



## The *Wai* (Y[aoi]) Genre: Local BL Media in Thailand

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- In his presentation at the AAS Annual Conference this year, Thomas Baudinette (2017) mentioned that some Filipino fans misunderstood that boys love (BL) was originated in Thailand because of the mushrooming of Thai BL-themed films and TV drama series.
- In recent years, Thailand's entertainment industries have produced an unprecedented number of films and TV series that features male–male romantic and erotic relationships. And, they attracted a great number of female fans and fandoms at home and abroad. I call this the “**wai [Y(aoi)] boom.**”



# Presentation Agenda

- This presentation aims to paint a picture of the development and important features of the commercial *wai*'s (Thai BL) popularity boom, or the *wai* boom in Thailand.
- This presentation will address the following issues:
  - Defining the key terms;
  - Introducing what is the *wai* boom recently emerged;
  - Examining *nang-wai* (Y[aoi] films) and *series-wai* (Y[aoi] drama series) to identify their nature, patterns and trends.



# Definitions of the Key Terms

- The Japanese BL genre is commonly called “*wai*” (Y[aoi]) in Thai.
  - *Yaoi* is a more common term than BL.
  - It is often shortened to the letter “Y”.
- The term today is no longer solely associated with Japanese popular culture.
- It has come to broadly signify a genre of fictional media, usually marketed to young women and sexual minorities, especially gay men, that features male-male romantic and erotic relationships.



# Definitions of the Key Terms

- The *wai* genre in the Thai sense is a blending of Japanese BL and other genres targeted narrowly at gay men.
- As a Thai media genre, the term *wai* has been ill-defined and its generic boundaries are blurred.

\* In this presentation, the term *wai* specifically refers to queer-themed Thai media, especially films and TV drama series.



# Definitions of the Key Terms

- Local female BL/*wai* fans are called “*sao-wai*” (Y[aoi] girls), while local male BL/*wai* fans are called “*hnum-wai*” (Y[aoi] boys).
- Both terms have negative connotations similar to the Japanese terms *fujoshi* (rotten girls) and *fudanshi* (rotten boys).
- Both terms connote a sense of *kwam-wiparit* (perversity) in BL/*wai* fans, and of the genre, although different in degree depending on space and time.
- Because narratives and images of beautiful boys loving each other evoke *fin* (an emotionally orgasmic feeling) in fans.
- More importantly, BL’s male homoerotic narratives were discursively ascribed to gayness or masculine homoeroticism which has long been uncounted within the gendered landscape of Thai society.

# What is the *wai* boom?

- The production of *nang-wai* (Y[aoi] films) and *series-wai* (Y[aoi] drama series) has been dramatically increasing in number sine 2014.
- In contrast to the stereotype of queer-themed Thai films that focuses on comedic *kathoey* (transgender/transsexual) characters, *nang-wai* and *series-wai* have broken new ground by portraying masculine boys and young men's relationships, which have long been denied, though tolerated by Thai gender norms and social values.
- The mushrooming of *nang-wai* and *series-wai* has attracted an unprecedented number of fans and followers at home.
- This, in turn, has pushed local broadcasting companies and film industries to cope with increasing demand by releasing more *wai* films and drama series.

# What is the *wai* boom?: Sources of the phenomenon

- Thailand's *wai* boom appears to have emerged from a confluence of several sources. At least two sources of the *wai* boom appear to be most notable:
  - (a) the enduring popularity of Japanese BL in Thailand;
  - (b) the increasingly visible presence of Thai BL/*wai* fans;



# What is the *wai* boom?: Sources of the phenomenon

- *The enduring popularity of Japanese BL in Thailand*
  - Japanese BL has proved not only popular and commercially viable, but has also melded into the popular culture landscape in Thailand.
  - BL becomes integrated as part of a middle-class youth culture especially in Thailand's big cities.



# What is the *wai* boom?: Sources of the phenomenon

- For example, BL language is adopted and localized not only by Thai *fujoshi*, but also young females in general.
  - Japanese BL words like *seme* (the penetrator) and *uke* (the penetrated) have become loanwords in everyday life.
  - The word *seme* is shorten to “*mei*”, while the word *seme* is shorten to “*kei*”.
  - Thai girls and young women usually use the word *mei* (as adjective) to describe young males who look more masculine, while use the word *kei* to describe young males who look more feminine.
    - Ex. He is so *kei*.  
He was born to be *kei*.

# What is the *wai* boom?: Sources of the phenomenon

- *The increasingly visible presence of Thai BL/wai fans*
  - When BL reached Bangkok in the 1990s, women and men who enjoyed the genre much more concerned about being known, in both public and private, that they were *sao-wai* and *hnum-wai*.
  - BL/wai fans were blackened and silenced in 2006 when BL manga became the headlines creating public anxieties.



# What is the *wai* boom? Sources of the phenomenon

- The turning point for Thai *fujoshi* and *fudanshi* was in the year 2007.
- In November 2007, Sahamongkol Film International released *Love of Siam*—the first film produced by a big Thai production company that portrays the love between masculine homosexual high schoolers.
- The film's queer content was unanticipated by most viewers.



# What is the *wai* boom? Sources of the phenomenon

- The film unintentionally functioned as a discursive battlefield. Because it obviously transgressed the heteronormative boundaries of the mass-media domain
- This was particularly true for the film's kissing scene between the two protagonists.
- Undoubtedly, *Love of Siam* provoked widespread consternation and stirred public debate as to its appropriateness.
- The film was also fiercely criticized by nationalists and conservative commentators for its word choice. As Siam is the old name of Thailand, they concerned that it would destroy an image of the nation.



# What is the *wai* boom?

## Sources of the phenomenon

- The film, nonetheless, quickly became a crossover hit, producing immediate and impressive box-office revenue, over 40 million baht in its first month, and gaining far-reaching acclaim.
- It also strikingly created a devoted, cult-like following that went back for multiple viewings and asked for the director's cut version.
- Even more worthy of attention was that *Love of Siam* motivated and empowered the invisible and unheard masculine gay youths whose selves had never counted in the Thai gendered landscape to openly express themselves as the film's gay fans, as *hnum-wai*.
- *Love of Siam* was thereby unprecedently queering not only the public sphere in Thailand, but also Thainess (Thai nationhood).

# What is the *wai* boom?

## Sources of the phenomenon

- Economically, the big success of *Love of Siam* gave entertainment media companies the signal to pay more attentions to the purchasing power and market significance of *sao-wai* and *hnum-wai*.
- And, given the fact that Thai BL/*wai* fans mostly came from middle-class backgrounds, they were part of an important economic sector, and had great potential to constitute economic and business opportunities for local entertainment industries.
- This seems to suggest that the increased presence of *sao-wai* and *hnum-wai* in public was market-mediated.

# What is the *wai boom*? Sources of the phenomenon

- Today, Thai *fujoshi* and *fudanshi* are increasingly vocal and highly visible participant in Thailand's dynamic popular culture. And, they are now far from being prisons who suffer their socially prohibited desires in silence



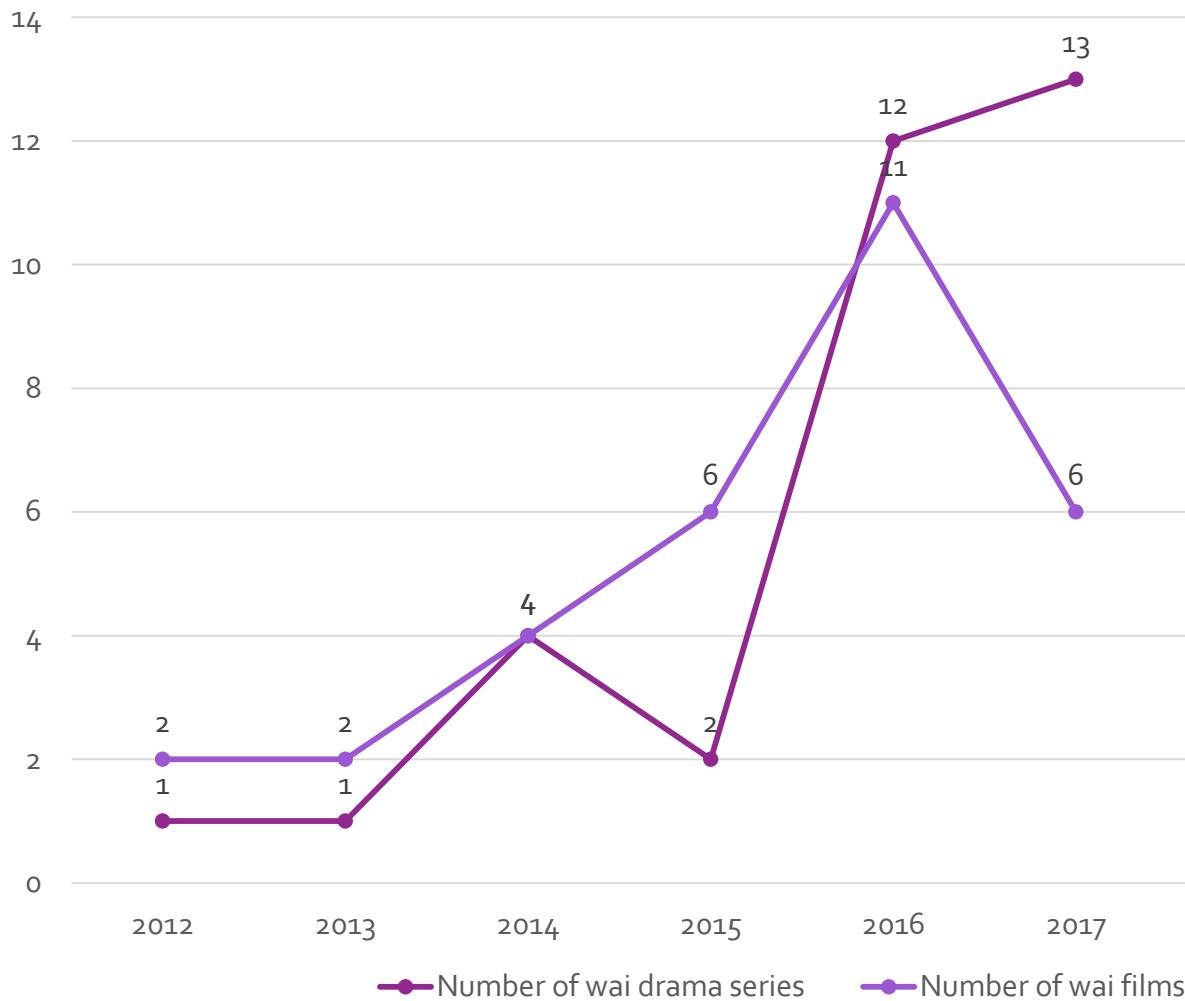
# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- *Wai* films and drama series have recently become the major form of local BL media in Thailand, and have been central to the *wai* boom.
- They have recently represented what *wai* means in Thai understandings of the genre.
- It was not until 2012 or so that *wai* titles began to be regularly shown in theaters and on free and cable TV channels.



# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- As of April 2018, at least 32 *wai* film titles have been released since 2007, and no less than 36 *wai* series titles (including *wai*-themed episodes of TV drama series) have been released since 2012.



# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- *Series-wai* seems to have outshined *nang-wai* as the most viable form of local BL media as they have been mushrooming in recent years.
- It is worth to briefly consider if *wai* drama series, released in different periods of time, have different patterns in terms of the storyline and graphic depiction.



# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- From 36 series-*wai* titles on air between 2012 and 2018, which include episodes of other TV drama series featuring male-male romance:
- 38.9% (n=14) of *wai* drama series end happily for the protagonists.
  - By a happy ending, I mean endings in which almost everything turns out to be good for the main characters, for example, they become a couple.
- 38.9% (n=14) of *wai* drama series end sadly or tragically for the protagonist.
  - By a sad or tragic ending. I refer to endings in which the main characters do not get together in the end. These include impossible love affairs, break-up and death.
- 19.4% (n=7) have inconclusive endings.
  - These inconclusive, but positive endings include an ending that the main characters do not become a couple, but not heartbroken, and relationships between the main characters seem to continue positively.
- 2.8% (n=1) N/A

# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- Considering a number of *wai* drama series with happy and inconclusive, positive endings, it is fair to say that the *wai* genre has been transforming.
- The pre-2014 *wai* drama series usually have sad, if not tragic, endings which signified the impossibility of love between masculine-identified gay men,
- The post-2014 *wai* drama series, more often than not, end happily, or at least positively.
- *Series-wai*'s plots have inclined to end happily.
  - For instance, in 2017, 53.7 (n=7) of all drama series end happily, and 15.4% (n=2) end inconclusively, while only 30.8% (n=4) end sadly or tragically.

# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- In *wai* media, the tensions between individual aspirations and family conformity are among stumbling blocks to the love of the main characters which have been recurrently presented.
- The main characters, usually a top, more masculine partner, have to choose between his identity and his family. And, if a negotiation with familial obligations fails, they will not choose a break with the heteronormative expectations of families.

# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- The year 2014 was a turning point for *wai* films and series, when the first season of *Love Sick The Series* was showing on Saturday and Sunday nights on MCOT HD, a free TV channel.
- *Love Sick The Series* is based on the highly popular online *niyai-wai* (Y[aoi] fan fiction) “Love Sick: The chaotic lives of blue shorts guys.”
- This drama series has broken new ground by featuring a story about the love between masculine-identified boys with a positive, though not happy, ending.
- And moreover, it is the first primetime drama that contain a kissing scene between the young male leads.

# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- *Love Sick The Series* not only enjoyed broad commercial success, but also created a large following among local people, especially *sao-wai*, and built its own fandom.
- Besides, the widespread popularity of *Love Sick The Series* has elevated *sao-wai*'s *khu-jin* practices of pairing heterosexual stars into fictive gay couple.
- The commercial success of *Love Sick The Series* has made Thai broadcasting companies aware the economic significance of Thai *wai* fans. For this reason, local broadcasting companies have quickly responded by producing more *wai* drama series to air on local TV channels.
- This trend has proved the potentiality and significance of the *sao-wai* and *hnum-wai* market.

# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- For graphic depictions, the images of Thai male stars starring in *nang-wai* and *series-wai* appear to be cute, young and good-looking and having a feminine manner.
- Pan-East Asian soft masculine young male stars in *wai* films and dramas are likely to satisfy complex human desires since their appearances possess both feminine and masculine natures.



# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- Young male bodies and masculine homoerotic expressions appear to have increasingly become selling points.
- This makes sense if we adopt the assumption that BL is a form of women's pornography that female audiences used to achieve sexual needs, *wai* films and series could function in the same manner.



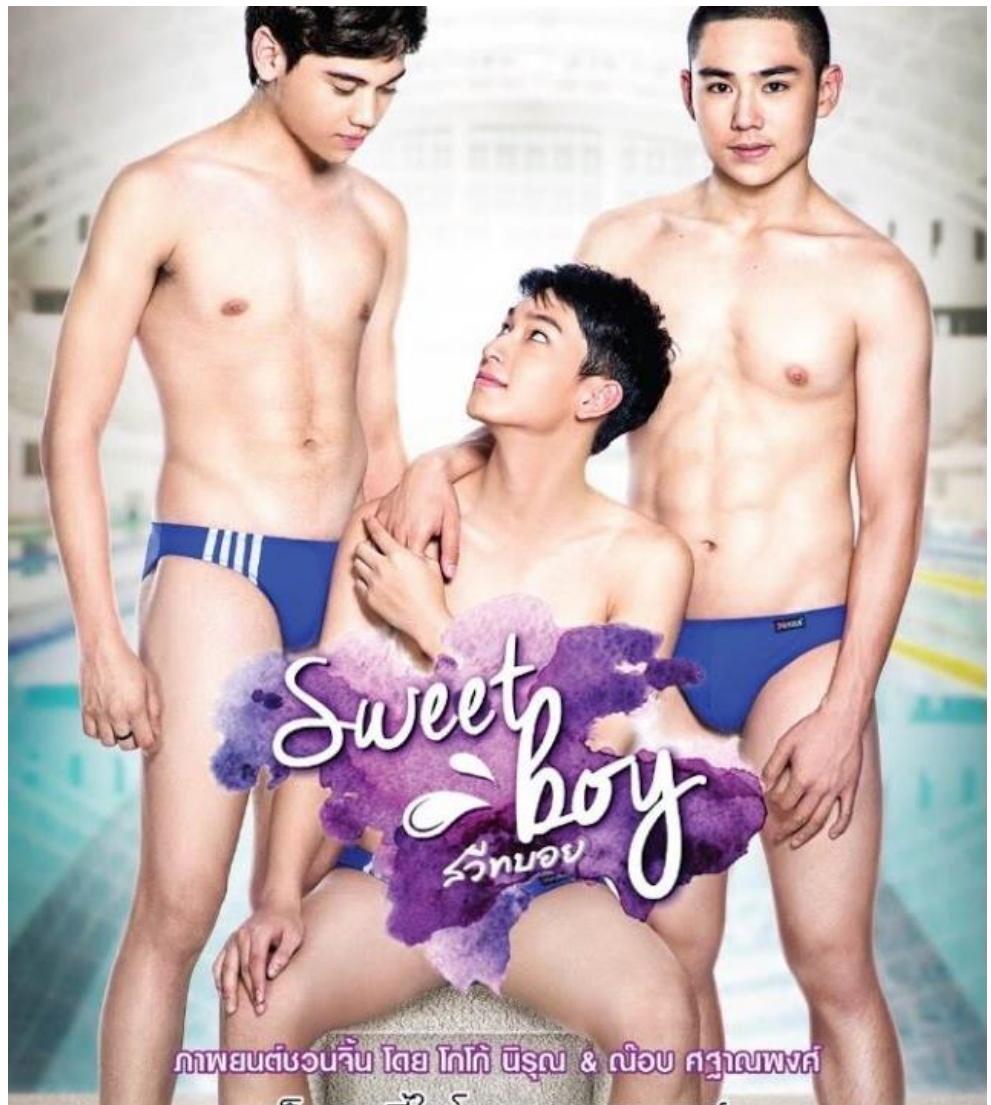
# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- *Wai* media today have shown a tendency to increasingly commodify young masculine bodies.
- Undressing scenes and half-naked scenes are thought necessary in *wai* drama series today in order to evoke *fin* (orgasmic) feeling in *sao-wai*.
- "*Sao-wai* reach nirvana when seeing boys having sex with boys" is a popular caption among Thai rotten girls on social media and the Internet.



# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- Graphic depictions of more, sexually explicit or sexually suggestive scenes make more sense if we assume that homosexual males also enjoy consuming BL media for their sexual needs.
- The *Sweet Boy* (2016) is an extreme example of commodifying young male bodies and male homoerotic expressions.



# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- Although the film's content was promoted as *narak* (cute) and *sai-sai* (innocent), the film contains many sexually suggestive scenes showing most young male leads half-naked in tiny swimming trunks and in enticing poses
- The film also have sexually explicit scenes showing oral sex between *kathoey* and masculine male characters.



# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

- *Sweet Boy*, allegedly targeted at gay audiences, has garnered mild controversies, especially with the issue of its selling campaign that any viewers who bought more than 10 tickets could compete for the prize of swimming trunks used by seven leading actors



# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

I would like to end this section by characterizing the post-2014 *wai* genre. These defining characteristics of the present-day *wai* are notable:

- (a) The *wai* genre is a Thai genre of fictional media that focuses on loving relationships and intimacy between masculine-identified boys and young men whose appearances are usually in line with pan-East Asian pretty boy images.
- (b) Despite often targeting heterosexual young women, the *wai* genre is marketed, though not primarily, to young gay men as well. Hence, it is aptly considered as a genre for both heterosexual women and sexual minorities, including gay men and *kathoey*.



# What is the *wai* boom?: *Wai* films and TV drama series

(c) The *wai* genre's recurring tropes are moving closer toward the generic conventions of the romance, and more likely to have happy endings.

(d) The *wai* genre inclines to have more, sexually suggestive, if not sexually explicit, scenes, increasingly presenting young male bodies and male homoerotic expressions, such as in undressing and half-naked scenes.

