

# What It Means to Love a Man: The Evolution of the Boys' Love Industry in Thailand

ANTHONY THIEN PHAM

*Independent Researcher*

## ABSTRACT

Thailand is internationally lauded as a haven for queer communities and, in some ways, this notion is true. The boys' love television drama series has had unprecedented success and received fame both within and outside Thailand. From the first boys' love drama series in 2014 to 2018, there has been a significant shift in the modes of production, styles of depiction, and approaches to masculinity. This study references earlier studies to illustrate how Thailand's boys' love productions have adapted from their predecessors while evolving by incorporating their own sociocultural experiences. It also describes how five years of productions have allowed the Thai entertainment industry to expand beyond its former constraints in the portrayal of boys' love by comparing and contrasting *Love Sick: The Series* and *Love by Chance*. Finally, the study highlights a schism that resulted in a defining moment for the continued production of boys' love drama series by analyzing the success of both *SOTUS The Series* and *Together With Me*. Though some may propose that the success of the boys' love industry in Thailand indicates a subversion of heteronormative mainstream narratives, the study denies this and elaborates on how the industry perpetuates heteronormativity by applying the same heteronormative standards it is said to subvert.

**Keywords:** boys' love, entertainment, gender, heteronormativity, masculinity, sexuality, Thailand

## DEFINING BOYS' LOVE IN THAILAND

Thailand is often acknowledged as a haven for queer communities (GSNContributor 2017; Ragavan 2017; Tandon 2018). This is not a development that resulted from intentional policy-making by the Thai state, but rather a coincidental evolution that was a byproduct of many social, political, and economic factors (Jackson 2011a). In recent years, this development has continued to draw international praise through measurable investment into the production of boys' love narratives within the mainstream media. Where South Korea is internationally recognized for its K-Pop and K-Drama productions, Thailand is acknowledged for its boy's love productions (Burcu Babal 2019).

The genre of boys' love originated in Japan during the 1970s as manga or graphic novels created by women for women (McLelland and Welker 2015; Mizoguchi 2003). It was then able to become internationalized as Japan intentionally sought to promote its culture via media exports (Iwabuchi 2015). With the evolution of social media, Chinese audiences were also able to engage with the boys' love genre, further popularizing it in the Chinese entertainment industries (Chen 2017). Previous studies have established well-recognized tropes to define the bounds of the boys' love genre in both Japan and China. First and foremost, the genre centers on the emotionally intimate relationships between male protagonists (Zhou, Paul, and Sherman 2018), either excluding or sidelining the sexual relationship which would associate it more with the sexually explicit *yaoi* genre (Zanghellini 2009).

Aside from that, this study references two sets of tropes established by Mizoguchi, as well as Zhou, Paul, and Sherman. Mizoguchi lists six tropes: the *seme-uke* model, strict non-exchangeable roles within a relationship, rape as a form of overwhelming love, previous experiences of heterosexual activity, explicit rejection of the term 'gay' and the depiction of boys' love relationships as more significant than heterosexual relationships (Mizoguchi 2008). The *seme-uke* model defines the two roles of a boys' love or gay relationship: the dominant, masculine penetrator and the submissive, feminine receiver (Nagaike 2003). Zhou, Paul, and Sherman list four tropes: the idealization of the partner, the belief in love at first sight, the soulmates narrative, and the argument that love conquers all (Zhou et al. 2018). Mizoguchi's doctoral dissertation goes into great detail to explore *yaoi*, *yuri*, and boys' love among other subgenres to distill a set of tropes that was commonly present in Japanese productions. Zhou, Paul, and Sherman, instead, reference Veronica Hefner's 2011 work, titled "From Love at First Sight to Soul Mate: The Influence of Romantic Ideals in Popular Films on Young People's Belief about Relationships." They utilized the four tropes that Hefner identified within Western romance narratives and analyzed their application in Chinese boys' love productions, acknowledging that they emulate these same tropes. Though these two lists of tropes are not identical, they point to a similar trend for boys' love productions to reproduce heteronormative narratives, with the only exception being the fact that the two romantic leads are male.

Finally, it is crucial to note that the boys' love drama series analyzed in this study were all originally authored by cisgender, heterosexual women – a common practice that began in Japan and has continued within the genre. Because of their inherent disconnect from lived experiences of queer, or more specifically gay, narratives, their writings ultimately lack authenticity and, therefore, authority. Instead, it is a voyeuristic imagining into the relationships that men have with one another. Pagliassotti even lists several motivations that may encourage engagement with the boys' love genre (Zsila et al. 2018), applicable to both writers and audience members. The biased perspectives of these authors, in regards to gender and sexuality, are therefore perpetuated through their writings.

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO THAI GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

In broaching the topic of boys' love in Thailand, acknowledging the sociocultural construction of gender and sexuality within a Thai context is necessary. Queerness and gender non-conformity existed in Thai culture before the coming of Westernization (Farmer 2011). However, the introduction of Westernization created confusion due to its need to distinguish between gender, sexuality, and performance (Yue 2014). Thai culture does not distinguish between gender and sexuality in the way that western societies do (Jackson 2000). Identity terminologies (known as *phet*) take into consideration several factors: gender, sexuality, and performance, as well as the identity of one's partner (Jackson 2000; Singhakowinta 2016). Loan words, such as 'gay' do not take on the same meaning as their western counterpart. Because public displays of affection are generally frowned upon, *phet* identifications were recognized partially based on public performance (Kang 2014). Therefore, non-heteronormative behavior often served as an indicator of 'queerness;' men needed to perform masculinity, and women needed to perform femininity. Any deviation from the expected performance of masculinity or femininity meant that one was subject to being considered as something other than 'true men' or 'true women' (Jackson 2000). In the context of this study regarding the love between two male protagonists, Thailand's conception of those who are not 'true men,' specifically gay men, requires an acknowledgment and understanding of both masculinity and homoeroticism existing in one individual (Singhakowinta 2016). However, Thailand's boys' love drama series challenge this notion by allowing both to exist within an individual without having to or even wanting to explicitly label the individual as gay.

## **BOYS' LOVE IS NOT GAY LOVE**

By capitalist demand, production companies seek to produce boys' love drama series not for the sake of subverting the general mainstream narrative of heteronormativity, but rather for capital gain. For the audience, it may seem that the growing visibility of boys' love in mainstream Thai media may be

subversive, but that is not necessarily so. Instead, the boys' love genre appeals to heteronormativity, aiming for inclusion rather than subversion. The practice of appealing to heteronormative standards is a common trend within the industry and can be noted in the clear and vast distinction between boys' love television drama series and gay television drama series.

At first glance, one may be tempted to assume that the two categories are the same, but boys' love dramas were historically the imaginings of cisgender, heterosexual women created for the consumption by other heterosexual women (McLelland and Welker 2015; Mizoguchi 2003). As stated, boys' love drama series are often idealized and voyeuristic narratives of heterosexual men and the relationship they have with one another. 'Gay' television drama series, on the other hand, emphasize the queerness of their main male characters without worrying about having to supplement their masculinity in other areas. These narratives are often truer to queer male experiences within a Thai sociocultural context. However, Thai gay productions tend not to generate as much popularity nor revenue when compared to the Thai boy's love productions, which themselves have gained popularity both in the Thai market and the international market. The study acknowledges this fact in the comparison of *SOTUS: The Series*, a boys' love drama series, to *Gay OK Bangkok*, a gay drama series, both of which were produced in 2016.

In Table 1, it can be noted that *Gay OK Bangkok*, a gay drama series, is rated about the same in quality as *SOTUS The Series*, a boys' love drama series, but is restricted to a slightly older audience, is reviewed less frequently by its audience, and is subscribed to by far fewer fans. Furthermore, *Gay OK Bangkok's* highest performing episode only achieved 5.8% of the viewership that *SOTUS The Series'* highest performing episode was able to garner. These statistics indicate that while gay drama series and boys' love drama series may be rated equally by their respective audiences, boys' love simply attracts a larger following, and thus more revenue, than its gay counterpart.

| Title                   | *Age Restriction | *Rating | *Review % | ** Fan Subscriptions Count | ** Highest Episode View Count |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------|-----------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Gay OK Bangkok</i>   | 18+ Restricted   | 8.1     | 33.1%     | 16,897                     | 297,451                       |
| <i>SOTUS The Series</i> | 15+              | 8.8     | 67.2%     | 180,051                    | 5,117,787                     |

**Table 1. Comparison of 'Gay' Drama Series to 'Boys' Love' Drama Series**

\* Data is sourced from MyDramaList website ([www.mydramalist.com](http://www.mydramalist.com)).

\*\* Data is sourced from LINETV website ([tv.line.me](http://tv.line.me)). Data sourced on 11 October 2019.

As gay narratives are more closely aligned with actual queer – and especially gay – communities in Thailand, their separation from the success of boys' love drama series productions ensures that there is no positive reinforcement for the development of the queer community. Any progress made in the boys' love media production industry does not automatically equate with progress in Thailand's queer

communities. Instead, it can be viewed as capitalist profiteering of queer narratives through the selection of commercially viable parts for production and explicit exclusion of the rest.

### **THE THEORETICAL APPROACH OF THE STUDY**

The study approaches the analysis of boys' love drama series productions through the use of queer theory. The Queer theory applies critical analysis to the practices and assumptions from a society around the sexualization of people, their desires, and their actions. It then poses a challenge to heteronormative standards by deconstructing it and questioning the basic assumptions that uplift its narratives (McCann 2016; Currah and Stryker 2014).

In doing so, the study utilizes the framework of the sociocultural contexts of gender and sexuality within Thailand and the framework of the traditional characteristics of boys' love in both Japan and China. The use of these two frameworks will help situate Thailand's boys' love drama series productions in historically and culturally relevant contexts. The methodology primarily consists of in-depth media analysis of selected series, while supplementing these with noted and observed actions by media companies that produce such drama series.

### **FROM *LOVE SICK: THE SERIES* (2014) TO *LOVE BY CHANCE* (2018)**

The study maps the evolution of Thailand's boys' love productions by analyzing the first boys' love drama series in Thailand, *Love Sick: The Series* in 2014, and one of the more recent ones, *Love by Chance* in 2018. There were several reasons for this. First of all, both are products of the typical pipeline for the development of boys' love drama series: beginning as web novels created by young Thai women authors before becoming published as paper books and then being picked up by production companies to be made into drama series. This cycle of developing web novels into television drama series for broadcast has been formalized in the years since, particularly by GMM Grammy (Prasannam 2019), the largest entertainment corporation in Thailand. Furthermore, both series were led by similar directorship teams: New Siwaj Sawatmaneekul served as editor and assistant director for *Love Sick* and as primary director for *Love by Chance*. His direct and central involvement in these series indicates their close relationship while also providing a constant with which to compare and contrast any shifting changes between the two. Finally, both were favorably reviewed and extremely popular, relative to other boys' love drama series broadcast within their respective years (LINE TV 2015; MyDramaList 2011). The growth in the boys' love industry can be noted when comparing these two series, as shown in Table 2. See the Appendix for more comprehensive data.

In 2014, *Love Sick* was broadcast on MCOT 9, a public state-owned television channel. Because it was not meant for exportation, it lacked subtitles, limiting any international engagement. However, by 2018, *Love by Chance* was broadcast on GMM 25, a private corporate-owned television channel. It was concurrently streamed on YouTube and LINE TV, with over twenty-seven subtitle languages (Studio Wabi Sabi 2018). Previously, informal subtitling communities had developed to provide subtitles without compensation, but now production companies were intentionally partnering with them to ensure international accessibility (Wood 2013).

| Producer         | Year | Series Title          | *Rating | *Review % | ** Fan Subscriptions Count | ** First Episode View Count | ** Highest Episode View Count |
|------------------|------|-----------------------|---------|-----------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Middleman Media  | 2014 | <i>Love Sick</i>      | 8.2     | 51.9%     | 20,119                     | 1,060,211                   | 1,060,211                     |
| Studio Wabi Sabi | 2018 | <i>Love by Chance</i> | 8.6     | 64.3%     | 232,852                    | 12,969,150                  | 12,969,150                    |

**Table 2. Comparative Statistics of *Love Sick: The Series* and *Love by Chance***

\* Data is sourced from MyDramaList website ([www.mydramalist.com](http://www.mydramalist.com)).

\*\* Data is sourced from LINETV website ([tv.line.me](http://tv.line.me)). Data sourced on 11 October 2019.

From this fact alone, it can be deduced that the shift in Thailand's boys' love genre in the 2014-2018 period was a dramatic one. The sheer number of available subtitle languages speaks to the international reach of Thai boys' love drama series five years after its inception. *Love Sick* was the first boys' love drama series to be produced in Thailand; therefore, it can be assumed that private corporate entities were unwilling to take the risk of sponsoring such a series at that point. Yet by 2018, GMM Grammy was one of the foremost producers and broadcasters of boys' love drama series. Once the profitability of the genre had been confirmed, corporations and production houses no longer hesitated to contribute to the genre to maximize their profits.

*Love Sick* spanned twelve episodes in a total of sixteen weeks. *Love by Chance* spanned across fourteen episodes that lasted a total of fifteen weeks. Each episode of *Love Sick* ranged from thirty-six to forty-eight minutes in duration, an average of forty-two minutes per episode. *Love by Chance*, on the other hand, ranged from forty-six to fifty-seven minutes in duration, an average of fifty-two minutes per episode. This, however, does not take into consideration the season/series finale which ran for a total of seventy-two minutes. This fact shows a trend for growing consistency in production, episode lengths, and season duration.

## **FIVE YEARS LATER – A SHIFT IN THE INDUSTRY**

*Love Sick* tells the story of high school students, whereas *Love by Chance* turns its attention to university students. Though adult themes are not exclusive to university-aged and newly graduated-age narratives, it is significantly more difficult to broach mature issues with high school-aged characters. The use of a university setting helps to offset the shock value and minimize the controversy with which the discussion of these topics is often met.

*Love Sick* sets its camera mostly on widescreen scenes, capturing full backgrounds with little emphasis on individuals or explicit intimacy. However, *Love by Chance* is full of scenes that linger on minute details, such as slight physical contact or exposed body images. Unlike *Love Sick*, *Love by Chance* is not shy to state that its protagonists have engaged in sexually explicit behavior, only shying away from depicting it. Furthermore, *Love Sick* portrays a significant kiss scene in a much dimmer atmosphere, as can be seen in Figure 1; juxtaposed with *Love by Chance*, which highlights the moment with bright yet soft lighting, as is depicted in Figure 2. Both types of lighting evoke a different kind of emotion: whereas *Love Sick* feels like it is trying to hide a secret, *Love by Chance* immerses the audience in feelings of bliss and sensuality.

*Love Sick* features only one on-screen kiss between the two male protagonists. However, *Love by Chance* features at least fifteen instances in which two male protagonists share an explicit on-screen kiss. The one kiss portrayed in *Love Sick* was a soft, brushing kiss that lasted mere seconds. However, the kisses displayed in *Love by Chance* vary in passion and aggression; some are similar to the kiss in *Love Sick*, but others express much more explicit sensuality. Furthermore, *Love by Chance* contains a greater number of scenes in which bare skin is exhibited and sexualized. The shyness that limited *Love Sick* from depicting too much bare skin has dissipated and paved the way for a boldness that is expressed in the fetishizing of skinship and sexualizing of physical contact.

In addition to this, the sheer number of boys' love relationships in any given drama series significantly increased as well. In *Love Sick*, the entire series spends its time on the primary boys' love relationship. *Love by Chance*, on the other hand, squeezes four boys' love relationships into a single series. While *Love Sick* portrays several heterosexual couples, the whole of *Love by Chance* portrays only one heterosexual relationship. In *Love Sick*, the narrative swings back and forth, sometimes highlighting the homoerotic relationship between the two male leads, and at other times centering on the heterosexual relationship between the male leads and their respective girlfriends (Baudinette 2019). Baudinette argues that this is a means of making the boys' love genre more consumable for a Thai audience who has never been exposed to a boys' love drama series before *Love Sick*. This is not seen in *Love by Chance*, wherein nearly all of the show's runtime is spent on developing homoerotic relationships between the male protagonists.



Figure 1. Scene from *Love Sick*, episode 5 (2014). Source: Soompi.

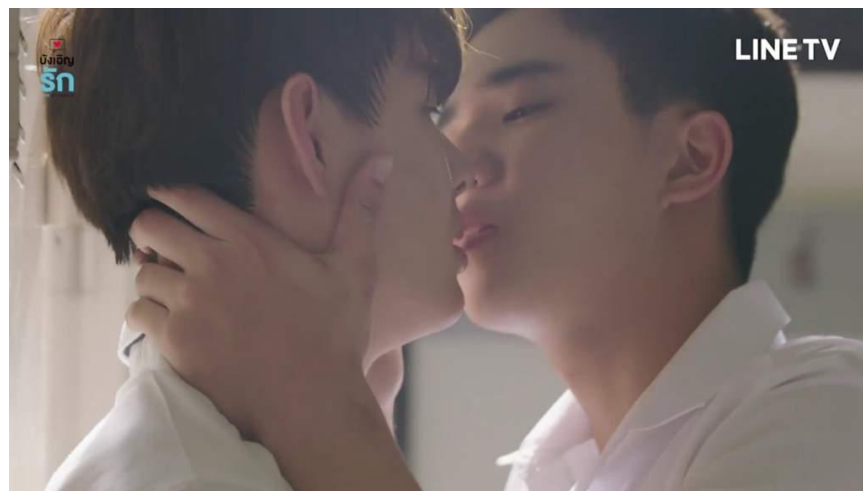


Figure 2. Scene from *Love by Chance*, episode 7 (2018). Source: Aminoapps.com.

The primary obstacle in *Love Sick* focuses on how the male protagonists come to find that they care more for one another than they do for their respective girlfriends, who are often portrayed as selfish or materialistic. This obstacle is reminiscent of the trope established by Mizoguchi which states boys' love relationships are of greater significance and fulfillment than heterosexual relationships. In the end, the two male protagonists mutually agree to not pursue their romantic relationship, instead of resigning themselves to a restrained friendship. The same obstacle is glaringly absent in *Love by Chance*. When a heterosexual obstacle is introduced, it is quickly and easily overcome. In this sense, heterosexuality is not weaponized to create conflict. Instead, the drama series portrays typical relationship issues, such as communication between the male protagonists, allowing for non-normative narratives to showcase themselves as normative.

The pacing of both drama series is indicative of a shift within the genre. *Love Sick* spends the entire season dealing with internal conflicts as the two main male leads attempt to understand their feelings for one another while also negotiating how to exist and navigate within the confines of their society. However, *Love by Chance* jumps directly into the relationship, having the two main male leads share an on-screen kiss by the fourth episode. The following ten episodes dedicate the entirety of their time to the portrayal of the continued growth of their relationship as well as the progression of the three other boys' love relationships.

Furthermore, both drama series subtly include the socioeconomic status of their protagonists. Within the Thai context, only those of higher status have the luxury of exploring their identities; those of lower status have to prioritize their day-to-day survival (Jackson 2011b). In *Love Sick*, the audience is constantly reminded that the characters attend a prestigious and expensive private school, confirming their wealth. Furthermore, the main male protagonists are often shown interacting with the staff that serves in their homes. *Love by Chance* also discusses the socioeconomic background of several characters, showing them to have mansion-like homes, fancy cars, and expensive belongings. It even goes as far as referencing their education in international programs as a marker of superiority to those educated solely within Thai programs. However, *Love by Chance* differs in that one of its main protagonists is clearly stated to be from the countryside, where his family operates a small local restaurant out of the ground floor of their home. This subtle change can imply that socioeconomic gate-keeping barriers have begun to shift, allowing for greater exploration of individual identity regardless of status.

The way each drama series approaches the issue of masculinity is another point of comparison. In *Love Sick*, the male protagonists are given positions of authority over other male characters, helping to reinforce their masculinity and identity as men. Furthermore, instances of violence are utilized throughout to bolster the masculinity of the characters, especially following any instance in which masculinity might be questioned due to the nature of their romantic relationship. *Love by Chance* similarly applies violence as a means with which to prop up the masculinity of its male protagonists and it supports the masculinity of its characters through their fields of study. The male protagonists all study in the faculty of engineering or sports science, fields of study that are closely intertwined with masculinity and manliness within Thai culture. The explicit listing of these university faculties pulls on social perceptions of masculinity to reinforce the notion that these characters are still masculine men who just happen to love one another.

Finally, this study turns to the tropes identified by Mizoguchi (2008)'s study as well as Zhou, Sherman, and Paul (2017)'s study. The forthcoming discussion regarding tropes is essentially an analysis of Thai boys' love drama series to identify whether they abide by the previously established social construction

of boys' love drama series or whether they provide a challenge to the established social construction to put forth their own bounds on the genre.

In both series, the *seme-uke* model of a relationship is well maintained in all relationships. Furthermore, once these roles were established in the early episodes of their respective drama series, they were immutable and unchanging. Aside from those two tropes though, *Love Sick* and *Love by Chance* diverge from their application of the tropes. In *Love Sick*, Mizoguchi's tropes are more fully applied. Both of the primary male leads have had and still do have significant heterosexual relationships. Despite both acknowledging their feelings for one another, they reject the identification of gay and maintain that they both are still 100% masculine men. In addition to that, the narrative paints how the heterosexual relationships that they each have stifle their happiness and self-fulfillment, qualities that are depicted to be more attainable if they were to engage in a boys' love relationship with one another. As such, boys' love relationships are shown to be more significant than heterosexual ones in nearly every way. This trope also serves to reinforce negative stereotypes about women while encouraging further consumption of boys' love. These tropes are not seen in *Love by Chance*, however. Aside from the *seme-uke* model and the immutability of roles within the relationship, no other Mizoguchi tropes appear in *Love by Chance*. In regards to the work of Zhou, Sherman, and Paul, both series reject the use of the partner idealization trope, the soulmates trope, the love at first sight trope, and the love conquers all trope.

In recognizing that *Love Sick* and *Love by Chance* both engage in Mizoguchi's tropes, it can be said that they continue on the tradition established by earlier boys' love genre industries, particularly in Japan. However, they do not fully corroborate with those experiences, as seen in their departure from the tropes identified by Zhou, Sherman, and Paul, rejecting the model that Chinese productions have attempted to emulate. Even in the case of Mizoguchi's tropes, *Love by Chance* can be noted to peel away more from the standard framework of boys' love when compared to *Love Sick*. The Thai boy's love genre industry can thus be said to take note from their predecessors but have ultimately built up their approach to the genre based on the sociocultural, political, and historical context of Thai society.

### **A SCHISM WITHIN THE INDUSTRY**

In 2016 and 2017, Thailand's boys' love genre industry faced a significant schism: two potential pathways for the continued development of the genre emerged and competed for dominance of the industry's future. To understand the schism and explain its outcome, this study now looks at two boys' love drama series: *SOTUS The Series* and *Together with Me*. Broadcast in 2016 and 2017 respectively, *SOTUS The Series* and *Together with Me* were met with high acclaim and success compared to other boys' love drama series broadcast in the same years. Due to their relative levels of success, both series were

granted a sequel or second season the year after their debut. *SOTUS S The Series* performed equally well as its predecessor, displaying a semblance of consistency within the production of the boys' love drama series and a dedication with its loyalty by the audience. *Together with Me: The Next Chapter* received about the same level of viewership, but was rated significantly lower than its predecessor. Table 3 illustrates the vast difference between the reach and favorability of these series.

| Producer   | Year | Series Title              | *Rating | *Review % | ** Fan Subscriptions Count | ** First Episode View Count | ** Highest Episode View Count |
|------------|------|---------------------------|---------|-----------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| GMM TV     | 2016 | <i>SOTUS The Series</i>   | 8.8     | 67.2%     | 180,051                    | 5,117,787                   | 5,117,787                     |
| GMM TV     | 2017 | <i>SOTUS S The Series</i> | 8.7     | 60.5%     | 110,419                    | 5,906,510                   | 5,906,510                     |
| TV Thunder | 2017 | <i>Together With Me</i>   | 8.6     | 61.7%     | 90,173                     | 2,183,162                   | 5,093,033                     |
| TV Thunder | 2017 | <i>Together With Me</i>   | 8.0     | 43.1%     | 90,173                     | 3,624,275                   | 3,624,275                     |

**Table 3. Comparative Statistics of *SOTUS The Series* and *Together with Me***

\* Data is sourced from MyDramaList website ([www.mydramalist.com](http://www.mydramalist.com)).

\*\* Data is sourced from LINETV website ([tv.line.me](http://tv.line.me)). Data sourced on 11 October 2019.

*SOTUS* and *SOTUS S* emerged from the schism as the new standard for the boys' love genre industry, whereas *Together with Me* and *Together with Me: The Next Chapter* found themselves fading into the background. What then were the two defining sides of the schism? The most significant difference between *SOTUS* and *Together with Me* is their depiction and engagement with masculinity. There is a constant need for the reaffirmation of masculinity to ensure that the male protagonists are portrayed as masculine and not as feminine men. The method of the portrayal of masculinity, thus, became the source of the schism within the genre.

In *SOTUS*, the depiction of the main male protagonists focuses on soft masculinity. Men are shown to be kind and caring, not only towards one another but towards everyone around them. Even when they act out in frustration, they are often later shown to have a redeeming moment that justifies their emotions and allows them to address their previous behavior. This is in stark contrast to *Together with Me*, which places heavy emphasis on hard masculinity through physical sports, active violence, muscularity, untampered passion, and even explicit, intense sexuality. Where *SOTUS* often highlights how men attempt to navigate emotional issues through communication, *Together with Me* places emphasis on violence as a means to resolve and perpetuate conflict. The schism in the Thai boys' love genre industry can thus be noted here in the clash between soft masculinity and hard masculinity. This is not to say that each drama series engaged in only one type of masculinity exclusively, but that each applied them in different degrees. To justify the romantic relationship of two male protagonists. As

such, the schism indicates a shift away from heavy reliance on hard masculinity towards an increasing display of soft masculinity.

All in all, the final solution to the question of masculinity in Thai boys' love drama series was answered in the subsequent years. *SOTUS* and *SOTUS S* continued with massive success, spawning dozens of fan meeting events across all of Asia and the production of countless merchandise that are continually sold out due to international demand. *Together with Me*, however, began to decrease in popularity. The second season failed to do any better than the first and was still unable to challenge the success of *SOTUS*. Though fan meeting events did occur, they were few and far in between. Oftentimes, companies would capitalize on the success of the male-male relationships within the drama series by producing merchandise that promotes the couple as a part of industry-fan interaction (Prasannam 2019); however, no official merchandise was ever produced for *Together with Me* or *Together with Me: The Next Chapter*, which potentially indicates that the company did not expect the significant return for such an investment.

The clear outcome for the discourse between soft masculinity and hard masculinity can be noted in the success of *Love by Chance*. In *Love by Chance*, the boys' love drama genre successfully applied both quantity and quality of boys' love relationships, utilizing the depiction of soft masculinity as a selling point. Aspects of hard masculinity are still present to bolster the maleness of the male protagonists, such as highlighting their sports activity and their use of casual and vulgar language that is often associated with young, masculine Thai men. However, soft masculinity is emphasized especially in romantic couples, no longer relying solely on hard masculinity to justify their maleness in those short instances. Like *SOTUS*, *Love by Chance* elaborates on the depth of a boys' love relationship with displays of kindness, softness, and deep respect for individual autonomy and consent. However, *Love by Chance* also took after *Together with Me* by squeezing in multiple boys' love relationships into a single drama series while providing intimate and sensual scenes. Such scenes still embody a sense of softness through the lack of muscularity, the bright lighting, and the gentle music, reminding the audience of an embrace of soft over hard masculinity.

## CONCLUSION

This study has laid out the evolution of Thai boys' love development over the five years between 2014 and 2018. The use of *Love Sick* as the beginning of the study allowed the study to acknowledge the differences that were achieved by *Love by Chance*, which marked the end of the study. During 2016 and 2017, a significant schism occurred in the boys' love genre industry, forcing the industry to choose either the application of soft masculinity or hard masculinity as a significant source of justification for the romantic behavior between two male protagonists. The study of *SOTUS* in juxtaposition with

*Together with Me* served the purpose of highlighting the two competing narratives and ultimately defining which one emerged victoriously.

The study has outlined the evolution of Thai boys' love depictions within the Thai entertainment industry through several factors. First, the main conflict of boys' love narratives has shifted away from issues specific to divergent identities within society. Main characters spend significantly less time battling their internal confusion regarding their love for another man. Instead, the main conflict now focuses on conflicts that are typical of any relationship, such as communication, jealousy, and trust. In redirecting the source of drama in these series around the building of a relationship, *Love by Chance* shows how boys' love relationships have become more normalized in social perception in juxtaposition to those very same boys' love relationships in *Love Sick* five years prior. Second, depictions of boys' love in these drama series productions have grown increasingly bold. Where intimacy used to be few and far in between, it can now occur repeatedly with increasing sensuality throughout the first few episodes. Third, socioeconomic diversity has begun to be included, signaling that wealth is no longer a barrier to the individual exploration of identity.

Much of this is only possible because Thai boys' love drama series build upon the progress established by their predecessors. *Love by Chance*, for example, is influenced by much of what was laid out by *Love Sick*. However, newer productions do not blindly follow prior established design and foundations. Instead, the study acknowledges that newer productions have begun to peel away from the typical tropes established in Japan and China, replacing them with traits that are more relevant within a Thai sociocultural context. Moreover, the study notes significant growth in both quantity and quality of Thai boys' love drama series productions.

In regards to the schism that emerged in 2016–2017, two opposing pathways were provided for the industry to consider: soft masculinity and hard masculinity. Where hard masculinity promoted a heteronormative approach to masculinity through violence, muscularity, unfiltered passion, and explicit sexuality, soft masculinity delved into a more nuanced practice of masculinity through respect, humility, consideration, kindness, and tenderness. In analyzing *Together with Me* and *SOTUS*, the study concludes that Thailand's boys' love genre industry soundly chose the latter. This is noted in *Love by Chance*, wherein the relationship between the male protagonists emphasizes their constant practice of clear communication, mutual affirmation, persistent consideration, and loving tenderness.

The victory of soft masculinity was only possible through the response of audience members in the form of viewership, merchandise purchase, ratings, reviews, and general support of the drama series and its respective cast members. With the enormous success of *Love by Chance*, the study concludes that modern audiences of Thai boy's love drama series prefer a more subversive soft masculinity. Men in these boys' love drama series do not need to justify or compensate for their actions through violence,

aggression, or physical muscularity. The consistency with which hard masculinity was utilized before this watershed moment to compensate for any challenge to normative constructions of masculinity is now being questioned. As depictions of soft masculinity continue to gain popularity and generate profit, it could be argued that the Thai boys' love genre industry will shift in accordance, allowing for more sensual or explicit portrayals of boys' love relationships, and potentially even gay relationships, without explicitly causing the characters' identity to come under scrutiny. The love of men itself may no longer be relegated only to women and femininity, nor will the need for violence continually appear to justify one's identity as a man. Should this relationship continue, the pathway that the boys' love genre industry in Thailand will take is one of continued development and evolution, peeling further away from typical tropes while expanding upon what is deemed acceptable through masculinity.

However, the narratives of boys' love that are presented and portrayed in these drama series do not serve as subversive alternatives or critiques of the larger mainstream heteronormative narrative. Though soft masculinity does challenge hard masculinity, it does not seek to supplant heteronormativity for the sake of diversifying queer narratives. No new social constructions of men and masculinity are offered as alternatives to the current system in place. Instead, social constructions are maintained and boys' love narratives merely appeal to heteronormativity to be included in the mainstream. Transgressions against heteronormative expectations seem to be allowed in instances wherein the transgressors have been able to fully prove their masculinity in all other regards. Even then, their transgression cannot be a general one, such as explicit homosexuality, but must be a restrained one, such as loving only one man as the exception to their otherwise heterosexual nature. Because of this, the diversity queerness within the Thai entertainment industry has not and will not take root – at least not as a result of the success of the boys' love industry. Depictions of boys' love relationships will continue to increase in quantity and quality, but will ultimately remain constrained by socially constructed perceptions of gender, sexuality, and *phet*. This can also be noted in the glaring lack of representation of non-male-centered queer narratives in the mainstream entertainment industry.

With that in mind, the study also acknowledges that much remains unchanged. The portrayal of women as obstacles or as explicit maniacal villains is a common practice. Women authors have been quoted to say that one of the reasons for their engagement with boys' love is because women are too fussy or complicated. This mentality is reflected in the way women characters are written, leading audience members to develop disdain or even hatred for them. This practice is reminiscent of Mizoguchi's trope that claims boy's love relationships are of greater significance than heterosexual ones. For instance, Dem Thanutnun Vitsivakul, the author of *Together with Me* has said: "Female characters in romance novels are usually fussy and weak, and they overreact to misunderstandings, which can be really annoying," Dem said. "But male characters in homoerotic novels hardly ever cry, and if they get into a fight, they fight back. They're stronger than female characters" (Chaiyong 2015).

On that note, the study reiterates that the presentation of boys' love narratives within the Thai entertainment industry itself is not even truly considered as queer representation. Not only is it a product of cisgender heterosexual women author's voyeuristic imaginings into the world of cisgender heterosexual men loving one another, it actively seeks to distance itself from the more real gay productions by explicitly rejecting the term gay for its main characters. This disconnect ultimately means that any progress or shift that is made by the boys' love genre industry will ultimately not shift social perceptions of actual queer community members.

The increasingly bold and daring approach to boys' love drama series and their production would not have been possible without significant capital gains, audience member support, and at least a lukewarm acceptance from the greater Thai society. This too is problematic because it relies upon a capitalistic framework to measure success and popularity. The study, however, is unable to make conclusions outside of such constraints due to the nature of the boys' love genre industry being so tightly intertwined with capitalism. Furthermore, separating such conclusions from capitalism would be inadvisable as it removes the considerable economic context that shades queer narratives within Thailand.

In the end, the Thai boys' love production grew significantly from 2014 to 2018, adapting from the foundations established by its Japanese and Chinese predecessors. However, the context of Thai *phet* and the inherent voyeuristic nature of the genre constrain it from truly becoming a subversive genre that can champion sociocultural change. Instead, it merely provides a new avenue for the reinforcement of heteronormative standards and traditional power structures.

To truly become subversive and transformative within a Thai sociocultural context, the Thai boys' love genre industry would need to remove its fear of explicitly being labeled as 'gay.' It would need to break through the barriers that separate it from Thai gay drama series, embracing them to present a unified message of acceptance for the inherent diversity in individual gender, sexuality, and *phet* identities. Perhaps through this show of solidarity, the greater Thai society may become more understanding and accepting of queerness and the queer community in Thailand. Representation would no longer be the end of the entertainment industry simply for representation's sake, but rather as a means for society to move towards queer liberation and justice.

## REFERENCES

- Aminoapps.com. 2018. *LOVE BY CHANCE kiss scene in pictures*. Accessed 1 June 2021.  
[https://aminoapps.com/c/bl drama/page/blog/love-by-chance-kiss-scene-in-pictures/JzDV\\_z5iduPMK1wpgPLQ2QeXdg8ZY21zJB](https://aminoapps.com/c/bl drama/page/blog/love-by-chance-kiss-scene-in-pictures/JzDV_z5iduPMK1wpgPLQ2QeXdg8ZY21zJB)

- Baudinette, Thomas. 2019. "Lovesick, The Series: Adapting Japanese 'Boys Love' to Thailand and the Creation of a New Genre of Queer Media." *South East Asia Research* 27, no. 2: 115-32. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828x.2019.1627762>.
- Burcu Babal, Yazar. 2019. "The Other Far East: The Thai 'Boys' Love' Series Sweeping Across Asia." Dizi-Mania. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://dizi-mania.com/the-other-far-east-the-thai-boys-love-series-sweeping-across-asia/>.
- Chaiyong, Suwittha. 2015. "Young Yaoi Novelist Finds Success." *Student Weekly*, February 9, 2015. <http://student-weekly.com/090215/090215-happen03.html#.XaBvGkYzbD4>.
- Chen, Min. 2017. "The Influence of Social Media on Contemporary Subcultural Groups in China: The Case of BL Fandom." *Sino-US English Teaching* 14, no. 1: 25-29. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://doi.org/10.17265/1539-8072/2017.01.004>.
- Currah, Paisley, and Susan Stryker, eds. 2014. *Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a 21st Century Transgender Studies*. 1. Vol. 1. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books.
- Farmer, Brett. 2011. "Loves of Siam: Contemporary Thai Cinema and Vernacular Queerness." In *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, edited by Peter A. Jackson, 81-98. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- GSN Contributor. "The Best-Kept Secrets of Gay Thailand That Make It an Essential Destination for 2017." *Gay Star News*. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/the-best-kept-secrets-of-gay-thailand-that-make-it-an-essential-destination-for-2017/#gs.BNdjCu1v>.
- Iwabuchi, Koichi. 2015. "Pop-Culture Diplomacy in Japan: Soft Power, Nation Branding and the Question of 'International Cultural Exchange.'" *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 4: 419-32. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2015.1042469>.
- Jackson, Peter A. 2000. "An Explosion of Thai Identities: Global Queering and Re-Imagining Queer Theory." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 2, no. 4: 405-24. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050050174422>.
- Jackson, Peter A. 2011a. "Bangkok's Early Twenty-First-Century Queer Boom." In *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, edited by Peter A. Jackson, 17-42. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Jackson, Peter A. 2011b. "Capitalism, LGBT Activism, and Queer Autonomy in Thailand." In *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, edited by Peter A. Jackson, 195-204. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Käng, Dredge Byung'chu. 2013. "Conceptualizing Thai Genderscapes: Transformation and Continuity in the Thai Sex/Gender System." *Contemporary Socio-Cultural and Political Perspectives in Thailand*, 409-29. Accessed 1 June 2021. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7244-1\\_26](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7244-1_26).
- LINE TV. n.d. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://tv.line.me/>.

- McCann, Hannah. 2016. "Epistemology of the Subject: Queer Theory's Challenge to Feminist Sociology." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 3-4: 224-43. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2016.0044>.
- McLelland, Mark, and James Welker. 2015. "An Introduction to 'Boys Love' in Japan." *Boys Love Manga and Beyond*, 3-20. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781628461190.003.0001>.
- Mizoguchi, Akiko. 2003. "Male-Male Romance by and for Women in Japan: A History and the Subgenres of 'Yaoi' Fictions." *US-Japan Women's Journal* 25: 49-75.
- Mizoguchi, Akiko. 2008. "Reading and Living Yaoi: Male-Male Fantasy Narratives as Women's Sexual Subculture in Japan." Dissertation, University of Rochester.
- MyDramalist. n.d. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://mydramalist.com/>.
- Nagaike, Kazumi. 2003. "Perverse Sexualities, Perverse Desires: Representations of Female Fantasies and 'Yaoi Manga' as Pornography Directed at Women." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 25: 76-103.
- Prasannam, Natthanai. 2019. "The Yaoi Phenomenon in Thailand and Fan/Industry Interaction." *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* 16, no. 02 (December): 63-89.
- Ragavan, S. 2017. "'Pink Tourism': Does Thailand Deserve to Be Asia's LGBT Capital?" *Travel Wire Asia*. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://travelwireasia.com/2017/08/thailand-deserve-asias-lgbt-capital/>.
- Singhakowinta, Jaray. 2016. "Reinventing Sexual Identities: Thai Gay Men's Pursuit of Social Acceptance." *National Institute of Development Administration Journal of Language and Communication* 21, no. 27: 18-40.
- Soompi. (2014). *[Thai Drama 2014] Love Sick The Series รักสู้ นักรักสู้ เสบ*. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://forums.soompi.com/topic/343599-thailand-drama-2014-love-sick-the-series/>
- Studio Wabi Sabi. 2018. "[Official] บังเอิญรัก Love by Chance | EP.1 [1/4]." YouTube. Video, 9:46. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drE4723t4j0>.
- Tandon, R. 2018. "Is Thailand Really the Most LGBT-Friendly Country in Asia?" 50 First Steps. <https://www.50firststeps.com/lgbt-friendly-thailand>.
- Wood, Andrea. 2013. "Boys' Love Anime and Queer Desires in Convergence Culture: Transnational Fandom, Censorship and Resistance." *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics* 4, no. 1: 44-63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2013.784201>.
- Yue, Audrey. 2014. "Queer Asian Cinema and Media Studies: From Hybridity to Critical Regionality." *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2: 145-51. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2014.0001>.
- Zanghellini, Alcardo. 2009. "'Boys Love' in Anime and Manga: Japanese Subcultural Production and Its End Users." *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 23, no. 3: 279-94. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310902822886>.

- Zhou, Yanyan, Bryant Paul, and Ryland Sherman. 2017. "Still a Hetero-Gendered World: A Content Analysis of Gender Stereotypes and Romantic Ideals in Chinese Boy Love Stories." *Sex Roles* 78, no. 1-2: 107-18. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0762-y>.
- Zsila, Ágnes, Dru Pagliassotti, Róbert Urbán, Gábor Orosz, Orsolya Király, and Zsolt Demetrovics. 2018. "Loving the Love of Boys: Motives for Consuming Yaoi Media." *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 6: 1-17. Accessed 1 June 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0198895>.

## Appendix: Data on Boys' Love Drama Series from 2014 to 2018

| Producer               | Year | Series Title                              | *Rating | *Review % | ** Fan Subscriptions Count | ** First Episode View Count | ** Highest Episode View Count |
|------------------------|------|-------------------------------------------|---------|-----------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Middleman Media        | 2014 | <i>Love Sick</i>                          | 8.2     | 51.9%     | 20,119                     | 1,060,211                   | 1,060,211                     |
| Greatest Entertainment | 2015 | <i>Love Sick 2</i>                        | 8.4     | 50.7%     | 18,720                     | 1,295,000                   | 1,295,000                     |
| COPY A'BANGKOK         | 2016 | <i>Make It Right</i>                      | 7.8     | 52.4%     | 84,353                     | 2,183,755                   | 2,183,755                     |
| GMM TV                 | 2016 | <i>SOTUS The Series</i>                   | 8.8     | 67.2%     | 180,051                    | 5,117,787                   | 5,117,787                     |
| Greatest Entertainment | 2016 | <i>My Bromance</i>                        | 7.7     | 38.1%     | 34,957                     | 2,498,732                   | 2,498,732                     |
| GMM TV                 | 2017 | <i>Water Boyy</i>                         | 7.8     | 58.7%     | 62,765                     | 2,722,235                   | 9,459,939                     |
| CCDM                   | 2017 | <i>2 Moons</i>                            | 8.2     | 64.0%     | 106,904                    | 5,814,258                   | 12,694,159                    |
| COSOCOMO               | 2017 | <i>Make It Right 2</i>                    | 8.0     | 50.7%     | 86,301                     | 3,459,029                   | 7,648,317                     |
| GMM TV                 | 2017 | <i>SOTUS S The Series</i>                 | 8.7     | 60.5%     | 110,419                    | 5,906,510                   | 5,906,510                     |
| TV Thunder             | 2017 | <i>Together With Me</i>                   | 8.6     | 61.7%     | 90,173                     | 2,183,162                   | 5,093,033                     |
| JINLOE                 | 2018 | <i>What the Duck</i>                      | 7.2     | 45.2%     | 66,346                     | 2,493,075                   | 2,641,196                     |
| GMM TV                 | 2018 | <i>Cause You're My Boy</i>                | 7.3     | 50.6%     | 86,519                     | 4,701,094                   | 5,474,233                     |
| Studio Wabi Sabi       | 2018 | <i>Love by Chance</i>                     | 8.6     | 64.3%     | 232,852                    | 12,969,150                  | 12,969,150                    |
| TV Thunder             | 2018 | <i>Together With Me: The Next Chapter</i> | 8.0     | 43.1%     | 90,173                     | 3,624,275                   | 3,624,275                     |
| Playeminent            | 2018 | <i>My Dream</i>                           | 7.1     | 37.5%     | 65,135                     | 3,065,348                   | 3,613,382                     |
| GMM TV                 | 2018 | <i>Our Skyy</i>                           | 8.5     | 44.7%     | 123,622                    | 2,251,141                   | 5,257,225                     |

\* Data is sourced from MyDramaList website ([www.mydramalist.com](http://www.mydramalist.com)).

\*\* Data is sourced from LINETV website ([tv.line.me](http://tv.line.me)). Data sourced on 11 October 2019.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**ANTHONY THIEN PHAM (they/he)** is a queer, non-binary masc educator and activist who recently graduated concurrently from Chulalongkorn University with a Master's Degree in Southeast Asian Studies and from Thammasat University with a Master's Degree in International Relations. Their research interests include issues of race, gender, and sexuality as they pertain specifically to Asian and Asian-American communities.

✉: [anthonyjrpham@gmail.com](mailto:anthonyjrpham@gmail.com)