

Transgender Culture and Thai Boxing.

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First of all I would like to apologize since even though I have been thinking about this presentation for quite a long time I had to prepare it in a hurry. It may be a little bit messy! Secondly, I have to precise that I am not all well acquainted with the gender issues yet. Thus this paper is not a well-integrated analysis of the relation between Thai boxing or Muay Thai and transgender phenomena in Thailand. Through exposing a few keys of understanding of the national success of transvestites as Muay Thai boxers in Thailand, I shall lay down a few perspectives that stand as many tracks to be followed during a future fieldwork that the ethnologic methodology I assume requires. I draw my data from a daily life experience in Thailand between 1999 and 2001 when I was carrying a fieldwork about Thai Boxing, and the reading of Thai newspapers (general interest ones as well as specialized in boxing).

As a matter of fact, the Muay Thai's image elaborated daily through its media coverage makes it a truly gendered activity. Definitely, it draws on masculine behaviour. Peter Vail (1998) sees Thai Boxing as the womb of hyper-masculinity. Considering this, I wish to question the confusing success of two cross-dressing boxers, Nong Tum and his recent emulator Nong Tim who is yet to be as famous as the former. I shall make use of the recent developments of gender analysis in Thailand embedded within the contemporary critical theory. Peter Jackson (2003)¹ for instance, shows how the performative norms of gender were altered and emphasized by the Thai State since the middle of the nineteenth century onward. *A process that has to be conceived as a self-civilizing response to the critics of the colonial powers seeing the androgyny of the local population as an objective sign of its backwardness.*

I would like to test the hypothesis that the high mediatization of Nong Tum can be related to the management of Thai bodies not only at the domestic level but also and primarily

¹ Peter Jackson, 2003, "Performative Genders, Perverse Desires: A Bio-History of Thailand's Same-Sex and Transgender Cultures", *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, Issue 9, august 2003.

at the international one. The nexus of the argumentation lies with gendered bodies to be a convenient support for mapping the Thai body and by so, negotiating the Thai Nation outlines². Which is particularly significant if one regards the emphasis Thai media put on the coverage of international boxing programs on the one hand, of international beauty pageants that bestows unambiguous feminine gendered bodies on the other hand. The question here today is in what kind of particular way do cross-dressing boxers bring along something special with their bodies in such a masculine oriented discipline like Muay Thai?

Firstly, I shall enlighten biographical features of a cross dressing boxer widely known as Nong Tum (Parinya Jaroenphol, or Kiatbusaba). He has fought Thai boxing bouts from 1994 up to the year 2000 and his image was omnipresent in the national media from 1998 to early 2000 just after he proceeded to a surgical operation that made him a woman and that forced him out of the muay thai rings. She is trying nowadays to make her way into show business as an entertainer. Nong Toom's national if not international success was crystallized in a movie called "Beautiful boxer" directed by Ekachai Euakrongtham that depicts Nong Toom's biography (2003). The movie put emphasis on the reasons why a young boy from a northern Thailand village who realizes about his feminine identity during a stay at a Buddhist temple decides to become a boxer. The story as presented inform us about two main motives: first of all, Nong Toom sees apprenticeship of muay thai as a mean to defend himself against his peers who provoke him on the basis of his self-assumed behaviour as a *kathoey*, a word that is used to refer to the people we would call men who are transvestites or transsexuals, that is, in a Thai perspective, a "second kind of woman" (*phu ying praphet song*). Secondly, and as Nong Toom made it widely known himself through the media during his short career, boxing was a way to get the money necessary in order to perform the surgical operation needed to make "his body and heart going in the same direction" (*rang kai kap hua jai pai thit thang dio kan*).

Like other boxers, prize fighting enables one to repay one's parents good deeds, notably by helping them to step out the low status as peasants they are usually stuck in. Nonetheless Nong Toom's debt is significantly peculiar since being a *kathoey* is recognized as bestowing demerit (*baap*) to parents when children, especially boys through their ordination

² Bernard Formoso has showed how the Thais, the Isans in particular, think the different social groups at every level following metaphors of the human body (1987 et 2001). This last one represents an adequate tool of discrimination to think the boundaries of the social and cultural bodies. It has to be suggested here the great importance of the human body as a mean for the Thais to manage their relations to foreigners. According to Peter Jackson (2003), we have to acknowledge the human body in the Thai context as marked by gender behavioural performative norms.

as Buddhist monks, are supposed to give them merit. Hence, Nong Toom's quest takes an other dimension.

As others had explained previously, gender performative roles rely much on the body, outstandingly it's control during every day life. I make mine the stance Penny Van Esterik assume when she says that in Thailand, the self-definition is body-based (1999). Drawing on the dynamic perspective she holds, one can consider Thai Boxing as an utmost form of discipline imposed on bodies and on somatic control. Following Peter Vail's analysis of Muay Thai, there is no ambiguity about Thai Boxing providing young boys an embodied curriculum in manhood. The development of a strong built mannish outfit, the mastering of one's strength and violence, learning to be self-reliant among others. Boxing is all about maintaining one's "boxing form" (*rup muay*), a criteria that pervades the appreciation of the bouts and of pugilists' abilities. The boxers are supposed not to express their feelings, sensations of pain and fatigue; they have to remain "indifferent" (*choei*). Muay thai carries moral values such as courage, tenacity, and selfcomposure that all refer to the dominant Buddhist ideology. These values, that constitute goals and tools during the socializing process of the boxers in the camps, are closely linked to the Buddhist ideals attained through surpassing of oneself in the search for spiritual progress like "detachment" (*khwaam choey*). Throughout the training sessions and while on the ring, boxers have to be "courageous" (*jay khlaa*) as they endure terrible sufferings they have to hold back. The work on body, especially its presentation, that Thai Boxing provides, makes it a suitable tool to reveal oneself, that is to say in a Buddhist way of thinking, to assume one's "destiny" (*kam*).

This could apply to any person, beyond the gender polarization. Nonetheless, to put to the test an individual through rough body experience is still attached to man performative role that makes boxers hyper-masculine males. From this point of view, there is no doubt, Nong Toom and Nong Tim definitely have man bodies, "housing bodies" (*riian kai*) for a woman heart. This incongruity echoes the fact that most of the *kathoey* in countryside, at least the ones I met during my fieldwork in isan, have a stronger body build than the average. At the same time, it seems like people think that *kathoey* can in some way compete in terms of physical force with men. Without searching for any causal explanations which is not my perspective, one can simply assume that the biographies of up country *kathoey*, conceived as long term processes of interaction with one's environment, both social and natural, brings the discrepancy between "physical appearance" (*hun phai nook*) and "inside" reality (*phai nai*) at

it's height. From this perspective it is quite interesting to interrogate the case of Nong Toom whose hardship during trainings and on the ring is merely and widely understood in Thailand as a path toward his future woman body.

Strangely enough, Nong Toom as Nong Tim, a successor of the former as a mediatized cross dressing boxer since 2004, aren't really associated with one of the two categories of boxing style that traditionally enables boxing aficionados to rationalize Thai boxing practise. This difficulty to class their boxing style is far from being restricted to them but they definitely embody the contrast of the two ways more sharply than other pugilists.

Muay Thai aficionados distinguish between two different kinds of boxers that are the "artists" (*muay fii müüü, muay choeng, or boksoer*) and the "attackers" (*muay buk, muay thora'ööt, or faythoer, from the English fighter*)³. Two boxing method are defined: on the one hand, pugilists that use counter-attack, who model their rhythm and their tactic on that of their opponent, who fight smartly, dodging an side-stepping, who master the great part of the Muay Thai techniques with effectiveness and stylishness; on the other hand, boxers who move forward permanently, betting on their stamina and strength, enduring a lot of blows and whose technical register is more limited than of the "artists" and whose style is not as aesthetic. The boxing stance of the "artists" (*choeng, fi müi*) refers, even if not directly, to the notion of "art" (*sinlapa*). It is not so much a question of terminology but the fact that the stylishness of the "artists" fit in the realm of "beauty" (*khwam suey ngam*), and what is beautiful is virtuous, and what is righteous from a Buddhist point of view is Thai. The "artists" style underlines the civilised nature of Thai Boxing that makes it belong to the national cultural heritage, that is the so-called Thai cultural centre associated to the central plain royal powers of Ayuthaya and nowadays of Bangkok.

As main actors of what is conceived as a traditional Thai show, the appreciation of the boxers' performance is far from being extensively gendered. Boxers belong to a group of local performers like comedians, dancers, singers that are renowned mainly for their stylishness, their gracefulness, be they women or men, this beyond the fact that performers are highly genderized (Cf. Peter Jackson, 2003 :). As any other monstrators, pugilists have to prepare themselves and their body to be presentable: the trainers add some olive oil in the

³ The same binary classification of boxers exists in the world of English Boxing, where distinction is made in between stylists, boxers or counter-puncher, and brawler or banger. The Thai version has been anthropologically analysed by Peter Vail (1998a) and Stéphane Rennesson (2005).

massage oil with which they massage the boxers before the fight. They explain that by doing so they intend to give a nice colour and make their boxer's skin shiny. They have to look *suey ngam* (beautiful) before being *lo* (handsome), to please the audience, from the bettors up to the king and the gods. Camp owners as well as relatives of the boxers are very sensible about this aspect of the boxing show. The good appearance of their fighters is a great source of pride and honour. It is even more important during the "paying homage dance" (*ram muay way khru*) boxers carry out before every fight. Nong Toom and Nong Tim are famous for their very stylish way of performing the *ram muay way khru*. Among four of five different patterns of dancing they chose the very famous one that is called the "young lady who powder herself". Their make up, the powder that they really put on their face before stepping over the ropes, even the lipstick on a few occasions for Nong Toom, reinforce their interpretation of the dance in a demure and sophisticated fashion exaggerating in way how women are supposed to control their body movement. Both of them simply pushes the refinement of self presentation a little further than other pugilists by giving it an explicit gendered nuance which is by the way widely appreciated by the Thai public, both outside the world of Muay Thai as within.

Both Nong Tum and Nong Tim are famous for their fluid and gracious moves during their fierce battles on the ring. In fact their artfulness is not synonym of weakness. A Thai boxing fight have to be *run raeng di*, that is "pleasantly violent", ostensibly violent but within the rules. Aesthetics plays here a great role in Thai boxing as a violent encounter between two bodies, but at an other level than previously said. The execution of techniques is one the main criteria for others to judge whether the violence expressed is legitimate or not, if they are still in the Muay Thai framework, not in a vulgar street fight. Even the most fearsome boxers satisfy to these criteria. Beyond the appreciation of the refinement boxers are able to produce when fighting what is beautiful is good in a moral way because it is controlled. Artists only are in control of themselves and of their art a little bit more than fighters.

Quite interestingly, our two boxers are also renowned to be fierce fighters who can beat their opponents whether betting on the punch that it takes to win bouts before the time limit or on their stamina and resistance. They are especially appreciated for the devastating effectiveness of their roundhouse kick that is the very trademark of Muay Thai as a masculine activity of mutual challenging. These kinds of features make them belong to the "attacking" stance of boxing. The rough fighters embody the stiffness and the fighting skills of the Thai

people. They are conceived as representing a less sophisticated practice of Muay Thai associated to the poor and less civilized margins of the kingdom, at least according to the stereotypes thoroughly used in the boxing world and of which impact on the representations should not be underestimated⁴.

Thus, more than any other fighters, the cross-dressing boxers personify the overcoming of “life’s hardships” (*chiwit lambak*). Because not only they have to sweat for their economic situation like other boxers, they also struggle in the ambiguous situation they have to cope with as *kathoey* in Thai society. On this basis, their mediatization made Muay Thai more acceptable and good to think beyond the traditional circle of the “Thai Boxing community” (*sangkhom muai* or *wong kan muai*) highly pervaded by an hyper-masculin ethos. Not only some *kathoey* recognize themselves in Nong Toom and Nong Tim. Men and more significantly women too for sure, especially originated from what I shall call here with many precautions the middle classes, and may be some kinds of outsiders too. Comparatively, the developing practice of muay thai by women doesn’t seem to crystallize the same fervor overall.

The ambiguity provided by the case of cross-dressing boxers seems to be better to think of. The mediatization of Nong Toom relied chiefly on the first hand on his progressive coming to terms of himself as a *kathoey* while on the ring, on the second hand on his internal debate for an operation that would transform his man body into a woman one. As the time went on, Nong Toom stylized more and more is make up and then decided to proceed to daily hormones intakes in order to enhance his breasts which no one could ignore when he began to emulate woman outfits on the ring by wearing a strap clothe to hide his then feminine chest. This evolution was not evenly regarded in Thailand, mainly in the Muay Thai circle. From the information I gathered in the press and through testimonies of some of Nong Toom’s boxing buddies, his physical transformation process was not challenging neither the workout nor the daily life among intimates in the camp (*because they are all linked by intimate relationship based on the share of hardships and the common goal to bring honor and pride to the group and its boss. The least we can say is that Nong Toom was bringing back some kind of fame to the camp. For sure he was respected for this. All the more his complicity with his boxing mates were not endangered by his identity. When training there is no ambiguity and in daily*

⁴ About the heuristic value of stereotypes one can have a close look to Michael Herzfeld’s work (1992 and 2004 among others).

life some small arrangements were made for everybody to feel at ease). On the opposite, as an icon, far away from daily routine and intimacy, Nong Toom's radical transformation began to put at odds the man to man to man challenge principle that founds the competitive practice, at least in the most conservative muay thai figures discourse. As Nong Toom's woman outfit got too obvious, Nong Toom began to shade as a chance for Muay Thai promoters to renew and modernize the national sport's image on the domestic scene. The ambiguity of Nong Toom's gender identity that permitted different points of view to coexist in a single stream of mediatization, progressively vanished. In the Muai Thai community, his case begun to draw more and more criticism. Beyond Muay Thai traditional circle Nong Toom was still very popular, once again especially in the middle class. That is what may be encouraged Muay Thai officials to organize a circus like fight between Nong Toom and a Japanese wrestler woman!

More widely, Nong Toom's intensive media coverage during a couple of years draws on the fact that Thai people like to think about *kathoey* as a national idiosyncrasy which is constructed on a comparative standpoint. As a matter of fact, the mediatization of both Nong Toom and Nong Tim is much more concentrated on their fights against foreigners, especially "westerners" (*farang*) and also Japanese. Their statistics considering the number of bouts with other Thai boxers is not that impressive. Even though their talent as rough pugilist is beyond doubt, when compared to their peers it seems like they unusually rocketed from the village fairs to the limelight of the international boxing programs without going through the normal intermediary stages of an ordinary career or so rapidly it is not worth mentioning.

In the context of international boxing bouts, whether in Thai or English Boxing, when Thai fighters meet foreigners, the local pugilists are either identified as "artists" and represent then the whole skilfulness and the elegance of Thais, or as "attackers" and then demonstrate the strength and the martial potential of the Thai nation, or as both at the same time. As a matter of fact, the real pugilistic excellence depends upon the harmonious combination of the two styles. Such a symbiosis refers to the unity of the Thai people and makes out of the perfect boxer, whatever its regional origin, an ideal representative for the country. In a way this is what kind of effective icon the two cross-dressing boxers we are talking about personify. Moreover, we could say they symbolize the all country and all the Thais, the three genders that Thai culture counts. More than any other boxers, they convey the complex and polymorphous picture of themselves that Thais want to give to others.

Unambiguous Gendered bodies, alike the women engaged in international beauty contests and boxers fighting with strangers, are good to think of since they provide a support for defining what is the “Thai people nature” (*thamachat khon thay*) and what is “thainess” (*khwam pen thai*). The discussion about the perfect national representative is always passionate. The necessary ambiguity stands here with the embodiment of regional origin and “mixed ancestry” (*luk khriing*). Alternatively and or in addition to that, Nong Toom and Nong Tim, at a certain moment of their career, bestow a peculiar opportunity for Thais to test among themselves and, more significantly, with foreigners, the continuum of the gender self performative roles pervasive in Thailand not only as a landmark of national identity but as a part of a dynamic domestic device.

The future research would gain a lot through a comparative work putting side by side the success of crossdressing boxers and the very famous transsexual beauty pageants that seem to catch the attention of the Thais at large too.