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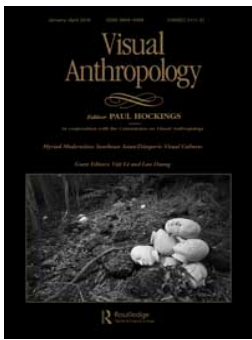
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Surfing the Korean Wave: Wonder Gays and the Crisis of Thai Masculinity

Dredge Byung'chu Kang 

The Wonder Gays was a Thai K-pop cover-dance group. Their viral 2009 YouTube video covered the Wonder Girls' song "Nobody" and consequently the Wonder Gays became an overnight sensation in Thailand, were signed by Zheza Records, and had a year-long tour. Their stardom however provoked questions about gender, sexuality and nationality. Wonder Gays' effeminacy and popularity called into question their morality and their influence on other young people. Their video, performed in school uniform, on a school stage, in front of the flagpole but to a Korean song, raised concerns about the institutional and national legitimacy of their routine, and the relative status of Thailand in the world. Thus the Wonder Gays incited a gender panic about Thai masculinity.

BEHOLD THE WONDER GAYS!

Five teenage boys in their physical education uniforms performed a cover-dance routine to a Korean girl-group song and posted it on YouTube. The video went viral, and they transformed into the Wonder Gays. The Wonder Gay follows other Thai imitators of K-pop, such as the all-*kathoey* (male to female transgender) group Venus Flytrap, modeled after the transgender Korean group Lady. Such mimicry calls into question Thai originality and why it is that Thais tend to copy mass culture from abroad. Furthermore, the Wonder Gays' popularity has infuriated the country's conservative social pundits, who decry their influence on other young people as sissies, femininely identified young gay men.¹ The Wonder Gay story becomes a case study in the intersection of Thai nationalism and new media globalization. The case examines both the international spotlight

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/gvan.

on Thais and the local reception of the group in relation to gender and sexuality, Asian regionalism, modernity, and social change. This paper examines how digital media enabled Wonder Gay stardom, the context of Asian regionalism in which K-pop circulates, and the national anxieties incited by their flamboyance. I argue that the Wonder Gay and “kathoeyness” [Kang 2012], or male effeminacy linked to homosexuality, transgenderism and sissiness in the Thai context, point to a crisis of masculinity in the international gaze. I analyze Thai YouTube responses to the Wonder Gay video, media coverage of the group, and interviews to show how Thai responses to the Wonder Gay performance reveal anxieties about modernity and morality as they intersect with non-normative masculinity. These anxieties are especially pronounced within periods of rapid socio-economic change, which are prone to moral panics [Cohen 2002]. Threats to the existing social order also incite intense conservative reactions, especially in the media. As the Wonder Gay exemplify, groups who stand outside the social norm and are assumed to be the source of social degradation, are often the conservatives’ most favored target for accusations and hostility.

The Wonder Girls are a South Korean girl group whose popularity swept through East and Southeast Asia. Their hit song “Nobody” in 2008 spawned numerous bands of Wonder Boys, various groups composed of actual boy band singers as well as of everyday folk, such as men serving in the military. The song was also performed by Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center inmates, who had become famous for their numerous renditions of popular songs such as Michael Jackson’s “Thriller.” The internet, and YouTube in particular, has provided a venue through which these performances—which are real, imitative and farcical—circulated. “Nobody” was played incessantly throughout Thailand in late 2008 and early 2009, became the theme song for the Sukishi restaurant chain, and is still often heard in shopping malls. Wonder Gays is a group of five male Thai high school students (Drive, Ki, Mix, Pai and Por) who created a video for a contest to win free concert tickets to the sold-out Wonder Girls concert in Bangkok on 28 February 2009. Though they did not win the contest, their video, which was posted on YouTube by Pai, the founder and leader of the group, went viral and generated a great deal of attention from K-pop fans, social critics and media pundits. After receiving some 800,000 hits, much more than any previous Thai cover video, the Wonder Gay was signed by Zheza Records, a K-pop oriented division of RS, one of the two major record labels in Thailand. They became an overnight sensation in Thailand, playing concerts throughout the country and providing television interviews to promote their band. Wonder Gay did a one-year tour including high schools, concerts, conventions and product launches throughout the country.

In their viral YouTube video “Nobody—Ouz Wonder Girls (cover),” uploaded on 14 February 2009, the Wonder Gay cover-dances to the Wonder Girls song “Nobody.”² Each performer copies the movements and takes on the persona of one of the Wonder Girls. In so doing the group’s mimicry has spawned varied forms of imitation. The Wonder Gay video was so popular that the band members themselves became the objects of imitation by other cover-groups in Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and elsewhere. The video also represented a tipping point at which the imitation of Korean girl groups by Thai sissies, or

femininely-identified young gay men referred to as *tut* (potentially derogatory, but also a term of self-identification in opposition to masculine gay men) or *ke-sao* (polite term for “girly” gay men), not only spread online but also offline [Kang 2014b, 2015]. The Wonder Gays’ “Nobody” cover popularized the gay imitation of Korean girl groups. For example, it was performed by male students at the Chula-Thammasat football game, the Thai equivalent of the Harvard-Yale game had both been located in New York City. Most dramatically, Calypso, the largest and most famous *kathoey* cabaret in Bangkok, continued to perform a rendition of the Wonder Girls Wonder Gay Mash Up at least through September 2011 [Figures 1–2]. In the Calypso performance, five *kathoey* performed the Wonder Girls rather authentically in pin dresses, then were joined by another five in beaded fringe dresses, only to have a group of school boys in uniform invade the stage and perform the Wonder Gay cover. At this point, the group performed the song collectively, but then one more *kathoey* performer joined them for the finale. Such a performance assumed that the audience would understand references to both the Wonder Girls and Wonder Gay performance of “Nobody.” The audience, primarily consisting of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Russian



Figure 1 A Wonder Girls’ and Wonder Gays’ “Nobody” mash-up performance at Calypso Cabaret in Bangkok on 21 April 2011. More than two years after the Wonder Gays’ cover video was released, Calypso continued to perform this routine. The cheering reaction of audience members when the Wonder Gays storm the Wonder Girls’ stage suggests that they are familiar with the Wonder Gays’ cover video. (Photo © Dredge Kang)



Figure 2 A Wonder Girls' and Wonder Gays' "Nobody" mash-up performance at Calypso Cabaret in Bangkok on 21 April 2011. (Photo © Dredge Kang)

tourists, laughed when the Wonder Gay joined the Wonder Girls on stage, suggesting that they were in fact familiar with the Wonder Gay rendition.

While the Wonder Gay video was hugely popular online, their stardom provoked many questions about gender, sexuality and nationality in Thailand. In particular, the Wonder Gays' effeminacy—as a self-professed group of sissies—impelled media commentators and netizens to question their morality and influence on other young people. The contagiousness of the Wonder Gay gender presentation was a serious concern for those in the Thai media. This was exacerbated by the fact that the Wonder Gay video post had an international audience. The Wonder Gay provides a case in examining gender/sexuality, modernity and internationalism precisely because their status is so contested. They show how Thai gender and sexuality are embedded within wider socio-moral contexts, how gender and sexuality are related to other axes of difference, and how foreign gazes impact local assessments of gender and sexuality.

TIMES OF CHANGE: GENDER/SEXUALITY AND IMPRUDENT MODERNITY

Thailand is currently undergoing a rapid social transition in its political, economic and cultural realms. Recent political events have caused concern in

the international community about the future of democracy, especially in the West. On 23 July 2009, during the ASEAN Regional Forum, the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, on her first official visit to Thailand, commented that Thai politics was often as “spicy” as Thai food. Soon after, Prime Minister Abhisit gave a speech at Columbia University titled “Post-Crisis Thailand: Building a New Democratic Society”, during which he outlined the numerous transitions the country has passed through since having dissolved the absolute monarchy. After Abhisit’s speech there have been numerous mass political protests and military crackdowns in Thailand as well as another coup in 2014, followed by the installation of a royalist military government and a new sense of nationalism. As others have noted, such periods of rapid transition are prone to “moral panics” [Cohen 2002] and “sex panics” [Rubin 1984; Lancaster 2011], which often involve the disciplining of gender and sexuality. In Thailand this has meant the stigmatization of female sex workers [Fordham 2001; Jeffrey 2002], though increasingly it is being applied to effeminate gay men and transgender women.³ Yet, as McRobbie and Thornton [1995] have noted, in a media-saturated environment the subjects of scapegoating often become active participants as a social constituency in debates and are able to produce their own counter-media; thus social consensus is less deliverable via the media. Additionally, within the Thai context, such social debates are often considered entertainment, being rather more sensational, exciting and pleasurable than serious. As a result the moral pronouncements made by conservative pundits are often dismissed faster than the trends they decry.

Rapid social change and economic development typically produce cultural conflict: economic development comes at the cost of a perceived loss of tradition. In this vein, economic development and the need to be competitive in the global market promote unwanted change. For example, in today’s global market, competitiveness requires learning English and other “international” business languages (previously French, German, and Spanish but now Chinese, Japanese, and Korean). Yet Thais often posit that learning another language leads to the loss of one’s mother tongue. In this way (global) modernity and (local) tradition are placed in direct conflict. In such a context, Wonder Gay, among others, comes to represent an imprudent and undesired modernity that results in the loss of traditional *khwan-pen-thai* (Thainess). In terms of talent and sexuality their status comes to allegorize both the pride and the shame of the Thai nation.

What is important here is that “tradition” is always already constructed, in that no tradition exists without its fixing, its prior invention and memorialization [Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992]. From a Buddhist perspective, moreover, this attachment is a “holding onto” of false appearances, which in reality are impermanent. But such theological distinctions hold little sway in everyday life. Thais readily accept that there is such a thing as “Thainess.” As contested, amorphous, flexible and unequally distributed as it is, people would identify Thainess with characteristics that differentiate it from other cultures and traditions. For example, “Thai” affective traits include *sabai* (easy-goingness), *sanuk* (fun-lovingness), and *kreng-jai* (deference, consideration or respect for others). However, we must not forget that these characteristics change over time and vary, based on social status, urban and rural lifestyles, generation level and

other factors. It is precisely in times of rapid change and uncertainty that “tradition” tends to be reasserted and used to demoralize “modernity” by those whose authority, legitimacy and power are threatened.

One of the most recent threats to Thainess has been the Korean Wave, or the popularity of all things Korean: music, television dramas, film, video games, electronics, cosmetics, fashion, food, martial arts, etc. This includes the embodiment of Koreanness through practices such as cover-dance, which has been extremely popular among gay men following the Wonder Gay incident described here [Kang 2014b, 2015]. Indeed, when I officially started fieldwork in 2009, I was shocked to realize that the majority of music being played at Thai gay nightclubs in Bangkok was K-pop. The practice of participatory cover-dance turned bar spaces into mass spectacles of Korean imitation. As a Korean-American raised and educated in the USA who had paid little attention to Korean popular culture, I had to catch up on and follow Korean media (especially K-pop and drama series) in order to understand what was happening in Thailand and thus be able to make small talk [Sinnott 2012]. For example, gay men and *tom* (masculine-presenting women who partner with feminine women) were enthralled by Korean dramas such as *The 1st Shop of Coffee Prince* [2007] and *You’re Beautiful* [2009]. In both these popular series (among many others with characters and themes read as “queer”), a female character cross-dressing as a man is involved in romantic relationships with men, allowing both Thai gay men and *tom* to identify with the characters. Additionally, as Thais would send me text messages in Korean, I had to learn to read and write Korean while in the field, which was facilitated by Thai, as its sounds (44 consonants and approximately 32 vowels) are more precise and consistent than English sounds.

In fieldwork, the body of the ethnographer is the primary tool to gather data via interpersonal interactions. As I generally passed as Thai, when Thais found out that I was Korean I was often met with a slew of Korean phrases including *annyeonghaseyo* (“hello”), *saranghaeyo* (“I love you” often accompanied by a gesture of hands over the head to produce a heart shaped arch and tilt of the torso), and *oppa* (pronoun for “big brother” from the perspective of a younger sister), *eonni* (pronoun for “older sister” from the perspective of a younger sister), or *hyeong* (pronoun for “older brother” from the perspective of a younger brother), as well as claims to having Korean names, including vulgar ones related to actions performed with a vagina (*hi*). For the most part, Thais immediately held me in higher esteem for the simple fact of being Korean. A number of people commented that I looked like Gong Yoo, the lead actor in *Coffee Prince*. I was often asked to model and did appear on a popular televised Thai talent show—having no talent at all except for being a Korean who spoke Thai. This dual quality of passing as Thai but being Korean gave me access to both Thai spaces generally off-limits to foreigners as well as to internationalized venues. Koreanness was also my “in” when talking to cover-dancers, some of whom have followed my work on them and delighted in seeing pics of themselves in Facebook posts from my conference presentations. I have presented versions of this paper at several venues, including in Thai, at a Thai academic conference on gender and sexuality. Indeed, there were discussions about my research and my whereabouts on gay Thai web boards during my fieldwork, so I have always been aware that I am

being observed as much as observing. I thus can expect that Thai academics and some of my interlocutors will read or otherwise engage with my work. The popularity of Korean media has also meant that I have to maintain a critical distance, follow the growing anti-Korean Wave sentiment in Thailand and elsewhere, and seek out critiques of the Korean Wave, as I do here.

RECEPTION OF THE WONDER GAY

The Wonder Gay cover-video of "Nobody" has shifted from highly enthusiastic to critical within several months. On 14 October 2009 the Wonder Gay clip registered 2,574,313 hits on YouTube. Compared to the official Wonder Girls clip, which registered 7,286,280 hits, the Wonder Gay clip attracted approximately a third the total hits of the wildly popular original song. This was no small feat. When I did a search of "Wonder Gay" on YouTube, eight videos came up as being immediately relevant. These included the original upload, three television interview clips, one Behind-the-Scenes "reality" clip, and three concert clips. In fact, a larger number of clips exist, including the previously mentioned clip that juxtaposes the Wonder Girls with the Wonder Gays. Given this, I argue that YouTube provides a better source of evaluative information than other websites in that (1) members can rate the video clips; (2) all people who post comments are members with some identification data, such as nationality, available; and (3) other members can provide a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" ranking on comments left by other members, to show the "temperature" reading of the recent YouTube audience. Besides analyzing YouTube comments regarding Wonder Gay, I also analyze different media forms like comments that were provided following a television interview about the Wonder Gay, and on web forums. I also engaged in participant observation in integrating myself in the milieu in which the Wonder Gay was often featured across Thailand. This multifaceted methodology emphasizes how the reception of Wonder Gay is complicated and needs to be examined in relation to larger social debates about the "degeneration" of Thai culture and negative representations of Thainess.

Without doubt the new digital media have enabled Wonder Gay stardom. Their YouTube clip spawned covers of their cover and public discussion about it in traditional media. But while YouTube provided the means for Wonder Gay exposure worldwide, the discussion of their significance was featured primarily on Thai discussion boards. A Google search on 14 October 2009 (eight months after the YouTube posting) using the term วันเดอร์เกย์ (Wondergay) produced 945,000 hits in 0.38 seconds, showing the extent of their web presence in Thai. By contrast, searching for "Wonder Gay" or "Wondergays" (the two variations of their name in English) produced less than 200,000 hits combined. Wonder Gay discussions are prevalent on many Thai discussion boards, both mainstream and gay, such as Palm-Plaza (gay), Atcloud (mainstream), and Beartai (mainstream).

Below I present a web forum thread from Beartai, a mainstream Thai forum, to highlight the kind of debate there is around the Wonder Gay in Thailand [Beartai 2009].⁴ In general, the threads tended to start positively, with fans posting

positive comments. But as the threads progressed, and the audience broadened, they often became more critical of the group. This would follow a general trend of excitement among early adopters which was then replaced by apathy and antipathy among later viewers of the “Nobody” clip. For example, in this thread, the statements were initially positive and then became increasingly critical. The following three posts demonstrate this kind of progression.

Post 3 of 29:

They are brave.

Funny, not disgusting as one might expect, just funny. Dance cute, but more funny.

Might I guess that it is TP school?

Heehee, wearing a green physical education school uniform from an all boy’s school.

Post 9 of 29:

Jeez! Jeez! All of them have to practice with all their heart and soul to be able to perform like this. If I am a good person, have morals, I would say this. But now, I am bored, so I think they are untalented.

Post 25 of 29:

I can’t accept this at all.

I know that they’ve already signed a contract.

I think they won’t be able to sell much, for sure.

Replies on this web forum generally pertained to the gender presentation and sexuality of the Wonder Gay, their ability, and popularity online. In particular, posters were counting their YouTube hits, showing that there was an interaction between how the online world, including foreigners, viewed the Wonder Gay and how they were or should be received in Thailand. But these issues are perhaps best examined in the comments left by YouTube posters themselves.

YouTube comments were left in English, Thai, Thaiglish, Thai “karaoke language” (a phonetic rendition of Thai in Roman alphabet and online idioms such as “555” [*hahaha* or “lol”]), Tagalog, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese.⁵ Ranging from mostly favorable to critical, comments were made about the entertainment value of the clips, Wonder Gay dancing and singing ability (though the group never actually sings in their videos until they release their own song later in the year), their gender and sexual presentation (which, in the Thai context are conflated as they are presumed to be isomorphic), and their appropriateness as role models for and representatives of Thailand. YouTube comments also showed how users were fixated on the originality of the Wonder Gay, since they are a cover group and can be perceived as imitators rather than original markers of Korean popular culture. Yet such a binary also questions what if anything, or to what extent, anything can be considered authentic. The Wonder Girls are, after all, referencing the Supremes. K-pop itself began with hybrid origins, borrowing from rap and other popular American music forms [Cho 2005; Shim 2006] and Japanese aesthetics [Jung 2009]. As Lee states, “South Korean cultural products ... are relatively refined, but not so original ‘copies of copies’ or commercially creolized or bastardized texts that have similar ‘clones’

or counterparts in other geographical regions" [2008: 184]. In fact, the Wonder Gay also have their own imitators.

Following a Thai television interview of the Wonder Gay on *Jao Khaow Den* (*Breaking News*, 2 June 2009), the English-language comments written by Thais on YouTube are illuminating, as they specifically addressed an international audience as opposed to a Thai one. They were clearly directed at those who are not literate in Thai and thus the commenters were not presumed to be Thai. The remarks emphasized what were considered appropriate by Thais in relation to the representation of Thainess in an international context, revealing to others what Thais themselves feel pride or shame about. I interrogate the Thai television interview clips and the comments made in response to them because they point to a wider social commentary that Thais are making about the Wonder Gay and highlight the concern over the appropriateness of the Wonder Gay as role models for Thai youth, and the anxiety around the sexual representation of Thais in an international arena.

The "Breaking News" program was widely cited in subsequent newspaper reports about the Wonder Gay and information from it circulated through gossip. The program begins with an opening text scrolling onto the screen, noting that 1,300,000 people have viewed the Wonder Gay "Nobody" video and referring to the Wonder Gay as the "Third Gender Wave" (*krasae phet-thi-sam*). The program uses terminology reminiscent of the "Korean Wave" (*krasae kaoli*). The interview starts with the host making the following statement:

This is an interview with a group of high school students that one day wore their school uniforms and used a school stage to perform a dance using the Wonder Girls' song "Nobody" and they posted the clip on YouTube. The Susan Boyd clip was seen by more than 150,000 people. But this group's clip was seen by more than 1,300,000. Their clip has been posted since February. There is something special that draws people to watch this clip. And now, a music company has asked them to be singers. Some people accept this hot topic, others are against it. They are good students and have good exam scores. Society is already more open but some people ask why they behave this way. And this may lead others to copy them.⁶

The interview, like the previously cited web forum post, foregrounds many of the social concerns of Wonder Gay critics, namely that they are inappropriately representing Thainess and that their popularity will encourage other boys to become effeminate. It is interesting to note that after the introduction, the interview veers toward their academic status, and in particular their academic performance. Each Wonder Gay member is asked about his major and grade point average (GPA). All of the performers have a GPA over 3.0, numbers that establish they are good students, which in turn suggests that they are good people and can therefore be considered good role models. But this focus on academic performance as a measure of "goodness" presumes that their effeminacy is already corrupt and that what is at stake is Thai masculinity.

Next, the same interview focuses on the setting of the YouTube clip and discusses their appropriate roles in national culture. The band members are wearing school uniforms on a school stage in front of the flagpole where students

daily receive announcements and sing the national anthem. This stage area is considered almost a sacred site because it holds special honor and is associated with national pride. The Wonder Gay explain that they practiced dancing to the Wonder Girls' song for a physical education class and that they used the stage on weekends and holidays when school was not in session. The group made clear that they did not receive institutional (and in this case, as public school students, governmental) sponsorship in the production of their clip. The host then goes on to ask about the social acceptance of their behavior:

Interviewer: Do you think society can accept this?

Pai: There is a good and bad side. We tried to do our best, we just did what we like to do. We didn't ask anyone to copy us.

Interviewer: Some may say that your behavior is very shameless and children may copy you. What do you think, Drive?

Drive: We just try to practice our dance.

Interviewer: You are shy. But this morning when you talked to my staff you were talkative. Mix?

Mix: I think we just try to do what we like. We didn't do anything wrong, we have got a chance, so we are trying to take the best advantage of this opportunity.

Interviewer: What did your parents say?

Mix: Yes, they did say something negative. But they still know that we are good students, we are not addicted to drugs or computer games. After school, we still do our homework and hang out with friends and practice our dance.

In this exchange, what is important is that the boys reassert their morality through the quality of being a good student. They are not delinquents and do not promote their gender or sexuality. Subsequently they mention that they do not have the full support of their parents in being gay. But they do have the support of their school in their dance activities, as physical activity is a productive use of their free time.⁷ The students also note that, having signed a record deal, they need to improve their singing and make their dancing "more masculine." As they relate, Wonder Gay understand that people criticize the way they dance. But they also respond to this criticism by saying that "[they] don't care; [they] just think [they] use [their] free time well. And [they] don't cause any problems." In this they re-establish their moral decency in reaffirming the fact that they are "good" teenagers. The interviewer then continues to ask about their school scores and their career aspirations as chemist, chef, tour guide, businessman and doctor.

Wonder Gays' responses reaffirm that the boys are properly upright; they have career aspirations beyond the entertainment industry, which is seen as morally suspect by middle-class professionals who associate it with alcohol, drugs, sex work and criminality. The interview segment further notes that their dance activities do not interfere with their academic performance because they

practice on their days off. The host then concludes with this statement: "This group is still young. They don't look very mature-like in their clip. They just get together and do what they like and now it depends on society whether to accept them or not."⁸ The show ends with a Wonder Gay performance where they dance to the song "Nobody." In sum, the "Breaking News" show affirms how the boys are moral by reason of their academic performance and bourgeois aspirations, while also reaffirming the social condemnation that the dance group has received for their expressions of gender and sexuality. That is, the show reiterates their ambivalent status as "good gays" [Jackson 1995], or homosexual individuals who use their moral standing to achieve individual social acceptance independent of a communal gay identity. As "good gays," then, they have not been subjected to any form of punishment by the school's administration. In my first 2011 interview with two members of the group, Pai and Ki and one of their boyfriends, they stated that they had a great deal of support and pride from family, family friends and peers. Pai noted that the school they attended was flooded with calls mostly in praise of the YouTube clip, though some were negative. The stage they performed on featured the school's emblem, and their uniforms were identifiable. Consequently the administration, fearing that the school's reputation would be tainted, asked Pai to remove the video from YouTube, which he did not. The boys did not however suffer any repercussions from the school administration when the video was posted online.

The issue of role modeling is important, because Thai media are considered highly influential on Thai culture, and in particular on the behavior of youth. This is perhaps most evident in televisual censorship. For example, the acts of smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol are routinely blurred out in Thai TV programming. Though it is clear what the actors are doing, the actual representation is masked. In the views of one public health official, watching cigarette smoking on television is just as dangerous as smoking. Sight of the behavior is as dangerous as the behavior itself, because it is understood to promote the actual behavior. There is immense fear among the public that what happens on screen will be mimicked, particularly by the youth. In this sense, homosexuality and transgenderism are often referred to in Thai discourse as "fashions" that are copied by youth and spread rapidly [Kang 2012]. In the banning of the 2010 film *Insects in the Backyard*, by the director Tanwarin Sukkhapisit, a censor stated that Thais cannot think for themselves, even if they are 40 or 50 years old [Sukkhapisit 2011]. Tanwarin had sought an NC-20 rating for the film. Earlier in the decade the former Prime Minister Thaksin's Minister of Education had made similar claims about the excessive representation of *kathoey* on television, suggesting that such representations encourage young people to become *kathoey*. A formal injunction based on these grounds was attempted in 1999, when Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai banned images of *kathoey* on television [Jackson 2004]. As Jackson notes, gender and sexual difference in itself is not problematic; however, visual representations, especially of effeminate males, are considered to be a breach of propriety, an embarrassment of the nation in the foreign gaze, and contribute to the "explosive" spread of homosexuality and transgenderism in society. The 1999 censorship order was not however enforced, simultaneously highlighting

continuing state intervention and the increasing inability of government to control the media.

To this day there is a strong emphasis on how Thai media need to sanitize visual representations and thus mold Thai behavior into an ideal, and in particular to reduce the population of sexual minorities in Thai society. This emphasis is reflected in the comments about the Wonder Gay, which have often focused on their sexuality, talent, and representativeness of Thais. By mid-October in 2009, for example, there were nearly 3,000 comments on the Wonder Gays' initial "Nobody" clip. Before I turn to the posts, however, I first want to note that YouTube posts regarding the Wonder Gay are overwhelmingly positive. As evidence of this, their "Nobody" clip has a 4.5 (out of 5) rating based on 2,754 ratings [Wonder Gays 2009a].⁹ While I focus on the criticism of the Wonder Gay I also want to note that for the most part the group has been well received in the online world. However, this online presence also reflects the fact that they are a queer phenomenon, attractive because of their difference, which is often taken to be humorous and entertaining: their "strange" behavior is what garners attention. In this sense, they are controversially queer "products," commodified [Prempreda 2003] and advertised, as controversy itself becomes a free form of marketing [McRobbie and Thornton 1995].

Controversially then, some of the YouTube posts referred to the Wonder Gays' gender and sexuality through homophobic remarks, which were followed by a defense of their gender/sexual expression. Secondly, posts referenced their talent. Typically, these praised the Wonder Gay for their dancing. For example, some women posted that the group dances better than they do. Koreans have posted that the Wonder Gay are better than the Wonder Girls. Numerous posts however spoke to their lack of talent or pointed out specifically which group members performed well or poorly. After release of their first single in 2009, posters criticized the group's singing heavily. Nonetheless, the Wonder Gay performance represents more than their video performance. In the international audience of YouTube, their performance represents a Thai performance and more specifically a Thai queer performance. Frequently referring to them as "gay" and "ladyboys," comments such as these were accompanied by a statement referring to the prevalence of such groups in Thailand. In response, many commenters pointed out that Thais feel humiliated by their queerness and/or lack of talent. Specifically, Thais were aligning the Wonder Gay with national sentiments and the status of the nation, expressing either support for or offering critiques of their performance.

Panya, for example, showed her support for Wonder Gay amid the criticism the group was receiving online.

[*pancristie*]

It is soooo sad to read the negative comments those people gave. This show the world to know how very super narrow minds they do have. They should respect the people in the way they do. They made the colour to the world and I am very grateful of that. I want those narrow minds people to think twice and see the good thing this band had made. Bring it on, Wonder Gay. I will be your fan.: -)
Panya from Thailand.

A Thai living in the United Kingdom provided another supportive response:

[JumLiverpool2009]

i love them so cool

nowaday thai children become more and more clever.....i wil support u na ka fighting:))

[sic]

Their online performance also generated debates on the comment forum. For example, in this exchange a USA-based fan of Thai boxing (all their favorite clips are Muay Thai) sparred with someone in Thailand:

[muaythai4ko]

Thai already have so many negative perceptions to the rest of the world already. People all over the world makes fun of thai and its country... add this into it. Soon thai culture has nothing left to be called proud that is positive. What thai people are thinking? maybe not thinking....

[thecoolbk]

Teenagers learn their talent. Dancing is just a kind of art, good exercise. I'm quite sure their school is good enough and won't let them lost. They will discover more. And in the future, they will have more creativity.

[muaythai4ko]

a form of art is a matter of perceptions... however what that art is showing or portraying is another story.... in this case, nothing good is coming out of it..... it's sickening and needed to be stoned at....

During this brief exchange the issue of Wonder Gay talent is highlighted, but what is ultimately at stake is the perception of the nation. This was a common critique of the Wonder Gay, as they were taken by their critics to be portraying the nation in a negative fashion because of their effeminacy. Their queerness implies that Thailand is overly gay and transgender. Comments of this nature were most predominant when Wonder Gay released their "Nobody" clip on YouTube.

The negative portrayal of the country rarely entered into the first 500 comments on the video, since the early viewers tended to be fans. In contrast to Thai posters, the question of the prevalence of homosexuality and transgenderism in Thailand emerged in the comments early on among international viewers.

[Kindapple]

im not trying to blame and dont have negative thinking against thai but why theres so many gays in thailand? so curious

[scaredzone]

Good question,

To be honest, I don't really know. Maybe we're very very open-minded when it comes to this kind of thing? Your question is tough.

The question of whether Thais are tolerant of homosexuality and transgenderism initially gets a mixed response among Thais. Most Thais who were early fans of the video showed general support for sissiness. However, Thai interest in the clip rapidly declined with time. Subsequently, issues of kathoeyness dominated later critiques of the Wonder Gay and their portrayal of the nation, among both foreigners and Thais. This dynamic brings to the fore issues of national representation, as the audience becomes more internationalized and as Wonder Gay queerness becomes the primary issue.

[TobyLittleDude]

I think 4 out of 5 of these guys are going to make great Thai transvestites in the near future. lol.

[bryanlunadelacruz]

no doubt they are from Thailand...

[seazboy]

thailand now days

[rakisaan]

Ok, they sure dance good and looks like they are enjoying it too. Guess they could be doing worse things then just dancing like queens trying out for Tiffany Universe.

Thailand's reputation for queerness can also have a positive spin. Thus TheChez1020, a Filipino, referred to Thailand as the "land of the gays" while asserting that he is proud to be one. And indeed, the Wonder Gay were asserted as being Thai, even while they were degrading their sexuality, for example, when another viewer mistook them for being Filipino:

[sweetkim3]

HaHa! its Filipino Style ^_^
hay naku nakakaaddeekk:))

[GordanFreementHAXXXX]

Filipino up ur ass. ITS THAI even they're FAGZ

On the issue of national identity, one Malaysian made this comment:

[ilyac]

I am not against Thais. Thais are nice people but the kids in the video, well, u really have to admit that they really look gay. But I don't hate Thais so don't get me wrong. My comment is limited to this video and I don't generalize. No doubt I have to say transexuals are very common in Thai and people mist [*sic*] of the time they look much prettier than your average Jane.

Collectively these statements point to Thailand's reputation as a country with a rather large effeminate male/transgender population [Kang 2011]. Such a representation influences how Thais come to see their country and its standing among others. But love for the nation and its people has the potential to override

sexual differences. For example, in this exchange, ThaiSouljaBoi (whose profile claims he is in the Thai Air Force) derided the Wonder Gays' gender/sexuality at the same time that he asserted Thai pride and nationalism.

[IHyraxI]

yeah thai kids are known to be gay. did you know there the tranny capital of the world? i mean come on how could these boys actually do this?? for a girl ok, but highschool biys?? just wow...

[ThaiSouljaBoi]

well keep it on the low, that will be good. Come on, i know u dont like people makin fun of u, do u ? lol
but anyway, these kinda people r like jukebox for us, so its good to have them around, just something to laugh at.

Such interactions indicate how the status of gays/transpeople in Thailand is seen as lower than that of heterosexuals. Especially in media representation, queers provide comic relief.

We return to the question of talent, then. In comments and forums alike, the Wonder Gay group has been criticized both for their sexuality and their performance abilities. For example, labchaeong suggests that Thailand's lack of talent reflects its lack of development: "after watching this vid i realise why thailand never develop [labchaeong]."¹⁰ More specifically, luoisvuitton focuses on the role of talent, as opposed to appearances, in the development of the nation, comparing Thailand and the USA:

Capable for dancing doesn't mean they are able to sing well. Why music company let them release an album when they are only good at dancing ?? and Thailand need to judge people by what thy can do rather than what they look like. Like many singing contests (AF, The Star), most of the winners are good looking but not good for singing. In USA, singers like Jennifer Hudson are more popular than rich young celebrities or good looking singers who have bad voices. Good role models = better country [luoisvuitton]

Comments like these reiterate the complaint that the Wonder Gay lack talent. The critiques link Thailand's lack of development to the group's perceived lack of Thai originality. That is, Thailand is described as a country unable to generate trends, but simply following others.

The twin issues of Wonder Gays' effeminacy and talent come together as a problem of under-development. From the Thai perspective, *kathoei*, in particular, and male effeminacy, or what I refer to more broadly as "kathoeyness," can be read as backward [Kang 2012]. Kathoeyness is simultaneously antithetical to modernity when it is construed as an anachronistic "pre-gay" and hence uncivilized form of gender and sexual practice, as well as an unfortunate outcome of modernity when it is formulated as deviance caused by excessive queer media representations, social problems such as the breakdown of the traditional family, or environmental misuse [Sinnott 2000; Jackson 2001, 2004]. This is in contrast to current Western liberal democratic ideology, where the social acceptance of

queers and associated human rights is a register of contemporaneity [Ho 2008, 2010]. For example, the acceptance of the transgender entertainer Harisu, as of a sexual minority, suggests Korea's cultural and political progress as a nation [Ahn 2009]. However, in Thailand an excess of kathoeyness, contrasted with modern masculine homosexuality, continues to be shrouded by the legacy of colonial-era intervention. Thailand engaged in a series of reforms meant to reconstitute Thai gender and sexuality in terms legible and acceptable to Western imperial powers (even though it was never colonized), specifically in the form of heterosexual monogamous marriage between individuals who are male and female, in order to "civilize" itself and resist colonization [van Esterik 2000; Barmé 2002; Jackson 2003; Loos 2006; Kang 2014a]. Wonder Gay is seen by their critics as yet another manifestation of this crisis, in that heterosexual monogamous marriage has not become fully institutionalized. Predicated on a strong belief that queerness is contagious through the media, the Wonder Gays' excessive effeminacy prevents the formation of nuclear families and their reproduction. Even more problematic, Thailand's crisis of masculinity is being witnessed globally through expansive outlets such as YouTube, making the situation an international embarrassment.

My interviews with Pai and Ki, two members of Wonder Gay, further demonstrate how they position themselves in relation to questions of media effects and masculinity. When I first interviewed them, they had little idea about how influential their YouTube clip was in a social context, even though they were aware of how controversial it was politically. Pai himself stated that he stopped reading the comments on YouTube because he could not keep up. He received more than 10,000 emails via YouTube in the first two months of the video release and then stopped reading them. The Wonder Girls record label, JYP Entertainment, asked Pai to note that the song belonged to them, but did not ask to remove their cover-video. Pai simply included the rights on the information section of the clip. They did know about the criticism of their performance and their increasing negativity. Tearing up, both Pai and Ki said they cried after reading some of the comments. They said that their manager at Zheza Records comforted them, stating there would always be criticism. Pai said that he never expected the video clip to become popular: it was simply easier to post it on YouTube than to email it to all the friends who wanted to see it. He did not expect it to go viral and to be thronged with fans. Pai told me, "We are a cover-group, so copying Koreans is not an issue. Different people have different opinions. We didn't want to do our own song, that was what the record company wanted, we just like to do covers." Their Zheza Records song, which the Wonder Gay say they did not like, did not sell well.¹¹ Subsequently their recording contract ended, their official website was decommissioned, and their fan club dismantled. The Wonder Gay made little money from a year-long tour and felt exploited by the record company.

The Wonder Gay dance members were disheartened to learn about how they were seen as representatives bringing shame to the country. "We never intended to represent the country or for people to think all Thai men are like us [sissy]. We want others to know that it is just us who are like this, we are not representing the country, we don't [even] say we are from Thailand on our video. Why do they think this way?" Pai said that he felt sad if the country were to lose face. When

I asked about the criticism that Wonder Gay are poor role models for youth, they replied: “The third gender is a trend, we don’t care if others say it is bad or good, but we do good and try to be good in society. We try to show that we can be good people in society so they will accept us more, since society is not that open.” As teenagers, the Wonder Gay did not know about the impact they have had on Thai gay culture. In the two years since they posted the video, they were high school students preparing to take their college entrance exams. They were not aware that others were trying to cover them internationally, that local gay bar patrons were copying them, or that the most famous *kathoey* cabaret in Bangkok was performing a number that referred to them. In fact, they did not know that cabaret even existed. The Wonder Gay presented themselves as good young boys, or rather good young sissies, who were just having fun, unaware of how their YouTube performance was being mimicked and circulated by others. When they turned 20-years old in 2013, which is the legal age to drink alcohol in Thailand, I took them to a gay bar so that they could witness for themselves the impact that they had made in the local gay culture where K-pop cover dance had proliferated. As Wonder Gay had noted that they had disappointed Thai society, I did not want them to see themselves as simply a group that had a brief moment of notoriety that was maligned by critics. Rather, I wanted to show them that their performance had a widespread effect on local practices of inhabiting and performing gayness, which could be interpreted positively outside the frame of hetero-normative masculinity.

CONCLUSION

At the center of the Wonder Gay phenomenon in the Thai context is the intersection of their queerness in conflict with Thai nationalism, Asian regionalism, and global media flows. The group’s queerness is the very factor that allows them to receive attention (both positive and negative) in Thailand and from around the world. Their talent does not however explain their popularity or success. In fact, their subsequent single release with Zheza records garnered little attention because, as they freely admit, they are not good singers. Rather, it is about the novelty of their status as young Thai sissies who dare to express themselves openly. Their queerness (especially “cute” gayness as opposed to masculine gayness) attracts attention from young girls who idolize “boy love,” or the genre of imagined relationships between young gay men.

The intersection of Thai gender/sexuality in an international context is what makes the Wonder Gays particularly problematic for many at the same time. Indeed, one can argue that Wonder Gay fans are already fans of the Wonder Girls and K-pop in general. However, the reverse scenario is not true. Fans of the Wonder Girls also deride the Wonder Gay, both for their status as imitators and for their queerness. Fans of the Wonder Gay are fans of this group because of their uniqueness as a gay group. This includes a queer audience, but also the audience of those young Thai women who follow K-pop. Viewing the concert videos of the Wonder Gay on YouTube, and hearing the audience scream, clearly shows that they have a primary fan base of young women.¹² This queer

difference, which makes the Wonder Gay attractive to young female audiences, is the very difference that opens them up to social criticism.

Wonder Gay and other imitators of K-pop pose a challenge to Thainess in three ways. First, through mimicry of K-pop, Wonder Gay challenge the value of Thai music and more broadly Thai culture. Second, through their open queerness, Wonder Gay contest the appropriate expression of gender and sexuality in Thai society. As performing artists, they are expected to be good role models for youth, and their gender/sexuality are questioned by those who speak for the Thai public in this regard. Third, given an international online audience, the pride and shame of the nation are at stake. As the Wonder Gay is situated as a Thai sissy group, they come to represent a nation that is already overly sexualized and already overly queered. Thus, Wonder Gay is seen to be an addition to the list of insults against the nation. In particular, the early and recurring emphasis of criticism focused on their school uniforms, their performance on stage at school, and in front of a flagpole. These icons of the nation seem to provide institutionalized support for queer behavior. Yet, as a self-professed group of sissies, they are not considered appropriate role models for Thai youth by their critics and thus should not be accepted in Thai society.


Finally, the question of talent is a recurring one and needs to be addressed. Can Thais only ride the Korean wave without producing anything original? Many critics question the singing and dancing skills of the Wonder Gay. They are often referred to as amusing though not good entertainers, who nonetheless do have a popular following, both online, in sites such as YouTube as well as other Thai forums, and offline, as evidenced by their concert fans. Regardless of their actual skill as performers, they have attracted a wide audience, and in this sense, they have “talent” and were signed for a recording contract. Ultimately their overwhelming popularity, irrespective of their skills, points to their charisma. At the same time there is some ambivalence, as this magnetism may only be a function of their gender/sexual difference, a difference which, in the international context, also portrays Thailand as overly queer. Wonder Gay embarrasses Thai notions of propriety. While cross-dressing satire in K-pop is common, visual representations of Thai gender/sexual variance continue to be a source of national humiliation. Their performance suggests a lack of national development on the part of Thailand as a country. Wonder Gay contradictorily represents both the pride and the shame of the Thai nation, symbolizing both a cosmopolitan Asian modernity through affiliation with K-pop performance and Thai backwardness in expressing kathoeyness, an uncivilized, effeminate gender presentation that has yet to conform with lingering notions of appropriate masculinity promulgated ever since the colonial era.

NOTES

1. The Wonder Gay identify not as เกย์ (*ke, gay*) but as ตุ๊ด (*tut, sissy or queen*), referencing their effeminate mannerisms, use of feminine polite-speech particles, and their desire for more masculine partners.
2. Although their video clip makes reference to Wonder Gay at the beginning and end, the name of the group was Ouz until they signed their record deal.

3. HIV prevention provides a system of labeling stigmatized groups such as sex workers, males who have sex with males, drug users, migrant laborers and others, though the aim is often to empower such groups.
4. English translations are mine.
5. “Karaoke language” (ภาษาคาราโอเกะ, *phasa kharaoke* is the rendering of Thai in Romanized transliteration). Thai youth use it when Thai fonts are not available, for example, while playing online Korean video games in groups or in sending SMS on phones purchased overseas.
6. The figure for the Susan Boyd clip is likely based on an alternative posting as opposed to an “official” one. Many YouTube clips are posted, reposted, and re-mixed, gaining vastly different numbers of hits.
7. In my interview with Pai and Ki, both said their families were very supportive, and that this was generally true for the group. It is possible that the editing of the interview focused on a negative instance. It is also possible that Pai and Ki have a more positive gloss of the situation in retrospect.
8. Some gay activists consider this host homophobic because of his line of questioning from a critical perspective and his lack of support on rights issues.
9. Comments are quoted exactly as they appeared on YouTube. After initially giving permission for the video to use the Wonder Girls’ “Nobody,” JYP Entertainment blocked the cover video on copyright grounds in early 2015, after it reached 5,091,146 views.
10. The profile for this user identifies him/her as being from Afghanistan, but the fact that the profile is written in Thai suggests the author is either Thai or a Thai living abroad.
11. The song, “ก็แต่ผู้หญิง” (*ko khae phu-ying*, Just Women), was available for online download as an mp3 file for 30 Thai Baht (approximately \$1.00) from 2009 to 2010 on the Zheza Records website. The YouTube video for the song, without dancing, was uploaded on June 17, 2009 [Wonder Gays 2009b]. This post received only 5,108 views by 14 Oct. 2009.
12. One of my female informants said it is not possible to differentiate the screams of young women and *kathoey* in such clips. The Wonder Gay themselves stated that their audience was comprised mostly of young girls.

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