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Thomas Baudinette: Boys Love Media in Thailand: Celebrity, Fans, and Transnational Asian Queer Popular Culture

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Thomas Baudinette's *Boys Love Media in Thailand: Celebrity, Fans, and Transnational Asian Queer Culture* explores Thailand's queerscape through Boys Love media analysis, while simultaneously proposing a decolonial reorientation of queer studies grounded in a transnational, Asia-centered perspective. Baudinette combines several methodological and theoretical frameworks from Kuan-Hsing Chen's "Asia as method" (18) and Louisa Schein's "ethnotextual approach" (19) to the affect theory, to situate Thai Boys Love as an autonomous site of queer Asian culture and knowledge production. In doing so, he shows how Thai Boys Love both participates in, strengthens, and reconfigures the flows of 'Korpanese' (Korean and Japanese) popular culture that inform its aesthetic and industrial context (cf. 34).

Baudinette traces the evolution of Thai Boys Love media in relation to the popularization of Japanese *yaoi* manga and Korean idol culture. Thai Boys Love literature began as translations of Japanese *yaoi* manga informally traded in Siam Square (cf. 31) and as online fan fictions written for male Korean idol groups. These mangas were mostly consumed by young women and to this day Boys Love continues to be a genre dominated by a female consumer base called "*sao wai*" (23) in Thailand.

The fondness of *sao wai* towards male homoerotic literature is discussed in detail in the early chapters of the book. A common claim is that Boys Love offers *sao wai* an opportunity to explore their sexuality without the restraints of a patriarchal society (cf. 34). Thus, while *sao wai* and Boys Love as a genre are frequently criticized for fetishizing gay men, Boys Love literature and media simultaneously may operate as a space for women's sexual imagination and emancipation. Another reason why Boys Love is a female dominated fandom might be explained in regard to Korean idol culture. Through 'shipping'—a practice where celebrities are imagined as couples (cf. 22)—*sao wai* find a way to "consume male celebrity through the 'safety' of a homoerotic fantasy dislocated from female competitors for an idol's affections" (34). Therefore, many renowned Boys Love authors may have written fan fiction for their favored ships at some point in their career. Although Baudinette's claims hold considerable validity, the sociocultural dimensions of Boys Love consumption among *sao wai* could have been examined in greater depth. In particular, critiques from male queer perspectives appear to be only briefly acknowledged or insufficiently engaged with.

Perhaps the most important role the *sao wai* have played for the queerscape of Thailand was to popularize homoerotic narratives which "allowed gay men access to fantasies of romance that heteronormative societies such as Thailand have historically denied them" (53). Although Thailand has been advertised in the West as some sort of "gay paradise," especially with the popularization of "*kathoey* or 'ladyboy'" (7), the reality differs from these narratives. A short analysis of *lakhorn* (Thai version of soap operas) reveals how deeply patriarchy and heteronormativity are embedded in Thai social and cultural

narratives (cf. 7-11). By bringing homoeroticism into the mainstream culture, *sao wai* thus enact a form of indirect agency that contributes to the ongoing reconfiguration of Thailand's queerscape.

In chapter 1, Baudinette narrates how publishing houses and entertainment companies that focus on Boys Love emerged as a lucrative business. The chapter focusses especially on how these publishers became the driving force in the glocalization of Boys Love. "BL Machine" (47), a term coined by Baudinette himself, explains how GMM and companies similar to it exploit and use Boys Love "as a vehicle to promote their new talent and access the lucrative fan market for Thai BL both at home and abroad" (48). They create *khu jin*, which translates to 'imagined couple,' in order to promote the series, their new idols, and the products endorsed by their sponsors. A lot of Anglophone fans, including myself, consider *khu jin* as 'queerbaiting.' Queerbaiting can be described as a marketing technique in entertainment in which "queer representation is deployed in mainstream media in tokenistic ways for the purposes of economic exploitation" (103). Baudinette also touches upon the allegations of queerbaiting as it is a topic frequently discussed within Anglophone fandoms, but resists what he calls a "fully 'paranoid reading' that only criticizes systems of oppression" (104). His reluctance to engage directly with queerbaiting discourse stems from his commitment to foregrounding fan agency; he resists interpretations that portray fans as naive or easily manipulated. Furthermore, Baudinette claims that the concept of queerbaiting itself is rooted in Western critical frameworks and that "such criticism fails to consider the specifics of the Thai context" (107), aligning with his broader Asia-centered perspective. Although I see the validity in Baudinette's arguments, I maintain that queerbaiting deserves deeper consideration, since *khu jin* is much more influential than the queerbaiting experienced within the Western media. The nomination of the famous *khu jin*, KristSingto from *SOTUS: The Series* (2016-2017) for *KAZZ Magazine's* Couple of the Year award in 2017 (cf. 46) testifies to the cultural impact of the *khu jin* phenomenon and displays the scale and reach of the *sao wai* fandom.

In chapter 2, *ōdō*, the Japanese formula used in Boys Love manga, is discussed, especially in regard to how heteronormative gender stereotypes are reinforced within *ōdō* through the allocation of *seme* (top/attacker) and *uke* (bottom/receiver) roles (cf. 55-61). The *uke* carries the stereotypical attributes and attitude of "the *bishōnen* or beautiful male youth" (58), modeled after the classic female protagonist of the *shōjo* manga, with his slimmer and fragile physique and passive behavior. Meanwhile the *seme*, as the typical male lead in romance stories, is both physically and financially stronger than *uke* and takes an active role in pursuing the love interest. Occasionally, these roles are challenged by subverting the characteristics of *seme* and *uke*. For instance, a character archetype called "*yancha uke*" (60), or the naughty bottom, challenges the *ōdō* by subverting the sexual innocence of the *uke* into sexual voraciousness. Although the characteristics of the *seme* or *uke* are challenged, they are rarely completely abolished. *Riba*, the switch, is a rare example where the line between *seme* and *uke* is crossed.

Baudinette states that in the early stages of Thai Boys Love series, the "Japanese BL has been glocalized to the narrative conventions of *lakhorn*" (62). Omnibus series, where the focus on the love stories between heterosexual and homosexual couples 'wavers,' are an example of this adaptation (cf. *ibid.*). Starting with the second season of the well-known Boys Love series *Lovesick: The Series* (2014-2015), the *ōdō* narrative structure becomes increasingly refined in Thai Boys Love television series, abandoning the aforementioned 'wavering' (cf. 65). Although Thai Boys Love productions follow and reinforce the rules of *ōdō*, it is possible to find works that challenge these stereotypes as well. *The Effect* (2019)



is a relatively unknown series that refused to adhere to the trope of rape victim turning into a lover (cf. 77f.). It depicts the aftermath of sexual violence in an ‘unromanticized’ way, completely different from the classic *ōdō* plotline.

Lovesick: The Series can be regarded as a prototype for Thai Boys Love series and serves as a recurring subject of critical analysis throughout the book. Unsurprisingly, the series also pioneered the Boys Love Machine business model, particularly in relation to product placement and celebrity endorsement, as discussed in detail in the third chapter. Talking about Boys Love Machine, GMM rises above other Thai entertainment companies so much that “in the mainstream public’s imagination that GMM has itself almost become a synonym for BL” (47). GMM is well known for its shipping practices; and throughout the book, its ‘royal couples’—SingtoKrist, OffGun, TayNew, and BrightWin—are examined in terms of media and fandom control as well as the commodification of celebrity and fan culture.

Baudinette states that “GMM’s BL Machine represents a form of ‘top-down’ engagement with consumers” (85), since it creates *khu jin* that are ‘supposed to be shipped’ by the fans. The deliberate nature of their shipping practices inherently entails a degree of fan base control, allowing GMM to shape Thai Boys Love media according to its own design. Baudinette breaks the GMM’s Boys Love Machine business model into ‘six stages’ once they find a suitable script adapted from a famous novel published in the GMM partnered publishing house (cf. 89-95). The first stage is to scout talented handsome young men. The second stage is to train the newly found talent in a way that mimics Korean idol trainees and broadcast the training process. Broadcasting is important since this is where the new talents start to form a *khu jin*. The third stage is the debut, and the fourth stage is product placement to maximize the profit gained from the *sao wai* who “are becoming lost in the affective worlds of *jin* produced by” (92) the queer romance on screen and the off-screen lives of *khu jin* that can be found on social media and promotional events. Similar to Japanese *moe*, *jin* describes a feeling of climax or extreme satisfaction, *jouissance* (cf. 35). Fan events are the fifth stage, such as fan meetings that are commonly practiced by Korean and Japanese idol bands. In the last stage variety shows are created in which fans can peek into the so-called ‘real lives’ of the *khu jin*. By completing all these stages, Boys Love Machine successfully manages to commodify romance or romanticize the commodity (cf. 95).

In the following chapters, Baudinette further elaborates on the workings of the Boys Love Machine, arguing that the commodification of queer love ultimately contributes to greater queer visibility and, consequently, to increased social acceptance within Thai society. While these claims are not unfounded, the commodification also risks reducing queerness to a marketable fetish, a process that proves harmful to actual queer individuals. As mentioned previously, Baudinette openly states that he prefers to “engage in reparative analytical practices” (105) rather than doing a “paranoid reading” focused on destructive criticism aimed at the “systems of oppression” (104). In doing so, he suggests that the Boys Love Machine has opened a new sociocultural space in Thailand, enabling queer minorities to engage in civil society and attain greater visibility for their political identities within the mainstream discourse (cf. 107). That the Boys Love Machine has the potential to encourage queer people in real life is shown by, for example, a fan watching *TayNew Meal Date* (2018). *TayNew Meal Date* is a variety show situated within the sixth stage of the Boys Love Machine model that features the *khu jin* sharing intimate moments in restaurants, remarked that the program made him realize that “gay couples should not be afraid to have sweet moments in restaurants” (105). This example really highlights the positive impact of Boys Love media on Thailand’s queerscape.

Boys Love Machine's business model mimics the Korean idols' interactive engagement schemes closely. Idols perform close interaction with fans in every imaginable way possible, be it online or offline. Streaming practices, interactions via social media, and offline meetings from handshake events to concerts are the backbone of both the idol industry and the Thai Boys Love Machine. Furthermore, the 'digital tribalism' that makes the core fan base of the Korean idol industry can be found in the Thai entertainment industry as well (cf. 113-115). This type of close engagement evokes feelings of communal bonding among fans, which then turns into a "collective *habitus*" (113). Baudinette states that Thai Boys Love fans do not borrow K-pop fan practices but that the relationship between Thai Boys Love fandom and K-pop fandoms is rather symbiotic, feeding off of each other (cf. 114).

At the same time, fans should not be seen as passive recipients of media content. By organizing banners, cheers, and souvenir exchanges, they actively assert their agency, transforming these events into spaces of shared engagement between fans and idols. To conclude, such events are not only beneficial in strengthening the fannish sense of belonging to a community but also valuable for research when observing the power dynamics between fans and their idols as these dynamics are continuously reconstructed.

In chapter 6, *Boys Love Media in Thailand* circles back to Japan; yet this return does not serve to retrace the historical roots of Thai Boys Love, but rather to illustrate a symbolic 'dethroning.' Baudinette examines the shifting circulation of Boys Love across Asia, emphasizing how the genre's meanings and aesthetics have been reconfigured as it travels from Japan to Thailand. This process of cultural translation, as he observes, involves not merely imitation but adaptation: Thai producers reinterpret Japanese narratives and emotional codes to align with local sensibilities, religious values, and commercial imperatives. At the end of the day, Thai Boys Love do not echo Japan but speak in their own voice, gathering fans from all over the world. With the global success of Thai Boys Love, most notably its reception in other Asian markets such as China, the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan, Baudinette argues that Boys Love has undergone a form of 'dislocation' from its Japanese origins (cf. 175-177). This dislocation signals both a 'decentralization' of Japan's cultural dominance and the emergence of Thailand as a new regional hub of queer media production, reshaping transnational flows of desire, fandom, and soft power across Asia. To sum it up, it can be said that, similar to the 'Korean Wave' or *Hallyu*, Thailand has swept through Asia like a gust of wind. And for many people, "the Thai Wind was ultimately a 'queer wind'" that has "begun to reshape the media ecologies of Asia" (141).

In the "Concluding Remarks," Baudinette states that "Asia has become an important new producer of 'nuanced, romantic, queer storytelling' that is revolutionizing global queer media" (183). It can be concluded that Baudinette delivers what he has promised in the introduction to his book: through his ethnotextual and transnational study of Thai Boys Love media, Thailand emerges as an autonomous site of queer knowledge production and a cultural pioneer that may ultimately exert greater influence on the Western queerscape than it is presently acknowledged to have.

