



## Boy Power: Soft Power and Political Power in the Circulation of Boys Love (BL) Narratives from South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines



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### [ *Abstract* ]

This paper examines the complexities and creative opportunities brought about by the transnational circulation of texts specifically in the areas of transmission, consumption, and adaptation. The circulation of texts and along with it creative elements such as generic forms, tropes, and frameworks for consumption form an integral part in the production and advancement of any form of popular culture. In the process of such circulation, adaptation becomes a form of social and political process necessary for domestic palatability. In this paper, I examine how these complexities can be illustrated in the circulation of one emerging popular form in East and Southeast Asia: Boys Love (BL) television and web series. Using the transnational movement of the BL genre from South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, I examine how the circulation and adaptations are inflected by considerations related to regional geopolitics and domestic issues concerned with the creative praxis of representing gender and sexuality.

**Keywords:** Boys Love, South Korean Popular Culture, Philippine Popular Culture, Thai Popular Culture

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## I . Introduction

Popular texts from Southeast Asia, specifically television or web series, have enjoyed worldwide circulation and consumption in recent years. Accelerated by digital technology and accessible through streaming services such as Netflix, YouTube, DailyMotion, and even the LGBT-themed service GagaOOLala, such texts have reached the screens of audiences around the world. Of the various texts that have since gained popularity, one genre seems to stand out among the rest: the Boys' Love (BL) series. BL narratives conventionally feature tender, intimate, and sweet encounters between two young men, usually in youth-oriented settings such as schools or camps. The lovers, who are often depicted as opposites of each other, are constructed according to the visual precepts of the notion of *bishonen* (beautiful boy), appearing as neat, wide-eyed, bordering on androgynous boys. Originating from the rich and vibrant culture of Japan, BL stories first appeared in manga, graphic novels, and other forms of visual art. Often changed interchangeably with *yaoi*, BL stories are distinguished from the former through the absence of overt eroticism and sexually explicit encounters found in their *yaoi* counterparts.

The increased popularity of BL around the world has led to a proliferation of adaptations and modes of narrative production that deviate from the Japanese versions. For instance, while most BL content in Japan was written primarily by heterosexual female writers and enjoyed communal readership in established communities, the profiles of present-day BL writers are quite diverse. More importantly, the adaptation of BL stories into audio-visual media such as film and television has opened opportunities and challenges for the deployment and consumption of such stories. For one, the "success" and popularity of such texts are no longer dependent solely on the authors [or in this case, the screenwriters]. Rather, an entire production staff occasionally working under the patronage and social politics of a major media conglomerate actively participates in the figuration of the texts' narratives.

Secondly, the wide circulation and popularity of such texts have inevitably led to the deployment of the BL text itself as a vehicle for the advancement of certain LGBT advocacies, the transmission of national economic aspirations, and the strategic filtration of such mobilization in its wake. Indeed, while earlier forms of BL focused solely on the homoerotic encounters between the two lovers in an almost idyllic utopian setting evacuated from any kind of context, these emergent texts take the conventional form of BL, with all its usual narrative tropes and characterization, and elevate these into imaginative meditations on the social and political issues of their creative ports of origin. The Taiwanese film *Your Name Engraved Herein* (2020) for instance is set against the backdrop of the end of Martial Law rule in 1987. In the film, the burgeoning romance is fractured not just because of the political shifts but also by the prevailing homophobia and heteronormative paradigms of the 80s. Another example, one that will be discussed later, is the critically acclaimed Filipino web series *Gameboys* (2020) which is set during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, the romance between the two protagonists—two computer gamers who initiate their encounters through a series of video calls—simultaneously functions both as a critique of the Philippine government’s inept response to the pandemic and as a parable of survival articulated through the trope of young love.

Sexual politics in these emergent BL texts, in other words, are not just sources of pleasure but resources of social and political narratives. In some stories, such as the aforementioned Taiwanese film and Filipino web series, the socio-political bent is obvious and apparent. In some instances, however, the inherent socio-political message is encrypted subtly not only within the text’s narrative structure but also in the creative infrastructure that supports it. Towards this, this paper is a critical meditation on how BL functions not as a textual platform to transmit political statements but as a medium of political power itself. Using samples from three territories and industries that have since taken the helm of the production of BL content, the ensuing discussion examines the various ways in which such power may be utilized and harnessed.

This essay on a meditation of two cases focuses on two forms of political power: soft power and political critique. The first part of the paper explores the notion of soft power and how contemporary BL textualizes contradictory articulations of soft power of a developing economy (Thailand) as it engages and contends with both its model and rival: South Korea. The relationship between contemporary Thai and South Korean popular culture is a contradictory one. On the one hand, the mass consumption of Korean popular media in Thailand represents the shift of preference from "farangs" (Caucasian foreigners) to what Dredge Byung'chu Kang calls "White Asians" as a source for intimacy and intercultural engagement—a turn to be sure that represents the larger geopolitical shift that positions East Asian economies as emergent superpowers (Kang, 2017: 188-189). On the other hand, the tendency of contemporary Thai popular culture to mimic and adapt Korean texts in terms of production procedures, narrative style, and ultimately infrastructure for stardom construction suggests an active movement towards utilizing the same strategies and style to compete for soft power supremacy in the Asian and international market. While these BL series are usually adapted from self-published novels written by Thai netizens, the eventual production of such narratives [from the choice of actors to the audio-visual rendition of such storylines] bears the artistic signatures of South Korean popular culture. The paper will focus on *Baker Boys* (2021), a *lakhon* (Thai television series) adaptation of the South Korean film *Antique Bakery* (2008) which in turn was an adaptation of a Japanese manga of the same name. The goal of the ensuing analyses will not be to do a side-by-side comparison. Rather, the goal is to demonstrate how, in *Baker Boys*, the aforementioned contradictions become, as in the baked sweets that emerge piping hot from the oven, a delightful textual confection of emergent sexual politics and representations of Thai soft power and visions of cosmopolitanism that are pleasing to the global eyes, ready for transnational consumption.

The second part of the work discusses the implications of such contradictions when applied to the Philippine case. While the utilization of BL as a medium to wield soft power may not

necessarily be a concern for Filipino BL, the iteration nevertheless inherits the genre’s penchant for embodying contradictions. Using *Gameboys* and the upcoming “BL Reality Show” *Sparks* (2023) as illustrative texts, the discussion examines how the genre utilizes constructions of gay masculinity to interrogate and maintain existing paradigms on sexuality, particularly in how such paradigms are constructed through the process of the consumption and adaptation of transnational texts.

As can be seen in the foregrounding of these two case studies, this paper is not necessarily a direct and clear-cut examination of Philippine-Korea relations [as in the case of the other articles in this issue]. Rather than taking a direct route, the ensuing discussion hopes to make several stopovers to extract shared concerns and possible converging points of critical reimaginings brought about by a genre that has since been circulating and wielding forms of political power in its wake.

## **II. Thai Sexual Politics and the Harnessing of Thai Soft Power in Boys Love (BL) *Lakhon***

To understand the significance of the role BL plays in the domestic sexual politics in Thailand and how it participates in the articulation of Thai soft power, it is important to do a cursory examination of BL—its perceived genesis in the Imperial courts of Japan, recurring tropes, and engagement through its reconfiguration of sexual politics—and how it was ultimately woven into the fabric of Thai popular culture and domestic political preoccupations. The focus of the ensuing discussion will be on how the importation of the BL genre into the commercial canon of Thai popular culture was and is continuously inflected by the engagement of Thai heteronationalist familialism with emergent queer subjectivities. As will be unpacked more thoroughly in this section, heteronationalist familialism in this regard refers to conservative, nationalist, and family-centered paradigms employed by the Thai government, especially during the administration of Thaksin Shinawatra, to navigate the wave of globalization in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis.

Existing scholarship on BL point to Lady Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji* (11th Century) as the urtext of sorts of BL (McLelland & Welker 2015: 6). Much of the generic conventions in BL, be they from Japan, China, or Thailand, can be found in the authorial politics and literary style associated with Murasaki's work: the image of the beautiful boy, the artistic power of the female hand in the rewriting of its milieu's concept of masculinity, and the privileging of private, domestic space in fleshing out the novel's creative treatise on sexual politics and gender-based decorum. Stories involving male-to-male romance [this time between an older and a younger samurai] during the Edo Period (1603-1867) highlighted the gender politics that minoritized women vis-a-vis the privileging of private masculine-oriented intimacies in its Confucian-oriented zeitgeist (McLelland & Welker 2015: 6-7). The proliferation of such narratives that focused on homoerotic practices and tendencies would first be supplanted during the Meiji Period (1868-1912) due to the deployment of Western sexology before seeing a revival in the Taisho Period (1912-1925) through the production of magazines that featured "young, beautiful, and sometimes effeminate-looking male figures" in women-less environments such as boarding schools and military camps (McLelland & Welker 2015: 8). The sustained mass production and consumption of such magazines, coupled with a burgeoning literacy rate, enabled a literary subculture to thrive. The primary movers and consumers in this subculture were women who not only gained access to magazines clandestinely through the subscription of their male relatives but also sought to read such texts along homoerotic lines. Ultimately, the creation of *shojo* manga in the 1960s and the authorial takeover of the so-called "Fabulous Forty-Niners" in the 1970s enabled a generation of female writers and artists, literary descendants in a way of Lady Murasaki Shikibu, to craft male-to-male romances that afforded a pleasurable form of escapism and engagement of existing heteropatriarchal structures (McLelland & Welker 2015: 9-10). The purposeful assignment of roles of the seme [the "top" or "attacker"] and the uke [the "bottom" or the "receiver"] in such texts reflects in a way the willful attempt to restructure the power play of sexual intimacy (Fujimoto & Quimby 2015: 85). Ultimately, the publication of magazines such as *Allan and June* which "functioned as a bridge... between commercial

and non-commercial worlds of *shōnen'ai manga*.” (Welker 2015: 62) and the international circulation of BL in the 1990s would facilitate the expansion of BL’s readership beyond the female demographic (Welker 2015: 66-67).

The popularity and practice of BL consumption entered Thailand through the transnational circulation of Japanese and Korean popular culture, specifically through the notion of the *bishonen* in the 1990s and Hallyu’s “flower boys syndrome” in the 2000s (Prasannam 2019: 65-66). Consumption of such texts was primarily an underground urban practice at first, with fans secretly purchasing materials through under-the-table transactions in department stores in Siam Square, a major commercial district and center for youth activity (Prasannam 2019: 66). BL entered the mainstream market by way of the award-winning film *Love of Siam* in 2007. The film, centering on the love story between two childhood friends Mew (Witwisit Hiranayawongkul) and Tong (Mario Maurer) who are reunited years later through a chance encounter in Siam Square after years of separation, swept the 2007 awards season in Thailand, winning Best Picture in almost all of the award-giving bodies. The film eventually went on to garner regional and international fame through its participation in various film festivals around the world. The success of *Love of Siam* was instrumental in laying the necessary foundation for the production of mainstream BL in Thailand. It not only assured producers that there was going to be a guaranteed domestic and international market for such content. As the thematic prototype of commercial Thai BL, the film also introduced the thematic tension and compromise that would structure the films and *lakhon* that succeeded it. In the film, the romance between Mew and Tong is aborted when the latter decides to return home to take care of his breadwinner mother and alcoholic father.

While it is easy to simply read such actions as the triumph of heteronormativity and the nuclear family, I argue that Tong’s decision must be positioned within the grid of post-1997 Thai sexual politics. It is therefore important at this juncture to briefly examine the effects of the policies enacted after the Asian financial crisis on the shaping of emergent sexual identities in Thailand. The response

to the Asian financial crisis, which began with the devaluation of the Thai baht and led to a mass withdrawal of investment from Southeast Asian economies, resulted in various changes in both the economic and political landscapes in Thailand such as the opening of the kingdom to foreign capital and investment as one of the conditions for receiving a billion-dollar aid from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Within the context of queer politics and practices, the importation of multinational investment and the economic recovery brought about by such policies gave rise to an emergent transnationally oriented class of queer consumers. Peter A. Jackson (2011) notes that the early 2000s saw an increase in the number of gay bars, saunas, and gay-oriented “zones” in Bangkok as well as a proliferation of queer-oriented print and media texts (Jackson 2011: 18). Aside from these, Thailand (most especially Bangkok) also became a hub for intra-Asian gay tourism and a home for regional queer non-government organizations (Jackson 2011: 19).

The proliferation of queer discourses triggered a dynamic push-and-pull that could still be seen in many queer-themed popular texts today. At the core is a tension between, on the one hand, the spirit of liberalism and the economic benefits brought about by the emerging class of queer local producers and transnational consumers (the notion of the “purple baht”) and, on the other, the heteronationalist paradigms that were set in place by conservative leaders to preserve the independence of a nation beset by the onslaught of foreign capital. Within the context of the production of Thai media texts, what emerges therefore are narratives that harness the lucrative power of queer capital within the acceptable parameters of a still heteronormatively-oriented nation-state. *Love of Siam* in many ways articulated the ideal compromise for such tensions. Tong’s final words to Mew [“I cannot be with you as your boyfriend, but it does not mean that I do not love you”] which he says before returning home to his family signals the kind of limited openness to queer sexuality so long as such identities and practices do not challenge the heteronormative stability of the nation. Such tension, as we will see later, is very much evident in the BL web series including *Baker Boys*.



The success of *Love of Siam* in both the domestic and the international markets encouraged the production of films that approximated its success. Some BL films such as *Red Wine in a Dark Night* (2015) and *The Blue Hour* (2015) utilize elements from the horror genre [which was also enjoying even greater viewership in the international film circuits] while others such as *My Bromance* (2014) and *Waterboyy* (2015) would later be adapted to *lakhon* formats. Such a shift increased the possibility for more sustained, long-term viewership from both domestic and international audiences. In recent years, media companies such as GMMTV have resorted to uploading subtitled episodes to free streaming websites such as YouTube. Such strategies eventually paid off, most especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when netizens, cooped up in their homes due to lockdown restrictions, began streaming new and old BL content. These investments in the burgeoning popularity of BL *lakhon* have cumulatively encouraged the Thai government to harness the lucrative potential of attracting international audiences to strengthen the nation's soft power. As defined by Joseph Nye in his seminal work *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), "soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others" (Nye 2004: 7).

More than reorienting the gaze of a captive audience to this Mekong River kingdom, however, the harnessing of soft power is also oriented by investment in utilizing the cultural apparatuses of the nation-state for economic benefits. As Nye points out, "soft power is also likely to be more important when power is dispersed in another country rather than concentrated" (Nye 2004: 16). In a meeting with major entertainment conglomerates, Prime Minister and Defense Minister Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha endorsed "the proposal made by representatives of the film industry to promote the country's soft power through entertainment and film contents related to arts, culture, food, and tourism, as part of the Government's effort to restore national economy and enhance people's solidarity" (Asia News Monitor 2020). As illustrated by Chan-o-cha's characterization of soft power, texts and practices deployed to fulfill the function of harnessing soft power must fulfill the two-pronged function of amassing transnational attraction and

income while simultaneously maintaining the stability of the nation-state. What is interesting with the Thai case however is that their increased attempt and interest in harnessing soft power by way of its varied cultural apparatuses seems to be heavily influenced and inspired by an example *par excellence* of Asian soft power: South Korea.

As mentioned earlier, the sustained circulation and consumption of cultural texts in Thailand is not an entirely new phenomenon, with such activity going back to the earlier days of the Korean Wave. In recent years however, the traffic of cultural texts between the two nation-states has become more vibrant and visible, with the production and circulation of such texts now no longer confined to a specific subgroup or niche market as in the earlier days. In university entrance examinations for instance, more students chose Korean (18%) over Japanese (17%) as a second language—a considerable feat given that Korean was introduced as a language exam choice only in 2018 (Sukegawa 2022). Another notable example that highlights this energized Thai-Korean collaboration is the popularity of the Thai artist Lisa in the South Korean group Blackpink who has been making waves as both a member of the group and as a stand-alone artist.

Lisa's recent success, paired with the sustained influx of Korean texts, has motivated state leaders of Thailand to not only continue the working relationship but also to replicate South Korea's successful mobilization of cultural resources in the deployment of soft power (Chaiyong 2021). Such attempts however are not without criticism or pessimism. Sukegawa Seia (2022) for instance argues that "political values," specifically adherence to democratic values and processes, are necessary for the replication of South Korea's success story. In contrast to South Korea which has since enjoyed rapid growth in cultural and creative industry since its first democratic election in 1987, the kingdom of Thailand up to today is beset with coups and the establishment of military juntas [the latest one in 2014] that may impede democratic processes (Sukegawa 2022).

Despite such obstacles, however, decent attempts to follow the South Korean style and production procedure could still be found in the production of such texts. The recent BL *lakhon* quite interestingly demonstrates this mimicry. Most actors for instance bear strong features that allow them to be passed off as East Asian actors. Another notable example is the instrumental in the opening theme of the hit series *Dark Blue Kiss* (2019) which bears striking similarities with the 2008 South Korean drama, *Temptation of Wife* (2008). Such similarities are “justifiable” in the sense that both dramas deal with the problem of infidelity as the core conflict of their story. In terms of production, Thomas Baudinette (2020) discusses how the introduction and promotion of BL actors, who are usually heterosexual) follow the same pattern as the construction of young pop stars in Japan and South Korea: first debuting as relatively unknown actors in BL roles then briefly hinting at their roles in fan meets and vlogs with their assigned “romantic partner,” before finally “graduating” to heterosexual roles in later *lakhon* (Baudinette 2020).

Such forays into the deployment of soft power using BL as a medium of choice have so far been quite successful. Fan meets of different love tandems touring Asia are often sold out. Merchandise [such as apparel and replicas of set props] sold on GMMTV’s websites run out of stock immediately. While the so-called “turnovers” of old to new stars are quick and almost mechanical, the passionate and warm reception to such actors remains the same.

Writers of such series however are still careful with the appropriation and mimicry. Towards these, my examination of *Baker Boys* explores how the *lakhon* borrows the structure and style of *Antique Bakery* and then transforms the BL into a commodity that neutralizes the queering potential of the BL through its family-oriented narrative for its conservative domestic audiences while simultaneously retaining the necessary exoticizing tactics related to the notion of the Asian Boy to sustain the gaze of an international market and strengthen its perceived growing soft power.

### III. The Case of *Baker Boys*

*Baker Boys* is a *lakhon* version of *Antique Bakery*. Originating as a manga, the story has film and television versions from Japan and South Korea. Despite the differences in medium, all versions retain the story's core narrative. The story follows the friendship and misadventures of four men. Since the characters in each version have different names, I shall refer to each one first as Character A, B, C, and D. Character A is the heterosexual owner of the bakery. A playboy-wannabe, he claims to have opened the bakery to attract and flirt with women. It is later revealed that he was once kidnapped and forced to eat pastries. Character B is an openly gay world-class pastry chef who is known as the "Gay of Demonic Charm" given his unique ability to make anyone [except for Character A, whom he is attracted to] fall in love with him. He is also the former lover of his French mentor, Jean. Character C is a boxer who, owing to a head injury from his last match, could no longer compete in the ring. He has a sweet tooth and his love for pastries motivates Character B to take him in as an apprentice. Character D is Character A's childhood friend turned self-appointed bodyguard for life. He is characterized as socially inept and clumsy.

While it is possible that *Baker Boys* is based on the original manga and did not take a transit route via South Korea, the mere selection of the material itself suggests an implicit attempt to simultaneously mimic and challenge the South Korean one. For one, it is quite unusual for producers of Thai BL to adapt a foreign text. A majority of Thai BL *lakhon* are either based on novels and Wattpad stories on the Internet or occasionally original stories. Moreover, the South Korean version of *Antique Bakery* remains to this date the more accessible and recognized version, despite the common knowledge that there is in fact an original Japanese version. Finally, the decision to cast actors who mostly bear strong East Asian features, contributes to the advancement of aesthetic politics and cultural power play.

In *Baker Boys*, Thanat "Lee" Lowkhunsombat plays Punn, the Character A of this version. Purim "Pluem" Rattanaurangwattana plays Krating, the Character C boxer and Patara "Foei" Eksangkul

plays the bodyguard. Standing out in terms of casting choices is Prachaya “Singto” Ruangroj who puts on the chef attire of Weir, the “Gay of Demonic Charm” [or as he is known in this version, the “Gay Conqueror”]. The decision to cast Singto is worth noting given that, compared to his other castmates, he is already a recognized BL actor as part of the so-called triumvirate of BL couples, being the “partner” to Perawat “Krist” Sangpotirat in GMMTV’s maiden BL *lakhon* *SOTUS: The Series* (2016). More importantly, if we follow Baudinette’s formulation on the “trajectory” that BL actors take, Singto has already “graduated” from gay roles and has started playing straight and more “serious” characters in other *lakhon*. Given this, the apparent conscription of Singto to return to the pink and pretty realm of BL suggests an attempt to bring the big guns into the game.

The utilization of the *lakhon* as the medium of choice [as opposed to the film form in *Antique Bakery*] opened opportunities for *Baker Boys* to venture into other subplots that extend the narrative to twelve closely-knit episodes and introduce thematic thrusts that calcify the *lakhon*’s visual politics. One such addition is the existence of a baking contest between Sweet Day Café [the protagonists’ shop] and other rivals. Another is the giving of more airtime to Monet (Juthapich “Jamie” Indrajundra) and her parents, the journalists who were investigating the series of child kidnappings.

Much of the differences between *Baker Boys* and *Antique Bakery* however have to do with an overt refocusing the narrative of the *lakhon* to a family-centric narrative. This is very much apparent in the transformation of the character trajectories of Punn and Weir in the series. In particular, one finds an apparent systemic and surgical attempt to first desexualize the two characters and transform them into responsible, entrepreneurial, and family-oriented subjects. In the South Korean version, Jin-hyeok (Ju Ji-hoon) and Seon-woo (Kim Jae-wook) are continuously portrayed as flirtatious individuals with some reasonable degree of transformation towards the end. The metanoia and transformation experienced by Punn and Weir however extend beyond mere character adjustment; the focus instead is on how the two friends, who may not necessarily end up

as lovers in the end, participate in the restoration of the family for the different characters as well as in how they are able to heal themselves from their life's hurts by repairing their familial relationships. For instance, the boxer Krating's eventual willingness to join the café staff is motivated by his need to find a family given his metaphysical predicament as an abandoned child. In this way, Punn and Weir function as substitute parents whose role is to nurture the maturation and socialization of Krating as a capable and productive neoliberal subject. In a newly introduced subplot, Pooh the bodyguard character, is revealed to have fathered a child upon a stranger's request. While initially hesitant to acknowledge Pooh as a present father figure, the mother eventually acquiesces with the assistance of friends from the household. Finally, Weir is only able to perfect his mother's cookie recipe after forgiving her for cheating on his father by sleeping with Weir's tutor (and first love). In an overtly sentimental if not cheesy encounter, Punn directs Weir into seeing that the missing ingredient is the "flavor of family." In doing so, Weir's artistic dilemma and resolution signifies the role of familial love in the realization of being a full neoliberal subject.

Perhaps the biggest difference between *Baker Boys* and *Antique Bakery* has to do with how the major kidnapping subplot is resolved. In both versions, the community is alarmed and troubled by a series of child kidnapping and murder cases where the victims are found dead and with cake found inside their stomachs. The Character A's in this regard are alarmed because they too were kidnapped in the same way but they managed to escape. Their trauma—particularly the inability to eat sweet things—is caused by this incident. In *Antique Bakery*, the killer is caught by Jin-hyeok but it is revealed later that the man who kidnapped him is a different person. In *Baker Boys* however, Punn's kidnapper, still initially traumatized by the death of his son [which in turn motivates him to kidnap Punn] becomes repentant and apologetic. He ultimately assists the protagonists in tracking down the true culprits, the male substitute teacher and his adoptive mother.

The motivation behind the killers' kidnapping spree is important here in that it turns out the adoptive mother had resorted to kidnapping children earlier to make the family complete. In doing

so, the *lakhon* positions the mother-son tandem as the antithesis to the centrality of familialism as the chief value. They are positioned as the tragic alternative to the four protagonists who have since understood the meaning of family. Towards this, unlike in *Antique Bakery*, Punn's healing and metaphysical recovery in the story, made possible by the cumulative thrusts of forgiveness, reconciliation, and platonic love, is complete and unambiguous. In the end, he is presented as a fully realized and reformed subject, not entirely desexualized, but capable still of redirecting his energies and talents towards the meaningful figuration of familial relationships in a space that he has since reclaimed as both a site that reminds me of his trauma and healing.

*Baker Boys* is an illustrative text of the complex relationship between Thai and South Korean industries. The expansion into a television format, in contrast with the South Korean version, allowed the producers and screenwriters to inject new narratives and thematic foci into the story while still retaining the core narrative. As discussed earlier, much of contemporary Thai cultural texts made for export for global circulation are predominantly occupied by striking a balance between on the one hand, audio-visual palatability for an international audience and on the other, the heteronationalist preoccupations of the domestic market—a legacy to be sure of the post-1997 cultural politics that have since oriented the kingdom's visual economy.

The eventual success of *Baker Boys* functions as a viable metaphor for the contradictory relationship that defines the traffic of cultural texts. As illustrated here and elsewhere, particularly in the means by which young Thai global stars are now constructed, the aesthetic schematic of the Thai industry is defined by a simultaneous process of mimicry, competition, and ultimately appropriation. The dynamic transnational circulation of popular media between South Korea and Thailand is an illustrative case of the complexities regarding the reification of soft power by way of a balancing between competition and modeling. In the next section on Philippine BL, I explore how such adaptation is reoriented towards a different direction: the use of the popular form in projecting a mode of political resistance.

#### IV. The Case of Philippine Boys' Love

As in the case of South Korea and Thailand, the production and proliferation of Philippine BL was shaped initially and primarily by Thai BL. To be sure, it is incorrect to attribute the proliferation of BL content in the Philippines to the Thai entertainment industry alone. As Louie Jon Sanchez (2020) points out, “underground” BL conventions [ones that required a pre-purchased ticket] had been in existence since the early 2000s. The key difference here is that the BL content enjoyed by fans in the Philippines and elsewhere in the early 2000s were primarily visual forms [e.g. magazines, *manga*, images circulated on the Internet]. In contrast, Philippine BL today has taken on more audio-visual forms, with its audience base expanding during the COVID-19 pandemic through the accessibility of free streaming sites.

While Thailand may not be seen as a direct competition of the Philippines in terms of soft power [as in the aforementioned case of South Korea], the creative strategy to pattern stories after the character-driven storylines of Thai BL [as demonstrated in other BL such as *Dark Blue Kiss* and *Theory of Love*] and deploy these through the structure and stylistics of the Philippine *teleserye* [similar to the *lakhon* format] suggests an attempt to place Philippine BL as a comparative genre to Thai BL. For instance, early Philippine BL such as *Gaya sa Pelikula* (As in the Movies, 2020) and *Gameboys* (2020), the BL that will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs, place the emotional fulcrum on the seventh episode of the season, similar to how things are done in Thai BL *lakhon*. As in the case of Thai BL, characters are not just avatars of sexual eroticism and play but are representations of certain ideological and political paradigms ripe for political play. While the radicalizing queer politics of Thai BL is occasionally limited and neutralized as a result of its participation in the harnessing of soft power, the independent nature of early Philippine BL takes on a different and more visibly political charge grants the writers some agency and flexibility in engaging issues in more creative and imaginative manners. In the subsequent discussions, I turn to *Gameboys* as an illustrative text for such creative praxis.



*Gameboys* not only adapted the popular East Asian form in the Philippine context but also utilized the form to deploy various reinterpretations of male sexuality in the homophobic and misogynist milieu of the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. The series follows the romance of two computer gamers, Cairo Lazaro (Elijah Canlas) and his fan Gavreel Alarcon (Kokoy delos Santos) as they find love amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Manila. Their burgeoning romance is witnessed and occasionally assisted by Gavreel’s ex-girlfriend-turned-best-friend and *babaeng bakla* (fag hag), Pearl (Adrianna So). While the arrival of two rivals, Gavreel’s ex-boyfriend Terrence (Kyle Velino) and Cairo’s childhood friend Wesley (Miggy Jimenez) cause some hormonally-charged drama, the pivotal complication of the story is one related to the series’ socio-political context: the pandemic-related death of Cairo’s father (Rommel Canlas, Elijah’s real-life father) and its effects on the family.

What makes *Gameboys* unique is how the story is told. Due to limits brought about by government-imposed lockdown restrictions, the series is first told through recorded video calls, social media postings presented as screenshots, and emails that are read out loud. Actors had to receive directorial instructions through video calls and rely on members of the household to do the filming. It was only when restrictions were relaxed that the production crew could continue the story by filming scenes “outside.” More importantly, the *raison d’être* of the project itself was not only to provide entertainment for a viewing public that was already exhausted by government incompetence but to also provide jobs to creative artists at that period.

At the core of *Gameboys* ‘ creative political praxis is the mobilization of queer domesticity as the site for its political engagement. Much like most of the BL series in the region, the domestic space is the realm of romance in *Gameboys*. What sets the series apart however is how such configurations of domestic space are elevated and appropriated as an imagined queer space. Queer domesticities are a nexus of contradictions. Functioning as a spatial means for utopian desires to be both enacted and interrupted, they are simultaneously transgressive in their construction of alternative

permutations of the household and constraining in their strategies for containment of such deployments in their wake, with the case of *Baker Boys* as well as other BL *lakhon* illustrative of the latter. *Gameboys* on the other hand activates the radicalizing power of queer domesticity more potently and visibly, highlighting the possibility of configuring and creating new and more accepting kinds of familial structures beyond the heteronormative ideal.

In *Gameboys*, the home and more importantly the notion of the home function as the center of the series' mode of queer engagement. It was after all Cairo's unintended outing [engineered by his heartbroken girl best friend] that pushes him to run away and ultimately results in his father being infected by the virus while searching for him—a return, to be sure, to the homophobic strategy of charging the homosexual with the crime of destroying the nuclear family. Such an initial charge however is later overturned when Cairo's family not only refuses to hold him accountable for his father's death but also grows to accept him for who he is. The domestic site, therefore, functions as the site for the possible termination and restoration of queer identity.

The radicalizing potential of queer domesticity reaches a full charge towards the end of the series. On the day of their flight back to their home province in the aftermath of the family patriarch's death, Cairo's sympathetic mother allows him to stay for a week with Gavreel, who resides in the neighboring city of Cavite. Cairo then surprises Gavreel, who was about to clichéd car run to the Manila International Airport. After ensuring that they are both negative for COVID-19, the boys unmask and kiss [for the first time], and spend a week or so together in Cavite. Here, a different type of queer domesticity emerges. The home-making act of the lovers, one orphaned (Gavreel) and the other fatherless (Cairo), may be read as an unlikely allegory that functions as a critique of the neglectful father's (Rodrigo Duterte) inability to defend the collapsing nation-state. The recreated queer home in this respect may not necessarily stand in as a site for pleasurable homoeroticized encounters but as an imagined site that foregrounds alternative forms of sociality beyond the nation-state. Read this way, the apparent success of *Gameboys*, as illustrated by its unique

deployment of domestic space, lies in its ability to equate the queerness of the household to allegorically stand for a politics of resistance and reinterpretation of socialities beyond the blood ties that bind citizenship to the nation-state. The happy ending which sees Cairo and Gavreel finally playing house returns us to Jose Esteban Muñoz's notion of queer utopia as one that "insists on something else, something better, something dawning" (Muñoz 2009: 189).

The case of *Gameboys* illustrates the dynamic ways in which BL stories take on different ways of deploying and harnessing power as they go through the process of adaptation and appropriation. While the Thai case utilized the form to deploy soft power, the case of *Gameboys* demonstrates how it may be used as a means to generate narratives of hope and political engagement in more subtle yet poignant ways. This however may not always be the case. In May 2023 for instance, Black Sheep Productions, an independent film company, started airing *Sparks Camp*, which was described and marketed as the "first Boys Love (BL) dating reality show." A curious characteristic of this description is the use of BL (instead of gay) to describe the reality show. We find here therefore an appropriation of the genre as a descriptor and framework for a mode of politics of pleasure. A cursory examination of the contestants eventually chosen for such a show elaborates on its politics some more. Most if not all its contestants were already widely recognized in the Philippines as content creators or Internet personalities and fall under the category of the typical beta male type reminiscent of BL characters. While the show and most of its contestants were well-received, such a deployment nevertheless runs the risk of maintaining a certain status quo regarding sexual politics, in this case, the privileging of one particular type of queer identity—middle class if not affluent, masculine, and highly educated – a criticism to be sure of early and contemporary BL. Given this, one finds in some instances of circulation and adaptation, the radicalizing potential of queer politics enabled by the generic parameters of the genre, may actually still be neutralized.

## V. Conclusion

The circulation and eventual adaptation of texts is a dynamic, complicated, and highly politicized process. As demonstrated by the movement and appropriation of the BL genre from the Land of Rising Sun to the Pearl of the Orient Seas, the process of adaptation is more than just a question of adapting to an imagined audience's tastes but is rather a means to structure, wield, and sustain varied forms of power. This essay explored two forms of such power. Using a close reading of *Baker Boys*, an adaptation of the South Korean version of the manga *Antique Bakery* as an example, the discussion on the Thai case of BL demonstrates how the form was utilized to harness soft power by systematically incorporating palatable elements from its chief rival in the soft power game of thrones while simultaneously maintaining the familialist charge of contemporary popular Thai visual forms. On the other hand, the case of *Gameboys*, a series that emerged in the wake of burgeoning interest in BL [thanks to Thai *lakhon* in particular] demonstrates how political power, one that engages issues in the domestic sphere, may be wielded by such adaptations. From the royal courts of the Heian emperors that somehow birthed it and now the millions of screens that multiply the genre's politics of representations, the smiles of these beautiful boys, crafted, curated, and perfected, are faces mobilized to perform forms of ideological labor. Heirs of Genji, they are both embodiments and pawns of power, articulating the political will of the invisible hands that pen them and send them out to the world to perform and play.

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