

ASIAN CELEBRITY AND FANDOM STUDIES



BOYS LOVE MEDIA IN THAILAND

CELEBRITY, FANS, AND TRANSNATIONAL
ASIAN QUEER POPULAR CULTURE

THOMAS BAUDINETTE

BLOOMSBURY

BOYS LOVE MEDIA IN THAILAND

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BOYS LOVE MEDIA IN THAILAND

**Celebrity, Fans, and Transnational Asian Queer
Popular Culture**

Thomas Baudinette

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NOTES ON LANGUAGE

The Thai language is notoriously difficult to render in the Roman alphabet, with most transliteration systems lacking recognition of tonal variation and only approximating Thai's complex system of vowels and diphthongs. In this book I have used the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS) propagated by the Royal Institute of Thailand. My decision to use this system is pragmatic, as it is accessible for a non-Thai literate audience. I use the RTGS for all Thai-language terms except the names of idol celebrities and certain Thai publications (such as magazines and websites) where I instead use the transliterations deployed by their agencies or publishers, most of which do not conform to RTGS, as these are more recognizable to fans and mainstream viewers alike. Translations from Thai to English are my own unless otherwise acknowledged.

Thai naming conventions are similarly complex. Thai people typically have a personal and family name derived from Pali or Sanskrit and a shorter “nickname” or *chue len* by which they are known among friends and family. In the text, after introducing their full names, I refer to idol celebrities by their nicknames, sometimes followed by their personal names, as is common among fans and within Thai mainstream media. I thus mostly refer to the idol Saint Suppamong Udomkaewkanjana, for example, as “Saint” or “Saint Suppamong.” Likewise, when discussing the imagined celebrity couples active within the BL industry throughout this book, I follow fan convention by combining the two nicknames of the celebrities together to create a couple or “ship” name. For instance: KristSingto, OffGun, TayNew, and BrightWin. Although Thai-language publications typically cite scholars by their first name, I follow English-language convention by citing them by surname to maintain consistency across a manuscript replete with citations to scholars from a variety of national contexts with their own citational practices.

For Japanese-language terms and names, unless the word has entered common English-language parlance or is the name of a place with an official English transliteration (such as Tokyo), I use the Hepburn system of transliteration. Macrons are used to indicate long vowels. I present all Japanese names in the traditional order of family name first and personal name second except in instances where the Japanese person has indicated a preference for personal name first, such as in English-language publishing. All translations from Japanese to English are my own unless otherwise acknowledged.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, the popular culture landscape of Thailand has radically changed as spaces that celebrate queer representation have opened within a media industry that had previously maligned sexual minority communities.¹ As little as a decade ago, the kingdom's cinema and television screens were dominated by romantic and erotic stories featuring upwardly mobile young women from the provinces and the wealthy, urban men who fell in love with them.² Further, both popular magazines aimed at young women such as *Praew* and *Sudsapda* and the online discussion boards *Pantip* and *Dek-D* were awash with gossip concerning the potential romances between young women and men working within Thailand's burgeoning entertainment industry. Thailand's popular culture landscape—similar to others within the broader Asian region such as Indonesia,³ South Korea,⁴ and Mainland China⁵—overtly celebrated highly heteronormative representations of romance through a privileging of conservative narratives that centered marriage, parenthood, and patriarchal authority. The popular media of Thailand and its related celebrity culture emphasized male dominance and female submission as part of a broader fantasy of socioeconomic development, suggesting to consumers that participation within the heteronormative life course and the acceptance of avowedly conservative gender ideologies was the key to one's own future happiness and fulfilment.⁶

When I visited Bangkok in July 2019, however, I found that Thai consumer culture had transformed into a space where the celebration of romances that challenge such heteronormative narratives had become increasingly mainstream. Passing through immigration at Suvarnabhumi Airport, for instance, I was greeted by numerous posters for the cosmetics company Cathy Doll, which were covered in handsome young men staring at each other longingly, their faces and lips posed perilously close together in homoerotically charged advertising. Rather than exclusively focusing on the relationships between heterosexual urbanites, Thailand's popular culture industries are now increasingly investing into explicitly same-sex desiring romances and homoerotic entertainment content.⁷ Over the past several years, Thai television series centering the blossoming love between handsome young men have become common, giving birth to a new genre of popular culture known as either “Boys Love (hereafter, BL) series” or “series Y (*wai*).” In Thailand, “series Y (*wai*)” is the most common name for this new media

genre, with the “Y” referring to the Japanese popular culture form from which it derives. On the other hand, “Thai BL” is more commonly used by fans outside Thailand, except in China where it is known as *tài dānměi*.⁸

Due to the popularity of these BL series, the magazines and online discussion forums that sit at the heart of Thailand’s celebrity culture have also transformed into spaces that celebrate the young men whose popularity has grown as a result of their staged performances of homoeroticism both on the screen and during meetings with fans. In fact, BL media is buoyed by a new celebrity system of “idols” that explicitly draws upon the traditions of celebrity management, which developed in Japan and South Korea and that have become influential within talent management agencies across East and Southeast Asia.⁹ The emergence of Thailand’s BL series also owes much to the popularity of Japanese and Korean popular culture in Thailand, revealing how the development of this new media genre is representative of broader shifts within Asian popular culture industries. Thai BL media ultimately represents an explicit response to the popularity of Japan’s tradition of homoerotic BL *manga* comics and South Korea’s K-pop idols among young middle-class consumers within the broader Southeast Asian region.

The emergence of BL media in Thailand is significant not only because it represents an important shift in the representation of queer sexuality within Thailand’s heretofore conservative media landscape, but also due to its substantial impacts on Thai consumer culture through the mobilization of middle-class fans. These impacts are especially clear when considering the culture of BL celebrity that has developed in recent years and that I had the chance to experience first-hand during my visit to Bangkok in 2019. One hot, summer day in early July, I joined a crowd of young men and women at an event organized by XOXO Cosmetics to launch their new make-up line in Siam Center (pictured in Figure 1), one of the larger department stores in the glamorous and upmarket Siam Square district.¹⁰ We had all gathered there to see the young idol Saint Suppamong Udomkaewkanjana who had become famous due to playing the role of Pete in the BL series *Love By Chance* (2018, titled *Bang-oen Rak*, “Accidental Love” in Thai). While the crowd was overwhelmingly comprised of young Thai women, I also met gay Thai men as well as both male and female fans who had traveled to Bangkok from China and the Philippines, revealing that Thai BL fandom was not only transnational, but also drawing in consumers from sexual minority communities. In the late afternoon, Saint finally appeared on stage after his fans and I had been waiting for approximately three hours, sampling XOXO Cosmetic’s new products and chatting about our shared loved of this charismatic and handsome young star. Throughout the event, Saint sang songs from *Love By Chance* and endorsed the new make-up to the fans who had traveled to Siam Center to see him, acting as a brand ambassador and image character who connected the world of BL to the corporate world of XOXO Cosmetics. It was during this fan meeting that I came to understand just how thoroughly BL media and its fandom had become intertwined with Thailand’s consumer culture.

Within the pages of *Boys Love Media in Thailand: Celebrity, Fans, and Transnational Asian Queer Popular Culture*, I draw upon seven years of traditional



Figure 1 Setting up for XOXO Cosmetic's launch event starring Saint Suppapong in Siam Center, July 2019. Photo by Thomas Baudinette.

and digital ethnographic research into this revolutionary form of media to trace both BL's significant impacts on depictions of same-sex desire in Thai popular culture and its simultaneous transformation of this culture through the development of new forms of celebrity and fandom. One of the chief aims of this book is to identify and theorize the changing representational politics of gender

and sexuality across Thailand's popular culture landscape, which have occurred as a result of the mainstreaming of BL media. I build this theorization through a filmic analysis of various seminal Thai BL series—as well as related fan events and practices—that is strongly influenced by the qualitative and explorative methodologies of cultural studies and ethnographic enquiry. Through my analyses, I demonstrate that BL media possess important queer potentials, which challenge heteronormative assumptions within Thai society concerning the naturalness of heterosexuality and the concomitant privileging of heterosexual romance as representative of both personal and national development. My argumentation takes seriously the theoretical claim that queerness represents more than just an epistemological subject position or representational strategy but is instead a critical hermeneutic that is both anti-identarian and anti-normative.¹¹ In viewing queerness as a process that is always a “becoming,”¹² I expose how Thailand's BL media destabilizes hetero-patriarchal social structures, which position same-sex desire as a potential threat to Thai culture. I thus engage in a “reparative reading” of this new genre of media as queer popular culture.¹³ I do, however, acknowledge instances throughout the following chapters where the queer potentials of BL are stymied by the Thai media landscape and its systems of control, censorship, and capitalist accumulation.

In tracing the development of BL series and their related fandom and celebrity cultures, I also demonstrate through this book that BL media did not emerge from a vacuum. Rather, BL emerged within a highly specific historical moment when Thailand had just experienced a “boom” in queer cultural production that owed much to the convergence of the Thai media landscape with consumer cultures across the Asia-Pacific region. As Peter Jackson has argued in the introduction to his seminal edited collection *Queer Bangkok*, “the first years of the [twenty-first] century have marked a significant transition moment for all of Thailand's LGBT cultures, with a multidimensional expansion in the ... media presence, economic importance, political impact, social standing, and cultural relevance of Thai queer communities.”¹⁴ These transformations have occurred, Jackson argues, due to the emergence of an “East-Southeast Asian regional network of queer cultures” that has “meant a relative decline in the significance of influences from the West.”¹⁵ In fact, Jackson persuasively argues throughout his broader scholarship that both commercial print media and consumer culture married to nightlife districts have played a crucial role in the production of a robust, local gay male culture.¹⁶ Within *Boys Love Media in Thailand*, I likewise argue that television series and their online fandoms also participate in the production of queer culture in Thailand.

For Jackson, it is especially important for theorists to acknowledge that the West has become a less important referent in Thai queer cultural production due to the economic rise of Asia, which in turn signals shifts in the political economy underpinning theories of global queering. Contrary to Dennis Altman, whose influential theory of global queering suggested that the expansion of liberal democracy and North American consumer culture across Asia would lead to the adoption and adaptation of Western queer cultures,¹⁷ Jackson posits that capitalist expansion may instead foster local knowledges that then enter into dialogue with

Western queer cultures rather than being subsumed by them.¹⁸ Forming part of the *Asian Celebrity and Fandom Studies* series, this book brings a fan studies-informed analysis to these broader scholarly discussions. Through a recognition of the highly reflexive and critical consumption of fan audiences, this book also provides an emic conceptualization of the formation of Thai queer culture that is often lacking within previous scholarship on the kingdom's consumer culture.

Importantly, the development of BL media in Thailand speaks to the growing integration of cosmopolitan, market-oriented queer consumer cultures across Asia, with BL series emerging within a context where the popular culture of Japan has played an especially prominent role in the formulation of knowledge concerning sexuality across the Asia-Pacific.¹⁹ Responding to Peter Jackson's previous work, I situate my own analysis of Thai BL within the critical methodology of "Asia as method." I reveal how Thai BL ultimately forms part of a broader transnationalization of a genre of young women's media from Japan also known as Boys Love (*bōizu rabu*) but that is often called *yaoi* outside Japan, including in Thailand.²⁰ As a genre of popular culture, Japanese BL focuses on the romantic and sexual relationships between beautiful male youths known as *bishōnen* and hence possesses narrative tropes and specific patterns of characterization born out of Japanese conceptualizations of gender and sexuality.²¹ Although ostensibly a form of popular culture for heterosexual women rather than members of sexual minority communities, I reveal throughout this book that Japanese BL possesses a queer potential, which is unlocked via its transnationalization.²² Following cultural historian Kristine Michelle Santos,²³ I emphasize how the reading practices that have emerged out of this young women's popular culture allow consumers to queer the structures of heteronormative romance central to traditional Thai media and therefore open spaces for the celebration of same-sex desire. In making this argument, *Boys Love Media in Thailand* thus contributes to the growing body of literature that investigates the impacts of East Asian popular culture on conceptualizations of gender and sexuality in Thailand.²⁴ I thus problematize simplistic accounts of global queering, which continue to center the West as both an inevitable and an ideal source of knowledge about queer sexuality and the experiences of those who are attracted to the same sex.

The vignette briefly presented above concerning my experiences in Bangkok in 2019 reveals that the emergence of BL media has done more than change the Thai mediascape's representational politics of gender and sexuality. The mainstreaming of BL also provides an opportunity to explore the evolution of contemporary Thai consumer culture and the development of new forms of celebrity and participatory fandom. A second significant aim of this book, then, is to investigate how Thailand's consumer culture is responding to broader regional shifts in the Asia-Pacific, whereby the economic potential of young female and queer consumers is becoming increasingly mobilized as a result of the neoliberalization of Asian popular culture markets.²⁵ As Jungmin Kwon has insightfully noted, the popular culture industries of both South Korea and Japan have strategically deployed homoeroticism as one of many methods to expand and diversify their markets, absorbing what was once an underground subculture into the mainstream in order

to boost profits.²⁶ This has meant that these two markets' idol celebrity cultures, which traditionally focused upon "highly produced and promoted singers, models, and media personalities" who act as postmodern "image characters,"²⁷ have increasingly centered performances of staged homoeroticism as one method of appealing to young female consumers. This targeting of young women was motivated by the recognition that their economic clout had greatly expanded in the latter years of the twentieth century.²⁸ Within this book, I reveal that similar processes are occurring in contemporary Thailand, with the Thai culture industries not just mimicking these management and production practices from Japan and South Korea, but innovating and expanding them to respond to the particularities of the Thai media marketplace.

But the development of BL media in Thailand and its new forms of celebrity and fandom culture does not just simply represent a narrative concerning the reception and adaptation of Japanese popular culture to the kingdom's media landscape. The ethnographic research which drives the arguments in this book occurred during one of the most disruptive moments in recent history—the COVID-19 pandemic and the expansion of stay-at-home orders across the globe. Surprisingly, as I will detail more thoroughly throughout later chapters, COVID-19 did not stymie the development of Thai BL media but instead unleashed new waves of potential as the Thai cultural industries were forced to embrace digitalization more fully in order to reach their target markets.²⁹ This push toward greater digital accessibility and more sophisticated engagement with social media as a method of interacting with fans had the unintended consequence of exposing consumers around the world to the wonders of Thai BL series.³⁰ Including international fan markets that had already begun to mature in the early years of Thai BL fandom, such as Mainland China and the Philippines, 2020 saw Thai BL series—most notably, the massively popular *2gether, The Series* (2020, *Phror Rao Khu Kan*, "Because We're a Couple" in Thai)³¹—experience a large positive reception among Japanese consumers.³² Thai BL dramas' explosion in popularity and the passion of Japanese fans who consistently trended topics on social media tied to handsome Thai actors eventually caught the attention of not only Thai cultural producers but also Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, leading both to shift their attention to Japan as an important new market for Thai media.³³ Thai BL media celebrity and fandom is therefore no longer just responding to Japanese media culture, but it is also influencing Japanese consumers and thereby transforming into an important transnational and transcultural media phenomenon itself.

This book's aim, then, is to argue that the center of queer cultural production within the Asia-Pacific has shifted from Japan—long considered the most influential producer of queer media in Asia³⁴—to Thailand. To support this claim, I explore both the growing international fandom of Thailand's BL media and the important influence of international investment into the development of these media. I particularly choose to focus on the specific case studies of Thai BL fandom in Mainland China, the Philippines, and Japan to explore how this popular culture form enters into dialogue with each of these national contexts' queer cultures.

Through this transnational investigation, I reveal that the queer potentials of Thai BL have unlocked particular affective fantasies among international fans that intervene into situations of homophobia, which exist across the Asia-Pacific region. The unexpected result of this transnationalization is that Thailand has emerged as an imaginary space through which consumers across these national contexts explore their identities as not only queer individuals, but also national subjects embedded within the broader Asia-Pacific cultural sphere. In producing a new celebrity and fan culture that queers the heteronormative nature of the Thai media landscape, BL series have also radically transformed the media cultures of the broader Asia-Pacific. In so doing, Thai BL media has thus produced new knowledge concerning gender and sexuality which both Thai and international consumers view as not only transformative, but also as specifically Asian.

Sexuality in Thailand: Evolving Understandings of Same-Sex Desire in the Twenty-first Century

There is a pervasive global belief that Thai culture is extremely sexually open and liberal, with scholars such as Alex Au and Yohsin Wang particularly noting that Thailand has emerged as a symbol of queer liberation for many same-sex desiring men and women throughout Asia.³⁵ Likewise, in the West there is a common discourse within gay male communities that the prevalence of foreign-facing sex entertainment districts in cities such as Bangkok and Pattaya speaks to Thailand's positioning as a "gay paradise" that is supposedly more tolerant than North America and Western Europe.³⁶ Lastly, the image of the *kathoey* or "ladyboy" has emerged within global media as a marker of Thailand's apparent status as a nation with a conceptualization of gender and sexuality that is radically different from the dimorphic model common in the West where a gender binary comprising the categories of "man" and "woman" has been traditionally dominant.³⁷ It should be noted that this is a narrative that agencies within the Thai governmental bureaucracy have occasionally promoted as part of an attempt to mobilize the pink dollar among foreign tourists, with a notable example being the Tourism Authority of Thailand's 2019 campaign entitled "GoThaiBeFree," which positioned the country as a space for LGBTQ+ tourists to "find themselves" within the kingdom.

At first glance the Thai concept of *phet*, defined by Jackson as a "master concept" which incorporates sex, gender, and sexuality within "legal, academic, and popular discourses,"³⁸ does appear more expansive than the traditional Western sex/gender binary. As presented in Table 1, *phet* contains within it a plethora of both heteronormative and non-normative (from a Western perspective) sexual and gendered subjectivities, each considered to be separate and contained.³⁹ It must be noted that the *phet* categories presented in Table 1 have undergone further refinement in the twenty-first century and this list is not meant to be considered exhaustive. Importantly, English-language terminology has been incorporated into the local system of *phet*, a phenomenon I unpack further below.

Table 1 A selection of *phet* categories in contemporary Thailand.⁴⁰

	BIRTH SEX					
	Male			Female		
Gender Expression						
Cisgender	<i>Phu-chai</i>	<i>Bi</i>	<i>Gay</i>	<i>Les; Dee</i>	<i>Bi</i>	<i>Phu-ying</i>
Undefined			<i>Chai-rak-chai</i>	<i>Ying-rak-ying</i>		
Intermediate			<i>Tut</i>			<i>Tom</i>
Transgender	<i>Kathoey-les</i>		<i>Kathoey;</i> <i>Sao-praphet-sorng;</i> <i>Phu-ying-kham-phet</i>			<i>Phu-chai-</i> <i>kham-phet</i>
Attracted to:	Females	Both Sexes	Males	Females	Both Sexes	Males

The superficial sexual plurality presented within this table and the fantasy of sexual liberalism that has widely circulated around the globe belie the remarkably conservative and heteronormative reality that typifies contemporary Thai society. Reflecting on the sexual norms of twenty-first-century Bangkok, Jackson notes that Thailand remains a society where expressions of sexuality which deviate from heterosexual norms are often explicitly censored, particularly within literature and film.⁴¹ Underlying the pluralistic notion of *phet* is a strong ideological commitment to heteronormative conceptualizations of sexuality which privilege the sexual and romantic relationships between the cisgendered and heterosexual *phu-chai* (men) and *phu-ying* (women).⁴² Thus, while *phet* categories for queer gender expressions and sexual desires such as *kathoey* (ladyboy), *tut* (sissy), and *tom* (butch) certainly exist, mainstream Thai society often positions them as dangerous or deviant due to the potentially un-reproductive nature of their sexual acts.⁴³ Indeed, terms such as *tut* have a decidedly pejorative nuance in mainstream Thai communication (somewhat akin to English “faggot”), despite having been recuperated among sexual minority communities in recent years. Within his history of the representation of men and women in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Thai cultural production, Scott Barmé exposes how Thai modernity was founded in remarkably patriarchal ideologies which privileged heterosexual relationships and the concomitant subjugation of women and same-sex desiring individuals.⁴⁴

The Thai media landscape plays an important role in naturalizing the privileging of the heteronormative *phu-chai* and *phu-ying*. Nowhere is this more apparent than within the television soap operas known as *lakhorn* from which the Thai BL series examined within this book have somewhat paradoxically emerged. Originally referring to a genre of classical theatrical performance, the term *lakhorn* is now also used to describe melodramatic soap operas screened on free-to-air TV channels that typically consist of hundreds of episodes.⁴⁵ According to media theorist Brett Farmer, *lakhorn* represent “national popular culture” that forms part of a “space of common cultural exchange,” which strongly influences understandings of society—including gender ideologies—among Thai consumers.⁴⁶ As a media form reminiscent of the Western soap opera, *lakhorn* “focus largely on ... the personal

and domestic spheres of everyday life (kinship, sexuality, generational conflict, marriage, birth, illness, death etc).⁴⁷ Media anthropologist Rebecca Townsend notes that *lakhorn* privilege romances between wealthy men and disadvantaged women, with the narratives almost always concluding with the male and female protagonists—known in Thai as the *phra-ek* and *nang-ek*—happily married to each other.⁴⁸ Townsend argues that the standard formula of *lakhorn* is not only highly heteronormative, but also disciplines consumers to adopt the gender norms prevalent within Thailand’s heteropatriarchal society. As the narrative goal of these popular soap operas is often marriage, *lakhorn* valorize and normalize heteronormative sexuality and life courses and thus “reflect Thai historical perspectives of male authority over women’s bodies.”⁴⁹ Nowhere is this more explicit than in the prevalence of sexual violence and rape in *lakhorn*. Through an analysis of popular *lakhorn*, Townsend persuasively argues that rape is commonly deployed as a narrative trope to either punish or discipline an independent young woman until she submits to male control (often, in the process, falling in love with her rapist).⁵⁰ As I will reveal in Chapter 2, early Thai BL series adapted many of these heteronormative representational strategies before the genre evolved into a more explicit challenge to the Thai media landscape’s ideological status quo.

Film scholar Serhat Üaldi argues within his survey of the “cinematic regime of representations” of gender non-conforming men within Thai cinema that “visual representation of queerness has long been dominated by transgender *kathoey* characters” who are rarely portrayed sympathetically.⁵¹ Further, the figure of the *kathoey* was often conflated with all same-sex desiring men, leading Thai cinema to typically present queer men as feminized, comparatively low-class compared to heterosexual protagonists, and morally loose.⁵² While the *kathoey* has emerged in Western commentary on Thailand as an index for the kingdom’s supposed sexual liberalism, Üaldi highlights that this *phet* category is in reality frequently deployed as a mark of deviance, which is contrasted negatively with heteronormative *phra-ek* and *nang-ek*.⁵³ As Jackson demonstrates through his analysis of state control of media in late-twentieth-century Thailand, government media regulators commonly positioned both *kathoey* and gay characters as not only potential threats to supposedly “healthy” reproductive sexual relationships, but even as a threat to the stability of Thai culture itself.⁵⁴ Indeed, in the past the Thai Ministry of Culture and other government agencies have often acted swiftly and decisively to limit depictions of gay male characters and *kathoey* as part of broader efforts to protect the moral purity of Thainess (*khvam-pen-Thai*).⁵⁵ From the perspective of successive Thai governments, then, Thainess is intimately tied to heteronormativity.⁵⁶ For this reason, *kathoey* characters are frequently utilized as comic relief or placed in narrative situations that reinforce rather than destabilize the heteronormative storylines that typically underpin Thai mainstream media. Referring to *kathoey* characters appearing within 1990s films, Üaldi provocatively argues that queer characters in mainstream cinema ultimately tend to be reduced to “screaming clowns.”⁵⁷

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, both independent and mainstream cinema has emerged that seeks to provide alternative and

empowering accounts of queer subjectivity, which directly challenge depictions of both *kathoey* and gay men as hyper-effeminate sexual deviants. Ünaldi notes that “the Thai movie scene ... has become increasingly dynamic in its depictions of modern gay and *kathoey* lives ... after the emergence of the so-called Thai New Wave cinema in 1997.”⁵⁸ For instance, Poj Arnon’s 2007 film *Bangkok Love Story* (titled *Phuean ... Ku Rak Mueng Wa*, “Friend ... I Love You” in Thai) was a gay romantic crime drama that focused on “macho” policemen and gangsters who just happened to fall in love, breaking the persistent tendency for same-sex desiring men to be depicted as “sissy” *kathoey* or *tut*.⁵⁹ The same year also saw the release of the blockbuster teen romantic comedy *Love of Siam (Rak Haeng Sayam*, “The Love[s] of/from Siam” in Thai), directed by Chookiat Sakveerakul, which detailed the blossoming love of two cisgendered high school boys.⁶⁰ *Love of Siam* has played a particularly important role in the development of Thai BL, as I will detail in Chapter 1. In recent years, independent and arthouse cinema has also subverted the image of the *kathoey* to deploy camp humor as a method for critiquing Thailand’s authoritarian governments.⁶¹ Likewise, theorist Arnika Fuhrmann has revealed that queer sensibilities have been brought into dialogue with vernacular Buddhism within both mainstream and independent cinema throughout the twenty-first century as a form of “melancholic critique” of Thai modernity, particularly in the work of Thailand’s most internationally renowned director, Apichatpong Weerasethakul.⁶² Despite the emergence of this queer cinema, the Thai mainstream media landscape has however remained largely heteronormative, at least until the advent of Thai BL series.

The evolution of this queer independent cinema forms part of a broader cultural shift or “queer boom” in Thailand, whereby “global capitalism, new electronic media, and transnational influences” have impacted understandings of *phet*, producing a new diversity of identity categories for queer sexualities and gender performances.⁶³ As Jackson has argued within his seminal work on the impact of global queering on Thailand’s sexual minority communities, influence from global gay and lesbian culture has led “Western” identity categories such as gay, lesbian, and transgender to be incorporated into the framework of *phet*.⁶⁴ But these identity categories were not imported directly into Thailand without undergoing processes of cultural localization, entering into dialogue with preexisting categories such as *kathoey* and *tut*. Therefore, the term *gay* came to signify a same-sex desiring male who expresses a gender normative masculinity that was contrasted with the supposed femininity of the *kathoey*. Likewise, the term “lesbian” was contracted to *les* and is typically used to refer to a “butch” lesbian, as did *tom*, a shortened form of the English “tomboy.” A same-sex desiring woman who expressed a hyper-feminine identity and entered into relationships with either *les* or *tom* came to be known as *dee*, derived from the English word “lady.” Finally, due to the work of transnational activists within the arena of public health, the concept of transgender was translated into a variety of different Thai-language terms including *sao-phphet-sornng*, *phu-ying/phu-chai-khwam-phet*, and *trans* in an attempt to dislodge concepts of transgenderism from the figure of the *kathoey*.⁶⁵ The explosion of these

new *phet* categories throughout Thailand was facilitated by the increasing visibility of same-sex desiring people across Thai media as well as a boom in businesses catering to domestic (rather than foreign) gay men in Bangkok and other major urban centers such as Chiang Mai, Hat Yai, and Nakhon Ratchasima.⁶⁶

While the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw the growing influence of Western knowledge concerning sexuality on Thai notions of queerness, the 2010s saw a decline in aspirations for Western modes of queerness in Thailand.⁶⁷ Instead, Thai sexual minority culture came under the influence of East Asia due to the rising popularity of Japanese and Korean popular culture among young people in Thailand.⁶⁸ The fashion for all things Japanese and Korean has instilled aspirations for what cultural anthropologist Dredge Byung-chu Kang-Nguyen has termed “Korpanese” (a portmanteau of Korean and Japanese) aesthetics for “White Asians” among middle-class Thai consumers.⁶⁹ Kang-Nguyen notes that K-pop has especially impacted gay male culture, with this genre of hip-hop- and electronica-inspired idol music more likely to be played in Bangkok’s bustling gay clubs than Western pop hits.⁷⁰ This, in turn, has led to shifting understandings of certain *phet* categories, with the pejorative category of *tut* (sissy) re-emerging as a positive marker for desirable feminine masculinity among some same-sex attracted men due to it having been linked to Korean idols’ supposed soft masculinity and fierce femininity.⁷¹ Megan Sinnott has likewise noted that Korean idol fandom has impacted the *tom* culture of Thailand, with the *tom* aesthetic evolving from a Western-influenced butch dyke style to a softer form of “female masculinity” that incorporates the aesthetics of male K-pop idols.⁷² In fact, this broader aesthetic shift has also further refined how *phet* operates, with categories such as *tom gay king* (a *tom* who couples with another *tom* and takes the active sexual position) and *tom gay queen* (a *tom* who couples with another *tom* and takes the passive sexual position) emerging in twenty-first-century Thailand.⁷³ Simply put, Japan and Korea have become desirable in Thailand and this has strongly contoured representations of queerness across both mainstream and sexual minority media. As I will explore throughout this book, the emergence of Thai BL and its celebrity culture is heavily embedded within this broader Korpanese imaginary.

Boys Love’s Global Journeys: From Japan to the World

The emergence of Thailand’s BL media also forms an important part of a broader transnational phenomenon—the spread throughout East and Southeast Asia of the Japanese genre of queer popular culture also known as Boys Love (*bōizu rabu*)—and it is crucial to understand this history to make sense of the transformative nature of Thai BL. This requires us to briefly consider the history of Japanese BL. To do this, it is first instructive to think through the global expansion of the popular culture of Japan, specifically its comics known as *manga* and cartoons known as *anime*. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the Japanese cultural industries specifically targeted East and Southeast Asia as priority markets for

their products as a result of the economic downturn brought about by the collapse of the Japanese postwar economic miracle.⁷⁴ Spurred by both passionate fans who shared unofficial translations of Japanese *manga* and *anime* and the broadcast of Japanese television dramas and idol pop music due to strategic investment by Japanese production companies,⁷⁵ East and Southeast Asia experienced a Japan Wave in the late 1990s and early 2000s as the consumption of all things Japanese became mainstream among the region's young people.⁷⁶ Media scholar Nissim Otmazgin highlights that this trend has continued to the present day under the Japanese government's Cool Japan scheme, an important soft power initiative designed to increase cultural exports to both address Japan's flagging economy and develop an attraction to Japan among international consumers to raise national prestige around the globe.⁷⁷ Within Thailand, the development of BL owes much to this attraction to Japan.

In Japan, BL historically emerged in the 1970s from *manga* for young women, which focused on the romantic and sexual relationships between boys and men.⁷⁸ At the time, such comics were known as *shōnen'ai* (the love of young boys) and they became increasingly popular among (mostly) heterosexual female consumers.⁷⁹ The genre was particularly pioneered by a group of female *manga* authors that included Takemiya Keiko, Hagio Moto, and Ikeda Riyoko. Inspired by the romantic fiction and films of Europe popular in Japan at the time,⁸⁰ as well as the queer fiction of author Mori Mari and the Japanese gay magazine *Barazoku*,⁸¹ these women began writing about the often-frustrated loves of boys in fanciful and beautiful European settings. Eventually coming to be known as the Year 24 Group since many of them were born around the twenty-fourth year of Japan's Showa Era (1949), these women played a crucial role in the wider development of postwar Japanese girl's culture.⁸² Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many amateur authors and fans also began to produce their own homoerotic and parodic re-imaginings of mainstream *anime* and *manga*, which would be self-published in fanzines known as *dōjinshi* and sold at large fan events such as Comic Market (*Komiketto*).⁸³ Eventually the works within these fanzines came to be termed *yaoi*, a humorous contraction of the phrase *yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi* (no climax, no point, no meaning) and at this time *yaoi* was especially understood as a parodic genre of mainstream works.⁸⁴ As BL professionalized via dedicated comic magazines in the 1990s, its generic conventions crystallized into a set of widely accepted representational strategies and narrative tropes that remain central to Japanese queer popular culture to this day.⁸⁵ The professionalization of the genre led to a supposed BL boom, which flooded the Japanese marketplace with *anime*, television serials, novels, drama CDs, and video games with BL themes and narratives.⁸⁶ Incidentally it was during the commercialization of the genre that the term "Boys Love" became the preferred name for Japan's homoerotic comics culture. BL has become big business in recent years, with a domestic market size estimated to be roughly ¥212 billion in 2014.⁸⁷

Noted *manga* historian and cultural critic Fujimoto Yukari provides two explanations for the popularity of BL among young heterosexual women in

Japan. First, within the context of Japan's heteropatriarchal society where women's sexual desires are often denied, the gender ambiguity of BL allows women to safely play with sex and explore their fantasies.⁸⁸ Second, the absence of women within these works creates a non-threatening atmosphere, which unlocks specific affective responses of intrigue and curiosity that empower women as agents who direct their own sexual futures without fear of patriarchal intervention.⁸⁹ It must be noted that since their inception, BL *manga* have also been consumed by lesbian women, with both *manga* critic Mizoguchi Akiko and cultural historian James Welker revealing that this genre of popular culture provided queer women an opportunity to see affirming images of same-sex attraction that were explicitly emancipatory within a social context that lacked lesbian visibility.⁹⁰ Mizoguchi, reflecting both on her own BL fandom and the realization of her lesbian identity, has stated that the relatively androgynous bodies of the characters in BL allowed lesbian women to reimagine them as female and thus project themselves into the characters, facilitating the expression of same-sex desire and producing new sexualities in 1970s and 1980s Japan.⁹¹ On the other hand, BL received a less enthusiastic reception among same-sex desiring men, at least initially. In the 1990s, Japanese BL fandom was dominated by a so-called *yaoi* dispute between gay activists and heterosexual female fans, with gay activists arguing that BL simplistically appropriates the images of gay men for women's fantasies and thus does little to destabilize heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality that underlie homophobic discrimination in Japan.⁹² That being said, my interviews with young Japanese gay men in the mid-2010s revealed that a minority of same-sex desiring men do indeed read BL and understand it as a legitimate expression of gay desire, although there remains broad distaste for these supposed women's texts in Japan's gay culture.⁹³

Tomoko Aoyama has persuasively argued that reading BL requires consumers to possess specific literacies born out of the genre's history in order to decode the meanings inherent to BL texts.⁹⁴ Santos likewise notes that these "rotten literacies" produce queer affects, which facilitate women's deconstruction of heteronormativity through the pleasurable potentials of homoeroticism embedded within Japan's traditionally homosocial framework for conceptualizing male-male relationships.⁹⁵ For both Aoyama and Santos, BL is representative of young Japanese women's culture due to its inherent intertextuality, encouraging readers to link texts together in ways that queer dominant imaginaries of sex and gender.⁹⁶ In many ways, Aoyama's and Santos's theories of BL literacy are similar to those of cultural critic Azuma Hiroki, who argues that Japanese fans of *anime* and *manga* possess a sophisticated database of narrative and non-narrative elements, which they draw upon to make sense of the popular culture texts that they consume.⁹⁷ BL, cultural critic Nishimura Mari attests, also draws upon a database that is structured around a supposed *ōdō* (noble formula), which stipulates that the narrative must focus on the romantic relationship between two *bishōnen* and that this narrative must progress in certain predetermined ways.⁹⁸ An important aspect of the *ōdō* is the so-called *seme-uke* rule, whereby one of the characters (typically the protagonist) is presented as an *uke* who is passively initiated into male-male

romance by an aggressive *seme* who subsequently leads their relationship.⁹⁹ Furthermore, the *uke* (the receiver) is the partner who is penetrated during sex and is represented as soft and effeminate compared to the *seme* (the attacker) who, as penetrator, is presented as comparatively harder and more masculine.¹⁰⁰ The authors of BL texts consciously use specific tropes from this *ōdō* in conjunction with the broader database that sits at the heart of Japanese pop culture fandom to signal to readers which character is the *uke* and which the *seme*.¹⁰¹ I will discuss the *ōdō* and its specific literacies in more depth in Chapter 2.

Over the years, BL has evolved into an increasingly transnational form of popular culture. For instance, BL fandom emerged in East Asia throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, with significant fan communities developing in both South Korea and the broader Sinosphere.¹⁰² Indeed, beginning in Taiwan and then flowing to Hong Kong and Mainland China, BL *manga* fandom rapidly spread throughout Chinese-speaking regions of Asia, giving birth to a vibrant tradition of text-based amateur fictions that came to be known as *danmei*.¹⁰³ At the same time, a large US-centric Anglophone fandom for BL also appeared, which subsequently spread throughout Western Europe and Latin America.¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, Anglophone fandom quickly developed their own uses for Japanese fan terminology, with *shōnen'ai* utilized for works lacking sexual content and *yaoi* referring to works with explicit sex scenes.¹⁰⁵ As BL transnationalized, it was often necessary for the genre to be adapted for local audiences via a process that media theorist Iwabuchi has termed “glocalization” in reference to the *mukokuseki* (nation-less) branding and development typical of Japanese companies in the 1990s.¹⁰⁶ Fan studies scholar Dru Pagliassotti, for example, notes that US publishers adapted Japanese BL to local legal and social frameworks by censoring sex scenes so that it would not be understood as pornographic content (specifically, child pornography).¹⁰⁷

The case of BL's journey into South Korea and its synthesis with the Korean idol industry is particularly important to consider. As I will reveal in subsequent chapters, aspects of BL culture as it was glocalized to the pop culture landscape of Korea have become especially influential to the culture of celebrity that has evolved around BL media in Thailand. Just prior to the moment Korean entertainment companies began producing idol boybands in the 1990s, a fandom for Japanese BL had exploded among young women in South Korea in the late 1980s.¹⁰⁸ As young women were enthusiastically supporting and discussing the handsome idols from bands such as H.O.T., Sechs Kies, and Shinhwa on online forums, some were also enthusiastically consuming the fan-translated BL *manga* from Japan that was available on these sites.¹⁰⁹ Unsurprisingly, young women began to “ship” handsome idols from their favorite bands together, practicing “shipping” whereby they imagined idols in homoerotic relationships as a way to express both their fannish devotion and their sexual desires.¹¹⁰ In Anglophone fandom, the term “ship,” deriving from “relationship,” refers to the process of imagining an intimate relationship between two characters or people. In Japan, the preferred term is *kappuringu* (coupling) and likewise in Korea the term *keopeulling* is most used. The phrase “to ship” has been borrowed into Thai fandom slang as a direct adoption of the English phrase.

This speaks to one of the biggest differences between the BL cultures of Japan and Korea. Whereas in Japan fans are more likely to reimagine characters from *manga* and *anime* in homoerotic relationships (at least before Japanese fans of K-pop and Thai BL emerged), Korean fans are more likely to imagine two real people together.¹¹¹ As businesses specifically targeting young female consumers, both the Japanese and the Korean idol industries go to great lengths to manage the star personas of their idols, implementing dating bans and media control to ensure that the male idols remain unattached and thus hypothetically available to their female fans.¹¹² As the K-pop industry matured, Kwon argues, BL was co-opted into the developmental logics of Korea's idol culture as a "safe" way for female fans to consume their idols without compromising this theoretical availability.¹¹³ It has now become routine for K-pop idols to perform "fan service" for their fans, whereby idols perform a variety of actions to satisfy the desires of their fans. This often involves a practice known as "skinship" in which idols touch each other in intimate ways (including hugging and sometimes kissing). These acts, which Kwon refers to as "staged intimacy," are then subsequently drawn upon by passionate fans in the production of homoerotic fanfiction and fanart.¹¹⁴ Similar practices have become central to Thailand's BL culture due, in part, from the influence of K-pop fandom in the kingdom, as I discuss in Chapter 3.

As I will more fully explore in Chapter 1, the development of BL fandom in Thailand can be traced to the early 1990s when members of the Thai middle class began to regularly consume Japanese *manga*.¹¹⁵ Most of the Japanese BL comics initially imported, translated, and consumed by fans in Thailand were pirated by clandestine fan networks since established publishing houses feared engaging with this explicitly homoerotic medium due to strict laws against the circulation of pornographic and other supposedly obscene materials.¹¹⁶ These comics became known as "cartoon *yaoi*" and this term was soon shortened to "cartoon *wai*" (where "*wai*" stands for the initial Y in *yaoi*).¹¹⁷ Since it was often difficult to access translated *manga*, especially outside Bangkok, a vibrant community of creators flourished online who produced BL fiction that became extremely popular on youth-oriented online portal sites such as *Pantip* and *Dek-D*.¹¹⁸ One online BL novel became especially famous—*LOVE SICK: Chaotic Young Men in Blue Shorts* (*LOVE SICK: Chunlamun Num Kang-keng Nam-ngoeng*), written by an author adopting the pseudonym INDRYTIMES.¹¹⁹ As this novel was particularly famous on the Thai internet, in 2014 it was adapted into a TV series. *Lovesick's* broadcast initiated the boom for homoerotic series that subsequently became known as "series *wai*" or "Thai BL." That said, I will reveal in Chapter 1 that there were also important precedents to *Lovesick*. Within these newly emergent Thai BL series inaugurated by *Lovesick*, however, the tropes of the Japanese *ōdō* were significantly adapted to the norms of the Thai mediascape. As I detail at length throughout the following chapters, this process of adaptation ultimately produced a new form of queer popular culture which has also spread throughout Asia, mimicking the initial transnationalization of the Japanese BL from which it was initially adapted.

Notes on Method: Critical Asian Queer Cultural Studies

There is a growing concern among scholars of Thailand that the academic study of the kingdom's culture and society has been typified by a lack of theoretical engagement, with most scholars instead merely seeking to empirically describe Thai society without considering what this may mean in more conceptual terms. In her insightful review of Arnika Fuhrmann's *Ghostly Desires*, literary critic Rachel Harrison states that "Thai cultural studies has struggled ... with the question of what to do with 'theory,'" persuasively arguing that the field has been "marred ... by a predilection for rich tapestries of empirical data in preference to forms of analysis commonly deprecated as somehow abstruse."¹²⁰ Likewise, Jackson has recently taken (Western) social theorists of Southeast Asia to task for treating the region as a mere laboratory for the testing of Anglo-American theory, failing to take into account the potentials of a critically informed area studies to develop its own theory grounded in local knowledge and experience.¹²¹ Jackson notes that the recent critique of area studies in the Western academy fails to consider that the so-called universal theory developed through disciplinary scholarship such as history, literary criticism, and social science is itself heavily embedded within particular Western contexts.¹²² Thai cultural studies, both Harrison and Jackson attest, has the potential to denaturalize and critique the purported universalism of critical theory's grand narratives, with a critical Southeast Asian studies turning Thailand into a site for the generation of theory rather than an object for empirical observation. Unfortunately, this potential has not always been realized in previous scholarship.

My aim in writing this book is precisely to produce critical theory concerning transnational Asian queer popular culture through my study of Thailand's BL media and its attendant celebrity and fandom culture. To do this, I draw upon the emerging conceptual approach that has come to be termed "Asia as method" to critically theorize Thai BL as a site through which queerness itself can be understood. Pioneered by historian Kuan-Hsing Chen as a decolonizing method that centers Asia within knowledge production,¹²³ "Asia as method" borrows from the traditions of cultural studies in its interdisciplinary analysis of "lived experiences, social practices and cultural representations ... considered in their network-like or intertextual links, from the viewpoints of power, difference and human agency."¹²⁴ Fundamentally, "Asia as method ... uses the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchor" from which the societies and cultures of Asia can become their own point of reference, mobilizing "the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia ... to provide alternative horizons and perspectives."¹²⁵ In so doing, "Asia as method" rejects the fixity and universality of Western theory and instead positions Asia as the lens through which new and different understandings of world history and culture can be expressed.¹²⁶

The study of Southeast Asian queer cultures has been central to the development of the "Asia as method" framework, drawing upon the scholarship of theorists such as Jackson in its skepticism of the universalist logics of Western theories.¹²⁷ Writing on queer Singapore, performance theorist Eng-Beng Lim has called on