

# **FROM DIRTY AND DARK TO CLEAN AND HEALTHY**

## **Female Fighters Re-negotiating Gender Boundaries in Hong Kong**

**Soisci PORCHETTA<sup>1</sup>**

Whilst writing this paper I came across the benefits and drawbacks of providing an emic account of the topic. As a woman who practices Muay Thai, I have the benefits of having access to the sport's cultural codes as well as a deeper understanding of my informants' situation. However this may also mean that I might take aspects of the sport for granted and neglect details that are crucial for "outsiders" to understand the sport.

This paper discusses how female Muay Thai fighters in Hong Kong re-negotiates gender boundaries in their fighting careers as well as deal with other obstacles they may encounter. Firstly, I provide an introduction on the history and origins of Thai boxing and discuss how the sport became institutionalized, globalized, how it came to Hong Kong and turned from a form of martial arts into a popular female fitness activity. Following this, there is a discussion on the dynamics among the different individuals involved in the practice of Muay Thai. This article also contains some discussion on gender issues related to female athletes, with some concluding remarks for potential female fighters.

### **The Fighters**

My first informant is a single 20-year-old Hong Kong woman named Venus Tsang. She has twice been my fighting opponent, from which we have developed a friendly relationship that perseveres until today. Venus, who trains at KM Boxing, has practiced Muay Thai for four years and has fought in over ten fights in Hong Kong and overseas. She is one of the most respected female fighters in Hong Kong. Venus is primarily close to her mother, who does not agree with her fighting career as fighting makes her worry, especially when she returns home with injuries. However, her mother is happy when Venus wins fights and brings trophies home, thus she accepts Venus' choice. Venus's male friends support her hobby, saying, "It's cool" whilst many of her female friends worry about her getting hurt. Besides fighting, she is currently pursuing a course in beauty and cosmetics. Venus provided a lot of insightful information on the fighting and fitness industry, as well as the mindset of the local people towards the practice of Muay Thai.

My second informant is an adopted Belgian-born Korean woman, aged 31, called Sunny

Coelst. She has resided in Hong Kong for the past seven years, but Sunny identifies herself as culturally Belgian. She left some of her hometown friends slightly dumbfounded about her fighting hobby, however she added, they are used to her “doing crazy stuff”, such as emigrating from Belgium in the first place. Her mother has supported her choice to fight, but her father is totally against the idea, especially after she recently got cut on the cheek by an opponent’s elbow. However, she mentioned that although her father disapproves, he is somewhat proud of her. Sunny has been training for approximately six years and has been in a total of seven fights so far. She is a self-employed fashion designer, making *Ultim8* training/fight-wear, and is currently raising a two-year-old daughter with her husband. Her husband fully supports Sunny’s decision to fight and now they both train together.

My third informant, Elaina, is a 34-year-old South African woman who has lived in Hong Kong for eight years and has a three-year-old son. Her husband, who is also from South Africa, is a trainer and a professional fighter in Hong Kong. Elaina works as a secretary for the German Swiss International School. Compared to my other informants, she appears to have the most overtly competitive attitude; perhaps this is due to her intriguing upbringing primarily by her grandfather, after her parents divorced during the Apartheid. Their divorce is in part because of their different ethnic backgrounds: colored and Indian. Now, however, Elaina is unable to continue fighting as her husband opposes stating that it is not a suitable activity for a mother.

Prior to starting a family, Elaina competed in several Karate competitions. Although she does not regret her choice to discontinue fighting, she still feels upset and misses fighting. Prior to one of her fights, Elaina’s sister was diagnosed with cancer and told her not to come home to see her but to continue to work on her training. Elaina created the analogy that if she won her fight her sister would recover, which is what happened, thus that fight became a precious victory. Elaina stated that her grandfather - who played a central role in her life - would probably not have approved of her fighting, as he was adamant on working hard to make a living; but if she were making a living from it, it would be a different matter.

My informants have a rather gender liberal way of thinking, and their mere competitive involvement in the training and/or fighting is in an unintentional and indirect way of putting feminism into practice. They are doing this through challenging old assumptions about femininity and masculine sports, through which they are shifting gender boundaries that have traditionally held women in confined physical and social spheres. All three women practice a “masculine” sport whilst pursuing what is typically regarded as female-oriented careers in Hong Kong.

## **The Origins of Muay Thai**

### *A Military Basis*

Muay Thai is currently Thailand's national sport. It involves two contestants generally of the same sex, weight and level of experience fighting in a boxing ring. The victory of an athlete is decided by judges who inform the referee; the winner is declared by raising of the athlete's arm in front of the spectators. In Muay Thai it is permissible to use one's fists, shins, knees, and elbows to strike one's opponent's head or body in order to inflict damage and score points.

Although there seem to be some variations in the exact origins of Muay Thai (lit. *boxing Thai*), records show its connection to the military in the Sukothai era (1238 – 1377). The earliest known Thai written references on the fighting style were found in Chiang Mai during the Lanna era. “The first great upsurge of interest in Muay Thai as a sport, as well as a battlefield skill, was under King Naresuan in 1584, a time known as the Ayuddhaya Period. During this period, every soldier trained in Muay Thai could use it, as the King himself did” (Horizon Muay Thai Camp). Muay Thai was then also referred to as the “sport of kings”.

Muay Thai's foundation in the military stemmed from the need to defend against “perpetual invasions from neighboring countries when Thailand was in the process of forming” (Muay Thai Fighting) with Burma being a main invader. In those early times “only short-range weapons, such as spears, pikes and clubs would have been available for use in battle” (*ibid.*), so the use of ones fists, legs, knees and elbows would have complimented short-range fighting especially if a weapon at hand was lost.

It was when the Ayuthaya king, Sri Sanphet VIII was in reign that Muay Thai was promoted to a national sport as he “encouraged prize fights and development of training camps in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Until then fights were almost exclusively attended by royalty and various branches of the Thai military. Only after King Sri Sanphet VIII did Muay Thai began its transition from a system of military defense into a spectator sport” (Cummings: 2003).

### *Transition into a Sport*

Initially, boxers fought bare-fisted and there was no attempt to pair opponents based on their weight; they needed solely to express a willingness to fight in order to be matched up for competition. The “ring” was a cleared patch of earth, which meant fights could have taken place in almost any public arena.

Muay Thai became a trend during the reign of King Rama V, with bouts becoming

betting contests as well as contests of local pride. “Many Muay Thai matches were Royal Command fights. These boxers were rewarded with military titles from the King” (Cummings 2003). At this point we can see the shift from the realm of sport to an “entertainment industry”, which allowed fighters to make a living from the sport itself; fighters who had proved themselves in provinces would often be invited to fight in the capital.

This trend persists until today although - rather than being linked to the monarchy - fighters from all over the country try to make their way into the capital to fight in the most prestigious stadiums against best-ranked opponents. Yet, a relationship between the monarchy and Thai-boxing still remains, as many fights are held during the birthdays of the Thai King and the Thai Queen. Many present-day Thai fighters who compete abroad often bring their national flag accompanied by a large framed picture of the King into the ring before or after their fight, and especially so if they win a fight. Thus there exists a tie between Muay Thai and Thai patriotism.

Historically, it was not until the reign of King Rama VI that the modern ring, that is surrounded by ropes came into being, as did time keeping, since fights did not previously have a specific time limit. “Time keeping was done by floating a pierced coconut shell on a boat of water, and when the coconut piece filled with water and sank, a drum would signal the end of the round” (Muay Thai Fighting).

“During the Ayuthaya era after King Rama V, came the introduction of Muay KAAD Chuek. That is the use of unrefined hemp or horsehide wrappings to protect the fingers and wrists. Before a contest, the fighters immerse their fists in water, which cause the binding to harden when it dried. Fists were often also dipped in glue and ground glass to inflict more pain. Until 1920 KAAD Chuek was utilized; however, after a tragic event in which fighter “Jia Kaegkhmen died in the ring of the Lak Muang Arena after being punched by Pae Lieng Prasert.” (Horizon Muay Thai Camp) KAAD Chuek was eventually replaced by gloves and other elements from Western Boxing. In the late 1920s a rudimentary ranking system was introduced, with modern groin protectors being used for the first time in Siam.

The 1930s saw the most radical change in the sport; it was then that it was codified and today's rules and regulations were introduced. Rope bindings of the arms and hands were permanently abandoned and gloves took their place. “Up to the 1920's Muay Thai was a part of the school curriculum” (*ibid.*) but it was withdrawn because of the high injury rate; however the sport is still popular amongst many Thai children.

Nevertheless in 2009, Muay Thai was re-introduced by the government into the school physical education curriculum. This was done in order to raise Muay Thai's profile as the

national sport. In order to prevent physical damage, only the *Wai Kru* (pre-fight dance ritual) and basic techniques are taught and there is only limited contact between children-fighters.

### *Modern Stadiums and the Arrival of Falangs*

Muay Thai training developed in the late 1920s and 1930s with gyms being constructed and punching bags along with other equipment becoming more widely available. By 1950 a fully developed ranking system was implemented with eight weight divisions. It was “at the end of World War II, at about the same time Siam changed its name to Thailand that Ratchadamnoen stadium, Bangkok’s first permanent boxing stadium was built along royal property... Ratchadamnoen’s first fight took place in 1949, but fights could only take place in the dry season due to a lacking roof which was built in 1951” (Cummings 2003); this enabled fights to be enjoyed by spectators all year round.

The rival Lumpini stadium was established shortly after and became equally famous and popular. From early on, Lumpini had a “policy encouraging non-local fighters to compete, resulting in several victories by fighters from around Africa, Europe and America” (Cummings 2003). Today, many *falangs* (trans. foreigners) compete in both stadiums.

### *Muay Thai Ventures Out of Thailand*

During the 1970s Muay Thai gyms started to emerge in the USA, Germany, the Netherlands and Australia. In Hong Kong alone, there are several dozen gyms: most are run by local practitioners - sometimes with Thai instructor(s) - and some by Thais who have migrated here. There is also an increasing number of expatriate-opened gyms.

Today in provincial Thai villages people can be seen clustered around television sets to watch matches, and much betting occurs at these public gatherings. “All professional fighters have official ring names. The first part of the name is generally their own, while the second is the name of the training camp to which they belong” (Muay Thai Fighting). This emphasizes the importance of camps to the fighters.

Nowadays the Muay Thai ring is the same size as that used for Western boxing (24sq ft). The floor of the ring is wooden with canvas-covered matting. “Traditionally the four sides of the ring were aligned with the points of a compass; the red corner pointed North West, the blue South East. The other two corners are white. These colors are derived from Western boxing and were introduced in the 1920s.” (Muay Thai Fighting)

With the development of modern rules, equipment and regulations and ever-growing migration of the sport with practitioners travelling to and from Thailand, many foreigners go

to Thailand to learn Muay Thai and fight there. Boxing schools and camps are often set up to cater for tourists and *falangs* and make significantly greater profits.

Local fighters, who are often children, train for free and are looked after by the camp, which takes a portion of their fight salary. Most of these children (minimum aged six) are from impoverished or semi-impoverished families. There, a boy may choose to become a professional fighter, fighting on average every month or approximately fifteen times per year; a fourteen year old may have been involved in a hundred fights. The camp provides food, accommodation, and basic expenses for the boys, and in exchange they help out with many chores and errands such as cleaning; and from observation, all of these are done humbly and respectfully, especially in contrast to children's attitudes in more affluent societies.

After a certain age or point in their fighting careers, many of the boys eventually become trainers themselves, thus replicating the cycle. Unfortunately some boy fighters and champions have been known to "drop out" of their fighting scene due to external influences, such as drugs and alcohol abuse. A fighter's life is a hard one as they are practically isolated from the rest of society on a daily basis, besides "home visits". Training is extremely intense and injury is frequent, yet it is a life choice made at an early age. Although I have only observed boy fighters in the two camps I trained in, I heard there are many girl fighters in different camps who live, train and fight in the same way as these boys do.

### **Muay Thai in Hong Kong**

Muay Thai is now relatively globalized, with people travelling in and out of Thailand for the sport, with boxing tournaments world-wide—sometimes with modified rules—and Thai boxing as popular fitness activity in most global urban cities is practiced by people of all ages, both sexes, and varying social classes.

#### *Muay Thai Becomes Institutionalized*

In light of globalization, it is common to misinterpret it as homogenization. In fact, globalization refers to an intensifying flow of goods, people (tourists, immigrants and refugees), images and ideas around the world. Time-space compression also takes place (Harvey 1989), as in the past time and space were connected, whilst in contemporary times information can travel at extremely high speeds cross-continently and simultaneously.

With this in mind we can now attempt to understand how Muay Thai was adopted in Hong Kong, and how it eventually transformed from a fighting art practiced only by "social outcasts" such as local triads, to a common fitness activity, which is popular especially among

young women of the middle-upper class.

Although the free market often has more power than the state in individual's choices, it is erroneous to assume that the global is something "above or simply predatory of the local...the global is realized through the articulation of a complex interaction of various local relationships...through which places are made as 'articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings'" (Mathews 2001). Thus, for globalization to be possible, various elements and interactions must first fit within local institutions, such that institutions, whether local or global, operate as a form of social control given the possibilities and limits they provide within their framework.

There are certain characteristics that are essential to at least help an institution or activity to become globally popular. The "look and feel" of the establishment needs to have a cosmopolitan and anti-provincial outlook for it to be successful. Even an ancient sport like Muay Thai has been re-constituted to appear modern, hygienic – in contrast to the originally often-bloody nature of the sport that is practiced in natural settings - and trendy with hip-hop music, fashionable training wear, and top brand name equipment such as *Fairtex* and *Kettler*. This phenomenon stems from "the idea that global trends originate within specific 'ordering control centers', first-order world cities like New York, London, Paris, Hong Kong or Tokyo...which is part of a world-wide *restratification*, in the course of which a new socio-cultural hierarchy is put together...cities like these have become key staging points in global economic networks which float over and beyond the control of any individual community of nation-state" (Latham 2002). Examples can be seen world-wide, from fashion accessories in Milan, to high-scale restaurants with state of the arts interior design and food from Tokyo, to popular music produced in Los Angeles and so forth.

### *Transitions*

Although Muay Thai is relatively popular in Hong Kong, much of its roots have been dismissed leaving only its practical form for the majority of practitioners. As previously mentioned, Thai boxing was solely a fighting art with military roots, however when Muay Thai first appeared Hong Kong, it was practiced by local triads as a sport. This, I suspect, was to improve their fighting capacity in times of conflict. It is presently still unclear how much the sport was modified, but what is certain is that for Thai boxing to enter the "clean and modern" world of sport and hobbies, it had to be compatible with contemporary trends. The lack of information on the relationship between Muay Thai and local triads is due to the sensitivity in approaching the topic as well as my deficiency in Chinese literacy.

Muay Thai eventually became a fitness-gear activity, and it is by losing its violent nature that it could appeal to women who want to lose weight and keep in shape. It is crucial to acknowledge the powerful gender-oriented phenomenon of weight loss especially in Hong Kong, a city strongly bombarded with mass media where “slimming methods and activities” take up much of the media and daily conversation. This is the main attribute that has helped the sport to acquire a large clientele.

Muay Thai can presently be grouped with other “soft” sports such as yoga (not forgetting to mention the modern invention of “hot yoga” for weight loss), pole-dancing, aerobics, spinning and many others provided by modern stylish contemporary gyms with a smart-casual ambience. This is a unique transformation for Muay Thai as well as Yoga as they both were originally male-dominated arenas that have now acquired a large female presence worldwide. This transformation has opened up a huge fitness industry for women. In fighting however (in contrast to fitness training) men are still predominant, and fight training is taken more seriously by practitioners, trainers and the general public.

In order for Muay Thai to succeed and survive in Hong Kong, it had - to some degree - become institutionalized. It is still relatively unclear as to when the sports image changed from a dark one to that of a healthy semi-elite activity. However, what we can be sure of is that it became institutionalized and standardized before entering the health market industry. “Institutions imply historicity and control. Reciprocal typifications of actions are built up in the course of a shared history. They cannot be created instantaneously. Institutions also, by the very fact of their existence, control human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would theoretically be possible” (Berger 1967).

By becoming institutionalized, the practice of Thai boxing in Hong Kong has become standardized in almost all gyms, including those run by Thai individuals. As mentioned previously, some of the traditional roots are eliminated, such as the raw simplicity of practicing; new timers, popular music, brand new equipment, floor mats and trendy outfits are now commonly used. In contemporary fight events outside Thailand individuals do not usually perform or even know that *wai kru* (the pre-fighting dance demonstrating respect for one's teachers accompanied by a flute, finger cymbals and hand drums), and many fighters do not wear the *mong kon* (lucky head charm) or *praiat* (lucky arm charms).

Although Muay Thai is a sport that can be practiced by anyone, its origins contain Buddhist elements and this can be seen in their pre-fight rituals that are presently absent from many fights outside Thailand. I would like to note, however, that many *falangs* who have



trained in Thailand for a period of time and almost every Thai fighter tend to carry out these rituals wherever they fight as these rituals are deeply embedded in the art itself.

Rituals include wearing the *mong kon* and *praciat*, which should never be left on the floor or lower ground because they are considered sacred due to their blessed protective properties (similar to a Buddha's statue or the photo of the King). Prior to performing the *wai kru*, the trainer will often say a Buddhist prayer for the fighter to protect them from potential damage. Some *falangs* express that they go to the stadium "expecting a sporting event, yet the solemn atmosphere and the slow deliberate rhythm of the two contestants as they approach the ring suggests a spiritual occasion" (Cummings 2003). In rural Thailand temple fairs are among the best venues for watching matches. We can observe that while religion and spirituality are integral to the sport, many elements are completely lost when Muay Thai is practiced overseas.

### *Ngalani's Gym*

When Cameroonian fighter Alain Ngalani initially arrived in Hong Kong, his gym was used as a martial arts exhibition; here he met individuals in the industry who were interested in his skills and offered him employment opportunities. Ngalani expressed that "it was a great way to get to know the city and get to like the idea of living here as it is a place full of opportunities." After working for a couple of years in a local expatriate martial arts gym, he decided to join his friend, also his business partner in opening a small gym of similar nature. At that time Ngalani stated that, "There was not much competition to prevent them from building up and doing well".

Before moving on to the second point, I would like to distinguish my approach in differentiating between *local* and *expatriate* gyms. Local gyms tend to be run by local individuals and accommodate predominantly native Cantonese speaking clients whilst expatriate gyms are often opened by immigrants and cater to both local and expatriate clients. Expatriate gyms also tend to hire more foreign trainers and are generally more up-market.

Second, upon migrating to Hong Kong he removed himself from the tightly defined traditions and hierarchies in Cameroon, which would have potentially prevented him from opening and expanding an up-market gym, whilst simultaneously using the knowledge and experience he received in his hometown.

As Ngalani expressed, as there was not much competition at the time of his gym's opening, it was not difficult to establish Impakt; he was and still is the only Cameroonian to own a gym in Hong Kong. He and his six brothers all grew up practicing martial arts: from

judo, karate and full-contact to French boxing, kickboxing, Muay Thai and Brazilian Jiu-jitsu. Finally, Ngalani works to localize himself by gathering together potential allies and contacts whom have greatly aided him and made everything possible, as well as a “feeling for the marker” by interacting with locals including local expatriates, and customers from previous gyms he has taught in. In his “localizing” experience, Ngalani familiarizes himself with the economic geography. To conclude, “he embeds himself within a web of social/material relationships” (Latham 2002). Ngalani gets away with not speaking the local language of Cantonese as the gym is located in the business district in which most people speak English. He has formed friendships and business alliances with both locals and expatriates who have helped him to set up Impakt.

One incorrect assumption I made was that a gym like Impakt could not exist and function as it does in many other countries, but Ngalani explained to me that this type of gym could and would work in any industrially and economically developed city. Ngalani said that he has had offers from investors in Dubai, Los Angeles, New York, Sweden, Tokyo, and Taiwan - all “global cities”- and believes that business would do well in those countries. However, he chooses to focus on his base in Hong Kong and will possibly expand the gym in the future, as he emphasizes the family-like environment, which he believes is essential to making the place function uniquely. He makes a point of remembering all his clients’ names and greeting them by name, and expressed that “over time many of them (clients) become your friends; which is wonderful although it can make things more complicated as it is more personal”. This “personal touch” is what makes many clients feel happy to pay for the service.

Alain Ngalani grew up practicing martial arts with his brothers, of whom three reside in Hong Kong. Two of them are personal trainers in Impakt whilst another one is a promoter who organizes an international fight event called Planet Battle. Ngalani expressed that it is fantastic to be able to work together, especially at fighting events where the gym provides fighters supported by clients/spectators. The event also presents opportunities for the fighters (who are often trainers at the gym) to fight as well as advertize for the gym.

### *International Events*

Some of the global Thai boxing events may not belong solely to the Muay Thai category as the rules are modified. For example, in the World Muay Thai Council’s (WMC) list of fighting events worldwide, *K-1 Style* fights are included, which unlike in Muay Thai they consist of no elbows and only a limited number of knees allowed when fighters make contact.

In Hong Kong there are three major large-scale shows (as well as many frequent and

smaller scale local shows all year round) that invite local and international fighters. They are I-1, Libogen and Planet Battle. The first two mentioned events operate on full Muay Thai rules whilst in Planet Battle the rules are slightly modified, thus some may refer to it as a kickboxing event; all three events are advertized on the WMC website.

There are various events held throughout the year in Australasia, Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, South America and the Middle East. Fights are also a mechanism for promoting nationalism as fighters are always representing their countries and fights may even be a “battle between two nations”. This has contributed to the intensified flow of people and practice of the sport globally, with fighters and trainers flying from one country to another in search of an opponent.

### **Image, Class and Identity**

#### *Image Transformation*

When analyzing any social group or unit, it is always important to understand how individuals identify with the group, and how they are identified by outsiders. Muay Thai identify themselves to the art through sport; they are athletes, practitioners or fighters. I refer to Schein’s study (Schein 1993) on identity of the Miao in Southern China to explain my analysis on how identity is formed as a unit.

Most social units have been pictured as homogenous groups; however this can be very misleading as we need to take into account subgroups and deviants within a community. Each sub-group also has different power. For example, there are great variations and degrees in power relations within the Thai boxing community in Hong Kong; triad leaders have political power, wealthy foreign gym-business owners have greater economic power, Thai immigrant instructors may not have much power outside of class, fighters with many fans can have greater income than less popular fighters and so on.

There are “mechanisms by which the limitless raw material of heterogeneity is socially marked, or politically charged, creating the conditions for the stabilization of particular differences in the constitution of social order” (Schein 1993). The image of Muay Thai practitioners has changed immensely over the last couple of decades. The sport originated in Hong Kong as a “dark activity” practiced primarily by triads, but in recent years it has become a popular fitness activity for health-conscious individuals, and popular among women. Such a transformation is made possible by either internal shifts within the industry or external social and political ideologies. “Cultural production is an ongoing practice that is still being conditioned by contemporary circumstances” (Schein 1993).

Although I have unfortunately not been able to find the origins for the dark and dirty image of Thai boxing, we can borrow the idea of “*the aura of descent* that permits the exclusion of marginalization of groups whose divergence from the mainstream causes them to be classed as impure by virtue of inheritance” (Schein 1993). There are probably numerous factors contributing to the change in the sports image. The following paragraph proposes an analogous journey of an activity that transformed from dirty to healthy.

Parallel to the shift of Muay Thai from a “dark and dirty” image to a healthy and popular one, tourism in Thailand has also taken the same route. Thailand is a prime destination for sex-tourism since a decade ago and currently strongly linked to health-tourism. Bangkok is especially known for its economic and high quality hospitals and clinics.

The topic of the change in the image of a group or activity relates to “the whole lived social process that is practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values.” (Schein 1993) Just as the “health food movement” took over urban areas after the 1980s, there was a growing popularity in new fitness activities. With the help of popular movies portraying non-Chinese martial arts, and the increasingly glamorized “fighting industry,” especially in Japan and the United States, a softer and perhaps more open environment towards Muay Thai in Hong Kong could be born. This is a tentative or at least partial explanation for the change in image and the identity of Muay Thai practitioners.

A new category of gyms have opened up in Hong Kong (mainly in Central business district and some expand to other areas), which are run by expatriates as trendy gyms for upper-class members to train with established or retired successful fighters. “Status groups in a society mark their boundaries through their consumption styles rather than, as with economic classes, through their relation to the production and acquisition of goods.” (Schein 1993) By turning Thai boxing into a commodity catered to elites, a new market and image for the sport is created as “taste classifies: it classifies the classifier... people make use of received cultural products; which present an infinitude of possibilities, not only for autonomy, but also for subversion of the dominant order” (*ibid*).

Finally, on this perspective on power relations I use Michel Foucault’s quote to support my theories. In the case of Thai boxing where power and social image have been evolving, it is the “possibilities for conceptually decentering power as something which circulates...is never localized here or there, and is exercised through a net-like organization.” Thus globalization and local social shifts make room for many social changes within the sport.

*Social Class*

The following section covers dynamics that envelop practitioners as well as the different types and groups of individuals who practice Muay Thai.

As the sport was originally classified as a triad fighting activity when it originated in Hong Kong, some of its rooted ideologies persist even in today's modern gyms. According to many locals, once a fighter fights for a specific gym, it is virtually impossible to change gyms if they desire to, as in the past it would have meant changing triad groups.

However, as social changes within the sport occurred and persist, this rule does not apply to all Thai boxing practitioners or even to most. This is because Muay Thai has gradually shifted from an image of darkness to one of health and beauty; this is why many contemporary practitioners are middle-classed women. Living in a society that over-emphasizes slimness, Thai boxing has been strategically marketed as a fun, safe and cool fitness activity, though at this stage the art has been "tamed" and modified by removing many of its dangerous and violent elements. When I mention the removal of violent elements, I specifically mean the removal of contact, for example sparring (practice fighting), and even physical power; Thai boxing is transformed into some sort of "boxercise" or "powerless-pad-work".

There are however some men and women who genuinely enjoy the original fighting art, but they are a minority. Venus shared, "when we began training, the training was very hard and technical and many people left. One lady explained to me in a 'girl to girl chat' that she just wanted light, fun training to get in shape, not the kind of training we were doing at the time. And she too left the gym. Now we separate sessions between intense and fitness oriented ones... Hong Kong girls want to exercise but not hard, if they sweat just a little, even without necessarily losing weight they are happy."

Besides the potential aesthetic benefits "fitness practitioners" reap from training, they can also demonstrate their social class by being seen in these gyms and telling their friends they practice Thai boxing. This is due to the fact that gyms charge relatively high prices (approximately HK\$800 Hong Kong dollars per hour for personal training or HK\$1000 per month for classes), so it is often individuals that earn a decent salary who can participate. It is popular among Tai Tais (a local term for wealthy housewives) and well-off individuals such as bankers and lawyers (particularly in the Impakt gym) to take up personal training with established fighters for a expensive hourly price-tag. Thorough attention from private training is a key selling point in gyms like Impakt. On their website's front page it states "It's personal. The best motivator for exercise is interaction. Your goal is a personal affair to us." Exceptions

and variations to this “rule” do of course occur; nevertheless this is the general normality. In contrast to fitness training, fighters come from different backgrounds, and class issues are not particularly significant. This is due to the fact that many fighters, regardless of the style and fees of their gym, do not need to pay for training as they represent and market their gyms when they fight. Gyms may also take a percentage of the fighter’s fight purse, but this practice and amount varies from gym to gym. In Hong Kong most fighters’ salaries are provided in the form of tickets from the event they fight in, which they must sell in order to generate their income.

### *Identity among my Informants*

We can perceive that the female Muay Thai fighters in Hong Kong all strongly identify with the art they practice. All three women are surrounded by friends who are surprised to see much strength and courage in them. For example, Sunny and Elaina have both broken their cultural norms by migrating to another continent, achieving cultural and economic capital in the process, and Venus faces the out-dated yet present image of practicing what used to be a triad activity. As Venus stated “I feel ok about letting my friends know I do Muay Thai even though it is still “dark” in outsider’s minds, as I explain to them the health benefits etc. But I may not share this with more distant acquaintances because of the mentality they may have. Some gyms are still run by triads today after all”.

Both Venus and Elaina played “boy’s games” when they were young and both have faced relationship problems due to the sport they practice, yet both persist: if not through fighting, at least through training. Sunny too expressed a desire to play “boys games” as a child but was not allowed by her father; she was given the choices between gymnastics, table tennis, ballet and other “non-masculine” sports instead. However after she turned 18 - the age of independence and adulthood - she instantly took up English boxing.

These women are confident, assertive, and like the popular gym saying goes: “You take into life what you learn in the ring,” thus they are also fighters in life. Although both Sunny and Elaina have, in the past, practiced other martial arts such as English boxing, karate and kickboxing, it is Muay Thai that they love most and identify with as they both feel that it is so far the most complete, technical, and “real hard contact” martial art they have tried so far.

All my informants pursue their selected goals in life. Venus has developed a father-to-daughter relationship with her coach and fights very regularly locally and overseas, leading her to become one of the top local fighters. She is also studying full-time at a beautician school which is another hobby and potential career path of hers. Being young, very

pleasant, and “free-minded” especially in gender terms for a Hong Kong girl, she has the most to look forward to and accomplish in either or both of the fields she pursues.

Sunny continues fighting at a high international level without putting much pressure on herself as for her it is a hobby, not a job, whilst she further launches her fight-wear brand which is gaining popularity in many of the local gyms. As she studied fashion design and is a *nak muay yin* (female Thai boxer) she designs clothes that specifically fit women better than the conventional “boy shorts”, which is partly why her brand *Ultim8* is popular. Through both Thai boxing and designing, Sunny pursues both her passions and still has quality time for her family as the Hong Kong middle class lifestyle permits residents to have a full-time helper.

Elaina also manages to spend much of her free time outside of work training and with her family, because she too has a full-time helper for childcare and housework. Although Elaina cannot fight in the ring, she is a fighter at heart and has also done several professional karate fights and tournaments, of which she won most. Elaina grew up “a bit like a tomboy” as she liked to engage in “boy’s activities” such as woodwork rather than knitting at school (which was not allowed so she learned with her grandfather instead), and always wanted to compete with the boys. This is what drives her in training and although her current situation does not permit her to fight, it is this attitude that brought her to the gym in the first place. She was training for her first professional ring fight a few months ago when her husband, who is also a professional fighter. He strongly disapproved of her fighting and claimed that it would cause problems for their marriage. She has not been back to the gym often since then perhaps due to a “scarring” of her identity and a shift in her priorities - her family- and although it was her own choice, which she does not regret, it has left her somewhat upset and “emptied”.

In an American reality show called *Fight Girls*, a contestant who was a top level athlete but not a fighter entered the show to test how far she could push herself. Unlike all the other women fighters, she did not feel anything special towards Muay Thai and expressed that fighters seem to have “something very psychological” about them that she cannot grasp. This suggests that only some individuals are “made to be fighters” through a strong identification to one another and the sport, because athleticism alone is not sufficient to keep them in the arena.

It is benefits such as strength and autonomy that female fighters gain from the sport, especially the ones who struggle. All identify strongly with Muay Thai and stick to it. It is perhaps due to this that a fighter may suffer some form of depression after losing a fight or a few consecutive fights. It is not generally jealousy or anger towards one’s opponent a fighter feels, but a questioning of self-validity and how much it is worth to keep identifying with the

sport if they are not successful with it.

Another crucial but often overlooked element of training and fighting is fun. None of my informants stick to such a laborious and often painful hobby or career if we did not enjoy it. The benefits fighters reaped from winning a fight or gaining respect or money aren't sufficient enough explanations that keep practitioners in the arena on a long-term basis. All three women feel that the pain is definitely worth the joy they get out of practicing.

### **Women Re-negotiating Gender Boundaries**

#### *The Female Athlete Lives in Two Dimensions*

“Sometimes, I think, the hardest thing to be an athlete is not to be an athlete. We do not so much choose to be an athlete. It is just what we are. And the times when we are what we are - an athlete - everything comes together - the body and the soul, the heart and the mind” (Bandy and Darden 1999).

An athlete is generally classified as an individual who competes against others within a sport, and as any athlete, female athletes strongly identify themselves with what they pursue. However, unlike male athletes, women (especially in so-called masculine sports) are “out of their gendered domain” as “physically active women and girls face an intriguing paradox: Western culture emphasizes a feminine ideal body and demeanor that contrasts with an athletic one. Sportswomen, therefore, live in two cultures, the sport culture and their larger social culture, wherein social and sport ideals clash” (O-Reilly and Cahn 2007).

The professions of all three informants are feminine in nature; beautician, secretary and fashion designer. All my informants appear very feminine when not training/fighting. When I use the word feminine, it may include wearing skirts, dresses and semi-tight fitting clothing, high heels, make-up, long or styled hair and so on. This contrasts to my mother's negative comments on my body when I do intense fight preparation training as my muscle mass, and in particular, shoulders increase in size.

One major factor to the idea of females as outsiders to sports and especially masculine sports is the so-called scientific research backing this ideology. “The belief in the fragility of female physiology is evident in 19<sup>th</sup> century medical writings which depict women of being inherently weak, hypochondriacally and intellectually incapable of understanding medical matters and their own bodies” (O-Reilly and Cahn 2007). As long as ideas are supported by medical and scientific research, they are almost impossible to alter or eradicate as science is in today's world, seen as ultimate objective reality. Thus change is more likely to occur with change in scientific approaches and findings. Such studies help to turn social ideas into a



reality, such as women as child bearers and men as breadwinners. Women and particularly fighters who are already mothers are however challenging such notions, though ideological change is gradual.

Female athletes live in dual worlds not only with their sports and feminine identity, but also in the sense that they are expected to possess both masculine and feminine characteristics in order to be acceptable. “Within the context of the masculine sport, sportswomen are expected to perform hegemonic femininity while distancing themselves from behavior perceived as masculine. This is often problematic for physically active women. They face the contradiction that to be successful in athletics they must develop characteristics associated with masculinity, for example, strength, assertiveness, competitiveness, which contradicts with hegemonic femininity” (*ibid.*).

Sunny appears to have the most liberal and concise opinion that reflects the reality surrounding fighters and gender issues. When I asked her how important it is for a female fighter to maintain her femininity she replied that she never asked herself if she should maintain her femininity. She said “I think you don't need to change or forget your femininity because you are a fighter. I believe that some women are feminine and some are not. Being a fighter should not be the reason why they are or aren't.” She states that if a woman is feminine outside of the gym she has no reason not to maintain it when fighting, and if she is not, then she has no reason to become feminine. She expressed that people are always very surprised when they first realize that she is a fighter. “They tell me *but you don't look like a fighter...*What does a fighter look like? It is just a stereotype that people have in mind.”

Sunny also feels that masculine traits such as competitiveness and aggression are not inherently male characteristics and “everybody (men and women) have those characteristics and in certain persons they are more or less developed.” For example some men dislike competition, whilst some women can be very aggressive, and to be a fighter one needs to possess at least one of those characteristics. She reaffirms, “that's what makes you want to do that kind of challenge.”

Wade's definition on masculine hegemony helps us to understand gender dynamics. On a *Youtube* video she states “Women do have options, in a certain way even more options than men. But that doesn't mean that when they act like men, they'll be respected by men.” For example, fight magazine coverage features men as cool and women, especially ring girls, as props. Female fighters are either sexualized or receive little coverage. She further states that “hegemonic masculinity is presented as good for everyone in contrast to femininity which is good only for women”, which explains why women can engage in masculine activities whilst

men receive much more stigma if they desire to participate in “feminine activities”.

On the surface hegemonic masculinity also appears to be the case with female Muay Thai, but I found that among the fighters I know as well as in many female fighters’ public interviews, femininity and “sportsmanship” are well negotiated and balanced. This is perhaps because they all seem to have a rather strong self-esteem and rather than be victimized by this dilemma, they can choose and benefit from both worlds; they find strength through training and express their femininity outside of the sport (and within it as well by retaining their feminine appearance such as wearing “female designed fight-wear”). However this balance is found perhaps because all my informants have a naturally petite/ feminine frame and choose to look feminine; had I been able to work with women who do not choose to present themselves in this manner my findings may have been different.

### *Sexualization*

As fighting has until recently been a male dominated sport, the entertainment industry has promoted boxing and Muay Thai also predominantly to a male audience. Thus, before women began fighting, the only women around the sport would be ring girls, who are still popular today. Ring girls are women that act as “eye candy” for men, yet they are not respected as they are considered indecent women, women that one would not marry. This again brings us to the subject of masculine hegemony, as women serve to enhance male’s masculinity through their own sexualization. In order to earn esteem, men need to strive toward ideal masculinity whilst women have two choices.

Women can either acquire self-esteem by attracting a masculine man by emphasizing their sexual femininity, or attain ideal masculinity themselves through masculine activities such as fighting, drinking beer, or working in a law firm. Ring girls fit into the first category, but it is not solely ring girls that surround the environment. Present day models that advertize Muay Thai and other martial arts are generally not female fighters but plain “sexy girls” who have no knowledge about the sport. This, to the surprise of many, has recently become popular even in China. In the Philippines “foxy boxing” occurs in bars in the red light district: it consists of two sex workers fighting one another to arouse potential customers. It is thus important to acknowledge that within the fighting sport, most of the women involved are not fighters, even in the present day. Moreover, the fact that models are often chosen over athletes even in sports advertisement suggests that a soft and feminine appearance is preferred over a strong and dynamic body for women.

Finally, audience’s response to female fighters needs to be observed and acknowledged.

Attitudes towards female fighters are still somewhat based on women's sexuality, however this is gradually changing as more women become competitive and their fighting level increases. On *Youtube* videos of female fights comments such as "she has no ass" or "I'd like to f\*\*\* her" are not uncommon, however increasing positive comments about women's fighting skills and athleticism are being shared online.

### *Fulfilling Gender Norms*

"Female athletes learn what behaviors and appearances are privileged, and femininity is 'performed' to gain social acceptance and status. For example, professional female boxers and elite ice hockey players present a feminine image even during competition (e.g. wearing pink). As female athletes who perform femininity correctly accrue power and privilege, female athletes perceived as masculine are labeled as social deviants and they experience discrimination" (O-Reilly and Cahn 2007). Therefore it is the feminine women in sport who reap benefits such as positive media attention, fan adoration, and sponsorship. These women also garner respect for their ability to be successful athletes while remaining within their gender boundary" (*ibid.*). Athletes that look very muscular or do not dress lady-like may even be referred to as lesbian. One local Canadian born Chinese female fighter was accused by many of being a lesbian until she recently got married and started a family.

As Elaina stated, "a woman who fights is still a woman so it's important that she maintains her femininity, or else we'd all look like men! But I don't judge anyone from their appearance (perhaps because I grew up during Apartheid), and because I was a bit of a tomboy myself I can understand unfeminine female fighters; but men wouldn't... It is most important to keep your eye on the prize. Girls can fight and be feminine and if they are not competitive then why should they compete?!" This is an example of the dual worlds female athletes live in.

Gina Carano is a case in point, who as a Thai boxer raised in the USA, is symbolic of transnationalism. She exhibits characteristics from her dual heritage, effectively strengthening her identity. Her performance is globally acknowledged and professionally merited. Despite her categorically masculine performance, executed with strength and agility, she preserves her ultra-feminine exuberance and sexual attraction. Regardless of the social criticism and pressure she sometimes receives for her skills and physical appearance, she serves as an inspirational figure for future female Thai boxers.

A comically radical perspective on Muay Thai is to see the sport as transiting from the religious realm to a sexually representative one. Although this is not essentially the case, it is

somewhat true when we take into account the loss of traditional rituals, the previously non-existent addition of scantily dressed ring girls and sometimes after-party girls that surround fighting and many other sporting events.

Muscularity - shape, definition and size - is a significant issue for female athletes when confronting their feminine identity. This creates sensitivity about how muscular their bodies are, as the general “rule” is that “*muscular but not too muscular*” is more attractive and desirable within stereotypically heterosexual norms, particularly in media driven consumer societies.” Being overly muscular is a masculine feature as it implies more size and power, both of which are not “feminine traits”. This brings me to consider female athletes and their intimate relationships.

Within heterosexual relations, female athletes often date male athletes, as there tends to be a shared understanding of the nature of what they do and the male is also likely to be at least as physically developed as the female. For example, my American *nak muay yin* (female boxer) friend’s boyfriend who is also a professional fighter explained to me that in Thailand, men do not like muscular women, but he appreciates the way her body is because he is also from the sports industry. Nevertheless she “gets away” with being slightly built as she maintains her feminine image and does not have “excessively large muscles for a woman.”

Although some women - being aware of common reservations about sports and femininity - may sometimes feel stigmatized, most of them feel empowered by their strength and skill, and thus pursue and maintain their identity as athletes. Regarding the two-sided dilemma of femininity and muscularity, “it appears that, in negotiating and reconciling the social expectations of femininity with athleticism, sportswomen develop two identities-athlete and woman. Sometimes these two contrasting identities are kept separate, sometimes they merge.” (O-Reilly and Cahn 2007)

### *Biological Concerns*

There appears to be a controversy between women not having enough power or ability to cause injuries as men do, and hurting themselves and one another through acquiring too much physical power through training. The reality is that women can and do acquire enough power to inflict as much damage as men can, for example Elaina broke the arm of her last opponent in two places, in a Karate tournament. What seems to be the main concern is not *if* a woman can fight, but *if* she should be allowed to.

Besides the physical display of one’s gender and sexuality, “proper” role-playing is crucial and affects some female athletes more than others, depending on what the people

around them think is appropriate behavior for a woman. A proper and respectable woman is generally expected to marry and reproduce, and upon reproduction, focuses mainly on her family duties. In Elaina's case, she is a fighter, a wife and a mother, her latter two roles were so significant to her marriage (her husband felt worried about her fighting as it would endanger her safety and motherhood) that she had to cancel her first professional fight in the ring and will probably not be able to compete ever again.

I will use her case to illustrate the "mysterious cultural meaning" behind women's bodies after marriage as their bodies become significantly more "vulnerable." An increasingly influential medical establishment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries warned women about the debilitating physiological effects of vigorous exercise, particularly on the reproductive system, providing ground for judgment towards motherhood and athleticism.

Throughout Elaina's pre-fight training, her husband kept expressing how her decision and action were a symbolic personal attack towards him. This struggle is also faced by many married female athletes, especially if they began training after their marriage, however in Elaina's case she met her husband in the gym. It is often the case that when the wife trains moderately the husband is pleased as she "keeps in shape", however once she increases her training to a higher level, she frequently hears comments such as "a mother/ woman of your age shouldn't be doing this to your body" (Bandy and Darden 1999).

Training may sometimes be viewed by athletes' husbands as a "lightning rod for the larger issues of who is in charge in the marriage"(Bandy and Darden 1999). In Elaina's case, she decided not to fight in order to end tensions and to restore harmony in the marriage, however in numerous accounts of female athletes in sports literature, pursuing their sport resulted in ending their marriages. As Elaina stated, she had to make a choice, and she realized that although she loves the art, "the fight lasts one night whilst marriage is for life, so it wasn't worth it in the end." Sunny too recalled some comments from people around her who are not particularly close to her making astonishing and disapproving comments about her continuing her hobby in fighting since she gave birth. In this sense we can see marriage as a right of passage into complete womanhood. However there is something biological to the symbolic nature behind marriage and reproduction. Physical and social examples of marriage as a right of passage can be seen globally, such as with women in India wearing saris and bindis, women's status rising in Mexico, changes in employment patterns world-wide after marriage, etc.

The issue of being a mother is even more crucial and controversial, as mothers have been culturally constructed to have stronger biological ties with their children. On the questionnaire,

one respondent stated that, “There are certain risks involved with fighting which includes death. Once you are a mother it is your obligation to raise the child the best you can. I feel as a mother you owe it to your child to not put yourself in such risk.” This statement reinforces the universal culturally constructed notion of women and their biological ties with their children. Although child love is largely true, it is not universal (take infanticide as an example), and many mothers express that they did not feel an instant love with their newborn babies, rather it developed over time.

Another respondent interestingly said the opposite: that it is acceptable for mothers but not fathers to fight. She explained her view referring to the idea of fathers fighting as distancing themselves from family responsibilities whereas if a mother fights it will not affect her responsibilities as nothing can go between her and the baby. Although this view is rather unconventional, it still reflects the idea of women (and solely women) being unquestionably closely linked to their offspring. My other informants Venus and Sunny do not have this issue to deal with as both have rather “ideal” situations encouraging them to pursue their fighting careers. Venus did however mention having previous intimate relationships that had to terminate *because* of her passion for Muay Thai, though she says that now if someone is to be her partner they must accept her as she is and what she does. Sunny was also not allowed to practice any “masculine sports” and was encouraged to do ballet and gymnastics (which she did not enjoy), until the age of 18, when she could make her own life choices. Venus’ example shows a clear choice in independence and liberty over playing a traditional female role which is ever-present in Hong Kong’s stereotypical gender ideology; such as focusing on keeping women’s bodies slim, their skin white and becoming encultured to family life.

### *The Story of Ulla*

In order to better illustrate how the above dynamics within female athleticism interact, I will use a brief touching and inspirational ethnography of a Finnish professional runner and her experiences within and outside of her sport.

Ulla Kosonen presents us with insightful questions such as: “Am I a subject or object of my own life? What is the social process of growing to be a woman? What is the role and meaning of sport in this process? And how would I have looked upon my brothers if they had taken on some ‘feminine’ hobby such as knitting?” (Bandy and Darden 1999).

Growing up with athletic father and brothers as well as a very encouraging mother, Ulla engaged in sports from a young age and began to take running more seriously when her family started listening to sports commentaries on the radio. She excelled and outperformed

the boys in almost every activity she participated in: running, long jump and more, and about this, she felt that it was nothing special as she was used to playing with the boys.

During her adolescent years, Ulla's body transformed, awakening her sexuality and the social perceptions of her newly matured body. "I left the world of innocence and entered the world of social norms. My body was no longer neutral; it had become a seedbed of sexual codes. I became more and more sensitive to comments concerning my body, especially those coming from my brothers. I was called "Big Ita" or "Fairy the Fat". Well I admit that I was big for my age, but those words made me even bigger... I tried to hide my embarrassment about my body" (Bandy and Darden 1999). Ulla also referred to herself as "unfeminine" as the female body is meant to "express smallness, subordination, harmlessness, apology, quietness and hiding" (*ibid.*).

Her character outside of sport did not fit these stereotypical norms and she shares; "I didn't want to be a weak fine lady. I had been living under a spell of self-delusion for a long time and I imagined that the boys I used to fall for would not have liked all those ladylike tricks; as far as I was concerned all the other girls were just acting; I was the only honest one. I deprived myself of something feminine because I failed to understand that not everything 'feminine' was mere acting" (Bandy and Darden 1999).

The American women's studies labels "tomboyism" as the main factor of unfeminine behavior. Ulla began to question her "deviant" comportment, which brings us back to the definition of what it is to be a woman and what it is to be a man, and sheds light upon how gender ambiguity is labeled. It is the rigid boxes that hold us true to our sexes and stigmatize those who stray out of them.

Ulla follows on with the classic discourse of muscularity and often undesirability. However, as all athletes, she shares a deep passion for her sport, which "keeps her going" and expresses that, "When sprinting I had no time to think about my body- do I have a potbelly, are my breasts bouncing? When I was running fast I felt light. I was not big and clumsy, but I was a fairy, the part I could never have got in the school play. Afterwards it seems strange that I was distressed by the idea of having to walk in town with legs that felt like blocks of wood, but then was perfectly comfortable running in front of thousands of people. No wonder I am still looking for that runner-girl who may be hidden somewhere inside me" (Bandy and Darden 1999).

It is this socially constraint-free space that allows individuals in any realm to pursue their interests at a high level. One of my professors expressed that it is the same in academia, where women who are "sweet and feminine" in daily life can become aggressive and competitive

once they enter the space of their expertise. Thus this “space” of freedom of expression is not retrained to Muay Thai or athleticism or women, but it is present in the activity of any individual’s pursuit of a phenomenon they feel determined or passionate about.

### *Practice and Bonding*

The story of Ulla concretely illustrates the cultural complexes, social responses, and normalities of female athletes. It is an elated experience of liberation from boundaries, social judgment and monotony of everyday life and freedom in expression in which one can excel through their activity that empowers sportsmen and women to pursue their sport regardless of their socio-cultural surroundings and expectations. Athletes recognize and share the complex emotions associated with their practice. Perspiration and endurance fuel their common identity and the social pressure they receive is communally felt. This issue forms the social glue that bonds them together. This provides an explanation for fighters’ quasi-instant bonding with the compatriots they meet even in foreign countries.

Strong connections are built as a shared response towards social pressures over skill, body image, and femininity. This has been experienced among many fighter girls in Hong Kong as some of them often help one another prepare for competition and have a unique feeling of closeness regardless of their knowledge about one another’s private lives. Intimate long-term bonds also often develop outside of the training/ practice area as a lot of time is spent together in training. All three female fighters agreed that they feel a special bond with their regular training partners and occasionally even opponents (and a sense of gratitude for the shared experience), even if it lasts only a short moment. Gym owner Ngalani too expressed that close bonds often originate in the gym.

### **Pushing and Breaking Boundaries: From “Dirty” to “Clean”**

Ulla beautifully shares an analogy concerning the social views and constraints on women and movement. “We are attached to the past, to these situations in which we have become members of society, by means of countless fibers. Those fibers form part of our personality, and the deconstruction and reconstruction of them may become a lifetime’s work” (Bandy and Darden 1999).

Activities such as pole dancing and Muay Thai in Hong Kong have traditionally been associated with a dirty image: pole dancing as sexually promiscuous and Muay Thai as a brutal triad related activity. These views and assumptions have changed greatly over time, as women keep engaging in activities that were previously forbidden or stigmatized. By



engaging in them they are enlarging the spaces available to them. This has happened in education where women went from being illiterate to a presently higher ratio of women to men in many university faculties; in sport where women were not allowed to participate or to compete in the Olympics; and in dress code when European women had to dress from conservatively to sexy post 1960s.

Although the examples I have provided may seem outdated, this phenomenon is still occurring today, which is what is driving me to research and write about women who fight and women who are not *allowed* to fight. I mention pole dancing as it is presently still a controversial topic, which changes in nature once it is viewed in different contexts and locations. A stripper for example is seen as dirty, a woman that men would like to ogle on but would never marry, thus she can never become a *true* woman as she does not attain her right of passage and reproduce her own nuclear family. But by creating schools in which women can learn pole dancing in a clean, friendly and health and fitness oriented environment (usually in an expensive studio or gym) a new window is being opened in people's minds.

Women who fight are doing something similar in this regard, despite the difference in their "journey." As expressed by some of my questionnaire informants, it is still seen as inappropriate for women and mothers to fight. But through fighting this mentality has and will change over time as people get used to the idea. Attitudes within many gyms are rather egalitarian and many women get plenty of support in their training. As Venus pointed out, in hers and many local gyms training is not divided according to sex but according to who is more serious about their training or fighting and who is there just to get fit.

I would briefly like to declare that although my research focuses on assumable heterosexual men and women and their gender norms, there are many issues surrounding homosexuality and other so-called gender ambiguities. These "other" categories are however not present or openly revealed to me from my informants so I persist with talking about them in male and female heterosexual terms such as "normal" marriage, dating and reproduction as well as other discourses on men and women.

## **Conclusion**

Even in today's world of martial arts where women can compete against one another just as men do, there are presently many prejudices that have not yet been eradicated. As we have seen in Elaina's case and in other ethnographies, many women still struggle to make accomplishments in what they pursue; we still live in a world that has unequal opportunities. However, as previously stated, women are re-negotiating gender boundaries, and on many

levels they are experiencing freedom and encouragement from both men and women. In the gym for example, all my fighter informants receive support from their trainers in the same ways that male fighters do.

Despite criticisms and the sometimes derogatory comments on females who fight, most female athletes today receive support and respect for what they do; if not from everyone, they find it from at least one source from their trainers, fans, family or friends. Even the so-called masculine female fighters are loved by the people close to them, so although they may be somewhat stigmatized by larger society, what tends to count the most to any individual is what the people close to them think of them. Whenever a popular, local, “tomboyish” fighter called Jenny enters the ring, you can hear many voices all across the vast stadium cheer for her, and when her fights are posted on the internet the fights usually receive positive and supportive comments about them. Appreciation and understanding towards female fighters however, seems to be mainly confined to the sports industry (not so much by the general public), and is gradually increasing among the younger generation.

Through fighting, female fighters are also re-defining what women *can* and *could not* previously do. All my three informants believe that a woman can achieve what a man can. Venus concisely stated that “women can do what men do; they just can’t compete *with* them due to their differences in muscular strength. But they can do just as well as men can.” As for her opinion on the future for female fighters, she expressed that “it is not up to us (women) as women who come to the gym cannot be forced to fight. They need to be interested as it is hard ... Female fights can be very exciting and sometimes women are even more determined than men.”

Sunny’s husband in contrast to Elaina’s is very supportive of her fighting, thus men’s attitudes hold as much importance as women’s in order for the sport to grow for both sexes. When I asked Elaina what she foresees in the future for female fighters, she expressed that “things will not change much, unless you go out there in protective gear... Professionals get called manly or lesbian because they are unappealing to men.” Although this statement is only partially true, it gravely reflects her personal experience as a fighter. She did however state that men do like to watch female fighters that look feminine and that “thinking about it, change has occurred over time but it is extremely gradual.” Elaina also named Gina Carano as a case example of an ideal female fighter: strong, beautiful and experienced.

As for Sunny’s outlook for the future of women who fight (as all of us), she hopes for the growth of international opportunities. But she too believes that the fighting scene will remain a male dominant industry as only a minority of girls, in comparison to men, is fighting. She

notes that the majority of the audience is also male, which is why the sport remains this way. However, like Venus, Sunny believes that the industry can keep growing developing. She provides examples of women fighting in high level international events such as K-1, which is already some progress. Sunny observes that “You can already see more attention being paid to female fighters, in magazines and on TV...before, women’s fights were essentially seen as entertaining, whereas now, they are beginning to be recognized for their skills as well.”

As we can see from the three female fighters’ views on the future for women and fighting, opportunities and change have been occurring, but gradually. Muay Thai is still globally a male dominated sport at the competitive level, but has acquired a large female clientele in the fitness industry, in many major cities such as Hong Kong. These clients who primarily come from the middle-upper class need to kick out social space to empower themselves, thus they too are shifting boundaries. Cultural and institutional changes need to occur contemporarily in order for social change to occur.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Soisci PORCHETTA has recently completed her undergraduate degree in anthropology at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her Email address is [soisci@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:soisci@yahoo.co.uk).

## References

- Berger, L. Peter, and Luckmann, Thomas. 1967. *The Social Construct of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Anchor Books.
- Bandy, J. Susan, and Darden S. Anne. 1999. *Crossing Boundaries: An Anthology of Women’s experiences in Sport*. Human Kinetics Books.
- Cummings, Joe. 2003. *A Golden Souvenir of Muay Thai*. Bangkok: Asia Books.
- Horizon Muay Thai Camp. “The History of Muay Thai Boxing.” At <http://www.horizonmuaythai.com/history.html>
- Latham, Alan. 2002. “Retheorizing the Scale of Globalization: Topologies, Actor-networks, and Cosmopolitanism.” In Andrew Herod and Melissa W. Wright eds. *Geographies of Power: Placing Scale*. pp. 115-145. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.
- Mathews, Gordon. 2001. “Cultural Identity and Consumption in Post-Colonial Hong.” In Gordon Mathews and Lui Tai-lok eds. *Consuming Hong Kong*. pp.287-340. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Univ. Press.
- Muay Thai Fighting. “The History of Muay Thai.” At <http://www.muaythai-fighting.com/the-history-of-muay-thai.html>

---

O-Reilly, Jean and Cahn K. Susan. 2007. *Women and Sports in the United States: A Documentary Reader*. Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy and Lock Margaret. 1987. "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology." In Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Lock Margaret eds. *Understanding and Applying Medical Anthropology*. Toronto: Mayfield.

Schein, Louisa. 1993. *Popular Culture and the Production of Difference: The Miao and China*. Duke Univ. Press.