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Embodiment and Meaning: Muay Thai in Different Cultural Contexts

Dana B. Dawson

This qualitative meta-analysis, drawing from published articles, books, and ethnographies, examines Muay Thai through the interdisciplinary lens of martial arts studies, cultural studies, and anthropological literature. I argue that the interpretation of Muay Thai is intricately tied to its cultural context, revealing dimensions such as cultural heritage, systemic violence, and the global dissemination of martial arts. Framed within anthropological literature on embodiment and cultural performance, the paper understands Muay Thai, akin to dance, as an embodied cultural performance shaped by bodily knowledge and practice. The analysis delves into the nuanced meanings of Muay Thai across three cultural contexts: native practitioners in Thailand, foreign practitioners in Thailand, and global practitioners in a mixed martial arts (MMA) community. A reflexive component, contributing a unique perspective from my training experience in a U.S.-based MMA gym offering Muay Thai, is also included. By combining insights from different disciplines, this meta-analysis provides a thorough overview of Muay Thai scholarship, fostering a comprehensive understanding of this martial art amidst integration into the wider MMA landscape.

Keywords: Muay Thai, globalization, embodiment, performance
I. Introduction

Muay Thai is a martial art with a cultural history unique to Thailand, and a multifaceted communal dynamic. Muay Thai is a widely appreciated form of sports entertainment, enjoyed not only by Thais but also by international spectators. Beyond its pure sport and entertainment dimension, Muay Thai holds a deeper meaning, encompassing cultural heritage and economic value. The practice of Muay Thai for fitness extends beyond dedicated Muay Thai gyms to include fitness centers in both Thailand and overseas. This global popularity benefits the local community through tourism and international exports (Jones and Theerawong 2021). Considering the processes of globalization and Muay Thai’s cultural origins in Thailand, I ask: How does the meaning of Muay Thai vary depending on the performer in relation to the cultural context? In doing so, I explore the different meanings that emerge depending on who is performing Muay Thai and the context in which it is being performed.

David Jones defines martial arts as having ten elements: 1) a dojo (a gym or training space); 2) kata (form/movements); 3) an emphasis on shock-combat (hand-to-hand combat); 4) ritual; 5) technique, repetition, and drill; 6) sparring; 7) entertainment; 8) seeking internal power; 9) ranking and indication of rank; and 10) connection with social elites (Jones 2002). For this section I will outline how Muay Thai meets this definition of a martial art and what differentiates it from other martial arts. I contend that the first three elements along with elements five (technique, repetition, drill) and six (sparring) are manifested through the training process leading up to fights. Element eight (seeking internal power) is exhibited in both the mental toughness required for the training
process, as well as in the process of climbing the ranks to achieve success in the sport, which leads to greater socioeconomic opportunities. Similarly, element nine (ranking and indication of rank) is observed in the training process as well as in matchmaking for fights. Since matches are based on experience, and many of the young boys in the village must have experience before being allowed to train at a camp recognized for training champions, there is some system of rank based on experience in Muay Thai (Kitiarsa 2005). The following paragraphs will look at the other elements in more detail.

The dojo, or training space (1), kata (form/movements) (2), technique, repetition, and drill (5), and sparring (6) are all exhibited in the training environment and process leading up to fights. The training takes place at a camp, and while camps can take place indoors or outdoors, they can be considered equivalent to a dojo; many fighters in Thailand even take up residence at these camps. The strict training routines practicing techniques repetitively, drilling, and sparring, and pre-fight rituals described in this section account for another four of the elements in Jones’s definition of a martial art (Kitiarsa 2005). As part of their training camps for fights, Muay Thai fighters do morning and afternoon training sessions featuring padwork drills, clinching, sparring, strength and conditioning, air punching exercises, and heavy bag drills. Male fighters are known as nak muay and female fighters are known as nak muay ying (Jones and Theerawong 2021; Kitiarsa 2005; Lucas, 2020). Fighters also go through mental training. The mental element of training fulfills the “seeking internal power” (8) element of Jones’s definition (Kitiarsa 2005). Buddhist teachings influence mindset—tied to samadhi, or concentration, and sati-
sampajañña, or consciousness-awareness—and seek to decrease mana (arrogance) and atta (ego), allowing fighters to perform better with a clear mind (Jones and Theerawong 2021). Both the training process and the fights themselves exhibit Jones’s third element, “an emphasis on shock-combat.” Muay Thai is known as ‘the art of eight limbs’ because it utilizes elbows and knees, which are considered more damaging technical strikes, in addition to kicks and punches found in other forms of kickboxing and boxing. While the training processes leading up to the fight can also be considered ritualized practices in themselves, Muay Thai also features a ritual element in the ceremonies around the fights, which I will detail in the next paragraph.

In Thailand, the commencement of Muay Thai matches involves the Wai Kru ceremony, wherein Nak Muay, or Muay Thai practitioners, express reverence to their spiritual and living teachers. This ritual is conducted through the artistic stretching Ram Muay, a form of Muay Thai dance, accompanied by the enchanting melodies of Pi Muay Thai instruments. Embedded in Thai culture, the Wai Kru ceremony holds significance across various domains of knowledge, particularly in the arts, symbolizing a tribute to teachers as the custodians and conveyors of acquired wisdom (Jones and Theerawong 2021). Fighters often wear sacred armbands, known as “Prajioud,” around their upper arms, and a headband or crown-like adornment, called a “Mongkol,” around their heads, for self-confidence and morale in Muay Thai. These ceremonial accessories are believed to possess protective and auspicious qualities, with the Mongkol placed during the Wai Kru Ram Muay ceremony. Blessed by monks or respected elders, the Mongkol is thought to provide protection, good luck, and a
connection to the fighter’s training and lineage. The Prajioud, worn around the biceps, is also blessed, and believed to bring luck and protection during matches, with different colors associated with various meanings or blessings. Together, the Mongkol and Prajioud serve as symbolic elements connecting the fighter to the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Muay Thai, showcasing the ceremonial richness integral to Muay Thai traditions (Kitiarsa 2005). Matches are usually five rounds and are accompanied by traditional sarama music (Cynarski 2012; Vail 2014).

Lastly, the remaining element, “association with social elites” (10), will be discussed through the connection between the history of Muay Thai and Thai cultural heritage and royal-nationalist texts. Many nations treasure Indigenous martial arts as their national sports: a form of wrestling known as Varzesh-e Bastani in Iran, Capoeira in Brazil, Sumo in Japan, Taekwondo in Korea, and the “violent and raucous form of full-contact prize-fighting pugilism” (Vail 2014, 509) of Muay Thai for Thailand. Muay Boran is considered “ancient muay,” or the non-sporting forms of muay. Muay Boran is featured in some historical narratives as the combat origins of Muay Thai, with techniques exaggerated in these texts as being too dangerous for use in the contemporary sport version of muay. However, Muay Boran was not actually any more violent than the techniques being practiced today (Muller-Junior and Capraro 2022). Muay Boran features more stylistic regional and lineage variations than the sport of Muay Thai. As a fighting art in the 16th and 17th centuries in the region currently known as Thailand, Muay Boran occurred at festivals and funeral ceremonies. The Department of Physical Education teaches generic forms of Muay Boran in school activities in Thailand, with students dressing in
premodern boxing garb (Vail 2014). “Muay” was used to describe the original sport practiced by royals. “Thai” was added to distinguish it from British-style boxing in the early 20th century, and the use of “boran” only emerged when Muay Thai was historized to distinguish the ancient form (Vail 2014).

The modern sport of Muay Thai and its ancient form, Muay Boran, have been intentionally associated with a royalist-nationalist history. This connection is forged through the invention of tradition in historical cultural texts to cement Muay Thai as an inexorable component of Thai national identity and cultural heritage (Vail 1998, 2014). In these cultural texts, Muay Thai is presented as the fighting art of historical Siamese Kings; therefore, muay is presented as the embodiment of Thailand’s national ‘warrior spirit’ (Vail 2014). Vail refers to Clifford Geertz’s notion of a “cultural text,” arguing that these historical narratives fall into this category of cultural text in that they are stories the Thai “tell themselves about themselves” (Vail 2014, 77). They are the shared knowledge of a performative cultural structure (Vail 1998). Discussed further in this paper, these historical narratives provide the connection to social elites that make Muay Thai so appealing as a form of social mobility in Thailand.

Over the past few decades, Muay Thai has witnessed a surge in global popularity, particularly in Western countries. The recognition that “[Muay Thai] puts Thailand on the map as the progenitor of a lucrative international martial arts craze” (Vail 2014, 510) emphasizes its increasing influence worldwide. This rise unfolded during the mid-to-late 1990s, aligning with a significant shift in Western perceptions of Asian martial arts. In this context, “the West” refers to countries in Europe and the Americas, where
there was a notable evolution in the perception and popularity of martial arts during this period. After multiple generations of instructors and schools, the ‘first wave’ of Asian martial arts underwent a transformation, shedding some of their mystique and becoming more standardized and rationalized as sports. Notably, in 1993, the global emergence of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) marked the ascent of mixed martial arts (MMA) on an international scale. MMA is a combat sport that combines techniques from various martial arts disciplines including Judo and Brazilian jiu-jitsu; wrestling for throws, takedowns, ground grappling, and submissions; kickboxing and boxing for punching and kicking techniques; and Muay Thai for additional striking with elbows and knees and the clinch (or standing grappling). MMA may also feature athletes with more diverse martial arts backgrounds that feature traditional Eastern martial arts such as karate, taekwondo, wing chun, and kung fu. The UFC, a major MMA organization, played a pivotal role in heightening Western interest and acceptance of diverse martial arts traditions, contributing significantly to the widespread dissemination of Muay Thai globally.

This process of the global dissemination of bodily knowledge enabled me to learn how to perform elbows in Muay Thai class in Birmingham, Alabama. The coaches and fighters at this gym had trained with a Muay Thai instructor from Thailand here in the U.S. years before the gym I found myself training at was built. In their time training with this Thai instructor, the bodily knowledge they acquired became the foundation for their Muay Thai classes, which they integrated into a broader MMA curriculum. I offer an anecdote to put this in perspective. I recall learning how to perform
elbows in class for the first time. I remember doing the elbow drills and my coach saying, “elbows are going to be your thing!” It is interesting for me now to read ethnographies about the vastly different experience of Muay Thai fighters in Thailand (e.g. fighters cutting their opponents’ faces with elbows to achieve social mobility), but I like drilling elbows because I like the embodied feeling of empowerment the activity provides. Before I joined an MMA gym, I considered myself to have a passive, non-violent personality. After joining an MMA gym, Muay Thai classes became my favorite part of the day or week. I enjoyed the privilege of being able to go to the gym and exercise in a fun, dynamic, and challenging way, drilling elbows on the bags or doing pad work with partners. I use the word privilege here because I was not training to fight out of a need to escape poverty, but for recreation and fitness.

Considering the surging popularity of martial arts and the trend of individuals cross-training in multiple disciplines, blending various forms together raises pertinent questions about the authenticity of these practices. How do we navigate these boundaries when martial arts become a blend of diverse traditions? At its core, practicing martial arts is a physical engagement laden with cultural nuances contingent upon the contextual backdrop. This encompasses the individual's existing cultural milieu, which can alter the local, national, or global cultural heritage associated with specific martial arts disciplines, intertwining with elements of nationalism, social mobility, gender dynamics, and cultural performance. Amidst the cultural diffusion or globalization of martial arts, the bodies engaged in performing and practicing become integral players in this intricate dynamic. When attempting to define Muay Thai, the categorization lines blur as one observes
the varied contexts in which it is practiced globally. While a white female nurse in Birmingham, Alabama, may not perform Muay Thai in the same way as a young boy in a rural village in Bangkok, they would both refer to what they’re doing as *Muay Thai*.

The central thesis of this paper contends that the interpretation of Muay Thai is intricately linked to its cultural context, which is shaped by dimensions such as cultural heritage, systemic violence, and the global dissemination of martial arts.

II. Methods

This paper undertakes a qualitative meta-analysis, drawing insights from a diverse array of secondary sources, including published articles, books, ethnographies, and studies in the realms of cultural studies and sociology. This meta-analysis provides a rigorous evaluation of the primary qualitative findings from this body of scholarship, offering a comprehensive exploration of the meanings associated with Muay Thai. The inquiry delves into the perspectives of native practitioners in Thailand, foreign practitioners in Thailand, and the global MMA community.

I draw from ethnographies by scholars such as Pattana Kitiarsa (2005, 2013), Peter Vail (1998), Dale Spencer (2014), Matt Lucas (2020), and Paul Schissel (2019). In his ethnographic writing, Kitiarsa acknowledges the inherent partiality and incompleteness of his Muay Thai stories, drawing from the dual perspectives of a Thai man immersed in the Muay Thai culture and a Western-trained local ethnographer exploring it as a complex arena for the production and consumption of Thai masculinity. As the son of a former Muay Thai boxer, his sense of self-conscious partiality adds complexity to the exploration. Childhood memories of engaging in
Thai boxing-style fights and accompanying his father to competitions in rural Nong Khai province remain vivid, blurring the lines between authentic ethnographic observation and the memories of his own lived experiences, creating a unique and personal lens through which Muay Thai is examined (Kitiarsa 2005, 66). Vail, who studied in the U.S. and is now an associate professor in Singapore, a seasoned academic with expertise in cultural and linguistic anthropology, offers a scholarly lens on Southeast Asian culture. Spencer's ethnography explores the experiential aspect of learning MMA in a gym, akin to my training experience in the U.S. Lucas, an American and a former Muay Thai fighter, brings a practitioner's viewpoint and extensive industry knowledge, contributing to the understanding of the sport's business. Schissel's dissertation, focusing on Muay Thai as sacrificial exchange, enriches the analysis with insights from two years of apprenticeship and participatory research in northeast Thailand and Bangkok.

In addition to ethnographic studies, I incorporate research from cultural studies and sociology, drawing from Davies and Deckert (2020), Gonen (2019), and Satchapappichit and Iesue (2022). These studies provide perspectives on diverse experiences in Thailand, from tourists to foreign fighters. Moreover, articles on cultural heritage, martial arts, and globalization by Bowman (2019), Cynarski (2012), Jones and Theerawong (2021), and Muller-Junior and Capraro (2022) contribute valuable insights. This comprehensive synthesis offers a nuanced understanding of Muay Thai's significance, considering the diverse cultural contexts and practitioner experiences involved.
III. Theoretical Framework

Before discussing the cultural meanings of Muay Thai, the bodily experience of practicing martial arts needs to be considered, centering the body as the mediator (or translator) between context and meaning. Margaret Lock argues that the body “mediates all reflection and action upon the world” (Lock 1993, 133), and it is this concept of centering the body in cultural, social, or environmental processes that is the heart of this paper (Lock 1993). I seek to examine the varied meanings that emerge in practicing Muay Thai in different cultural contexts.

In examining the different cultural contexts Muay Thai is practiced in, we must consider all the forces surrounding bodily practice that shape whatever meaning emerges from it. Problems evident in looking at these different contexts include notions of cultural heritage and diffusion, nationalism, and systemic violence. However, it should be emphasized that at the center of all these forces are bodies in motion—bodies performing. The meaning of Muay Thai varies depending on the context in which the body is situated. It is not just about experiencing and performing physically, but also about the body’s agency within the social and cultural realm, in the words of Lock, “the problem of people both having and being a body” (Lock 1993, 136). Martial arts knowledge is embodied knowledge that transcends political and lingual barriers, enabling the blending of disciplines and the emergence of diverse meanings for individual or group practitioners.

Embodied knowledge, rooted in muscle memory and relentless practice, possesses the remarkable quality of transcending linguistic and political barriers. Individuals well-versed in specific movements could effectively teach those movements to someone who speaks a
different language. This phenomenon is particularly evident in martial arts, where grappling moves share universal principles despite having distinct names in English, Portuguese, and Japanese. This same universality applies to striking styles as well. For example, during a class at the gym where I formerly trained, I observed an older white female and an older Thai male engaged in drilling. Despite limited verbal communication, their shared understanding of the movements fostered a seamless interaction. Laughter, smiles, and moments of intense focus characterized their training, emphasizing the depth of non-verbal comprehension within martial arts. The blending of disciplines and the varied meanings that practicing holds for each individual or group of practitioners become inherently challenging to control, showcasing the dynamic and organic nature of martial arts knowledge.

Because martial arts are a bodily practice, performing martial arts blurs the lines of presenting or wearing cultural heritage; rather, the practitioner is performing cultural heritage in bodily movements. Thomas Csordas (1994) described the body as both a cultural phenomenon and a biological entity: an ‘analytic body’, which focuses on perception, practice, parts, processes, or products, and a ‘topical body’, which focuses on the body in relation to specific cultural activity. Similarly, Mary Douglas presented a concept of ‘two bodies’, or social and physical aspects of the body, the difference between mind and body and culture and biology (Csordas 1994). Practicing martial arts merges the mental and physical aspects of the body and merges the physical and the cultural in muscle memory.

Lowell Lewis advocates for investigating performative events as a means to grasp broader cultural patterns, contending that culture
is best comprehended as an ongoing process or sequence of performances. Lewis examines the relations between types of play and cultural performance and their centrality to both group and personal identities (Lewis 2013). Paul Bowman asserts that martial arts are context-dependent, with their meanings and values often shifting, mutating, or transforming, depending on the context (Bowman 2019). Martial arts must be understood as a network of different dimensions of the meanings attributed to these practices, which can be seen in the diverse reasons individuals learn and perform martial arts, including self-defense, play, competition, performance, social mobility, or personal wellness (Muller-Junior and Capraro 2022). Applying these understandings to Muay Thai specifically for this paper, the meaning that emerges from Muay Thai changes depending on the performing body(ies) and the context.

This qualitative meta-analysis seamlessly integrates insights from diverse sources, providing a comprehensive overview of Muay Thai scholarship. Perspectives from Pattana Kitiarsa, Peter Vail, Dale Spencer, Matt Lucas, and Paul Schissel enrich the analysis, offering unique viewpoints on Muay Thai's cultural significance. The study is further enhanced by research on diverse experiences in Thailand and articles covering cultural heritage, martial arts, and globalization. This cohesive synthesis offers a nuanced understanding of Muay Thai's significance within diverse cultural contexts and practitioner experiences. Utilizing anthropological literature on embodiment and cultural performance as a theoretical framework, the paper presents an interdisciplinary review of Muay Thai scholarship, underscoring aspects of Muay Thai and martial arts that merit deeper anthropological inquiry. The study's
distinctive contribution lies in its interdisciplinary approach, fostering a more profound appreciation and exploration of Muay Thai within the broader anthropological literature.

IV. Analysis

Native Practitioners in Thailand

For native practitioners in Thailand, especially poor rural children, practicing Muay Thai provides a way to achieve social mobility, enduring various forms of systemic violence along the way. Thais grow up with Muay Thai like Westerners grow up with soccer, football, and baseball (Lucas 2020). The historical narratives about Muay Thai in Thailand are so popular that some claim that ‘muai Thai is in the blood of the Thai’; it is common for boys to imitate Muai Thai boxing during playtime, especially in remote villages with no electricity or other distractions (Kitiarsa 2005; Vail 1998). Pattana Kitiarsa, the son of a former Muay Thai fighter, offers a nuanced ethnographic exploration influenced by his upbringing in the Muay Thai world. Conducting fieldwork in Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand, from 2000 to 2001, Kitiarsa focuses on the narratives of young Thai boxers known as ‘hunting dogs’ within the realms of Thai boxing and society (Kitiarsa 2005). The ‘hunting dog’ metaphor reflects the lowest level of social status in Thai society: they are “fed, trained, and then sent out to hunt for its master” (Kitiarsa 2005, 65). Just like Loïc Wacquant’s 2003 ethnography Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer located at a Chicago boxing gym in a predominately Black neighborhood, Kitiarsa’s ethnography shows how the body is both a commodity
and vehicle for social agency, in that through this grueling sport, the individual may achieve social mobility.

In an interview during his research, Kitiarsa engages with Choi Phuangthong, an esteemed Muay Thai camp owner, manager, and trainer in Khorat, who believes that the optimal age for commencing Muay Thai training is 12 years old, asserting a belief that “poverty always produces a great Muay Thai champion” (Kitiarsa 2005, 73-74). According to Choi, a twelve-year-old boy represents the ideal candidate for Muay Thai training due to their obedience, attentiveness, and capacity to retain instructions. Expressing a preference for boys from impoverished backgrounds, Choi contends that they approach boxing with heightened seriousness, perseverance, and resilience, drawing inspiration from the adversities witnessed in their parents' lives. In his book *On Fighting in Thailand: A Guide to the Sport in the Motherland*, Lucas (2020) interviews an American woman training and fighting at a gym in Thailand. She gives her perspective on the age of trainees: “A lot of Thais are very young. Whether they like it or not they do it. Foreigners have a choice in the matter. The Thais don’t have that” (Lucas 2020, 40). Kitiarsa interviews Takiang, a 13-year-old boy from Mahasarakham, who had already fought 15 times at the time of the interview (Kitiarsa 2005, 74). Their post-Muay Thai future seems to be deeply vulnerable and uncertain.

While pursuing social mobility, many Thai fighters endure harsh living conditions and strict routines. Training under their masters, they are treated as commodities or objects. In this patron-client system of masters and students, these fighters “cannot live their own lives, at least not in their active careers” (Kitiarsa 2005, 65). The *To. Silachai* training facility, where Kitiarsa conducted his
research in 2001, stands as a prominent boxing gymnasium in Khorat and one of the country's renowned training camps. The facility, resembling a rudimentary extension of a military barracks, features a zinc-roofed training ground with a basic boxing ring outlined by four ropes tied around posts. The makeshift setup accommodates various boxing and workout equipment, such as heavy bags, padded gloves, dumbbells, skipping ropes, headgear, chest protectors, and kicking pads. Living quarters within the facility include three unfurnished bedrooms equipped only with bamboo beds, worn-out reed mattresses, old mosquito nets, and pillows. A separate bamboo hut is allocated for resident Muay Thai trainees, with the bathroom situated behind the bedrooms. Despite apparent functionality, a closer exploration of the premises and conversations with boxers after their morning training sessions reveal the harsh realities of their living conditions. Items like mosquito nets, northeastern Thai-style futons, and loincloths (pha khao ma) bear signs of wear, emphasizing the challenging environment within this esteemed training camp, surpassing expectations derived from portrayals in popular boxing magazines featuring leading Muay Thai camps in Bangkok (Kitiarsa 2005, 70-71).

Paul Schissel, in his ethnographic study framed through ritual, explores Muay Thai as a sacrificial exchange, examining the lives of fighters in northeast Thailand and Bangkok. He delves into the thematic aspects of sacrificial movement within the boxer's daily routines, revealing the intersection of Muay Thai with seasonal labor migration. Schissel's lens, focused on ritual sacrifice, uncovers how northeastern Thai families redefine meaningful lives, finding a delicate equilibrium between growth and decay through social
mobility gained by sacrificing the body in Muay Thai (Schissel 2019). Schissel's ethnographic study emphasizes the bodily sacrifice inherent in Muay Thai, portraying how it intertwines with the socioeconomic mobility discussed in Kitiarsa’s work. Here, decay refers to the gradual deterioration of the body due to the strenuous demands of Muay Thai training and fights, leading to long-term physical decay for practitioners. This decay is accelerated by the bodily sacrifice of fighters, or their commitment to endure pain, injuries, and physical hardship in their pursuit of victory and personal growth. Kitiarsa highlights that Muay Thai serves as a potential avenue for social mobility for young Thai boys, offering an alternative to the constrained opportunities they might face. This narrative is echoed in the life of Buakhaw Por Pramuk, a renowned boxing champion who, as his body began to falter, temporarily entered the Buddhist monkhood, showcasing Buddhism as another avenue of social mobility for Muay Thai practitioners (Kitiarsa 2013).

The world of Muay Thai for native practitioners in Thailand is marked by a profound bodily sacrifice, with fighters enduring harsh living conditions, strict training routines, and the physical toll of combat. This process of sacrificial exchange for social mobility occurs within a cultural context that venerates Muay Thai, associating it with nationalism and the Thai warrior spirit. While native Thai fighters willingly subject themselves to this sacrificial exchange, the limited lifestyle freedom and harsh conditions they endure can be viewed as a form of systemic violence within Thai society. This phenomenon is embedded in a public arena where Muay Thai and gambling are deeply intertwined. Live reports during competitions in major Bangkok stadiums are designed for
gambling enthusiasts. The dynamics of gambling within the Muay Thai arena involve intense negotiations and bets among managers, trainers, relatives, and supporters, creating a vibrant and heated atmosphere. Temple, school, and provincial charity fairs, along with widespread media coverage, create an environment where gambling becomes an integral part of the sport's narrative (Kitiarsa 2005; Schissel 2019). This intricate interplay of bodily sacrifice, ritual, social mobility, and gambling weaves a complex tapestry that defines Muay Thai for native practitioners in Thailand.

Foreigners in Thailand

Fighting in Thailand is the goal of every Muay Thai fighter outside the Land of Smiles. Entering the ring in the homeland of Muay Thai can create a great deal of pride in a person. It is both a test and a testament to one's ability. It is a mecca for aspiring boxers.

-Matt Lucas-Foreward, On Fighting in Thailand

The allure of Thailand, for foreign Muay Thai practitioners, transcends mere training and fighting—it embodies a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by diverse motivations. This section argues that for many foreigners, the appeal of Thailand lies in the freedom to train and fight without the constraints of work-life balance experienced in their home countries. The affordability of living in Thailand, coupled with easier money-making opportunities, affords them the time to immerse themselves in the sport. Foreigners often embark on this Muay Thai journey to escape restrictive lives, marking a departure from the struggles of everyday existence. While some foreigners choose to initiate their Muay Thai training in gyms outside Thailand, others make pilgrimages to the “Motherland” for the ultimate training experience. Despite the accessibility of Muay
Thai training worldwide, there persists a belief that the ultimate experience awaits in Thailand. The country's rich martial arts tradition, coupled with its global popularity, positions it as a magnet for martial arts tourism, fostering a blend of cultural fascination and practical benefits such as self-defense, exercise, and discipline.

In Matt Lucas’s exploration of Muay Thai fighting culture in Thailand, in which he interviews foreigners fighting in Thailand, a stark difference emerges in the meaning and dedication attached to the sport for those who relocate to Thailand compared to native Thai fighters discussed in the previous section. In his book On Fighting in Thailand (2020), Matt Lucas provides interviews with foreigners fighting in Thailand. The meaning of practicing Muay Thai in Thailand seems to be different for foreign practitioners in Thailand than native Thai practitioners. Angela Chang—a 27-year-old American who had trained for 3 years in Thailand and had participated in 30+ fights—remarked: “You can fight way more here than in the States. You’d be lucky to fight every 2 or 3 months in the States” (Lucas 2020, 37-38). For her, in the U.S., fighting was a hobby, whereas in Thailand, “training and fighting becomes your life... Everything I do is about fighting because I want to fight” (Lucas 2020, 39). Many of the other interviews feature similar narratives: fighters come to Thailand to fight because they prefer to just train and fight and not have to deal with work balance in the U.S. It is cheaper to live in Thailand, and easier to make money, which gives them more time to focus on training and fighting (Lucas 2020). A 2020 study featuring interviews with 17 professional and amateur female Muay Thai fighters based in Thailand provides a testament to the diversity of international
fighters residing in Thailand (Davies and Deckert 2020). The female fighters were born in 11 countries, including Australia, Chile, England, Finland, Iran, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, South Korea, Sweden, and the U.S. (Davies and Deckert 2020). While the poor ‘hunting dogs’ of Thailand fight to achieve social mobility, which may provide them with more freedom of opportunity than they were born with, foreigners leave lives they feel are constricting in their homelands for the freedom to train and fight in Thailand.

Some foreigners start training at Muay Thai gyms outside of Thailand and take trips to test their skills and train with Thai masters in ‘the Motherland.’ In his ethnography about his training experience at an MMA gym featuring a combined Muay Thai and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu curriculum, Dale Spencer writes that he trained Muay Thai for two months in Sam Kampung, Thailand (Spencer 2014). Pedro Solana, a martial artist trained in multiple martial arts disciplines—judo, wing chun, Kali, and jiu jitsu—and once an American Muay Thai champion, trained in 45 Muay Thai camps all over Thailand. In 1999, Pedro won his first fight in Thailand against the champion of Koh Samui Island becoming the new Middleweight Muay Thai Champion (Wei 2020). According to the Sports Authority of Thailand, there are 5,100 Muay Thai gyms in Thailand and 3,869 Muay Thai gyms in 36 countries, which reflects the economic value in the global popularity of Muay Thai (Jones and Theerawong 2021). With the global dissemination of martial arts knowledge, there are many Muay Thai gyms accessible to practitioners outside of Thailand, but there still exists the belief that they will get the ultimate Muay Thai training experience in Thailand.
Thailand is also a popular destination for martial arts tourism. There has been an enduring Western interest in Asian martial arts. Beginning with Bruce Lee’s films in the 1960s and 1970s, the popularity of martial arts rose, continuing with films such as The Karate Kid and pop culture icons like Jackie Chan and Jet Li (Vail 2014). Some of the practical benefits of martial arts for the hobbyist include self-defense, exercise, and discipline (Vail 2014). The rapid growth in popularity of Asian martial arts is also attributed to the “mystically and culturally exotic dimensions of martial arts” (Vail 2014, 532). For the third time, the Faculty of Sports Sciences at the University of Chulalongkorn organized an international scientific conference in Bangkok. This time the conference focused on the global future of sport sciences and cultural research on Thai martial arts (Cynarski 2012).

A 2022 study explored push and pull factors to determine the most motivating reasons for international tourists to come to Thailand to learn Muay Thai (Satchapappichit and Iesue 2022). In this study, “push” and “pull” factors refer to different types of motivations influencing their decision to engage in Muay Thai: “push” factors representing internal motivations such as the desire for relaxation or personal growth, and “pull” factors representing external attractions like the affordability and cultural authenticity of Muay Thai training in Thailand. The study utilized self-administered questionnaires distributed to tourist practitioners at the 26 most popular Muay Thai gyms in Bangkok (out of 912) for international tourists. The data was collected from January 5, 2020, to March 10, 2020. The push factors included “getaway/escape,” “social interaction interest in sports,” “hobby/relaxation,” “spiritual needs,” “knowledge gain,” and “success/achievement”;
and the pull factors included “budget/inexpensive,” “history and culture,” “easy to travel,” “enjoy the fun,” “art of protection,” and “country of origin” (Satchapappichit and Iesue 2022, 67). From the 384 valid responses, the primary pull factor was the "desire to acquire genuine Thai training," emphasizing the nuanced mastery that can only be obtained in the martial art's country of origin (Satchapappichit and Iesue 2022, 72). While various internal motivations, “push” factors, might lead individuals to consider learning Muay Thai, the primary driving force, or “pull” factor, attracting them to Thailand specifically was the desire to acquire genuine Thai training.

A 2019 ethnography considering the experience of tourists at the Best Fighter Muay Thai and Mixed Martial Arts training camp in Koh Samui, Thailand, determined that tourist experiences are shaped by a complex interaction of socio-cultural factors, including tourist imaginations of Thailand, masculine stereotypes, sport and socialization, and a mythologized self-making process. Participants did report finding self-discipline, self-improvement, meaningful friendships, and holistic balance (Gonen 2019). While there are many factors that may motivate tourists to travel to Thailand to train Muay Thai, it seems the primary motivating factor is the desire to experience this uniquely Thai Muay experience in its country of origin.

For foreign practitioners, Thailand serves as a nexus where diverse aspirations intersect—whether it be the quest for personal freedom, the pursuit of authentic training, or the exploration of a unique cultural experience. Foreign practitioners, driven by a desire to escape constraints, find in Thailand a sanctuary to immerse themselves in the art of Muay Thai, unburdened by the
complexities of their home environments. The global popularity of Muay Thai, evidenced by the proliferation of gyms worldwide, underscores its universal appeal, yet the belief persists that the ultimate experience awaits in the very place where the martial art originated. The motivations of international tourists further highlight the magnetic allure of Thailand, emphasizing the nuanced mastery and genuine training intrinsic to the country's martial arts heritage. As Muay Thai continues to transcend borders, its significance as a cultural phenomenon, a sporting pursuit, and a transformative journey remains firmly entrenched in the vibrant tapestry of Thailand's rich martial arts tradition.

**Muay Thai, Cultural Heritage, and Mixed Martial Arts**

In recent years, Muay Thai has experienced a surge in global popularity, thrusting Thailand into the spotlight as the originator of a lucrative international martial arts phenomenon. This acclaim, however, has prompted the Thai state to grapple with preserving Muay Thai's cultural heritage amidst its integration into the global MMA community. As practitioners worldwide seek the allure of Thailand as the 'Motherland' of Muay Thai, concerns arise about the potential erosion of its cultural heritage. This section explores the evolving landscape of Muay Thai training, the institutional efforts to safeguard its traditions, and the strategic moves by the Thai state to position Muay Thai as an official Olympic sport. With the concept of “fighting arts” introduced by scholars such as Muller-Junior and Capraro (referencing Cynarski’s *Martial Arts & Combat Sports: Towards the Generational Theory of Fighting Arts* (2019)), which encompasses fighting skills and styles, martial arts, self-defense, combat sports, and training programs, the following section...
explores how Muay Thai's international popularity intersects with its cultural identity, dissecting the intricate dynamics between tradition, global appeal, and MMA integration.

Over the last couple decades, Muay Thai has grown in popularity on an international scale: “[Muay Thai] puts Thailand on the map as the progenitor of a lucrative international martial arts craze” (Vail 2014, 510). Muay Thai’s growing international popularity has raised concerns with the Thai state to protect the cultural heritage of Muay Thai: “the desire to keep muay distinctly Thai has sparked a barrage of cultural politicking” (Vail 2014, 510). Muay Thai’s popularity grew in the mid-to-late 1990s. By the 1990s in the United States and Europe, after several generations of instructors and schools, the first wave of Asian martial arts became demystified and routinized in their development into rationalized sports. These martial arts, once shrouded in exoticism, became more standardized and systematized, evolving into sports with defined rules and structures.

The community of MMA today “deliberately subsumes and effaces the cultural identities of the individual arts that make up its eclectic repertoire” (Vail 2014, 533). Vail (2014) suggests that MMA as a sport prioritizes a blend of techniques and strategies from various martial arts traditions, often overlooking or minimizing the cultural significance and heritage of each individual style. While Muay Thai’s subordinated role in MMA sometimes disregards or diminishes its cultural heritage, its role in MMA also plays a part in its international popularity, which brings tourism to Thailand. However, because of its subordinated role in MMA, there has been a push in Thailand to affirm its connections to Thai cultural heritage. Dale Spencer’s 2014 ethnography focuses on the bodily,
sensory experience of practicing MMA and only briefly mentions anything of the cultural heritage. While his ethnography focuses on the experience of learning MMA, Spencer writes that he went to Thailand for two months. Spencer followed this trend of athletes that learn and train Muay Thai at MMA gyms and developed a desire to travel to train in ‘the Motherland,’ or country of origin for the sport. Pedro Solana is another high-level athlete that began his Muay Thai training in the U.S. while learning other martial arts disciplines (Wei 2020).

Spencer's ethnography, coupled with my personal experience training at a similar mixed martial arts gym in the U.S., underscores the enduring allure of Thailand as the 'Motherland' of Muay Thai within these gyms, emphasizing the preservation of the sport's connection to Thai cultural heritage. The fantasy and discourse about training in Thailand persist, symbolized by the widespread donning of Fairtex Muay Thai gear, a Thai brand, or Yokkao, another Thai brand, and various Muay Thai knock-off styles. However, a dissonance emerges when comparing the watered-down version of Muay Thai commonly practiced in some MMA gyms in the U.S. to the rigorous training methods described in Thailand. This contrast was highlighted during a conversation I had with a Muay Thai coach in Birmingham (Alabama), who trained in Thailand during the 1980s. In Thailand, he recounted how children conditioned their shins with rocks and wooden logs to better absorb damage from strikes. This is a practice that I have not seen my American training partners use, though they may kick heavy bags or drill without shin guards for conditioning.

The pursuit of Olympic recognition for Muay Thai serves a purpose in affirming its cultural heritage and identity, a critical
aspect of Thailand’s sports diplomacy and projection of soft power on the international stage. Muay Thai now being one of Thailand’s major cultural exports, there are three institutions that are affirming its history and inventing tradition to ensure that Muay Thai’s “cultural trappings are not eroded”: the Institute for Muay Thai Preservation, Muban Chombueng Ratchaphat University, and the Department of Cultural Promotion (Vail 2014, 509). Jones and Theerawong (2021) provide a modern perspective on the relationship between Muay Thai and the Thai state and this idea of using sports diplomacy to exercise ‘soft power’ in international affairs. They focus mainly on Thailand’s policy to get Muay Thai approved as an official Olympic game, but also look at how the Ministry of Foreign Affairs promotes Muay Thai abroad to increase visibility and prestige. In sports diplomacy, athletes are seen as “diplomats and ambassadors of public diplomacy” (Jones and Theerawong 2021, 105). If Muay Thai were classified as an Olympic Sport, it would be a big step in affirming the ‘invented tradition’ and cultural heritage of Muay Thai as uniquely Thai in origin—a notion that is already internationally accepted and cherished. This recognition might ease the Thai state’s worries about losing this cultural heritage. This would also open new economic opportunities for Thailand and Thai athletes.

The term “fighting arts” provides researchers with a comprehensive framework to address complex issues within the realm of martial arts knowledge dissemination and representation (Muller-Junior and Capraro 2022). When considering the potential loss of Muay Thai's connection to Thai cultural heritage due to its increasing international popularity and subordinated integration into MMA, the concept of “fighting arts” becomes a tool for
differentiation. Muay Thai's appeal lies in its rich cultural heritage rooted in Thailand, which has fueled its global popularity. However, as it becomes more integrated into MMA, there is a risk of diluting its cultural significance. By employing terms like “fighting systems” (Wei 2020) or “fighting arts,” the integration of different martial arts into MMA (or other self-defense or fitness training programs) can be articulated while preserving their cultural identities. This distinction enables discussion of Muay Thai in a language that emphasizes its cultural connections to Thailand separately from discussions about its integration into broader martial arts practices. Recognizing the nuances of “fighting arts” of “fighting systems” enables the appreciation of the heritage of Muay Thai while acknowledging its evolution in various ‘mixed’ martial arts formats.

In the evolving landscape of Muay Thai, its global surge in popularity positions Thailand at the forefront of an international martial arts craze. However, this acclaim raises critical questions about the preservation of Muay Thai’s cultural heritage, prompting the Thai state to engage in cultural politicking to safeguard its distinctiveness. As the sport gains traction internationally, there is a delicate balance to strike between its global appeal and the preservation of Thai cultural identity. Examining the integration of Muay Thai into the global MMA community reveals a stark contrast between the culturally rooted training methods practiced in Thailand and the culturally diluted approach adopted in mainstream MMA settings. Despite this, the allure of Thailand as the 'Motherland' persists, symbolized by the widespread use of Thai gear brands. Institutional efforts work to affirm Muay Thai's history and invented traditions, ensuring the safeguarding of its cultural
trappings. Furthermore, the Thai state strategically explores sports diplomacy to secure Muay Thai’s place as an official Olympic sport, a move that may both protect its cultural heritage and open new economic opportunities. In navigating the complex relationship between tradition, global appeal, and MMA integration, the introduction of terms like “fighting arts” offers a new paradigm to understand Muay Thai’s cultural context, signaling its potential to thrive as an integrated element in the broader landscape of mixed martial arts.

V. Conclusion

This comprehensive exploration of Muay Thai offers a nuanced understanding of this martial art's multifaceted significance within diverse cultural contexts. The examination of Muay Thai through the lens of the anthropology of the body reveals the centrality of bodily experience in mediating cultural meanings. As Margaret Lock (1993) aptly argues, the body acts as a mediator, translating contextual forces into meaningful reflections and actions. This paper delves into the intricate interplay between Muay Thai’s cultural aspects, such as meditation, religion, music, dance, and ritual respect for a master, and its role as a global combat sport. The embodiment of cultural heritage in the practice of Muay Thai becomes apparent, highlighting its dynamic nature in diverse cultural contexts.

The analysis unfolds across three distinct sections, each contributing valuable insights. The exploration of Muay Thai for native practitioners in Thailand elucidates the profound bodily sacrifice inherent in the pursuit of social mobility within the confines of a cultural context that venerates the martial art. The
interplay of bodily sacrifice, ritual, and gambling creates a complex tapestry defining Muay Thai for those who call Thailand home. Conversely, for foreign practitioners, Muay Thai becomes a sanctuary, offering an escape from constricting home environments and a unique cultural experience. The global surge in popularity positions Thailand as the epicenter of an international martial arts craze, prompting the Thai state to navigate the delicate balance between global appeal and cultural preservation. In the broader global martial arts community, for hobbyists and competitors, Muay Thai is popularly known as a combat sport emphasizing technical efficiency, though sometimes disregarding cultural aspects in its ‘mixing’ with other martial arts in MMA. But even in its subordinated role in MMA, there is still appeal in its Thai cultural heritage, which drives international fighters to travel to Thailand to fight and promotes martial arts tourism in Thailand.

Going back to the theoretical discussion of the anthropology of the body, this paper underscores the embodied knowledge embedded in Muay Thai. Martial arts’ ability to transcend linguistic and political barriers, rooted in muscle memory and relentless practice, highlights the dynamic and organic nature of martial arts knowledge. The interconnectedness of mental and physical aspects, as described by Thomas Csordas, underscores Muay Thai’s role as a cultural phenomenon and a bodily performance. The blending of disciplines and varied meanings attributed to the practice of Muay Thai showcases the complex nature of embodied cultural performance.

The contribution of this paper lies in its interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from diverse sources, including ethnographic works by Pattana Kitiarsa, Peter Vail, Dale Spencer,
Matt Lucas, and Paul Schissel. The synthesis of these perspectives offers a review of Muay Thai scholarship while advocating for more anthropological research, looking deeper into the diverse cultural contexts of Muay Thai and other martial arts. Vail emphasizes that the majority of published works on Muay Thai in English focus on aspects of its physical praxis. However, other disciplines barely address the sport, or are explorations of theoretical interests such as masculinity and gender. Most studies do not view Muay Thai as a field in its own right, as a structured, rationalized sport, both professional and amateur, that is linked to cultural politicking due to its associations with Thai cultural heritage and nationalism as a symbol of Thailand (Vail 1998; 2013). By recognizing martial arts as embodied cultural performances, the field of anthropology can gain valuable insights into the cultural processes surrounding these bodily practices and understand how context influences meaning. In essence, this paper invites further exploration of the dynamic interplay between tradition, global appeal, and the integration of Muay Thai into the broader landscape of MMA.
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