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Idols of Development

Transnational Transgender Performance in Thai K-Pop Cover Dance

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Abstract Inter-Asian cultural flows are transforming everyday Thai gender practices and performances in unexpected ways. The most striking example is the way in which Korean popular music, or K-pop, is molding contemporary beauty and dance aesthetics through cover dance, the copying of choreographed movements from music videos. K-pop cover dance has become a definitive social activity among Asian sissies (young feminine gay men) and is organized into an extensive contest circuit leading to an annual competition in Korea. Thai sissies are among the most enthusiastic and skillful practitioners of K-pop cover dance, and some practitioners, such as the members of the group Wonder Gay, have become national celebrities. I describe how cover dance demarcates a new social arena for feminine Thai males to express themselves through the idiom of modern Korean female embodiment. Semiprofessional cover dancers constitute a class of “hyper-fans” who become “demi-idols,” with fan followings in their own right. I argue that Thai K-pop cover dance can be read as both an aspiration for personal and national development that indexes participation in a new cosmopolitan Asian sphere. The cover dance phenomenon in Thailand highlights recent shifts in Asian regionalism, idol fandom, and transgressive gender performance.

Keywords sissy, cover dance, Korean Wave, Thailand, inter-Asian popular culture

In the climate of political uncertainty following the 2006 military coup d'état, many Thai people worried about perceived weaknesses of national character allegedly manifest in both a large transgender population and an international reputation for sex tourism. Thailand is also anxious about being seen as a copycat nation populated by followers rather than by innovators and creators. These concerns converged in 2009 when a cover dance video went viral and incited a gender panic in Thailand (Käng 2012). The video shows the group Wonder Gay performing the choreography from the hit Korean pop music video by the Wonder Girls, “Nobody.”

Cover dancing to K-pop is immensely popular among feminine Thai gay men, who participate in an extensive contest circuit that culminates in an annual

competition in Korea; but it has not always been especially visible to the heterosexual public. This changed when the Wonder Gay video amassed over 5 million YouTube hits and brought both the members of the group and the larger cover dance scene to national attention. In response, journalists, television personalities, and netizens generated an enormous outpouring of commentary on Thailand's alleged lack of "real men" and its inability to produce anything original and trendsetting. As a Korean gay man educated in the West, I hold some critical distance from these straight Thai concerns. Still, the experience of entering Thai bars with K-pop cover dancing was profoundly jarring. This was not because of the cross-gender performances—one expects gender play in gay bars. What surprised me was the transnational performance of Korean femininity, and only Korean femininity, seemingly coordinated en masse, throughout the night. Since 2009, when Wonder Gay became minor national celebrities, I have been following the practice of K-pop cover dance in gay bars, competitions, and practice sites and the public discourse in Thai newspapers, television, and online media.¹ I interviewed ten members of four competitive cover dance groups, observed cover dance practice sessions, routinely observed and talked with cover dancers in gay bars, and followed several cover dance groups online.

The question at the root of my research is why in the world would anyone want to imitate Koreans? This is not my question alone, but the recurrent concern of Hallyu, or Korean Wave, studies. What I have found is that K-pop's associations with a developed Asia, and its contrast with both Western and Thai music, provide an opportunity for effeminate Thai gay men to enact modern Asian identity.

In the following pages I describe contemporary shifts in Thai expressions of gender identity influenced by East Asian media. I first define the gender locally known as "sissy," situating it in the larger context of transgender and gay identifications in Thailand. Then, I describe the phenomenon of K-pop cover dance in more detail, showing how cover dance as ritualized performance and as social practice allows Thai sissies to embody modern Asian femininity. I argue that Thai K-pop cover dance can be read as both an aspiration for development and the instantiation of participation in a new cosmopolitan Asia.

Thai Genderscapes

The Thai term *phet* incorporates multiple forms and expressions of sex, gender, and sexuality. I have recently argued for conceptualizing *phet* as genderscapes with five key nodes: *kathoey*, *tom*, *gay*, female, and male (Käng 2014). These categories and their subcategories overlap and change; they are fluid and dynamic and vary with social position and the ideological stance of the speaker, so that it is impossible to draw firm boundaries between categories. In theory, the term

kathoey is expansive enough to encompass all forms of “transgender” expression in Thailand. I have found it helpful to use the analytic term “kathoeyness” to refer to male-bodied femininity as manifested among transgender women and feminine *gay*, including *tut* (sissy or queen) (Käng 2012). This broad grouping usefully sidesteps questions of exactly how variations of male-bodied femininity play out, allowing me to focus instead on analyzing disciplinary discourses that promote the masculinization of males for the sake of national development and pride.

However, in contemporary urban usage, the term *kathoey* refers only to trans women (with the caveat that not all *kathoey* live as women 24-7). Sissies do not think of themselves as *kathoey*, though they often joke about it. While they identify with femininity, often present a feminized comportment and sartorial aesthetic, and often use female speech patterns (e.g., the *-kha* female polite particle and terms like *jang-loei* that express feminine mood or affect), they think of themselves as essentially male. Sissiness (*ok sao*, express girliness) represents the refusal of normative gender dimorphism, what Lin (2006) refers to as “queered effeminacies,” particularly in light of the growing popularity of feminized masculinity among heterosexually identified men in East Asia (Shiau and Chen 2009).² As among many transgender women of color in the United States (Valentine 2007), Brazilian *travesti* (Kulick 1998), Indian *hijra* (Reddy 2005), or other groups, Thai cross-gender identifications are situational, highly differentiated, and complex in ways that defy academic differentiations between gender and sexuality.

Part of this complexity reflects the fact that Thai genderscapes are thoroughly hybridized constellations. The Chinese minority, in particular, has had a significant impact on middle-class Thai views of gender and sexuality (Bao 1998). Southern Thai gender norms are molded by Islamic ideals. More recently, the popularity of Japanese popular culture and the dominance of Korean media in the region have provided new channels for gender expression. Korean media is most popular in Thailand among the young urban middle class, women, and gay men. Historian Peter Jackson’s 2011 book *Queer Bangkok: Twenty-First Century Markets, Media, and Rights* offers a powerful account of what he calls the “Asianization” of queer Thai cultures through film, the Internet, and contact with tourists—a transnational trend that has intensified in the years since the contributors completed their research. Indeed, hybrid Thai genderscapes continue to evolve. Anthropologist Megan Sinnott has documented the use of the term *tom* (a relexification of the English *tomboy*) to refer both to transgender men and to butch women (Sinnott 2000, 2004, 2007), but increased public presence among FTMs in Thailand since 2010 has eroded the idea that *tom* can be considered men. More recently, Thai *tom* have adopted the styles of K-pop boy bands (Sinnott 2012). The emergence of this new, soft masculinity among *tom* represents an

interesting convergence of female masculinity with the effeminate presentation of many *tut*. It also testifies to the increasing importance of East Asian media in shaping queer Thai practices of gender.

Sites and Practices of Transnational Transgender Performance in Thailand

Thai cover dance relies heavily on mass media, both televisual and Internet based. Cover dancers learn their craft by watching official music videos, dance tutorials, concert footage, and “fancam” video of stars’ daily lives. Bench (2010) captures the mediated aspect of cover dances with the descriptive term *viral choreographies*. Viral choreographies resist mutation or abbreviation in favor of faithful replicas of sequenced movements. However, other elements of the copied performance are open to reconfiguration, especially the staging and context. Thus, effective cover dances can take place in a bedroom wearing pajamas as long as precise gestural replication is preserved (e.g., think of the many YouTube bedroom performances of Beyoncé’s 2008 “Single Ladies” dance). Beyond such domestic settings, cover dances may ambitiously copy both movement and costumes from the music videos they emulate, while resituating the movement into the shopping malls, dance clubs, and convention venues that sponsor and host dance contests. It is interesting that while cover dance competition venues do not overtly mimic the settings of the copied music videos, their commercial nature resonates with the economic value of mass mediated celebrity: the monthly “Hello! Korea” contest at MBK has a top prize of 30,000 THB (approximately US\$1,000, or the monthly salary of a mid-level professional).³ These competitions also prepare groups to compete in the annual Cover Dance Festival in Korea.⁴

The most common venues for cover dance, however, are the gay dance clubs throughout Bangkok where patrons join in when their favorite K-pop songs are played. Gay dance clubs in Bangkok can be grouped into several major zones: the Silom Sois 2, 2/1, and 4; Soi Sarasin; Ortorkor; RCA, Ratchada, and Mengjai; Ramkhamhaeng/Lamsalee and Lad Phrao; Thonglor/Ekkamai; and Thonburi/Pinklao. I have witnessed participatory cover dance (PCD) in all of these areas; however, it is relatively rare in international districts where the bars have a significant number of Western or Japanese patrons (Silom, RCA, and Thonglor/Ekkamai). Furthermore, while it is popular in many “local” Thai bars, the space does not always lend itself to cover dance. For example, in Ortorkor, dance bars are generally crowded to the point that one cannot move freely (like being on the Skytrain [metro] during rush hour). These bars do not have dance floors or stage areas accessible to patrons. PCD is therefore most elaborated in the Ratchada, Mengjai, and Lamsalee bars. These bars tend to have large stages with catwalks that are accessible to patrons following live shows, which include drag, live bands, coyote boys,⁵ and variety acts. Possessing these facilities allows bars to sponsor

major cover dance contests, but it also allows patrons a place to perform their own cover dance renditions at will when there is no show.

Most of the music played in these venues is Korean, not Thai or Western. Gay bars almost never play *luk thung* (Thai country music) or *mor lam* (Isan music). There are two exceptions to this rule: first, some gay bars play *luk thung* music to drive patrons out at the end of the night, and second, professional *kathoey* performers sometimes draw on Western, Chinese, or Thai country songs for specific kinds of effects. In comedic burlesque or ribald routines, *kathoey* use country music to support their depictions of rural Thai womanhood as the foil of cosmopolitan urban respectability: what not to be. Such drag characters typically display rustic mismatched clothing, bad makeup, unkempt hair, excessive body hair, flat noses with large blackened nostrils, splotchy or wrinkled skin, and accessories such as woven baskets or paper and plastic bags. In other routines *kathoey* divas may perform Western (white or black) and Chinese ballads, lip-synching in elegant costumes surrounded by casts of professional dancers. Such *kathoey* performances depict foreign femininity as beautiful, modern, and culturally inspiring, in contrast to the grotesque, backward forms of embodiment attributed to native Thai women.

Thai participatory cover dancers share the general gay bar scene's enthusiasm for foreign femininity and disdain for Thai music. However, they rarely cover Western songs the way *kathoey* performers do. Some Western artists with elaborate dance routines are very popular in Thailand (Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Britney Spears), but PCDs describe their videos as "not fun" to cover because Western music videos often interrupt dance sequences with narrative elements. Thus neither Western nor Thai music can sustain participatory cover dance, so that almost all PCD bar performances take place to Korean pop music.

When asked about their choices, cover dancers say that Korean music is simply better than Thai music. But this preference for a particular kind of foreign music is significant, just as the preference for a particular gender performance is significant. One night at the Pop Bar in the Soi Sarasin area of Bangkok in September 2009, I documented the DJ playing an hour of continuous Korean music while club patrons danced in groups imitating the girl singers' moves. When the most popular boy-band song at the time played, the participants' movements became labored and most participants dropped out of the routine until another girl-group song came on. It became clear that the gay audience had rehearsed the movements of girl bands but not boy bands. When I asked why they did not dance to the boy bands, the cover dancers replied that those moves were "too masculine," "too strong," and "too difficult." The movements, they contended, required more masculinity than they could produce. Such responses underscore the value that the dancers place on a feminine self-presentation. Similarly, the near-total rejection of

both Thai and Western music in favor of Korean music underscores the value that the dancers place on a particular kind of foreignness.

Interestingly, K-pop cover dance takes place in all types of gay bars in Bangkok—except for those that cater to Westerners. Korean pop songs usually do not penetrate Silom Soi 2 (or 2/1), an alley of five bars and one disco. This area is known for its more Westernized gay bar scene (i.e., single drinks with a dance floor rather than table service). The international influence attracts both a cosmopolitan Thai gay clientele and Thai sex workers looking for clients. As K-pop has come to represent “Asian” music, the management of DJ Station, the most popular dance club for foreigners, prohibits its play so as not to disturb Western clients. There are, however, exceptions (JJ Park, which is similar to a piano bar, and Espresso, a “sticky” bar, or one in which Thais seek Asian rather than Caucasian partners).⁶ K-pop music and dancing is found at both. Thus K-pop functions as an indicator of Asian identification for the clientele of spaces where it is played, which include the majority of local Thai gay bars in Bangkok.

For cover dancers, K-pop is not a derivative or imitative genre of Western pop but a distinct genre in its own right. Thus, K-pop cover dance specifically allows the dancer to imagine a self outside the cultural realm of the West, in a pan-Asian context, without acknowledging how the music or milieu is already hybridized via the West. In particular, cover dance allows feminine Thai males to embody cosmopolitanism and middle-class standing through their performances of Korean femininity, simultaneously foreign and Asian.

Becoming Demi-Idols

Covering is affective labor. A great deal of time and energy is required to become like the star one emulates. I describe competitive cover dancers as “hyper-fans,” to highlight the commitment and emotional attachment involved in “replicating” an idol. Through both online video posts and live competitions, cover dance groups become famous and attract their own fans. Performing one’s fandom as labor complicates the relationship between production and consumption and creates new layers of parasociality, the more or less unidirectional interpersonal engagement between fans and stars. Intensified consumer activity as fans enables coverers to become highly intimate with the idol and imitate her bodily comportment, movements, gestures, personality quirks, habits, and affective style. They closely follow idols through newspaper gossip columns and webposts; watch concert videos, dance-training videos, fancam clips of concerts and everyday lives, and television variety shows; and attend concerts as well as fan-club meetings. In this technical refashioning of the self (Foucault 1988), successful cover dancers become like their idols and gain the ability to perform as their idols. And as cover dancers attract fans, they become “demi-idols” in their own right.

Boys' Generation TH (for Thailand) is a cover group of young males from Bangkok who exclusively perform the songs of Girls' Generation (a.k.a. SNSD).⁷ They exemplify this form of hyperfandom. Boys' Generation originated in 2009 via an online fan forum, and like Girls' Generation, it has nine members. After three years, only three original members remain in the group. Each time an individual leaves the group, he is replaced, not unlike in K-pop bands themselves. I first met Boys' Generation at the popular MBK Center's monthly Hello! Korea cover dance contest in August 2011, a prestigious competition linked to radio programs and broadcast on television. The live audience consists primarily of teenage girls, who often bring props, such as electric signs with their favorite cover dance-group names, and scream appreciation for their favorite groups and particularly good moves. That night, Boys' Generation won the Popular Vote award for their rendition of "Hoot" (2010), which has its signature "bow and arrow" dance. The prize money the group has won ranges from a low of 1,000 THB (approximately US\$32.50) to 30,000 THB (approximately US\$1,000). This supports the members' participation in the group, including travel costs and costumes, which are a custom-made "boy" version (i.e., does not show cleavage) of Girls' Generation outfits.

Boys' Generation has two choreographers, Boat and Coco, whose responsibility is to learn and teach dances to new Girls' Generation songs. After the members have mastered the dance moves, Boat and Coco block the dance for the group to fit on a small stage. The group practices approximately four or five hours twice a week at a public location in central Bangkok such as Central World shopping mall or National Stadium. Public practice sessions are only the tip of the iceberg, as each group member spends a great deal of time learning to become his Girls' Generation counterpart. This affective labor centers on practicing the dances at home, as well as on following their counterpart day and night. To become his Girls' Generation equivalent, at least on stage, a dancer will study her daily life and stalk her every move via fancam videos. He works on becoming as much like her as possible, embodying her personality and able to convincingly mimic her clothing, gestures, and mannerisms during a performance.

Boys' Generation members have become demi-idols, with their own fan club, composed mostly of young girls and some gay men. Girls make tribute videos to them and post them online, as well as record and post contest performances. Boys' Generation contest performances, when recorded by the group, are posted on YouTube and linked to their Facebook fan page. Due to their success, Boys' Generation has appeared on Thai television variety shows. Since 2012, K-pop cover dancers have been participating in nationally televised competitions such as Thailand's Got Talent. Millennium Boy, which Coco is also a member of, has been featured on Thai PBS. The group has developed an international fan base

that follows their competitions (82,701 Facebook likes as of September 15, 2013). Millennium Boy holds its own fan meets, just like K-pop stars. Many cover groups have also created a cottage industry selling prints, T-shirts, hats, and other fan paraphernalia.

Boys' Generation fans are primarily girls who are invested in their youth and femininity. Like in Japanese and Korean performances, boy-band members flirt with each other and the audience to promote an ambiguous sexuality (Glasspool 2012; Nagaïke 2012). This is referred to as *khu-wai*, literally Y couple, where Y is short for the Japanese *yaoi* or boys love genre of fandom. Part of the appeal for girls is that they can imagine being fans (in Thai the same word is used to refer to a lover) forever because they do not have competition from other women. Fans of Boys' Generation also imagine that the members are lovers (boy-couples) and post pictures of them as imagined same-sex couples, for example, when they are hugging, holding hands, or looking at each other as if in love. Of the nine members, pictures of four are routinely posted as two couples. One couple represents the "pretty boys" who look cute together; the other is always seen together in public as they are close friends who spend a lot of time together. This is the same *yaoi* practice of matching K-pop boy-band stars as couples (e.g., HaeEun/EunHae from Super Junior). In this sense, the cover dance group becomes famous and its members are treated as stars. Fans follow them in real life, posting random pictures of their demi-idols spotted at malls, riding the Skytrain, or backstage at a competition. Fans also produce tribute videos, photo collages, fiction, and other products for them.

Successful cover dance performers are demi-idols as the layering and circulation of representations simultaneously references their relationship with the K-pop idol being mimicked and their stardom for their own fans. The potency of the performance comes from the perfection of the dance and the precision in personifying the star. When I asked Boat how he becomes like his Girls' Generation counterpart, he responded:

I follow the feeling of womanness (*arom khwam-pen-ying*) from the song. The song brings the feeling out. It's not like a male performing as a woman, but being a woman, like being the person when dancing, only when dancing. When you get on the stage and the music starts we have to think we are Girls' Generation to be convincing to others that we are Girls' Generation. Each [Boys' Generation] member has to follow the steps of one person in the [Girls' Generation] group. I become Seohyun. After the song ends, I am myself again.

When I followed up with Boat on being "like" (*meuan pen*) Seohyun, he stressed that he does not become "like" his counterpart but, temporarily, "becomes" (*pen*)

her. In addition, when I asked Boat about whether he does participatory cover dance at bars, he noted that outside of contests and practice for the group, he typically does not do cover dance as a leisure activity. For Boat, competitive cover dance is like a specialized ritual activity.

Not all the members of Boys' Generation say they become their Girls' Generation counterparts, even temporarily. But many of the members talk about their performance in this manner; for example, Ben notes that he "becomes" Tiffany through his body movements. He also notes that he is constantly becoming more like her, of having her "feeling." Through his ongoing practice of performing Tiffany, he increasingly perfects his mimicry. For Ben, part of his motivation in practicing is the increased competition. As more people are engaging in cover dance, Ben must be able to embody his idol's idiosyncrasies ever more precisely (e.g., eye, lip, and wrist movements). This is most acutely felt on stage at competitions, where the repetitive movements become second nature. These contests provide a liminal space in which the performers access the power of their stars. The stage of gay bars also provides a venue for the embodiment of Korean femininity. Yet these ritualized performances can also carry over into everyday life, like the instant transformation of bodily comportment when a cover dancer hears his song being played at the mall and he momentarily strikes a pose.

Asian Regionalism and Transnational Transgendering in Cover Dance

Cover dance links new technologies, evolving political economies, and historically contingent events. K-pop cover dance in Thailand has specific features that point to novel ways of thinking about new media, fandom, and gender performance. Internet social media express the rising influence of East Asia and provide a platform for the circulation of K-pop music videos and cover dance. The generic dance conventions of K-pop coupled with an unfamiliar language lend itself to copying via dance. As Sinnott (2012) notes, the gender ambiguity and play in K-pop soft masculinity has become a source and the means through which new *tom* and lesbian gender categories are rearticulated and expressed. I argue that the transnational transgendering in sissy K-pop cover dance opens up new possibilities for imagining and embodying the Thai self not only as queerly effeminate but also as Asian and economically developed.

Wonder Gay, which is the first cover group to achieve national fame in Thailand, spearheaded the explosion of K-pop cover dance and associated it with sissies. Indeed, during my first interview with them (2011), I asked the unspeakable question never posed to them but assumed in their television and newspaper interviews: "Are you gay?" The answer was a resounding, "No, we are not gay. We are not masculine. We are *tut*."⁸ The question seemed a bit ridiculous to them, as

their “showing out” (*sadaeng ok*) of sissiness already revealed their gender identity as femininely identified *gay*. Indeed, their critics had chastised them for daring (*kla*) to flaunt their effeminacy. In elite commentary, “kathoeyness,” including sissiness, is degenerate and contagious, undesirable and expanding, and thus in need of discipline. However, within the context of the contest circuit, the transgender performance is valorized by fans, primarily heterosexually identified girls. Within bar spaces, cover dance is both admired as a skill and at the same time marks the dancer as an undesirable partner for those seeking masculine ones.

To Wonder Gay, their choice of the song “Nobody” was also self-evident: “It was the most popular song. Korean music is the most popular music.” Other cover groups similarly state that they focus on K-pop because it is trendy. There is nothing equivalent to the cover dance competition circuit or PCD for any other foreign genre. What remains unsaid is that Korea has come to represent a model for Thai development. Even as Wonder Gay critics chastised them for copying a Korean group, exposing Thailand’s belatedness, these very social commentators stated that what should be imitated is not Korean music but, rather, Korean national character, especially diligence. A common rejoinder among Wonder Gay supporters was that cover dance performances did, in fact, demonstrate assiduousness and hard work. While the signature moves of songs are relatively easy to learn, complete routines require dedication to master intricate dance sequences. Here, I want to make a connection to development, by highlighting the expansive growth of the Thai middle class since the 1997 IMF (International Monetary Fund) crisis, when the West lost favor as the model for economic development. I want to emphasize that Hallyu is not just about the rise of Korea. It should also be understood as the rise of China, Thailand, Indonesia, and other countries that have developed a large middle-class consumer base for Korean popular-culture products. The Korean Wave is also a story about the expansion of Asian middle-class consumerism and the imagining of cosmopolitan “Asian” lifestyles.

New routes of Asian media circulation are crafting contemporary queer gender aesthetics and practices in Thailand. This fits a wider pattern of recent Thai engagement with East Asia, what Jackson (2011) refers to as the Asianization of Thai queer cultures. K-pop cover dance not only creates new modes of fandom and participation in the production, consumption, and recirculation of K-pop but also provides new opportunities for Thai sissies to perform femininity and modern Asianness. Participation in K-pop cover dance demarcates a new social arena for feminine Thai males to express themselves through the idiom of modern Korean female embodiment. This practice expands the performative range of gender, both staged for broader audiences and enacted in the confines of gay spaces. The identification with Korean femininity also identifies Thai sissies with their desire to participate in a wider Asian sphere. K-pop cover dance in Thailand

implicates the creative refashionings of gendered and racialized East Asian performance. Thus, I read Thai K-pop cover dance, or Thai sissy performance of Korean femininity, as an allegory for Thai national aspirations for development and actual participation in an emergent cosmopolitan “Asia.”

Dredge Byung'chu Käng, MA, is a PhD/MPH candidate in anthropology and global epidemiology at Emory University. His research focuses on transnational relationships, race, homosexuality and transgenderism, sex work, biopolitics, popular culture, and Asian regionalism. Dredge has extensive experience in HIV services and nonprofit management. He has published on queer media and art, gender/sexuality, and HIV in journals such as *GLQ* (2011) and *Asian Studies Review* (2012). Dredge's dissertation, “White Asians Wanted: Queer Racialization in Thailand,” argues that middle-class Thai gay men are directing their romantic desires toward newly ethnoracialized “white Asians” (light-skinned Asians from developed nations such as Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan or economically powerful Chinese minorities in Southeast Asia). His second project, tentatively titled “Amazing Waves: Queering East Asian Popular Culture through Thailand,” examines the impact of the Korean Wave on the performance of Thai gender and sexuality.

Notes

1. This paper comes from a larger project addressing how class stratification and Asian regionalism structure Thai *kathoe* (a broad category for all “third gender” individuals, but most often used to refer to transgender women in urban contexts) and gay-life opportunities, stigma reduction strategies, romantic partner preferences, and risk of HIV. Multisited anthropological fieldwork consisted of approximately fifty months of participant observation, primarily in Thailand from 2004 to 2013. I interviewed 72 *kathoe*/gay Thais and their partners and followed another 304 Thais, their foreign partners, and families. This paper focuses on interviews with ten competitive cover dancers from four cover dance groups, participant observation of competitions (approximately one per month), and informal interactions with numerous participatory cover dancers (approximately two times per week), February 2009 to September 2011, June to August 2012, and June to August 2013.
2. The Thai category of “sissy” is similar to that in the Sinophone (Lin 2006; Shiao and Chen 2009) and South/East Asian areas, with some parallels to how a *kothi* would be differentiated from a *hijra* and a gay man in South Asia (see, e.g., Bakshi 2004; Boyce 2007; Dutta 2012).
3. MBK (short for Mahboonkrong) is the busiest mall in Thailand. The mall, located in central Bangkok, is eight stories tall, has over 2,000 shops, and boasts over 100,000 daily visitors.
4. The K-pop Cover Dance Festival is the official international K-pop cover dance competition, with Korean government and corporate sponsors. Groups from Thailand have been top contenders. In 2011, Thailand was represented by Next School, a sissy group from Chiang Mai, covering After School's “Bang!” This group placed third. Numerous

online commenters (in both Thai and English) noted the group would have won if they were not “gay” or doing a transgender performance (e.g., see www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=kurEI2oCEcg). In 2012, the Thai boy group Lollipop CZ from Bangkok won for their gender-normative rendition of Big Bang’s “Fantastic Baby.” This was repeated in 2013, when the Thai boy group Millennium Boy, from Bangkok, won for their cover of EXO. For more information about the K-pop Cover Dance Festival, see their official website at www.coverdance.org.

5. Coyote boys are a local form of exotic dancer that can be hired for companionship or sexual services.
6. The DJ at Espresso is a transgender woman. She notes that if she substitutes at DJ Station, she not only cannot play K-pop but must dress in men’s clothing. Westerners are not the majority of clients at DJ Station; however, the presence of many Westerners changes the dynamics of the space, as the establishment caters to them as if they were the primary audience.
7. It is common in K-pop for boy bands to do cross-gender parodies of girl groups. For example, members of SHINee, 2AM, 2PM, and Super Junior performed together as Boys’ Generation covering Girls’ Generation. Other Boys’ Generation cover groups exist in the Philippines and Indonesia, resulting in the use of the “TH” for Thailand.
8. Perhaps an English equivalent would be to say one is not gay but a queen.

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