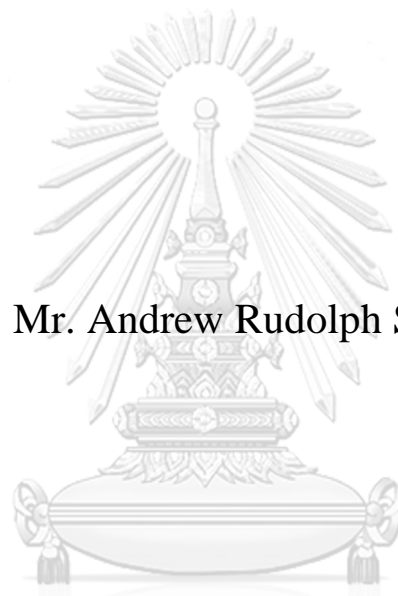


THE POPULARITY AND THE LOCALIZATION OF MUAY  
THAI IN CALIFORNIA, USA



Mr. Andrew Rudolph Sorrells

จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย  
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Southeast Asian Studies  
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GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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ความชื่นชอบและการปรับให้เข้ากับท้องถิ่นของมวยไทยในแคลิฟอร์เนีย สหรัฐอเมริกา



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ลิขสิทธิ์ของจุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

Thesis Title  
By Mr. Andrew Rudolph Sorrells  
Field of Study Southeast Asian Studies  
Thesis Advisor Professor Emeritus AMARA PRASITHRATHSINT,  
Ph.D.

---

Accepted by the GRADUATE SCHOOL, Chulalongkorn University in  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Master of Arts

..... Dean of the GRADUATE  
SCHOOL  
(Associate Professor THUMNOON NHUJAK, Ph.D.)

THESIS COMMITTEE

..... Chairman  
(Assistant Professor Theera Nuchpiam, Ph.D.)  
..... Thesis Advisor  
(Professor Emeritus AMARA PRASITHRATHSINT,  
Ph.D.)  
..... External Examiner  
(Assistant Professor CARINA CHOTIRAWA, Ph.D.)



จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย  
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

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เนื่องด้วยขนบธรรมเนียมประเพณีไทยที่สืบทอดกันมา รวมไปถึงความพยายามของรัฐบาลไทยที่สืบสานทำให้มวยไทยเป็นศิลปะการต่อสู้แบบดั้งเดิมของชนชาติไทย ในช่วงไม่กี่ทศวรรษที่ผ่านมา มวยไทยได้แพร่หลายไปทั่วโลก ปัจจุบันสหพันธ์มวยไทยสมัครเล่นนานาชาติ หรือ (IFMA) ตั้งอยู่ในกรุงเทพฯ มีสมาชิกมากถึง 130 ประเทศ ซึ่งหนึ่งในสมาชิกของสหพันธ์ฯ ที่มวยไทยได้รับความนิยมเป็นอย่างมาก ก็คือรัฐแคลิฟอร์เนียของประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา บทความนี้เป็นการศึกษาเชิงชาติพันธุ์วรรณนาเกี่ยวกับปรากฏการณ์ที่ศิลปะการป้องกันตัวมวยไทยได้รับความนิยมและแพร่หลายในรัฐแคลิฟอร์เนีย ประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา ข้าพเจ้าเขียนงานวิจัยนี้ในฐานะผู้ที่มิประสบการณตรง เริ่มตั้งแต่การสังเกต เข้าร่วม ไปจนถึงการเข้าร่วมรับการอบรมที่โรงยิมมวยไทยในรัฐแคลิฟอร์เนียและในประเทศไทย ในการเก็บข้อมูล ข้าพเจ้าสังเกต ประเพณี ธรรมเนียมการปฏิบัติ และวิธีการฝึกอบรมที่แตกต่างกันในโรงยิมรัฐแคลิฟอร์เนียและในประเทศไทยข้าพเจ้ายังได้ทำการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลความนิยมของผู้ใช้ที่ใกล้เคียงในการค้นหาหัวข้อมวยไทย ศิลปะการต่อสู้ป้องกันตัวแบบผสม และศิลปะการต่อสู้อื่นๆ ในรัฐแคลิฟอร์เนียอีกด้วย จากการศึกษาวิเคราะห์สถิติจากสหพันธ์มวยไทยแห่งประเทศไทย (USMF) และสหพันธ์คิกบ็อกซิ่งนานาชาติ (IKF) พบว่าความนิยมของมวยไทยในรัฐแคลิฟอร์เนียเริ่มต้นจากการแข่งขันของสมาคมศิลปะการต่อสู้แบบผสมผสาน หรือ (UFC) ในปี ค.ศ. 1993 สมาคมศิลปะการต่อสู้แบบผสมผสาน (UFC) นำเสนอและรวบรวมศิลปะการต่อสู้หลายแขนงให้เป็นอันหนึ่งอันเดียวกัน ซึ่งหนึ่งในนั้นก็คือมวยไทยซึ่งนำไปสู่ปรากฏการณ์การต่อสู้แบบผสมผสาน เรียกสั้นๆ ว่า เอ็ม เอ็ม เอ (MMA) หลังจากมวยไทยได้รับความนิยมเป็นอย่างมากในรัฐแคลิฟอร์เนีย เหล่านายทุนและผู้ประกอบการในวงการต่างพากันคัดแปลง ปรับเปลี่ยนรูปแบบกีฬามวยไทยให้เข้ากับรสนิยมของชาวแคลิฟอร์เนียอีกด้วย ในด้านกฎการแข่งขันและหลักการเรียนการสอนที่แตกต่างไปจากเดิม ไม่มีการรับแทงพนันระหว่างการแข่งขัน ไม่มีการไหว้ครู มีการเปิดสอนมวยไทยให้เด็กและเยาวชน มีการแบ่งลำดับความถนัดให้นักมวยด้วยห่วงคล้องแขนที่มีสีแตกต่างกัน มีการสอนมวยไทยเพื่อสุขภาพ และการลดน้ำหนัก ไปจนถึงการสอนศิลปะการต่อสู้อื่นๆ ที่โรงยิมมวยไทย เช่น บราซิลเลียนยิวจิตสู (Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu) กระแสความโด่งดังของมวยไทยได้แพร่หลายกระจายไปทั่วโลก การรวมมวยไทยเป็นกีฬาสารคดีในโอลิมปิกปี 2020 ยิ่งทำให้มวยไทยได้รับความสนใจมากยิ่งขึ้นไปอีก คำแนะนำสำหรับการศึกษาเพิ่มเติมคือการวิเคราะห์แนวโน้มความนิยมเหล่านี้ รวมไปถึงการศึกษามวยทรงที่ยิ่งใหญ่ระดับโลกอย่างวันแชมเปียนชิพ (ONE Championship) ว่าภาพลักษณ์ที่แท้จริงของมวยไทยที่ทางสมาคมฯ พยายามนำเสนอ นั่นคืออะไร อย่างไรก็ตามความเป็นสากลของมวยไทยสมควรได้รับการศึกษาอย่างละเอียดรอบคอบโดยผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียในประเทศไทย เพื่อให้แน่ใจว่าประเทศไทยได้รับประโยชน์สูงสุดจากความนิยมในกีฬาดั้งเดิมของชาติ และสามารถรักษาประเพณีวัฒนธรรมของกีฬามวยไทยไว้ได้ครบจนชั่วลูกชั่วหลาน

สาขาวิชา เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ศึกษา      ลายมือชื่อนิสิต

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ลายมือชื่อ อ.ที่ปรึกษาหลัก

# # 6187612220 : MAJOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

KEYWOR Muay Thai; Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC); Mixed Martial  
D: Arts (MMA); Localization; Ong-Bak

Andrew Rudolph Sorrells : THE POPULARITY AND THE  
LOCALIZATION OF MUAY THAI IN CALIFORNIA, USA. Advisor:  
Prof. Emeritus AMARA PRASITHRATHSINT, Ph.D.

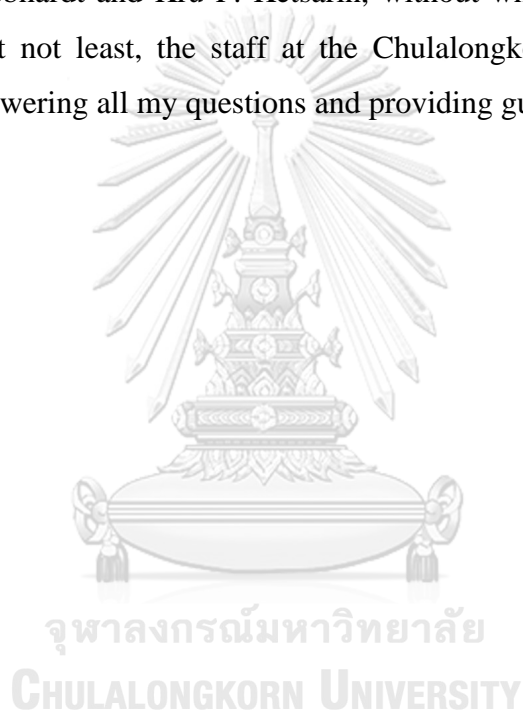
Muay Thai as the traditional martial art of the Thai people. In the last few decades, Muay Thai has spread throughout the world. The International Federation of Muay Thai Amateurs (IFMA), based in Bangkok, boasts 130 member countries. One of the places Muay Thai spread to and became popularized is California, USA. This paper is an ethnographic study of the phenomenon of how the Thai martial art of Muay Thai has been popularized and localized in California. I did field work at Muay Thai gyms in California and Thailand where I observed the different traditions, practices, and training methodologies. I analyzed Google Trends search data and statistics from the US Muay Thai Federation (USMF) and International Kickboxing Federation (IKF) to determine the popularity of Muay Thai, MMA and other martial arts in California. The results of this study show the popularity of Muay Thai in California started with the beginning of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) in 1993. The UFC featured several different martial arts styles, including Muay Thai, and led to the phenomenon of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). As Muay Thai gained popularity in California it was localized by entrepreneurs to adapt to the tastes of Californians. The main aspects of traditional Muay Thai that were localized in California are: competition rules, the lack of gambling, the deletion of the Wai Kru, pedagogical methods, kids Muay Thai classes, the band system of promotions, Muay Thai for fitness, and the teaching of other martial arts at Muay Thai gyms. Interest in Muay Thai has exploded internationally. The inclusion of Muay Thai as a demonstration sport in the 2020 Olympics is sure to increase attention to the sport. Recommendations for further study are to analyze these trends in popularity, as well as international promotions offering Muay Thai fights, such as *One Championship*, to ensure what they are calling “Muay Thai” holds true to the image that Thailand wants to promote for the sport. The internationalization of Muay Thai should be carefully studied by stakeholders in Thailand to ensure the country benefits from the popularity of their traditional sport, and the cultural tradition of Muay Thai is preserved.

Field of Study:	Southeast Asian Studies	Student's Signature
		.....
Academic	2019	Advisor's Signature
Year:		.....

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Andrew Rudolph Sorrells



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## Chapter 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Rationale/ Background

The Thai Ministry of Culture is promoting Muay Thai as a vital piece of Thai cultural heritage. According to the Ministry's website ([www.m-culture.go.th](http://www.m-culture.go.th), 2020) they are introducing Muay Thai to the world with the slogan "Thai Fight, Thai Culture." The Ministry of Culture has also submitted its application for traditional Thai massage to be added to UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage list; and according to Jasmine Chia of the Bangkok Post, "Of the 20,000 Thai restaurants overseas, 50% of them are in the US and Canada (Chia, 2017)." From this we can surmise the main cultural exports from Thailand are 1) Thai food, 2) Thai massage, 3) and the Thai martial art of Muay Thai (Spencer, 2013) (Chia, 2017). These cultural exports help to shape the way people in other countries view Thailand and the Thai people. This is especially true in the United States (US). Thai restaurants have become ubiquitous in most parts of the US. Thai diaspora opened restaurants on practically every block of the downtown areas in most major US cities. Thai food, which is thought of by Americans as a lighter and healthier choice, is surpassing Chinese food in popularity, which was once the staple Asian food choice of Americans. Thai massage has also become popular in the United States. This unique form of massage can be found in many areas of the US and is promoted as a form of physical therapy with many health benefits<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Proud Thai Massage* parlor located in Menlo Park, California states on their website that Thai massage is an ancient healing system combining "acupressure, Indian Ayurvedic principles," and "assisted yoga postures" (Massage, 2016).



*Figure 1. Proud Thai Massage in California claims Thai Massage is an "Ancient Healing System." Source: proudthaimassage.com*

In the last decade, Muay Thai has experienced a significant expansion in popularity throughout the world, especially in the United States. To standardize and control the expansion of Muay Thai, Thailand formed the International Federation of Muay Thai Associations (IFMA). The IFMA now has 130 member countries and regulates amateur Muay Thai events throughout the world. The IFMA was also formed with a goal to facilitate and promote Muay Thai's acceptance to the Olympics. In 2016 Muay Thai, along with Cheerleading, were accepted as provisional sports by the Olympic committee (nationthailand.com, 2016). Thailand also formed the World Muay Thai Council (WMC) to regulate professional events. The WMC now boasts 120 member countries (wmcmuaythai.org, 2020).

In the United States, the start of this rapid expansion of Muay Thai can be traced to the beginning of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, or UFC as it is now known. The first UFC event held in 1993 featured Martial Artists from several disciplines competing in an Octagon shaped ring, with little to no rules, to determine which martial arts style would prevail. The competitors could do everything from punch and kick their opponent to wrestle them to the ground and apply a chokehold to their neck. After several of these matches, it was determined that no one martial arts discipline was best for everything, but rather a mix of the styles gave the competitor

the skills to be successful in this event. Elements of styles that were shown to be ineffective in scoring a knockout or forcing a submission on an opponent were dismissed (Spencer, 2012). Thus, Mixed Martial Arts, or MMA, was born. The sport of MMA has become wildly popular in the US. MMA is rivaling Boxing (Hauser, 2009), which was previously the most popular combat sport, for viewers. Maese and Clement (2017) stated: *“For much of the past two decades, mixed martial arts has enjoyed a meteoric rise in the United States, its surge in popularity coinciding with mounting concerns over the sharp decline of boxing and its aging audience”*(Maese, 2017). Although many boxing fans do not appreciate MMA. Emmanuel Steward, a retired boxer and commentator said, *“Mixed martial arts is too brutal, too ugly. There’s nothing beautiful about it”* (Hauser, 2009). And the late US Senator John McCain in an effort to get MMA banned, once famously said on the floor of the Senate that MMA was *“human cockfighting.”* MMA’s popularity continued to rise however, and competitors quickly determined what the Thais have known for centuries, that Muay Thai was one of the most effective Martial Arts disciplines to be utilized in the Stand-Up, or “Striking” range of MMA. According to Patrick Tray, a Martial Arts instructor and member of the USA Thai Boxing Association, writing in Harvey’s 2018 book, *Mastering Muay Thai Kick-Boxing: MMA-Proven Techniques*, *“Muay Thai is one of the fastest-growing sports in the world, it has become one of the most prominent arts in MMA, Muay Thai’s effectiveness in the ring and MMA has become common knowledge to fans and fighters throughout the world”*(Harvey, 2018). Subsequently, many of the top MMA fighters sought out training in Muay Thai and began to showcase those skills during MMA events. According to themmaguru.com (2020), a popular MMA website, *“Muay Thai is extremely*

*important in MMA. Almost every fighter has some sort of Muay Thai training because it's so common and powerful in professional MMA” (themmaguru.com, 2020).*

The public caught on and began to seek out Muay Thai training for themselves. Muay Thai is now popular with professional MMA fighters, amateur Martial Artists, and housewives looking to get fit. Even the United States Army adopted Muay Thai skills for their latest Combatives (self-defense) program, which features the Muay Thai techniques of the “Round Kick,” “Switch Kick,” and “Push Kick.” The Army manual actually uses the Thai word for the push kick “Teep” in parentheses leaving no doubt where the technique originated from (Army, 2017). Kickboxing/Muay Thai promotions such as *Glory*, *Lion* and *One Championship* were started to showcase Muay Thai and profit on its popularity. Some enthusiasts have sought to go to the source of the art, Thailand, to learn Muay Thai skills. However, most students have ended up in one of the many Muay Thai gyms opened by entrepreneurs in California and the rest of the US, to service this expanding demand. These new Muay Thai gyms changed and adapted Muay Thai to suit the business realities of running a martial arts gym in California. This localization process made Muay Thai more appealing to Californians which led to a further increase in the sport’s popularity.

California (see figure 2) is the most populous state in the US and has the fifth largest economy in the world with a Gross Domestic Product of 3.1 trillion dollars (Forbes, 2019). Due to the influence of the movie and music entertainment industries based in Hollywood and Los Angeles, California is the source of many new trends that have swept the US and the rest of the world. Muay Thai has become very popular in California. According to the US Muay Thai Federation (USMF, 2020),

California has the largest number of Muay Thai gyms in the US. Due to California's oversized influence on trends, and in order to understand this phenomenon, it is important to examine how and why Muay Thai became popular in California, and how it was localized.

Scholarly research into Muay Thai is lacking in the literature. This study seeks to add to the small body of work on the subject, and to gain a better understanding of an important Thai cultural phenomenon occurring in California.





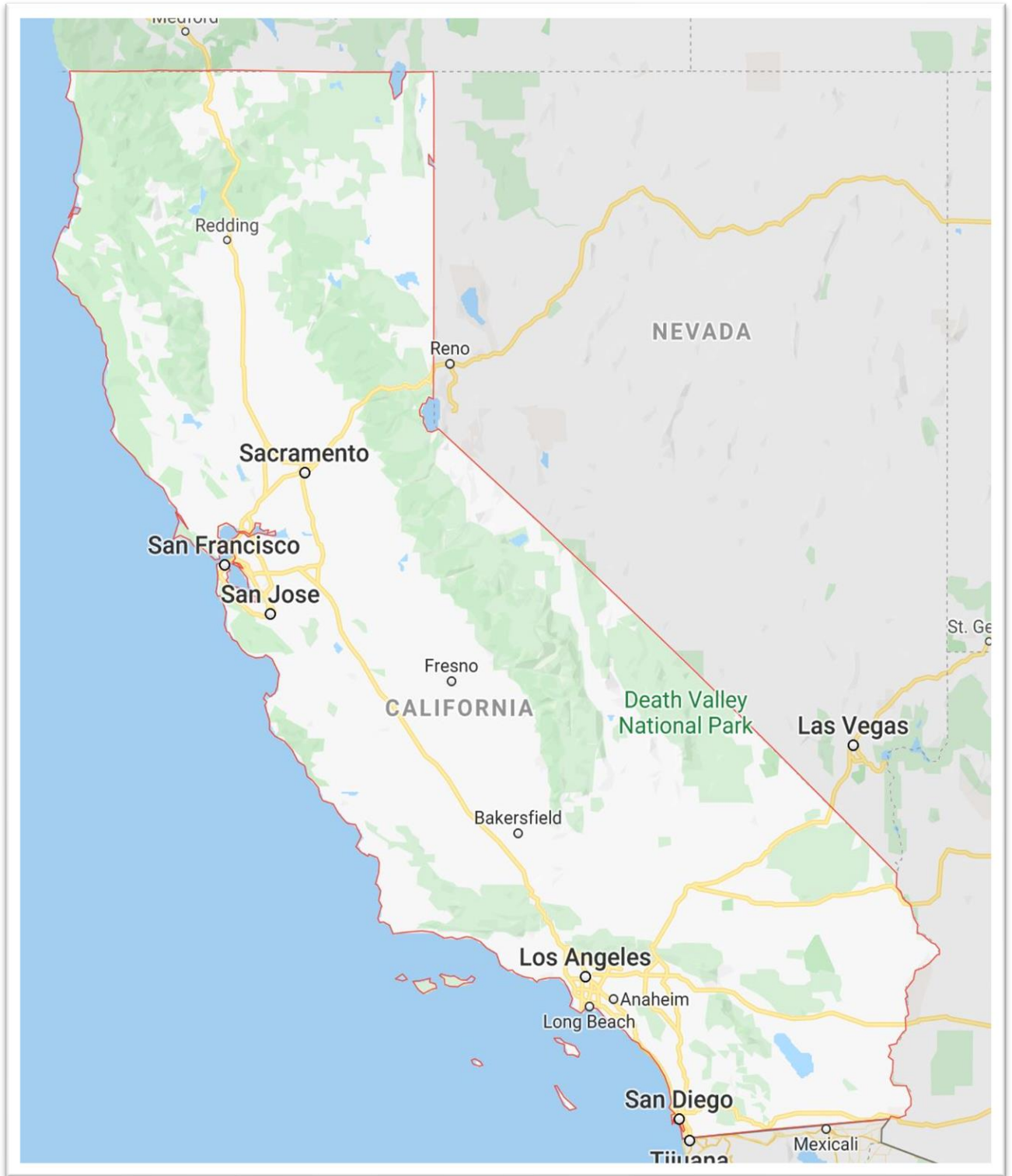


Figure 2. Map of California. Most Populous State in the USA. Source: google.com/maps

## **1.2 Research Questions**

1. How and where did Muay Thai's popularity in the US begin?
2. How has the localization of Muay Thai in California changed the way Muay Thai is practiced and taught?

## **1.3 Objectives**

This research aims to:

1. Examine the phenomenon of the popularity of Muay Thai in California, USA, and how it began.
2. Study how Muay Thai instruction and sport has been localized in California, and how that differs from the original form of Muay Thai from Thailand.

## **1.4 Hypotheses**

The rapid expansion and popularity of Muay Thai in California, USA began with the rise in popularity of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) starting in 1993. The study and practice of Muay Thai have been changed and localized in California from the original form in Thailand, to conform to American's traditional values of sport and instruction.

## **1.5 Research Methodology**

The scope of this research was limited to the popularity and practice of Muay Thai in California, and how that differs from Thailand. California has the most US Muay Thai Federation (USMF) registered gyms in the US, and thus it is chosen to be the focus place of this study, as well as various locations in Thailand. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this study.

### **The impact of COVID-19 on this study and the Muay Thai industry**

In late January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread around the world. Much of the research for this thesis had been completed by that time, however, there were still interviews scheduled with several interlocutors and a survey to be distributed. Due to health concerns and lockdown orders, the pandemic canceled these planned research activities. Even with the possibility of Skype or other video conferencing applications in which to do an interview over the internet, my interlocutors, such as Mr. Gebhardt, all but disappeared as they struggled to save their businesses and feed their families. The same was true in Thailand as the government shut down all Muay Thai gyms and competitions. My teacher Kru Gi was fortunate to continue to work at his boss's apartment building as a driver, but lost his private Muay Thai clients, a source of substantial income for him. In reaction to this abrupt shut-down of the Muay Thai industry, many of the trainers and fighters returned to their hometowns in the provinces outside of Bangkok and were thus difficult to reach for interviews.

On March 3, 2020, the Thai government issued an order to cancel all sporting events due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 6, 2020, in contravention of that order, a Muay Thai boxing event was held at Bangkok's Lumpinee Boxing stadium. This event would later be recognized as a so called "super spreader" event of the COVID-19 disease in Thailand. Many of the attendees at the packed stadium returned home to provinces outside of Bangkok, effectively spreading the disease throughout the country. Muay Thai fighters and trainers at the stadium were the most effected, and it put a spotlight on Muay Thai as a COVID-19 hazard. Subsequently, all Muay Thai gyms in Thailand were closed and competitions were canceled (Nanuam, 2020).

A cautious reopening of Muay Thai gyms and events began on July 1, 2020, however, there is a long way to go before things return to normal. No one yet knows what this “new normal” will look like for Muay Thai. The previously full stadiums with gamblers packed in chest to back shouting their bets to the bookie are gone for now. Prior to the pandemic, many of the Muay Thai gyms had been converted to cater to and market their services to international tourists. With tourism effectively stopped for the near future, these gyms are suffering. With the lack of international visitors, Muay Thai gyms may, perhaps, have to return to the traditional way of just teaching local kids from the provinces. These questions, however, are yet to be answered and should be the subject of future studies. One Championship began to host Muay Thai and MMA competitions in Bangkok starting in August. These fights featured Thai fighters and foreign fighters who were already based in Thailand, because no competitors could travel into the country without a lengthy quarantine. As the Muay Thai industry (along with Thailand and the rest of the world) recovers from the pandemic, the “new normal” of Muay Thai may change some of the conclusions reached in this study. More research should be conducted to understand the full impact of the pandemic, as well as how Muay Thai can be safely reinstated in Thailand.

The COVID-19 pandemic similarly affected Muay Thai in California. All fitness facilities, including martial arts gyms, were closed and sports competitions were canceled. My research field site SteelMMA was closed along with the other gyms. The owner Mr. Gebhardt moved all his classes to an online format. SteelMMA briefly opened to modified classes in July, but quickly closed again as COVID-19 cases spiked in California and the government ordered another round of lockdowns

and the closing of most businesses. At this time, Mr. Gebhardt has only been allowed to hold classes outdoors with social distancing and masks. Ironically, the traditional Thai model of the fighters living at the gym provides less chance of viral transmission than the Western model of fighters and enthusiasts commuting to the gym and then returning home to interact with their family and friends. The MMA gyms that have reopened in the US are using this model in order to isolate their fighters prior to a fight. In order to reduce the chance of acquiring COVID-19, several weeks out from the fight, these gyms move their fighters into, or near the gym. The fighters and their training partners live together until after the fight, to avoid interacting with persons outside of the facility. The UFC, which was the first professional sporting league in the US to reopen, has instituted testing and similar controls to ensure the fighters are safe and the competitions do not spread COVID. Because the UFC was the first professional sports league to reopen, many viewers, hungry to watch sports, watched the UFC for the first time. Dana White, the president of the UFC, stated that viewership was way up for these post-COVID events. This exposure to new viewers, may lead to new fans and a boost in the popularity of MMA, and as a corollary, an increase in the popularity of Muay Thai.

### **Quantitative method**

1. Data and statistics were analyzed to look at the number of Muay Thai gyms in California, and where the first Muay Thai gyms and instruction began in the United States. Trends in the data can help in answering the first research question: “how and where did Muay Thai’s popularity in the US begin?” The number of Muay Thai gyms

and competitions in California compared to other states in the US can show the popularity of Muay Thai in California compared with the other states. A rise, or fall in the demand for a product, in this case Muay Thai instruction and events, corresponds to an increase or decrease in the popularity of that product. ESPN.com (the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network) gathers data on the most popular sports in the United States and the Top 100 most popular athletes in the world. This data was analyzed to evaluate the popularity of MMA and Muay Thai and to look for trends in the data. This data can help answer if the popularity of Muay Thai is a function of the popularity of MMA, as I propose in my hypothesis.

2. A questionnaire was developed to survey Muay Thai students who had trained in both California and Thailand. Unfortunately, only three responses were received prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic I was unable to distribute further surveys due to lockdown orders and health concerns. I had originally planned to distribute these questionnaires in Thailand and California to gather data on different training methods, as well as perceptions and attitudes regarding Muay Thai in Thailand versus California. The three responses are not statistically significant, and thus were not included in this research. However, the questionnaire will be presented in Appendix D for use in further study and research.

3. Google Trends and Topics, and YouTube search data was collected and analyzed to determine the popularity over time of search terms related to Muay Thai and MMA. Google Trends analyzes a percentage of Google web searches to determine how many searches were done over a certain period of time (google.com 2020). According to the Search Engine Journal (searchenginejournal.com), Google is

the most popular search engine by far with 75% of market share. Thus, Google Trends can be utilized as an important tool to analyze the popularity and interest in a topic as evidenced by people's searches on the internet seeking information on that term or topic. Trends in this data can show the popularity of searches for Muay Thai versus MMA, the UFC, and other martial arts. Positive or negative correlations between these search terms can show if they are linked, and their relationship over time, which can tend to prove or disprove my hypothesis that the popularity of Muay Thai is linked to the rise in popularity of MMA. The use of Google data to show the popularity of topics in Combat Sports is not without precedence. Thomas Hauser (2009), the acclaimed American writer on the topic of Boxing, used Google data in his book "The Boxing Scene," to compare the popularity of various boxers to the top Mixed Martial Artists. ESPN, the most popular sports entertainment network in the world (forbes.com, 2020), uses Google search data as one of three criteria to determine their top 100 most popular athletes. ESPN explains their rationale this way:

*"How do you know you're famous? When everyone is talking about you, or in this day and age, looking you up on Google. For our fourth annual World Fame 100, we bring you each athlete's most searched moment worldwide, as measured by Google Trends" (ESPN, 2019).*

The ESPN *World Fame 100* is a measure of the world's 100 most famous athletes. The list was analyzed to determine the popularity of MMA fighters who were on the list. I propose that the popularity of MMA and Muay Thai is linked, therefore the rising popularity of MMA fighters should result in Muay Thai also rising in

popularity. ESPN uses the following three indicators to measure each athlete's popularity (ESPN, 2019):

1. Search score - Measuring how often a name is searched on Google. We took a weighted average of an athlete's Google Trends peak score (how much he spiked on his most searched day) and his average score.
2. Endorsement dollars - Our sources ranged from Forbes to ESPN contributors.
3. Social media followers - Since not all athletes are on every platform, we used only the number from their most popular account.

### **Qualitative method**

In order to answer the second research question: "How has the localization of Muay Thai in California changed the way Muay Thai is practiced and taught?," autoethnographic field work was done in California and Thailand to research and experience the various phenomenon for this study. An analysis of the different methods of instruction and programming between a traditional Muay Thai camp in Thailand and a gym offering Muay Thai instruction in California was conducted to show how Muay Thai has been localized in California (see also Appendix B). This analysis will provide information on the difference in instructional methodologies between California and Thailand, and other practical and cultural changes that have been made to Muay Thai to adapt the practice and instruction of the art in California. Unstructured and semi-structured interviews were also used to gather information from stakeholders and students in the Muay Thai industry in both California and



Thailand (see Appendix A).<sup>2</sup> The information from these interviews was helpful in determining attitudes and perceptions, as well as cultural context, towards Muay Thai in California and Thailand.

### **Field Sites**

1. SteelMMA and Fitness is located at 5910 Santo Road, San Diego, California (see figure 3). SteelMMA is primarily a Muay Thai gym, but they also offer instruction in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ), fitness classes, Yoga, Boxing, and kid's classes. Interestingly, they do not actually teach a separate MMA class like many MMA gyms. This is because the MMA title is more of a marketing tool, than an actual offering. I trained at SteelMMA from January 2018 until December 2018. While at this site I trained in Muay Thai, Kickboxing and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. During training and my time at SteelMMA, I observed and participated in Muay Thai training and the methodologies associated with this in California. I also conducted many unstructured interviews and held discussions with gym members on their attitudes and perceptions about Muay Thai, Thailand and the different training methods. Several gym member and instructors had spent time training Muay Thai in Thailand. Carl Gebhardt is the owner and head coach at SteelMMA, and I discussed his Muay Thai training methods with him on several occasions. I formal structured interview was arranged with Gebhardt, however was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I have also trained Muay Thai at other gyms in the San Diego area to include "The Art of Eight" Muay Thai gym. Although, I was only there briefly, I was able to observe the training methodologies, and believe they

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<sup>2</sup> While conducting research for this project, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. I was able to accomplish interviews in California and Thailand prior to the pandemic, however, many planned interviews were canceled due to health concerns and lockdown orders.

are consistent with SteelMMA. Additionally, most of the Muay Thai trainers at SteelMMA previously coached at other Muay Thai/Martial arts gyms in the area. For instance, Gebhardt was previously a Muay Thai instructor at “Black House,” an MMA gym owned by the famous Nogueira brothers, who were both UFC fighters. Gebhardt also manages the SteelMMA fight team. The team consists of about 10 (the amount varies) part-time Muay Thai fighters. These are all amateur fighters who also have fulltime jobs or are students. Gebhardt also trains professional Muay Thai and Kickboxing fighters, but these fighters are not technically a part of the SteelMMA fight team. I attended several local Muay Thai competitions held in San Diego where SteelMMA fighters competed. I talked with Gebhardt and the fighters before and after the competitions, and discussed their experience in the ring, and preparing for the fights.

2. T-DED 99 Muay Thai Gym (see figure 4) is located at Inthamara 9 Alley, Samsen Nai, Phaya Thai, Bangkok, Thailand. T-DED 99 is a purely Muay Thai gym.<sup>3</sup> The gym has approximately 43 Thai fighters<sup>4</sup>, or *nak muays*, at any given time. During the course of this research, there were usually a fair number of foreigner fighters visiting Thailand and training at the gym. There were also some enthusiasts (such as me) training there at any given time. The Thai fighters training at T-DED 99 compete at the major stadiums in Thailand to include Rajadamnoern, Lumpini (see figure 6), Channel 7 and others. T-DED 99 is considered a true fighter’s gym. This means most of the *nak muays* live at the gym facility and are considered “clients” of the owner of T-DED 99. I trained in Muay Thai at T-DED 99 from

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<sup>3</sup> T-DED 99 has a fitness center attached to it, mainly for the use of the residents of the apartment building it sits on top of.

<sup>4</sup> This was pre-COVID-19. The virus wreaked havoc on the Muay Thai industry in Thailand and it is unsure how and when the industry will fully return to normalcy.

July 2019 until July 2020. My main trainer was Kru P. Ketsarin, also known as “Gi” (see figure 5). Kru Gi was a former Muay Thai fighter from Chaiyapum. After fracturing his foot in a bout, he retired from fighting and became a trainer. Gi was one of six trainers at T-DED 99. Gi’s main job was to train the Thai fighters, and to assist and coordinate their competitions at the major stadiums. During my training at the gym I attended several Muay Thai fights at Rajadamnoern (see figure 7), and Channel 7 stadiums in which T-DED 99 fighters competed. These are two of the most prominent Muay Thai stadiums in Thailand. While there I observed Gi prepare and corner the fighters, as well as celebrate after the fights. I would stand with the trainers and the fighter’s family members in their corner just outside the ring. From this vantage point I was able to observe the rituals and preparations of the trainers and fighters before and during the fights, and the behavior and instructions of the trainers during the fights (see figures 7, 8 and 9). Prior to the competitions I observed the trainers from T-DED 99 prepare the fighters at the gym and observed the fighters “cutting” (losing) weight for the fight. I also attended celebrations after the fights and observed the fighters during their non-training hours. While conducting this field work, I was able to observe and practice traditional Muay Thai techniques and observe Thai *nak muays* train and fight; all while in the contextual setting of a traditional Muay Thai camp. I also observed the cultural differences in the fighter’s lifestyles, instruction and fighting between the two Muay Thai gyms T-DED 99 and SteelMMA.



*Figure 3. The Front of SteelMMA. I trained here almost two years. Source: Author*





*Figure 4. T-DED 99, my gym in Bangkok, Thailand. I trained here for one year. Source: Author*





จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

Figure 5. Kru Gi and I (green shorts) sparring at T-DED 99. Source: Author



## สนามมวยเวทีลุมพินี

### Lumpinee boxing stadium bangkok thailand

6 ถนนรามอินทรา แขวงอนุสาวรีย์ เขตบางเขน กรุงเทพมหานคร 10220

www.lumpineemuaythai.com, E-mail : lumpineethaiboxing@gmail.com

โทร. 02-522-6846 , 02-522-6847 ( วันอังคาร, วันศุกร์ และ วันเสาร์ ตั้งแต่เวลา 16.00 น.- 22.00 น.)

**“ศึก ทูไฟร์ยูมวยมันส์วันศุกร์ + ทีเด็ด 99”**

วันศุกร์ที่ 16 สิงหาคม 2562 เวลา 18.00 น.

จัดโดย นาย สรศักดิ์ แซ่ตั้ง

รายการกุศล “หลักสูตรผู้นำลูกหมัดกระบอบประชาธิปไตย รุ่นที่ 8”

อัตราค่าเข้าชม	
ชั้นริงไซด์	<b>2,000</b> บาท
ชั้นที่ 2	<b>860</b> บาท
ชั้นที่ 3	<b>430</b> บาท

คู่ที่	ชื่อ และ คณะนักมวย	น้ำหนัก	มุม	หมายเหตุ	
<b>1</b>	เพชรสวนจันทร์	ส.ชัยเจริญ	107	แดง น้ำเงิน	“ศึก ท่อไฟไทยลุมพินี TKO. มวยไทยเกียรติเพชรซูเปอร์ไฟท์” วันเสาร์ที่ 17 สิงหาคม 2562 เริ่มการแข่งขันเวลา 16.00 น. จัดโดย นายพิรพงศ์ ธีระเดชพงศ์
	พญาน้อย	ส.บริสุทธิ์	107		
<b>2</b>	กุหลาบขาว	ส.ชัยเจริญ	119	แดง น้ำเงิน	
	ธันวาคมเล็ก	ลูกสวน	119		
<b>3</b>	สิงห์แดง	ส.ชัยเจริญ	105	แดง น้ำเงิน	
	เพชรพนัส	น.อนุวัฒน์นิมิต	105		
<b>4</b>	ศิษย์เอก	อ.บัวเลิศ	127.6	แดง น้ำเงิน	
	เอกมงคล	น.อนุวัฒน์นิมิต	128		
<b>5</b>	สิงห์โตมทอง	โชคทวีออยล์	120	แดง น้ำเงิน	
	ลูกครูอินทร์	ดาบรันสารคาม	120		
<b>6</b>	บางกล้าน้อย	ศักดิ์ชัยโชติ	105.2	แดง น้ำเงิน	
	แสนเอก	หนุ่มบางกระดี่	108		
<b>7</b>	เด่น	ส.เพชรอุดร	113	แดง น้ำเงิน	
	อนวัจน์	ฉัตรกินปลา	113		
<b>8</b>	เพชรมรกต	ทีเด็ด 99	136	แดง น้ำเงิน	
	เด่นเกรียงไกร	สิงห์มวีน	136		
<b>9</b>	พลอยสุริยา	นกยีนส์ลาดกระบั้ง	110	แดง น้ำเงิน	
	กันต์	ศิษย์นายกโมทย์	110		

นาย เกษม ชินะทุไร ผู้พิมพ์ และ ผู้โฆษณา โทร. 02-2824-763

Figure 6. Lumpinee Boxing Stadium Fight Program. T-DED 99 fighter is in the main event #8. Source: Author



Figure 7. The famed Rajadamnoern Stadium, the oldest in Thailand. The night I attended fights with two T-DED 99 fighters. Source: Author





*Figure 8. Me with T-DED 99 fighter preparing to fight at Rajadamnoern Stadium July 2019. Source: Author*



*Figure 9. Me in the corner as T-DED 99 fighter conducts his Wai Kru in the ring. Kru Gi is in the background. The fighter's mother is to the right of the photo. Rajadamnoern Stadium July 2019. Source: Author*

## 1.6 Approach

The following theoretical models were used in this research:

1. Ethnography, Autoethnography and Habitus –focusing on context and culture

I immersed myself into several Muay Thai gyms in California, and several Traditional Muay Thai camps in Thailand. Chang (2016) believed, “*personal memory is a building block of autoethnography because the past gives a context to the present self and memory opens a door to the richness of the past.*” This experience has allowed me to help understand the goals, cultures, motivations, and themes that emerge from these environments, and use my several years long experience as a Muay Thai student to assist in this field work. This *carnal ethnography* is the somatic of the body’s experience to the outside world and a specific interaction with a subject, in this case Muay Thai. *Carnal ethnography* was used by Wacquant (2004), Loh (2016), and Spencer (2012, 2013) as tools to analyze combat sports. And finally, I deployed the theoretical concept of “Habitus” developed by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990). I used Habitus as a method of inquiry to understand the lives of the Muay Thai boxers at the gyms in Thailand and California. Wacquant, writing in Sanchez and Spencer’s *Fighting Scholars* (2013), described the three components of Habitus as the cognitive, the conative, and the affective which can be tools for sociological inquiry. Habitus, simply put, is our habits and skills developed over a lifetime by culture or upbringing. Wacquant (2004, 2011, 2014), extended Bourdieu’s signal concept of habitus both empirically and methodologically, using it as a tool for investigation during Wacquant’s three years of immersing himself in the lives of inner-city boxers in the United States. Wacquant said this led to a “*conversion*” of his thinking (Wacquant,

2004). I utilized Wacquant's "*immersion*" into the lives of the subjects of this inquiry to further understand their goals and motivations, i.e. their *Habitus*.

2. Narrative – focusing on the individual experience, I conducted semi-structured and unstructured interviews with owners of Muay Thai gyms and trainers. I had informal conversations with numerous interlocutors who were serious Muay Thai students, as well as tourists trying Muay Thai for the first time in both California and Thailand to better understand people's opinions and experiences regarding Muay Thai. I gained valuable insight while training at *SteelMMA*, a Muay Thai gym in California from 2016 to 2018 and was fascinated with American's interest in Muay Thai and how Muay Thai had been localized in California.

3. Phenomenological – This is the empirical study of the different ways in which people think about the world. Its aim is to discover the different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, realize, and understand various aspects of phenomena in the world around them (Martin et al., 1992). This approach was helpful to understand how Muay Thai became popular in California, and what factors were related to this phenomenon. It also provided context in which to evaluate the quantitative and qualitative data that was collected.

In this thesis I compare "traditional Muay Thai" to the localized version taught and practiced in California. It is then important to define what is "traditional Muay Thai," especially because there is disagreement amongst scholars on this topic. Spencer (2013) believes that what is thought of as traditional, or authentic, Muay Thai is a fluid concept, "*authenticity (in Muay Thai) is not just a matter of perspective but rather is enacted through various practices that work to signify and resignify what is*

*muay thai...Martial arts should not be seen as static entities...Rather as fluid objects.”*

Similar to Spencer, this author used habitus to analyze the different bodily experiences of practicing Muay Thai in Thailand and California. Spencer felt habitus “can move us closer to sensing the changes that occur at the micro-level, that modify and challenge doxa.” However, Spencer (2103) believed the very presence of foreigners training Muay Thai in Thailand altered traditional Muay Thai by their very participation in the sport (Spencer, 2013). According to Saengsawang, et al., (2015), traditional Muay Thai was the art practiced by Thai men to be accepted into society or as a soldier; and used by the royal family as a *weapon* to rule the kingdom (Saengsawang, et al., 2015); while George (2012) believes traditional Muay Thai was a vehicle to instill morals in youngsters, and that authentic Muay Thai is very hard to come across in this day and age, even in Thailand. Monthienvichienchai (2004) and Saengsawang (1979) believe the main shift in Muay Thai occurred in 1920s when Muay Thai evolved from a mainly ceremonial and military role to a Western style ring sport (Monthienvichienchai, 2004), (Sangsawan, 1979). Whereas, Vail (2014) believes much of the “traditions” of Muay Thai are being invented on a continual basis by the Thai nation state to “ensure that its Thai cultural trappings are not eroded”(Vail, 2014).

For the purpose of this research, however, when referring to “traditional Muay Thai,” it means the period from the transition of Muay Thai to a ring sport in the 1920s, to the early 2000s. The early 2000s is the period when Muay Thai tourism became prominent in Thailand and effectively turned many Muay Thai gyms into tourist attractions. An important element of my definition of traditional Muay Thai is also the practice of adopting young students in a student-teacher relationship, which is

based on the traditional Thai patron-client relationship. This involved young boys (clients) being sent by their parents, who oftentimes could not afford to raise them, to be taken-in, or “adopted” by the owner (patron) of a Muay Thai camp. In exchange for the patron providing food, shelter and training, the client promised to train diligently, not embarrass the camp, fight hard, and pledge a large portion of his earnings from fighting to the camp. The camp owner effectively “owned” the young fighter, and the fighter would take the name of the camp as his last name. The camp owner even had the ability to “sell” the fighter to another camp owner/promoter.<sup>5</sup> There are similarities to this in the Western world in the sport of Boxing. If a boxer has a contract with a management or promotion company, oftentimes that company would have the right to sell that contract, and thus the boxers services and commissions from his fights, to another company. However, in the traditional Thai context, this patron-client relationship has deep roots in Thai history, and more resembles indentured servitude than a business arrangement. These young *dek muays* (kid boxers) that have been sent to the camps have no say in the matter but were sent by their families for economic concerns.

This definition of traditional Muay Thai also refers to the style of instruction, the types of techniques, and the way of fighting practiced at these aforementioned traditional camps.

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<sup>5</sup> See interview of Phillip Wong when he refers to “buying” Yodsanklai Fairtex (Fairtex, 2019).

### 1.7 Significance and Usefulness of Research

This study will provide new knowledge about the international popularity of Thailand's cultural export of Muay Thai. The analysis of how Muay Thai has been localized in California will help to better understand the American tendency to deconstruct cultural imports to the component parts, discarding the ceremonial and religious aspects of the sport and only teaching the practical elements. This study also highlights entrepreneur's roles in marketing and packaging products that have been *globalized* and then *localized* for local markets.

The information from this study can be used by stakeholders at the Thai Ministry of Culture, the Tourism Authority of Thailand, as well as Thai sport's governing bodies such as the International Federation of Muay Thai Amateurs (IFMA) and the World Muay Thai Council (WMC); to be better informed on international trends and how Muay Thai is being used and modified outside of Thailand. Tourism is a major industry in Thailand. An important component of Thai tourism is the Muay Thai industry. This industry is comprised of competitions, training camps, cultural performances, and gear sales. A better understanding of how Muay Thai is taught and practiced in places such as California can help to improve marketing tools and informational campaigns to attract more tourism in this industry.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

A review of literature concerning this research is presented in this chapter. It is divided into these sections: Martial Arts, Muay Thai, Aspects of Thai Culture in the Academic Literature, Theoretical approaches used in prior sports research, Popularity of Martial Arts, and the Localization of Martial Arts.

### 2.1 Martial Arts

The study of martial arts in academia has been lacking. Henning (1999) agreed, *“In academia, the Chinese martial arts have been conspicuous by their elusive absence from scholarly discussion,”* so did Spencer (2009), *to date, there is a paucity of sociological research on mixed martial arts (MMA)* (Spencer, 2009). In Henning’s seminal (1999) article *“Academia Encounters the Chinese Martial Arts,”* he wrote: *“Despite the fact that martial arts is one of the most distinctive aspects of Chinese culture for many people, little research has been done”* (Henning, 1999). The mention of an academic paper with martial arts as the subject matter leads to derision, or *“raised eyebrows, sniggers and confusion in academia circles”* (Bowman, 2019). For most scholars, the martial arts are a thuggish world inhabited by uneducated miscreants. However, this is not always the case, participants in Muay Thai and MMA in the United States often have advanced degrees (Chin, 2016; Loh, 2016). Janet Todd, a Muay Thai and Kickboxing champion, is an aeronautical engineer. Most research on martial arts has been done by academics who themselves are martial artists (Burdick, 1999; Krug, 2001; Loh, 2016; Lorge, 2012; Monthienvichienchai, 2004; Spencer, 2009). An attempt was made to begin a scholarly discussion about the martial arts with the 1992 publication of the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*. The journal featured articles on such topics as *“A universal martial tactic: the shoulder*



*throw & its variations*” (Pittman, 2009), “*Shaolin physical conditioning: what's old is new again*” (Anta, 2009), “*Dangerous animals and the Asian martial arts*” (Dohrenwend, 2010), and my personal favorite “*North star: head butting as a weapon in Chinese martial arts*” (Burroughs, 2010); perhaps not every academics scholarly cup of tea. Some of the subjects may not have been the most academically rigorous however, the journal was peer reviewed and gave an outlet to the serious discussion of martial arts. The Journal had a good run, but unfortunately published its last issue in 2012.

It seems that burgeoning academics have more interest in these topics. Much of the research found on martial arts was completed as theses and dissertations for advanced degrees in university such as (Monthienvichienchai, 2004), (Burdick, 1999), (Eiamrerai, 2011), (Belardo, 2007) and (Laosuwanwat, 2016). Only a few of the more seasoned scholars (Kitiarsa, 2005a; Krug, 2001; Spencer, 2012, 2013; Vail, 2014) have devoted time to researching the martial arts. An exception is Lorge (2012), in his excellent scholarly book based on his PhD dissertation on the Chinese martial arts: *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (Lorge, 2012). Lorge dispelled many of the myths surrounding martial arts in this work, and showed, at least when it came to China, historical records exist on martial arts, but were often ignored by martial arts “experts” and pseudo-academics who preferred to keep an aura of ancient mysticism around the origins and early practice of martial arts. Martial arts, in their pure form,<sup>6</sup> are simply reflections of the culture from which they sprang, which are no different than other cultural heritage such as art, craft, celebrations, ceremonies and dance. Subjects that are frequent fodder for academics.

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<sup>6</sup> Those that have not been adulterated and localized in the West.

Karate, the historically most popular martial art in the world, receives the most attention from scholars. However, similar to Muay Thai, most of the research is done on the physical properties of Karate and injuries sustained from Karate practice. Beneke (2004) looked at the energy consumption of an athlete during a Karate Kumite (non-contact fighting event). The study found that Karate Kumite fighting contains activities that require a high metabolic rate and aerobic metabolism is the predominant source of energy utilized (Beneke, 2004). While Mori (2002) measured the reaction times of skilled Karate athletes and believed they had superior anticipatory skills as opposed to novice Karate practitioners (Mori, 2002). Even the collision mechanics of a forward Karate punch were measured by researchers (Walker, 1975), as well as injury rates of Karate practitioners (Critchley, 1999; McLatchie, 1981). The cultural aspects of Karate do receive some notice in the literature; as well as the globalization of Karate which began with its spread from Okinawa to Japan and peaked with its introduction into the Olympic games (Lawton, 2019). Karate's subsequent appropriation by Western cultures (Krug, 2001); and what Johnson (2012) called the "Japanization" of Karate and how it was modified as it transitioned from Okinawa to Japan. Kotek (2016), in contrast to Krug (2001), believes Shotokan Karate survived its globalization and appropriation quite well, and *"transitioned from a set of local Okinawan fighting skills into a methodical, institutionalized Japanese martial art"* (Kotek, 2016).

## 2.2 Muay Thai

According to Davies and Deckert (2018), “*Despite a large body of work about martial arts, there is a limited corpus of work on Muay Thai,*”<sup>7</sup> A search for existing literature and significant prior research on the subject of Muay Thai has confirmed Davies’ and Henning’s (1999) assertions on the paucity of work. Most of the literature revolves around books explaining what Muay Thai is (Kantamara, 2010), as well as “How To” manuals on learning Muay Thai (Tapina, 2010), (Kantamara, 2010), (Tienviboon, 2014). Most academic articles and papers discuss injuries from Muay Thai (Gartland, 2001; Halil, 2010; Lystad, 2018), or the biomechanics of Muay Thai (Turner, 2009). Google Scholar was searched in January 2020 for academic literature on Muay Thai using the search terms “Muay Thai,” and “Thai Boxing.” This search returned 37 results for Muay Thai and 19 results for Thai Boxing. When the terms “exercise,” “injuries,” and “dance” were removed from the titles, only ten papers remained with seven of those in the English language. This is a stunningly low number of papers concerning a topic that is considered by Thailand as one of its greatest cultural treasures. Vail (2014) agreed, “*despite its ubiquity in Thai society and the current popularity that it enjoys internationally, Muay Thai remains woefully understudied in academia, especially as a cultural phenomenon*” (Vail, 2014). Mohamad et al. (2017) and his team went further, they did a review of all existing academic literature on Muay Thai. Mohamad et al., found “*based on the systematic review performed, it can be concluded that there was not enough research found on the sport of Muay Thai*” (Mohamad, 2017). When academic work includes a study, or mention of Muay Thai, it is often lumped in with broader studies on Mixed Martial

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<sup>7</sup> In comparison to Muay Thai, there may be a large body of work on martial arts, but many scholars disagree with Davies and Deckert on that point.

Arts (MMA), such as (Spencer, 2012) and (Loh, 2016). In a thesis on the linguistic aspects of Muay Thai, Upanisakorn (2006) analyzed the semantic components of terms referring to fighting techniques, which were divided into three categories *Basic Skills*, *Single Skills* and *Complex Skills*. Upanisakorn believed that you can derive “culturally significant cognitive systems of the Thai people from the terminology of the fighting techniques of Muay Thai” (Upanisakorn, 2006).

Scholars often disagree on the origins of Muay Thai. Kantamara (2010) believes Muay Thai can be traced to 947 CE when a group of Thais settled the North of Thailand near Fang, whereas Tienviboon (2014) contends Muay Thai adopted techniques from China and India due to their great influence on Southeast Asia. Sangsawan (1979) concluded Muay Thai was developed to fight barehanded against wild beasts, “a time when body parts were to protect and fight against natural dangers” (Sangsawan, 1979). However, the use of weaponless martial arts as defense against animals is disputed by Dohrenwend (2010). Sangsawan in his findings, also fails to consider pre-historic peoples well researched use of weapons and tools for defense against so-called “natural dangers” (Villa, 2009). Other scholars, such as Monthienvichienchai (2004) and Henry (2013), contend pre-modern Muay Thai was purely a method of military training, while Vail (2014) emphasizes the importance of historical Muay Thai’s role in festivals and entertainment. Vail, however, concludes that most of the history and tradition of Muay Thai has been invented by the modern Thai nation state (Vail, 2014). Some academics have been overly pedantic in their papers, such as Spencer (2013) in his autoethnographical article on Muay Thai, using habitus as a tool to understand Thai and Western bodies reaction and involvement in the sport (Spencer, 2013). Kitiarsa (2005, 2007, 2011, 2013), however, was an

exception in the scholarly research of Muay Thai. Kitiarsa turned his considerable academic talents towards the subject with several excellent papers, including *The Fall of Thai Rocky, Muai, Thai cinema and the burdens of Thai men*, *Lives of hunting dogs: Muai Thai and the politics of Thai masculinities*, and *Of Men and Monks: The Boxing-Buddhism Nexus and the Production of National Manhood in Contemporary Thailand*. Most of this research focused on the Thai male's role in Thai society vis a vis Muay Thai. With Kitiarsa's unfortunate passing<sup>8</sup>, his admonition is ever more prescient today, "*I argue that muai Thai, with its historical and cultural prominence, presents itself as an ideal candidate for Thai studies practitioners and students to rethink the culture of Thai men...in contemporary Thailand*" (Kitiarsa, 2005b, 2007, 2011, 2013).

As stated, the cultural study of Muay Thai has received scant attention in academia. The standouts, Kitiarsa and Vail, have mostly written about Muay Thai's role in Thai society. Spencer has used a similar approach to my study in his (2013) work about Muay Thai, but the bulk of Spencer's work has focused on Mixed Martial Arts. The subject of this research, the localization, practice, and training of Muay Thai in the United States, however, has not yet been explored in the academic literature.

### **2.3 Aspects of Thai Culture in the Academic Literature**

In contrast to the dearth of scholarly work on Muay Thai, other Thai cultural phenomena have been common fodder for academics in the English scholarly literature. This thorough approach to the study of Thai culture has excluded Muay

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<sup>8</sup> Pattana Kitiarsa was a Professor of Anthropology at the National University of Singapore. Professor Kitiarsa was born in Nong Khai, Thailand and unfortunately died in his mid-40s in 2013.

Thai for the most part. For instance, Thai cinema, music, dance, and massage have all been researched and discussed in the literature at length. Cinema is perhaps, the most well represented, with studies such as Akiba's (2007) thesis on Thai independent cinema which analyzed the genre from the, "*aesthetics perspectives of Gramscian theory of hegemony*," which holds that some arts support the ideological hegemony, while other arts work against it. Akiba found that contemporary Thai artists were challenging the Thai political hegemony by using novel, experimental artistic styles (Akiba, 2007). According to Pratheepwatanawong (2008), who studied the role of censorship in Thai films since the 1930 Film Act, Thai filmmakers generally avoid sensitive subjects out of fear of censorship, which has limited the development of the Thai film industry (Pratheepwatanawong, 2008). The subject of gay, or "queer" representation in Thai films and television is also thoroughly studied in the literature. Many of these papers such as Wren's (2016) *Six-pack twinks, lipstick dipsticks and twice-touched teases: queering the stereotype in Asian Cinema*, and Yue's (2014) *Queer Asian cinema and media studies: from hybridity to critical regionality*, spring from Jackson's (2011) edited book *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Market, Media, and Rights*, where Jackson casts doubt on Thailand as a so called "gay paradise" (Jackson, 2011; Wren, 2016; Yue, 2014). Muay Thai in cinema is explored by Kitiarsa (2007) in *Muai Thai Cinema and the Burdens of Thai Men*, which reflects how masculine Thai identity is portrayed in Thai cinema. Kitiarsa believes the message from these movies is to "*convince their audiences that it is, and should be, men's historical burden to defend the country*" (Kitiarsa, 2007). Thai music and dance are also given attention by academia. The prolific Kitiarsa (2006), who

wrote extensively on Muay Thai, also turned his talents to a study of *Lam Sing*, a new genre of Northeastern Thai music, which Kitiarsa believes has become a source of cultural agency for the young generation of Lao-speaking Isan people (Kitiarsa, 2006). According to Mitchell (2009), the rising status of *Luuk Tung*, or Thai country music, in Thai society has created a rebirth of interest in Isan culture, and inspired works by Thai academics on the subject. Tucker (2010), in his Ph.D. dissertation, studied improvisational humor in the Thai dance genre of *Lakhon Chatri*. Tucker found that, “*comic improvisation in lakhon chatri entails a re-contextualization of formal...speech and movement...associated with modes of everyday social performativity*” (Tucker, 2010). Even Thai massage is given exposure in the literature, mostly for its health properties, as well as “*unveiling misconceptions*” about the massage technique (Ryan, Keiwkarnka, & Khan, 2003). Burynski (2010) wrote a thorough article on the history and techniques of Thai massage, and how it can be a lucrative addition to a Western massage therapy practice (Burynski, 2018). While Wiwanitkit (2015) studied the possible adverse side effects from Thai massage after a person had a heart attack while receiving a Thai massage. Wiwanitkit concluded the issue needs further study, and there needs to be standardization in the practice of Thai massage (Wiwanitkit, 2015).

With the exception of perhaps Thai massage, these other cultural aspects of Thailand get more attention than Muay Thai from scholars. Muay Thai and Cinema do, however, often intersect in the literature. Papers such as Kitiarsa’s (2007) aforementioned work *Muay Thai Cinema and the Burdens of Thai Men*, and several references in the literature to the 2003 film *Beautiful Boxer*, about a male Thai boxer

who fights to get money for sex reassignment surgery to become a woman (Akiba, 2007; Kitiarsa, 2007; Rennesson, 2011; Spencer, 2013; Stefanus, Sili, & Nasrullah, 2020); and of course the popular film *Ong-Bak* (2003) and its sequels which are featured in Hunt's (2005) paper *Ong-Bak: New Thai Cinema, Hong Kong and the cult of the 'real,'* and mentioned in several academic works as having influence on the discourse of Muay Thai and Thai identity (Hunt, 2005; Laosuwanwat, 2016; Vail, 2014).

With this study, I hope to begin to correct the underrepresentation of the Thai cultural phenomenon of Muay Thai in the academic literature, and spark discussion that will lead to more interest into this important subject.

#### **2.4 Theoretical Approaches used in prior sports research**

Different theories have been used by scholars to analyze sports, and combat sports in particular. Thanks to Wacquant (2004), ethnography, autoethnography and habitus seem to be the most popular tools currently used by social scientists for this research. Previously the purview of anthropologists, these tools have begun to be wielded by sociologists in their studies of combat sports such as boxing, MMA and Muay Thai (Sánchez García, 2013; Wacquant, 2004). Some of the most important work in the field has used carnal ethnography, or the lived, bodily experience, and Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) theory of habitus as the framework for this research (Bourdieu, 1990; Loh, 2016; Spencer, 2012, 2013; Wacquant, 2004, 2011, 2014). The most famous of these is Loic Wacquant's (2004) autoethnographical paper *Body and Soul*, in which Wacquant used habitus as a tool to analyze boxing, and the life of inner-city boxers in the US. Hartmann (2005) said of Wacquant's research, it could



“put the study of sport at the center of all sociological theorizing and analysis” (Hartmann, 2005). Following Wacquant’s footsteps was *Fighting Scholars* (2013), an edited book containing articles by different scholars using habitus to analyze various fighting arts, including Muay Thai, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and something called the *Fifty-Two Hand Blocks*, an African American prison fighting style (Green, 2013) (Sánchez García, 2013). Hogeveen’s (2013) addition to *Fighting Scholars* “*It is about your body recognizing the move and automatically doing it: Merleau-Ponty, Habit and Brazilian jiu-jitsu,*” discussed BJJ’s popularity, Hogeveen’s experience in training in BJJ, the Habitus of the martial art, and how bodies react, change and are modified by BJJ (Sánchez García, 2013). Several scholars (Spencer, 2013), (Monthienvichienchai, 2004), (Schissel, 2008) (Kitiarsa, 2011) and (Loh, 2016) used ethnography, autoethnography and habitus to analyze and explain various aspects and phenomenon of Muay Thai.

Although, Bourdieu’s habitus theory has been called into question recently (Lizardo, 2004; Nash, 1999), Wacquant’s excellent work in combat sports using ethnography and habitus paved the way for future researchers such as Spencer (2012) and Loh (2016). Scholars such as Hogeveen (2013), Sanchez Garcia (2013) and Spencer (2009, 2012 and 2013) find Habitus useful in analyzing the participants of combat sports. Sports do not readily lend themselves to outside observation, only through the bodily experience of practicing the sport do we fully understand what the participants are going through (Wacquant, 2004). Who else but the famous boxer Mike Tyson could accurately tell his own story, unless the author lived through the experience (M. Tyson, 2013)? Phenomenology is also a popular theory used by scholars to analyze martial arts, such as Tae Kwon Do (Petrovic, 2017), MMA (Loh,

2016), and martial arts in general (Columbus, 1998). The narrative approach is also useful (Belardo, 2007; Kitiarsa, 2011; Loh, 2016), to get the participant's perspective.

All of the above theories are deployed in this research, with special emphasis on the work of Loh (2016) and Wacquant (2004) due to their objective research in combat sports. Although, I use similar techniques to these scholars, none have used these tools in a comparative analysis of Muay Thai in different locations such as is attempted here.

## **2.5 Popularity of Martial Arts**

The popularity of various trends has been analyzed by scholars mostly using statistics to show an increase in people using or choosing a particular thing or service (Lex, 2020; Yunxian, 2020) such as is done in this research with Muay Thai. Tools provided by Google Inc., such as search hits, and Google Trends analysis are useful for measuring popularity (Hauser, 2009; Mohamad, 2017). Vail (2014) commented on the popularity of Muay Thai and how it relates to Thai identity. While Phuykaeokam (2020) made the dubious claim that there are over 300 million Muay Thai practitioners worldwide and said that Muay Thai is the most commonly practiced sport and 'diet' on earth. Despite the wide evidence of the international popularity of Muay Thai, Phuykaeokam's numbers seem perhaps, slightly on the high side (Phuykaeokam, 2020). The phenomenon of the rapid rise in the popularity of MMA receives the most thorough analysis in the literature. Hauser (2009) compares MMA in popularity to boxing (Hauser, 2009), while Cheever (2009) looked at the phenomenon of the popularity of viewing MMA contests amongst young men worldwide (Cheever, 2009). The popularity of Muay Thai training and competition

with tourists is the most commonly studied aspect of interest to academics in Thailand in the faculties of hospitality and tourism, such as Chaigasem (2020) , Phuykaeokam et, al. (2020), and Henkel et, al. (2006) (Chaigasem, 2020; Henkel, 2006; Phuykaeokam, 2020). This tourism aspect is, of course, of great interest to the Thai government who funds much of this research. The popularity of MMA and Muay Thai with women is an oft explored subject by scholars (Davies, 2018, 2019; Luker, 2012), including Chin's (2016) look at MMA's popularity with Asian women and how their bodies are perceived in MMA (Chin, 2016). Davies (2018) believes that for many, the sight of bruised and battered women represent "*failed femininity*," whereas for a man it embodies masculine success (Davies, 2018).

## **2.6 Localization of Martial Arts in the West**

Localization, usually as a corollary to globalization, has been the subject of much research, usually in the economic realm. The danger of globalization, and the need to move towards the localization of products and systems has been analyzed (Hines, 2000). The economics and business aspects of localization are the most often researched (Lane, 1998). The localization and adaptation of martial arts, however, has been given only scant attention in the literature. Burdick (1999) researched the influx and adoption of eastern martial arts in America (Burdick, 1999), while Krug (2001), discussed Karate's origins in Okinawa and what Krug called Karate's three-stage appropriation in the Anglo-American culture. Krug did not particularly address localization, or popularity, but rather cultural appropriation as he called it (Krug, 2001). The topic of Americans clashing with Asian culture as reflected through the adoption of various Asian martial arts has been studied by academics (Hilnak, 2009;

Krug, 2001; Rouse, 2015). The early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is a popular period for these studies. The early period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time when the US was experiencing an influx of Asian immigrants who brought knowledge of martial arts with them from their home countries. Even US President Theodore Roosevelt (president from 1901-09) was a fan of Jiu-Jitsu (Rouse, 2015) and touted its benefits in physical fitness and self-defense. Waves of Japanese immigrants to California during this period, seeking jobs in the agricultural industry, exposed Californians to Japanese martial culture (Hilnak, 2009). In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the American occupation of Japan after World War II led to many American servicemen learning Asian martial arts and subsequently returning to open their own schools in the United States. Burdick (1999) covers this at length in his dissertation on the history of unarmed combat in America (Burdick, 1999).

The world of academia has begun to turn the corner on the critical and academic analysis of the martial arts. The rise in the popularity of the UFC and MMA, is leading to more research on the matter. Wacquant (2004) paved the way, and scholars such as Spencer (2009, 2012, 2013), Kitiarsa (2005), and Vail (2014) have produced noteworthy works on the subject (Kitiarsa, 2005a; Sánchez García, 2013; Spencer, 2012, 2013; Vail, 2014; Wacquant, 2004, 2011, 2014). Bowman (2019), wrote a detailed guidebook on the academic study of the martial arts (Bowman, 2019). The interaction of martial arts and culture is starting to get more attention in academia. Similar work to my research has been done by several scholars including Belardo's work (2007) on the attitudes of foreigners towards Muay Thai. Belardo's study found that most foreigners came to Thailand to study Muay Thai for the atmosphere, and studied Muay Thai just for pleasure, not for the purpose of being

an instructor or being a boxer; female Muay Thai practitioners trained in Muay Thai to lose weight (Belardo, 2007). Laosuwanwat (2016) wrote a thesis on the appreciation for Thai culture in Korean Muay Thai practitioners. Laosuwanwat concluded Korean's and Thai's had shared cultural values which led to Korean's having an enhanced appreciation of Muay Thai (Laosuwanwat, 2016). Krug's research (2001) on the three steps of the cultural appropriation of Karate in the West is relevant and shows aspects of localization of a martial art, as well as Kotek (2016) who looked at the globalization and localization of Karate, what Kotek called "*glocalization*." Hilnak (2009) came close to the mark by looking at Judo and Japanese in California, however, Hilnak focused on the clash of cultures and not on how Judo was localized (Hilnak, 2009; Kotek, 2016; Krug, 2001). The research done here is new and prescient because the author has found no studies that have been done on the topic of localization of Muay Thai, and its popularity in California. In fact, in her thesis, Belardo (2007) recommended further study, "*there should be research done also in the Muay Thai training camp in other countries to have a good comparison of the curriculum here in Thailand and in other countries*" (Belardo, 2007). This study aims to fill this gap in knowledge and provide important information on how Muay Thai, a major component of Thailand's intangible cultural heritage, has been popularized, adapted, and localized in California.

### Chapter 3 Popularity of Muay Thai in California

The first research question of this study was: How and where did Muay Thai's popularity in the US begin? From my research I can ascertain that the first established Muay Thai instruction began in California in 1968 by Ajarn Surachai ("Chai") Sirisute. Ajarn Sirisute went on to form the World Thai Kickboxing Association (WTBA, 2020). In the decades that followed, several factors accelerated interest in Muay Thai. The 1989 film *Kickboxer* starring action hero Jean-Claude Van Damme was set in Thailand and featured mentions of Muay Thai and Muay Thai training. The film was popular and a commercial success, but did not particularly promote Muay Thai, more of a Hollywood version of Kickboxing dressed up as Muay Thai. Spencer (2013) believed *Kickboxer* "did much to distort Western visions of Muay Thai" (Spencer, 2013). However, the film deserves mention, because it was one of the first films of the genre that showed Muay Thai and training in Thailand. Muay Thai did not receive much further attention until 1993 when the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) held its first contest. The UFC fight promotion highlighted the effectiveness of martial arts that were not well known to Americans, including Muay Thai and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. Henry (2013) found, "as the UFC gained popularity, interest in Muay Thai increased along with it. MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) training became popular, of which Muay Thai was an important component (Henry, 2013)." California went on to become one of the epicenters of MMA training. Such California gyms as Alliance MMA, The Lion's Den, Black House<sup>9</sup>, Victory MMA (all in San

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<sup>9</sup> SteelMMA, one of the field sites for this research, is owned by Carl Gebhardt. Mr. Gebhardt was a former Muay Thai coach at the Black House gym.

Diego, California) and others, are well known gyms in the MMA community. These MMA gyms all feature Muay Thai instruction. The acknowledgement of the importance of Muay Thai in MMA, as evidenced by these popular and respected gyms offering it as part of their MMA program, boosted the public perception of Muay Thai as a valuable martial art.

UFC was described this year by Time Magazine as “the fastest-growing sports brand in America” (Hauser, 2009). With this rise in interest, MMA athletes are now becoming some of the most popular athletes in the world. Since 2016, the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN)<sup>10</sup> has been publishing a list of the Top 100 most famous athletes in the world. In 2016 two MMA fighters made the list: Rhonda Rousey #23, and Conor McGregor #37. In 2017, three MMA athletes made the Top 100 list: Rhonda Rousey increased seven spaces to #16, McGregor increased to #25, and Brazilian UFC star Anderson Silva joined the list at #39. It should be noted that Anderson Silva is considered a “Muay Thai specialist.” In 2018, McGregor was the only MMA athlete still on the list at #18, Rousey and Silva had fallen off. In 2019, the latest year we have data, McGregor had advanced precipitously to #5. Khabib Nurmagomedov, a Russian UFC athlete, and the nemesis to McGregor, made the list at #15. Although, McGregor is a star even outside of MMA, and has even tried his hand at boxing, his popularity is mainly due to MMA and the UFC. The meteoric rise of these MMA athletes in popularity in the last several years reflects the overall popularity of the sport. Although, this is worldwide popularity data, the only place where McGregor and Nurmagomedov are more

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<sup>10</sup> According to Forbes.com, ESPN is the world’s most popular sports broadcast network. ESPN also recently bought the rights to exclusively show the UFC in the United States forbes.com (2020).

popular than in the US, is in their native Ireland and Russia, respectively. What is also interesting to note, in each year analyzed, except for 2018, the top MMA athlete beat the most popular boxer. In August of 2017, McGregor was defeated by Floyd Mayweather in a much-publicized boxing match that had cross-over appeal to both boxing and MMA fans. Due to the publicity surrounding that event, and Mayweather's conquest over McGregor, Mayweather increased in popularity and captured the #14 spot in 2018 (ESPN, 2019).

The debut of the UFC in 1993 coincided with Phillip Wong opening his famous Fairtex Muay Thai gym in Chandler, Arizona USA (see interview of Ariyawat ("Prem") Busarabavonwongs). Wong brought five Muay Thai coaches from Thailand to help him with the gym. The Fairtex gym relocated to San Francisco in 1996 (Fairtex, 2020; Pacificringsports.com, 2020). Wong was a pioneer in spreading the art of Muay Thai to the United States and later internationally. Wong currently operates one of the largest Muay Thai equipment brands and the Fairtex Sports Complex in Pattaya, Thailand<sup>11</sup>. Fairtex gym's move to California, and the introduction of Muay Thai trainers from Thailand, right at a time when MMA was popularizing Muay Thai, almost certainly was a major factor in Muay Thai's eventual spread and popularity in California. Many of the early students at Fairtex San Francisco went on to open their own Muay Thai gyms in California (Pacificringsports.com, 2020).

The film *Ong-Bak* was released in 2003 and became wildly popular. It was a worldwide hit and achieved a cult following (Hunt, 2005). The film featured Thai actor Tony Jaa and was one of the first films released internationally to feature

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<sup>11</sup> Although, Fairtex Pattaya was not technically a field site for this research, I have trained Muay Thai there on no less than a dozen occasions.

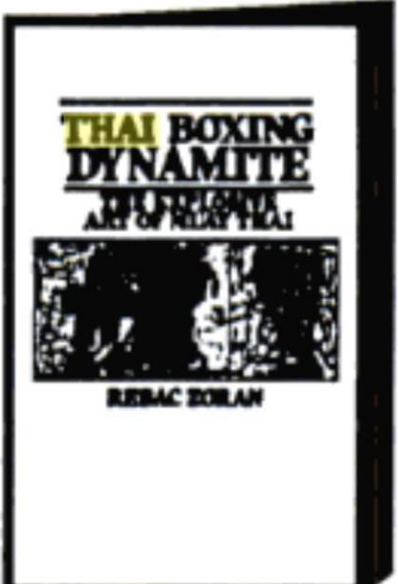


traditional Muay Thai. Americans were curious about the exotic martial art Tony Jaa used to subdue his onscreen foes. This would not be the first time a film fueled a martial arts craze in the US. The 1973 Bruce Lee film *Enter the Dragon* caused an explosion of interest in Kung Fu and Asian martial arts in the US and California. Lee was a Chinese immigrant from Hong Kong<sup>12</sup> who settled in California and eventually founded his own style of Martial Art named Jeet Kune Do (JKD). JKD featured a conglomeration of techniques from other martial arts. Dana White, the president of the UFC, credits Lee for inventing Mixed Martial Arts<sup>13</sup> (Lole, 2012). Westerners are always seeking the next exotic and esoteric martial art that will prove unstoppable in self-defense situations. Tony Jaa had just whetted America's appetite for a new and exotic martial art to practice. This made Muay Thai the new "hot" and exciting art to learn. See (figure 10) an advertisement from the 1993 edition of the martial arts publication *Black Belt Magazine* as an example of the promotion of Muay Thai the new "hot" martial art. Krug (2001) described the introduction of new Eastern martial arts to the West as *"the secret traditions of martial artists and the fabulous stories circulating within martial arts circles proved helpful in feeding the popular imagination with beliefs about the practices in general as secret, highly advanced, deadly, and possessing the ability to make the practitioner virtually invulnerable to physical harm."* Krug links this fascination and exoticization of Eastern martial arts by the West, with the parallel Western views of Asia in general (Krug, 2001).

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<sup>12</sup> Lee was actually born in San Francisco when his parents were traveling there but grew up in Hong Kong.

<sup>13</sup> The author studied JKD in California in the early 1990's. The principles of JKD were to include what is useful and discard that which is not, regardless of what martial tradition the skill came from. JKD included Muay Thai in the "what is useful" part. This was the author's first exposure to the Thai martial art.



**THAI BOXING DYNAMITE**  
The Explosive Art of **Muay Thai**  
by *Zoran Rebac*

You're in the ring when three flashing kicks from the **Muay Thai** boxer knock you to the canvas. **Muay Thai**, the hottest style of kickboxing to hit the sports world, integrates the use of legs and fists in one clean, fluid, yet savage style. Get the facts on how to master **Thai Boxing Dynamite**. 8 1/2 x 11, softcover, photos, 120 pp.

**\$14.00**

Figure 10. Ad from Black Belt Magazine referring to Thai Boxing as the "hottest" new style. Source: Black Belt Magazine (1993)

### 3.1 Google Trends analysis:

Google Trends was analyzed to show the relationship and popularity of the UFC, MMA, and Muay Thai in California. As previously mentioned, Google Trends has become a valuable tool to measure the popularity of various trends and subjects.

1. Figure 11 shows the popularity in California of the search terms Muay Thai vs UFC from 2004 (the first year google trends has available data) to present. The trend shows there is a correlation between the popularity of the search term Muay Thai and UFC. This tends to show the two terms have a positive effect on each other's popularity. In this case it is a positive correlation showing that a rise in one led to a rise in the other. This trend continued until approximately 2006 when searches for UFC decreased relative to Muay Thai.

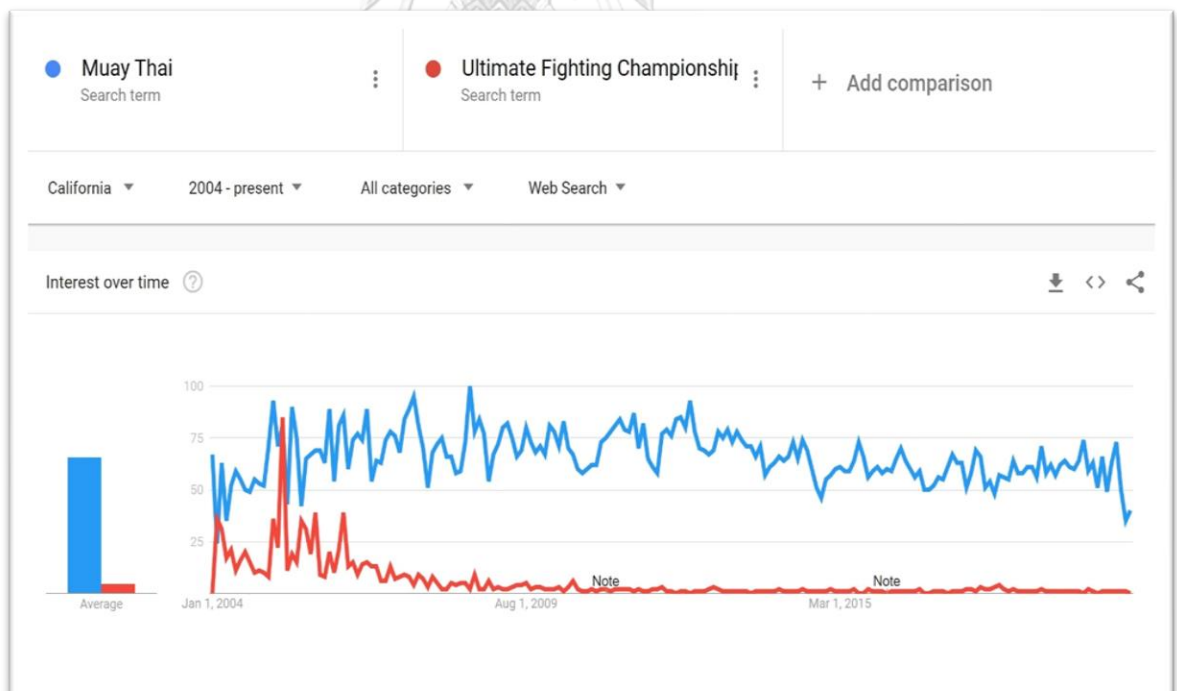


Figure 11. Muay Thai vs UFC. Source: Google Trends, 2020

2. Figure 12 shows the popularity in California of the search topics Muay Thai vs MMA, from 2004 to present. The trend shows a positive correlation between the two terms from 2004, and a couple of years after. MMA then rapidly rises in popularity while searches for Muay Thai remained flat in comparison.

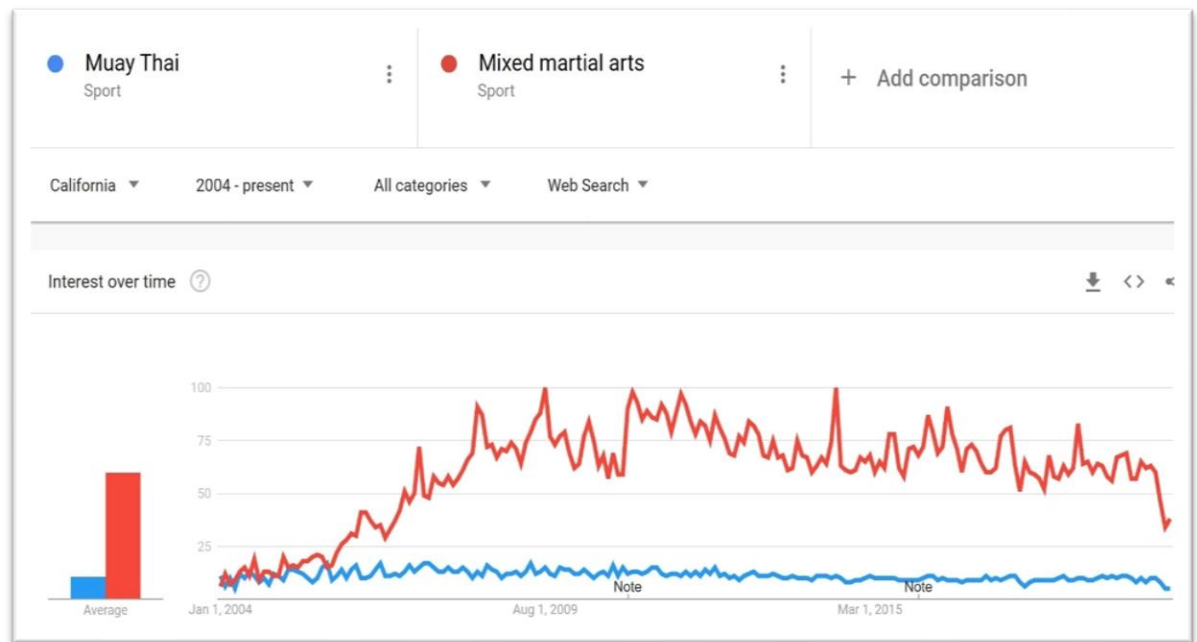


Figure 12. Muay Thai vs MMA. Source: Google Trends, 2020

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CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

3. Figure 13 shows the popularity in California of the search topics Muay Thai vs the film Ong-Bak. The popularity of searches for Ong-Bak shows a sharp peak in late 2004, which was around the time it was released in California, and a corresponding (although delayed) rise in searches for Muay Thai.

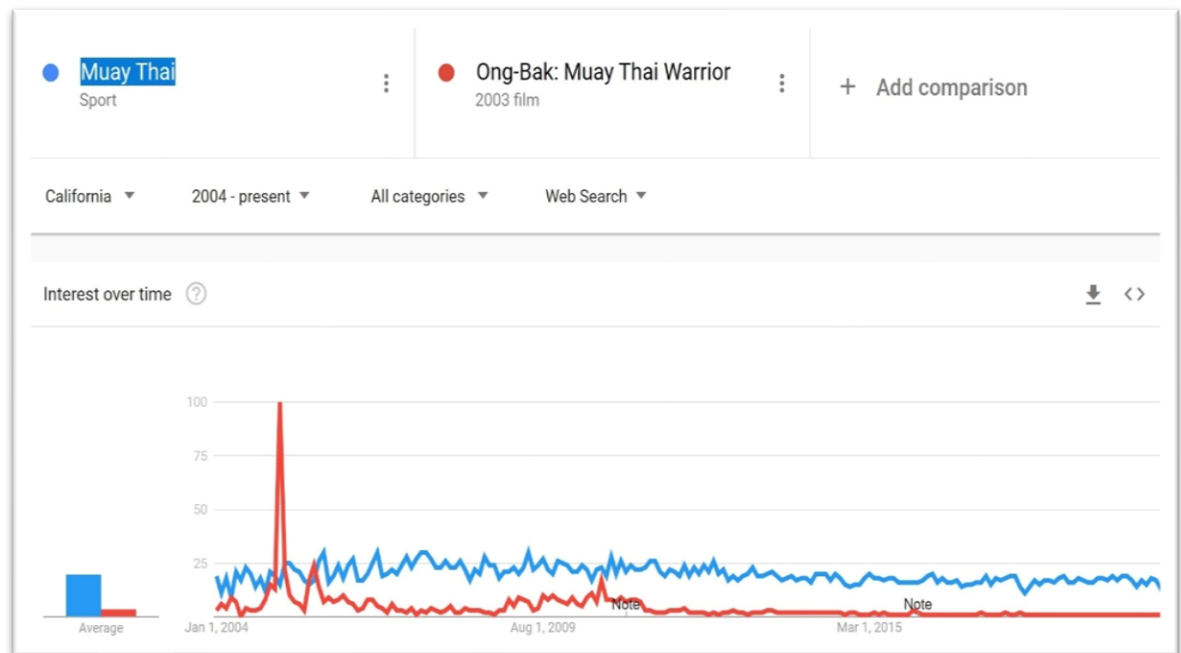


Figure 13. Muay Thai vs Ong-Bak. Source: Google Trends, 2020

4. Figure 14 shows the popularity of the search term *Muay Thai near me*. This is an interesting search because, although it does not compare to, or show a correlation with the searches for another term, it does show a search that is done to find the closest Muay Thai gyms to the searcher's location. The popularity for this search began to rise in 2011, and then rose sharply in late 2019. This data tends to show that the interest in Muay Thai gyms, and correspondingly Muay Thai training, is high and has been steadily rising. There was a sharp decline recently, but this is an artifact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the closing of all gyms in California.

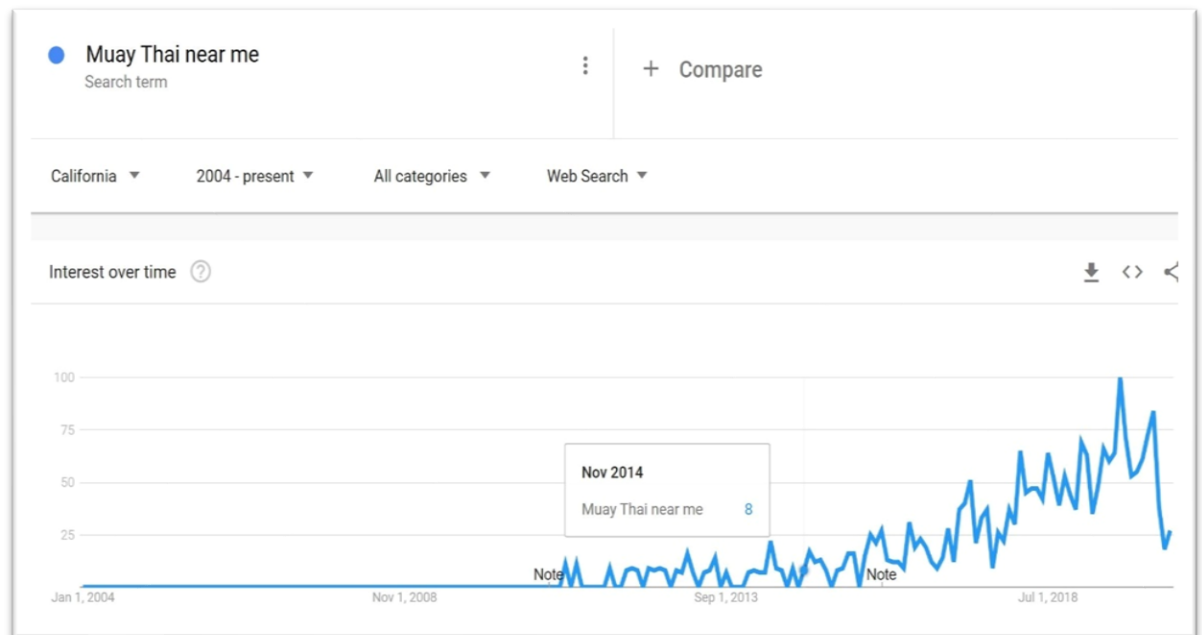


Figure 14. *Muay Thai Near Me*. Source: Google Trends, 2020

In aggregate, the Google trends data shows a positive correlation between Muay Thai, MMA, the UFC, and the film *Ong-Bak*. Unfortunately, the data only goes back to 2004. Therefore, we cannot see early associations of the data from 1993 forward when the UFC and MMA were first developed; from which the author asserts led to a corresponding rise in the popularity of Muay Thai. However, the data is still valuable to show the later trends. In all cases, except for the search *Muay Thai Near Me*, the trend data for the search term Muay Thai is declining up to the present. Since Google Trends only measures the popularity of one search term relative to other searches, it is hard to determine if this downward trend is because of a decline in the overall popularity of Muay Thai, or in the popularity of the search term Muay Thai compared to other terms. As previously mentioned, “*Muay Thai Near Me*,” is still a popular search, which indicates the interest in Muay Thai instruction remains high.

Muay Thai's popularity is also reflected in the growth of amateur Muay Thai in the US. This growth accelerated after Muay Thai was accepted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2016 as a provisional sport. The United States Muay Thai Federation (USMF) is the sole organization representing the International Federation of Muay Thai Amateurs (IFMA) in the United States. The IFMA, based in Bangkok, Thailand, is the governing body for amateur Muay Thai internationally and oversees its member countries national organizations. The IFMA is the sole representative of Muay Thai to the IOC. In its mission statement, the USMF remarks on its exponential growth since its founding in 2004. The USMF now has over 4000 registered members that include athletes, gyms, coaches, and fans (USMF, 2020). The USMF lists 223 member gyms on its website, with California having the most at 13 gyms. The next closest state is Illinois with six gyms (USMF, 2020). It should be noted that the majority of Muay Thai gyms in the US are not registered with the USMF. Membership is not mandatory for a Muay Thai gym in the US but, allows the gym to participate in USMF sanctioned events, and provides marketing materials for the gym.

There is no recognizable database that lists Muay Thai gyms in the US or California. However, another way we can measure the popularity of MMA and Muay Thai is to look at one of the few franchised MMA gyms in the US. These gyms are owned by the UFC organization and are called the "UFC Gym." The UFC gym offers MMA, fitness, BJJ and of course Muay Thai classes. UFC gyms are located throughout the US with several international locations. Once again, we see that California has the largest number of UFC gyms by far at 20. The next closest state is New York with ten gyms (UFCGym.com, 2020). A google search for "MMA

Franchises” on July 29, 2020 only produced two other MMA franchises, “Victory MMA” and “Tapout Fitness.” All of Victory MMA’s locations are in Southern California. Tapout Fitness is much smaller than the UFC Gym with 22 locations but, is the outlier with most of its locations in the Southern United States. From this we can conclude that MMA, and its integral art of Muay Thai, have risen precipitously in popularity in the US and California. The International Kickboxing Federation, the organization that regulates Muay Thai competitions in California, sponsored 52 events in California in 2019 (IKF.com, 2020). During my research I could not locate any other state that had more Muay Thai events than California.

The evidence for Muay Thai’s popularity in California is the following:

1. Muay Thai’s first organized instruction in the US was by Chai Sirisute in California
2. The establishment in 1996 of the famous Fairtex Muay Thai gym in San Francisco in 1996
3. The largest number of USMF Muay Thai gyms and,
4. The largest number of popular MMA franchise gyms in California which all feature Muay Thai instruction
5. According to the IKF, California had 52 sponsored events in 2019, the most of any state in the US

### **3.2 The Popularity of Muay Thai compared to other Martial Arts in California**

Eastern martial arts from Japan began to enter the American consciousness in the early 1900s with the influx of Japanese immigrants seeking jobs in the agricultural



industry in California. Even US president Theodore Roosevelt practiced Japanese Jiu Jitsu in the early 1900s (Hilnak, 2009; Rouse, 2015). Martial arts from Japan, especially Karate, became even more popular after US soldiers began to train in them during the American occupation of Japan after World War II. Some of these soldiers returned to the US and opened schools (dojos) to teach these new “exotic” martial arts. A similar event occurred after the Korean war and the return of US servicemen from South Korea in the 1960s-1970s<sup>14</sup>, which introduced Tae Kwan Do and other Korean arts to the US. The commercial acting success of Bruce Lee and his films in the 1970s cast a light on Chinese martial arts in the American psyche (Lole, 2012). The television show “Kung Fu” starring David Carradine and the introduction of low budget, but exciting martial arts films from Hong Kong also made an impact on young men. It appeared that with the secret knowledge of Eastern martial arts a smaller, weaker person could defeat a larger assailant, or even multiple attackers (Krug, 2001). K-1 style Kickboxing, which originated in Japan in the 1990s, also became a ring sport in the US and developed a following (although small compared with football, baseball and Western boxing).<sup>15</sup> Judo, Tae Kwon Do and Karate<sup>16</sup> were then adopted as sports in the Olympic games. The inclusion in the Olympics gave these martial arts a legitimacy, and a path for young people with dreams of being a competitive athlete an avenue in which to realize those dreams. Thus, a youngster in the US can train and compete in these martial arts with the intention of going to the Olympics, as opposed to just doing it for self-defense or fitness purposes.

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<sup>14</sup> I trained at a Tang Soo Do (Korean Karate) school in Los Angeles owned by the famous martial artist and actor “Chuck” Norris, who had been a US service member in Korea and studied Tang Soo Do during his time there.

<sup>15</sup> There is wide agreement that K-1 style was derived and modified by the Japanese from Muay Thai.

<sup>16</sup> Karate makes its debut as a medal sport in the Olympic games in Tokyo in 2020.

All of the previous listed factors, the early introduction, popular films and television shows, established competitions and organizations, and the inclusion in the Olympic games; have given Eastern martial arts from Japan, Korea and China, a boost in popularity over late comers to the American martial arts tapestry such as Muay Thai. Despite Muay Thai's recent rise in popularity, it still lags behind in overall participation in the US and California to these other martial arts.

There is one martial that is a relative late comer to the California scene, that has had a meteoric rise in popularity, for some of the same reasons Muay Thai has flourished. Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, or BJJ, was developed from the Japanese martial art of Jiu-Jitsu after a Japanese expert traveled to Brazil in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and taught local Brazilians the art. The most famous of these Brazilians were the Gracie brothers. BJJ has since become the hottest and fastest growing martial art in the US and California (see Figures 15 and 16). If the UFC and MMA began the popularity of Muay Thai in the US (as I contend) this was doubly so for BJJ. In fact, the UFC was conceived and founded by Rorion Gracie to showcase his family's martial art of BJJ. Royce Grace, Rorion's brother, won the first, second and fourth UFC events using BJJ against much larger opponents. This catapulted BJJ into the American consciousness and now makes it the most popular martial art in the US and California. Muay Thai, however, while nowhere near as popular as BJJ, has ridden to popularity alongside of BJJ's success. Most so called "MMA" gyms will feature BJJ and Muay Thai classes. *SteelMMA*, although primarily a Muay Thai gym, also offers BJJ. BJJ is one of the few martial arts (including Muay Thai) that fulfills the promise of a smaller, weaker opponent having the ability to defeat an untrained, larger, stronger opponent.

Despite the greater popularity of these other martial arts and their advantages such as early introduction and tireless promotion (BJJ), Muay Thai is gaining ground. We return to our Google Trends analysis to show the popularity of these other martial arts to Muay Thai. Figure 15 is a chart of the popularity in the USA of the search topics Brazilian jiu-jitsu, Muay Thai, Karate, Tae Kwon Do and Chinese martial arts from January 2004 to January 2020.<sup>17</sup> As we can see BJJ surpassed the other martial arts in popularity starting in June of 2016. Although, Muay Thai comes in fourth out of five, it does surpass Chinese martial arts in popularity,<sup>18</sup> and is beginning to narrow the gap with Tae Kwon Do. Also notice the early correlation of Muay Thai and BJJ, which is probably due to the influence of the UFC. The decline of previously most popular martial art, Karate, is also an interesting phenomenon, especially against BJJ. Muay Thai may even eventually surpass Karate if current trends hold. In Figure 16 we have the same comparisons in the state of California. We see similar trends to the US as a whole except BJJ has an even steeper rise in popularity surpassing Karate in June of 2011. This was fully five years earlier than the rest of the country.<sup>19</sup> We also see that Muay Thai leads Chinese martial arts by a wider margin in California and is approximately equal in popularity to Tae Kwon Do.

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<sup>17</sup> 2004 is the first year Google trends began collecting data. January 2020 was chosen as the end date to control for the closure of all gyms and martial arts facilities in the US due to COVID-19.

<sup>18</sup> “Chinese Martial Arts” is a blanket term to describe the variety of martial arts originating in China. For a full description of each of these arts see Lorge (2012).

<sup>19</sup> This is another indication of California leading the way in nationwide trends.

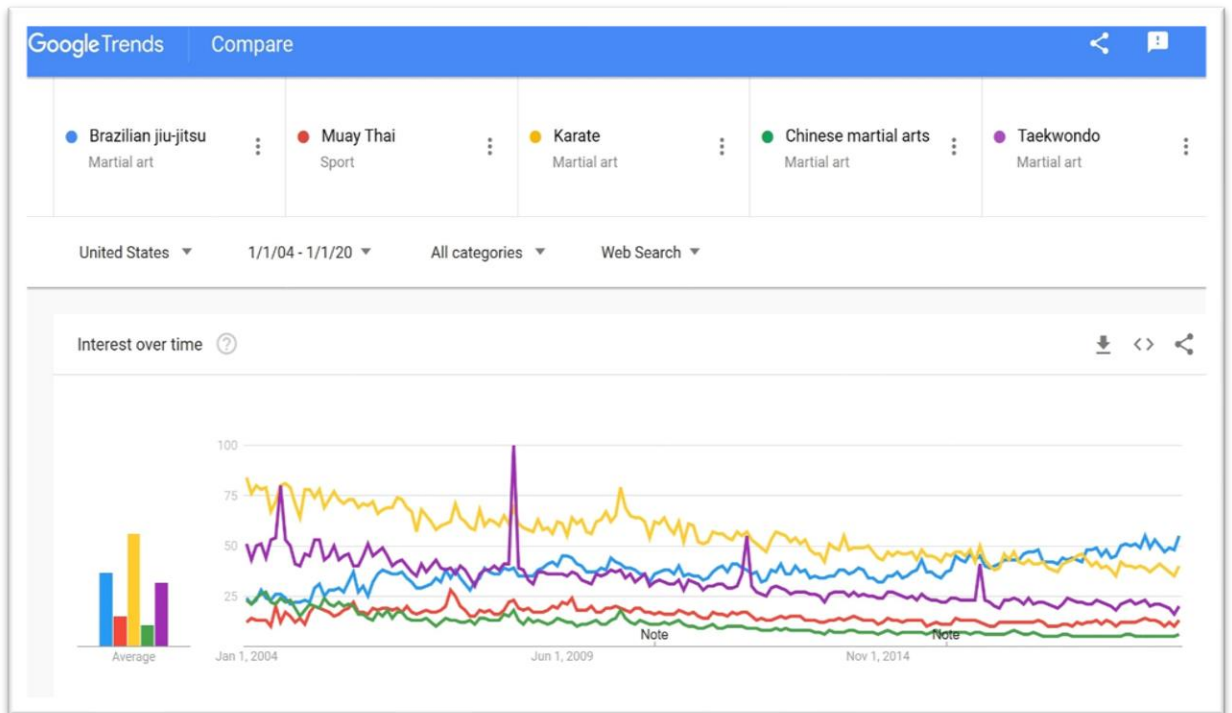


Figure 15. Other Martial Arts vs Muay Thai in the US. Source: Google Trends, 2020

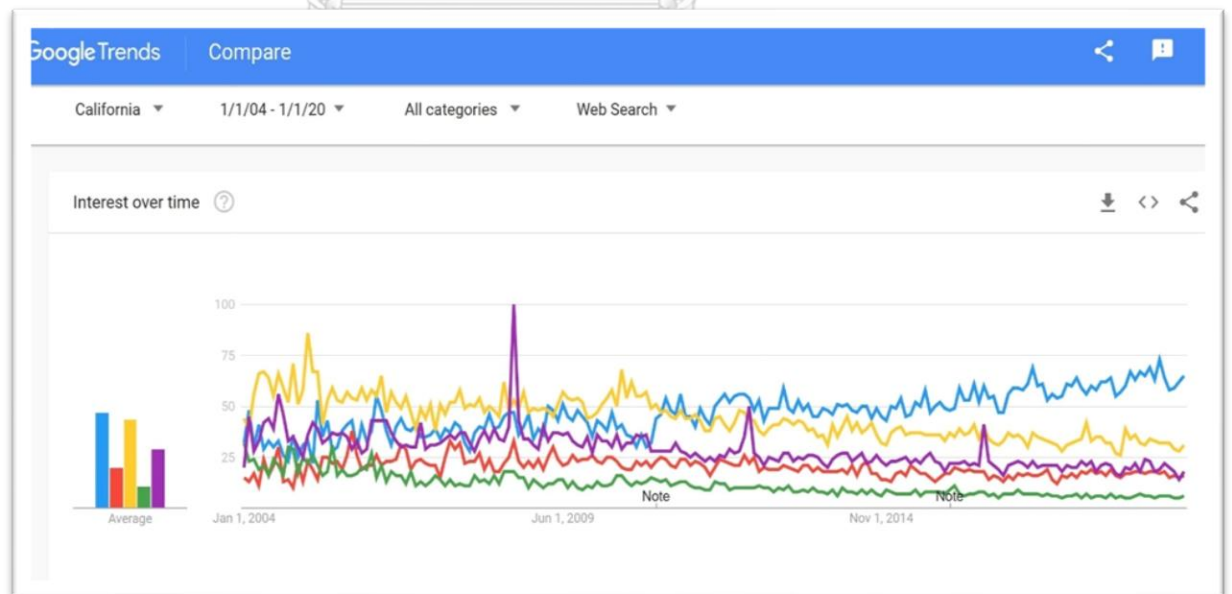


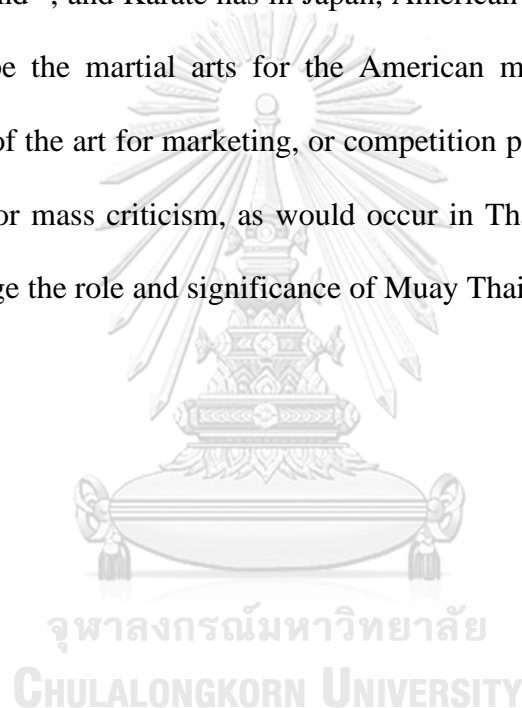
Figure 16. Other Martial Arts vs Muay Thai in California. Source: Google Trends, 2020

## Chapter 4 Localization of Muay Thai in California

The Cambridge Dictionary defines Localization as *“the process of making a product or service more suitable for a particular country, area, etc.”* (Cambridge, 2020). LionBridge, a company that helps large corporations globalize and localize, explains localization this way: *“In order to define localization, first keep in mind that internationalization helps a product become adaptable to and user-friendly for audiences in many different countries. Localization, conversely, is the process of actually adapting that product to a specific target market once internationalization has taken place”*(LionBridge.com, 2020). The masters at the process of globalization, internationalization and localization are the American fast food conglomerates. They first globalized in late 20<sup>th</sup> century by moving their stores throughout the world, they then internationalized their hamburgers, drinks, and other food offerings by altering products as needed to appeal to the widest possible customer base. Finally, these companies localized by designing special products and adapting old products to specific countries or markets. In Asia, this would usually involve the addition of spicy glazes and condiments so their food items would appeal to the Asian palate. Figures 17, 18 and 19 are examples of products made or localized for the Asian market. All of these products are sold in Thailand, although figures 17 and 18 were originally produced for the Japanese market.

Localization of Asian martial arts have occurred in a similar way to the products of the fast food giants. Karate, Tae Kwan Do, Chinese martial arts and other disciplines have been watered down of their original self-defense techniques (usually for sporting purposes), stripped of their cultural and religious connections, and spread

throughout the world. These arts were then adopted and adapted in many parts of the world, but mostly in the West, to suit the tastes of the local populace. Entrepreneurship played a major role in localization as these arts became big business. Competitions with new watered-down rule sets, such as “point” Karate, Tae Kwon Do and now Muay Thai competitions, were created to give practitioners an outlet for their newfound skills<sup>20</sup>. With no links to national identity, such as Muay Thai has in Thailand<sup>21</sup>, and Karate has in Japan, American entrepreneurs, in this case, were free to shape the martial arts for the American market as they saw fit. By changing aspects of the art for marketing, or competition purposes, there would be no national outcry, nor mass criticism, as would occur in Thailand, for instance, if you attempted to change the role and significance of Muay Thai in Thai society<sup>22</sup>.



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<sup>20</sup> “Point” style fighting is a competition where the aim is not to hurt your opponent, but to win by scoring points which are earned by lightly touching your opponent with a punch or kick.

<sup>21</sup> See Vail (2014).

<sup>22</sup> See Monthienvichienchai (2004) and Eiamrerai (2011).



Figure 17. McDonalds in Pattaya, Thailand. Hamburgers that have been localized for the Asian market. Source: Author



Figure 18. Burger King Siam Paragon. Hamburger localized for the Asian market.  
Source: Author

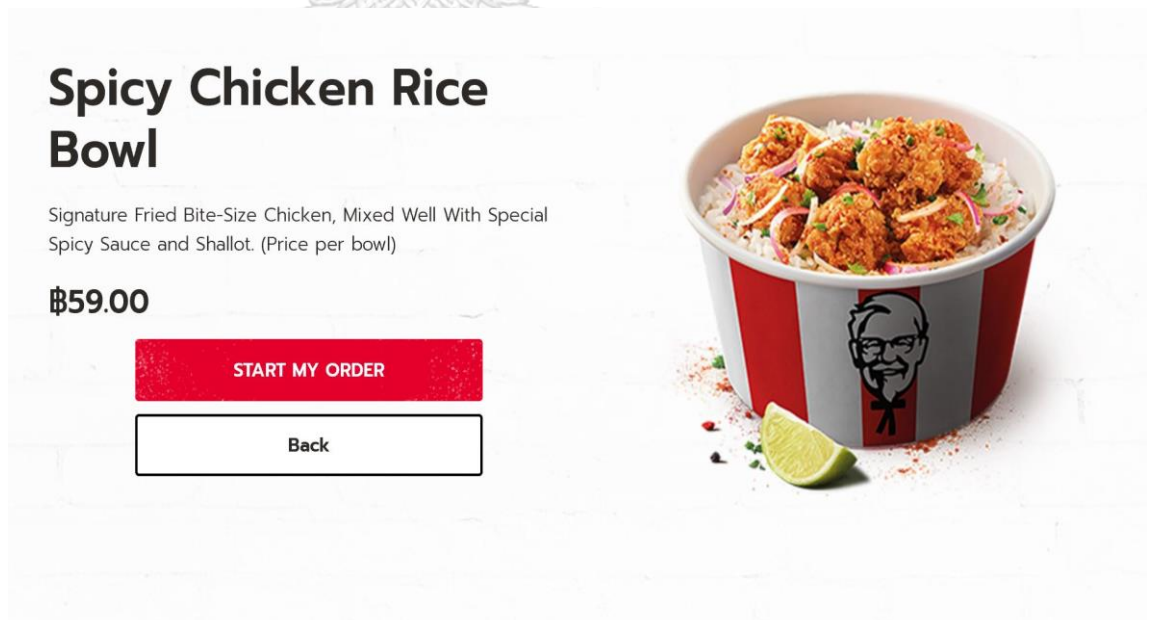


Figure 19. KFC Chicken Rice Bowl. KFC product localized for the Thai market.  
Source: KFC Online Menu



Krug (2001) researched the localization, or what Krug called the “appropriation,” of Karate in the United States. Krug believed the transfer of an “*object of knowledge*” from one culture to another requires a set of related ideas that Krug referred to as a “*texture of knowledge*.” Krug said there were three stages of the appropriation of a cultural object 1) Discovery and mythologizing, 2) Martial arts as practices, and 3) Appropriation and de-mythologizing. In other words, a martial art is “discovered” and exoticized in the West, practice in the martial art begins, and then the art is appropriated. New Western “experts” take over the art, and de-mythologize it, or strip the art of its ancient “secret” origins, cultural and religious roots. Krug observed business interests would then market this new, localized, martial art by “*methods used to sell hamburgers, cars, or deodorant*” (Krug, 2001).

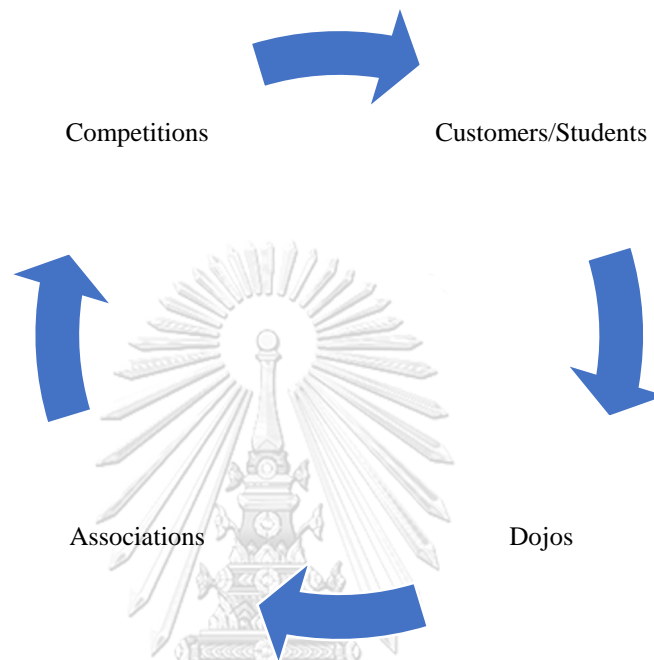
This localization, or appropriation process, can be seen as a process of cultural domination. The dominant culture of the US taking over, localizing and absorbing, the cultural product, in this case Muay Thai, of a so-called inferior culture Thailand. Spencer (2013) called this the *disembedding and re-embedding* process. The United States, however, has done this for centuries. As a nation of immigrants, aspects of various cultures have been absorbed into the cultural landscape of the US. This is most striking in food products. Pizza, hamburgers, and hot dogs are considered American products by many. However, the origins of these food stuffs, in Italy and Germany respectively, are lost in time. For instance, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), first held in the US in 1993, was a creation of the Brazilian Gracie family who had immigrated to the United States. The Gracie’s had previously held *Vale Tudo*, or no holds barred, fighting contests in their native Rio de Janeiro. The Gracie’s started the UFC to showcase their martial art of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ)

in the US and show its dominance over other martial arts. BJJ, which itself had been so-called culturally appropriated from the Japanese, was now marketed as a product of Brazil. As the UFC became popular with Americans, the beginnings of the UFC are known to only a few. Most Americans now believe the UFC, and Mixed Martial Arts are American inventions. In other words, the UFC has been wholly appropriated into the American culture.

California has a history of localizing martial arts. When the author received instruction in Korean Karate in Los Angeles from the famous martial artist Chuck Norris, board breaking was practiced as part of the belt promotion ceremony. This is the practice of breaking wooden boards as a show of punching or kicking power. This never existed in traditional Korean arts. Board breaking was added in California as a flashy show of strength to impress audiences who were unaware that the boards were specially made to crumble upon impact. Muay Thai is the latest in the line of new, exotic, and fresh martial arts that have captured Californian's imaginations.

The business model of running a martial arts *dojo* (gym) in California has been established from decades of teaching other martial arts. Part of this model is the establishment of associations and competitions which promote these new Westernized martial arts. The *dojos*, martial arts associations, and competitions are usually owned and staffed by the same business interests. Much like any business organization, this triumvirate structure serves the needs of those who belong to it. The *dojos* recruit customers/students. The *dojos* belong to the associations, which exist to promote the *dojos* and the martial art. The associations then sponsor competitions, which serve to attract more students to the *dojos* (see figure 20). Muay Thai, as the new martial art on

the California scene, still has to adhere to this tried and true martial arts business model in California.



*Figure 20. Cycle of California Martial Arts Dojos, Associations and Competitions. All designed to attract more students*

The major adaptations made to Muay Thai in California in order to make the art more attractive to California consumers, as well as to adhere to the martial arts business model, are the following:

1. Competitions with Different Rule Sets from the Original art
2. The Removal of Gambling
3. The deletion of the Wai Kru
4. Functionality/Practicality
5. Individualized instruction

6. Child participation
7. Band/Rank systems and ceremonies
8. Teaching other Martial Arts
9. Fitness classes
10. Yoga Classes
11. Western Boxing and Dutch Style Kickboxing

Therefore, for a martial art to be commercially successful in California it will have to adhere to this model. In other words, localize the martial art for the commercial market in which you are trying to sell access to the martial art. Entrepreneurs understood this and adapted Muay Thai to this model. Below we will look at these localization factors in more detail.

#### **4.1 Competitions with Different Rule Sets from the Original art**

The governing bodies for Muay Thai in Thailand are the World Muay Thai Council (WMC) and the International Federation of Muaythai<sup>23</sup> Associations (IFMA). There are two other governing bodies in Thailand, the World Muay Thai Organization (WMO) which regulates professional fights, and the Amateur Muay Thai Association (AMAT). It appears that the WMC and the IFMA are the more dominant governing bodies. The fact that there were more than one governing body for amateur Muay Thai was one of the reasons in the past cited by the IOC to deny Muay Thai

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<sup>23</sup> The spelling of Muay Thai as *Muaythai* by the IFMA was a compromise to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as a condition to Muay Thai being considered as an Olympic Sport. This is due to the requirement by the Olympic committee that no sport can include the name of a country in its title. Therefore, the IFMA changed from the traditional spelling of Muay Thai using two words to *Muaythai* consisting of one word. In this paper the traditional way of spelling *Muay Thai* will be used.

consideration for the Olympics. The IFMA recently merged with the WMC, which appears to have made the IFMA dominant governing body for amateur competition, and apparently overcome the limitation set by the IOC. The IFMA was the organization that successfully had Muay Thai included in the Olympics as a demonstration sport. Regardless of the organization, a study of the rules of these organizations in Thailand shows they are consistent throughout and are referred to in this paper as the “rules in Thailand.”

On March 17, 2014, the state of California appointed the International Kickboxing Federation (IKF) as the sanctioning body to regulate all amateur Muay Thai competition in the state (IKFkickboxing.com, 2014). Prior to that it was regulated by the California State Athletic Commission, which still regulates professional Muay Thai bouts. The IKF is a private organization, however the state of California deferred to their experience in Muay Thai and Kickboxing events. The California State Athletic Commission was experienced in regulating traditional boxing, but not Muay Thai.

DENNIS WARNER & IN SYNC PRODUCTIONS, INC. PRESENT

**WCK FULL RULES MUAYTHAI**

**REDEMPTION**

**WCK Muaythai Super Featherweight**  
Alyshia Madison Gerrica Trias

**WCK Muaythai Featherweight**  
Jackie Buntan Amanda De Rosa

**WCK Muaythai Super Featherweight**  
Erik Van Der Lee Jacob Hebeisen

**WCK Muaythai Featherweight**  
Andrew Rivera Brandon Kurosawa  
Thai Ngan Le Susan Wallace  
Danny Strahan Jorge Gamez

**WCK Muaythai Featherweight**  
Jocelyn Breland Carleigh Karen

**WCK Muaythai Featherweight**  
[Fighter 1] [Fighter 2]

**SAPPORO PREMIUM BEER**

**TEAM CHANEY**

**FOUR POINTS BY SHERATON**

**amazing THAILAND**

**FOUR POINTS BY SHERATON • SAN DIEGO**  
**SATURDAY • OCTOBER 19TH • 7:00PM**  
**8110 AERO DR. • SAN DIEGO, CA 92123**  
**TICKETS: \$100 • \$75 • \$45 • [www.WckMuayThai.Tix.com](http://www.WckMuayThai.Tix.com)**

Tickets available fight night at the door. Bouts subject to change or cancellation. All ticket sales are final. No refunds or exchanges.

Figure 21. Full rules Muay Thai Bout in San Diego, California featuring SteelMMA fighters. Source: steelmma.com

SEMI- CONTACT EVENT / NO KNOCKOUTS ALLOWED  
 IKF-PKB MUAY THAI KICKBOXING

# DECEMBER 7. 2019



**INTERNATIONAL  
 PKB  
 SEMI-CONTACT  
 IKF  
 POINT MUAY THAI/  
 KICKBOXING ©  
 KICKBOXING FEDERATION**

**ALL LEVELS ADULT/JUNIORS REGISTER ONLINE**  
<https://www.carlsbadkickboxingclub.com/registration>

Weigh in 11AM  
 Rules meeting 12PM  
 Event starts 2PM

PH: 760-421-4286 / 5751 PALMER WAY CARLSBAD CA. 92010

Figure 22. Muay Thai fight poster featuring "point" and "semi-contact" Muay Thai fights in Carlsbad, California. Source: IKF.com

**Traditional Muay Thai rules:**

According to the World Muay Thai Council, the authoritative body for Muay Thai in Thailand, the following rules apply to a Muay Thai match<sup>24</sup>:

1. Paying Homage (Wai Kru) and Rounds
2. Before the bout, every boxer must pay homage in accordance with the art and customs of muaythai, accompanied by musical instruments of Javanese oboe: a Javanese tom-tom (drum), and a pair of small cup-shaped cymbals for rhythm. The bout will start after paying homage.
3. Boxers shall shake hands before the beginning of the first round and before the beginning of the final round, symbolising that they will compete in the spirit of sportsmanship and in accordance with the official rules and regulations.
4. A bout consists of five (5) rounds of three (3) minutes each with two (2) minutes resting interval between rounds. The time shall be stopped in case of interruptions for cautioning, warning, correction of the boxers' attire, or other similar causes, and shall be excluded from the competing time of that round.
5. Scoring System
6. A score shall be awarded when boxers use fists, feet, knees, and elbows as muaythai fighting weapons to hit his opponent powerfully, accurately, unprotected, and according to the rules.
7. Scoring advantage is awarded to:
  - a. The boxer who goes on target with muaythai weapons the most.

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<sup>24</sup> These rules were derived directly from the WMC website at <http://www.wmcmuaythai.org/about-muaythai/muaythai-rules>



- b. The boxer with heavier, more powerful, and the most accurate hits on target, using muaythai weapons.
  - c. The boxer who can cause more physical exhaustion to his opponent by use of muaythai weapons.
  - d. The boxer who shows better style of aggressive attacks.
  - e. The boxer who shows better defence of muaythai art and techniques.
  - f. The boxer who violates the rules the least.
  - g. Scoring advantage is not awarded to:
  - h. The boxer who violates any rule when using his muaythai weapons.
  - i. Muaythai weapons strike on the opponent's arm(s) or leg(s) as his self-defence techniques.
  - j. The hit is light, without power or body weight behind it.
  - k. The boxer kicks on target, his kicking leg is caught by his opponent and he is thrown on the ring floor. The kicker however scores a point, if his leg is caught by the opponent and he pretends to fall on the ring floor (violation of rules).
  - l. Throwing the opponent on the floor without using any muaythai weapon.
8. Scoring points system:
- a. Full ten (10) points are given to the winner of the round and his opponent may be given 9 – 8 – 7 points in proportion. Points are not given in fraction.
  - b. For an even round, both boxers score full ten (10) points (10:10).
  - c. The winner of a round scores ten (10) points and the loser scores nine (9) points (10:9)

- d. The clear winner of a round scores ten (10) points and the loser scores eight (8) points (10:8).
  - e. The winner of a round with his opponent having been counted once in that round scores ten (10) points and the loser scores eight (8) points (10:8).
  - f. The clear winner of a round with his opponent having been counted once in that round scores ten (10) points and the loser scores seven (7) points (10:7).
  - g. The winner of a round with his opponent having been counted twice that round scores ten (10) points and the loser scores seven (7) points (10:7).
  - h. Boxers who have been warned must lose one point in that round.
9. Fouls:
- a. The boxer who intentionally behaves in any of the following mode is considered foul:
    - b. Biting, eye poking, spitting on the opponent, sticking out tongue to make faces, head butting, striking, or any similar action.
    - c. Throwing, back breaking, locking the opponent's arms, using Judo and wrestling techniques.
    - d. Falling over or going after a fallen opponent or opponent who is getting up. Rope grabbing to fight or for other purposes.
    - e. Using provocative manners during contest.
    - f. Disobeying the referee's command.
    - g. Knee striking at the groin area (e.g. holding for knee striking at the groin and straight knee striking at the groin area). For such violations, the referee has the right to allow a resting time-out, not more than five (5) minutes

long. If the knee-struck boxer refuses to continue, the referee shall declare him as the loser or “no decision”.

- h. Catching the opponent’s leg and pushing forwards more than two (2) steps without using any weapons. The referee shall order the boxer to stop and shall give him caution. After two cautions, the referee shall warn him.
- i. If a boxer pretends to fall on the ring floor after his kicking leg is caught. This is considered to be taking advantage over his opponent and the referee shall give him a caution. If the boxer repeats the action and the referee has given him two cautions, he shall receive a warning.
- j. When both boxers fall out of the ring and either boxer tries to delay getting back into the ring.
- k. Using forbidden substances as specified by WADA.
- l. Violating any of the rules.

#### **Muay Thai Rules in California:**

The International Kickboxing Federation (IKF), the authoritative body for Muay Thai in California, has formulated various sets of rules for different types of Muay Thai matches. “Full Rules Muay Thai” (see figure 21) matches have similar rules to traditional Muay Thai, however, with some differences which are set forth below. A feature of Localization in California is the addition by the IKF of “Modified Muay Thai Rules” and “Point Muay Thai Rules” matches (see figure 22). We will further explore these rule sets below.<sup>25</sup>

1. Kicks & strikes:

<sup>25</sup> The Muay Thai rules for California were derived from the IKF website at <https://www.ikfkickboxing.com/CARules.htm>.

## 2. Knees:

- a. Knees: may not be allowed in a modified muay thai rules bout since the term "modified" indicates something has been taken away.
- b. Knees are only allowed below the shoulder line - body and legs. (no groin of course)
- c. No strikes are allowed to the groin or joints -knees- of the leg.

## 3. Elbows:

- a. Elbows may not be allowed in a modified muay thai rules bout since the term "modified" indicates something has been taken away.
- b. Fighters must supply their own IKF approved elbow pads.
- c. Since headgear protects the beginning novice adult fighters and all amateurs wear elbow pads, all adult fighters 18 years old and older regardless of fight record are allowed to use elbows.
- d. Novice / beginning adult amateur fighters with under 3 bouts:
- e. No spinning elbows for fighters with 2 bouts or less.
- f. All adult amateur fighters may use elbow strikes
- g. Striking surface is the forearm / back of bicep only! Not the point of the elbow!
- h. Padded elbows allowed to the body & head.
- i. "Spinning" elbows allowed to the body & head.
- j. Elbow techniques not allowed:
- k. Any elbow strikes that makes contact with the "point' of the elbow.”
- l. No: spiking elbows, spiking elbows (12 - 6), dropping elbows, spiking elbows, downward elbows, 12-6, 3-9 elbows, etc., rising elbows.

- m. Spinning backfist: Spinning backhands/fists are legal as long as you strike with the back of your glove, above the wrist line.

4. Kicks:

- a. All standard martial art / kickboxing kicks are allowed.
- b. You cannot use the cartwheel kick.
- c. Cartwheel kick is illegal because your gloves can not touch the ground before you strike because when they do, you are considered a down fighter.
- d. Direct side / thrust kicks:
- e. Direct (side kick or thrust kick style) kicks to the front of a fighter's legs (mainly 6 inches above to 6 inches below the knee) are not allowed.

5. Flash knockdowns: Flash knockdown rule is in effect for all bouts. In true Muay Thai as with these rules, flash knockdowns, where the knocked down fighter rises up immediately after being knocked down are usually not counted as knockdowns with a standing 8 count. However, if the fighter is "rocked" by the shot taken, the referee can make the decision to give an 8 count if he/she feels necessary, no matter how fast the fighter rises after the fall.

6. Clinching:

- a. Clinching is only allowed when opponents are facing each other.
- b. Clinching is allowed as long as 1 fighter is active within the clinch.
- c. If there is inactivity for a period of 3 seconds, the referee will break the fighters.
- d. Fighters may not grab an opponent from behind and lift to throw.

- e. Back breaking:
  - f. You cannot grab (clinging) around your opponent's lower spine and hyper-extending their back (pulling).
  - g. In a "back breaking" move forcing your opponent's body to bend backwards hyper-extending their back.
7. Throws - trips – sweeps:
- a. Taking an opponent around the waist with both arms and twisting them off balance so they will fall is legal. No hip throws
  - b. Over the hip throws such as in Japanese arts like judo, jujitsu, karate, sambo, or san shou are illegal!
  - c. To describe:
  - d. You cannot use the hip or shoulder to throw an opponent in any kind of judo throw or reap.
  - e. You cannot step across, or in front of, your opponent's leg with your leg and bringing your opponent over your hip.
  - f. You cannot grab the opponent's hip in a waist lock and throw them using a hip throw
  - g. You cannot grab an opponent's arm, turning and using the calf and back of the thigh (hamstring muscle group) to sweep an opponent's legs from under them
  - h. You cannot grab an opponent and fall backward to throw your opponent.
  - i. You cannot perform a rugby style tackle on the legs and waist of an opponent to throw them.

- j. You cannot grab an opponent's waist from behind, then and place a leg between the opponent's legs, pulling the opponent backwards over the leg and hip.
- k. You cannot grab an opponent from below the waist and lift them up and throw them.

8. Throwing & sweeping:

- a. Fighter may "kick" (roundhouse or using the top of your foot) their opponent's legs out striking with the top of their foot or shin, not the instep as in a karate style sweep.
- b. You cannot sweep with the instep of your foot or your calf.
- c. You cannot lock an opponent's neck (like a headlock) and executing a hip throw.
- d. You cannot grab an opponent in the clinch and then sweep their legs out.
- e. You cannot catch an opponent's leg and using the calf to trip/sweep them off their feet
- f. You cannot trip your opponent with your ankle.
- g. You cannot leg sweep or kick the back of the supporting leg out of your opponent using your calf or inside of your foot.
- h. You cannot trap your opponent's arms in a waist lock and lift them to throw

9. Illegal trip:

- a. If you position your foot next to your opponent and twist them over your foot you must clear the leg as your opponent falls or it is an illegal trip.
- b. An athlete can spin or pull an opponent over the inside or outside of the leg and dump him on the ground.
- c. However, the leg being used to manipulate and dump the opponent to the ground cannot stay in that position as the opponent goes to the floor.
- d. If it is set and stays in that position, that too is an illegal throw (tripping). In other words, the leg must clear immediately after the opponent is pulled or tripped over the knee.
- e. Clear means that the leg must be moved out of the way before the opponent hits the canvas.
- f. This means skipping the leg or slightly jumping to the side (as long as it is moved from the original position).
- g. Strangely, this means an athlete can trip over a leg but must move the tripping leg while the opponent falls to the ground, or it will be deemed illegal and called a trip.

10. Neck wrestling:

- a. If in a clinch (locking an opponent's neck) with arms around each other's shoulder, as to deliver or defend from an elbow strike, twisting the opponent using the upper body in such a way that you will fall to the ground is allowed.



- b. If in a clinch (locking an opponent's neck) you may not execute a hip to shoulder or hip throw.
- c. By using neck and shoulder manipulation, you can spin and throw/dump an opponent to the canvas without using any part of your body as a barrier. This is fully legal.

#### 11. Lifting:

- a. You can not in any way lift an opponent off of the ground to throw them.
- b. Common to see an athlete clinch their opponent around the waist, lift their opponent off the canvas and then twist and throw them around to the side and onto the canvas.
- c. This is illegal and points could be deducted of continues use this move.

#### 12. Plowing:

- a. Fighters are allowed to catch their opponents leg and take 2 steps forward.
- b. You can "dump" a person if you catch their leg and throw it back towards them causing them to fall backwards but must do so within 2 steps (see previous).
- c. You can also catch under their knee while they are doing a swing knee and topple them over backwards but must do so within 2 steps (see previous).

#### 13. After two steps:

- a. The fighter holding the leg must strike before taking a third step or more or let go!

- b. You cannot hold a leg and charge/push an opponent to the ropes.
- c. You cannot catch an opponent's leg and use your other arm to push them off balance while taking more than two steps forward.

14. Landing:

- a. Stepping on a fallen opponent is illegal. Commonly one sees an athlete twist and pull an opponent over the side of their body (and then land on top), this is illegal.
- b. It is considered an intentional foul is when a fighter plans, with the sole intention, of falling on top of their opponent to either strike with their knee or to intentionally hurt their opponent, by making it look like an accident.

If we compare the Thai rules and the California rules, one thing is very clear, the sheer volume of California rules. There are over 10 rules on the use of elbows alone. In the Thai rules they do not even mention elbows other than in the scoring system. California rules also go into detail on kicks and knees and what types are allowed. The Thai rules simply state knees to the groin are not allowed. There are also violations in the Thai rules for impoliteness: *“using provocative manners during contest, sticking out tongue to make faces.”* The Thai's also emphasize sportsmanship and good nature between the fighters: *boxers shall shake hands before the beginning of the first round and before the beginning of the final round, symbolising that they will compete in the spirit of sportsmanship and in accordance with the official rules and regulations.* There is no mention of sportsmanship, or shaking of hands in the California rules, we just have to assume that it is optional. California also has different rule sets for adults, novice, amateur and professional. The difference here is

mainly the amount of protective gear that is worn. In Thailand there are one set of rules for everyone, regardless of age, experience level or otherwise. It is simply Muay Thai.<sup>26</sup>

#### **4.2 The Removal of Gambling**

Gambling on Muay Thai fights in California is illegal and is not a significant aspect of any competition. In Thailand, however, it is integral to the sport. Monthienvichienchai believes Muay Thai partially exists in Thai society as a vehicle for gambling (Monthienvichienchai, 2004). One only has to attend a Muay Thai match at one of the large stadiums in Bangkok, such as Rajadamnoern or Lumpini, and you will witness the incredibly raucous crowd of gamblers in the upper tiers of the stadium shouting out bets and encouraging their chosen fighters. It is clear that gambling on the fights casts a dark cloud on the veracity of the judge's decision in the bouts. Especially considering the immense sums of money bet on the fights. In California, you will often see the fighters engage each other full-force in the first round of a Muay Thai fight. In Thailand, the opening round is often two fighters circling each other, throwing light punches and kicks. This may be the fighter's evaluating each other, or more likely a chance for the gamblers to evaluate the fighters and place their bets. This is also apparent in the final round. The boxers will often stop fighting near the end of the round and just dance, not wanting to change the fortunes of the fight in the last minute. Cynical observers believe these are both concessions to gamblers.

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<sup>26</sup> The IFMA has a different set of rules for international amateur competition, however this rule set is only implemented for those type of bouts featuring amateur fighters from foreign countries.

### 4.3 The deletion of the Wai Kru

The Wai Kru is a ceremonial dance performed to honor a boxer's teacher. The ceremony is considered an integral part of a Muay Thai match in Thailand. The fighters wear a *mongkol*, or sacred headband when they perform the Wai Kru.

I attended dozens of Muay Thai matches in California, where no Wai Kru was performed. Spencer (2013) also recognized this difference in the West, "*this (the Wai Kru) is a ritual that is not practised or learned in many Western schools*" (Spencer, 2013). The Wai Kru is technically allowed in California matches, but only if the promoter has confirmed there is enough time AND has coordinated with the event DJ to play the appropriate music (IKFkickboxing.com, 2014). The lack of a Wai Kru ceremony is also the case of most international Muay Thai bouts held outside of Thailand. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, most non-Thai boxers do not practice the Wai Kru, and thus could not perform one. Secondly, international promotions want to keep the entertainment flowing. Anything that would delay or take away from the fight action is removed. The One Championship promotion, which is billed as the largest fight promotion in Asia, features MMA, Muay Thai and Kickboxing fights. However, there is no Wai Kru ceremony performed prior to the Muay Thai fights. This may seem curious considering the founder and CEO of One Championship, Chatri Sityodtong, is a Thai national and former Muay Thai fighter. These large promotions so value the entertainment value of the fights that they have disposed of the extraneous cultural aspects of the martial art, even when the competition featured is promoted as "Muay Thai."

In California, the deletion of the Wai Kru serves as another example of the localization of Muay Thai. The participants learn the so-called practical aspects of the art, such as punching and kicking techniques, while sanitizing out the superfluous (according to them) cultural aspects. In Thailand, a bout would almost certainly not be held without a Wai Kru ceremony. In fact, it is written into the official rules:

*Paying Homage (Wai Kru): Before the bout, every boxer must pay homage in accordance with the arts and customs, accompanied by musical instruments of a Javanese oboe, a Javanese tom-tom drum, and a pair of small cup shaped symbols for rhythm. The bout will start after paying homage (Tapina, 2010).*

The Wai Kru serves several purposes including the primary purpose of showing respect and thanks to your teachers. It also serves as a warm-up for the boxers<sup>27</sup>, and gives the crowd (especially the gamblers) a chance to evaluate the grace, flexibility, and condition of the combatants. During the Wai Kru, the fighter can also recite incantations and prayers which keep the boxer safe and to help the boxer defeat the opponent (Tapina, 2010). It is important to note that the cultural aspects of the art, in this example the Wai Kru, are very important to the Thai's. So much so, that they write it into the official rules. One of the reasons for this importance is seen in the explanation of the Wai Kru on the website of the famed Lumpinee stadium: "*Wai Kru, which is the beautiful charm of Muay Thai and full of profound Thai meaning. This ceremony is like maintaining Thai nationality and knowing the gratefulness to*

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<sup>27</sup> Your author has attended several Muay Thai matches at Rajadamnoern and other Muay Thai stadiums in Bangkok as a member of the fight team for the author's Muay Thai camp T-DED 99. The fights move very quickly, and the fighters are not given any time to warm-up. In California, the author has attended and observed promotions which provide the fighters with an area to warm-up, and practice with their coaches before a fight. This is usually done by practicing fight moves and hitting pads.

*the patron and nation*” (Lumpineemuaythai.com, 2018). The Wai Kru is often interpreted as a ritual to give respect for your teacher. However, as noted above the Wai Kru also has the meaning of fealty and respect, “*gratefulness*,” to the Thai nation, and by extension the monarchy. The word “patron” is also used, as opposed to teacher. Which, as mentioned earlier, goes back to the traditional Thai patron-client relationship. This relationship is still alive and well in a traditional Muay Thai camp. Interestingly, this patron-client relationship in the US is not unheard of, especially in the boxing world. Cus D’Amato, the boxing trainer of the former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson, took Tyson into his home to train and manage him as a boxer. Tyson grew up poor and had been in constant trouble with the law. After Tyson’s mother died, D’Amato adopted Tyson as his son, and continued to train and manage him (M. a. S. Tyson, Larry, 2017). This relationship parallels the Thai patron-client relationship of camp owner and fighter. The music for the Wai Kru, *Javanese oboe, a Javanese tom-tom drum, and a pair of small cup shaped symbols for rhythm*, performed by live musicians, is also required to accompany each round of the fight. The music helps the fighters keep a rhythm and timing while in the ring. This is not featured in international bouts. In California, the fight will only feature traditional Thai music if the “*promoter has coordinated with the event DJ to play the correct music*” (IKFkickboxing.com, 2014). However, of the dozens of Muay Thai bouts I attended in California, music was never featured.

#### **4.4 Functionality/Practicality**

With the advent of MMA, the functionality and practicality of a martial art became a heated topic of discussion. Prior to the UFC, the discussion was theoretical. Martial arts practitioners would argue whether Karate, Kung Fu, Western Boxing, or

name your martial art, were the most effective. The UFC settled this argument by showcasing practitioners from the various arts in a realistic “no holds barred” contest. Certain martial arts featured in the UFC proved more effective than others. Once martial arts fans realized this, they demanded a martial art be practical and functional for its claimed application of self-defense/effectiveness in a fight. Loong (2016) said of his fellow students at a Muay Thai camp in Thailand, “*these men value practicality and efficacy over other considerations such as martial traditions*” (Loong, 2016). Part of the process of making the martial art more practical was to strip away all the aspects of the art that did not contribute to its effectiveness in combat. This included many of the cultural, and ceremonial aspects of the art. Spencer (2013) called it a “*disembedding of the philosophical and moral aspects of these martial arts and a re-embedding of a philosophy of meritocratic individualism. Resultant of this process is the cultural appropriation of martial art styles and conversion of them into ‘winner-takes-all’ combat sports*” (Spencer, 2013). Loong (2016), similar to Spencer (2013), found the process of changing a martial art to be more practical resulted in the following: “*as individuals are concerned only about the efficacy of the techniques, this process of adaptation and hybridisation results in techniques of the body being disembedded from their original martial traditions and cultures*” (Loong, 2016). Spencer and Loong were partially correct. Many of these martial arts “*dojos*” in California replaced the “*disembedded*” aspects of the art with dubious, pseudo-oriental, philosophies and traditions to make their version of Karate, Ninjutsu, Judo, Kung-Fu, etc., more marketable to a prospective student. Usually, by spouting claims their version was more “*deadly,*” or effective in a fight. Fake, or unverifiable claims of “*secret*” techniques and training were often made (Johnson, 1988). Californians

had been deceived for decades by these stripped-down versions of original combat martial arts and their claimed “secret” self-defense techniques that would prove useless, or even counter-productive, in a real fight. This charade was laid bare at the 1993 premier of the UFC. Invincible “Ninjas,” 400-pound sumo wrestlers, and Tae Kwon Do fighters were easily defeated by Kickboxers and BJJ stylists. The debate over which was the “best” martial art had now been effectively settled. Subsequent versions of the UFC solidified these results, and eventually led to the most effective martial arts, BJJ and Muay Thai among them, being combined together into a style now referred to as Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). Californians, interested in learning the best martial arts for self-defense embraced this new reality and flocked to learn these new “functional and practical” martial arts. Entrepreneurs responded in kind by opening new gyms, or converting their old martial arts *dojos*, into Muay Thai, BJJ, or MMA gyms (see figure 20).

#### 4.5 Individualized instruction

The educational systems in Thailand and the US are very different. These different theories of pedagogy evolve from the Western philosophy of individualism, as opposed to the Eastern philosophy of Universalism. One emphasizes the individual, and the individual experience, and the other emphasizes the needs of the group over the individual. One example of this is a system developed by Fred Keller in 1968. This was a Westernized system of learning called the *Personalized System for Instruction*. One of the key tenets of Keller’s system was to allow individual students to go through content at their own pace, independent of other learners. In the Keller



Method the teacher was expected to locate learners who need more attention and plan individual learning activities for these students (Metzler, 1984).

In Thailand, Muay Thai is practiced by mainly poor kids from the rural areas, whereas in the United States it is often practiced by individuals looking for self-improvement with disposable income that can pay the usually high price of a gym membership. Westerners join groups to serve their own needs, while Easterners serve groups to which they belong (Kastanakis and Voyer, 2014). In other words, Westerners are more likely to seek self-improvement through the group, as opposed to improving the group itself. This attribute of Westerners can help explain the high price paid by gym goers for Muay Thai instruction that promises to provide them with a means of improving their skills. How does this translate into the different methods of teaching Muay Thai in Thailand versus California? In Thailand instruction is given in a group setting, starting when a student is young, usually under the age of 12. Individualized instruction is rare, unless the student is preparing for a fight. In California, classes are also in a group. In these group classes, however, the students expect the teacher to focus on each of them as individuals and correct each student's mistakes in turn. Carl Gebhardt, the owner and head coach at SteelMMA, in a promotional video on his website, discusses the individual attention he gives to each student (Dojillo, 2018). Gebhardt understands that students in California demand individual attention from a martial arts coach. In Thailand, the Muay Thai is learned by repeating the skill thousands of times until eventually the correct form is reached and learned. In California, students do not want to spend their time on endless repetition, instead students prefer the teacher to provide them with individual knowledge and instruction to learn the correct form. Students of California gyms are

also expected to pay extra for private, one-on-one, sessions with a trainer to accelerate their learning. This process of Westernizing Muay Thai's instruction method is part of Spencer's (2013) "*disembedding*" process or stripping away of the traditional teaching methods of the art and *re-embedding* it with "*a philosophy of meritocratic individualism.*"





Figure 23. SteelMMA Kids Class. Source: Facebook

#### 4.6 Child Participation

SteelMMA is a Muay Thai gym located in San Diego, California. I trained at SteelMMA from January 2016 until December 2018. I trained mainly in Muay Thai, but also BJJ, as well as participated in fitness and yoga classes. SteelMMA offers children's classes for ages four to seven. According to their website, *"the kids Muay Thai class introduces students to the art of Muay Thai in a way that increases focus, discipline, physical and mental strength as well as both their fine and gross motor skills. Students will progress through our Muay Thai band system as they develop as young martial artists. Class goals: improve movement and coordination, learn self-discipline, build confidence and respect for instructors and peers. (Steelmma.com 2016)."* The above statement encapsulates many of the differences between

traditional Muay Thai in Thailand and the localized version in California. Traditional Muay Thai, for many years, has promoted child fighting. Children as young as four years old compete in organized fights, with no extra safety gear, to win cash prizes. Many of the Muay Thai superstars in Thailand started as child boxers. Stamp Fairtex, the One Championship, atomweight, Muay Thai World Champion, started competing in Muay Thai at five years old. Stamp was the subject of the documentary film *Buffalo Girls* about child boxers in Thailand (Kellstein, 2012). In Thailand, children train in Muay Thai to compete in full-rules Muay Thai bouts, without additional safety equipment. They participate in these fights to earn money for their families, and to have a career for the future. There are no separate ‘Children’s Classes’ at a traditional Muay Thai gym, the children train alongside the other fighters.<sup>28</sup> These child fighters are often from poor families, coming mainly from the provinces outside the capital. As Kitiarsa (2011) found, *“boxing is a tough career sought almost exclusively by poor young boys from working-class backgrounds; boxing serves as an escape from poverty and a venue for geographical and socioeconomic mobility...the rural periphery is where a mass of raw talent is nurtured, through boys’ alluring dream of success through boxing.”* (Kitiarsa, 2011). In contrast, children training in Muay Thai in California, are mainly from middle-class, or wealthy families, who can afford expensive gym membership fees. The parents who put their kids into these classes are drawn in by the stated purpose of the training to: *“increase, focus and discipline, and build confidence,”* among other supposed intangible benefits. The California parent enrolls their child into Muay Thai classes to gain these intangible

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<sup>28</sup> At T-DED 99 most of the “other” fighters were in their teens. There were a few fighters in their early twenties, but this was the exception. Most of the adult Muay Thai fighters no longer fight on the Thai stadium circuit but have moved on to international promotions such as One Championship.

skills, which theoretically will translate into other aspects of their lives and make them a better person. This type of thinking in traditional Muay Thai would be very foreign. The child fighter is learning Muay Thai to survive. They must start early in life to help their family earn extra income, as well as to gain the necessary skills to compete in the ring later in life<sup>29</sup>. The advertisement from Steel MMA also states that children will “*progress through our Muay Thai band system,*” and the child will undergo “*regular band testing*” (see figure 24).

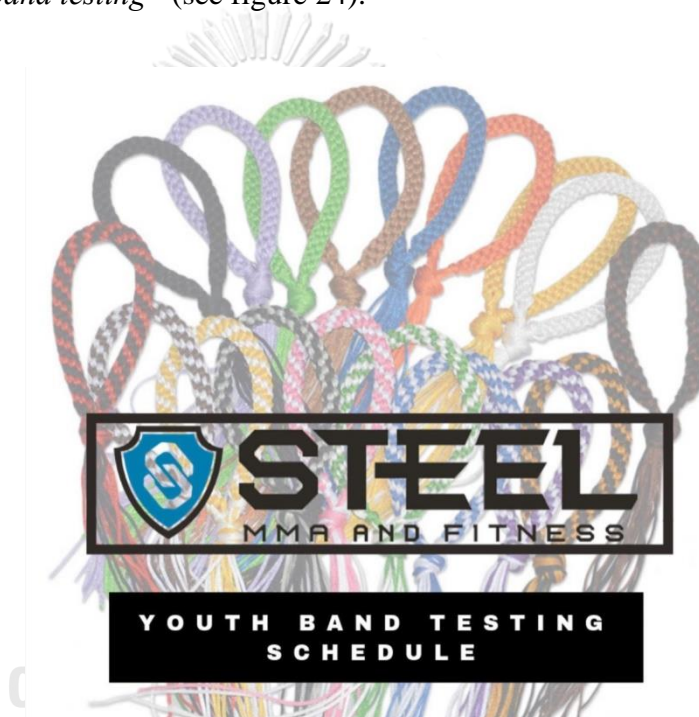


Figure 24. SteelMMA Kids Band Promotion System. Source: SteelMMA.com

<sup>29</sup> In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand, Muay Thai gyms had just started to open, however, the competition stadiums were still closed, and no fights were yet allowed to begin. I had begun training again at T-DED 99. I asked Kru Gi where were all the *nak muays*, as the gym was usually packed with fighters practicing. Kru Gi replied that there were no fights scheduled yet, so there was no reason for the fighters to train. This highlighted to me that these fighters were not training for “fun,” or as a hobby as I was, this was strictly a business for them. If there were no fights, then there was no need to train.

The Muay Thai band system was an invention of the California based World Thai Boxing Association, and has no root, or equivalent system in Thailand (see next section for further explanation). The “band” system mimics the belt systems from other Asian martial arts, such as Karate, Judo and Tae Kwon Do. The advantage for a California gym to adopt this system, is two-fold: 1) generating extra income for the gym, and (2) increasing loyalty to the gym. Each time the child takes a test for a new band the gym charges an extra band promotion fee. Additionally, once the child has promoted to higher ranking bands, the parent and child have an incentive to stay at that gym, and to continue in that particular martial art (in this case Muay Thai). Changing gyms, or, switching to a new martial art would require the child to start from the beginning at that new gym, or in that new martial art system. In traditional Muay Thai, bands and “promotions” have no relevance. Fighters, including children, are ranked by their success in the ring, which translates to monetary success. Ranking bestowed by a gym, as opposed to a boxing commission, is meaningless. In Thailand, rank and success in Muay Thai are only gauged by victories in the ring, not in the sterilized confines of a California kids Muay Thai class; which often serves as a substitute for day-care, or as a way to keep the child from playing too many video games.

#### **4.7 Band/Rank systems and ceremonies**

In California, the schools teaching Muay Thai have implemented a ranking system consisting of a “band” worn around the arm. This was started by the World Thai Boxing Association (WTBA) based in the city of Carson, California. This

ranking system is similar to the different colored belts worn by Karate and Tae Kwon Do practitioners to denote rank. Ironically, the World Thai Boxing Association was founded in 1968 by Ajarn Chai Sirisute, a Thai immigrant to California. Ajarn Sirisute claims to be the first person to actively teach Muay Thai in the United States. The band system goes in the following sequence:

- White, Yellow, Orange, Green, Blue, Purple, Red, Brown, Black, Black & White, Black & Red, Black & Silver, and Black & Gold.

A white band denotes a beginner, all the way to the Black & Gold band which denotes an advanced instructor (see figure 25).



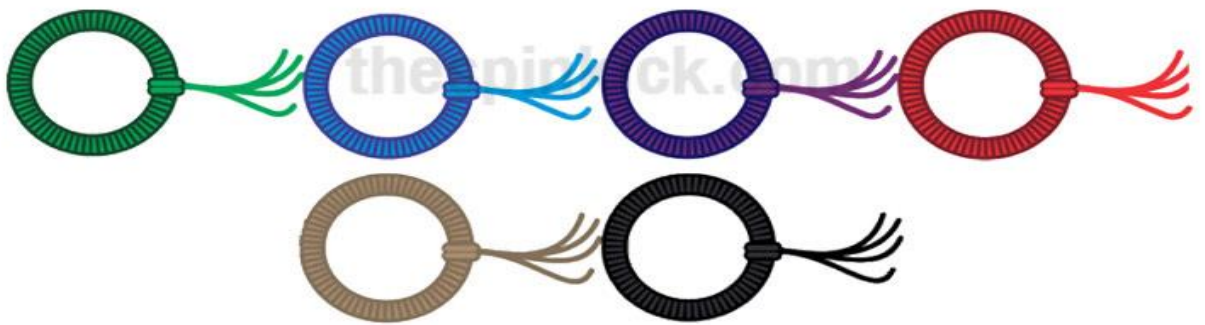


# OFFICIAL WTBA MUAY THAI ARMBAND RANKS

## BEGINNER



## ADVANCED



## INSTRUCTOR



thespinkkick.com

Figure 25. WTBA Band Ranking System. Source: thespinkick.com



Unlike other martial arts, traditional Muay Thai does not have a ranking, band, or belt system. Chris TSK, writing for the martial arts website “The Spin Kick,” provides the explanation of the WTBA’s ranking system (figure 25). “*In Thailand, Muay Thai is a professional combat sport just like boxing. Fighters who join a gym do the sport to earn a living not belt ranks. A fighter’s rank is based purely on skill, fight record, quality of wins, and number of championship belts and titles. You’re not going for color belts, but for championship belts*” (TSK, 2020). This is a very important concept in which to understand the difference between how Californians study Muay Thai as a hobby, in contrast to Thais who study Muay Thai as a way of life. Muay Thai, as a ring sport, cares nothing as to what band, or belt, a practitioner has earned from their gym. What really matters is skill and success in the ring. *Nak Muay* (a practitioner of Muay Thai) in Thailand are at the gym to earn a living, not to acquire WTBA bands to denote their status. For Californian’s who study Muay Thai as a hobby, status, and pride count for a lot. In a traditional Karate or Tae Kwon Do *dojo* (school), the students wear a belt to denote their rank. This belt system usually goes from white for a beginner, to black to denote an expert. *Dojos* charge extra fees for a student to undergo a belt promotion ceremony. Thus, the belt system becomes a lucrative source of extra income for the martial arts school. The students at the school also feel a sense of pride at getting a promotion and wearing an advanced belt. This gives instant recognition that one is an accomplished martial artist. The band system has no root in traditional Muay Thai in Thailand, and was simply developed for the tastes of Californians who have been conditioned through years of movies and practicing other martial arts, to expect a ranking in a system, as well as recognition, to reward them for their efforts. It seems clear that the development of this band system,

by a Thai immigrant no less, was done in response to the realities and pressures of running a martial arts business in California. If we refer back to our definition of localization as “*the process of making a product or service more suitable for a particular country, area, etc.*” (Cambridge, 2020); this is a classic example of the localization of Muay Thai in California.

#### **4.8 Teaching other martial arts**

SteelMMA is primarily a Muay Thai gym. Their fight team, consisting of more than ten amateur and professional fighters are all Muay Thai practitioners. Steel does not even offer an MMA class. The MMA portion of their name is justified because they also teach other martial arts such as Brazilian Jiu-jitsu (BJJ), Boxing, and Kickboxing (see SteelMMA class schedule, figure 26). There is no true MMA class however, where all of these arts are combined at once. The owner of SteelMMA, Carl Gebhardt has always been a Muay Thai and Kickboxing practitioner, however in order to open a successful gym Gebhardt had to offer classes in other martial arts. The author, when selecting a gym, chose SteelMMA, expressly because it offered BJJ as well as Muay Thai, as the author had a desire to train in both. Figure 27 shows a BJJ class at SteelMMA. I am standing on the far left of the picture.



5910 Santo Road, San Diego, CA 92124

Email: info@steelmma.com Phone: 858-987-0113 Website: www.steelmma.com

	All Levels	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	Fitness	
TIME	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
6:30 AM	CARDIO KICKBOXING Marvin		CARDIO KICKBOXING Marvin		CARDIO KICKBOXING Marvin	
9:00 AM						YOGA Iejnno
10:00 AM	STRENGTH & CONDITIONING Marvin	MUAY THAI BEGINNER Marvin	STRENGTH & CONDITIONING Marvin	MUAY THAI BEGINNER Marvin		POWER BOXING Brendon
11:00 AM	JIU JITSU - GI Jeremy	MUAY THAI INTERMEDIATE 90 Min, Carl	JIU JITSU - NO GI Ryan	MUAY THAI INTERMEDIATE 90 Min, Carl	JIU JITSU - GI Jeremy	JIU JITSU - NO GI Joshua
12:00 PM	MUAY THAI (ALL LEVELS) Marvin		MUAY THAI (ALL LEVELS) Marvin			MUAY THAI (ALL LEVELS) Brendon
1-4 PM	PRIVATE LESSONS / OPEN GYM					
3:30pm		KIDS JIU JITSU Ages 4-7, Max		KIDS JIU JITSU Ages 4-7, Max		
4:15 PM	KIDS MUAY THAI Ages 4-7, Shaun	KIDS JIU JITSU Ages 8-15, Max	KIDS MUAY THAI Ages 4-7, Shaun	KIDS JIU JITSU Ages 8-15, Max	KIDS SPARRING Carl & Shaun	
	KIDS MUAY THAI Ages 8+, Carl	KIDS MUAY THAI Ages 8+, Shaun	KIDS MUAY THAI Ages 8+, Carl	KIDS MUAY THAI Ages 8+, Shaun		
5:00 PM	BOXING HEAVY BAG Marvin	BOXING HEAVY BAG Brendon	BOXING MITT WORK Marvin	BOXING MITT WORK Brendon	KICKBOXING HEAVY BAG Carl	
	KIDS FIGHT TEAM 45 Min, Invite Only		KIDS FIGHT TEAM 45 Min, Invite Only		Muay Thai BEGINNER Shaun	
6:00 PM	MUAY THAI INTERMEDIATE 90 Min, Carl & Erik	MUAY THAI ROTATIONAL 60 Min, Erik	MUAY THAI INTERMEDIATE 90 Min, Carl & Erik	MUAY THAI ROTATIONAL 60 Min, Erik	MUAY THAI OPEN SPARRING 90 Minutes, Carl	
	MUAY THAI BEGINNER Shaun	MUAY THAI (ALL LEVELS) Carl	MUAY THAI BEGINNER Shaun	MUAY THAI (ALL LEVELS) Carl		
7:00 PM		STRENGTH & CONDITIONING Brendon		STRENGTH & CONDITIONING Brendon		
		JIU JITSU - GI Max		JIU JITSU - NO GI Max		
7:30 PM	JIU JITSU - GI Jeremy		JIU JITSU ROLLING 90 Min, Jeremy			
	CARDIO KICKBOXING Brendon		CARDIO KICKBOXING Brendon			

Figure 26. SteelMMA class schedule. Note the Kids, Jiu Jitsu, Yoga and Fitness classes in what is primarily a Muay Thai gym. Source: steelmma.com



*Figure 27. SteelMMA BJJ Class. I am standing on the left of the picture. Source: steelmma.com*

The inclusion of BJJ in gyms that primarily focus on another martial art has become common. It is rare to find a gym that solely teaches Muay Thai in California. The rise of MMA not only introduced the California public to Muay Thai, but also to BJJ, and other effective martial disciplines. BJJ has enjoyed a meteoric rise in popularity, which meets or exceeds that of Muay Thai. Therefore, if a gym is not offering customers the option of learning BJJ as well as Muay Thai, they are excluding a large portion of clients. A look at the names of some of the member gyms of the USMF in California confirms this assertion (USMF, 2020):

- Combat Sports Academy-Dublin, California
- American Kickboxing Academy-San Jose, California
- Valor Training Center-Sacramento, California
- Carlsbad Kickboxing Club-Carlsbad, California

- Boxing Works-Torrance, California
- El Nino Training Center-San Francisco, California

Although, all these gyms offer Muay Thai instruction and are members of the USMF, they do not even list Muay Thai in their gym names. El Nino Training Center in San Francisco lists its *raison d'être* as: “*a top premiere training and fitness facility in mixed martial arts.*” Even Woodenman Muay Thai Gym in San Francisco, one of the few USMF gyms that uses Muay Thai in its name, lists its head trainer as “*a Muay Thai trainer and MMA coach*” (USMF, 2020).

This business of running a martial arts gym is a competitive one. Entrepreneurs want to appeal to the largest possible customer base. The popularity of MMA dictates most customers want to train in a variety of martial arts including Muay Thai. Thus, most gyms will feature MMA in their title or “about us” section on their website. These gyms are very aware the public does not want to pay for one gym to learn Muay Thai, then another to learn BJJ, and yet another for boxing training. Most Californians demand so called “one stop shopping” for their martial arts consumption. This, of course, is not true of traditional Muay Thai camps in Thailand.<sup>30</sup> A traditional Muay Thai camp, such as the camp where I train Muay Thai, T-DED 99, would not consider teaching other martial arts. Their stable of *nak muay*'s train twice a day for three hours at a time. There is no extra time or room to train other martial arts. I asked my Muay Thai trainer, Kru Gi, if he had ever watched MMA. Kru Gi replied that he was not interested in MMA, because most MMA fighter's Muay

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<sup>30</sup> As MMA becomes more popular worldwide, gyms offering MMA instruction are popping up in Thailand to cater to tourists. The Bangkok Fight Lab, Executive Martial Arts Academy, and Superpro Samui are a few offering MMA.

Thai technique is terrible. Gi believed you have to dedicate yourself to Muay Thai full-time in order to learn it effectively.

#### 4.9 Fitness Classes

Another Localized aspect of Muay Thai in California is its use and marketing as a method for increasing fitness. Most Californians in the past sought out martial arts instruction for self-defense purposes. Commercial advertising at the time reflected that reality (see figures 32 and 33). Martial Arts practiced only to increase fitness, however, are a relatively new phenomenon which began in California decades ago. Several fitness instructors introduced systems that used dubious martial arts moves advertised as an extreme workout, such as the popular *Tae Bo* system developed by former Tae Kwon Do practitioner Billy Blanks. Tae Bo emphasized a cardio type workout using martial arts movements. In the past, martial arts were known to increase fitness as a corollary to the main goal, which was to master the art for self-defense, or competition purposes. The introduction of martial arts fitness workouts, however, proved to be very popular and developed into a fitness phenomenon. Even SteelMMA, which promotes the aura of a hard-core fighting gym, offers cardio-kickboxing courses (see Figures 26 and 29). This trend is mostly aimed at the growing proportion of women training in Muay Thai. Men find competition and movement efficiency more meaningful in a fitness program, whereas women look for a program that emphasizes weight control (Jewett, 1984). Belardo (2007), had similar findings, “*the outstanding motivational factor (for training Muay Thai) for female respondents was the desire of losing weight. From 11 female respondents, 9 of them*

*had a strong desire to lose weight*” (Belardo, 2007). This phenomenon has not escaped Thailand. A case in point is the recent opening of a fitness chain called *FitFac Muay Thai Academy* (see figure 28). They advertise as the first Muay Thai gym for weight loss. They also proudly state on their website: “*FitFac has designed its signature Muay Thai class purposefully for getting in shape. It’s safe and fun! Customer lose up to 7 kilograms*” (FitFac.com, 2020). This is an interesting case of a trend reversing course. A martial art that spread internationally, is modified, sterilized, and stripped of its fighting applications; then, in its new modified form, is subsequently adopted back to the country where the art was founded. Of course, Thais are just being practical, because after all there is a much larger market for people interested in fitness, than learning Muay Thai to fight in a ring. Indeed, it has become fashionable for a new generation of middle- and upper-class Thais to take Muay Thai classes for health and fitness. In the past, Thai parents would put their kids into Karate, Judo or Tae Kwon Do classes, eschewing Muay Thai as the martial art of the lower classes. The new generation of well to do Thais, however, have realized they do not need to look outside of Thailand for a martial art that is effective for self-defense and can improve fitness. Businesses such as the aforementioned FitFac, and Rajadamnoern Singha Muay Thai (RSM) Academy, a joint venture between Singha Beer company and Rajadamnoern Stadium (which I attended for a short time), cater to this new, elite fitness trend.

According to the American College of Sports Medicine, an association of academics, exercise scientists, physicians and fitness professionals; the top three biggest fitness trends in North America in 2020 are HIIT (High Intensity, Interval Training), Wearable Technology (i.e. apple watch, fit bit), and Group Training

(ACSM.org, 2020). Although, not specifically parsed out, Muay Thai can fit into the HIIT and Group Training categories. Muay Thai classes are usually taught in a group setting, and involve intense athletic movements, usually performed in three-minute intervals (the length of a round in a Muay Thai fight), with a period of rest in between. This puts most of Muay Thai training into two of the top three fitness trends categories.







Figure 28. FitFac Muay Thai. Muay Thai fitness gym. Source: Author



Figure 29. Cardio Kickboxing at SteelMMA. Source: [steelmma.com](http://steelmma.com)

#### 4.10 Yoga Classes

The addition of Yoga classes at Muay Thai gyms is another California phenomenon. Yoga is a popular wellness/fitness activity in California. Originating in India, yoga is known for increasing flexibility, strength, and efficiency of breathing. These are good assets for the martial artist. The layout of a Muay Thai, or other martial arts gym, is very similar to a yoga studio, an open room covered in mats. This makes yoga and martial arts instruction a natural fit together. For any aspiring California martial arts business, offering yoga in addition to martial arts, creates a

wider potential client base. SteelMMA, my gym in San Diego, specializes in Muay Thai instruction. However, the owner of SteelMMA Carl Gebhardt, explained to me, “*everyone is offering yoga (instruction), in order to be competitive, and to better serve our members, we have to offer yoga as well*” (see figure 30). Teaching, or practicing yoga at a traditional Muay Thai gym in Thailand would be considered a foreign practice. The traditional Muay Thai gym is designed and used, solely for the practice of Muay Thai. There are usually weights and other fitness apparatuses at these gyms, but they are there for the Muay Thai students, not to entice members interested in other pursuits. This is not to say, of course, especially considering the strong influence of Hinduism on Thailand, that yogic practices do not influence the moves, stretching, or breathing techniques employed by Muay Thai practitioners. I have no data one way or the other on this subject. However, during my autoethnographic field work, I can find no examples of yoga, as a separate wellness promoting activity, being offered at a Traditional Muay Thai gym.



*Figure 30. SteelMMA Yoga Class. Source: steelmma.com*

#### **4.11 Western boxing and Dutch Style Kickboxing**

A significant difference in California Muay Thai is the addition of Western Boxing techniques and Dutch Style Kickboxing to traditional Muay Thai practice. Muay Thai in Thailand became a ring sport in the 1920s (Monthienvichienchai, 2004). This change led to the addition of Western style boxing gloves, and a boxing style ring. Because of the changes and the addition of gloves, Thai fighters had to adopt some Western Boxing techniques, such as the jab and uppercut. In California, however, Muay Thai and Western Boxing were basically joined together. The reason for this phenomenon of the melding of styles in California is due to two factors.

1. The long history of Boxing in the USA: Boxing was the most prevalent combat/ring sport in the United States for much of its history. This roughly paralleled boxing's popularity in the United Kingdom. Boxing is still one of

the most popular combat sports in the US, although it is now rivaled (and perhaps even surpassed by) Mixed Martial Arts. This popularity of boxing has bled over to other martial arts taught in California. Popularity alone, however, is not the only reason boxing is included in martial arts instruction, effectiveness is perhaps the more important factor. Bruce Lee believed that boxing was the most effective striking art in the punching range, and incorporated boxing training into his martial art Jeet Kune Do. In other words, top martial artists recognized Western boxing's punches and movements were the most effective for that limited purpose.

2. Boxing's use in Mixed Martial Arts: Due to this effectiveness in the punching range, nearly all professional MMA athletes now include Boxing into their MMA training. Of course, Western boxing does not allow for elbows, knees, and kicks, which is why Muay Thai is a more complete striking system for MMA, and the reason most MMA athletes train in both Boxing and Muay Thai.

Another addition to Muay Thai training in California is the "Dutch Style Kickboxing" training methodology. Although, the Dutch call their style "Kickboxing," their style incorporates both Muay Thai (elbows and knees) and K-1 style kickboxing (no elbows, and which was adapted from Muay Thai by the Japanese)<sup>31</sup>. One Championship.com explains Dutch Style Kickboxing this way "Dutch kickboxing, unlike American kickboxing, incorporates techniques from three martial arts: Kyokushin karate, Western boxing, and Muay Thai" (onefc.com, 2020).

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<sup>31</sup> Many professional fighters compete in both Muay Thai and K-1 style fights. Since the movements and training methods are practically the same, the skills for both styles crossover. For example, Thai champion Stamp Fairtex holds championship belts in both Muay Thai and Kickboxing in the One Championship promotion.

The Dutch were some of the first Europeans to compete in Muay Thai competitions in Thailand. The most famous of these was Dutch fighter Ramon Dekkers. Dekkers fought in all the major stadiums in Thailand and even defeated legendary Thai fighter Coban Lookchaomaesaitong (evolve-mma.com, 2020). Dekkers legacy, as well as that of many other Dutch kickboxers, led to a surge in the popularity of Muay Thai and Kickboxing in the Netherlands. The Dutch use their style to compete in both Muay Thai and K-1 style kickboxing competitions. Much as the Japanese did earlier, the Dutch adapted Muay Thai training and techniques to form their own style of Kickboxing. Wolcott (2019) defines Dutch Kickboxing training methods thusly: *“As opposed to Thai boxers, who work a variety of drills on the pads with their trainers, Dutch kickboxers often repeat the same drills over and over again. These drills can be up to six techniques long – sometimes more – and help practitioners internalize their skills”* (Wolcott, 2019). The addition of the Dutch Style of training and techniques has become common in California Muay Thai gyms. Figure 31 shows the schedule from Pacific Roots Muay Thai a San Diego, California Muay Thai gym that also offers classes in Dutch Style Kickboxing. My gym *SteelMMA* defines the style of Muay Thai they teach as “Dutch” style. The Dutch style incorporates more punching, and more offense. The use of this style and type of training methodology suits the students in California better. Dutch style is more instructor centric, because showing and correcting a long technique drill leads to many questions and errors as students try to follow along with the routine. In Thailand, the training usually sticks to the basics, with simple combinations and techniques practiced and drilled thousands of times until they are natural movements for the fighter. Additionally, punches are not weighted as heavily in a Thai boxing ring match, therefore Traditional Muay Thai

focused more on elbows, kicks, knees, and clinch fighting. The Dutch adopted their style for fight promotions such as K-1 that did not allow elbows and limited clinching. Another feature of the Dutch Style is drilling the techniques with a partner. In California Muay Thai classes, students will partner up in pairs, with one partner holding striking pads while the other partner practices the combination drill outlined by the instructor. After several rounds of this, the students switch. This is very different from Thailand, where the students will usually drill by hitting a heavy bag, and then partner with a coach who holds the pads for them. It is rare for a student to hold pads for another student.

Another aspect of the Dutch style is the practice of hard sparring. Sparring is the practice of simulating an actual competitive match in the given martial art. Sparring can be light and technique focused or, be so-called “hard sparring” which would be equivalent to an actual fight. The Thais rarely if ever hard spar, and if they do, it is usually when they have a fight coming up. The Dutch, on the other hand, are known for their hard-sparring, and enjoy a reputation as being some of the toughest martial artists. The Thai’s save the hard hitting, and subsequent possible injury, for the ring, or competitive event. The reasons for this are two-fold, the Thai’s fight more often than most combat athletes, and start younger. It is common for Thai fighters to have fight totals in the hundreds of fights. Therefore, regular hard sparring would just lead to damage both inside and outside the ring, which would limit the longevity of the fighter. In California, that vast majority of students will not fight in the ring in a Muay Thai match. And even if they are a fighter, their fight totals rarely exceed 20-30. Therefore, their only way to practice their techniques in a realistic way is to hard spar. Because of this difference between the Thai *nak muay*, and the California hobby

practitioner, the Californians adopted a more Dutch style methodology for training Muay Thai and kickboxing.

*Figure 31. Pacific Roots Muay Thai Schedule, Featuring Dutch Style Muay Thai.*



The poster features a central circular logo with a silhouette of a Muay Thai fighter in a dynamic pose against a sunset background. The text 'PACIFIC ROOTS' is arched above the circle and 'MUAY THAI' is arched below it. To the left of the logo, the words 'ADULT' and 'SCHEDULE' are written in large, bold, black letters on orange rectangular backgrounds. Below the logo, the schedule is presented in a series of horizontal bars with alternating colors: orange for days with Muay Thai and yellow for days with Dutch Style Kickboxing.

Day	Activity	Time
MONDAY	MUAY THAI	10:00-11:00AM & 7:00-8:30PM
TUESDAY	DUTCH STYLE KICKBOXING	7:00-8:00PM
WEDNESDAY	MUAY THAI	10:00-11:00AM & 7:00-8:30PM
THURSDAY	DUTCH STYLE KICKBOXING	7:00-8:00PM
FRIDAY	MUAY THAI	10:00-11:00AM & 7:00-8:30PM

*Source: Pacific Roots Facebook Page*



## Chapter 5 Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

Returning to my hypothesis: *The rapid expansion and popularity of Muay Thai in California, USA began with the rise in popularity of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) starting in 1993. The study and practice of Muay Thai have been changed and localized in California from the original form in Thailand, to conform to American's traditional values of sport and instruction;* and my research questions: 1) *How and where did Muay Thai's popularity in the US begin?*, and 2) *How has the localization of Muay Thai in California changed the way Muay Thai is practiced and taught?*

I believe my original hypothesis has been partially proved. I, however, discounted the influence on this trend of popular culture films, especially the Ong-Bak film series. As earlier stated, Chinese martial arts films, especially the ones starring Bruce Lee had a significant impact on Californians interest in Chinese martial arts. It seems the Ong-Bak film series also had a positive impact on Muay Thai's popularity. The research questions have been answered and addressed below.

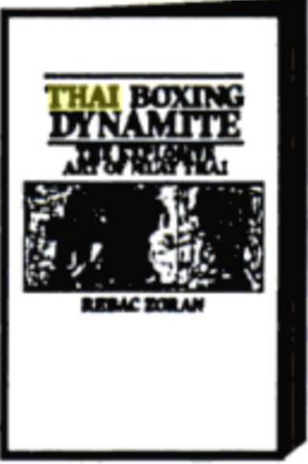
This research shows, and most observers agree (Henry, 2013), the UFC and MMA played the largest role in the popularity of Muay Thai in the United States. Google Trends data confirms this role by showing a positive correlation in the popularity of Muay Thai, the UFC and MMA. Prior to the advent of the UFC in 1993, Muay Thai was first taught in California, conspicuously by Chai Sirisute and Fairtex Gym. Muay Thai, however, remained an esoteric martial art until the dawn of the UFC and MMA. This research did show however, that I perhaps gave too much weight to MMA's role in my hypothesis. The release of the 2003 movie Ong-Bak,

along with its sequels, also played a major role. It seems strange that a movie can have such a significant impact and so effectively transmit a piece of cultural heritage to an international audience. However, it is not unprecedented. It is widely accepted that Bruce Lee's movie *Enter the Dragon* had that effect on the US and the world regarding Chinese Martial Arts (Coover, 2008). In California, the place where many trends in the US are born, MMA, the UFC and Ong-Bak combined to propel Muay Thai to become the new, hot, and exciting martial art on the scene. This had previously happened with Jiu-Jitsu, Judo, Karate, and Chinese martial arts in California. Californians continuously seek the martial art that will provide them with the "secret" techniques of self-defense that will enable them to defeat their potential (or imaginary) adversaries. As Krug (2001) put it, "*feeding the popular imagination with beliefs about the practices in general as secret, highly advanced, deadly, and possessing the ability to make the practitioner virtually invulnerable to physical harm*" (Krug, 2001) (see figures 32 and 33).<sup>32</sup>

จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย  
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

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<sup>32</sup> See Kelly's (2020) excellent article on martial arts comic book advertisements at <https://www.hoganmag.com/blog/the-deadliest-ads-alive>.



**THAI BOXING DYNAMITE**  
The Explosive Art of **Muay Thai**  
by **Zoran Rebac**

You're in the ring when three flashing kicks from the **Muay Thai** boxer knock you to the canvas. **Muay Thai**, the hottest style of kickboxing to hit the sports world, integrates the use of legs and fists in one clean, fluid, yet savage style. Get the facts on how to master **Thai Boxing Dynamite**. 8 1/2 x 11, softcover, photos, 120 pp.

**\$14.00**

Figure 32. Muay Thai, the new "hot" martial art on the scene. Source: Blackbelt Magazine (1993).

**SHOP BY MAIL**

**I CAN PARALYZE A 200-LB. ATTACKER WITH JUST ONE FINGER!** Yet I weigh only 93 lbs.! **YOU TOO can protect yourself with my SECRET Oriental System of Yubiwaza.**



Yoshie Imanami

Girls, these days it isn't safe to be alone even during daylight—let alone coming home at night on dark streets. Mugging and other kinds of attacks can do more harm than the loss of mere money. Yet—although I'm under 5 feet and weigh only 93 lbs.—I don't have a bit of fear—day or night! That's because my forefathers in Japan always passed along to each generation the secrets of Yubiwaza—the amazing system of ONE-FINGER DEFENSE. With Yubiwaza, I've subdued huge bullies almost twice my size and weight... I've made rough characters cry out for help themselves... and I've left muggers suffering in pain on the ground! And I've done all this just by placing a single finger on the right spot of my attacker's body! Simply press your finger on one of the vital spots shown in this Yubiwaza System and your attacker may lose consciousness... or become paralyzed—completely unable to move. He releases his grip on you instantly—becomes helpless himself! I've revealed every secret of the ONE-FINGER SELF-DEFENSE SYSTEM in my book, Yubiwaza. I guarantee you can protect yourself as easily and surely as I have done—or your money back! Now you can walk home at night unafraid, with the knowledge no harm can come to you as long as you know YUBIWAZA. My system is profusely illustrated with LIVE ACTION photos of me demonstrating each secret. My system can be used by any man as well—so why not order an extra copy for your favorite man! For my complete instructions, send only 99c plus 26c postaxe (Total: \$1.25). YUBIWAZA, c/o Precise, Dept. Y-2, Box 322, Lenex Hill Sta., New York, N.Y.

**ONLY 99c**



Figure 33. Ad from a 1970's Comic Book. Source: Kelly, (2020)

Muay Thai, much like other Asian martial arts, has changed as it has spread throughout the world. Similar to Lorge's (2012) opinion on Chinese martial arts "*it is now an international product subject to globalization, commercialization, and*

*nationalism*” (Lorge, 2012); Muay Thai has undergone a similar transformation as it has been *globalized, internationalized and localized*. If internationalization is the process of making a product as adaptable and user friendly for as many countries as possible, then localization is the process of actually adapting that product to the target market once internationalization has taken place (LionBridge.com, 2020).

Following the globalization and popularity of Muay Thai (120 member countries in the IFMA), localization has occurred in most countries where it has been adopted. Notably, Holland (Dutch Style Muay Thai), Japan (K-1 Kickboxing), and the United States (Boxing Style Muay Thai). This localization process has also occurred in California, where it has been driven by the advent of mixed martial arts and commercial concerns. The localization in California has been high-lighted by 11 major adaptations from traditional Muay Thai:

1. Competitions with Different Rule Sets from the Original art
2. The Removal of Gambling
3. The deletion of the Wai Kru
4. Functionality/Practicality
5. Individualized instruction
6. Child participation
7. Band/Rank systems and ceremonies
8. Teaching other Martial Arts
9. Fitness classes
10. Yoga Classes
11. Western Boxing and Dutch Style Kickboxing

Most of these adaptations are driven by entrepreneurs and the business realities of running a martial arts gym in California. California consumers demand to study martial arts that are both practical and functional for self-defense and/or competition, has resulted in further adaptations from traditional Muay Thai. These include the stripping away of the “extraneous” cultural and religious trappings and practices of the art while emphasizing its practicality in MMA and self-defense scenarios. This is a gesture towards the popularity of MMA and the UFC, as well as the growing public fatigue with “fake” martial arts with dubious claims of potency. The Westernized pedagogical teaching methodology, of emphasizing the individual and giving individual attention to students, over the traditional Thai Eastern philosophy of group training, is expected from California consumers who seek that “individualized experience.” Another localized phenomenon is the addition of children’s Muay Thai classes. The WTBA Band system, which serves to generate pride and loyalty in the students along with additional revenue for the gym, is another California invention. Muay Thai gyms offering fitness and yoga classes, are another example of the adaptations made to run a successful business appealing to the largest possible number of patrons. If one were to run a gym solely for professional fighters, the clientele would be very small indeed<sup>33</sup>. The deemphasis of the Wai Kru, especially at competitions (mandatory in Thailand), and the lack of gambling on Muay Thai in California are major departures from traditional Muay Thai. This is in stark contrast to the role that gambling plays in Muay Thai competitions in Thailand. Monthienvichienchai (2004) believed that Muay Thai partially exists in Thai society as a vehicle for gambling (Monthienvichienchai, 2004). There are also the different

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<sup>33</sup> Thailand has also capitulated to this reality. Many Muay Thai camps which heretofore serviced only professional fighters have started training tourists to tap into the lucrative tourism market.

competition rule sets between California and Thailand. These rules differences are high-lighted by the greater amount of rules in California, as well as the different rule sets for novice, amateur and professional fighters. The California rules allow only basic elbow and knee strikes, and restrict most variations on these strikes such as rising elbows and knee strikes above the shoulder line. These restrictions are probably due to the legacy of Kickboxing competitions which did not allow knees and elbows and which used to dominate martial arts competition in California. In fact, the International Kickboxing Federation (IKF), the current regulatory body for Muay Thai in California, was originally formed to regulate Kickboxing competitions. The IKF only recently included Muay Thai in its purview. California also has something called “point style” Muay Thai, which is a legacy of “point style” karate fighting. Point style Karate was a competition where the fighters scored points by merely lightly touching their opponent, no hard punches or kicks were allowed. This is, of course, vastly different from the legendary full-force brutality that takes place weekly in the Muay Thai competitions in the major stadiums in Thailand. Lastly, in California, there is a heavy emphasis on “Dutch” style Muay Thai. This features partner drills involving long punching and kicking combinations as the partners switch off holding pads for each other. Dutch style also includes frequent hard-sparring. Western Boxing techniques are also emphasized along with the elbows and knees of Muay Thai. This blending of Eastern and Western techniques in California, results in a more offensive orientated style. This is in contrast to Thailand, where a beautiful defense scores a fighter almost as many points as an effective offense.

In Thailand, fighter’s study Muay Thai to get better at, and be more successful in Muay Thai competitions. My trainer Kru Gi’s, matter of fact answer to my question

as to why the *nak muays* were not training, “*because there were no competitions scheduled,*” is stark evidence of the nature of Muay Thai as a business. It just so happens that Muay Thai is also a devastatingly effective form of self-defense. But self-defense is not the Muay Thai competitor’s primary goal. Their goal is to earn an income. Why train for a job when there is no work available? In California however, the effectiveness of the art in self-defense is the reason why most practitioners are learning Muay Thai. This explains why the UFC and MMA so popularized Muay Thai. Not because the public saw it on television, but because they saw how devastatingly effective it was at destroying an opponent. Even if a student never needs to use Muay Thai in self-defense, they appreciate the aura of invincibility bestowed upon them because they have been exposed to the “secret” techniques of the newest, deadliest, martial art to hit the West. To make learning the art more practical for Californians, instructors stripped away anything that did not achieve their student’s goal of learning the physical self-defense moves of Muay Thai. Muay Thai in California underwent Spencer’s (2013) *disembedding* process (Spencer, 2013). This process of disembedding elements of original Muay Thai, or in other words the localization of the martial art, had the effect of further increasing the popularity of Muay Thai by making it more palatable to the tastes of Californian martial arts enthusiasts. In so doing, Californians, unfortunately, discarded the cultural aspects of traditional Muay Thai. This included the teaching methodology, and other traditions of the art like the *Wai Kru*, which were difficult for them to understand and did not translate well into Californian culture.

The unfortunate result of this localization is, if you took a Thai *nak muay* who trains at a traditional camp in Thailand, and inserted him or her into the middle of a

Muay Thai class in California, the *nak muay* may not recognize what is being taught as Muay Thai.

## 5.2 Recommendations

The internationalization of Muay Thai and its inclusion in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics as a demonstration sport will have profound ramifications for the sport of Muay Thai, and for Thailand as a country. The explosion of interest that has occurred from MMA, as well as the interest that is sure to be generated by the sport's exposure in the Olympics should be managed and curated carefully by stakeholders in Thailand. Perceptions of Thailand by foreign tourists are mixed at best. Many foreigners have a negative view of Thailand (Henkel, 2006). Muay Thai is an opportunity to shape international perceptions of Thailand in a positive way, which could have a great effect on the tourism industry and the sport of Muay Thai (also see Appendices B and C).

International fight promotions such as *One Championship* and *Glory* should be studied further by stakeholders in private industry, as well as the governing bodies such as the IFMA and WMC. These entities should ensure that what these fight promotions call "Muay Thai" holds true to the image that Thailand wants to promote for the sport. The popularity of *One Championship*, in particular, should be studied and understood. *One Championship* is founded by a Thai national, and billed as the number one sports media property in Asia (onefc.com, 2020). This promotion features "Muay Thai," along with Kickboxing and MMA. The Muay Thai bouts, often featuring top Thai fighters, do not include many elements of a traditional Muay Thai



competition. The *One Championship* fights are three rounds<sup>34</sup> (as opposed to the traditional five rounds), the fighters wear three-ounce, fingerless gloves,<sup>35</sup> instead of traditional boxing gloves, there is no Wai Kru before the matches, nor is traditional music played. The World Muay Thai Council professes on its website concern over international standards and control: “*The Council...is the sole body for sanctioning of championship bouts of a world standard. The worldwide members of 120 countries in all 5 continents and the WMC are working together to hold shows, events, seminars, instructor courses and referees and judges courses; to further increase the standard of Muaythai around the world.*” This may be true for WMC sanctioned events, but what about *One Championship*, which has implemented different rules for so-called professional “Muay Thai” bouts? The *One Championship* fights are spectator friendly and give a career path for Thai fighters who have exhausted their careers at the traditional venues, but is it good for the sport? This internationalization of Muay Thai should be carefully analyzed to ensure that Thailand benefits from the popularity of their traditional sport. The Thai Ministry of culture must take careful steps to ensure that the traditions of the Thai cultural art of Muay Thai<sup>36</sup> are preserved, and not watered-down or lost in the face of the onslaught from internationalization and Olympic ambitions such as what happened to Karate. Stakeholders in Thailand should heed Lawton’s (2019) warning about the fate of Karate, “*soon traditional karate may be lost to the world...while the sportized form of karate continues to expand*” (Lawton, 2019), and endeavor to fulfill the stated mission of the WMC, “*to maintain*

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<sup>34</sup> Except for title fights which are five rounds.

<sup>35</sup> Ariyawat Busarabavonwongs, manager of Fairtex gym, stated the three-ounce gloves used in *One Championship* Muay Thai fights are actually a nod to Muay Boran, when they fought with hemp rope wrapped around their fists, called “Khard Cheuk.” These MMA style gloves, however, bear no resemblance to Khard Cheuk.

<sup>36</sup> See Vail (2014), who calls into question what exactly is traditional Muay Thai.

*and promote excellence in the art of Muaythai, and to regulate all Muaythai competitions worldwide.” (wmcmuaythai.org, 2020).*



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**APPENDIX**



จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย  
**CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY**



## **Appendix A**

### **Interviews**

#### **Interview of Ariyawat Busarabavonwongs (Prem)**

This interview was conducted on January 20, 2020 at Fairtex Gym in Pattaya, Thailand. Prem is the manager of Fairtex Training Center and the son of Phillip Wong, the founder of Fairtex.

Fairtex started their first Muay Thai gym in Chandler, Arizona in 1993. Prem's dad Phillip Wong brought over five MT trainers to help with the gym; Gan yoo Saksem is still a trainer in the US. Fairtex was the first gym in the US to use Thai trainers. Prem's brother-in-law moved the gym to San Francisco.

The Fairtex brand is popular due to the champions they have had over the years.

Prem believes the popularity of MT in the US is due mostly to MMA and movies like Ong Bak.

Regarding MMA, Prem believes the Thai government and sports associations were initially against MMA and having MMA fights in Thailand, because they thought it would interfere with MT. But now the government is changing and starting to see the value in MMA and promoting MMA in Thailand.

Prem believes the biggest obstacle for foreigners wanting to train MT in Thailand is obtaining a visa. Anything past a tourist visa is difficult to get so foreigners cannot stay and train MT on a long-term basis. Fairtex is attempting to register as a school, to be able to qualify for education visas, but there are many obstacles put up by the government and it is difficult to get this status. Prem said it is especially difficult for

Middle Easterners to get Visas and there are a lot of people from that area who want to train MT.

Despite this Prem believes MT is expanding internationally and in the US at a rapid rate. Prem believes the biggest obstacle for Americans to come to Thailand to train MT is the length of the trip and the cost of the flight.

Prem believes MT is helping change people's perceptions of Thailand positively. Many people ask him why he has a MT gym in Pattaya, which is known for entertainment tourism. Prem says it is all about personal choice, if you are here to learn MT, you have to be disciplined and train hard. It does not matter the location.

Regarding the Board of Tourism's campaign to promote MT, Prem has heard of it, but does not believe there is much being done in practice to advertise and promote MT to foreigners.

Prem believes international organizations that are holding MT competitions, such as One FC, are great for the sport and have given more experienced MT fighters a second chance to make a living and extend their careers.

Regarding the international rules of MT and how it differs from traditional MT rules in Thailand; Prem believes it is good because it is more friendly for the audience. Three rounds instead of five for instance keeps the action and intensity up which makes it more appealing to an international audience. As for the three-ounce gloves that expose the fingers, and their use in One FC, Prem says the idea is to recreate MT Khard Cheuk, the old-style MT where they covered the hands with ropes.

Prem believes the number one thing the government could do to promote the study of MT in Thailand is to streamline the visa process.

### **Interview of Kru Ror-Fed La-ard, aka Bung-Sef, Muay Chaiya Master**

Kru Bung-Sef, aged 73, was interviewed on November 10, 2019, in Chaiya, Surat Thani where he resides. Kru Bung-Sef is a recognized Muay Chaiya master and has been featured in books and articles as well as a Thai PBS documentary on Muay Chaiya. Kru Bung-Sef related the following:

He started learning Muay Chaiya at age 11 from his uncle “Pae.” Muay Chaiya is passed down through families, and he is the 4<sup>th</sup> generation of his family to learn Muay Chaiya from the time of the master. Kru Bung-Sef believes it is his duty to pass along the knowledge of Muay Chaiya to the next generation. He has taught his son and nephews who now represent the 6<sup>th</sup> generation of Muay Chaiya disciples (see figure 38). Kru Bung-Sef also fought in the Muay Thai ring and had over 200 fights. Kru Bung-Sef relates that the characteristics of Muay Chaiya are its speed and quick punches and fist swings. Muay Chaiya was designed as an unarmed martial art for use when swords were not available or had been lost during combat. In Muay Chaiya practice they do not use gloves, but rather ropes which are twisted around the hand (see figure 36). A sticky solution of egg whites was used to dip the ropes in broken glass which were then used as weapons in fighting. Other forms of Muay Thai use ropes, or Khard Cheuk, but what separates Muay Chaiya is the ropes are only wrapped around the hand to the wrist, where other forms of Muay Thai wrap the ropes half-way up the forearm.



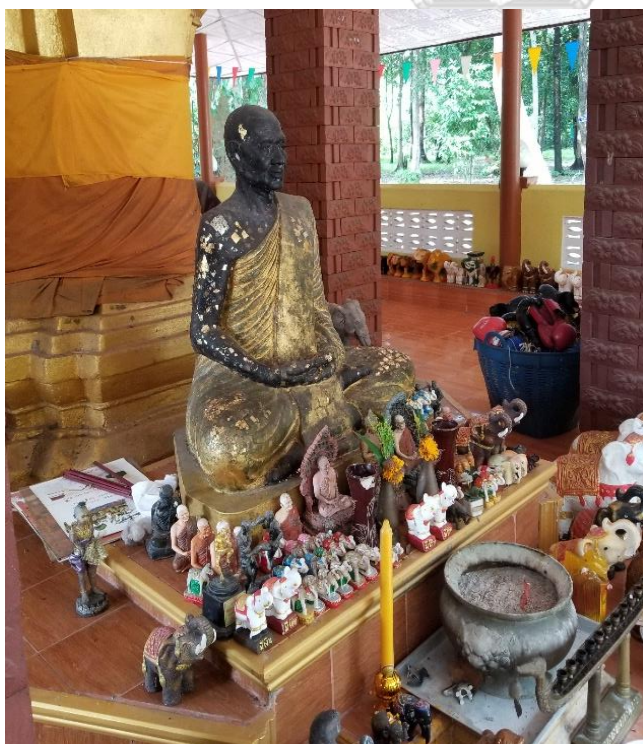
*Figure 34. Me with Kru Bung-Sef. Source: Author*



*Figure 35. Kru Bung-Sef at Por Than Ma's shrine. Source: Author*



*Figure 36. Muay Chaiya rope hand wraps. Source: Author*



*Figure 37. Shrine of Mony Por Than Ma, founder of Muay Chaiya. Source: Author*



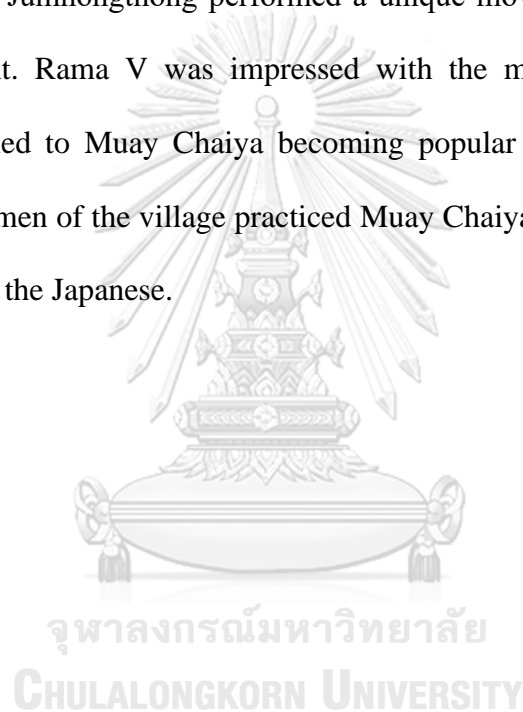
Figure 38. Shrine to Phra Vajee Sriyapai, founder of Muay Chaiya. Source: Author



*Figure 39. Nephew of Kru Bung-Sef. The future of Muay Chaiya. Source: Author*

Regarding the history of Muay Chaiya, Kru Bung-Sef said the following: In the time of King Rama III, in the Rattanakosin era, from approximately 1824 CE to 1851 CE a battle of succession with Rama IV happened. There was a struggle between the forces of Rama III and IV with Rama IV emerging as the victor. All of Rama III's warriors were sentenced to be executed for their disloyalty. One of those soldiers escaped from Bangkok and traveled to Chaiya disguised as a monk. His true name remains unknown to this day, but he was called "Por-Than-Ma," or literally "father is coming." Por-Than-Ma lived like a monk at the temple Wat Tung-Jab-

Chang in Chaiya. It was at this temple that he recruited and taught Muay Chaiya to young men who wanted to be soldiers instead of doing menial jobs. The need for martial skills was always important due to the ever-present threats of Burmese invasions. During this time, the governor of Chaiya, Than Phya Vajee Kam Sriyapai, trained with the monk and observed the young men fighting. Kam Sriyapai's mother took Muay Chaiya fighters to Bangkok to perform in front of King Rama V. One of the fighters Plong Jumnonthong performed a unique move called "tiger doing tail" and won the fight. Rama V was impressed with the move and gave the fighter accolades which led to Muay Chaiya becoming popular in Thai folklore. During World War II, all men of the village practiced Muay Chaiya in order to resist invasion and occupation by the Japanese.





## Appendix B

### The Habit(us) of Muay Thai in Thailand and California, USA

The first thing you notice is the smell. The moment you walk into the gym the smell hits you like a wall. Gyms in Thailand and California both have it. The accoutrement of Muay Thai, the boxing gloves, hand wraps, kicking pads, and heavy bags are similar in both countries, and this equipment absorbs sweat. As part of this research I conducted field work at Muay Thai gyms in California and Thailand (see Chapter 1). The bulk of my time was spent at SteelMMA (Steel) in San Diego, California and T-DED 99 in Bangkok, Thailand. For a wider breadth of experience, I also trained at other Muay Thai gyms including, *Arena MMA*, and *The Art of Eight* both in San Diego. In Thailand I trained at *Punrith Muay Thai* in Bangkok, *Team Quest* in Chiang Mai, as well as the famous *Fairtex Gym* in Pattaya. The training methodologies, practices, traditions, and habits amongst the gyms in California were fairly uniform. These methods were also similar in the gyms in Thailand. The differences, however, between Muay Thai in Thailand and California were significant. I used Bourdieu's (1990) theory of habitus, or the habits and cultural traditions established in a culture, area, or industry to analyze Muay Thai in California and Thailand. I followed Wacquant (2004) and Spencer (2013) in their use of carnal ethnography, or direct participation, in the activity to understand the bodily experience of Muay Thai training. Muay Thai has a reputation as a brutal sport, and Muay Thai fighters are widely considered the toughest and hardest training athletes in combat sports. I directly experienced Muay Thai training in Thailand and California (see figures 40-45).

The most distinct difference in the smells, is the odor of the ubiquitous muscle liniment *Naman Muay*, which is used at every Thai gym. *Naman Muay* contains menthol, and that smell greets you as you enter a *Khai Muay*, or Muay Thai camp. The dry climate of California helps to dissipate the smells of Muay Thai, but it never completely goes away. In humid Thailand it lingers longer. Since the *nak muays* live at the Thai gym, their equipment hangs to dry from every free hook, rail, or fence in the gym. In the US, the average Muay Thai student trains at most once a day, and maybe only a few times a week. The US competitors, as opposed to the enthusiasts who do it for fun, fitness, and self-defense, keep a slightly more rigorous schedule. For the *nak muays* in Thailand, who train twice a day, every day, except for Sunday, Muay Thai is their life. They do not go to a job after training is finished, or worry about their final exams at university, their life is just Muay Thai. Mostly poor kids from the rural provinces in Thailand, the *nak muays*, or as my Thai trainer called them *dek muays*<sup>37</sup> (kid boxers), know that Muay Thai is their only way out of poverty. The *dek muay* also have families back home relying on them to send money for support. My main trainer was Kru (Kru means teacher) P. “Gi” Ketsarin or, as I called him, Kru Gi. Gi was a former Muay Thai fighter from Chaiyapum province in the northeast of Thailand. After fracturing his foot in a bout, he retired from fighting and became a trainer. Gi was one of six trainers at T-DED 99, who were all former fighters. Gi’s main job was to train the Thai fighters, and to assist and coordinate with their competitions at the major stadiums. In his spare time Gi took on private clients, foreigners such as me, and some Thai’s who were solely interested in improving their fitness. T-DED 99 was a serious Muay Thai gym with approximately 43 fighters.

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<sup>3737</sup> Most of the fighters at T-DED 99 were kids. The average age was probably 16, with the youngest around 7 years old and the “older” fighters in their early twenties.

These fighters competed in all the major stadiums in Thailand, to include the fabled Rajadamnoern and Lumpini stadiums. At T-DED 99, the only martial art they trained for was Muay Thai. The class schedule at Steel, in contrast, only listed two Muay Thai classes a day. The rest of the classes on the schedule had names like “Cardio Kickboxing,” “Strength and Conditioning,” and “yoga.” Steel, although primarily a Muay Thai gym, also had classes for other martial arts such as boxing and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.

The second thing you notice is the sounds. The staccato shouts of “*ha, ha, ha*” echoing through T-DED 99, along with the slapping sound as the fighters slam their shins into the heavy bags at dizzying speed. You hear sounds at Steel also, but they are uncoordinated with the strikes as the minimally trained “enthusiasts” (including me) struggle to time their exhale of air as they land a punch or kick on a pad or bag. The luxurious bodies of the West, forged by long sessions of sitting on the couch playing video games, interrupted by equally long sessions of sitting behind a computer in their office cubicle at work; struggle to contort their stiff bodies into the correct position to land a rear Muay Thai kick. The clientele of Steel are mainly sedentary office workers and university students. This clientele was interested in increasing their fitness and perhaps obtaining some self-defense skills. The majority of Steel students have never been to Thailand, but have seen the new, “hot,” and exotic martial art of Muay Thai used in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fights in promotions such as the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* and *Bellator*. The members of the Steel fight team, however, bear more similarity to the *dek muays* of Thailand. Many of them are from the working class. There was a construction worker, an electrician, and a few of the fighters who earn a modest income as coaches teaching at

the gym. However, there are exceptions. A scientist, a university student, and a high-technology worker also fight on the team. For most of the fighters, competing is a hobby. “I am a Muay Thai fighter,” is an interesting conversation starter at parties, and a break from their sedentary lives, however, most of them have no illusions of making a living as a Muay Thai fighter. Nor is it much of a possibility in the US. Professional Muay Thai fights are hard to come by. *Lion Fights* is the most notable full-rules Muay Thai promotion, but it is struggling for viewership. *Glory* is a K-1 style Kickboxing promotion. While not technically Muay Thai, it does feature many Muay Thai fighters. However, *Glory* appears to be teetering on bankruptcy (Carbajal, 2020). With so few options in which to make a living at Muay Thai, most professional fighters will compete as amateurs for a few years and then use their skills and experience to move on to MMA competitions. MMA is more popular than Muay Thai and has a small number of elite athletes that make a good living competing.

The first few weeks training Muay Thai your entire body aches. Your feet especially. Nothing prepares you for slamming your feet and shins into the dense vinyl and leather surfaces of the striking pads. Muay Thai training is done bare foot. Western feet accustomed to being shod from the moment they took their first steps as a baby have to toughen up and develop callouses to withstand the rigors of Muay Thai. Thai gyms are even harder on your body. The equipment is more primitive, the floors often bare concrete. I had to wrap my feet in tape to hold them together after the first few training sessions at T-DED 99. The soles of my feet were stained black from bouncing back and forth on a car tire, used in Thailand to train the calves and improve your balance. The first few weeks of training every muscle hurt, but I adapted. I never achieved the flexibility, speed, and toughness of the *dek muays*,

whose lithe muscles have been forged from years of throwing kicks, punches, knees, and elbows. Each fighter throws thousands of strikes a day. A common warm-up at T-DED 99 was to throw 500 knee strikes on the heavy bag. A *nak muay* with a long career must throw at least a million blows at the gym. In California, the students are out of breath after the first few combinations of kicks and punches launched at the bag. Most California gyms have adopted the “Dutch” style of Muay Thai training where a student will hold striking pads for another student who drills a long combination of punches and kicks often extending to six or seven strikes. I usually forgot which strike to throw after the third or fourth blow. The other student holding pads for me was usually just as lost as I was and would often forget where to hold the pad for the desired strike. Three or nine-o-clock position for a hook, one or two-o-clock position for a jab or cross and so on. The blind leading the blind so to speak. At T-DED 99 they keep it simple. Combinations are two or three punches long with maybe a kick. These combinations, however, are repeated thousands of times until they are as natural to the fighter as breathing. The coaches hold the pads at T-DED 99, cycling through fighters. When the fighters finish on the pads they move on to heavy bag work. In between rounds of pad work at T-DED 99, I did pushups and sit ups. Each training session lasts 90 minutes and there was minimal rest allowed. A quick drink of water and back to the pads. At the beginning, I struggled through three rounds of work on the pads, but near the end of my training I could do five without too much effort. I improved at Steel as well, but the progress was much slower. Kru GI confided in me that he hated working with *farangs* (foreigners) who were not tough, or who could not stand up to the rigors of training. The *dek muays* had no choice. They had to win fights to make money for their families and the camp, or out

they went. Quitting was not an option. Their destiny had been set the moment their parents sent them to live at the *Khai Muay*. The students at Steel had many choices. Most of them came from the upper middleclass of society. They had to have means in order to afford the \$150 a month membership fee to train at Steel. A student also needed to purchase boxing gloves, hand wraps, shin guards, a mouthpiece, and training shorts, which all totaled at least another \$150 dollars. *Dek muays* usually make do with “hand me downs” (previously used equipment). I felt incredibly awkward and entitled my first day at T-DED 99 sporting brand new, top of the line Fairtex gloves, shin guards and hand wraps. I eyed the *dek muays* with their shredded and tattered equipment and vowed to at least donate my gear to them when I finished my training. At Steel, my new equipment fit right in. Everyone had similar high-end brands. The difference, however, was the *dek muays*, with their worn-out gloves, could throw ten perfect punches in the same time that I could manage two or three lame, slow strikes. The lesson here is the gear does not make the fighter. Fighting is about will and practice, not shiny new gear.

The other difference between SteelMMA and T-DED 99 was the ownership. Steel was owned by C. Gebhardt. Gebhardt had previously been a Muay Thai trainer and amateur fighter at an MMA gym called *Blackhouse*, which was owned by the Nogueira brothers, a rather famous set of brothers who competed in the UFC. In my conversations with Gebhardt, he came across as an intelligent person who cared for his students and wanted to give them a great experience at his gym. However, he did not coddle them. In fact, Gebhardt had to refund one student’s gym fees after the student ended up in the hospital because of damage sustained to his leg after getting repeatedly kicked during a band promotion ceremony (see Chapter 4). Gebhardt was

certainly not privileged or wealthy. Although he loved Muay Thai, he ran the gym to make a living, and provide for his wife and child. In contrast, the owner of T-DED 99, Mr. S. Sae-Tang, was a wealthy Thai businessman. Mr. Sae-Tang owned several apartment buildings, including the building in which T-DED 99 occupies the top floor. He also owns a motorcycle dealership and a nightclub which has the same name as the Muay Thai gym. The dichotomy between SteelMMA and T-DED 99 is interesting, wealthy students at SteelMMA and poor *dek muays* at T-DED 99. A relatively poor owner at SteelMMA, and a rich one at T-DED 99. But that is the reality in Thailand. Most Muay Thai gyms, at least in Bangkok, are owned by rich businessmen, or government officials. The land the camp occupies in Bangkok is expensive, and the connections necessary to get fighters into the major stadiums are difficult to make, unless you are wealthy and well connected.

The third thing you notice is the attitude. The SteelMMA students who were experienced, or who had come over from *Blackhouse* gym with Gebhardt were standoffish at first. They seemed suspicious of new students. They only warmed up to me after I had stuck around for a few months of training and had proven that I was tough and not going to quit when the training got hard. The experienced students and fight team members were proud of the skills they had achieved and enjoyed their status as senior students and fighters. The junior students often looked at the seniors with admiration of their Muay Thai skills. This served as a powerful ego boost to this senior cadre. At T-DED 99, this suspicion and ego did not exist. Even the best fighters, who had wins and championship belts from the major stadiums of Thailand, accolades and accomplishments that even the best students and fighters at Steel could only dream of, did not show arrogance or a powerful ego. There was the initial Thai

shyness and hesitancy with English ability, but with my basic Thai language skills I was able to communicate with them, and they opened up with me. Within my first week at the gym, a fighter and his family accepted me ringside with them at Rajadamnoern stadium to cheer on their fighter who won by decision. In the two years I trained at Steel I attended many Muay Thai competitions in San Diego where SteelMMA fighters competed, but this privilege was never offered to me. Within weeks of starting at T-DED 99, I was standing ringside at Channel 7 stadium with the owner and head trainer of the gym, as one of their best fighters competed for a championship belt. The Thai cultural informality and rapid acceptance of outsiders is something I was not used to and learned to cherish. Friday is hard sparring day at SteelMMA. It is mandatory for the fight team to attend. Fighters from other Muay Thai gyms in San Diego will often go as well to spar with new opponents. These sparring sessions often get nasty. The fighters reach a mutual agreement on how hard they want to go, but after the first hard punch is landed the agreement is usually forgotten. I attended three of these sparring events and left each of them with a headache from all the punches I stopped with my head. Sparring definitely gave me a better gauge of my skills. Until a hard punch or kick slips through your defense, you really do not know if it is effective or not. Same goes for your offense. It is easy to throw a punch with poor technique in pad training, but when you use poor punching technique in sparring, a counter punch to the jaw is the usual result. I generally stuck to Saturday sparring classes at Steel. The Saturday sessions were light sparring, which was more technique focused. You were not supposed to throw any strike with power. As with the hard-sparring sessions, however, students sometimes got overly excited and threw hard strikes. Every day is sparring day at T-DED 99. However, they spar



like it is Saturday. The Thais generally do light, playful, technique sparring. The Thais fight in competition so much, they save the hard sparring for the ring. The only time I saw the *dek muay* spar somewhat hard at T-DED 99 was right before a fight.

The final thing you notice is the perceptions regarding Thailand of the students at SteelMMA. In the past, when I told American's I visited Thailand, the common response was, "*I like the food, but isn't Thailand a dirty country with prostitutes on every corner.*" Muay Thai students, however, were different. Each student who found out I had lived in Thailand asked me details about the country, and had an enthusiastic desire to visit Thailand and train Muay Thai. Many of the trainers and fighters had already made the pilgrimage to Thailand, the Mecca of Muay Thai. They all had positive things to say about Thailand, and felt that Thailand was the only place you could really learn "true" Muay Thai. This phenomenon of the increase in positive perceptions of a country through the practice of that country's martial art is not new. Americans and other Westerners have flocked to Japan, Korea, and China to learn and train in the countries where the martial art they practice originated. I found this difference in perceptions of Thailand between the average American and Muay Thai students striking. Curated carefully by stakeholders in Thailand, Muay Thai, along with Thailand's other cultural exports such as Thai food and massage, has the ability to shape perceptions and increase tourism and cultural exchange between Thailand and the West. My time at SteelMMA ended as I packed up and moved to Thailand to begin graduate school.<sup>38</sup> My training at T-DED 99 ended with Kru Gi leaving the gym and taking a job at a government physical education program in Northern Thailand. I will continue to study Muay Thai. Through Muay Thai, I learned more about Thai

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<sup>38</sup> I did return to SteelMMA during summer break from school for research.

culture and the common people of Thailand, than in my university classes. I found those lessons the most valuable of all.



Figure 40. Me doing pad work with Kru Gi. Source: Author



*Figure 41. Me practicing my knee strikes on the heavy bag at T-DED 99. Source: Author*



*Figure 42. More pad work with Kru Gi. Source: Author*



*Figure 43. The outside of SteelMMA. Source: Facebook*



*Figure 44. The inside of SteelMMA. Source: Author*



*Figure 45. Gebhardt (on the left) and a fighter during Fight Team training. Source: Facebook*



## Appendix C

### The use of language in Muay Thai instruction

During the course of my field work, and from my previous experience training Muay Thai, I received extensive instruction both in Thailand and California. I gave much thought and discussion with other Muay Thai students and my interlocutors regarding whether Thailand or California is a more effective place for English speakers to learn Muay Thai. My research and analysis revealed that it depends. Thailand, the progenitor of Muay Thai, obviously teaches traditional Muay Thai in its original and most pure form. The atmosphere, single-minded focus, and commitment required at a traditional Muay Thai camp are hard to replicate outside of Thailand. One glaring problem for foreigners with training Muay Thai in Thailand, however, is the language barrier. I have trained in Muay Thai camps throughout Thailand to include Bangkok, Pattaya, Chiang Mai and Hua Hin; and it was rare to find a Muay Thai instructor with good English skills. There is no doubt that this language barrier makes it difficult for foreign English speakers (the *lingua franca* of tourism) to absorb more than rudimentary movements in Muay Thai. Complex concepts and advanced Muay Thai techniques were difficult, and/or, time consuming to learn due to the language barrier. When I trained at T-DED 99, my instructor Kru Gi spoke no English. Thankfully, my Thai language skills were adequate enough that I could understand the basics of what Kru Gi was saying. However, as I advanced, and Kru Gi began to teach more complicated techniques, it was difficult to grasp the information. Muay Thai uses terms not often found in everyday language. Words such as *doi* (punch), *tang* (stab), *tim* (poke), *mhad* (hit with the fist), *jab* (hit with the lead

fist), *sok* (elbow, and a suffix for all the variant strikes), and various anatomical terms<sup>39</sup>. It would often take two or three sessions before I learned a new technique, which was achieved more with mimicry, than understanding the words and descriptors. I would usually seek out my Thai friends for assistance to explain to me what the terms meant in order to fully understand. In California, conversely, my Muay Thai instructors, giving instruction in English, could more precisely explain various techniques and concepts in detail, which allowed me to grasp them the first or second time. Some Muay Thai gyms have attempted to make this perceived weakness into a positive by advertising that you can learn Muay Thai and Thai language at the same time. I embraced this concept as these were two common goals of mine which intersected in my training with Kru Gi. I felt that the difficulty in transmitting complex concepts and the delay in my Muay Thai progression, was, conversely, a positive in my Thai language progression. I was forced to learn new words and concepts, and proactively seek translations and discussions about these new Thai words.

There are, however, a large segment of tourists to Thailand who are interested in learning Muay Thai, or at least taking an entry level Muay Thai class, but have no interest in learning the Thai language. This group would be better served by Muay Thai instructors who had a better grasp of the English language (or other popular languages of foreign visitors, such as Chinese). With the goals of the Thai Ministry of Culture (MOC) and the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) to increase Muay Thai tourism, this should be a consideration in their campaigns. In Thailand, most Muay

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<sup>39</sup> For a complete description of Muay Thai terms, see the article by Sylvie von Douglas-Ittu “Muay Thai Vocabulary, Understanding Your Muay Thai Trainer,” at the popular Muay Thai website [www.8limbsus.com](http://www.8limbsus.com).

Thai instructors are former fighters, and therefore do not usually have extensive education. In order to boost tourism in this sector the MOC and TAT should consider offering English language instruction and assistance to Muay Thai camps and instructors. Increasing knowledge of the *lingua franca* of tourism with these stakeholders would boost the satisfaction with tourists and enhance opportunities in the sector of Muay Thai tourism.





## **Appendix D**

### **Survey Questionnaire**

The following questionnaire was designed in Google Documents to gather data from Muay Thai practitioners on the differences between Muay Thai instruction and training in Thailand versus California. The target demographic were Muay Thai practitioners who had trained in both California and Thailand. Initially, I planned to distribute this questionnaire personally in Thailand and California with a target goal of 20 responses. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 outbreak I was prevented from traveling to the United States to distribute the form. Google Docs allows you to email or post the form on social media sites. I emailed the form to several acquaintances whom I knew trained Muay Thai in both locations. I also posted the questionnaire on the Facebook page of my Muay Thai gym in California, SteelMMA, with a message explaining my request for data. I additionally posted the survey on 8limbsus.com, a popular Muay Thai blog. Despite these efforts I only received four responses. I attributed the lack of response due to the chaos and distress caused by the COVID pandemic. Four responses were a statistically insignificant data set. Therefore, this data was not used in my research. I include the questionnaire as information and ideas for future research, and the potential efficiency of using Google Docs as a survey tool.

## Survey of California Muay Thai Practitioner's Opinions on Muay Thai

Hello everyone! The purpose of this research is to better understand how Muay Thai has been adapted (localized) in California from its original Thai form. This survey is anonymous and will be used for research purposes only in a graduate thesis. The results will be made available when the responses of all participants have been tabulated. Thank you for your help!

\* Required

Email address \*

Your email

About You



## Your Age

- 14 >
- 15-20
- 21-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51 or more

## Your Gender

- Female
- Male

## Occupation

- Student
- Employed
- Amateur Fighter (Please Specify in Other: MMA, Muay Thai, etc.)
- Professional Fighter (Please Specify in Other: MMA, Muay Thai, etc.)
- Gym Owner
- Unemployed
- Other:



How long have you been training Muay Thai?

- 0-6 months
- 6 months-1 year
- 1-2 years
- 2-3 years
- 3-4 years
- More than 4 years

Have you trained Muay Thai in California?

- Yes
- No

Have you trained Muay Thai in Thailand?

- Yes
- No



Have you fought Muay Thai in California?

- Yes
- No
- Other:

Have you fought Muay Thai in Thailand?

- Yes
- No

Are you a Muay Thai instructor?

- Yes
- No

**Next**

Page 1 of 2

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Google Forms



## Survey of California Muay Thai Practitioner's Opinions on Muay Thai

Your Opinion of MT in California vs Thailand

Please answer only those questions which apply to you

1. What are the differences between Muay Thai instruction and training in California as opposed to Thailand? For example, gym atmosphere, different training and instruction methodologies, techniques, facilities, etc.

Your answer



2. Keeping in mind your answers to the previous question, please indicate which of the following factors of training Muay Thai are better in Thailand, or in California.

	Thailand is better	California is better
<b>Gym atmosphere</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Training and instruction methods</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Techniques</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Facilities</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Instructors</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Tradition</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Cost</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Overall Experience</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. What are the differences in the cultural and ceremonial aspects of Muay Thai in Thailand versus California/United States?

Your answer

4. What are the differences in a Muay Thai competition/fight in Thailand versus in California, i.e. rules, techniques, structure, equipment, preparation, weight cutting, weigh-ins etc.?

Your answer

5. Other than what you already listed, what changes have Muay Thai instructors/gyms in California/USA made to Muay Thai to make it more popular, or easier to learn for Americans?

Your answer

6. As an American, what challenges/limitations do you face training Muay Thai in Thailand?

- Language barrier
- Cultural differences/norms
- Visa problems
- Long flights/cost
- Other:

7. As an American/Californian, do you believe you receive more benefit training Muay Thai in California, or in Thailand? Why do you believe that?

Your answer





8. Please provide any other opinions on how Muay Thai instruction in California/USA is different than the original form in Thailand, and/or how it has been adapted to suit Californian's tastes and style.

Your answer

Send me a copy of my responses.

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## VITA

**NAME** Andrew Sorrells

**DATE OF BIRTH** 10 November 1966

**PLACE OF BIRTH** New York, USA

**INSTITUTIONS  
ATTENDED** Butte Community College  
California State University, Chico

**HOME ADDRESS** Ari Soi 4 North  
Samsen Nai, Phaya Thai  
Bangkok, 10400 Thailand

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**AWARD RECEIVED** Bachelor of Arts Economics