signifies the 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 their careers in their mid 20s. If their path towards wealth and social glory as *Muai Thai* champions fails, they simply become spent bodies, struggling to cope with life's uncertainties on their own.

The tough hunting-dog image of *Muai Thai* is challenged by the occasional arrival of feminized fighters. None of the films in my selection shows the inner life of the hunting-dogs

better than *Beautiful Boxer*. This film depicts the extraordinary life struggles of a boxer who desires to become a female. This cinematic narrative contains some dramatic, real-life episodes. The “Beautiful Boxer”, emerging from a very poor family background from Northern Thailand, hankers to realize his feminine sensibility, yet he joins his male peers to become a boxer so as to fend off poverty and support his family; he fights extremely hard to make his life-time desire a reality – to free his ‘female self’ from being imprisoned in the male body. “He” finally becomes a “she” with the aid of medical technology.

Beautiful Boxer is a critical narrative of the media-saturated feminization of *Muai Thai*, a domain 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 transgressions 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 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 the 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 how awkward and ambiguous it is to come to terms with one’s realization of female personhood.

This biographical drama of a famous transvestite *Muai Thai* fighter in *Beautiful Boxer* exemplifies the cultural-gendering themes in Thai cinema, in which the body looms large as a fundamental subject of discourse (Foucault, 1977; 1980; Turner, 1996). Nong Tum weaves his webs of liminal gender identity through the Thai Buddhist framework of fateful destiny, which he himself strongly believes resulted from his good and bad karma in the past. Nong Tum really believes that the sinful acts he committed during his time as a Buddhist novice (*samanen*) have a consequence in his later life predicaments. He had violated the Buddhist Sangha Vinaya regulations for a novice by committing a series of immeritous acts such as, applying some cosmetics (lipstick and puff powder), temporarily self-defrocking to wash dishes in the market and at temple-fair food stalls to earn money for his brother and

imprisoned parents, and telling lies to his peer novices and the abbot. These acts are sinful despite his good intentions. Nong Tum blames himself for failing to exercise proper self-discipline and control over his obsessive desire to become a woman while carrying out his male sacred duties as a son and as a Buddhist. Later, he suffers the consequences of his bad karma for being too indulgent with “beautiful things” (*khong suai suai ngam ngam*). His difficult journey from a male person to a female one is interpreted by this karmic explanation. Of course, he finally decides to pursue his dream at all costs to become a woman. His karmically-determined fate finally favors his feminine sensitivity.

Muai Thai as a male-dominated cultural sphere and a masculine social institution comes under a severe test when Nong Tum emerges from his Northern Thai training camp as a noted professional boxer. Even though Nong Tum has a feminine character dwelling in his male body while practicing one of the most masculine careers available to working-class young men, the movie does not take away the fact that Nong Tum earns his living and supports his impoverished family through the masculine job of *Muai Thai*. Nong Tum climbs up the professional ladder by sharpening his skills as a novice boxer in temple fair tournaments, testing himself for years in order to accumulate his “bones of boxing experience” (*kraduk Muai*), and then advancing to Bangkok’s famous *Lumphini* boxing stadium, where he finally makes his breakthrough to a better life of fortune and fame. Late into his fighting career, when his body reacts positively to some female artificial hormones, he is invited to fight a woman wrestler in Tokyo. The fight is highly symbolic to him as a boxer and a person undergoing gender transfer. He realizes during the bone-breaking fight that he can no longer live his life as a person who possesses a woman’s heart in a man’s body. His female-hormone infused body could not longer bear the pain and hardship of boxing. He, therefore, decides to divorce himself from his biological male body and problematic masculine past.

Nong Tum’s “first-person narrative” (Oradol Kaewprasert, 2006) shows that life as a transvestite is far from smooth as it is still not a condition that is openly accepted in Thailand. It began with his excessive fondness of “beautiful things” during his formative years. As a young boy, he fell in love with the highly feminized character in the *likae* performance, adored the contestants in the temple fair beauty pageant, and admired the females in his life (female friends, a former transvestite beauty queen, and mother). He grew up dreaming female dreams. He wished to have long hair, wear women’s dresses, women’s makeup, and to imitate woman’s manners. He hated the rough play and bullying, which he received from

his male friends. He also detested the violent boxing matches in the temple fairs. Throughout his life, he had a love-hate relationship with boxing. He became a *Muai Thai* trainee under Phi Chat's supervision in his teenage years and saw the sport as a viable way to earn cash for his poverty-stricken family. In the training camp and in the fighting ring, he was never at home among boys and men. He was uneasy and uncomfortable throughout his days in the boxing camp as he had to hide his body from the curious gazes of his male colleagues. He usually took refuge by 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) made him the passive subject of embarrassing jokes by the men surrounding him and the target of gender discrimination in the male-exclusive boxing world. Among many embarrassing incidents which Nong Tum suffered were the occasions during the daily communal baths when he had to bath among groups of half-naked male boxers, and the weigh-in procedure prior to the fight in Bangkok where every boxer is required to step on the weight scale nude in front of curious male on-lookers. On the latter occasion, 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 maintain the boxing world as the traditional domain of male dignity and honor. It offended them to fight or watch a transvestite boxer wearing makeup and performing a woman-like *wai khru* (boxing ritual dance to pay homage to teachers/masters) in 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 overcome the male biases against him.²

Beautiful Boxer exposes the gender tensions and rigid structure of Thai masculine culture. Nong Tum feminized *Muai Thai*, and his controversial boxing career produced some effects on the Thai boxing world and the masculine culture of Thai men. From his marginal position

² Nong Tum confirms male prejudices against his identity as *nak Muai kathoei* on the boxing ring in the following interview. "When you feel like a woman, to be fighting like a man is very difficult. You're a woman doing the manliest thing. When men fight with other men, it matters differently than when they fight with me and lose. And that made them fight extra hard. They were yelled at by their coaches. Their friends told them 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).

as *nak Muai kathoei*, he reveals the dark side of Thai men's world, which is full of narrow-minded gender prejudice, exploitation of the weaker members of society, and personal rivalry. He was treated like a clown in the boxing ring rather than a serious contender. His notoriety because of the attention of the media and the tourism promotion authority was an insult. They painted him as a rare, exotic species of *nak Muai kathoei* from the countryside, presenting him as a new-found tourist attraction to lure more foreign tourists during the country's difficult years of the post 1997 economic turmoil. His boxing prowess and talents were rarely honored. The media and the public were more curious about the development of his biological body and personal life than his boxing skills. He was never recognized as a hero when he fought against foreign fighters. When he went to fight a Japanese female wrestler and won a hard-fought match, the Thai public saw it as a way for him to make some good money, which was required for his sex-change surgery.

Despite his successful attempts to become a woman, Nong Tum's feminized boxing legacy is still far from producing any significant transforming effects on the Thai boxing world. It certainly fell short of overcoming male prejudices in the male-oriented social institution. It was more like a passing fad. The training ground and the boxing arena are the places in Thailand where male disciplinary regime matters most. Nong Tum's desire to be true to himself was constrained by the masculine regimes of symbolic and professional ethical regulations. Phi Chat inscribed in him the professional ethics of Thai boxing as a manly contest in which every fighter has to fight to his full capability in order to attain the *Muai Thai*'s male honor and dignity (*saksi muai Thai*). Nong Tum could wear all the makeup he wanted to, so long as he fought hard and properly upheld *saksi muai Thai*. The focal point in the inner battle between the male-Nong Tum and his female counterpart is centered on the embodiments of *saksi* and *heart*. He fought hard to attend and uphold his *saksi*, while still listening to his undeterred heart. Although both *saksi* and *heart* have their feminine manifestations in Nong Tum's life ventures, they are by essence very masculine subjects.

In addition, Nong Tum's life as a young boxer and a man was deeply influenced by male authorities (the abbot, the father, and his trainer, Phi Chat). These influences occurred in the open and public domain of his life, whereas those from feminine figures (his mother, a transvestite beauty queen) were mostly kept secret and private to himself. Although his parents' consent to 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 guilt towards 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 result in 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 new 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 with his newly crafted body and selfhood away from the rigid and suppressive masculine world.

In conclusion, all the *Muai Thai* films 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* films bear witness to Thai men's desire for a heroic return to glory at the national and transnational stage. Thai manhood is not given by birth but is culturally constructed, and *Muai Thai* offers a channel for the making of manhood in the Thai cultural tradition. Thai men have carried the historical burden in defending Thai cultural honor and dignity. Men's right and privilege 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 the honor 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 transnationalization of this professional sport. *Muai Thai* has finally arrived at a complicated junction in which it could mean many things to many people. Through the years of his drastic *Muai Thai* career, Nong Tum became a new, sexually-transformed 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 an important marker of national cultural heritage, Thai men expressed their heroic aspirations and nationalist sentiments to their audiences. *Muai Thai* as a lethal form of combat has the ability to incite excitement in the local as well as international audiences, and to weave itself into the

popular 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, 1997:74), *Muai Thai* has suddenly become an exotic fighting sport able to attract the attention of tourists and the international martial arts community. Perhaps, *Muai Thai* is the only traditional Thai masculine skill which is marketable on a relatively large scale around the world (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2003). It helps reassert Thai men’s masculine position as proud owners and heirs of a sophisticated, yet ferocious martial art tradition in the global/transnational context. Finally, through the feminization of what has been a rigid and chauvinistic masculinity, *Muai Thai* and the notion of Thai manhood are being increasingly contested. Transvestite boxers like Nong Tum and her colleagues (Renesson, 2005) have exposed the ambiguity of Thai gender construction and redefined the gender tension in the cultural domain which was once monopolized by men. Together with other invisible cultures of cosmopolitan-urban men (e.g., gay men, male models, racially-mixed children, the Sino-Thai nouveau riche, or men from professional middle class background), the feminization of Thai boxing signifies an emergence of ‘new masculinity’ and poses some serious challenges to the old masculine model (e.g., *nakleng*, godfather, Buddhist monk, and traditional boxer) in contemporary Thailand.

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