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Thai boys love series and idols: a new facet of soft power diplomacy in Thailand

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Thailand has traditionally relied on high-culture products and practises as assets for promoting the nation's soft power. The essence of this approach differs from Joseph Nye's original conception in that it focuses preponderantly on "commercialisation"; consequently, such assets must necessarily be monetisable. This study explores why the domestic Boys Love (BL) industry—notably BL series and their idols—has recently emerged as a novel soft power source, and how these assets have been mobilised in Thailand's soft power diplomacy as conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The present study employed qualitative historical analysis as a research method to compile and interpret information gathered from primary and secondary sources. The findings indicate that the economic potential and high monetisability of the rapidly growing popularity of Thai BL have driven the MFA to incorporate BL series and idols into its diplomatic portfolios for soft power promotion. The mobilisation of these soft power assets has been achieved through hybrid models. In addition to regularly held Thai Festivals, these models included live streaming, fancalls, and international fan meetings. Beyond securing economic returns to bolster the national economy, the promotion of BL content has positively contributed to the country's international image, for instance, regarding LGBT+ openness, as well as to the legitimization of the administrations in Bangkok.

KEYWORDS

boys love, soft power, soft power diplomacy, Thai BL, Thailand

1 Introduction

Soft power is a new engine for growth. It must generate revenue, not only being enjoyable and a source of pride but yielding no profit.

— Chadatip Chutrakul.

Soft power (*amnat baep nimnuan*) is a ubiquitous term that has been extensively utilised within policy circles and political parties. The Pheu Thai Party (PTP), which governed after the 2023 general election, pervasively employed the term in its electoral and policy campaigns, albeit rather ambiguously and vaguely. The concept of soft power in contemporary Thailand appears to diverge from the definition originally introduced by Nye (2004). This divergence is corroborated by the aforementioned statement made by Chadatip Chutrakul, a member of the country's Soft Power Committee (Today Bizview, 2023).

According to Nye (2008), soft power can be understood as "the ability to shape the preferences of others... getting others to want the outcomes that you want" (p. 95). This ability relies

on three types of assets: (a) attractive personality and culture, (b) political values and institutions, and (c) foreign policies. Crucially, all these assets must be perceived as legitimate and morally sound. From a behavioural perspective, soft power is characterised by its capacity to attract, and soft power resources are the assets that engender this attraction (Nye, 2004, 2008). At an individual level, soft power in everyday life can be conceptualised as “the power of attraction and seduction” (Nye, 2008, p. 95). Thus, comprehensively defined, soft power, as Nye (2011) stated, is “the ability to affect others to obtain preferred outcomes by the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuasion, and positive attraction” (p. 19).

Nevertheless, within the Thai context, the concept of soft power has been widely misconstrued and misused by various stakeholders, notably scholars and policymakers (Charoenvattananukul, 2023). In numerous strategic plans—drafted and implemented at multiple levels by the government and ministries, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)—the term “soft power” has been prevalent within myriad indicators evaluating external policy schemes. These jargon-laden trends have predominantly referred, in vague terms, to the promotion and export of traditional culture and customary commodities (Charoenvattananukul, 2023; Prasirtsuk, 2024).

The term “soft power diplomacy” (*kan thut amnat nimnuan*) was coined and has sporadically appeared in materials issued by the MFA in Bangkok and Thai diplomatic missions abroad. Nonetheless, the term has been used somewhat interchangeably with “cultural diplomacy” (*kan thut watthanatham*) and “public diplomacy” (*kan thut satharana*) — at times, even as a subset of the latter (e.g., MFA, 2013). As a result, the scope and meaning of soft power diplomacy in the context of Thai foreign relations have remained unclear. High-cultural exhibitions and exports through public activities hosted by Thai Embassies and Consulates-General, particularly Thai Festivals, have cursorily characterised Thai soft power. Such orthodox displays have ordinarily included, inter alia, traditional Thai dance, Thai boxing, and Thai cuisine (Prasirtsuk, 2024). The window dressing of these cultural artefacts has been widely discussed in the existing literature on Thailand’s soft power (e.g., Jones and Theerawong, 2021; Praditsilp and Pongsakornrungsilp, 2024; Suntikul, 2019).

The theme of soft power assets, as presented by Thailand to foreign publics, had remained largely high-cultural and traditional, with the promoted products having been consistent for over two decades. It was not until March 2021 that the MFA publicly introduced a novel source of soft power—the Thai boys love (BL) industry in general, and BL content and starring idols in particular—into Thailand’s soft power diplomacy (Bunyavejchewin et al., 2025). Specifically, the Ministry posted an advertisement via its official Facebook page promoting the grand opening of *The Miracle of Teddy Bear* (*Khun mi patihan*; Lorphanpaibul, 2022), a local BL series, which was to be held at the Thai Drama Festival in Japan that year. This unprecedented move took both domestic and foreign audiences by surprise (Bunyavejchewin and Sukthunthong, 2021).

The recent mobilisation of the Thai BL industry as a soft power asset was selected as the case study of interest due to its deviation from Thailand’s traditional soft power diplomacy, which has historically relied on the international promotion of high-cultural and traditional assets. This constitutes a robust deviant case, the *explanandum* of which warrants inquiry. Additionally, the existing literature on Thai BL and Thailand’s diplomacy has remained scarce and has relied predominantly on secondary sources (Fan and Supalakwatchana, 2025; Lizada, 2022, 2024; Lyajoon, 2024).

Framed as a brief research report, the present study addressed the following research questions:

- 1 How has soft power diplomacy been constructed, construed, and conducted by the Thai MFA?
- 2 Why has the BL industry emerged as a novel source of soft power, and what drove this development?
- 3 How have new soft power assets been mobilised by Thailand’s soft power diplomacy?

2 Method

This study relied extensively, though not exclusively, on primary sources. These included archival materials, such as cablegrams and internal memorandums, released by the Thai MFA at the authors’ request under the Official Information Act, B. E. 2540 (1997), alongside official news and information. Only those concerning topics related to soft power were considered. The temporal scope of the compiled primary sources spanned from 2008, the earliest accessible year, to 2025. Secondary sources were also utilised in a supplementary capacity.

Methodologically, a qualitative historical analysis was employed to structure the study design, data collection, and analysis. Briefly, this research method “employs qualitative... measurement and the use of primary historical documents or historians’ interpretations’ (Thies, 2002, p. 352). This involves the selective, close reading of sources to synthesise facts into a narrative analysis of the case studied. The method was selected for its realistic premises; it assumes that facts in qualitative historical analysis are not objective but are instead theory-laden. Specifically, they are compiled and interpreted subjectively, typically based on the investigator’s theoretical orientation (Thies, 2002).

The research questions specified above informed the collection and analysis of factual data to provide an account of the case under study. Although this account was constructed in detail, it remained largely descriptive, as the study was neither directly nor explicitly theory-guided. The author was cognisant of this shortcoming, which is inherent to the qualitative historical analysis employed.

3 Results

3.1 Soft power diplomacy in Thailand

Soft power has been a favoured, albeit cursory, term within policy circles in Bangkok for over a decade (Charoenvattananukul, 2023). Over time, it has become a slogan, highlighted in the PTP’s election campaigns and later translated into a public policy promoted by the PTP-led government. Despite this, the articulation of its meaning and interpretation has been confusing, inconsistent, and unclear. Further, its meanings and usages are not conceptually aligned with Nye’s (2004, 2008, 2011) original conception (Metaveeviniij and Chomngam, 2025). This conceptual misalignment extends to the term “soft power diplomacy”; Nye (2008) does not appear to employ this specific terminology, instead frequently associating soft power with the mechanism of public diplomacy.

In the publications of the MFA, a key entity in promoting Thai soft power overseas, the terms “soft power” and “soft power diplomacy” have often been mentioned without an explicit definition. For instance, in its *Annual Report 2012*, a publicly available publication, soft power diplomacy was incorporated as one of the eight elements of Thailand’s national policy on foreign affairs; however, no clarification of its precise meaning was provided. Instead, the content focused primarily on the provision of development assistance and the promotion of cultural diplomacy activities (MFA, 2013).

Unlike cultural and public diplomacy, which are formally managed under the mandates of the Cultural Diplomacy Division and the Public Diplomacy Information Division within the MFA’s Department of Information, soft power diplomacy lacks a dedicated organisational mandate. Rather, it typically manifests through operational plans (*phaenngan*) and strategic plans (*phaen konlayut*), which are integrated into the broader Master Plan (*phaen maebot*). Notably, plan formulation is primarily conducted by the Department of Information (MFA, 2016a, 2016c). Plan implementation, meanwhile, is carried out by Thai Embassies and Consulates-General, in addition to the relevant departments under the MFA in Bangkok, alongside the de facto arms of the Ministry, most notably the Thai Foundation (MFA, 2016a).

Notwithstanding the absence of an explicit definition, soft power diplomacy may be roughly described as “the ability of a state to achieve its goals without the use of force or coercion, but rather by persuading other states and actors to foster positive sentiment, acceptance, and alignment with that state’s goals and actions, through the conduct of foreign policy across the political, economic, social, and cultural domains” (MFA, 2016b). In addition to this description, soft power is understood to encompass three key abilities: (a) the ability of a state to achieve its objectives through persuasive rather than coercive means, which is typically developed by strengthening alliances, providing economic aid, and promoting cultural exchanges; (b) the ability for attraction, which ultimately leads to acceptance and harmony; and (c) the ability to make others want what the state wants or to agree to its objectives (MFA, 2016c). It should be noted, nonetheless, that the absence of coercion alone is neither a form of persuasion nor equivalent to co-optive behaviour. Rather, it represents, at best, a form of political neutrality.

According to a report circulated in 2016, soft power is derived from persuasion and is conceptualised through three core attributes: (a) benignity (*khwaam onyon*), (b) brilliance (*khwaam rungrueang*), and (c) beauty (*khwaam ngam*). In particular, benignity generates soft power through pride and sympathy; brilliance generates soft power through admiration for success, with examples including phenomena such as Hollywood films and K-pop culture; and beauty, which comprises ideals, values, and a positive vision, generates soft power through inspiration and by providing a model for others, such as Thailand’s Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, which inspired Bhutanese elites in the development of their country (MFA, 2016c). The same report further highlighted the role of cultural diplomacy activities, such as the regular organising of Thai Festivals abroad. Additionally, it emphasised two conditions for efficient and effective soft power projection: (a) choosing the appropriate “soft power ambassador” and (b) hosting activities regularly and meaningfully (MFA, 2016c).

Circulated in late 2018, the *Concept Paper* furnished more concrete details on the policymakers’ conception and implementation of soft power diplomacy. This information deviated slightly from the aforementioned details (MFA, 2018). The paper defined soft power

more closely aligned with Nye’s (2004, 2008, 2011) original conception, stipulating the following:

Soft power refers to the ability to induce other states to act in a preferred manner without coercion or explicit quid pro quo, instead relying on its attractive power to gain acquiescence; this mechanism fundamentally distinguishes it from influence that relies heavily on hard power. The effective mobilisation of soft power, however, remains a considerable challenge... Each nation must identify its distinctive qualities and invest strategically in areas where it excels. A state should not project a national image that fails to reflect its authentic character... [Furthermore,] it is imperative... not to expect immediate gains, as the cultivation of soft power is inherently a long-term investment. (MFA, 2018, p. 1).

Policymakers in Bangkok have evaluated the nation’s soft power using major soft power indices. These included Portland Communications’ The Soft Power 30 and Monocle’s Soft Power Survey. Thai policy elites were displeased by the absence of Thailand from these rankings, as they believed the nation possessed ample soft power potential and resources (MFA, 2018). In response, the Thai government has consistently endeavoured to achieve inclusion in such lists (The Nation, 2024).

Given the strategic overlap with cultural and public diplomacies, the objectives of soft power were identified as aligning with the primary goals of the aforementioned diplomacies (Bunyavejchewin et al., 2025). These goals included (a) the promotion of a favourable national image of Thailand, derived from the concept of Thainess and serving to elevate the pride of the Thai people and foster both international goodwill and “Thaiism” (*krasaeniyom thai*; Thai fever), and (b) the commercialisation of international goodwill and Thaiism into economic benefits, which is intended to increase the trade value of Thai goods and services, including long-term investment (see MFA, 2018).

Soft power became a central theme, or mantra, promoted by the PTP government under former Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra (2024–2025). Nonetheless, the application of this watchword departed significantly from its original conception. Under Paetongtarn’s leadership, the term typically referred to the promotion and export of local cultural products (Metaveevinij and Chomngam, 2025).

Notwithstanding this reinterpretation, it is evident that Thailand’s soft power diplomacy experienced a degree of revitalisation during her tenure, demonstrated by the establishment of a Soft Power Committee comprising 12 sub-committees. Moreover, during this period, home-grown BL dramas and idols were unprecedentedly promoted by the MFA to hold events, both virtually and physically, in distant regions such as Latin America. This matter is discussed in greater detail below.

3.2 BL as a source of Thai soft power

While the utilisation of dramas and films as Thailand’s soft power resources for international promotion is not novel, the promotion of the premiere of *The Miracle of Teddy Bear*, a local BL series, on the MFA’s official Facebook page in early 2021 was unprecedented. This incident, seemingly of little importance, is critical as it marks a new chapter in the country’s soft power diplomacy, deviating from soft power sources—notably, Thai high culture and traditional arts

(Kittisareekul and Kaeokomonman, 2025)—customarily mobilised by the Ministry.

Originating in Japan, BL, a media genre depicting romantic and/or erotic relationships between young male characters, has been assimilated into the Thai popular media landscape since 2014. This localised genre, referred to locally as *Y (wai)*, was extensively adopted by the youth-oriented local media-entertainment industry and has since become a prevalent theme in hundreds of domestically produced BL series. Between 2014 and 2024, no fewer than 250 BL dramas produced in Thailand were broadcast via multiple channels, primarily international streaming platforms such as WeTV (Tang, 2025), catering to the rapidly growing demand of both domestic and foreign markets (Bunyavejchewin and Sukthungthong, 2026).

The global expansion of Thai BL is primarily attributable to social media (e.g., X and YouTube) and streaming platforms (e.g., iQIYI and Viu), which are widely accessible to both domestic and international audiences (Lizada, 2022). A significant number of Thai BL dramas and idols have successfully established fanbases not only domestically but also abroad (Pongsapitaksanti, 2026), reaching regions as distant as Brazil (da Silva et al., 2025). This success is also an outcome of “affective economics,” a marketing strategy heavily relied upon by local BL firms. Essentially, this constitutes a business model wherein profits are generated through constant interaction with idols. Such interaction is founded on audiences’ emotional attachment and affection, which are intentionally nurtured by starring idols to solicit fan support in diverse forms. Firms subsequently monetise this support or utilise it to deepen emotional engagement through activities such as fan meetings and interactive communication via live streaming (Boonlert, 2022; Bunyavejchewin and Sukthungthong, 2026).

Foreign audiences have become increasingly familiar with, and receptive to, a diverse range of Thai BL products, ranging from television series to live events featuring starring idols (Baudinette, 2023). Furthermore, these fan bases represent a significant economic asset. Their affection generates lucrative revenue for the Thai BL industry through various channels, including the licencing of broadcasting rights to foreign media firms in high-demand markets.

In 2025, revenue from Thai BL products was projected to reach 144 million US dollars (The Economist, 2025). Between 2019 and 2025, the share of BL content and related activities within the Thai media-entertainment sector experienced a 17% year-on-year growth (The Nation, 2025). This growth trajectory stood in contrast to the performance of other business sectors. Consequently, the BL industry has emerged as a significant revenue generator with substantial potential for the wider Thai economy (Bangkok Post, 2025; The Nation, 2025).

Given the rapid expansion in the popularity and revenue of Thai BL over the past half-decade (Mornkum, 2025), it is evident why the MFA and the broader government, despite their initial reluctance, have turned their attention to home-grown BL series and stars, regarding them as resources for Thailand’s soft power projection (Bangkok Post, 2025). To be precise, the capacity and promise of Thai BL as an emerging engine for the national economy, coupled with its global appeal, likely explain the MFA’s decision to incorporate local BL as one of the Thai-branded products promoted overseas as part of Bangkok’s soft power diplomacy (Bunyavejchewin et al., 2025; Lizada, 2024).

Interestingly, it was the General Prayut Chan-o-cha government (2014–2023), a military-backed regime, that began to incorporate non-traditional assets, such as Thai BL, in its soft power promotion portfolios (Mahavongtrakul, 2022). Arguably, this approach enhanced

the regime’s image by demonstrating a greater openness regarding LGBT+ issues to the international community, regardless of its semi-democratic rule. Concurrently, the government sought to monetise soft power to alleviate the country’s economic downturn (Sangpolsit, 2022). These efforts likely contributed positively to the regime’s legitimation. Nevertheless, despite these earlier initiatives, it was not until the PTP-led administrations assumed power that public–private partnerships concerning the promotion of the Thai BL industry and the export of its products as soft power assets began to take concrete form (Metaveevinij and Chomngam, 2025).

Strategically, Thai BL has been exported as Thai-branded products, the nation’s soft power assets, fostering international goodwill and elevating Thaiism among foreign publics. Crucially, the promotion of domestic BL abroad via Thai Festivals and related events has translated into tangible commercial benefits, contributing to national income and foreign investment (The Economist, 2025). This aligns with Thailand’s objectives of soft power projection, namely, commercialisation (MFA, 2018); hence, the BL industry has emerged as a novel source of Thai soft power, demonstrating considerable efficacy (Lizada, 2024).

3.3 The hybrid mobilisation: from Thai festivals to fan event sponsorship

In September 2025, the Thailand Foundation, a de facto arm of the MFA, announced that the Thailand Public Diplomacy Award for that year was bestowed upon GMMTV Company Limited (GMMTV) for its outstanding role in promoting Thailand’s culture and image, as well as popularising Thainess to foreign publics (MFA, 2025a). The selection of the 2025 laureate marked a milestone in the country’s soft power diplomacy, which has actively publicised Thai BL as a soft power asset through activities and events hosted by the Ministry and its overseas missions. This development stems from GMMTV’s status as the largest firm within the domestic BL industry (Dionisio, 2025).

Since 2021, the MFA has actively promoted local BL dramas and idols, exporting them as instruments of Thai soft power. Its modus operandi has relied on a hybrid of old and new ways. In several instances, the Ministry has promoted Thai BL by showcasing activities at Thai Festivals and Mini-Thai Festivals, which are regularly hosted by Thai Embassies and Consulates-General, particularly in Southeast and East Asian countries. For instance, the 25th Thai Festival in Tokyo featured concerts and fan meetings with actors, including two BL couples starring in GMMTV-produced series and the stars of the BL drama *4MINUTES (Si nathi; Dhubthien, 2024; MFA, 2025b)*. This represents an old way of promotion frequently utilised in soft power statecraft.

Recently, the MFA and the Thailand Foundation sponsored a fan event called OLÁ BL & GL Thailand in Brazil at the Terra SP Concert Hall in São Paulo. At this venue, BL idol couples, nominated by the Thai Association of Boys Love Content (TBLC), performed a live show and participated in a meet-and-greet with Brazilian and Latin American fans and media outlets. The press conference for the event was convened at the MFA in Bangkok on 17 January 2025 (MFA, 2025d). This occasion arguably marked the first time that the Ministry, through one of the nation’s top diplomats, officially and publicly announced full support for Thai BL exports abroad.

The projection of home-grown BL series and idols as Thai soft power assets has also been conducted via a more hybridised approach. The MFA opted for live streaming and fancalls to achieve this

objective. For example, in 2021, owing to the pandemic, the Thai Consulate-General in Osaka hosted a live streaming event—Amazing Thai Festival Online, Osaka 2021—featuring live performances by a famous couple of BL idols from *SOTUS: The Series (Phi wak tua rai kap nai pi nueng; Samajarn, 2016)*, alongside other Thai celebrities. More recently, in 2025, the Thai Consulate-General in Sydney organised a fan meeting titled BL & GL Thai Pop Fan Meet, which featured activities for Australian BL followers, most notably a special fancall with Thai BL idols (MFA, 2025c).

It is, therefore, not an exaggeration to assert that local BL series and idols are indispensable assets of Thailand's soft power diplomacy, owing to their continually rising global popularity. As a result, this presents a significant opportunity for the Thai government to capitalise on the momentum of “Thai BL-isation.”

4 Discussion

The findings reveal that policymakers in Bangkok have construed soft power nebulously, diverging from the original concept. Contrary to the seminal conception of soft power (Nye, 2021), which emphasises “co-option,” the MFA has prioritised “commercialisation.” Accordingly, soft power assets must be monetisable, yielding returns to Thailand's national economy, particularly as the nation faces an economic downturn. Given the popular trend of Thai BL, the genre has aptly aligned with this prioritisation of soft power statecraft.

The decision by policymakers in Bangkok to incorporate the Thai BL industry as a source of the country's soft power represented a departure from the established practises of the MFA. Previously, the Ministry had navigated soft power diplomacy primarily through the promotion of traditional cultural assets, such as Thai boxing and Thai classical dance (Prasirtsuk, 2024). However, even though Thailand's soft power diplomacy and broader policies towards foreign publics have gradually moved away from decades of orthodox displays, this shift does not signify the complete abandonment of the former approach.

The Ministry's pivot towards home-grown BL productions has been primarily and undeniably driven by the unstoppable market forces of the so-called “Y economy” (LINE Insights, 2020), which encompasses local BL series and idols and is forecasted to reach approximately 150 million US dollars within the coming years (The Nation, 2025). As Thai BL functions as a revenue generator for the Thai economy, the growth of this business sector is lucrative not only economically but also politically. This is because the country's economic health is crucial for bolstering the legitimacy of the government in power, irrespective of its regime type. Moreover, promoting Thai BL series and stars as elements of Thai soft power enhances the government's image, signalling to the international community a degree of openness concerning LGBT+ people and issues (Metaveevinij, 2023). Thus, this represents the political economy of local BL as a form of soft power.

The soft power statecraft used to project Thai BL overseas has been executed through various means. Hosting activities at Thai Festivals in foreign countries is a frequently mobilised channel for the communication and dissemination of Thai BL content. Simultaneously, more hybrid alternatives, notably live streaming and fancalls, are occasionally selected. What is particularly noteworthy is the public-private partnership established between the MFA and media-entertainment

firms, particularly GMMTV, which is a large conglomerate within the Thai BL industry. This partnership is crucial because media-entertainment firms have played a pivotal, and potentially more effective, role in advancing Thai BL into specific foreign markets and towards foreign publics.

Through the findings and discussion presented above, the Thai case appears to align with contemporary scholarly observations. These observations posit that popular culture is not merely instrumental to soft power aspirations but also integral to a state's national security, particularly within the economic dimension, and its wider foreign relations (e.g., Press-Barnathan, 2022). Hence, the long-term implications of mobilising Thai BL as a vanguard of Thailand's soft power diplomacy merit rigorous longitudinal examination.

Lastly, beyond such considerations, this study acknowledges its limitations as it focuses narrowly on local BL as an asset for the soft power diplomacy conducted by Thailand's MFA. Consequently, the active roles assumed by non-state actors—notably domestic and foreign media and entertainment firms and streaming platforms—are marginalised, notwithstanding their apparent efficacy as strong transmitters of soft power promotion (Carminati, 2023). Thus, further research is required to address this omission.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human data in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was not required, for either participation in the study or for the publication of potentially/indirectly identifying information, in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The social media data was accessed and analysed in accordance with the platform's terms of use and all relevant institutional/national regulations.

Author contributions

PB: Funding acquisition, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Methodology, Conceptualization.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. This article was prepared with the assistance of Google Gemini to enhance language quality. PaperTrue, a professional English language editing service, underwent editing and proofreading of the final manuscript. The author has read and approved the final work.

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