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Nagaike Kazumi

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Thomas Baudinette. *Boys Love Media in Thailand: Celebrity, Fans, and Transnational Asian Queer Popular Culture*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, and Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024.

Reviewed by Nagaike Kazumi*

“Boys Love” (BL) refers to a genre of narratives that portray romantic and/or sexual relationships between male characters. The term emerged in Japan in the late 1990s as a distinct cultural category, with manga culture at its center. As Dru Pagliassotti (2009) has observed, Japanese BL culture then underwent a process of “GloBLisation,” wherein the genre was locally adapted and transnationally circulated across a wide range of cultural contexts. Since the late 2010s, however, the rise of Thai BL drama series—often referred to as “Y series”—has signaled a significant shift in scholarly attention from Japanese manga to Thai live-action television.

Boys Love Media in Thailand offers a groundbreaking and theoretically rich analysis of the transnational development of Thai BL drama series through the intersecting lenses of queer autoethnography, affect theory, and “Asia as method” (p. 5). Employing these robust conceptual frameworks, Thomas Baudinette repositions BL as a critical site for interrogating queerness, popular culture, and capitalist media production in Asia. His study foregrounds regional specificity, affective intensity, and fan creativity as central to queer cultural production, while simultaneously interrogating the global commodification of LGBTQ identities.

Rather than positioning Thai BL as merely a derivative of Japanese BL manga or as a wholly commodified genre, the author foregrounds its localized affective resonances and the participatory labor of fan communities. The analysis focuses primarily on four of GMMTV’s iconic “royal couples”: Krist/Shingto, Off/Gun, Tay/New, and Bright/Win. By situating the analysis within a queer autoethnographic framework—grounded in seven years of primarily digital ethnographic research—Baudinette not only offers critical scholarly insight but also foregrounds his own positionality as an academic fan (acafan). This dual engagement—both critical and affective—makes the book a rare and compelling contribution to queer media studies and

* 長池一美, Institute for Educational Management, Oita University

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6494-679X>

inter-Asian cultural studies.

At the heart of the book is the concept of the “BL machine,” a term coined by the author to describe the industrial mechanisms by which Thai media conglomerates such as GMMTV promote BL celebrities. These celebrities—often organized into on- and off-screen romantic pairings known as *khu jin*—are the products of carefully curated affective labor, commercial strategy, and parasocial intimacy. The GMMTV BL machine follows a six-stage process: (1) scouting attractive young male actors to perform queer romance based on adapted BL novels; (2) training them through acting workshops modeled after K-pop idol systems; (3) launching BL dramas via terrestrial TV and streaming platforms; (4) monetizing viewer affect through strategic product placement; (5) organizing fan events such as concerts to sustain parasocial intimacy; and (6) producing variety shows that extend *khu jin* narratives beyond the dramas themselves. These stages reflect a sophisticated media apparatus that commodifies queer desire while also enabling new forms of queer celebrity and participatory fandom. While the term “BL machine” accurately captures the capitalist logic underpinning the production of BL content, it is also a source of ambivalence. As the author notes, this “machinic” system paradoxically generates affective assemblages that exceed its commercial intent. Through social media engagement, fan art, meme creation, and algorithmic amplification—alongside BL stars’ off-screen pro-LGBTQ advocacy—BL fans actively coproduce meanings and affective intensities that frequently exceed or resist the logics of commodification. These practices have contributed, at least in part, to broader shifts in public discourse surrounding queer visibility and rights, aligning with Thailand’s movement toward—and the eventual legalization of—same-sex marriage in January 2025.

This tension—between queer liberation and capitalist containment—is a recurring thread in the book. Baudinette draws on affect theory to articulate how Thai BL fosters visibility, recognition, and intimacy for queer audiences across Asia, while also acknowledging how queerness is frequently sanitized, commodified, or depoliticized for market consumption. Particularly insightful is the discussion of how Thai BL stars have gone beyond the strategic ambiguity characteristic of queerbaiting in Korean or Japanese idol cultures. Many of these celebrities have publicly endorsed LGBTQ rights, participated in Pride events, and aligned themselves with queer activism. Their performances of queerness extend beyond the screen, creating a space for what the author terms “affective engagement”—a form of political alignment rarely seen in comparable entertainment cultures.

The author’s deployment of Asia as method constitutes one of the book’s most significant theoretical interventions. Instead of interpreting Thai BL exclusively through Western queer theory or globalized queer discourses, the author locates it within inter-Asian circuits of cultural exchange, affective resonance, and media reception. Through careful ethnographic attention to fandoms in the Philippines, China, and Japan, the book highlights how Thai BL becomes

a vehicle for regional queer identifications. Filipino fans, for instance, articulate their desires and frustrations through the affective lexicon of Taglish, drawing on expressions such as *kilig* (a euphoric, romantic thrill) and the widely shared phrase “Sana All” (May everyone experience this joy). Chinese fans, by contrast, perceive Thai BL as a more emotionally resonant and culturally proximate alternative to Western gay media. These localized forms of engagement underscore how Thai BL facilitates affective queer imaginaries that are neither entirely local nor wholly global but instead situated within a distinctly inter-Asian framework.

Japan’s reception of Thai BL is another fascinating dimension of the book. The author introduces the term *Tai-numa* (Thai swamp) to describe the immersive and addictive nature of Thai BL consumption among Japanese fans. Chapter 6 highlights a subtle but important shift: many Japanese fans, including former K-pop followers and even gay men, are now turning to Thai BL for its perceived emotional “authenticity” and queer realism. They distinguish themselves from *fujoshi*—female fans of BL manga—by labeling themselves *Y-gāru* (Y girl), signaling their preference for 3D, live-action depictions of romance over 2D manga fantasy. While this shift is undoubtedly important, I would also suggest a degree of caution in approaching the 2D/3D binary too rigidly. Both manga and live-action drama offer distinct modes of emotional and imaginative engagement, and I would gently encourage a more nuanced exploration of how realism, fantasy, and identification operate across media forms. As a scholar of Japanese BL manga, I found the distinction between manga and live-action drama to be one of the more thought-provoking aspects of the book. While Thai BL indeed offers a more immediate and politically visible form of queer representation, framing manga solely as a medium of fantasy or escapism risks overlooking its long-standing significance as a critical site for women’s imaginative agency, queer speculation, and affective projection. In my own work (Nagaike 2022), I have examined male readerships of BL, *shōta* (small boy), and *otokonoko* (cross-dressing feminine boy) manga, which further complicate assumptions about fantasy, identification, and gender performance within these media forms.

Another area that could benefit from further exploration is a comparison with K-pop (and J-pop) idol cultures. Given the shared aesthetics and affective labor between Thai BL stars and Korean male idols, a more fully developed theorization of K-pop’s queer performativity would have further enriched the analysis. While K-pop (and J-pop) is frequently criticized for queer-baiting—performing queer-coded intimacy while remaining largely silent on LGBTQ issues—the question remains: does queer signaling in these industries function solely as a marketing strategy, particularly when contrasted with the more overtly political framings found in Thai BL dramas? Or might such performances also be reappropriated by fans as spaces of queer identification and affective resistance? Although the book briefly addresses the cultural power of K-pop from a feminist perspective, this comparative dimension opens a fertile avenue for future scholarly inquiry.

The monograph also makes a significant methodological contribution by blending traditional and digital ethnography with queer autoethnography. Its “queer scavenger” approach—drawing on Jack Halberstam—privileges fragmentary archives, affect-laden materials, and fan-generated content as valid sources of knowledge. This methodology not only challenges established academic orthodoxies but also affirms fan affect as a legitimate site for critical theory. The author’s positionality as both a queer scholar and a queer fan is not concealed but actively foregrounded, reinforcing the dialogic and performative nature of knowledge production. As a reader, I found the book particularly powerful in the way it resonated affectively with some of my most cherished scholarly works, including John Treat’s *Great Mirrors Shattered: Homosexuality, Orientalism, and Japan* (1999), Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist: Essays* (2014), and Ann Cvetkovich’s *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012). Like these texts, this monograph offers an emotionally compelling and politically engaged mode of queer critical inquiry—one that stays with the reader long after the final page.

In conclusion, *Boys Love Media in Thailand* stands as a landmark contribution to the study of queer media, fan cultures, and inter-Asian popular culture. It compellingly challenges Eurocentric paradigms of queer theory and advances alternative frameworks grounded in regional affect, cultural specificity, and queer-affirmative visibility. Its conceptual innovations—particularly its theorization of autoethnography, theorization of affective commitment, and application of Asia as method—are poised to influence future scholarship on queer fandoms and Asian media industries in significant and lasting ways.

As an academic fan, I was both intellectually invigorated and emotionally moved by this work. At the same time, I hope to extend the dialogue it opens by raising several critical questions. How might we analyze expressions of rigid masculinity and femininity within Y drama culture beyond the conventional *seme/uke* (Japanese for “top or dominant partner/bottom or submissive partner”) dichotomy—for instance, through frameworks such as Natthanai Prasannam’s (2024) theorization of the “sissyphilia” phenomenon? What are the limits of parasocial intimacy in an era increasingly shaped by algorithmic capitalism? And how can we sustain space for fantasy, affect, and politics simultaneously, without allowing any one of these dimensions to overshadow the others?

Ultimately, this book reminds us that BL is not merely a genre but a dynamic mode of queer world-making. Thai BL, in particular, serves as a compelling case study of how popular culture can function as a site of queer becoming, not in spite of its commercial foundations but precisely through its entanglement with them. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Baudinette for writing this important and inspiring work. His book has not only enriched my understanding of transnational queer media but has also strengthened my resolve to write my own queer autoethnographic monograph on *fujoshi* culture. I sincerely hope that one day I will have the honor of asking Dr. Baudinette to review that future work.

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