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MULTIDIMENSIONAL SECURITY IN MUAY THAI PRACTICE**

(Translation in *Extenso*)

Abstract

This article examines Muay Thai as a cultural practice that reflects the multidimensional character of human security. Once tied primarily to warfare, Muay Thai now engages multiple domains of security: physical, economic, health, and ontological. Through ethnographic accounts and historical analysis, I show how the development of Muay Thai has been shaped by the ways Thai society has understood and responded to insecurity, whether military threat, economic precarity, or existential uncertainty. Its practices provide livelihood opportunities, bodily conditioning, and ritualized forms of resilience that extend into both communal life and cosmological orientation. The analysis also considers the perspectives of foreign practitioners, revealing how national narratives meet lived realities. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that security in Muay Thai is paradoxical: the very practices that cultivate resilience and continuity simultaneously produce new vulnerabilities.

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INTRODUCTION

A core difficulty in defining security is that it has largely been constructed from institutional perspectives while simultaneously trying to capture how people themselves experience and understand security. The challenge lies in the absence of a clear way to speak to humanity as a whole, encompassing its diversity, while also mobilizing individuals on a personal level for collective wellbeing. Over recent years, this difficulty has led to an increasingly comprehensive definition of human-centered security, one that seeks to embrace everything a person might perceive as relevant to their own sense of safety and stability.

For the purpose of this article, I have chosen to study a cultural process that, in my view, reflects this expanding definition of security particularly well: the evolving place of martial arts in society. Once tied primarily to military security, martial arts today extend far beyond the battlefield. They contribute to everyday physical security through self-defense, to economic security as global sports industries, to health security by supporting both physical and psychological well-being, and even to community resilience through cultural and educational practices. Moreover, the reach of martial arts extends to providing a deeper, spiritual form of security, serving as embodied expressions of diverse ontologies that ground people in meaning and offer a profound sense of purpose (Nešković 2024; Nešković 2025). In this sense, the ways culturally embodied practices evolve mirror a broader understanding of the human condition itself, dynamic, interconnected, and continually redefining what it means to be secure. I draw on Giddens' (1991) concept of ontological security as confidence in continuity and order. While Giddens emphasizes the role of narrative in sustaining self-identity, my analysis highlights how practice and embodied experience also contribute directly to existential grounding. In the case of martial arts, more specifically Muay Thai, ontological

security is not only reproduced through identity narratives but is cultivated through the ritualized and embodied discipline of fighting, training, and endurance.

Building on these insights, this article explores the following questions: How has Muay Thai evolved historically from battlefield practice to codified sport and national heritage? In what ways does it address multiple dimensions of security, physical, economic, health, and ontological, through practice, livelihood, and ritual? And how do these dimensions reveal the paradox of security, in which efforts to cultivate resilience simultaneously create new vulnerabilities?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Security studies have long grappled with the scope of the concept. As Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 3–5) note, Stephen Walt (Stephen Walt 1991) argued that security should remain focused on war and the use of force, warning that widening the field would destroy its intellectual coherence. This reflected the Cold War legacy, when security was largely reduced to state survival, nuclear deterrence, and geopolitical rivalry. By contrast, Ullman (Ullman 1983) proposed that severe degradations in societal well-being also constitute security concerns, while Buzan (Buzan [1983] 1991) shifted attention to multiple referent objects and sectors. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998) summarize these early moves as the first steps in “widening” the agenda of security studies. They propose a constellation framework¹ that moves beyond military defense, emphasizing the interrelation of security sectors rather than treating them as isolated domains. They distinguish five key sectors of security: military, political, economic, societal, and environmental, and argue that threats in each domain can become securitized when framed as existential threats to a referent

¹ Constellation emphasizes that security arises not from static units but from the dynamic interplay of their actions and relations (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 191).

object. In their constructivist approach, security is not an objective condition but a social practice: issues become security problems through interactions, power dynamics, and discursive framing. These authors believe that such a view enables a broader analysis without dissolving security into incoherence. A comparable expansion of the analytical field can be observed in studies of urban security, where multidimensional approaches are articulated through cultural patterns and practical frameworks of security governance in cities (Ćurčić 2024). At the level of military institutions, this expansion is reflected in educational and organizational processes through which institutional capacities for action in evolving security environments are produced, including the increasingly prominent integration of advanced technologies into military training systems (Vuletić 2025).

Anthropologists have extended this critique by situating security within longer intellectual traditions and by exposing its uneven social effects. Goldstein (Goldstein 2010, 489–493) argues that, although the post-9/11 era intensified the global “obsession” with security, concerns about safeguarding order and life have long underpinned political theory and state formation (Goldstein 2010, 490). Hobbes rooted the origin of the state in fear, arguing that individuals surrendered freedoms to a sovereign in exchange for protection from the chaotic “state of nature” (Hobbes [1651] 2003). Montesquieu, while advocating for a liberal state, similarly saw fear, but this time of tyranny, as foundational to political order (Montesquieu 1979; Robin 2004). Marx (Marx [1843] 1967), on the other hand, viewed security not as protection against nature or despotism but as a product of capitalist alienation, in which the state emerges as the guarantor of egoistic civil society (Der Derian 2009). In the twentieth century, these legacies informed doctrines of national and collective security, later challenged by the United Nations Development Programme (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 1994), which introduced the concept of human security. Goldstein further notes that while “wideners” broadened the agenda, neoliberal states continued to emphasize threats such as terrorism while retreating from welfare, shifting the burden of “self-security”

onto individuals. The constructivist approach of the Copenhagen School underscores this shift, showing that securitization is socially constructed and self-referential. Yet Goldstein stresses that such state-centered frameworks marginalize subordinated groups and alternative voices, including indigenous peoples, women, and the poor. A critical anthropology of security, he argues, reveals how security is produced, contested, and lived across everyday domains of power, ultimately resituating it as a socially embedded experience shaped by conflicting interests, unequal power relations, and diverse social positions (Goldstein 2010).

In parallel to these critical turns, the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report articulated human security around seven “pillars”: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political. Through this approach, the referent object of security is shifted from the state to the individual, highlighting that in earlier state-centered security frameworks, the legitimate everyday security concerns of ordinary people were marginalized. Human security was defined as both freedom from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression, and protection from sudden disruptions in everyday life (UNDP 1994, 22–23).

Yet, as Paris (Paris 2001) notes, this widening of scope created significant conceptual challenges. Human security, much like the concept of sustainable development, became a term that everyone supported, yet few could define clearly. Its expansive formulations, encompassing everything from physical safety to psychological well-being, left policymakers with little prioritization and scholars with little analytic clarity. Paris, therefore, critiques human security as “extraordinarily expansive and vague” (2001, 88), questioning whether it represents a genuine paradigm shift or rather a rhetorical expansion without significant analytical consequences. Still, both human security and critical security studies share the crucial move of challenging state-centrism by privileging the individual as the referent object of security analysis (Newman 2010). It seems the tension between breadth and coherence remains unresolved: a broader agenda risks vagueness, while

narrowing the concept to military threats reproduces the blind spots that human security was meant to address.

Drawing on my association with the World Academy of Art and Science, which partnered with the UN Trust Fund for Human Security in the Human Security for All campaign, I got a brief insight into how these tensions play out in practice. The campaign positioned human security as a transdisciplinary and inclusive reference framework, allowing space for diverse approaches and interpretations. Yet this very openness also meant that actors continued to speak and act primarily from their own professional and disciplinary standpoints, using the concept as a shared point of reference rather than as a vehicle for a deeper analytical convergence. From this perspective, the value of the concept of human security lies less in providing a definitive framework than in serving as a lens through which to explore how security is perceived, enacted, and expanded across diverse domains.

In this article, rather than working strictly within the human security paradigm, I place it in conversation with lived practice and other strands of security studies to propose a multidimensional security domain. For the purposes of this study, the dimensions most relevant are: military security, physical security through self-defense, health-security preventive and rehabilitative, including the psychological aspects of mental resilience and identity stability, and finally, ontological security² in terms of the deeper sense of meaning, purpose, and continuity provided by embodied practices. Through the case of martial arts, I argue that cultural practices themselves can be mechanisms through which insecurity is addressed, confronted, and negotiated across multiple levels: individual, communal, and societal.

Anthropological studies have great potential to demonstrate the multidimensional character of security and insecurity. In this paper, insecurity is not understood as the mere absence of security, but as

² Apart from Giddens's already mentioned definition of ontological security, I rely on Vékony's (Vékony 2020) stance that "ontological security is a state in which one feels secure in one's existence".

a lived condition of uncertainty, vulnerability, and exposure to risk, from which different forms of security only subsequently emerge. In the edited volume *The Insecure American* (Gusterson and Besteman 2009), the contributors argue that insecurity has become the defining condition of contemporary American life. Unlike the Cold War era, when insecurity was primarily conceived in terms of military threat, it is now experienced in multiple dimensions: economic precarity, social fragmentation, diversity-based fears, migration anxieties, and ontological vulnerability. Insecurity, as the authors show, is not a singular phenomenon but a complex condition embedded in everyday life, shaped simultaneously by neoliberal labor regimes, privatized and gated lifestyles, the global “war on terror”, and religious apocalyptic imaginaries. This multidimensional framework provides a valuable background for understanding how cultural practices evolve to cultivate resilience in the face of pervasive insecurity. Martial arts exemplify such practices. They cultivate the body as a site of resilience against physical threat, but they also extend beyond defense to offer traditions of disciplined practice, grounded in lineage and method, that secure health, economic well-being, and ontological well-being. Through ritual, they sustain cultural traditions that anchor belonging and meaning; through teaching and performance, they generate livelihoods and solidarities that counteract economic and social precarity. When situated within the broader dynamics of neoliberal globalization, militarization, and cultural alienation, martial arts can thus be understood not merely as systems of combat, sport, or self-defense, but as embodied responses to the insecurities that characterize modern life.

METHODOLOGY

In this article, I draw on anthropological studies of Muay Thai, together with my own ethnographic fieldwork, to explore the multiple dimensions through which this popular Thai martial art engages with questions of security. My fieldwork includes one and a half years

of Muay Thai training in China (2023–2025), under professional coaches from Thailand, as well as two separate two-week research stays in Thailand, during which I visited numerous renowned gyms in Bangkok, Pattaya, and Chiang Mai. Empirically, this article constitutes an analytically grounded initial step within a broader ethnographic research project. Rather than offering a comprehensive, long-term ethnography focused on a single research site, the paper provides a conceptual and interpretive mapping of multiple domains of security as they become visible through practice, narratives, and institutional frameworks. Future research aims to deepen this analysis through extended participant observation, ethnographic vignettes, and interview-based material.

The analysis is grounded in the sociocultural dynamism of Muay Thai and demonstrates how, through ethnographic accounts and selected works, its security dimensions can be understood. The discussion moves across several themes: its historical and contemporary links to national security; the ways it provides economic security through professional careers and transnational networks; its role in cultivating physical security through self-defense and bodily conditioning; its contribution to health security through fitness, endurance, therapeutic practices, and the fostering of mental resilience and self-discipline; and its capacity to secure ontological grounding through ritual, religious belief, and cultural practices that situate Muay Thai within a wider moral and cosmological order. In this framework, the psychological dimension is not treated as a separate category. Aspects such as mental resilience, self-discipline, and emotional regulation are considered part of health security, while the deeper dimensions of identity, belonging, and existential assurance are already encompassed within ontological security. I also address the perspectives of foreign practitioners, which are particularly revealing because they show how this complex social field is first encountered through the lens of Thai national narratives, and how those narratives are reinterpreted when confronted with lived reality. Finally, I turn to the paradoxes of security that emerge across these dimensions,

showing how the very mechanisms that offer protection and stability simultaneously generate new forms of vulnerability and uncertainty.

FROM WARFARE TO CODIFIED SPORT

Muay Thai has long been linked to Thailand's history of warfare and national defense. As part of the institutionalization and heritagization of the sport, official narratives describe it as the primary unarmed combat method of Thai soldiers, rooted in battlefield practice and codified in manuals such as the *Chupasat*. These manuals emphasized the use of each body part as a weapon, guided by the commitment of "mind, body, and soul" (Nation Thailand 2024), and are frequently referenced in contemporary accounts of Muay Boran, presented as the precursor of Muay Thai (Saengsawang, Siladech, and Laxanaphisuth 2015). Simon de la Loubère (La Loubère 1693), an early European visitor, recorded organized boxing and other martial displays at the Ayutthaya court among the first external accounts of Thai combat arts. Later historians, including Baker and Phongpaichit (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017), contextualize these spectacles within the broader festival culture of the court. While such sources demonstrate the existence of formalized unarmed techniques, they provide little evidence that traditional boxing constituted a codified battlefield curriculum. The International Federation of Muaythai Associations (IFMA) portrays the reign of King Prachao Sua (1697–1709) as a turning point, when boxing shifted from a battlefield art to a contest-driven practice; accounts describe the king himself as fighting incognito in village matches, helping popularize the art beyond its military setting (Nation Thailand 2024). The story of Nai Khanom Dtom, who in 1774 reputedly defeated ten Burmese boxers as a prisoner of war, further cemented Muay Thai's reputation as a practice tied to honor, endurance, and national identity.

The Thai army continued to foster Muay Thai as a system of close-combat skills, embedding it in soldier training, while its popularity spread among civilians as a sport. By the 1930s, Muay Thai

was officially codified: rope bindings were replaced by gloves, rounds and weight divisions were introduced, and refereed contests aligned the art with international boxing regulations. From that point, Muay Thai transformed into both a professional sport and a cultural practice accessible to the wider public. Today, it is practiced globally as a combat sport, self-defense method, and a fitness-lifestyle regime, while in Thailand it remains a key site of economic opportunity, cultural heritage, and national prestige (Vail 2014; Saengsawang, Siladech, and Laxanaphisuth 2015). The historical codification laid the groundwork for later reinterpretations of Muay Thai's past, especially those framing it as part of the national narrative. Vail (Vail 2014) notes that historical sources on boxing (*muay*) are exceedingly scarce, and that the history we know today is largely a modern construction shaped to establish an "authentic" tradition in service of Thai nationalism. He explains that particular events have been selectively elevated as foundational moments, especially those that link muay to royalty and the theatre-state politics of Siam, while its image as a grassroots practice has been maintained by emphasizing its regional diversity and presenting it as a performative enactment of Siamese warrior spirit. Apparently, even the categories of Muay Boran and Muay Thai are later inventions, since the original practice was simply referred to as *muay*. The narratives that have emerged retrospectively frame *muay* both as the art of warriors and national heroes and as a performance central to royal ritual. Vail states that in reality, however, the earliest records describe *muay* primarily as a form of prizefighting, accompanied by betting and staged as entertainment during ritual occasions sponsored by local elites or royalty (Vail 2014, 515).

What matters for this study is that Muay Thai continues to be framed as an art born of war (Vail 2014; Saengsawang, Siladech, and Laxanaphisuth 2015), a narrative frequently reiterated in both popular and official discourses. Contemporary promoters, such as ONE Championship, regularly highlight these martial origins when hosting events at Bangkok's Lumpinee Stadium, reinforcing processes of heritagization and branding Muay Thai as national cultural heritage

presented for international spectacle. Since the twentieth century, *Muay Thai techniques have been* gradually standardized into the modern sport of Muay Thai and adapted not for survival but for aesthetics, scoring, and safety, with restrictions introduced to protect fighters. This standardization helped ground the narrative of transition, recasting *muay* not only as a martial art of war but also as a regulated practice of self-defense and sporting competition. Furthermore, as the codification was widely accepted, Muay Thai became not only a national symbol but also a means of livelihood for many practitioners.

LIVELIHOODS, GLOBALIZATION, AND NATIONAL PRESTIGE

Today, Muay Thai stands as both a living cultural tradition rooted in grassroots practice and a professional sport that provides livelihoods for fighters and international prestige for Thailand. Many professionals begin training and competing as children, often to support families in precarious economic circumstances. While some come from established fighting lineages, others enter the sport against family wishes, driven by love for the practice itself and the hope of upward mobility. Historical sources mention boxing officials with the title of *muen*, a mid-level rank in the traditional Thai hierarchy, and show that exceptional skill in the ring could open pathways to social mobility even centuries ago (Vail 2014, 515–520).

For most Thai fighters today, however, economic security remains precarious. Fighters are usually contracted by gyms, with managers arranging matches and taking a significant share of the earnings. Competition prizes for Thai nationals in domestic venues are often modest, and bouts are not frequent enough to guarantee a steady income. Many fighters begin their careers young, but sustaining a livelihood requires enduring intense bodily strain: frequent training, weight cutting, and fighting through injury. In this way, the fighter's body becomes both the source of income and the site of its depletion, as

earning potential is tied directly to the ability to keep fighting despite long-term physical costs.

The professionalization of Muay Thai has taken place not only in the civilian domain but also within the Thai military. The Royal Thai Army (RTA) has recently recommitted to Muay Thai as both a training method and an emblem of Thai martial heritage. In February 2023, the Army Chief mandated the inclusion of Muay Thai in the curriculum of military schools, emphasizing its role in shaping soldiers' physical and moral character (Nation Thailand 2023a). By September of the same year, RTA officials were promoting Muay Thai internationally through partnerships with Lumpinee Boxing Stadium and the Ministry of Culture, aligning these efforts with Thailand's United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – UNESCO heritage initiatives (Nation Thailand 2023b). At the same time, standardized "C license" instructor courses were introduced for soldiers, signaling the institutionalization and pedagogical expansion of the art within the ranks (Nation Thailand 2024). Conversely, Muay Thai itself has also been mobilized to promote the military, as seen in the case of Buakaw Banchamek, the Muay Thai legend associated with the RTA reserve force, who has provided training to U.S. soldiers during joint Cobra Gold military exercises in both 2023 and 2025. These events further consolidate Muay Thai's role as an instrument of soft power and as a medium through which martial heritage intersects with military diplomacy (Khaosod English 2023).

Globalization has played an important role in shaping Muay Thai's social landscape. Thailand attracts large numbers of foreign practitioners who relocate to train in the long term. Some pursue professional careers under contract with gyms that manage and promote their fights in renowned venues such as Lumpinee Stadium and Rajadamnern Stadium. Others combine training with unrelated professions such as IT or digital media, using the flexibility of remote work to sustain daily Muay Thai practice as a form of leisure. This mix of professional and lifestyle practitioners illustrates how Muay Thai provides avenues for economic mobility and enables individuals,

whether fighters or long-term enthusiasts, to construct identities rooted in Muay Thai, even outside professional competition. The global prestige of Muay Thai also extends abroad. Exceptionally successful Thai athletes often move into international circuits, such as kickboxing or mixed martial arts, before retiring around the age of 30. Many then open their own gyms or travel internationally to teach, in places such as the United States, Japan, Singapore, and China. Their authority stems not only from competitive success but also from having been immersed in the distinctive Thai ethos of training, discipline, and bodily formation since early childhood.

EXISTENTIAL GROUNDING THROUGH MUAY THAI RITUAL

Renesson's (Renesson 2012) ethnography of Muay Thai illustrates how martial arts serve as tools people mobilize to confront insecurities, negotiate marginalization, and build resilience within complex social landscapes. It provides valuable insight into how Thai boxing operates simultaneously as a bodily discipline, an economic activity, and a social practice with institutional dimensions or a social field in Bourdieu's sense, structured by struggles over economic capital, prestige, and cultural recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). By adopting an immersive "apprentice boxer" methodology inspired by Loïc Wacquant, Renesson highlights how training and fighting cultivate forms of self-mastery and resilience while embedding fighters within dense networks of camp owners, sponsors, gamblers, and state officials. His analysis shows that the "fight" extends beyond the ring into a broader "science of interaction" where prestige, money, and ritual protection intertwine. Beyond combat and sport, Muay Thai also carries health and therapeutic dimensions. Its rigorous training builds physical resilience, cardiovascular endurance, and psychological discipline, making it attractive to fans of fitness and wellbeing worldwide. Traditional healing practices (*naut boran*) accompany the sport. Fighters are prepared for combat through an oil massage

that warms the muscles and stimulates circulation. Moreover, Thai traditional medicine is believed to regulate the flow of internal ‘wind’ (*lom*), helping to disperse excess gas and tension from the body. After fights, similar treatments are used to help the body recover, releasing lactic acid, reducing inflammation, and alleviating bruises and stiffness. In contemporary contexts, these practices are complemented by Western sports medicine, with medical teams conducting post-event check-ups for fighters to ensure safety and manage injuries.

What makes Muay Thai unique among martial arts is the extent to which its techniques and ethos remain embedded in Thai cultural life. Gyms are situated within lineages, but individual fighters are encouraged to develop their own style from the outset rather than conform strictly to a prescribed form. Rituals such as the (*wai khru ram muay*), pre-fight oil massages (*nuat namman*), dietary regimens, and basic fighting stances in rhythm with traditional (*pi phat muay Thai*) music embody this cultural embeddedness. Fighters display a paradoxical composure: calm minds and wide eyes contrasted with lightning-fast strikes. Punches and kicks are designed to achieve knockouts, while knees and elbows are sharp and decisive, sometimes ending bouts through cuts that force stoppages. Among the many stylistic categories, the one that stands out is the “technician style” (*muay fi mue*). This style emphasizes fluid defense and attack from improbable angles, marked by balance, timing, and tactical ingenuity. It epitomizes the creativity that Thai coaches cultivate in students, encouraging them to find their own rhythm and bodily expression rather than simply reproduce standardized forms.

The process of learning and practicing Muay Thai provides a grounding sense of belonging and continuity through ritual, lineage, and community. The (*wai khru ram muay*) ceremony is central here. Performed before every bout, it combines gestures of respect to teachers (*wai khru*) with the ritualized “boxing dance” (*ram muay*), accompanied by traditional music. The movements vary by gym, lineage, and region, allowing fighters to signal identity, creativity, and connection to their roots. The ritual also functions as a display of skill:

to the expert eye, the precision, balance, and composure shown in the (*ram muay*) can reveal much about a fighter's training and technical mastery. At the same time, the pre-fight ceremony provides spiritual protection, invokes ancestral and religious blessings, and prepares the fighter psychologically for combat. Fighters enter the ring wearing a (*mongkhon* a sacred, blessed headband and often remove it only after completing the (*wai khru ram muay*). While entering the ring, around the neck they may wear protective amulets, blessed by monks, believed to confer spiritual strength and safety. Around the arms, during the whole fight, they wear the (*prajioud*), blessed armbands. Many fighters also carry (*sak yant*) tattoos, sacred geometrical and script designs inscribed by Buddhist monks or spiritual masters, which are thought to protect the body from harm and channel spiritual power. These ritual practices can be properly contextualized within Thailand's complex religious field.

Although Thailand is religiously diverse, Theravāda Buddhism provides the predominant framework for these protective practices, which are infused with syncretic elements drawn from Brahmanic-Hindu traditions and local animist beliefs, and are best understood within what Kitiarsa (Kitiarsa 2012a) terms vernacular Buddhism hybrid religious field that also encompasses practices like Muay Thai. In this sense, Muay Thai ritual and adornment anchor fighters within this specific moral universe, reinforcing ties of lineage, community, and cosmology. Ritual dance, sacred objects, and bodily inscriptions are key sites where Muay Thai transcends a "combat sport" to become a practice of ontological grounding, situating fighters in broader cultural and religious orders (Vail 2014; Kitiarsa 2005). Foreigners who come to Thailand to train also encounter these dimensions, negotiating identity and security in diverse ways.

GLOBAL ENCOUNTERS AND THE PARADOX OF SECURITY

Looking at Muay Thai through the prism of multidimensional security reveals a series of contradictions within each security dimension and between them. These tensions come to the surface most clearly in global encounters, when foreigners arrive in Thailand to live and train, as well as when Thai society itself negotiates the role of its national sport. In this section, I consider how these contradictions can be understood as paradoxes of multidimensional security, revealing the ways in which the very practices that generate resilience also produce new vulnerabilities.

When it comes to foreigners practicing Muay Thai in Thailand, Deng (Deng 2025) provides a rich ethnographic account that traces how these practitioners negotiate their identities as fighters and position themselves in relation to local Thai boxers. His analysis reveals a complex web in which physical risk, economic precarity, health consequences, and the search for ontological security are tightly interwoven, making Muay Thai not simply a sport but a multidimensional site where different forms of security are contested and produced. Deng's recent ethnographic work on Muay Thai tourism in Thailand shows how foreigners approach the practice as a way to confront insecurity through danger. This author observes that many travelers enter gyms in Thailand expecting holistic or spiritual wellbeing, yet quickly discovered that fighting was the central communal activity. Participation in the ring generated social and cultural capital, positioning fighters as "warriors". This shift underscores the paradox of martial arts and security: the body's exposure to harm becomes the very ground on which fighters cultivate resilience, toughness, and a sense of belonging. Fear is central to this process. Deng's interlocutors described trembling before fight nights, restless and sleepless evenings, and the omnipresence of anxiety. Yet, instead of being avoided, fear was incorporated into the very identity of the fighter. Deng calls upon Mott and Roberts (Mott and Roberts 2014)

to describe how men's ritualized banter what they term "ball-talking", a form of joking and competitive talk that both asserts masculinity and builds group solidarity – can temporarily ease insecurity by producing soothing and affirming effects on the mind-body. He also draws on Green and Evers (Green and Evers 2020, 13–14) to show that masculinity functions not as an overt identity but as a style of practice at the carnal level, where it operates as a remedy to men's fear and vulnerability.

Here, security is generated not by eliminating risk, but by embracing it, with martial identity emerging precisely through fragility, endurance, and mutual care among fighters. Finally, Deng highlights the tension between Western ideals of aggressive masculinity and Thai notions of cool heart (*jai yen*), which privilege composure, endurance, and calm under stress. In contrast to interpretations offered by some foreign visitors, who view Muay Thai through dichotomies such as aggression versus self-control or dominance versus submission, Deng argues that martial arts provide existential grounding not only through superiority, but also through cultivated endurance, ritual and composure – dimensions that are often obscured in reading of fighting as mere aggression. Deng's analysis shows how injury and pain, far from being seen as weaknesses, became "forms of embodied capital" proof of resilience and evidence of a fighter's capacity to endure insecurity (Deng 2025). This points out to how martial arts cultivate bodily discipline to transform the experience of effort, as well as exposure to hardship and physical pain, into socially recognized value. Yet such practices also foreground the paradox: physical harm that compromises health security is simultaneously reframed as a pathway to psychological resilience and social recognition.

Economically, Muay Thai fighting tourism produces uneven forms of security. For some travellers, participation remains a leisure activity, subsidized by remote jobs or savings, while for others especially those seeking contracts with gyms or competing professionally it becomes a precarious livelihood. This duality reveals the layered ways martial arts mediate economic security for foreigners,

in ways that are not fundamentally different from the experiences of local practitioners: they can offer a route to income and, for a select few, opportunities for upward mobility through international competition, teaching, or opening gyms. Yet these prospects often come at a high bodily cost, as careers are short and sustained success depends on enduring injury, risk, and physical decline.

Kitiarsa's (2012b) analysis identifies the paradox of security that underlies Muay Thai. On the one hand, boxers are locally celebrated as breadwinners and community heroes, but on the other, they are embedded in exploitative systems that profit from their labor and risk. Their training regimes cultivate bodily discipline and endurance, yet simultaneously expose them to injury, precarity, and shortened careers. The very hardships of pain, fatigue, and self-discipline become culturally meaningful, transforming vulnerability into moral strength and ontological grounding. Muay Thai appeals especially to underprivileged youth because it provides immediate income and the promise of upward mobility. Yet its significance extends beyond the individual. Fighters who emerge from society's margins, participating in what remains a grassroots practice shaped by the beliefs, aspirations, and lived experiences of the underprivileged, come to embody and transmit Thai culture abroad. In doing so, they transform Muay Thai from a local practice of survival and resilience into a vehicle of national prestige and soft power.

The question of ontological grounding becomes especially compelling in Kitiarsa's comparison of Muay Thai boxing and Buddhist monasticism, two practices that might appear opposed: one centered on fighting, physical dynamism, and domination, public attention, and the pursuit of money: the other on cultivating stillness of body and mind, seclusion, and the renunciation of material gain. Yet both, in different ways, offer frameworks through which Thai grassroots society confronts vulnerability and seeks security. Kitiarsa insightfully compares the boxer's body (*nak muai*) with the monk's body (*nak buat*), and shows converging aspects in the cultivation of disciplined, resilient male bodies in contemporary Thailand. Both are

disciplined through specialized “techniques of the body” (Mauss [1977] 2009), but toward different ends. For boxers, the body is a site of physical power, endurance, and the struggle for livelihood, recognition, and honor. For monks, on one hand, the body represents desire and suffering that must be overcome; on the other, it is the necessary vehicle for meditation and Buddhist practice. In both cases, male bodies are inscribed with discipline, hierarchy, and moral purpose, and both cultivate forms of resilience that exceed the immediate domain of fighting or monastic life.

Socially, Muay Thai provides pathways for mobility and recognition, but nationally, it stands as a symbol of cultural heritage and identity. Vail (Vail 2014, 516) adds another dimension to this argument by showing that the mythology of Muay Thai serves as a narrative medium through which Thai men reimagine and rewrite their social selves, casting boxers as heroic figures capable of transcending everyday constraints, “stories that they tell themselves about themselves”. This narrative framing provides not only symbolic prestige but also a sense of existential grounding, enabling the underprivileged to see themselves as more than their precarious social conditions. The analysis of Muay Thai demonstrates how embodied practices and narrative traditions alike transform vulnerability into continuity, meaning, and value, thereby contributing to ontological security in contemporary Thailand.

What emerges from the above analysis of security as something never given, but constantly worked out through these contradictions: between earning and exploitation, toughness and injury, identity and reinvention. Muay Thai’s endurance lies in this ongoing negotiation, in the balancing of different dimensions of security that intersect, overlap, and sometimes collide, producing a form of security that is lived, processual, and dynamic rather than fixed or stable.

CONCLUSION

My overall research on martial arts shows that they are cultural practices that carry a heritage which, enlivened by practitioners, generates an encompassing cultural sphere while remaining deeply responsive to wider social dynamism. Rooted in tradition and shaped by centuries of change, these practices embody histories of resilience and ongoing struggles for survival. From battlefield techniques of close combat to methods of self-defense in everyday life, martial arts have continually been reshaped by governing structures, shifting in their techniques, lineages, and narratives. They have taken on new forms as performance, health-oriented practice, and embodied art, always retaining a complementary dimension of healing and resilience alongside fighting.

The vitality of grassroots cultural practices must be considered not only in breadth but also in depth, for they are grounded in what is existential for communities, their vernacular cosmology. In this article, I have used the concept of security to examine how a popular cultural practice responds to basic human needs. I argue that martial arts practice, such as Muay Thai, persists because it addresses physical security, livelihoods, health, and ontological grounding encompassing both community belonging and cosmological orientation.

Yet what emerges most strongly is the paradox of security, that is, the complex interrelation between different dimensions of security. Every pursuit of security arises from an experience of insecurity, and each effort to build resilience produces new vulnerabilities. Social and cultural innovations are always reinterpreted and contested within broader society, generating fresh tensions. For this reason, research on cultural practices such as martial arts gains particular momentum when they are studied in their multidimensional, lived complexity. This paper offers an introductory, analytically focused insight into the interplay of different dimensions of security. It demonstrates that martial arts can serve as a powerful analytical lens for understanding how resilience, vulnerability, and cultural continuity are interwoven

in contemporary societies – not as fixed conditions, but as dynamic, continually renegotiated processes.

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ВИШЕДИМЕНЗИОНАЛНА БЕЗБЕДНОСТ У ПРАКСИ МУАЈ ТАЈА**

Резиме

Овај чланак је посвећен питању како се борилачке вештине, односно Муај Тај (*Muay Thai*), могу разумети као културне праксе које се кроз време обликују као одговор на мултидимензионално поимање безбедности на Тајланду. Историјски везан за војску одбрану, Муај Тај је током времена прошао кроз значајне трансформације, еволуирајући у кодификовани спорт, национално-културно наслеђе, и глобалну индустрију. Данас његово значење далеко превазилази бојно поље: доприноси физичкој безбедности кроз самоодбрану, економској безбедности кроз професионално борила штиво и транснационалне мреже, здравственој безбедности кроз тренинг, издржљивости и терапеутској пракси, као и онтолошкој безбедности кроз ритуале, религијска веровања и космолошке оријентације које продужују смисао и сигурност. Анализа се ослања на етнографске приказе и одабране студије како би пратила различите улоге које Муај Тај има у сферама физичке, економске, здравствене и онтолошке безбедности. Посебан акценат ставља се на то како историјски и савремени развој Муај Таја одражава променљиве перцепције у односу на то шта безбедност представља у тајландском друштву од колонијалних претњи и ратног преживљавања до савремених питања економске несигурности, телесне издржљивости и културног признања. Психолошки аспекти попут самодисциплине

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и емоционалне контроле овде се посматрају као део здравствене безбедности, док онтолошка безбедност обухвата дубљу сигурност коју нуде ритуали, космологија и уопште отеловљен културни континуитет. Перспективе страних практиканата нуде додатну димензију, показујући како се Муај Тај најпре сусреће кроз националне наративе, а затим реинтерпретира у самом искуству праксе. Истовремено, контрадикције се јављају како унутар, тако и између различитих димензија: економске могућности наспрам експлоатације, телесна снага наспрам физичких повреда, културна укореењеност наспрам реинвенције традиције у сврси глобалног признања и престижа. Ове контрадикције најбоље се разумеју као парадоски безбедности, где сваки покушај успостављања стабилности истовремено ствар нове облике рањивости. У ширем смислу, чланак ситуира Муај Тај у дугу историју борилачких вештина као пракси културног наслеђа. Оне су обликоване вековима друштвених промена, али и даље остају осетљиве на савремене притиске, изграђујући своју отпорност кроз историју борбе за опстанак. Од ратних техника до здравствено орјентисаних пракси и глобалних перформанса, борилачке вештине настављају да се прилагођавају, задржавајући притом потенцијал да буду коришћене како у борбе тако и у виду терапеутских пракси. Посматрајући Муај Тај као мултидимензионално поље безбедности, чланак наглашава како се културне праксе развијају у преговору између отпорности, рањивости и култног континуитета у условима стално променљивих друштвених околности.

Кључне речи: мултидимензионална безбедност, борилачке вештине, муај тај, отпорност и рањивост, културно наслеђе, етнографија спорта.

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