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## Bangkok and Muay Thai. The next episode of the martial arts tourism

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**Abstract:** The author describes a trip to Bangkok to attend a conference organised in connection with cultural research on Thai martial arts (observation and analysis of cultural conditions). It is an example of an event interpreted as a manifestation of congress and, at the same time, martial arts tourism. The international scientific conference is subject to the author's assessment. The study presents a subjective view of Thailand and of Thai martial arts. The complete version includes complementary photographs.

### Introduction

The trip described is included in the area of scientific tourism [Kosiewicz 2011], and constitutes an occasion for personal reflection on Thailand and Thai martial arts. As has been pointed out by Dean MacCannell [1976], the work of a sociologist or an anthropologist (field research) is similar to a tourist's activity. It is based mainly on observation (tourist's view), but it is difficult to overestimate the meaning of the so called "tourism tasting" [cf. Urry 2002; Cynarski, Obodyński 2006]. It concerns "tourism of martial arts" [Sieber, Cynarski, Litwiniuk 2007], and at the same time, scientific, congress and cultural tourism [cf. Munsters 2008; Cynarski 2010b; Kosiewicz 2011]. Travelling in order to get to know martial arts, which are a part of the cultural heritage of a given country is a form of cultural tourism [Ďuriček 2007, pp. 68-69].

Instructors of martial arts travel to foreign countries in order to study, learn or teach. One person goes to Germany to practise "modern jujitsu" [Blumentritt, Cynarski 2008; Słopecki 2012], another person goes on a long expedition to distant China to learn Chen style Taiji quan [Raimondo 2011] at the source. Another time this is a field research aiming at collecting materials for a book, as it was done by Michael Maliszewski [1992, 1996]. The author of this paper was also such an observer.

### A trip to Bangkok

The journey consisted of several stages. The first stage was in Rzeszow, where on the night of the

6th February at 4.40 am. the author and Kazimierz Obodyński got on the "Neobus" bus and travelled to Warsaw. From there they flew by Finnair Airlines to Helsinki and then to Bangkok. They covered a distance of about 9000 km, they passed through 6 time zones and experienced significant climate differences (temperatures from -20°C to +36°C and high humidity, and on return +40 °C to -28°C).

Both professors from Rzeszow University were flying to the conference organized by Chulalongkorn University. Apart from that, the author's goal was to conduct cultural research on Muay Thai and hold talks concerning the development of the IMACSSS in Thailand. As members of the board of IMACSSS, they were greeted at the airport by the delegation of organizers and taken to the congress centre in The Imperial Queen's Park Hotel and next to their hotel. On the following day, 7th of February the professors from Rzeszow registered at the congress centre and spent an evening with friends from Thailand and Japan. The author conducted a conversation on the future of the IMACSSS with Prof. Chuchchai Gomaratur, Vice-president of this Scientific Society.

### International Conference

**Chulalongkorn University** is among the top ranking universities in Thailand. This is a state university founded in March 1917. It consists of 20 faculties and 2 schools and 13 colleges and institutes. The Faculty of Sport Sciences has a national stadium. The Dean Prof. Vijit Kanungsukkasem was the main organizer of the Conference.



**Photo 1.** The author next to the banner of the Conference, Bangkok 2012

The 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Sports and Exercise Science, “Toward the Global Future of Sports Science” was held 7-10.02.2012 in Bangkok (photo 1).

Among almost 400 participants at the Conference from 20 countries were, inter alia: 2 Swiss, 1 British, some Germans, 2 Poles, Americans, numerous Indians, Japanese, Iranians, Koreans and Malaysians.

The Faculty of Sports Sciences at the University of Chulalongkorn organized for the third time an international scientific conference which took place in Bangkok – the 9-million inhabitant city. This time the conference focused on the global future of sport sciences.

The Opening Ceremony started at 9am on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February. The Rector of Chulalongkorn University presented the sponsors of the Conference with souvenirs. Little gifts were also given to the speakers of the sessions.

### Scientific programme

The Conference programme included 13 topics: Sport and Exercise Physiology; Sport Biomechanics;

Exercise Science; Sport Nutrition; Sport Coaching & Training; Sport Pedagogy; Sport Sociology; Sport Management; Sport Tourism; Recreation Leisure Science; Recreation Tourism; Health Promotion; other related fields.

The first invited speaker was Mr Christophe Troendle from Lausanne with a paper “Toward the Global Future of Sports Science”. The subject matter concerned not sports sciences but sport itself and global trends of its development.

The second speaker – Timothy D. Mickleborough (Bloomington, USA) - talked on “Future Trends for Physical Fitness Improvement”. He focused on the crucial role of physical activity and fitness in medicine.

A few authors focused their attention on the perspectives of sports sciences based on the example of institutionalised development in their countries (South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand) but more interesting was a reference to the system approach in the speech delivered by B. Junhasavasdikul (Bangkok). The author of the paper on “Sport Science – the Holistic Approach for Medical Healing” referred to the traditional methods of exercises and therapy such as qigong, wushu, prana/yoga, acupuncture, homoeopathy etc. [cf. Sieber 2002-2003; Cynarski 2010a; Junhasavasdikul 2012].

The author presented a paper: “Martial Arts Anthropology for Sport Pedagogy and Physical Education”. This was the only theoretical work concerning the application of traditional martial arts (according the Humanistic Theory of Martial Arts) to the needs of physical education.

The participants and the speakers were given separate certificates. The proceedings were published on CD and in a paper version – two supplements of the “Journal of Sports Science and Health” (2012, vol. 13).



**Photo 2.** At the table during the banquet – Prof. Chuchchai Gomaratur and Prof. W.J. Cynarski



**Photo 3.** Krabi Krabong demonstration – forms and fights



**Photo 4.** Thai-boxing, junior competition – a break in the fight. Rajadamnern Stadium.



**Photo 5.** Military traditions and mythical accounts in a Xylography and Sculpture Museum

### Cultural programme of the Conference

Apart from the interesting papers and scientific discussion, not less interesting was the cultural part – demonstrations, trips, Muay Thai tournament. The participants could see some of the amazing cultural monuments of this beautiful country, nature (Botanical Garden, Native Roses, Ixora Garden and Orchid Garden in the Rose Garden Riverside), ride an elephant or practise a Thai dance.

The programme of local culture included the training of elephants, folk dances, elements of traditional folklore as well as Thai-boxing, traditional arts of self-defence and sword fighting (elements of krabi krabong). The actors were performing their routines half-jokingly. However, a serious demonstration with the use of different kinds of sharp weapons and full dynamism was carried out during the welcome banquet (photos 2, 3). Anybody who has ever fought using sharp weapons knows what skills and expertise it requires.

The tickets for the Thai-boxing competition were reserved only for members of the Scientific Committee, keynote speakers and VIPs. The limitation was probably due to the size of the boxes for special guests (photo 4).

One of the organized trips included the Chinese district – Chinatown. The author did not expect to find, anywhere apart from the People's Republic of China, a taste of old China here in Bangkok, as he previously did in Taipei [Cynarski 2010b].

Probably the high positions of the Polish scientist in the IMACSSS resulted in them being included among the VIPs and participating in the aforementioned banquet and tournament, where the tickets in the VIP box cost 100 USD.

### Tradition of martial arts

The symbolic dimension of the respect for military culture can be found on a 50 THB note

(Thai bhat). We can see here the embodiment of the king wielding a sword and soldiers on elephants as well as warriors fighting for the fortifications. Thai-boxing appeared also on a Conference poster and on the cover of the publication with a Conference programme and abstracts. The images of fighting Thai-boxer appearing next to footballers, a bodybuilder and a runner (photo 1).

GM Chuchchai Gomaratur is a distinguished expert on Muay Thai and krabi krabong, Thai traditional martial arts. He has been the main master of the fourth generation since the time when over 100 years ago a long-time tradition of Thai martial arts was systematized (photo 5). He had already demonstrated his knowledge and skills during the 2nd World Scientific Congress of Martial Arts and Combat Sports in Rzeszow in September 2010. This time his students honoured him during the Conference welcome banquet demonstrating krabi krabong. Prof. Gomaratur promised to write articles about krabi krabong for the periodical published in Rzeszow "Ido Movement for Culture. Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology". The author's school friend Saravuth Sek gave one talk about fights of Khmer and Thai contestants. The neighbouring countries and nations were competing with each other for a few centuries. What is interesting, they co-created krabi krabong art. Probably the first Polish publication on the techniques of wielding weapons from this region of the world was the author's interview with Saravuth Sek [Cynarski 1997]. Whereas one the first major studies on Muay Thai as the martial art and an educational system was a much later study by Prof. Chuchchaia [Gomaratur 2011]. The professors from Rzeszow arrived in Bangkok at the invitation of Prof. Chuchchaia Gomaratur, one of the organizers of the Conference. They had a chance to watch the competition of Muay Thai in the famous Rajadamnern Stadium (The Ultimate Muay Thai Arena). On 9th Feb., 2012, 9 combats of junior boxers were planned of weights 101 to 148 lbs. Wai khru is something in between a dance and

a prayer during which the competitor pays respect to his/her teacher and the school he/she represents. The atmosphere was co-created by the musicians – a flute player, two drummers and a cymbal player. They encouraged the contestants to a further more dynamic combat by intensifying the rhythm of the melody. Rhythm and cheering constitute a special atmosphere and provide the feeling of ‘the social ritual of power’ [Cheska Taylor 1978].

Amateur fights are held in four 2-minute rounds, plus 1-minute breaks. Traditional fights last 5 times three minutes with 2-minute breaks. Juniors were fighting according to the traditional rules. There was one major knock-out. The fight was not faked.

### General reflections

Thailand (Kingdom of Thailand) – appears to be a land of polite, smiling and religious (the main religion is Hīnayāna Buddhism- “inferior vehicle”), hard-working and disciplined people. Traditionalism is the foundation of society. The Warrior culture is still alive and it has not been ousted by the Kramar culture. On the streets of Bangkok the national flag waves and a huge picture of the royal couple is presented. Despite existing political tensions, patriotism and respect for the king are common. The portrait of the king (Rama IX) appears obviously on all coins and notes.

A warm climate allows exotic vegetation to grow here. The participants at the Conference had an opportunity to see mango trees, pomelo and coconut palms. Thai cuisine, which the participants could taste, is full of exotic fruits such as guava, papaya, pineapples, dragon fruit (Vietnamese dragon fruit), star-shaped karambola fruit (*Averrhoa carambola*) and others. There were also delicious and healthy shrimps served in a variety of ways. It is obviously impossible to enumerate all the treats, because it would require a separate study. Nevertheless, Thailand deserved to be an important destination in culinary tourism.

The author was familiar with “film-like” Thailand. It is a location for many films, for example “Kickboxer”, “King of Kickboxers”, later “Ongbak” and its sequels. These films presented Thailand as a land of Muay Thai warriors, one of the toughest and most effective martial arts. The films showed big cities, suburbs, nature and landscapes.

As many boys practising Kyokushin karate, the author was familiar with stories of the half-legendary fights of Masutatsu Oyama and his students with the best Thai warriors. It was said that apparently only karate practitioners of this style of fight were

able to deal with Thai boxers. It turned out later that the best kick-boxers such as Benny Urquidez and Rob Kaman were able to win such confrontations. On the other hand, there are Thai-boxers, who are doing well in a professional boxing and in fights of K-1 organization (e.g. Kaoklai Kaennorsing, Buakaw Por Pramuk) [Cynarski, Ziemiński 2010].

What does the confrontation of ideas and reality look like? The author has not seen a remote Thai, but what he saw was even more beautiful than film shots. The warriors are authentic as well as the esteem for the martial arts. The country is modern, Bangkok in particular, with a good standard of services. What is more important is the fact that the country has not been Americanized. People are not passionate about baseball but a national sport which is Muay Thai. Let it remain this way.

The outcome of participation in the 3rd International Conference on Sports and Exercise Science are also invitations to “2nd ASEAN Universities Conference on Physical Education and Sport Science”, July 7-8, 2012, at University Putra Malaysia; an interdisciplinary Burapha University International Conference 2012 “Global Change: Opportunity & Risk”, July 9-11, 2012, Pattaya (Thailand); “International Workshop on Health, Physical Education and Computer Science in Sports”, August 11-12, 2012, Hyderabad (India); “2nd International Congress on Sport for All and Sport Tourism”, November 8-11, 2012, Antalya/Kemar (Turkey); “Global Conference on Traditional Physical Culture & Sports”, January 15-17, 2013, Amravati (India).

Photographs taken by Kazimierz Obodyński.

### Filmography

1. “Kickboxer”, USA 1989, dir. Mark DiSalle, stars: D. Alexio, J.C. Van Damme.
2. “King of Kickboxers”, USA 1991, dir. Lucas Lowe, stars: L. Avedon, B. Blanks, K. Cook.
3. “Ongbak”, Thailand 2003, dir. Prachya Pinkaew, star: Tony Jaa.

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## Bangkok i Muay Thai. Następny epizod turystyki sztuk walki

**Słowa kluczowe:** sztuki walki, Tajlandia, podróż konferencyjna

### Streszczenie

Autor opisuje wyjazd konferencyjny do Bangkoku w powiązaniu z badaniami kulturowymi sztuk walki Tajlandii (obserwacja i analiza kulturowych uwarunkowań). Jest to przykład zdarzenia interpretowanego jako przejaw turystyki kongresowej i jednocześnie turystyki sztuk walki. Ocenie autora podlega konferencja naukowa (III Międzynarodowa Konferencja o Nauce o Sporcie i Ćwiczeniach, "W kierunku globalnej przyszłości nauki o sporcie", Bangkok 7-10.02.2012). Przedstawione zostały subiektywne spostrzeżenia natury ogólnej dotyczące Tajlandii i tajskich sztuk walki – *Muay Thai* i *krabi krabong*. Całość uzupełnia faktografia fotograficzna.