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The Softening of Butches

The Adoption of Korean “Soft” Masculinity among Thai Toms

Dredge Byung’chu Kang-Nguyen

I’m riding the BTS Skytrain with my gay friend Beer.¹ He looks across the way and finds someone especially attractive. “Do you think that is a guy or a girl? S/he is so cute, but I can’t tell. I don’t know if I can hit on her/him?”² Because I am a foreigner with little shame and like to play matchmaker, I do what most Thais would rarely do, I go and ask. I come back and report: “S/he’s a *tom*.” Beer is no longer interested. Later in the evening, Beer and I meet up with my gay daughters at Fake Club, a popular gay bar in the Ortorkor area of Bangkok, where, like other gay bars in Bangkok, the majority of music played is neither Western nor Thai, but Korean.³ A *tom* named Pop approaches me and asks for my phone number. In bar environments, it is quite common for gay men to send a woman to make such a request, to make it less threatening and soften potential rejection. So, I ask who it’s for. She says for her. A bit confused, I reply, “I’m a man.” She says, “I know.”⁴ I give her my phone number, we chat for a bit, and then we dance with each other throughout the evening whenever she visits my table.

Since the late 1990s, Thai aesthetics have taken a decidedly eastward-looking turn. The intensification of inter-Asian media flows, where Thailand is more often the recipient than originator, has created new aesthetic standards for hair, cosmetics, clothing, surgery, and other self-enhancements. Some desirable features, such as white skin or big eyes, are often misread by Westerners as a desire to look Caucasian. I argue

that they instead represent a desire to look “white Asian” (Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, and others), a new racialization of Asianness associated with light skin, economic development, and modern lifestyles, but also conceptualized as physically and culturally similar to Thais.⁵ White Asians have thus become the exemplars of beauty for Thai middle-class people of various gender presentations. Young queer people are on the vanguard of this trend in following East Asian popular culture, most notably the recent adoration of K-pop idols and drama stars. However, the kinds of gender identifications and associations being performed are not simply an imitation of same- or cross-gender forms from developed Asia, rather, they are an indigenization of new imaginings within contemporary Thai frameworks. *Toms* and *sissies*, for example, have convergent aesthetics but attach different meanings to them. More than mimicry, these new beauty ideals point to a bricolage of styles that localize foreign influences into practices of self-transformation.

Megan Sinnott and I have written about Thai *tom*, *les*, *sissy*, and gay male mimicry of Korean aesthetics.⁶ This chapter examines how young Thai tomboys and sissies have become virtually indistinguishable in public. *Tom* and *sissy* aesthetics have converged because they are modeling themselves on the same Korean idols. One result is the softening of female butchness relative to a previous generation. I do not assert that East Asian media directly fashions new Thai desires and subjectivities. Instead, I argue that the practice of “soft” masculinity facilitates new queer gender and sexual possibilities.⁷ These forms transcend cross-gender couplings, such as *tom-gay* or the relationships of *tom* (akin to a butch lesbian) with other *tom* rather than *dee* (the feminine partners of *tom*).⁸ According to Sinnott’s earlier work, this *tom-tom* pairing would previously have been unimaginable.⁹ Thai queer youth have fashioned contemporary sartorial assemblages by localizing East Asian media flows that have until recently been coded as “conservative,” but that now allow for the reimagining of new gender and sexual identities and practices.

This essay is based on comparative data for young tomboys (*tom*) and sissies between 2004 and 2015. My *tom* data is derived from several years of participant observation with *tom*, including living with one who transitioned from *tom* to *tom bi* categories over a twenty-three-month period, participant observation at two *tom* clothing stores, interviewing five *tom* about their relationship with K-style, and *tom* media such as *@tom act* (a glossy *tom* magazine) and online sites. My *sissy* data is

derived from several years of participant observation and seventy-five interviews with variously gendered and self-identifying individuals who position themselves between masculine gay men and *kathoey* (transgender women).

GAY, SISSY, KATHOEY, AND OTHER MALE-BODIED IDENTITIES

There are five primary gender-sexuality categories with an ontological fixity in Thailand: male, female, *kathoey*, *tom*, and *gay*.¹⁰ Queer male-bodied gender-sexuality forms are multiple and shifting. There is currently no good term for Thai sissies because most simply refer to themselves as *gay* (เกย์) and sometimes as *tut* (ตุ๊: sissy or queen) or another slang term.¹¹ The previous use of *gay king* and *gay queen* to differentiate masculine and feminine gay men is still understood but no longer common in everyday speech. These terms have been replaced by the sexual positions *ruk* and *rap* following the Japanese *seme* (invader) and *uke* (receiver), which do not assume heterogender difference but rather focus on sexual positioning.¹² Sissies would not think of themselves as *kathoey* (transgender women), though they often joke about it. Although they identify with femininity, necessarily present a feminized comportment and sartorial aesthetic, and often use female speech patterns (such as the *-kha* female polite particle and terms like *jang-loei* that express feminine mood or affect), they think of themselves as essentially male. This is also true of many *kathoey*, who express complex relationships with their bodies, religious identity, and wider discourses about sexual diversity. Sissies are also not *kathoey noi*, male individuals who present their faces as female (wear obvious women's make-up) but wear short hair and dress in men's clothing. From the perspective of masculine *gay*, particularly those only aroused by other masculine gay men, sissies might as well be *kathoey* or on the path to become *kathoey*, which is not necessarily the case. Masculine *gay* refers to sissies as *gay-ork-sao* (gay who expresses girliness). This is also the standpoint of Thai social critics who are embarrassed by Thailand's putative shortage of male masculinity.¹³

Gay are presumed to be masculine and undistinguishable from heterosexual men. Thus, only *gay-ork-sao* are said to "show" themselves and often come to represent all gay men in public space. In academic Thai, sissy is rendered *gay sao* (เกย์สาว, girly gay). However, this term is not used in everyday

discourse. For this essay, I sometimes use *tut* to mean femininely identified *gay*, given that many sissies reclaim and self-identify with the often-derogatory term. I also reclaim “sissy” to be used in an embracing rather than pejorative manner. Sissiness in this sense articulates the refusal of normative gender dimorphism and subsequent expectations of gender presentation, what Dennis Lin refers to as “queered effeminacies,” particularly in light of the growing popularity of feminized masculinity among heterosexually identified men in East Asia.¹⁴ Many new Thai terms specifically refer to soft masculinity. Recent terms such as “cutesy boy” (*phuchai pen phet thi mung-ming*, ผู้ชายเป็นเพศที่นุ่มนวล) specifically refer to the style of masculinity one would expect from a K-pop idol or boys love character.

TOM, LES, DEE, AND OTHER FEMALE-BODIED EROTICISMS

The categories of female same-sex relationships in Thailand coalesce around three general archetypes. These include the relatively rare but increasingly visible trans men, who identify, like transsexuals in other parts of the world, with a desire to change sex via medical intervention that includes use of hormones and, less often, surgery. Second are the more prominent *tom* (a relexification of “tomboy”), who identify with masculinity but do not want to change their sex. Thai *tom* typically dress as men, cut their hair short, and do not use feminine cosmetics on their face. But *tom* typically use female pronouns and polite particles in speech. *Tom* is a gender category that “shows” and Thais would assume that trans men are *tom*. *Dee* (a relexification of “lady”) are feminine women who are labeled as such only when they are the partners of *tom* and alternatively are referred to as women if they are partnered with men. *Dee* is thus a gender normative category relational to and less fixed than that of *tom*. Third are the increasingly visible *les* (a relexification of “lesbian”), which typically refers to more femininely identified women who love women (*ying-rak-ying*). The *les* categories have valences of being more middle class, Westernized, and gender egalitarian. Whereas trans men are asserting a more distinct presence, *tom* and *les* categories are increasingly overlapping.

The last decade has seen a proliferation of *tom* and *les* subcategories. These include *les king*, *les queen*, *les two-way*, *les bi*, *tom one-way*, *tom two-way*, *tom bi*, *tom gay king*, *tom gay queen*, and *tom gay both*. Many of these categories, based on sexual preferences for being active or passive

during penetrative sex, are explicitly modeled on Thai gay men's discourse. Previously, *tom* would be assumed to only be penetrative partners and to be in relationships with *dees* rather than other *toms*. However, *tom* sexual practices have broadened. *One-way* and *two-way* refer to whether a *tom/les* is only penetrative, or also is also penetrated. *Both* is a Thai relexification of "both," which means "versatile," playing both top and bottom roles in penetrative sex. At the same time, other typologies of female same-sex desire rely more on the affective nature of one's personality, for example: prince type, queen type, romantic type, cool type, cute type, sweet type, calm type, host type, SM type, and hot type. These labels both point to highly differentiated subcategories and various ways of conceptualizing gender and sexuality that are not uniform in either thought or practice. What is most striking, however, is that the sexual practices of *tom* have significantly transformed, from assuming a masculine role with a *dee* to one that is more flexible, both in choice of gendered partners and sexual activity. *Toms* now can partner with each other and engage in reciprocal sex, activities that previously were unconceivable.

ASIAN REGIONALISM

I want to shift one of the key terms of Asianification or Asianization to Asian regionalism.¹⁵ I do so to acknowledge Thailand's medial position in the production, consumption, and circulation of queer popular culture in Asia. Thailand is a producer and has been increasingly recognized for its role in "inter" (international) queer popular culture areas such as film and music. Films such as *Love of Siam* (2007) and *Bangkok Love Story* (2007) have been popular throughout the East/Southeast Asian region, as have musicians and groups such as Tata Young, Girly Berry, and Kamikake featuring Baitoey. Thais have also been involved in indigenizing pop culture forms from Korea and Japan. Subsequently, these localizations are often recast and branded as queer Thai in other areas of Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Indeed, Thailand is beginning to dominate the boys love drama genre in the region.

In relation to Asian regionalism, I also briefly define two neologisms I use: "white Asian" and "Korpanese." "White Asian" is an etic term that combines two Thai concepts that have emerged in the mid- to late 2000s: *khon khao* (literally "white person," it does not refer to Caucasians,

who are *farang*) and *khon echia* (literally “Asian person,” referring to East and Southeast Asians but not South Asians, who are categorized as *khaek*). *Khon khao* became popularized after a controversy surrounding the Oishi Amino Plus Brightenn advertising campaign of 2010–2011. Jillana Enteen observes that, between 2004 to 2008, Thai gay men start using the term “Asian.”¹⁶ Thais have historically referred to their Asian neighbors by terms of ethno-national groups, such as Chinese, Malay, Burmese. The use of “Asian” represents a new regionalization and racialization of Asianness as a common group.¹⁷ This is not to be confused with ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations), though the integration of those states and its permutation of ASEAN +3 (China, Korea, Japan) and Taiwan, roughly defines the geography of Asia as conceptualized by Thais. What is important is that the groups featured are those that meet two criteria: they have “white” skin (Thais generally do not describe themselves or other Asians as “yellow”) and they are either from developed countries or represent relatively economically, though not necessarily politically, powerful Chinese minorities.

White Asianness is epitomized by the “Korpanese.” I use Korpanese as a shorthand for the hybridization of Korea and Japan. These two countries are often conflated and combined in Thai discourse and practice, like two sides of the same coin. For example, Korean music is ubiquitous in Japanese restaurants, the hosts may wear a combination of kimono and *hanbok*, the brand ambassadors are typically K-pop stars, and the food is fused so that sushi comes with a side of kimchi. There is also the tendency to attribute Koreanness to Japanese things because the Korean Wave has become the dominant foreign media.¹⁸ Japanese practices like *yaoi*, or the practice of constructing homoerotic imagery from found photos and video, are also interpreted through Korean forms. Currently Thai *khu-wai* (literally “Y couple,” similar in sound to Japanese *kawaii*) is dominated by K-pop *yaoi* and now, Thai boys love drama series. Various representations of soft masculinity, queerness, Asian racialization, and middle-class modernity are coming together in the construction of a new Asian “taste continent.”¹⁹

THE CONVERGENCE OF *TOM* AND *SISSY* GENDER AESTHETICS

Within this context of Asian regionalism, Thai beauty practices and gender have increasingly incorporated East Asian elements. For the sake of

brevity in this chapter, I address only *tom* and *sissy* groups, but these Korpanese aesthetics have affected all gender and sexual identities, especially in youth subcultures. As Megan Sinnott notes, one of the new forms of gender or sexual expression becoming dominant among women loving women is the *tom-gay*, that is *tom* in relationships with other *tom* as opposed to *dee*, feminine women in relationships with *tom*. *Tom-dee* relationships are increasingly being displaced by *tom-gay* ones. Indeed, when conducting online searches for *tom-dee* images in 2015, I was struck by the absence of *tom-dee* images on *tom* websites. Sinnott notes that in *tom-gay* couplings, subtle differences of masculinity that structure gender difference remain, but the same-gender coupling is a major contrast to the cross-gender *tom-dee* pair.²⁰ It more closely approximates gay and lesbian same-gender attraction. Indeed, the language being used in terms like *les king* and *les queen* is a direct borrowing of older *gay* slang's use of *gay king* and *gay queen*. Both among women and gay men, the term "lesbian" is being more positively evaluated via the abbreviated use of *les* among women and the increasing acceptance of *sissy* *sissy* and *kathoey kathoey* or *kathoey gay* relationships, which were previously referred to disparagingly as "lesbian." Interestingly, *tom gay* are now also using the abbreviated acronym TG (*thi-ji*) as shorthand for *tom gay*, similar to *kathoey* borrowing of TG for the English word "transgender," as it is used in international HIV prevention efforts.

These changes are occurring amid an ongoing proliferation and reorganizing of gender and sexual categories.²¹ In 2013, Police General Pongsapat Pongcharoen, the Pheu Thai Party candidate for Bangkok governor, ran the first Thai electoral commercial targeting alternately gendered constituents. The video included images of ten queer gender-sexual categories including *angie* (แอนจี้, *kathoey* who likes *tom*), *cherry* (เชอรี่, woman who likes *gay* or *kathoey*), *adam* (อดัม, man who likes *tom*), and "uncertain." The ad promoted Pongsapat's candidacy by aligning with a progressive tolerance of sexual diversity, ending with the message "It is now the twenty-first century." Against pollsters' predictions, Pongsapat lost the election. However, the advertisement points to ongoing shifts in Thai identities as well as the increasing influence of gender or sexually diverse constituencies.

The conjunction of the internet, Korpanese media, cross-gender cover dance, and other media and consumption practices opens up new possibilities for desires that are neither anatomically based nor reliant on a masculine-feminine gender binary.²² That is, the recent proliferation

of categories such as in the Bangkok governor's race advertisement are not limited to types that pair based on dualistic gender difference (*tom-dee*) or similarity (lesbian), but increasingly based on putatively previously unimaginable couplings.²³ Here I follow Ara Wilson in suggesting that new gender and sexual identities are made possible with style commodification, and, more recently, borrowing of Korpanese gender aesthetics.²⁴ In this process, the aesthetics of sissies and *tom* are increasingly converging based on Korpanese soft masculinity and allow for new sexual possibilities to emerge.

SOFT MASCULINITY IN EAST ASIA

Soft masculinity is the recent feminization of masculinity in East Asia epitomized by the Korean flower boy (*kkonminam*) and the Japanese-Chinese herbivore or grass-eating man.²⁵ These new styles of masculinity have also engendered masculinist backlashes and are being critiqued in places like Japan and Thailand as diminishing fertility. Before the 1990s, Koreanists would not have predicted that flower boy masculinity would be popularly dramatized, become fashionable in Korea, and spread through K-pop, K-dramas, fashion, and cosmetic advertisements. Indeed, Korea remains one of the most militarized states in the world, where mandatory military service of two years are still required of all men. But now, one can buy and bring one's own camouflage cosmetics because the low-quality products supplied by the military might cause skin irritation. And though Korean men generally lack *aegyo*, or the winsomeness associated with Korean media, young Korean male stars are generally expected to act the part and engage in homoerotic displays referred to as "fan service" like in Japan.²⁶

Historical antecedents for a soft Asian masculinity, homosociality, and homosexuality are deep seated. Louie suggest that soft masculinity is modeled from prior scholarly masculinity as opposed to militaristic masculinity.²⁷ Others link it to a long tradition of masculine homosocial bonding in such works as the Chinese classic "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" and the Japanese scroll "A Long Tale for an Autumn Night." I do not, however, believe such a lineage is necessary, given more proximate antecedents. Nor does such a lineage acknowledge the role of women in shaping male masculinity through their desire for relatively egalitarian companionate partners.²⁸ I suggest that instead

East Asian masculinity has feminized as men adapt to what women find desirable in them.

The recent antecedents for soft masculinity derive from Japanese popular culture in the figure of the modernized *bishonen* (beautiful boys), which dates to the 1960s, and the practices of boys love and *yaoi* fandom that have subsequently emerged. These *bishonen* characters, often portrayed historically, such as in *King and the Clown* (Korea, 2005) and *Frozen Flower* (Korea, 2008), are contemporary conceptions of the past. They are also hugely popular: *King and the Clown*, for instance, was the top-grossing Korean film at the time of its release, and these sales are driven by women. McLelland, for example, argues that Japanese women's desires for gay men, in the production of boys love material, represents their indirect protest against gender oppression.²⁹ Cultural representations can be tied to actual demographic shifts in relation to gender egalitarian values and expectations.³⁰ Louie himself has updated his notions of Chinese soft masculinity as they have been transformed by contemporary Korean and Japanese popular culture.³¹ He notes that women define what a "sexy man" is. Thus, a softer masculine ideal is made possible because it is created in women's fantasies, which constitute a large consumer market.

As a major market segment, female desires for gentle, romantic men, unlike traditional patriarchs, have proliferated a vast explosion of soft masculine imagery that caters to them. Like Louie, Darling-Wolf noted earlier that "the fact that Japanese female media consumers are longing for representations of men who can take on what have traditionally been more female roles and character traits may itself be significant, as indicative of a female-influenced shift in the conceptualization of ideal masculinity in Japan."³² I argue that these images not only influence masculine ideals, but also shape how East Asian men see and cultivate themselves in order to appeal to women. That is, in a dialogical relationship women's frustrations with patriarchal masculinity become reimagined and disseminated in media as new soft masculine ideals that are then taken up by some men who conform to these new ideals.³³ Young, aspirational, middle-class men, in particular, use newly defined soft masculine aesthetics as resources for male beauty practices, courtship performances, and everyday embodiments. In Thailand, *sao-wai* (literally "Y girl," where the "y" is an abbreviation of the Japanese *yaoi*) are fans of boys love genre manga and other media, in which the narrative, produced primarily by and for women,

revolves around the romantic and sexual relationships of young male couples. But there are also the men, both *gay*-sissy and heterosexual, who desire the attention and affection of *sao-wai* and thus fashion themselves in the image of boys love.³⁴

KOREA AS IMAGINED TOMBOY PARADISE

Another common depiction in Korean media is of cross-gendered female to male characters. In Korean popular media, gender is highly regulated yet simultaneously transgressed. Again, this is not common in real life. Nonetheless, it is a popular trope, especially in K-drama. Further, the media consumed within Korea is often strikingly different from the K-version that is exported. Early in my fieldwork, I was commonly asked by Thais, because they had watched popular series like *Coffee Prince* (2007) and *You're Beautiful* (2008), why there are so many *tom* in Korea. In *Coffee Prince*, a female tomboy character, Eun-Chan, must play a male because she wants to work in a café that hires only attractive male staff. The owner of the shop, Han-Gyul, mistakes her as a man and hires her to play a gay lover to sabotage the matchmaking dates his parents set up for him. Later, Han-Gyul falls in love with Eun-Chan and must come to terms with his homosexuality. After Han-Gyul accepts himself as gay, the plot climaxes in what has been dubbed “the man or alien kiss,” where Han-Gyul professes his love to Eun-Chan and states that he does not care whether Eun-Chan is a man, alien, or whatever. This is roughly contemporaneous with the Thai film *Love of Siam*, a boy love story with a kiss. The kiss between the boys was censored when it played on Thai television but the kiss in *Coffee Prince* was not. Based on storylines such as this, many Thais make the assumption that *tom*, gay, and other gender-sexual differences are socially acceptable in Korea when, in fact, Thailand is much more socially tolerant of homosexuality in everyday life, even though local homoerotic representations are more likely to be self-censored in relation to Thai Ministry of Culture regulations and thus less likely to be televised.

Boys love and tomboy images and stories have become extremely popular, common elements evolving over time and recirculating through online parodies, often by K-pop idols themselves. The extreme popularity of *Coffee Prince* set it up for spinoffs and remakes including *Happy Michelin Kitchen* (2012, Taiwan), *Coffee Prince Thai* (2012, Thailand), which repeats

the “man or alien” line, and *Coffee Prince* (2012, Philippines), in which the “man or alien” line is replaced with a joke in which the Tagalog pronunciation of “keys” is used to initiate the kiss. *You’re Beautiful* (2009, Korea) continued the tomboy theme, was also parodied and recirculated by 2PM, which is famous in Thailand for having a Thai band member, Nichkhun Horvejkul (a Sino-Thai born and raised in the United States, who had never lived in Thailand and is now fluent in Korean). Although tomboys are not common in Korea, they are frequently represented in K-dramas, which are popular and broadcast in prime-time television viewing slots in Thailand. These images promote the idea among Thai *tom* that Korea is accepting of tomboys and that there are many there.³⁵ At this point, I turn to *tom* accounts of their turn to soft masculinity.

“WE LOOK THE SAME AS SISSIES,” “WE LOOK THE SAME AS KOREANS”

Tomboys in K-drama follow flower boy aesthetics and this, along with K-pop idols, is one of the primary sources of *tom* inspiration in Thailand. Among younger urban *tom*, their aesthetics of gender presentation have shifted from a butch rebel style (e.g., James Dean, Marlon Brando) to a localized soft masculine style epitomized in K-pop.³⁶ Some *tom* subclassify into *K-tom* or *J-tom* type, based on whether they look stylistically more K-pop or J-pop. However, by the time of my interviews in 2015, this labeling became unnecessary as *J-tom* disappeared and *K-tom* became presumed. *Tom* stores specifically cater to this market with small-sized men’s clothing, accessories, and cosmetics. Often, clothing like Adidas is marked “Korean” to give it more cachet. The *@tom act* magazine (www.atomact.com) and singer Zee (Matanawee Keenan, Zheza Records) epitomize this style. As the aesthetics of East Asian masculinity have recently “feminized,” Thai *tom* following East Asian trends have similarly softened.³⁷ This means that, in Bangkok, although very different meanings (being a masculine female or being a feminine male) are attached to the same style, young *tom* and *tut* (sissy) aesthetics have increasingly converged.

I met See through a mutual activist friend. We agreed to meet for an interview about *toms*, Korean style, and new trends. On the day of our interview, I started receiving text messages from her stating that she would be late. Ultimately, See arrived ninety minutes late. She had driven

with her girlfriend, Som, and apologized profusely, noting the traffic from the Thonburi side of Bangkok to Lad Prao was jammed. I apologized and said that I could have met her closer to where she lived had I known. See shrugged it off and said they were planning to come to Lad Prao anyway because it was their regular hangout as a *tom-dee* couple. See and Som typically came to this area every weekend to eat, shop, and hang out. As a twenty-four-year-old, unemployed, recent college graduate, I assumed that driving meant that she lived with her family and used their car. See confirmed this, which meant that she came from a relatively wealthy family.

When starting our interview, I began with two anecdotes of recent experiences I had in which my gay friends could not tell whether a *tom* was male or female, that is, whether the person was dating material. Both See and her girlfriend Som laughed. "Yes, it's hard to tell these days. Sometimes I'm confused too. You look and then you have to look again. You have to examine closely for signs. Like an Adam's apple. Or the size of the hands. Or the pitch of their voice when they speak." Som nodded. "It's not easy to distinguish anymore." I was taken aback. The description reminded me of how Western men talk about identifying whether a Thai woman is "really" female or a ladyboy (trans woman). It seemed ironic that the influence of East Asian soft masculinity was creating new Thai anxieties around gender differentiation along the same lines that Westerners had about local gender formations. I was repeatedly told by *tom*, *dee*, and *gay* that the adoption of soft masculinity made it increasingly difficult to differentiate young *tom* and *sissy*. See had repeated what I had heard over and over again: *tom* (referencing those under thirty-five years or so) now follow K-style and thus embody a soft masculine style. This style, however, did not only reference gender, but also a racialization of white Asianness.

Em is the manager of a *tom* store that specializes in "Korean style" clothing. The store is located at the Central Plaza Lardprao mall. Technically the shop is not in the mall itself, but in a permanent lower-end market that links the MRT (subway) to the mall. When I visit the shop on a Saturday afternoon, her girlfriend is hanging out with her and agrees to watch the shop while we go to the McDonald's to talk. Em reiterated much of what I'd heard from other *tom*: this area (Lad Prao), and particularly, Union Mall (a lower-end mall) across the street, are ground zero for *tom* in Bangkok. Among young *tom*, the popularity of

Korean media is very strong, and drama series like *Coffee Prince* were a major influence on her ideas about living in a masculine role. She identified with characters like Eun-Chan and assumed that there were many *tom* in Korea because there were so many representations of females who dressed and lived as men. But, as an employee at a *tom* clothing store, this was manifest to her not only in televised dramas but also through Korean tourists. Em maintained that *tom* were everywhere in the world and many were in Korea, as in Thailand. She made this assertion based on the visitors to the shop.

According to Em, the *tom* foreigners who most commonly visited were from China, Korea, and England. Among them, Em noted, “we [Thai *tom*] look the same as Koreans.” When I asked her to elaborate, she replied that *farang tom* style is very different from Asian *tom* style. Thai *tom* look similar to Chinese *tom* but like Korean *tom*. For Em, the significant difference was in the hair styling. Chinese, Koreans, and Thais dressed the same, following Korean fashion. However, “Chinese have a natural hair style.” By this, she meant that Chinese do not use a lot of hair products, which looks soft and natural, whereas Thais and Koreans have harder, wetter, molded hair styles. Thais, she noted, took the extra effort needed to emulate the Korean style, which Chinese did not, by styling their hair more like Koreans. Em also stated that Thais were more likely to dye their hair popular colors such as platinum blond, lavender, or light pink, blue, and green. This was a distinction of pride for Em, who emphasized how closely Thai *toms* followed Korean style. This exhibition of high maintenance hair styles, however, was not universal nor even in the majority of my observations of young *tom*. Yet it was an important difference for Em, given that she was a purveyor of K-style at the shop. Looking “Korean” was her job.

Several *toms* reported that their current or previous girlfriends have been *sao-wai*. But when I raised the issue of *toms*, and particularly *tom gay* couples looking like boys love couples, they were perplexed or repulsed. For example, Yu was a college student studying sociology who worked on the weekends at the Chatuchak Weekend Market. I met Yu through a close friend who owns a shop near the stall where she works. When I noted that Thais had been particularly successful at K-pop cover dance competitions, Yu agreed. But when I asked her whether Thai *tom*, and, in particular, *tom gay* couples had any resemblance to the *khu-wai* (boys love) couples in K-pop fandom, Yu recoiled in horror. “Not at all!” Like with other *tom*, I tried to make the case that their sartorial practice

was not only like sissies, but also, when in couples, similar to boys love imagery. Although Thai *tom* acknowledged that they looked similar to Thai sissies, the idea of their looking like boys love couples seemed revolting to them. The line between *tom* resembling the same kind of soft masculinity as *tut* and sharing similar gender or sexual identities was clear. *Tom gay* couples looked like soft gay couples but were not like gay men. That is, *tom* investment in soft masculinity was divorced from gay male sexuality and the adoration of girls who love boys love.

The medial role of Thailand within wider Asian networks of media circulation is paramount to understanding recent changes in Thai gender and sexuality practices as well as Thailand's impact on its neighbors. As noted, Thailand consumes a great deal of media produced in Korea as part of the Korean Wave. Some of this media is read as "queer" even though the plots often reinforce normative heterosexuality. The consumption of this media is affecting local ways of performing gender and sexuality. Here I focus on the recent softening of Thai butches.

Yet I also want to highlight how Thais are indigenizing, localizing, and recirculating Korpanese flows. Thailand produces a significant volume of queer media that is circulated regionally. Inter-Asian cultural flows are transforming everyday Thai gender practices and performances. Korpanese media is molding contemporary beauty aesthetics. One of the most visible examples is cover dance, the copying of choreographed movements in K-pop songs.³⁸ Since 2009, K-pop cover dance has become a definitive social activity among Asian sissies and girls and is also being taken up by *tom*. Cover dance is organized into an extensive contest circuit leading to an international competition in Korea. Thai sissies are among the most prolific practitioners of K-pop cover dance, engaging in various forms of cover dance and posting their videos online. Indeed, groups such as the Wonder Gay, Millenium Boy [*sic*], and Tom Act have risen to national celebrity.³⁹ The cover dance performed by *tom* and sissies are often cross-gender. That is, sissies perform to girl groups and *tom* perform to boy bands. Semi-professional cover dancers constitute a class of "hyper-fans" who become "demi-idols" with fan followings in their own right. This has created a local scene in which Thais can idolize K-pop cover dancers as well as K-pop stars themselves. This means that Thais have refashioned *khu-wai* boys love practices to create local celebrities. These images are then circulated not only in Thailand but throughout East and Southeast Asia as well.

Various communities of queer Thais (e.g., gay, *tom*, kathoey) unite for political activism but lack unifying affective platforms for routine socialization. That is, queer Thais often come together across community divides for political actions but typically do not spend recreational time with each other. Yet, in recent times, Korean and Japanese popular culture has had a dominant impact on the beauty ideals of Thais. These new beauty ideals are most prominent among queer Thais, who have embraced being “Asian,” and specifically, the realm of developed East Asians, or what I refer to as “white Asians.” Following Jackson’s assertions about the Asianization of Bangkok and Boellstorff’s conceptualizations of the nationalization of queer Indonesians, I argue that Asian identification provides a new way for queer Thais to identify with each other in everyday life outside the discourse of (Western) human rights via popular culture.⁴⁰ Although different queer communities are not engaging each other in the same spaces, they are often appropriating the same aesthetic sensibilities, aligning themselves with East Asian forms and each other through this common interest. The Thai localization of Korean media simultaneously highlights the shifting boundaries between media consumption and production and the regionalization of inter-Asian popular culture.

In the reworking of white Asian aesthetics, Thai beautification practices allow for the development of new forms of gender expression and sexual desire that transcend conventional norms. I describe the convergence of *tom* and sissy aesthetics in relation to Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, in relation to Thailand’s medial role in the consumption, production, and circulation of soft masculinity in East and Southeast Asia. I argue that new media flows dominated by the Korean Wave are shaping Thai aesthetics and, that soft masculinity, in particular, is enabling new possibilities for alternative gender and sexual relations that transcend heterogender pairings. The softening of Thai butches has enabled new categories such as the *tom gay*. Furthermore, East Asian popular culture is not only being consumed by Thais but digested, reworked, and rebranded and consumed as Thai in other parts of Southeast Asia.

NOTES

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1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. The third-person pronoun in Thai is gender neutral.
3. In 2015, Fake Club moved to the Ratchada area of Bangkok.
4. Author field notes, 2010.
5. Dredge Byung'chu Kang, "Eastern Orientations: Thai Middle-Class Gay Desire for 'White Asians,'" *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (2017): 182–208.
6. See Megan Sinnott, "Korean-Pop, Tom Gay Kings, Les Queens and the Capitalist Transformation of Sex/Gender Categories in Thailand," *Asian Studies Review* 36, no. 4 (2012): 453–474; see also Dredge Byung'chu Kang, "Idols of Development: Transnational Transgender Performance in Thai K-pop Cover Dance," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 559–571; Kang, "Cultivating Demi-Idols: The Queer Convergence of New Media and Korean Dance Performance in Thailand," in *New Media Configurations and Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Asia and the Arab World*, edited by Nadja-Christina Schneider and Carola Richter (Berlin: Nomos Publishers, 2015), 287–303; Kang, "Eastern Orientations"; "Surfing the Korean Wave: Wonder Gay and the Crisis of Thai Masculinity," *Visual Anthropology* 31, no. 1–S2 (2018): 45–65.
7. Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-pop Idols* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).
8. On *tom-gay*, Sinnott, "Korean-Pop"; on *tom* rather than *dee*, Walter Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Cultures* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1986); Michael G. Peletz, *Gender Pluralism: Southeast Asia Since Early Modern Times* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
9. Megan Sinnott, *Toms and Dees: Transgender Identity and Female Same-Sex Relationships in Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004). Similarly, acceptance is increasing of sissy-sissy couplings, which have previously been derided by gay men as "lesbian." Indeed, these couples are now the subject of boys love (*khu-wai*) fandom in Thailand.
10. Dredge Byung'chu Kang, "Kathoey 'In Trend': Emergent Genderscapes, National Anxieties and the Re-Signification of Male-Bodied Effeminacy in Thailand," *Asian Studies Review* 36, no. 4 (2012): 475–494; "Conceptualizing Thai Genderscapes: Transformation and Continuity in the Thai Sex/Gender System," in *Contemporary Socio-Cultural and Political Perspectives in Thailand*, edited by Pranee Liamputtong, 409–429 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014).
11. In Thai, *gay* refers to an identity similar to the English "gay man." The term in Thai is a noun. Thus, I use *gay* and "gay man," respectively.
12. Peter Jackson suggests that the terms are derived from Thai kickboxing moves of offence and defense (personal communication July 14, 2017). Given the recent shift in use of these terms, I suggest that they are influenced by Thai gay male consumption of Japanese pornography.
13. Kang, "Surfing the Korean Wave."
14. Dennis C. Lin, "Sissies Online: Taiwanese Male Queers Performing Sissinesses in Cyberspaces," *Inter-Asia Culture Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006): 270–288; Hong-Chi Shiau and Chi-Chien Chen, "When Sissy Boys Become Mainstream: Narrating Asian Feminized Masculinities in the Global Age," *International Journal of Social Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2009): 55–74.

15. Peter A. Jackson, "Bangkok's Early Twenty-First-Century Queer Boom," in *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, edited by Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 17–42.
16. Jillana B. Enteen, *Virtual English: Queer Internets and Digital Creolization* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
17. Dredge Byung'chu Kang, "White Asians Wanted: Queer Racialization in Thailand" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2015).
18. The exception to this is pornography, where Japan is dominant.
19. Tania Lim, "Renting East Asian Popular Culture for Local Television: Regional Networks of Cultural Production," in *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*, edited by Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 33–51.
20. Sinnott, "Korean-Pop."
21. Peter A. Jackson, "An Explosion of Thai Identities: Global Queering and Re-imagining Queer Theory," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 2, no. 4 (2000): 405–424; Kang, "Conceptualizing Thai Genderscapes."
22. Peletz, *Gender Pluralism*.
23. Sinnott, "Korean-Pop."
24. On style commodification, Ara Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); on gender aesthetics, Sinnott, "Korean-Pop."
25. Arguably, boy bands and male teen idols are often rather feminine in Western pop music as well. The emulation of Justin Bieber by lesbians is a parallel example of modeling soft butch aesthetics off of pop icons.
26. Kazumi Nagaike, "Johnny's Idols as Icons: Female Desires to Fantasize and Consume Male Idol Images," in *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*, edited by Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 97–112.
27. Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
28. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).
29. Mark McLelland, "A Mirror for Men? Idealised Depictions of White Men and Gay Men in Japanese Women's Media," *Transformations* 6 (2003): 1–14. For a similar argument on China, see Chunyu Zhang, "Loving Boys Twice as Much: Chinese Women's Paradoxical Fandom of 'Boys' Love' Fiction," *Women's Studies in Communication* 39, no. 3 (2016): 249–267.
30. Makoto Atoh shows that the dramatic decline in Japanese fertility does not follow a Western pattern of secularization, individualism, and antinatalism but has more closely followed increasing gender egalitarianism, changing gender roles, and female autonomy. See Makoto Atoh, "Very Low Fertility in Japan and Value Change Hypotheses," *Review of Population and Social Policy* 10 (2001): 1–21.
31. Kam Louie, "Popular Culture and Masculinity Ideals in East Asia, with Special Reference to China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 4 (2012): 929–943; "Chinese Masculinity Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Westernizing, Easternizing and Globalizing *Wen* and *Wu*," *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 9, no. 1 (2014): 18–29.
32. Fabienne Darling-Wolf, "Male Bonding and Female Pleasure: Refining Masculinity in Japanese Popular Cultural Texts," *Popular Communication* 1, no. 2 (2003): 83.

33. Here I would suggest that the aesthetics of boys' love, especially as manga imagery, and soft masculinity more generally preceded their everyday embodiments among men rather than reflected or magnified actual male gender performances. The literature on "metrosexuality" in the United States focuses more on the commodification of soft masculinity, its reflection of ongoing gender trends among heterosexual men, and the difficulty of its execution in everyday life. See, for example, Helene Shugart, "Managing Masculinities: The Metrosexual Moment," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (2008): 280–300; Donnalyn Pompper, "Masculinities, the Metrosexual, and Media Images: Across Dimensions of Age and Ethnicity," *Sex Roles* 63, no. 9–10 (2010): 682–696; Margaret Ervin, "The Might of the Metrosexual: How a Mere Marketing Tool Challenges Hegemonic Masculinity," in *Performing American Masculinities: The 21st-Century Man in Popular Culture*, edited by Elwood Watson and Marc E. Shaw (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 58–75.

34. Byung'chu Dredge Kang, "Realizing Boys Love: Y Couple Fandom in Thailand" (paper presented at the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society World Conference, Bangkok, Thailand, July 2017).

35. Thai gay men, especially those who have traveled to Korea, are less likely to hold these beliefs and instead see Korea as much less accepting of homosexuality, especially in public.

36. Sinnott, "Korean-Pop."

37. I want to emphasize that the feminization of Asian masculinity should be understood in relationship to itself and the West. I particularly caution that Western commentators often already see the Orient as feminized. Indeed the "lack" of sexual dimorphism in Southeast Asia (such as short hair among women and long hair among men) justified colonial domination. Further, I follow Nguyen Tan Hoang in emphasizing that femininity need not be abject but can be a "bottom" position of social and political alliance formation. See Tan Hoang Nguyen, *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Repression* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

38. Kang, "Idols of Development."

39. Kang, "Surfing the Korean Wave."

40. Jackson, "Bangkok's Early"; Tom Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).