

The Turning Point in the Boxing Circle and Muay Thai Commoditization by Muay Thai Gamblers¹

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Abstract

This research aimed to study 1) the moving of Muay Thai into business, 2) the wagering techniques of and Muay Thai commoditization by Muay Thai gamblers. Participatory observation and in-depth interviews were used with 8 key informants and other informants. The key informants were Muay Thai gamblers and the other informants were Muay Thai commentators and those involved in organizing Muay Thai matches: boxers, trainers, gym owners, referees, and promoters. The concepts of modernity and commoditization were used as a framework for the analysis. The data were categorized, decoded, interpreted and also examined by triangulation. The results revealed that Muay Thai business started after the establishment of Raj Damnern Boxing Stadium to become business-like. Activities done by all parties involved including Muay Thai gym owners, boxers, match organizers, sponsors, promoters as well as spectators in the ring, were for profits. As for the wagering techniques of and Muay Thai commoditization by Muay Thai gamblers, the gamblers used their experience in making decision in bet, assigning values to Muay Thai by using money through gambling. Muay Thai gamblers, hence, were the key factors in Muay Thai commoditization.

Key words: turning point in the boxing circle, Muay Thai gambler, Muay Thai commentator, commoditization

Introduction

After Thailand had moved into its civilization age which could be considered a great change resulting from the rapid penetration of the western modernization into the eastern world, it quickly and willingly embraced modern technology as could be seen from the First to the Fifth National Economic and Social Development Plans used in the country administration aiming to improve the standard of living of the Thai people (Office of National Economic and Social Development Council, 1967). The employment of these plans led Thailand into a more modernized society. There were many more roads to the communities. People had piped water and electricity for use as a result of the public utilities development indicated in the National Economic and Social Development Plans. These, in turn, brought modern technology into the communities.

The above-mentioned changes affected Thailand and also the boxing circle. The establishment of a standard boxing stadium with the influx of modern technology was like a stimulator for Muay Thai circle to become more business-like. The production of Muay Thai for the market was connected all through the system, starting from the production of boxers for the programs to the promoters who organized the match, matched the boxers and paid them.

The emergence of standard boxing stadiums was the first step in the expansion of job and income opportunities for many parties. The jobs eventually became the profession which induced a huge sum of money in many forms. This was not restricted only to the boxers who were directly involved in Muay Thai but also other groups of people who used Muay Thai as an instrument for gathering profits in many different ways. One of these groups was Muay Thai gamblers. They had been in the circle for a long time, long enough to have thorough knowledge about Muay Thai so they used this advantage to establish their career. Muay Thai gamblers, hence, meant more than just spectators at the stadium. They could forecast who would be the winners and then wagers. This was because they mostly were highly experienced from being through a lot of matches in many stadiums. Hence, Muay Thai gamblers became one component in Muay Thai commoditization. This research, as a result focused on the evolution and the turning point of Muay Thai that had become a business and commoditized by Muay Thai gamblers.

Purposes of the study

1. to study the turning into business of Muay Thai
2. to study the techniques and wagering procedures of Muay Thai gamblers and Muay Thai commoditization by Muay Thai gamblers

Concepts used in the study

This study of Muay Thai is a study with different perspectives from those that have been done. The researcher views that Muay Thai has been commoditized by the spectators, leading to the wagering among the so-called Muay Thai gamblers. Hence, Appadurai's (1986) concept of commoditization was used in analyzing Muay Thai commoditization. Apart from that, there was a certain period of time which was like a pusher that made Muay Thai commoditization more rapid. This period of time was indeed the turning point in the boxing circle. So, to analyze this turning point, the researcher brought in Gidden's (1992) concept of modernity to uncover how modernity became important in Muay Thai commoditization during the turning point.

This research employed Appadurai's concept of commoditization to analyze the activities of Muay Thai gamblers that eventually led to Muay Thai commoditization. The gamblers assigned values to Muay Thai as something that they could use to win or lose a huge sum of money. Appadurai's meaning of commoditization is that it is the study of an object's biography, viewing it as a culture-governed entity with certain definition and classified or void of being an object or commodity. "Commodities", hence, is a cultural phenomenon that naturally exists. The existence of the "commodity" occurs together with the trading of the objects both in the form of goods and services. Commoditization, therefore, depends on the overlapping and complicated existence of the components including time, culture and society. Though some objects have the characteristics which cannot be changed into commodities, they can become the commodities on their own right if there are ways to present themselves as commodities within appropriate context for the trading Appadurai's (1986: 13-15).

Commoditization, hence, means the process in establishing values. One thing can have different value at different points in time and it can also have different value according to each individual point of view. Commoditization can specify value in the exchange and what to be exchanged may not always have to be an object or a thing.

Kopytaff's research (1986: 64) views the commodity production process as a cultural process and meaning assignment. A commodity is not produced just for the sake of production but has to be culturally defined as an object. An object may be a commodity in one place and time but may not be so in another time and place or it can be defined differently by different individuals or societies. The change and the difference in defining the commodities reflect the morally economic system behind the market economic system and the exchange of commodities in everyday life.

Khongthawisak (2008) has examined the ethnic commodities produced to serve the needs of the capitalist consumers in his study titled *Akha Nigh Bazaar: Trading and Ethnicity*. The study aimed to comprehend the relationship between Chiang Mai as an urban and the ethnicity existence of the Akha who came to trade in this special area of the town like Night Bazaar. The results reveal that being migrants in a city results in the adaptation of group traditions to use in everyday life in the city, especially trading activities. The commodities that the Akha brought for selling have ethnic identity such as caps, skirts, belts, etc. They are unique and different and so are popular among foreigners.

Chatuworaphruk's study (2008) titled *Border, Identity and Commoditization: Politics and Culture of Ethnicity in the Tourism Context* found that the cultural border of the ethnic groups that used to be clear-cut or independent of others, for example, Hmong's embroidery design, Lisu's patterns on cloth bands, weaving patterns of Mian and Karen were all brought in for common use through the presentation of the same commodity to satisfy the tourists' needs to consume symbolic meanings. The borrowing and stealing of cultural symbols among the ethnic groups is the changing of the face-off point, resulting in the new area or new border from the creation of the hybrid condition of one another's culture. It is the area where cultural commodities of various ethnic groups lay over the existing ethnic areas.

In terms of modernity, Giddens (1992) mentions that modernity is the result of the Industrial Revolution including the use of production technology for huge amount and the rapid increase of capitalism. Modern society has comfortable life, full of facilities. This wave of modernity has also led Muay Thai to become more business-like.

Modernity has quickly spread into the Thai society since after the implementation of the First National Economic and Social Development Plan. It can be said that Thailand has advanced in terms of public utilities because of the rush in the infrastructure development according to the plan and duration that the government has specified. Water, electricity and roads reach more remote communities, hence, the beginning of modernity in the communities. When there are roads, transportation and traveling on land are easier. With

electricity available in the community, they want for electrical appliances for more comfortable life increase and finally become their needs. Giddens has said that modernity will flow along comfortable transportation routes and will reach out even the bordering places and valleys in the form of commodities from other places which represent modernity.

Sugannasil (2005: 73-84) studies Thai communities scattering in the southern border areas between Thailand and Malaysia and points out that when people in an area are facing modernity, they will try to adapt themselves to comply with it. For example, they can take labor work in other areas to enable themselves to buy facilities for their homes such as rice cookers, fridges, T.V sets, or motorcycles and cars. This is to make their everyday life more comfortable and also to establish values concerning face in the society. Sugannasil indicates that the economic, social and cultural movements connecting to the nation and world economic and market systems has also pushed the consumption culture of the labor into modernity, whether it is the consumption of vehicles and utilities that facilitate life like cars, motorcycles, T.V., gas cookers, fridges, as well as fashion clothing.

Like Sugannasil's findings, in the advancement into modernity of the Thai society, commoditization of Muay Thai is sped up and spread out by communication. Muay Thai has become well-known through advertisement. Boxers from some gyms build their own brand by using names which rhyme, names which sound nice or innovative to catch the ears of the spectators. This is the way that Muay Thai builds its social identity so the boxers become known to the spectators from the start. The producers intend it to be that way and hence create the boxers with uniqueness including striking names that arouse the curiosity of those who have heard to find out who those boxers are. When boxing programs are organized to be televised, their sponsors will advertise the programs through media. The organizers, again, will name the program using attractive slogans such as "Songchai Day Battle" (Songchai means victory.) when actually the word "Songchai" is the name of a famous promoter of Muay Thai. When the boxing program is televised live to homes of the consumers, the consumers will assign meaning to the boxer in another way resulting in the unknown boxer becoming well-known in Muay Thai circle. The creation of identity through brand establishment or social foundation that those boxers have in them will make the boxers well-known to many people. Hence, the concept of modernity is the key instrument for use as a guideline in analyzing the change into business of Muay Thai circle and the concept of commoditization that the commodity is not just a tangible object but everything that has equal value in the exchange. Moreover, values do not mean only the money value but also the

spiritual value of the owner. This concept can be used in the analysis of the change in Muay Thai circle and the activities through which Muay Thai gamblers commoditize Muay Thai.

Research methodology

This research used the anthropological approach focusing on field phenomena for the information that is knowledge and facts gathered from those in the arena. The researcher uses participatory observation to collect data for the analysis of techniques and negotiation of Muay Thai gamblers while they are watching boxing matches in the ring, participates in the watch, collects data about the boxers' weighing-related process, and is involved in organizing the radio programs, for example. The duration of data collection was during May 2006-July 2010. The informants giving information from their real life experience were divided into 2 groups:

1) **Key informants** They were highly experienced in wagering on Muay Thai and able to suggest other persons for the interview. They are Muay Thai gamblers.

2) **Those involved in Muay Thai betting** They were permanent Muay Thai match watchers including commentators and those involved in the match like boxers, trainers, gym owners, referees, and promoters.

The areas selected for the phenomenon observation was Bangkok metropolitan, the area where Muay Thai matches were organized everyday and the main area for Muay Thai matches. Bangkok is the center of modernity before the modernity spread out to other regions and it is also the only place where there are standard boxing stadiums. Moreover, Muay Thai live broadcast is done here in Bangkok so the activities in watching the matches are more varied than in other areas. The researcher chose to collect the data from Raj Damnern, Lumpini, Omnoi (live broadcast for Channel 3) and Mor Chit (live broadcast for Channel 7) stadiums.

Results of the study

1. Advancement into business of Muay Thai circle

Earlier, Muay Thai had a role in the Thai society as Thai men's weapons in wars. When the country was peaceful, Muay Thai had changed its role to serve the society. It was still used in fighting but the fighting field was not in wars but in the boxing stadiums. This

kind of fighting was the beginning of using Muay Thai to create income and profits in many different ways by many different groups of people.

The turning point of Muay Thai circle was during the establishment of the first standard boxing stadium in Thailand. This was the time when Muay Thai has greatly changed its role to serve the society. From a weapon in wars to Muay Thai at the temple fair for sports and entertainment, Muay Thai, then, has completely turned into a true sports competition when the first standard boxing stadium was built. At the same time, the emergence of the stadium was also the beginning of the Muay Thai business in Thailand. In the beginning, after Raj Damern Stadium was just completed and officially opened, the matching of boxers were still done in the same way as it was. That is, the stadium matched the boxers and paid them. Hence, it did not affect a change in Muay Thai circle much. The boxing gyms were like an institution that trained the boxers of specific skills. Boys or boxers resided in the gym to be trained until the trainers felt that they had enough skills to fight with others. Then, they are matched for a fight. When the boxers got paid, the trainers took part of the payment, which was not much, to use in running the gym.

Most boxers during the changing time, if not young men in their last years of education, were grown men already with a career who had personal passion for boxing. So the pay was just extra money. However, when Raj Damern Stadium was in the red because the matchmakers were not just and took side, the administrative team decided to discard the whole matchmaking system to embrace the use of promoters instead. A group of people not belonging to the stadium was appointed to organize the match. They were in the position of the renters of the stadium, hence, having to pay for the rent, the match, the advertisement and the boxers. They took responsibilities for either the loss or the gain among themselves. This system of promoters had caused a great change in Muay Thai circle, both positively and negatively.

Promoters are actually entrepreneurs or merchants who take profits as their priority. The matching, hence, emphasized compatibility with the aim to attract gamblers to the ring and eventually steady income for the stadium. At the same time, these promoters started to build their own network by booking boxers. This led to auctions for famous boxers, making the pay for top ones during 1957-1972 shoot up from twenty or thirty thousand bath to a hundred thousand as can be seen from the interview of Ah Song about Muay Thai gamblers that:

“A hundred percent of Muay Thai spectators come for gambling. Let’s simply put it, 99% come to gamble and only 1% do not. They do not because they are foreigners. They sit

in the ringside so they cannot gamble. All the rest come for gambling ...” (Ah Song (pseudonym), interviewed on June 10, 2010).

The above quote was the reflection of a person deeply involved in Muay Thai circle for at least 20 years. It revealed that most Muay Thai spectators came to gamble.

The training of boxers is a total investment; that is, the gym needs to take the boxers to spend their lives in the gym, train them and send them to fight. This has become a completely controlled business cycle. The boxers in the gym have to strictly follow the rules and regulations set up by the owner of the gym. The pay that the boxer receives is divided between him and the owner of the gym at the rate the owner is pleased with, usually 40:60 or 50:50. This is because the gym owners take it that their boxers are under their care, provided with food and accommodation, so they have no rights to demand anything.

In addition to that, the influence of gambling has become prominent in Muay Thai competition. Disregarding foreigners sent by the tour agents to witness “the No. 1 martial art of the world” so that their trip to Thailand is worthwhile, almost all of the spectators buying the ticket to watch the boxing matches are professional gamblers.

Likewise, Muay Thai boxers at the moment are not different from other commodities since they are similar in the fight format. That is, round 1—staring in the eye, round 2—slight kicks in the leg, round 3—clasping the opponent, round 4—an important one, clearly showing the spectators and referee that they are stronger by clasping, using knees to hit, throw the opponent side by side or pulled forcibly to make them lose their position, and the last round: round 5—circling around. The winning one paddles out; the losing one chases after and if not succeeding in knocking the winning one out, loses the match. This is to please the gamblers who want to see fierce fight, full force and tactics to win more than tactics in using weapons. The beauty of Muay Thai which is unique is necessary no more. On the contrary, some promoters view the 2 round savage fights as a market opportunity and bluff by assuring their gambler fans that their matches are fierce and exciting right from the start of round 1. This has become an excellent selling point which can make millions for every match. It is well-known in Muay Thai circle that if a match cannot make the ticket sale over 500,000 baht, the promoter will be in trouble because there may not be any profit after paying the boxers. Hence, the intensity in selecting quality boxers for the match may have to be lowered to avoid the high pay. The eventual result is that the match is not exciting, and hence, boring the gambler and finally the inability to reach the ticket sale target. The promoter loses

money and withdraws from being an organizer in the end. An example of this is Ah Sink, a former veteran promoter in this interview.

“When I was a promoter, it was stressful, I was very stressed. Right now I quit doing that and become just a gambler. I build condominium. I feel light-hearted, not stressed” (Ah Sink (pseudonym), interviewed on June 11, 2010)

What Ah Sink who quit being a promoter to become only a gambler said well reflected the business-like nature of the boxing circle. That is profits and losses are important for the present Muay Thai circle.

Muay Thai has become a business and what is more important is that gambling is widely spread. Boxers are hired to pretend to lose and there were many things that have caused the deterioration of May Thai circle. The rules and regulations in Muay Thai matches have been changed as time changes. The art of fighting is not displayed fully because of time restriction and influence of the gamblers. The art of paying respect to the teachers and trainers has been neglected because sometimes if the boxers take time in doing this, the gamblers may yell at them and insult them so they dare not perform the whole respect-paying process. (Office of the National Cultural Commission, Ministry of Education, 1997: 58). This is in accordance with the information given in the interview by Uncle Phut as follows

“Muay Thai now is not like what it used to be. When I was the boxer, Muay Thai was an art and required skills. Now these are all gone. Someday I will launch a complaint to the Ministry as to what has happened to Muay Thai for certain.” (Uncle Phut (pseudonym) interviewed on July 10, 2010)

This was what the former top Muay Thai boxer declared during Muay Thai match “The Grand Fight of Top Southern Muay Thai Boxers: Diamond Honor Channel 7 for Education” at Hatyairatprachasan School, Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province. It reflected the changes in Muay Thai, resulting in the change in the art of Muay Thai to commoditizing Muay Thai boxers to serve the business purposes and assigning values of Muay Thai as money. This was to serve the needs of the gamblers who were regular consumers.

The development into business arises from one important factor, that is, when Muay Thai can be televised live. Raj Damnern Stadium was the first to arrange the live televised on

October 13, 1953 of the boxing program on “Police Day”. The match was between Chamroen Songkittirat and Jimmy Pias (The Long-legged) from Australia. It was televised by Thai Television Co., Ltd., under the supervision of Sapphasiri. The broadcast team brought the equipment to install and try out at Raj Damnern Stadium 2 days before the event. In the meantime, a group of people were sent to guard the equipment which was very expensive and weighed more than 4 tons in total.

To facilitate the spectators to have a chance to watch the match free of charge, Thai Television Co., Ltd. installed a TV set at 3 different locations, namely in front of Raj Damnern Stadium, in front of the Registration Section, Police Department (present day Bang Lin Police Station) and in front of the Bangkok Fountain Co.’s ice cream bar.

When Chamroen fought, the spectators who did not want to buy the tickets to view the match at the ring hustled to occupy the area in front of the screen, resulting in chaos that damaged many pieces of furniture and utensil in the bar. Finally the owner of the bar asked the Thai Television Company to move the TV set to the front of Chalerm Thai Theater and the problem was solved.

The fight ended with Chamroen knocking out the Australian boxer in round 6 and for the Muay Thai prime match, Sakchai Nakphayak or “Chom Samingprai” won a technical knockout over Surachai (Luk Surin) Chawiwong or “Sua Sam-ang”. It can be said that the legend of TV. live broadcast started at Raj Damnern Stadium (60 Years Raj Damnern Stadium: 31).

Live broadcast of Muay Thai can be taken as an important channel to gain income for many groups of people: promoters, boxing gym owners, boxers, business people and companies that make use of the broadcast time to advertise their commodities.

In the modern era, communication via media has become convenient. The message and information from around the world can be known in a few minutes. Hence, the dissemination of a country’s culture to other countries in the world has become the point of interest for many countries and Thailand is of no exception. The exporting of culture is one of the alternatives in making other countries know more about Thailand. Mr. Jekhong, a former Muay Thai trainer told the researcher that:

“I’ll tell you something. The only thing that Thai people can use to compete with other countries is Muay Thai. Take a look at the Olympics that has just completed. Boxing is the only sports that Thai people had more opportunities of getting the medals. Why is that so? I can answer right away that it is because

all the boxers had Muay Thai foundation. They have trained since they were kids. So who would be able to win over them? Just like football, we have to give in to the Brazillians. (Mr. Jekhong (pseudonym), interviewed on July 18, 2010).

The information above revealed the attitudes and pride that the Thai people have on Muay Thai. It also emphasized that Muay Thai is a commodity that can be sold to other nations all over the world.

Muay Thai is the sports of Thai people but many foreigners are interested in it and come for really serious training. Sister Won, a female Muay Thai trainer told the researcher that:

“Thai people give little interest on Muay Thai. On the contrary, many westerners give it a high level of importance. Training the westerners is just like training Thai people. It has to start from the way you clench your fist, setting up guarding, and standing position which are considered the basics for boxing. Westerners who train in Muay Thai are very attentive with heart and soul. When they have certain level of experience, they will take a test to move up the level. When they reach the red headband (Mongkhon Daeng) level, they will be eligible to open a gym for Muay Thai training themselves” (Sister Won (pseudonym name), interviewed August 8, 2010).

The interview showed the interest the foreigners put on Muay Thai and the devotion they gave to the training until they can become a Muay Thai trainer.

The moving of Muay Thai into business occurred after the emergence of Raj Damnern Stadium. At the same time, Muay Thai has been commoditized by many parties, mostly for profits. All activities were done, again, for profits. These include the gym owners who want to gain fame for themselves try to push their boxers to fight in a standard stadium. That is why they need to have close relationship with the promoters. The boxers who are directly involved in the boxing competition, if not because of poverty, would rarely choose the occupation that hurt their own body. The sponsors see Muay Thai match as the time to present their merchandise to the spectators whether by putting placards up in the stadium or advertisement spots during the breaks in the live broadcast on TV. The promoters who arrange the match are the main stakeholders of the match because they are the investors in the competition. The income from ticket sales deducted by expenses such as stadium rent and

pay for the boxers will be what the promoters receive from each match. It also includes the spectators who are all gamblers. Hence, their main reason for watching the match is to gamble. It can be seen that the commoditization of Muay Thai is for several reasons but this article will focus on Muay Thai gamblers in Particular.

2.Wagering techniques of and Muay Thai commoditization by Muay Thai gamblers

Muay Thai gamblers are a group of people in the boxing circle who are essential to the survival of Muay Thai because they regularly support Muay Thai by paying for the tickets to view the match at the stadium. Moreover, they are an important factor in Muay Thai commoditization. This is because they use their experience collected from the stadium to use as techniques and ways in wagering that can make them or others rich or poor in a few minutes.

By asking for the definition of “Sian Muay” from those involved in the circle, it can be concluded that “Sian Muay” are those who earn their living from Muay Thai matches. They are experienced especially in Muay Thai analysis and have long been in the circle using their experience in wagering. These people are “Sian Muay” or “Muay Thai gamblers” as called by people out of the Muay Thai circle.

Usually, most people think that Muay Thai spectators are fierce. If they are not Dons or gang leaders, they will have to be the rich. They have stern faces that intimidate people. These images of the gamblers faded out from the mind of the researcher after having chances to watch the matches with them. The understanding that came to exist was that these people were humorous and friendly. The researcher observed that they were divided into groups of which the members had close relationship with one another. Some gamblers would be at the stadium before the match to have something to eat or drink and chat with their gambler friends and then went separately into the stadium as convenient. However, in the end, they would meet at the regular spot of the group. One of the gambles talked about the relationship among them as follows:

“Each gambler has his own group. When they come, they will sit at their regular place. Everyone has got his regular spot. Like Ah Sink, every time he comes, he will sit on the banner, letting his legs loose. When the newspapers report the news, he is always in the prime spot in the pictures. Everybody

knows whose spot it is. The newcomers who don't know may come to take the seats but nobody would say anything. When the match starts, everyone will stand up to cheer and yell and gamble. They hustle and jostle until the newcomers are out of the group (laughing). It's normal; a newcomer doesn't know much and is clumsy when betting. (Ah Teelek (pseudonym) interviewed on June 20, 2010).

The statements indicate close relation among the gamblers.

Gamblers usually travel to different boxing stadiums to watch matches. Different stadiums hold matches on different days. For example, Ratchdamnoen Boxing Stadium holds matches every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday while Lumpini Boxing Stadium holds boxing matches every Tuesday, Friday and Saturday. The matches begin at around 6 o'clock in the afternoon at both stadiums. Therefore, the researcher usually saw the same old faces of gamblers coming to the stadiums to watch the matches and to always take part in the betting activity; there were not many new faces there.

For the boxing circle, it is common for a boxer to have another name for use in the boxing career in addition to his real name. The name used for the contest is more familiar to the public than the name on his official identity card. For instance, if the name Mr. Sura Saenkham is mentioned, not many people would know the person but if the name "Khaosai Galaxi" is mentioned, people would say "Of course, I know him." because he is well-known among Thai people as a boxing champion. Likewise boxing gamblers also have another name in addition to their real name, a pseudonym known only among the group of gamblers. It is not easy at all to identify the person by his real name because gamblers know each other only by their pseudonym.

In placing a bet while the boxers are fighting, gamblers must have a lot of skills and long-time experiences to do it and most of the skills and experience depend on their familiarity with the boxing circle for over 10 years as shown in the interviews given by Ah Teelek and Mr. Jekhong below:

"When we bet we need to know the boxer's fighting history; whether he is left-handed or right-handed when he fights or how he has lost his fights. We have to know even which round he would do it best". (Ah Teelek (pseudonym), interviewed on June 20, 2010).

“Most of the newcomers are irregular gamblers and will usually lose to the old ones with lots of experience who are called super-gamblers. The newcomers who keep losing would soon disappear”. (Mr. Jekhong (pseudonym), interviewed on July 18, 2010).

The above statements in the interviews reflect a technique used by professional boxing gamblers in Thai boxing. The gamblers keep data about boxers in their memory and use them when they make their betting decision during the fight.

In betting, gamblers use gestures as the main way of communication about their bet. The hand movements or signs are clearly understood among gamblers without verbal communication. A few gamblers use verbal communication together with their hand signals. Once the researcher had a chance to have a quick talk to a gambler while watching a match which was a very important moment for him so he told the researcher to come back to talk to him later or give him a call on the following day before 6 o'clock in the evening. While saying “six” he used his hands to signal a “carabao” which is very well known around the circle that it means “6”.

The atmosphere of the boxing stadiums that the researcher visited showed that the audience consisted of gamblers who were there regularly to bet and most of them were males. It is common to see them betting while watching the fight after which follows an announcement of the winner of the fighting followed by a lot of noise made by winning and losing gamblers. The exciting loud noise stops when another match starts but it does not mean that it really stops because it will come back again a few seconds after the new fighting match has begun.

In betting, gamblers use boxing critiques to help them in making decision on which fighter to wager on to make sure that they will win. Critiques come from different sources and the reliability of each depends on the gamblers' trust. One thing that the researcher saw when mingling with the gamblers was that each gambler was equipped with two instruments: a writing instrument, either a pen or pencil as one likes, and A4 paper sheets with either handwritten or printed information or critiques from various sources that each gambler trusts. It is obvious that each gambler buys these information sheets by the same critics and each sheet costs 10 baht. Each seller sells around 100 sheets a day. One of the sellers talked about how he wrote the information.

“I have to gather the data by myself and write about the boxer’s weight compared with the other fighter, their training and how they did in every fight in the past”. (Uncle Banchong (pseudonym), interviewed on June 9, 2010).

What Uncle Banchong, whose only occupation was writing and selling boxing information sheets said shows that in writing the information sheet or critiques, experience and skills were needed. He had to keep records of every boxer for use in his writing about the next fight of each boxer.

In addition to this type of boxing gambling, there is another type that gamblers in other parts of the country can participate in without having to travel to the stadiums. They can watch boxing through the use of technology, that is, through television which is called “TV. Boxing”. TV. boxing gamblers use information sheets to help them in betting. They get information from boxing newspapers and even through a boxing hotline for which they pay 9 baht a minute. Similarly, gamblers can listen to the price of wagers right from the ringside by subscribing to this listening program for a group calling itself “Ear boxing” and pay a monthly subscription. Another method is live gambling from the ringside without using a telephone; this is done through signals sent by boxing signal senders as described by a famous boxing critic.

“When the boxer kicks, the audience in front of the screen see that he kicks but they don’t know whether the kick actually hits the other boxer or not. But I am sitting at the ringside at a spot where I can see exactly whether the kick actually hits...” (Uncle Tree (pseudonym), interviewed on June 19, 2010).

The interview statements give one reason for TV boxing or cabinet boxing gamblers to subscribe for the critique services which may be seen as unimportant by people who are not gamblers. These services can have a lot of effects on boxing gambling because winning and losing is like a near miss. Only a few kicks can easily mean transferring money from one’s pocket to the other’s.

Most professional gamblers or people who make a living in the boxing stadium use their accumulated experience as an important tool in gambling. The older the gamblers, the more experienced they are. Having been close to the boxing circle for a long time, these gamblers are confident in their knowledge and therefore, the only equipment needed for gambling is the information sheets that can be bought in front of the stadium. They use the

information sheets only to help them make decisions which fighter to bet on. They use their hand signals in betting which are understandable among the gamblers. For TV boxing gamblers, they have different methods of gambling. They have two ways of obtaining boxing information which are from boxing newspapers and from listening to comments or information on the telephone. Moreover, they can listen to live information from the ringside and become members of Ear Boxing and Signals Boxing.

From the study on how Muay Thai has been commoditized, it can be summarized that gamblers have made Muay Thai become merchandise that is wagering using gamblers' experience and skills as important tools for decision-making. Gamblers are willing to pay for the ticket to watch Thai boxing no matter how expensive it is if they consider the matches worth the ticket price. In addition, gamblers see Muay Thai as an income-making tool, and some even resign from their job and turn to take gambling as their main and only occupation to raise their family. Nonetheless, in gambling there are always winners and losers. Some have lost even 7-digit money over one match.

Discussions

The findings can be discussed as follows:

1. **Thai boxing as a business:** The results of the study revealed that Thai boxing has become a business ever since the first standard boxing stadium (Raj Damnern Boxing Stadium) was built and officially opened. In the beginning, the management used the match-maker system in matching the fighters. Later, the promoter system was used to match fighters because the match-making system was not a success and caused match-maker to lose some money. The system also caused favoritism in matching fighters. The change to having promoters responsible for all the matches has been an important stimulator that turned Muay Thai into business. Promoters are responsible for the profit and loss and they therefore try to use every possible way to make the most profit out of each match. Boxing gyms also need to have networks so that their fighters have a chance to fight in a standard boxing ring in which fights are televised live. The fact that Thai boxing is televised live on various television channels proves that it is business with all kinds of advertisements including placards on the ring, spots during rest intervals, lucky draws and award presentation to the fighters during the televised period.

It can be seen that Muay Thai makes use of technology in disseminating information through mass media, especially television which is easy for consumers to access and

remember because both the voice and pictures can be consumed. Thus, it is very common for advertisements to be seen during the matches and become hidden business in the boxing circle in line with the modernity concept of Giddens (1992) in which he sees modern society as convenient with the help of equipment and appliances. Thus, modernity is an important catalyst to turn Muay Thai into modern business through media and this is also to upgrade boxing for people all over the country to watch. This is a way of advertising Muay Thai at the same time as adding an income channel through commercials during rest intervals.

The study by Laksameewanit (2002) revealed that television is a type of media that is easily accessible by consumers. This study was on modernity and utilization of information by people living in Nakhon Pathom municipality in which the researcher believed that mass communication is one of the most important factors in the modernization process. This modernity refers to social modernity showing people's needs for success. The data of the study were collected through interviews and it was found that people in Nakhon Pathom municipality obtained most information from television.

Furthermore, fighters themselves are like merchandise with prices and can be bought and sold just like footballers in leagues abroad. To impress gamblers, boxing tactics are more emphasized in order to win rather than to preserve the art of Muay Thai which includes the Wai Khru ritual before the match which is unique for only Muay Thai and which distinguishes it from other types of boxing. Nowadays Wai Khru or paying respect to the fighter's trainer is done only as part of the fight and is not done artistically as it was in the past. Wai Khru now lasts for only a few minutes because if the fighters spend too much time on it, they may be chased away from the ring by impatient gamblers who lust for gambling. Therefore, in order to please gamblers who are the only group of regular audience, the art of boxing has to be changed according to the gamblers' demand. As can be seen, presently Thai boxing has become business even more than before with links between people inside and outside the boxing circle who want to gain reputation and income from Thai boxing activities.

2. Thai boxing as commodity: Thai boxing has been commoditized after the establishment of Raj Damern Boxing Stadium. Operation performed by different parties is done for their profit including owners of boxing camps, boxers, contest organizers, sponsors, promoters, and audience. If foreigners are not included, all audience are there for gambling. One gambler said that dealing with boxing is just like dealing with stocks; you have to collect and keep records of data about boxers such as their fighting history, whether they are left-handed or right-handed, defenders or attackers, and which round is their best. Gambling to

win rather than lose cannot be left to chance; gamblers must use their knowledge and tactics. They also have to use their hand signals instead of verbal communication; this is known among gamblers. It can be said that boxing gambling has turned Muay Thai into merchandise. Obviously, gamblers use the physical aspect of the boxer in gambling leading to winning or losing money. Using other's physical aspect as a way to make a living makes the boxer a piece of commodity with a price that is negotiable for other groups of people or audience.

Another study that emphasizes that people can commoditize others is the study by Kopytoff (1986) as he states in *The Cultural Biology of Things: Commoditization as Process* that slavery began with capturing or selling and keeping them away from society so that they had no identity in society. Slaves were brought to new society with a house owner and the slaves' social status was changed. The commodity which was slaves was owned with a new status and their external characteristics that were unique could be related. It can be concluded that slavery is a process of status change from an independent person to an object with the lowest social status and with value for exchanging, and with an owner who is the master.

According to Appadurai's concept (1986), commoditization is a process by which an object is valued for exchange. Regarding Thai boxing, for some people, it is a sport; for others, it is art and culture. Nevertheless, for gamblers it is an occupation that brings them income to live on and to raise their family. Some gamblers can even send their children to school all the way through university with earnings from boxing gambling. Thus, gamblers support organization of good contest programs. Programs organized by renowned promoters would be packed with regular gamblers and others who may make the program a million baht boxing program. In such a good program, gambling is certainly violently exciting. Consequently, gamblers have commoditized Thai boxing in the business system.

Recommendations

The study revealed that one important problem affecting the survival of Thai boxing is the number of audience who buy tickets of admission to the boxing contest. At present, the audience of Thai boxing is all gamblers which is different from the past when the number of other people who were boxing fans was relatively the same as that of gamblers actually watched boxing in the stadiums. One reason why audience keeps away from the stadium is

the repetitiously same old fighting styles focusing on only winning or losing rather than boxing styles and skills. Fighters, trainers and mentors all focus on tactics (methods for winning) such as leg-catching and throwing or low kicking rather than styles or boxing techniques. The methods of winning such as these are not appropriate and may injure the opponent. Above all, they would completely destroy the martial art of Muay Thai with techniques such as double kicks or triple kicks which seem to disappear because his opponent will counteract by leg-catching and throwing. Hence, the Ministry of Culture which is directly responsible for it should oversee and seriously solve the problems in order to maintain the art of Muay Thai to maintain its existence in the Thai society in this changing world.

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