

Research Article

# BL Drama: The Thai Entertainment Industry as a Source of Soft Power

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## Abstract

Boys Love, a subcategory originated in Japan in the 1970's has swept the Thai entertainment industry. BL dramas has put Thailand on the map with an international recognition and appreciation through the portrayal of the country's gender fluidity narrative and addressing relatable social question of the current generation. Observations can be made on the possibility of Thailand to use this newly found niche market as a source of soft power. Looking at the country's other Asian neighbors as case study allows for a clear pattern to be observed through the use of the entertainment industry as a mean for cultural export, simultaneously establishing a sphere of influence that can be leverage on the diplomatic stage. This paper leverage the case study of South Korea and Japan as prime example of soft power through their respective entertainment industry. From the origin of the Boys Love and its success in Thailand to analysis of similar case studies in Japan and South Korea, this paper seeks to understand the feasibility of the BL genre becoming an asset positioning Thailand as a key player in the diplomatic arena both within Asia and the international community. The BL industry in Thailand has a significant potential of propelling the country on the international stage as a significant regional power. Yet, there are some major setbacks to be addressed for that concretization of this phenomenon.

## Keywords

Boys Love, Soft Power, Thailand, Diplomacy, Policymaking

## 1. Introduction

The end of the 1990's saw a resurgence of the Thai entertainment industry with the repositioning of the Thai film industry on the international market. Soft power in the East and Southeast Asian region has become more prominent with the turn of the century. From Japan with anime to South Korea with K-pop and K-drama, soft power through the entertainment industry is not a new phenomenon. The concept of soft power relies in the use of a country's values and cultural resources to assert structural power and influence on the diplomatic and political stage [17].

Whilst the 1980's and 1990's saw the export of Japanese and Korean culture respectively, today the same trend can be observed in the Thai entertainment industry with a particular genre, Boys Love (BL), gaining traction on the regional and international stage. The Thai BL genre saw a clear increase in popularity with popular shows such as Lovesick (2014) or 2gether (2020) being received positively by international viewers. Observations show how by 2020, this genre swept the audience on a global scale. Similarly, scholars such as Shi [21] outline how "Thai drama has reached a climax again"

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through the BL genre. This narrative has been taken again by popular media such as the popular Singaporean Campus Magazine [3] who clearly demonstrate the advent of BL drama popularity in Asia and how Thailand has been at the forefront of it. The growing popularity of Boys Love and the Thai entertainment industry at large within the international community can be a great source of soft power positioning Thailand as a key player within the diplomatic arena. Furthermore, as it will be demonstrated below, with a proper nurture of its foreign policy, Thailand has the potential of becoming an influential player within the international community.

## 2. The Japanese and South Korean Model

### 2.1. Japan & South Korea and the Concept of Soft Power

Looking at the Asian region, Japan and South Korea are no stranger to the concept of soft power and its exploitation to further their influence on the international stage. Gilpin [9] explains the use of influence as one form of power the international political economy where one asserts a certain agenda through the use of their influence in the international system.

In Japan for instance, the concept of soft power emerged as an alternative for the country to reinvent itself following the humiliation and demise of the great Japanese Hard Power after World War II. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies fellow and journalist Christensen [7] further explain this concept as a mean of reclaiming the lost Japanese grandeur through “the projection of soft power [as] a conscious, focused and highly prioritized effort by the Japanese government to exploit the country's popularity among young people worldwide — multitudes of whom share a passion for Japanese fashions and fads — and to create a broader sympathetic image in the host country.”

Similarly, South Korea's relationship with soft power can be traced to the search of grandeur. This can be observed in the South Korean strategy for diplomatic outreach where it is clearly stated that “Korea's public diplomacy entails promoting diplomatic relations by sharing country's history, traditions, culture, arts, values, policies, doing so, we enhance our diplomatic relations and national image by increasing our country's global influence” [5].

Hallyu, meaning Korean Wave, depicts the popularity of K-pop and K-drama at an international scale. While the Hallyu phenomenon gained traction around the world with through international consumption of South Korean media, Băjenaru [5] illustrates how the South Korean government took this as their chance to further their foreign agenda of becoming a prominent player within the international community. Similarly, Social activist Amatya [1] speaks of ‘manga and animation diplomacy’ as a way of positioning

Japan as a strategic player in within the international community. There is a certain similarity in how both Japan and South Korea view soft power. While there is a difference in reason for the emergence and adoption of soft power, both countries follow a similar ‘a rags to riches’ narrative where both Japan and South Korea have used their respective entertainment industries as a mean of achieving glory and influence either to reassert a loss power or ensure an advantageous diplomatic influence.

### 2.2. Influence of Japanese & South Korean Entertainment Industry in Policymaking

It is undeniable that the current Korean diplomatic power is vested largely in its entertainment industry which has brought the country its transnational popularity through the export and subsequent mass consumption of its media. While the famous Psy's ‘Gangnam Style’ was a short-lived viral phenomenon, the current cultural wave has definitely found its place in many international households throughout all generations. From BTS or Blackpink to hit dramas such as Squid Game, South Korean influence has swept the world and “integrated itself into the global mediascape” [24]. This transnational wave has placed the country at a favorable position as an influential middle power in the diplomatic world.

It is no secret that the first thing that comes to mind when one hears South Korea is either K-pop or K-drama. The South Korean entertainment industry can be considered one of the most prominent tools for soft power for the country. The transnational success of this cultural diplomacy is flagrant and has even been acknowledged by the United Nation – one of the most influential international diplomatic bodies. The most prominent case study of the Hallyu success is definitely the famous boyband BTS being part of the South Korean delegation to the 2021 UN Opening General Assembly. From BBC to CNN, every major media outlet covered this unprecedented news in both South Korean and UN history. International relation scholar Nguyen [16] even goes as far as describing the boyband as the most prominent tool of South Korea's public diplomacy. South Korea's cultural diplomacy through Hallyu since the turn of the century clearly depict the country's interest to be a dominant player and stand out as an economic and diplomatic power in the international cultural stage [11, 12].

In contrast, the Japanese approach to cultural diplomacy takes a whole different turn, aiming mainly at boosting the country's image and attain diplomatic influence by distancing itself from the pre-World War II cultural Imperialist image. Today, Japan is seen as an influential regional power both within Asia and Internationally. Similar to South Korea, the Japanese entertainment industry enjoys a transnational success with a worldwide consumption of Japanese media. From Manga to Anime, an increasing acceptance of Japanese culture can be noted, which subsequently drew government attention to use that wave “of popular culture as a way of

boosting the country's image abroad and attaining soft power" [18]. Thus, with the advent of what is known as the 'manga and animation diplomacy' as diplomatic strategy, Japan emerged as an influential middle power through the export of its culture while keeping its narrative as a neutral pacifist nation.

One example of the Japanese soft power diplomacy can be seen in the appointment of one of the famous manga characters, Doraemon, as the nation's ambassador [15]. Similar to South Korea who named BTS as its cultural ambassador, a common pattern can be seen in both countries' foreign strategy. Similar to South Korea, Japan's use of an internationally recognizable and acclaimed character has boosted the penetration of the country's culture among the international community. This has subsequently created a Japanese diasporic subculture evolving alongside the host country's main culture. Anime and Manga today are considered as Japan's trademark known worldwide. From Dragonball Z to Naruto, the thematic of Japan's entertainment industry today is an integral part of the international community. From a profit of \$60 million in 2002 to \$19.8 billion in 2019 from international consumption, the Japanese entertainment industry has not only seen a consecutive growth economically, but also politically [8, 10]. In fact, with the spread of manga and anime worldwide, the international community has also seen a spread of the Japanese influence. Japan today has gathered a substantial amount of diplomatic influence thanks to its 'Manga and Animation diplomacy' which has provided the government with a strong foothold in terms of diplomatic influence worldwide.

### 3. Analysis of the Thai Entertainment Industry

#### 3.1. Origin of the BL Genre & Its Success in Thailand and Beyond

The Boys Love (BL) genre originates from Japan in the early 1970's under the form of 'Light Novels'. This particular genre, according to researchers such as McLelland et al [14], was created to cater for a specific type of consumer showcasing the fluidity and openness of Japan towards "male-male romantic and sexual relationships". In addition, the BL genre in Japan was seen as a revival of the neutral and genderless notion of romance that existed back during the Feudal Japanese Edo period before the introduction of western cultural norms.

Whilst the BL genre in Japan remained as a subcategory, its popularity in Thailand skyrocketed. Thai society, in contrast to their Japanese counterpart, has a much more open and inclusive representation of queer narrative. Similarly, the success of the BL genre is largely based on this fluidity of the heteronormative narrative of the Thai society [23]. Majumdar's [13] analysis associates the popularity and positive

reception of BL in Thailand "to the freedom of gender expression" that the country enjoys. In addition, with the new generation being more inclined towards the narrative of gender fluidity, it is easy to link the success of BL with this openness towards the LGBTQ narrative. Indeed, the success of BL relies greatly on the fact that it touches relatable and realistic subjects that are becoming less and less of a taboo as opposed to before, especially among the current generation. With internationally acclaimed BL dramas like '2gether The Series' or 'I Told Sunset about You' as case studies touching subjects like 'the normalization of love irrespective of gender', 'being true to yourself' or even 'the toxicity of concealing part of your identity to fit into society' the BL genre has enjoyed a real hit for being relatable to the new generation's questions and open mindset towards the queer narrative.

#### 3.2. GMMTV as a Key Player

Within the Thai entertainment industry, the BL genre has grown into one of the country's main exports in the entertainment sector, earning Thailand the nickname of 'Land of BL'. Moreover, one key player behind this success is GMMTV, one of Thailand's largest entertainment conglomerates. An analysis from the Bangkok Post outlines GMMTV's experimentation with the BL genre through minor side characters [22]. Subsequently, with the positive critics and popularity of the characters, the company dived fully into the BL genre with the production of 'SOTUS The Series' its first drama fully within the BL realm. With this success among the mainstream viewers, GMMTV saw the opportunity and potential of this untapped market, and quickly positioned itself as a key player.

Prasannam [19] sheds light on the rise in popularity enjoyed by GMMTV by positioning itself as the main producer of BL content within the Thai entertainment industry. From its entry and intervention into the book industry and subsequently the music industry through what analysts call the 'fan/industry interaction', GMMTV has positioned itself as a major player within the main spheres of the Thai entertainment industry [6, 19]. Moreover, the grooming of its artists' popularity among the fans through imaginary offscreen couple, fan meet events or even music collaboration offers a great amount of recognition to GMMTV, cementing the company's legitimacy as a key player in the BL world.

### 4. Possible Tool for the Thai Government in International Politics

The positive reception of Boys Love and its subsequent success can be observed as a major advantage for the Thai entertainment industry. Indeed, GMMTV's senior director himself note the growing demand of the BL genre and shows how the Thai entertainment industry has shown a yearly 30-40% growth thanks to Boys Love [22]. Moreover, with the growing popularity of Thai BL dramas worldwide, Thailand

could easily emulate the South Korean and Japanese model. With an entertainment industry growing in popularity, a rich cultural history and room for cultural export, Thailand can easily become an influent character in international politics. This has been recognized by the director of the Thailand's Tourism Authority who views BL as a source of soft power for the country [22].

However, one major difference can be observed within the Thai narrative. Whilst the government of Japan and South Korea have completely embraced their respective entertainment industry and its potential for soft power, a clear absence of government support can be noted within the Thai entertainment industry. It is true that the entertainment industry is recognized as a tool for soft power by the Thai government, but unlike its above-mentioned Asian counterparts, government intervention to nurture that potential as a tool for political influence is very minimal. Indeed, from Nation Thailand [4] to Thai Enquirer [2], filmmakers took to the local media outlets to outline the lack of support from the government towards the entertainment industry. Whether from lack of funding or censorship, Satrusayang [20] notes how government support within the Thai entertainment industry is kept to the strict minimum. Whilst the Thai government acknowledges the potential of its entertainment industry, especially the BL genre, as a tool for soft power, there is a lack of willingness to exploit it as it might affect the status quo of ambiguity that it has toward the country's LGBTQ narrative.

## 5. Conclusion

Boys Love has evolved to become a niche market anchored within the Thai entertainment industry acknowledged by various entities both in Thailand and within the international community earning Thailand the nickname of 'Land of BL'. Moreover, with the growing popularity of its entertainment industry within the international community and neighboring countries' pattern of political influence acquisition as blueprint, Thailand can become a major player in international politics both in Asia and within the international community. However, the country needs to address certain aspects regarding its policymaking to attain the optimum environment for nurturing its soft power.

## Author Contributions

Stephen Lyajoon is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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