

Power and Resistance in *The Gifted Thai Series*

Terryna Pramesthi Rizmadhani¹, Theophilus Joko Riyanto²

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
Email: a11200026@john.petra.ac.id¹, jokri@petra.ac.id²

ABSTRACT

This study applies Michel Foucault's theory of power and resistance to explore how the school maintains control over students and how the students fight back. It reveals how the school uses power/knowledge to create rules and disciplinary power to enforce the system and rules in maintaining control. Students resist through micro-resistance by questioning the system and rules, and through strategic, tactical, and counter-conduct resistance by protesting the system and rules. The analysis shows the school establishes control by informing and threatening students, and by intimidating and punishing them. To resist, students question the rules in the conversations with friends and the headmaster, and protest by breaking the teacher's metronome and complaining to the government. This study concludes that the school's use of violence to maintain power contradicts Foucault's concept of power and leads to students' resistance, highlighting their desire for a fairer environment.

Keywords: counter-conduct resistance, disciplinary power, micro-resistance, power/knowledge, strategic and tactical resistance, Thai series, *The Gifted*

INTRODUCTION

The Thai series, also referred as Lakorn, gets its popularity due to the high demand of people to watch during pandemic Covid-19 in 2020. Thai series has adapted so many series from Korean and Chinese drama which is also the reason for its popularity. Wang Yingmin (2023), through the ThinkChina newsletter, found that Thai series have produced over 50 foreign dramas. One of the most popular Thai series in Indonesia is *The Gifted Thai series*. Airing on GMMTV official Youtube channel and WeTV, and supported by the well-known agency and actors, *The Gifted* reaches 4.1 million Youtube viewers and gained popularity with an 8.2/10 rating on IMDb.

The Gifted tells Ritdha Wittayakom High School having a "Gifted Program". It is a program for a small number of selected students having access to the special class. The gifted class taught students to find and improve their superpowers. In the first session, one student starts feeling that something is off with the program. He and his talented classmates notice problems with the school's system and rules. Over time, they gather proof of the program's dark side. They try many ways to share this evidence with the government, but the government ignores them and continues to support the school. This series appears to have complex relationships of power and resistance that exist between the school and its students. It strikes a deep connection with issues in the education system nowadays. Hence, this paper analyzes the school's reinforcement in maintaining its power and the students' resistance to the school's power.

The applied theory is Michel Foucault's concepts of power and resistance. Foucault describes power not just as something held by the rich or elite, but as something anyone in society can possess to influence others (Foucault, 1980). This implies that people from all social classes can make an impact in their communities. Furthermore, this analysis applies two out of five types of power. The first is disciplinary power which means that the power

controls behavior through system and rules in institutions like schools and prisons. The second is power/knowledge which shows how knowledge and power are linked. In this context, power controls what is considered true or important.

In the concept of resistance, Foucault explains that resistance within power systems can take different forms, where three out of five are used in this paper which are strategic and tactical resistance, counter-conduct resistance, and micro-resistance. Strategic resistance includes organized efforts like protests, while tactical resistance happens spontaneously in daily life. Foucault (1978) says, "Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society" (p. 93), meaning that power comes from social interactions and can change. Counter-conduct resistance means cleverly resisting control and rules, challenging norms and practices. According to Foucault (2004), counter-conduct is the behavior that opposes the control exerted by power. The third form, micro-resistance, happens in small everyday actions, showing that everyone can make a difference. This concept is applied to analyze how students resist the school's power.

The School's Reinforcement to Maintain its Power over The Students by Establishing the System and Rules

The school's methods are designed to control the students and make sure they follow the system and rules. The headmaster focuses on the overall school system, while the teachers manage classroom rules. Establishing the system and rules is the first step in maintaining power over the students, directing them to comply and asserting power. According to Foucault, systems and rules come from knowledge and are tools for maintaining power. The school's ability to create these systems and rules reflects Foucault's ideas of disciplinary power and power/knowledge. In *The Gifted* (episode 1, part 1, 02:20–03:03), a teacher explains the school's system, telling students they must live in the dormitories at *Ritdha Wittayakom High School*. The dormitories allow the school to supervise and control students' activities and academic progress even after school hours. The teacher's explanation serves two purposes which are informing students about the dormitory system and reinforcing the school's power. It is clear that staying in the dormitories is mandatory, and not following this rule would break the school's system and rules.

Furthermore, the establishment of the system and rules for the school in general is also reinforced by the gifted homeroom teacher as a representative of the school. In episode 1, part 3, the gifted homeroom teacher explains the rules of the gifted program in front of the students.

“First of all, the Gift program is a supplemental class. That means you need to attend your regular class. Those from room 1 must go to classroom 1. Those from room 8 must go to classroom 8. After you finish your regular class, you must attend this program here. From now on, please pin your badge in place of your old one. Secondly, this program comes with all these rules. I want you to read them in your own time. The most important rule of all is... You are prohibited from letting people outside of this program know what we do here, in any circumstances. If you violate this rule, you will be expelled from this program, effective immediately.”

The conversation reveals that the teacher can expel the students from the gifted program, portraying Foucault's disciplinary power. By enforcing clear rules, the teacher controls the students' behavior. They must comply with the rules to remain in the program. The teacher explicitly outlines these rules, including confidentiality requirements, to assert the school's authority.

The next announcement is also delivered by the gifted homeroom teacher as another form of reinforcement to establish the school's power. The teacher is explaining the benefits that the students can get as the gifted students.

“All of the students will enjoy the highest privileges in this school. You'll have access to better facilities than your ordinary classmates. Compliance dress code is not strictly enforced on you. In addition, you'll get to stay in your own dorm room. You'll receive regular health check-ups in school.”

The school provides better facilities to the gifted students, exempting them from certain regulations, while ordinary students must follow strict rules. This system showcases the school's use of power/knowledge to discipline the students. The teachers shape students' perspectives by suggesting that following the rules leads to better facilities and future success.

In summary, the school uses different methods to control the students, following Foucault's ideas of disciplinary power and power/knowledge. Teachers explain that dormitories allow for constant monitoring and give presentations on the rules to get the students' consent. They also highlight the benefits of the gifted program, showing that the students' excellence and obedience lead to rewards. By setting up these systems and rules, the school effectively uses Foucault's theories to keep its power.

The School's Reinforcement to Maintain its Power over The Students by Controlling the Implementation of System and Rules

Controlling the implementation of the school's system and rules is crucial for maintaining power over students. To ensure these system and rules are obeyed, the school monitors and influences the students' behavior by using the system and rules as tools to keep its power. There is no issue when the school uses its system and rules properly to discipline the students. However, the school sometimes punishes the students in ways that instill fear and force obedience without necessarily educating or improving their behavior (*The Mentality of Reward*, n.d.). This means that punishment may not always lead to better attitudes towards the teacher and the students. Many schools use various forms of punishment, including violence, to discipline students. However, there is growing opposition to using violence because it has no positive effects. UNICEF reports that corporal punishment harms students' behavior, academic performance, and increases dropout rates.

In *The Gifted* series, the school often uses violence or coercion to enforce the rules and control the students. It can be seen in Figure 1 that a teacher cuts a student's hair for breaking the school's rules.



Figure 1. "The student is getting a haircut by the teacher," *The Gifted*, episode 2, part 2, 08:28-08:48.

In the scene, the student breaks the school rule about boys' hair length, so the teacher cuts his hair. Although the student broke the rule, using violence as punishment goes against Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, which opposes violence. Foucault's concept is to create order through rules for productivity, not through violence. The scene shows the teacher using violence for discipline, contradicting Foucault's ideas.

The school shapes how the students view the school's system. Using Foucault's ideas of power/knowledge, the headmaster influences the students' perspectives about the school's system. When a student questions the system, the headmaster convinces him by stressing that following the school's rules leads to future success and urging them to help improve the system.

"Pawaret, don't think that the system is not equal. Now you have more opportunities to develop your potential. One day you will use that potential to lead inferior people to in the future. Let it go. I want you to believe in the system and help me to improve it".

In this conversation, the headmaster tries to make the student obey the system without questioning it. He forces him to believe in the system, even though the student openly says there are mistakes. The student also says the system is unfair between the gifted students and the ordinary students, but the headmaster assures him that the system prepares the students for the real world. The school seems to force the students to obey the system, whether it is fair or not. It shows the school uses its power for its own benefit. The headmaster's efforts to convince the students despite their criticisms highlight this control.

In summary, the school's system and rules aim to maintain its power by using intimidation and physical punishment, which do not educate students effectively and create a harmful atmosphere. This approach contradicts Foucault's theory of power, which warns against using force and fear as intimidation and physical punishment harm the students. This misuse of power reveals a fundamental flaw in the school's disciplinary approach. Additionally, the headmaster's efforts to force students to obey a flawed system show how the school uses its power to shape the students' perspectives, aligning with Foucault's concept of power/knowledge.

The Students' Questioning the System and Rules to Resist The School's Power

This part examines how the students resist the school's power. Based on Foucault's theory, this analysis uses three out of five forms of resistance: strategic and tactical resistance, counter-conduct resistance, and micro-resistance. Questioning the unfair system and rules is the main way students resist the school's power. By recognizing the system's bias, the students start to resist unequal treatment, realizing that the system is not fair to every student. This aligns with Foucault's concepts of micro-resistance and counter-conduct resistance. In *The Gifted Thai* series, Pang realizes his school's system is unfair and discusses it with his roommate, Nac, although Pang does not find out how to change it.

PANG: But seriously, I don't think it's fair

NAC: What's not fair?

PANG: The school's classroom division. It only makes the students feel worse.

NAC: When you say worse, does it include anything grave?

PANG: No, but it's frustrating

NAC: That's why the school has something called a placement test. This test gives students in the bottom like you a second chance. If you score high, you have a chance to move up. I, on the other hand, need to maintain my grade or I can end up in the bottom. To sum it up, if you want something nice, you need to focus on your study. (Figure 9).

This conversation illustrates Pang's frustration and his inability to change the system, which aligns with Foucault's concept of micro-resistance. Micro-resistance involves small, often unnoticed acts of resistance, like questioning norms. It reflects Pang's questioning in line with Foucault's idea of micro-resistance.

The frustration about the school's system impacts not only for Pang but also his friends in the gifted program. It starts after the teacher explains the program's rules, which seem strange and raise suspicions about what the school might be hiding. Pang and his friends gather to seek answers but come up with no answer. The way they are questioning the system aligns with micro-resistance and counter-conduct resistance, even though their questioning is mainly to satisfy their curiosity.

In addition, Pang does not only discuss his frustrations about the school's system with his friends but also directly confronts the headmaster. This occurs after Pang and his Gifted friends complete their midterm exams. Pang questions the headmaster about fairness between the ordinary students and the gifted students. However, the headmaster dismisses it. It shows that Pang's questioning is an act of resistance, demonstrating his awareness of flaws in the system and attempting to persuade the headmaster through his inquiries. This aligns with micro-resistance, where small acts challenge power.

In conclusion, the students questioning the school's system and rules demonstrate their critical evaluation of the education system. Pang, representing the students, acknowledges the unequal treatment between the ordinary students and the gifted students. This inequality prompts the students to confront the school, an act of resistance categorized as micro-resistance by Foucault.

The Students' Protesting the System and Rules to Resist The School's Power

Protesting against the school's system and rules is another way for the students to resist its power. It involves taking action to challenge the flaws in the system, not just questioning them. In *The Gifted* series, the students protest actively to address the system's exploitations and unfairness, advocating for equal educational rights. This resistance aligns with strategic and tactical resistance and counter-conduct resistance by Foucault.

In this context, the students start actively resisting the biased school's system and rules by planning their actions. This planning is a form of resistance aligned with strategic and tactical strategies by Foucault. In *The Gifted* Thai Series, Pang and Wave use their status as the gifted students to challenge the school through the headmaster. They see themselves as the agents of change with the chance to make improvements. Pang and Wave strategize how to confront their frustrations with the biased system and rules as an act of resistance.



Figure 2. "Pang and Wave try to make up a plan," *The Gifted*, episode 12, part 1, 10:57-11:31.

In that scene, Pang and Wave strategize a plan to expose the school headmaster's flawed system during the midterm exam, where on that day the headmaster has a meeting with the government. By doing this, Pang and Wave hope the government will intervene. Initially, they had evidence, but Mr. Pom took it. Now they need a new plan to retrieve it from him. They find out Mr. Pom can erase memories using a metronome and by snapping his fingers. Their strategy involves preventing him from using this power by destroying the metronome. However, Wave worries that destroying the metronome might not be sufficient enough because Mr. Pom could replace the metronome with something else.

"I've got it! The metronome and finger snapping—both have something to do with sound, right? Our task is not to get rid of the metronome but do whatever to avoid hearing those sounds, right?"

Pang's speech to Wave shows that he proposes a solution where their goal is not just to destroy the metronome, but also to prevent Mr. Pom from using his powers through sound cues. This strategy allows Pang and Wave to avoid Mr. Pom's abilities. Their actions represent strategic and tactical resistance by Foucault

Pang and Wave persist in their plan to expose the school system's flaws to the government by retrieving evidence from Mr. Pom. They use their superpowers to assist them in this mission. Wave hacks the school's CCTV to locate Mr. Pom's positions, while Pang uses his ability to control his mind by sensing Mr. Pom's heartbeat, compelling him to surrender the evidence file. This demonstrates how Pang and Wave creatively apply their powers to achieve their objective. Their approach of counter-conduct resistance ensures they create innovative

methods to retrieve the evidence successfully.

To conclude their protest against the system and rules, Pang and Wave seek public support by presenting impactful evidence to the government. They plan to address the government directly during a meeting with the headmaster, exposing all the negative aspects of the gifted program. During the confrontation, Pang boldly reveals the school's hidden flaws in the gifted program to the government (*The Gifted*, episode 13, part 2, 01:07-05:24). Wave supports him by presenting evidence using his superpower. Despite their efforts, the government officials applaud the headmaster, not Pang, indicating that his protest does not sway the government's support away from the headmaster. Thus, their strategy to challenge the system fails to persuade the government effectively.

In conclusion, students in *The Gifted* series protest against their school's unfair system and rules through active resistance and exposing problems. Led by Pang and Wave, the gifted students use their superpowers to advocate for change. Despite these obstacles, they reveal flaws in the school's gifted program to the government. Even though they do not succeed in persuading the government, their efforts show a strong determination to challenge misuse of power and aim for system improvement, reflecting their commitment to making a positive impact.

The analysis of students' resistance to the school's power illustrates two types of resistance according to Foucault's theory: questioning and protesting. Questioning involves the students like Pang discussing frustrations and unfair treatment, raising awareness and promoting critical thinking among the students. The second type, protesting, is shown by the students such as Pang and Wave, who plan to expose system flaws by gathering evidence and presenting it to the government to challenge the status quo. Despite initial setbacks, their actions demonstrate a dedicated commitment to fairness in the school. In other words, whether through questioning or protesting, students' resistance highlights their proactive stance against unfair practices and emphasizes the importance of student advocacy for justice in education.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *The Gifted* series shows how the school controls students through rules and systems, sometimes resorting to violence. This contradicts Michel Foucault's idea that power should influence behavior without physical force. This misuse of power prompts student resistance, by questioning and protesting against unfair rules. These acts of resistance align with Foucault's concepts of strategic and tactical resistance, counter-conduct resistance and micro-resistance, reflecting students' desire for fairness. The series highlights broader implications of power dynamics in education, stressing the importance of resistance to advocate for justice systems. It emphasizes that while maintaining power is crucial, the school must use the methods that should not harm the students. The students' resistance underscores the need for ongoing questioning of the unjust systems, promoting critical thinking and advocating for change which is essential in the society.

REFERENCES

- Ending corporal punishment in schools to transform education for all children.* (2023, May 3). UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/safetolearncoalition/stories/ending-corporal-punishment-schools-transform-education-all-children>
- Foucault, M. (1978). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison.* Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: An introduction.* Pantheon Books.

- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. Longman.
- Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, territory, population*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- The gifted* (TV series 2017-2018). (2018, August 5).
IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9136312/>
- GMMTV Youtube Analytic. (n.d.).
Socialblade.com. <https://socialblade.com/youtube/c/gmmtv/monthly>
- The mentality of reward and punishment in education*. (n.d.). International School Parent. <https://www.internationalschoolparent.com/articles/reward-punishment-education/>
- Michaelj Bogert. (2023, August 26). *Thai tv's impact on global popularity: How it's captivating audiences worldwide*.
Medium. <https://medium.com/@michaeljogert/thai-tvs-impact-on-global-popularity-how-it-s-captivating-audiences-worldwide-17d5abf94243>
- Naraghi, A. R. (2012). *Foucault's Conception of Power and Resistance Introduction*.
- Shih, F. H. (2023, June 24). *Thailand's BL series have increased Thailand's soft power*. Thai PBS World: The latest Thai news in English, News Headlines, World News and News Broadcasts in both Thai and English. <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/thailands-bl-series-have-increased-thailands-soft-power/>
- Taylor, D. (2014). *Michel Foucault: Key concepts*. Routledge.
- Top Thai novel adaptations*. (n.d.). Discover, Discuss, and Organize the Best Asian Dramas & Movies for Your Entertainment - MyDramaList. <https://mydramalist.com/list/1NkyYjL>
- Turetzky, P. (n.d.). *Outline The History of Sexuality: an Introduction, volume 1 By Michel Foucault*.
- Yingmin, W. (2023, June 15). *How Thailand is remaking TV dramas, from Taiwan's meteor garden to China's addicted*. ThinkChina - Big reads, Opinion & Columns on China. <https://www.thinkchina.sg/society/how-thailand-remaking-tv-dramas-taiwans-meteor-garden-chinas-addicted>