

Heterosexual Reading vs. Queering Thai Boys' Love Dramas among Chinese and Filipino Audiences

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Over the past decade, Thai boys' love (BL) series,^[1] which typically portray two young men as the focus of a love interest, have been a phenomenon throughout Asia. Originating from Japanese *yaoi manga* translated into Thai in the 1990s, the Thai BL genre has expanded from *manga* to novels, fan fictions, films and live action TV series. This paper focuses on Thai BL series whose stories depict homoromantic or homoerotic relationships between young male couples, which have become popular throughout Asia. Since its inception in 2014, enthusiastic fans in many different linguistic communities have worked to provide subtitles to BL content and helped to popularise Thai BL series. Thai BL actors have gained a large following among mostly heterosexual women, not only in Thailand but also in China, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan and even Latin America.

While BL content is considered a challenge to heterosexual norms in many Asian countries such as China, Malaysia and Indonesia because of its association with homosexuality,^[2] BL series from Thailand have become the main channel for young audiences starved for content which has otherwise been restricted at home. The popularity of Thai BL series raises questions, on the one hand, about the ways in which audiences in many Asian countries consume Thai BL series in relation to gender politics in their countries. On the other hand, as many scholars have argued, Thai BL adopted from the Japanese *yaoi* genre has grown to develop its own unique characteristics.^[3] The question remains: what kind of cultural experience do audiences outside Thailand have when consuming Thai 'queer' popular culture adopted from other nations' cultural products? Do the experiences differ when BL texts from other nations are being consumed? This paper explores the ways in which Thai BL fans in Asian countries engage with Thai BL texts. I take the case of Chinese and Filipino audiences watching Thai BL series to examine how Thai BL texts evoke different kinds of experiences and responses from these international audiences, who today can choose from a multitude of entertainment options. Although Thai BL series have been shunned by the LGBTQ community for not reflecting the real lives of LGBTQ people,^[4] I argue that the interpretation of an international audience towards Thai BL texts is far more complex and is influenced by the socio-cultural and political contexts in which they live. Addressing audience reception of Thai BL drama series can shed light on a better understanding of not only how Thailand is imagined and fantasised by youth in Asian countries in relation to its representation of queerness, but also how different groups of audiences bring their own national, cultural and gender politics into reading Thai BL texts.

The boys' love debate: Fantasy or transgression

Boys' love or *yaoi* originated in Japan as a form of *manga* portraying romantic or sexual relationships between male characters which later evolved into a variety of formats: fiction, *manga*, *anime*, games, live action series and films. Its creators, amateurs and professionals, and consumers, are mainly heterosexual women.^[5] Many scholars contend that despite its portrayal of homoerotic relationships, it is

a non-gay text. The debate whether BL characters and settings are representative of the real lives of gay men is a familiar one in the discussion of BL texts.[6] Despite the fact that most BL fans are aware that BL stories do not reflect the real lives of gay people, there exists a growing number of gay audiences.[7]

Audience interpretation of BL literature can be accounted for in varying ways. Some argue that BL projects a female gaze, which in turn allows women to objectify men.[8] Others contend that BL texts offer 'ideal love' or 'pure love,' which is not possible in typical heterosexual relationships, thus creating the concept of an idealised, equal heterosexual relationship.[9] The argument that BL texts offer resistance to heterosexual norms is also common in BL scholarship. Aspects of this resistance to heterosexual norms vary as scholars take different readings of the genre. Yukari Fujimoto, for example, argues that BL texts allow women to 'play with gender' by freely adopting various sexual roles. Through a reading of BL texts, the constraints of oppressive female gender roles can be removed.[10]

Central to the argument regarding the gender politics of BL is the way that BL texts become queer because the readers are queering them. Andrea Wood, while agreeing that not all BL texts are queer, views BL as the deployment of romantic fantasy to imagine worlds in which 'the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture.'[11] BL for Wood thus can be seen as a queer articulation of dissatisfaction with heterosexual hegemony. Akiko Mizoguchi argues that BL or *yaoi* provides a discursive space for women to participate actively in issues of female sexuality and identity that contest a hierarchised, heterosexual paradigm.[12] Hitoshi Ishida argues that even though representations of gay men in BL are fantasies, they are points of identification for female readers. BL is mutually structured on a representational appropriation of gay men's imagery and self-projection of women's desire.[13]

In contrast to a queer reading of BL texts, Yao Zhao and Anna Madill demonstrate how, compared to Anglophone readers, Chinese fans read BL through a heteronormative frame.[14] By heteronormative frame, the authors refer to a thematic reading such as a preference for BL stories where relationships between men could be accepted by their family and society, or a preference for stories where romantic relationships between two men last a long time, and the couple ultimately commit to each other forever. The other themes include reading the *seme* (playing a dominant role) and *uke* characters (less dominant and/or receptive) as a heteronormative couple and wanting *seme* and *uke* to remain in roles that mirror that of traditional heterosexual relationships, rather than a reversible relationship. By 'reversible relationship,' Zhao and Madill refer to a relationship in which both partners can be 'penetrating' or 'receptive' in sexual activities. Lastly, when it comes to accepting gay relationships in reality, many admit that *yaoi* stories made them more open-minded towards male–male relationships that take a different form to traditional relationships between men and women. Zhao and Madill conclude that Chinese fans are reading *yaoi* in a very different cultural context; sometimes traditional heteronormativity influences their readings; other times, they tend to be relatively open about new ways of thinking about gender.

The debate over whether the relationships described in *yaoi* and BL represent either the subversion or reinforcement of gender norms is well worn. This paper argues that audience reception should not be reduced to discourses only about fantasy or resistance, and that there is no point in generalising about it. However, at the same time, I argue that Thai BL dramas should be dealt with on their own terms by considering the contexts of production and reception. It is equally important to explore BL texts from the production side, where the industry can exploit an appeal to heteronormativity to attract an audience, and the reception side, where the audience brings their own socio-cultural conditions into reading the text. While novels can be written by heterosexual women fans who experience patriarchal society, and while they may reflect their fantasy and resistance through BL texts, we should not forget that BL TV dramas are dictated by mainstream media, whose power is over which representation should be promoted.

With the growth of a transnational fandom of BL texts, literature has begun to pay attention to a transnational audience's reception when BL's images and narratives cross national and cultural borders.

In China, BL is often referred to as *danmei*. From imported Japanese BL products, the genre has been localised into a variety of formats including novels, fan fiction, films and TV series. The depiction of homosexuality in the genre has made it a topic of scrutiny by the government. Online BL works have often led to criminal charges and prison sentences. TV series have also been taken down without explanation by the government.^[15] Literature about *danmei* discusses the ways in which fans interpret *danmei* in varying ways. Some argue that *danmei* represents a form of subversive resistance to mainstream cultural norms and values, especially regarding gender and sexuality.^[16] Others view *danmei* as an alternative gender and sexual articulation which challenges the Chinese state's heteronormative gendered politics.^[17] Xi Lin discusses the positive effect of *danmei* in raising public awareness about the LGBTQ community and opening up a discursive space in which to discuss LGBTQ issues in China.^[18]

With the rise of the Thai BL series in Asia, there has been an increasing interest in Thai BL. In his earlier work, Thomas Baudinette discusses *Love Sick the Series* (2014), the very first Thai BL series, as a way of introducing a queer form of reading to Thai audiences used to the conventional form of Thai TV dramas which typically portray heteronormative romance.^[19] In his later work, Baudinette studied how Filipino fans engaged with Thai BL texts. Baudinette argues that although Thai BL portrays heterosexual romance between two men, international fans choose to appropriate BL texts for their own end. One of the major readings Baudinette discovered is that Thai BL was seen by Filipino fans as both 'uniquely Thai' and 'authentically gay' in contrast with Japanese *yaoi*, which fans perceived as 'inauthentic' and 'heteronormative.' By queering Thai BL, their 'creative misreading' allowed the genre to open up space to subvert the conditions of heteronormativity and homophobia in the Philippines, and thus perform emancipatory work for them.^[20]

While I agree with Baudinette's argument that fans can produce meanings and appropriate transnational texts for their own ends, this paper takes a step beyond Baudinette's work in two ways. First, rather than focusing mainly on the reception side, I incorporate views from the production side, exploring how the industry shapes the representation of masculinity in Thai BL series. Second, in order to bring nuanced readings into how fans engage with BL texts, I engage with two groups of audience members of Thai BL, namely the heterosexual female audience and gay male audience. I explore the ways in which heterosexual female audiences and gay male audiences engage differently with Thai BL and how audiences bring their own socio-cultural contexts into reading transnational Thai BL texts.

Methodological note

Data presented in this paper is the result of my long-term research on the cross-cultural reception of Thai television dramas in the region. Between 2014 and 2019, I conducted field research in Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, China, Indonesia and the Philippines, exploring audience reception and factors that facilitate the flow of Thai dramas. Starting around 2016, I discovered that Thai BL dramas had become hugely popular among heterosexual female audiences in almost every country I visited. While the majority of Thai drama fans was female, I found a few male audience members, some of whom identified as gay and claimed they were BL fans.

In this paper, I choose to focus particularly on audiences from China and the Philippines. The reasons these two countries were chosen for comparison come from their similarities and differences. The similarity resides in the fact that China and the Philippines have relatively large fanbases among international audiences of Thai BL. The differences lie in the perceptions of LGBT communities in Chinese and Filipino societies. While homosexuality in contemporary China is not condemned, it is not fully accepted as a social norm. The Chinese government has historically been conservative when it comes to LGBT issues and often censors media that portray homosexual relationships.^[21] There have been cases where online writers have been arrested on charge of circulating obscene material and for

self-publishing books.[22] In the Philippines, the country seems to be relatively open about LBGQTQ community. The state and society allow free expression of diverse perspectives and identities, and sociocultural attitudes towards sexual expression and sexual minorities have been lenient.[23] However, while the country has been ranked one of the most gay-friendly in Asia,[24] LGBT individuals still face disadvantages and difficulties in obtaining their rights, owing partly to heteronormative Catholic Christian ideals.[25] These socio-cultural contexts form a background from which to compare the audience interpretation of Thai BL dramas in the two countries.

The in-depth interviews with audience members in these two countries were conducted between 2017 and 2018. In China, I conducted in-depth interviews with about 27 viewers regarding various aspects of consuming Thai television dramas between May to July 2017 in various cities, including Hangzhou, Nanjing, Ningbo, Beijing and Guangzhou. Of these, there were 23 women and four cisgender men, two of whom identified as gay, even though they are not openly gay. Among the 23 women, although I do not assume that all of them were straight, all but one of the audience members explicitly identified themselves as other than heterosexual. Their ages ranged from 18 to 36 years. In the Philippines, I interviewed ten women who self-identified as heterosexual and six gay men. The interviews took place in Manila in November 2017 and October 2018. All have university education or are currently attending university. As for those who have a university degree, they work as lawyers, teachers or in IT-related businesses and as other types of professionals. In addition, I have also interviewed two key figures from the production side: one is a Managing Director of GMMTV, a major producer of BL series, and the other is CEO of Star Hunter Entertainment, an agency which produced *Two Moon the Series* (2017).

The in-depth interviews in China were conducted in Chinese with the help of a translator who could speak both Thai and Chinese. In the Philippines, the interviews were conducted by the author in English. The interviews usually lasted between one and two hours and covered aspects of audience reception of Thai TV dramas (i.e., heterosexual romance) as well as BL series. The part of the interview addressing BL covered patterns of consumption, interpretation of male-male relationships, as well as the portrayal of Thai culture in Thai BL series.

The audiences in both China and the Philippines accessed Thai BL series through online platforms mostly via fan-subtitled versions. In China, there are about ten fan-subtitling groups which regularly translate Thai dramas into Chinese language to share with other fans. Among these, Tianfu Taiju, the most popular fansub group, translates and subtitles mainly Thai BL series. In the Philippines, fans usually watch Thai BL series through fan-subtitled versions on streaming sites in the English language. Although GMMTV often upload their series with English subtitles on LineTV and YouTube platforms, audiences outside Thailand find it difficult to access LineTV while Thai BL series on YouTube channels with English subtitles are often available two or three months after initial broadcasting in Thailand. Hence the fan-subtitled versions are the best option for a young audience with access to the internet.

It should be noted that, as the interviews with audience members and the industry personnel took place between 2017 and 2018, Thai BL series discussed by the audience members in this article were released before August 2018. They include the most popular series during that time such as *Love Sick the Series* (2014), *SOTUS the Series Season I* (2016) and *Season II* (2017), *Kiss the Series* (2016), *Make It Right* (2016) and *Two Moon the Series* (2017). This timeframe is significant, since Thai BL series released after 2018 have developed to include certain characteristics unprecedented in earlier Thai BL series. While the small number of audience members I interviewed cannot be representative of the entire audience in China and the Philippines, my aim is to use this sample to examine cross-cultural readings of Thai BL text to gain a better understanding of how heterosexual female audiences and gay male audiences engage differently with Thai BL.

Yaoi/Boys' Love—From Japan to Thailand and to Asia

The development of Thai BL series can be said to begin with *Love Sick the Series* (2014).^[26] Aired on MCOT 9, a public state-owned television station, during the prime time slot, the story portrayed a romantic relationship between two high school boys. The series became a big hit. Following the success of *Love Sick the Series*, many BL dramas have been produced. GMM25, a privately owned television channel, is a major producer of BL series. Typically, the series were adapted from web novels created by young Thai women authors, whose novels were later published as paperback books. Production houses selected the stories based on the popularity of web novels and turned them into drama series.^[27] At the beginning of Thai BL production, production houses and mainstream TV networks were unwilling to sponsor and broadcast such series. Once the BL genre was proven to be profitable, mainstream TV networks such as MCOT, GMM25 and Channel One no longer hesitated in broadcasting BL series.^[28] The reason BL series can guarantee relatively high viewership is due to the large numbers of fans who have already read the novels and anticipate seeing the live action version.^[29] Over the past decade, Thailand has outnumbered other Asian countries in producing BL series. Natthanont Sukthungthong and Poowin Bunyavejchewin point out that between 2014 and 2019, there have been 35 Thai BL series, with an additional 41 series which have two male couple characters as secondary leads.^[30] As for international audiences, fans translated the texts into many different languages, helping to extend the Thai BL series' international reach.

In terms of thematic stories and since most readers are teenagers, Thai BL stories typically present everyday life in school or university. In early BL series (between 2014 and 2017), characters tended to study engineering or medicine. *SOTUS the Series* (2016), for example, portrays a relationship between freshmen and seniors of the engineering faculty where the freshmen must undergo hazing. *Two Moon the Series*, aired in 2017, depicts the stories of freshmen and seniors in medicine, where romantic relationships between three boy couples take place. While early BL series tend to portray pure love without showing many sexual relationships, later BL series started to show more sex scenes between the two male lead characters. It is not common that early BL series released before 2018 would portray a character identifying himself as a gay man whereas BL series released after 2018 such as *TharnType the Series* (2019) portrays one lead character as a gay-identifying man. Sathaporn Panichraksapong, an MD of GMMTV, a major producer of BL series, claimed that audience members who are mainly heterosexual women look for romantic relationships among the characters rather than sexual relationships.

We know that our audience are [sic] women. Women want to see only two boys having romantic moments together. They don't want to see sex. Sexual relationships in BL are for a gay audience. That's why in *SOTUS the Series* we have only two kissing scenes. With only these, audiences were already screaming. This is enough for them. (Interview with Sathaporn, GMMTV, 10 Aug. 2017)^[31]

Besides everyday life in school, narratives in Thai BL often revolve around the characters overcoming relationship problems and social problems, that is the stigma of a homosexual relationship. Since the two male leads are usually portrayed as non-gay, or even when one man identifies as gay but the other does not, narratives are often devoted to relationship anxieties rooted in sexual identity dilemmas, sometimes relating to having had sex with each other when intoxicated. At other times, due to the time spent with each other, they start to develop feelings for each other. In some stories, although the parents do not accept them at first, they eventually come to accept them.^[32] In addition, the two male protagonists often come from well-to-do backgrounds, studying in leading colleges.

In terms of characterisation, Thai BL series have idealised male characters who are sensitive and nurturing. This might be an influence from the notion of 'soft masculinity' portrayed in Korean drama series which have been hugely popular in Thailand over the past two decades.^[33] However, this soft masculinisation must be presented with a somewhat 'masculine' appearance of male lead characters. In most BL dramas before 2018, both male leads had to be represented as heterosexual men. In many Thai

BL dramas, the characters do not equate their love with another man to a gay identity. Kongphop, a lead character, in *SOTUS the Series*, for example, responded to his friend who jokingly said that he did not know that Kongphop liked men: 'I don't like men. I like Arthit. If he is not Arthit, I will not like him.' As Fran Martin has argued, the characters in BL are 'not homosexual' but simply in love with a unique individual who 'happens to be' male.^[34] In several series, the male characters are constructed to have a girlfriend, simply to show that they are 'real men.' This point is confirmed by Sathaporn: in BL series produced by GMMTV, the two male leads need to have masculine characteristics.

Our target is heterosexual women. They want to see two real men have a sweet romance with each other. They don't want to see any of the boys look too feminine. That's why when we cast actors, we need to make sure that none of them look effeminate. We are not doing gay series. We also don't need to include so many sex scenes. If we include a lot of sex scenes, we would be attracting a gay audience. (Interview with Sathaporn, GMMTV, 10 Aug. 2017)

What Sathaporn revealed is the fact that Thai BL series are produced for women, and therefore, the set of tropes presented in Thai BL must be geared toward heterosexual women. Even though fans may accept or celebrate gay couples in BL culture,^[35] from the business's point of view, it is necessary to feature non-gay actors. In addition, some production houses have a strict rule that actual gay actors cannot play a leading role, despite the genre's focus on two boys falling for each other. Yot Kornherun, a CEO of Star Hunter Entertainment, the agency which produced *Two Moon the Series*, explained the reason for casting only straight actors to play lead roles:

It is not that we discriminate against LGBT. But from a business perspective, 'real men' actors are a better fit. We are not only doing the series, but we are also star makers. We want to create idols who we can use in other businesses too. (Interview with Yot Kornherun, Star Hunter, 18 Dec. 2017)

The comments above reflect the idea that for production companies, BL series exist purely for lucrative gain. The industry as a whole does not intend to subvert the general mainstream narrative of heteronormativity.^[36] Since the majority of the audience is heterosexual women, production houses and TV networks aim to produce star idols who have the capacity to gain a large following among girl fans. The comments above not only illustrate that young male bodies have increasingly become selling points for commercial success, but also that appealing to heteronormative standards is a common practice to attract a large heterosexual female audience.

What does the appeal to heteronormative standards rest on then? Following Anthony Thien Pham who argues that such an appeal rests on a notion of soft and hard masculinity that the industry has attempted to construct, I would add that the appeal to heteronormative standards lies in both the mixture of soft and hard masculinity, the characterisation as well as storylines.^[37] Male characters in Thai BL series possess soft and hard masculine qualities expressed not only in their bodies, which are youthful, masculine and fit, with light skin and cute faces, but also in the characterisation of characters engaging in active violence, using vulgar language, studying in disciplines associated with masculinity such as engineering. Yet they are sensitive, nurturing and vulnerable. The characters often come from a well-to-do class, and studying in a leading college guarantees a bright future career. These are components constructed in BL series which offer an alternative world where 'women's frustrations with patriarchal masculinity' find an outlet.^[38] In addition, BL series typically end happily with family and society accepting their love for each other, thus celebrating the freedom to love regardless of gender and sexual identities.

Building on the argument about the appeal to the heteronormative standard, I argue for the need to understand Thai BL in relation to the gender politics of the audience. However, Stuart Hall urges us not to view audience interpretation as free-floating in a way that fans can choose to appropriate any media texts for their own ends.^[39] The questions this paper asks are not only how heterosexual women and gay men audiences engage with Thai BL texts, but also how they bring their own socio-cultural contexts to their interpretations of transnational Thai BL dramas.

Heterosexual readings of Chinese and Filipino female fans

When asking female audience members in the two countries I studied what attracts them to Thai BL, the most common answer I received is the beauty of Thai actors, combined with the 'light' characteristics of Thai dramas.

Thai actors are good looking. Korean actors' looks are too similar to Chinese people. That's why we want to try something different. Plus, the stories are light, about school life. Dialogues are funny. The love is pure without much sexuality, only kissing. (Chingching, f, 23, China)

Thai BL are light, always with a happy ending. I am a big fan of BL. So I watch BL series of many countries. Japan did not produce much of the BL series; none from Korea. There were a few from China. But in all of the Chinese BL I watched, the characters often ended up being punished or turning straight in the end. They make me sad rather than happy. (Amy, f, 25, Philippines)^[40]

With regard to good-looking actors, audience members in China and the Philippines often comment that Thai actors have different looks from Korean actors. For Chinese audiences, Korean actors and actresses have an East Asian look which is too familiar to Chinese people. While it may not be accurate to generalise about the looks of Thai actors, what I can infer from audience comments is a preference for their youthfulness, cute faces, light skin and masculine bodies. Although one might argue that Thai BL actors' beauty is increasingly similar to Korean actors, fans often comment that Korean actors tend to have a 'plastic surgery look,' in contrast with Thai actors, who come from various mixes (mixed-race parents) and have more natural looks.

As for the light characteristics of Thai BL dramas, the notion of 'light' is linked to several components in Thai BL series. To fans, 'light' refers to storylines that often focus on life in school or early career, and which revolve around friendship, leisure activities and romance. In Thai BL series, comedic situations that are designed to evoke laughter, happiness, and emotional warmth are always presented. Audiences, both in China and the Philippines, often comment that Thai BL series are funny. Light storylines also refer to the ways in which problems encountered by the characters are solved in an easy manner, with the characters finding happiness and fulfilment at the end of the story. This is exemplified in one audience member's comment:

I like the way they portray love in Thai BL. It is a kind of puppy love. BL of other national, like Chinese BL, are darker. In Thai BL, two male characters often start off friends, then develop feelings for each other. It is very light, very sweet. They prove their love for each other and overcome relationship problem[s] eventually. After all, it is a feel-good story. (Krissy, f, 27, Philippines)

Besides the light characteristics, one of the most common comments I have heard when women and gay men audiences described the relationships between men in Thai BL is that the feelings seem more 'authentic' and 'real.' The characters overcome relationship problems and social problems—the stigma of homosexual relationships—which proves their love for each other and renders the relationship pure and authentic. Pure love narratives such as these are common in BL narratives.^[41] Thai BL series subscribe to this trope as male characters are seen as struggling to overcome the obstacles presented by society for each other and their relationship.

Love in Thai BL is very sweet and real. They overcome the struggle to accept who they are. And in the end, the society around them accepts who they are. It makes me happy. (Xioaliang, f, 24, China)

Boy-girl relationships are too boring. The story is always like that. The couples have to go through difficulties, like different class backgrounds, misunderstandings, and so on. But in Thai BL, you can see that love is more genuine. It feels more real because they overcome their own challenges, inner challenges about their love for each other. (Chao, f, 30, China)

According to the interviews above, we come to see that female fans are attracted to Thai BL due to 1. good looking actors, 2. light storylines, and 3. pure love narratives. As for the last component, what an audience infers into 'pure love' narratives, I would argue, lies in a depiction of love that transcends societal norms and boundaries. The pure love narrative is also common in heterosexual romance where love is the central motivating power. However, in heterosexual romance, the relationship between the characters is often depicted as being more accepted and less challenged by society, while in BL texts, the relationship between the male characters is often depicted as being more taboo and facing more obstacles, such as societal prejudice and discrimination. In fact, Thai BL narratives often focus on the process of self-acceptance, where the male protagonists fight to accept their real love toward each other. For many, a pure love narrative, which highlights internal conflicts as the main protagonists attempt to understand their feelings for each other while negotiating social acceptance, renders boys' love relationships more significant than standard heterosexual relationships.

Referential reading vs female gaze

With regard to the difference between women audiences' and gay men audiences' readings of Thai BL, they differ from each other when it comes to identifying themselves with characters in the series. My interviews below show that women tend to adopt a female gaze through their appropriation of male bodies, while gay men reference relationships in Thai BL with their own struggle.

We love to see not only one good looking boy but two or more. (Tingting, f, 21, China)

I like Thai BL because the actors are so cute. You know when you watch a Boy-Girl series, you realize that in the end, the female lead who is more beautiful than you will get the handsome boy. But in BL, you can get them both. There is no woman in between for me to feel jealous of. (May, f, 26, China)

When I see two good-looking boys together, who care for each other, it feels *kilig* (exhilarating),^[42] like a butterfly in my stomach, very exciting. (Sina, f, 22, Philippines)

I like the moment of sweetness when two boys are having skinship. (Xioaliang, f, 24, China)

While young male bodies and masculine homoerotic expression have become selling points in Thai BL, audiences show that they buy into what the industry is selling to them. Chinese and Filipino female audiences in this study show the ways in which they project a female gaze onto sexualised male bodies. Besides gazing upon male bodies, women tend to read the *uke* and *seme* characters as a heteronormative couple. Some fans also dislike that the characters are constructed as having a girlfriend.

When I watch these series, I don't feel that there is any difference between male and female romance. It is just the same. They are just like men and woman. (Fangping, f, 20, China)

What I see in Thai BL is the characters like *seme* and *uke*. The *seme* is very masculine, dominating. The *uke* is not acting like a woman, but the audience knows that he likes a man. When I watch it, I didn't see the difference between BL or BG, not much difference. But BL makes me more excited, maybe because I watch too many BG romances. They are not exciting anymore. (Tingting, f, 20, China)

When I see some BL stories show that a man has a woman as a girlfriend, I feel like this kind of relationship is messed up. Like in *Love Sick*, both of the male leads have girlfriends. Still, they fall in love with one another. I don't like it. If a man has a relationship with a man, they should be honest with each other. They should not have other women. In *SOTUS the Series*, the male protagonist decides to choose a man, he just goes for it. It is more graceful. (Xiaobai, 24, China)

A Filipino woman who claims herself to be a fan of 'Krist' Peerawat Sangpotirat, a male lead actor in *SOTUS the Series*, describes the difference between being a fan of *uke* and *seme* characters in a BL series. She described her own 'shipping'^[43] practice as follows:

I main^[44] (am a fan of) Arthit (a male lead in *SOTUS the Series*). For me, he is *uke*, because despite his trying-to-be-

fierceness, he is approached by Kongphob (another male lead character) and follows Kongphob's lead. But I never ship him with myself. When women main an *uke* character, they would ship him with the *seme* character. But if they main a *seme* character, they would ship him with themselves. (Krissy, f, 27, Philippines)

Her comment, on the one hand, points to a heterosexual framework which women bring to their reading of Thai BL. She assigned gender roles of male and female onto two male characters: hero, the one who takes the initiative, and heroine, the one who is passively affected by his partner's actions. Moreover, her 'shipping' practice subscribes to the role of *uke* and *seme* in relation to a heteronormative imagination. If an audience member liked the *seme* character who is masculine and dominant, she would want him for herself. But if she liked the *uke* (the submissive character), she would pair him with the masculine dominant character in the story. On the other hand, her reading also breaks away from the *seme/uke* tradition. She assigned the *uke* position to a head hazer character who leads the hazing team in disciplining the freshmen students, despite his portrayal as more powerful and somewhat abusive to the freshmen while reading the character that is supposed to be inferior because he is a freshman as *seme*. Her reading runs parallel to how Tricia Abigail Santos Fermin describes how Filipino fans' reading of BL texts is a way of rejecting gender binaries. Filipino fans see the androgyny of the male characters as an alternative mode of masculinity and prefer pairing 'where neither character is purely dominant or unconditionally submissive.'^[45]

Considering the comments above, one may ask if the consumption of Thai BL is about a female gaze over male bodies, or about identification and seeing the female side in the male. The answers may be both, or even multiple, when it comes to the ways in which fans engage with Thai BL texts. As Fujimoto has argued, fans use BL to play with gender by freely adopting various sexual roles and power dynamics.^[46] The interpretations of Chinese and Filipino women vary from voyeuristic desire and pure love narratives to seeing the female side in the male character, and to adopting various positions in their reading. And while some read the *uke* and *seme* as fixed roles, others prefer shifting the gender dichotomy of *uke* and *seme*. While these are common findings on how female fans engage with Thai BL, gay male audiences read Thai BL differently. Remarkably, they tend to reference relationships in Thai BL to their own social reality.

I can see myself in Thai BL. It relates to my own story. My family did not accept me. Thailand is more open to LGBT people. In the Philippines, there is a lot of bullying of gay people. When I see two men fall for each other and try to be together and finally society accepts them, it completes me. (Jones, m, 22, Philippines)

When I watch Thai BL, I feel nostalgic about myself. The struggle to be themselves, to accept love with a man, is something that I have been through. The stories in Thai BL are about young boys trying to find who they are. As I've had to go through all of these things before, Thai BL makes me feel very nostalgic in a positive way. (Pauwee, m, 33, Philippines)

Thai BL series teach us that in the BL world, you don't have to be scared, you don't have to hide your feelings when you are in love. You just accept who you are. (Christopher, m, 21, Philippines)

Some compared their reading with that of their female friends:

Many of my female friends like to watch Thai BL. They watch them because they are fans of that actor. They don't look into content about LGBTQ. They just want to see their favourite actors performing the role of a nice and caring man. They imagine themselves through that role. But for us who are gay, we feel that Thai BL goes deep down into our feelings. We relate to it as our own experience. Thai BL brings our own struggle, our first love, back to us. (Pauwee, m, 33, Philippines)

The above comments may resemble what Baudinette called a 'resource of hope,' when Chinese fans choose to appropriate BL texts as a resource that helps them explore their sexuality and cope with the heteronormative structure of their society.^[47] The difference, as I have stated, is that female fans and gay fans differ in their readings of Thai BL. We may recall what Zhao and Madill suggest, in their study of how Chinese women interpret BL texts, that there exists a heteronormative frame used by female fans, characterised by social and family approval, an everlasting romantic relationship, the heteronormative

couple as *uke* and *seme*, and a dislike for reversible relationships.[48] My findings above show how most Chinese and Filipino female audiences enjoy Thai BL in similar ways that Zhao and Madill describe although some break away from such a framework by 'playing freely' with gender dynamics.[49] To many fans, the appeal of Thai BL lies in the stories where the relationship between the couple struggles against the social taboo of homosexuality, and is finally accepted by their families and society around them. They show the expectation of fixed roles between the *seme* and *uke* characters, which resemble heteronormativity. They like it when the couple commits to each other and fight to be together; the plot appears to be an essential element of an ideal romance for a heteronormative relationship. They also do not like to see BL characters having a girlfriend as it is considered unfaithful or cheating.[50]

Here I do not wish to reduce female audience's readings of Thai BL texts to simply that of a heterosexual frame manipulated by the industry, while celebrating gay men's readings as 'queering' and 'creative misreading' to combat their social disenfranchisement.[51] My intention is to show how they read Thai BL differently according to their own gender politics. Female audience also express feelings of discontent towards gender norms in their cultures. Many of the Chinese female audiences express the stress of finding the right boyfriend and getting married for the happiness of their parents. In the Philippines, although the society is relatively open toward sexual expression, Santos Fermin notes that many of Filipino women feel the pressure of living up to a submissive model of femininity owing to an upbringing in Roman Catholicism.[52] The freedom to love in a society that accepts non-conforming relationships portrayed in Thai BL series fulfils heterosexual desire for many young women, while the texts are being appropriated as gay texts by a gay male audience. The collective female fantasy and gay men's struggle both find their expression in Thai BL.

Thailand, a gay paradise from reading Thai BL

If Thai BL enables female and gay male fans to engage imaginatively with regard to different sex-gender politics, it also provokes engagement with a cultural-national meaning through which fans bring their own socio-cultural context into reading Thai BL.

We love to see the relationship between seniors and juniors in Thai universities. We don't have such close relationships like the Thai. We don't even know each other in the university, not to mention doing all activities together like in Thai BL series. (Fangping, f, 20, China)

We love Thai hazing culture. In the Philippines, we have hazing culture too but in the Thai BL, the seniors and juniors are very close, and their relationship is very warm. Plus, we love to see the food and the drink the male leads like, like Pink Milk. My friends and I have to visit Thai restaurant in Manila every week to eat Thai food and drink Pink Milk. (James, m, 24, Philippines)

Most of the audience are impressed with the liberty and inclusiveness of Thailand portrayed in BL dramas, especially with respect to male-male relationships. Thai BL idealises the freedom to love, representing an inclusive society where parents and friends accept male-male love.[53] The depiction of family as accepting their choice brings admiration toward Thailand as a utopian world. Some gay audience members say that they want to live in Thailand, which in their view is a 'gay paradise.'

Thailand is very liberal when it comes to accepting gay people. When Chinese TV presents gay issues, they always label gay people as abnormal, mentally ill. I think Thai BL teaches us about a cultural diversity that China lacks. What is good or bad, the government does not need to tell us. We can think by ourselves. They should not close our eyes. (Cheng, m, 32, China)

Most gay people in China are part of the 'one child generation' who are young, and more often than not, face marital and parental pressure. Exposing their non-heterosexual identity is never easy and often causes conflict in the family.

My mom cried when I confessed to her that I am gay. She thought that when she was pregnant with me, she must have had a disease that made me become gay now. We are the one child generation, our parents expect us to get married, to have children. When I watch Thai BL series, I feel that Thai society is very much accepting of LGBTQ people. I feel envy. (Anthony, m, 25, China)

While hegemonic norms, social expectations and government attitudes toward LGBTQ are mentioned by gay fans in China with reference to Thai BL, audience members in the Philippines often mentioned religion, which plays a role in the discrimination they face as LGBTQ people.

It is good that Thai BL is not just about sex. It is more about relationships. It portrays the whole spectrum of relationships; how their friends, their family accept them to be open about same-sex relationships. We like Thailand so much. It is open about LGBTQ issues. In the Philippines, there is still a lot of stigma toward LGBTQ people because of our religion. The Bible says that a man needs to be with a woman. (Marvin, m, 19, Philippines)

Baudinette argues that for some Chinese gay male audiences, consumption of Japanese BL has become a 'resource of hope' allowing them to reject Chinese heteronormativity.^[54] Collin Jerome, Ahmad Junaidi bin Ahmad Hadzmy and Ting Su Hie study how Malaysian gay men audiences consume Asian BL dramas, suggesting that the BL genre can give comfort to those living in countries where homosexuality is condemned and made illegal.^[55] Similarly, Thai BL can perform as a 'resource of hope' and give comfort for gay male audiences to face with heteronormativity in their society.

Generally, we are quite open about LGBTQ, but we do not tolerate LGBTQ in the same ways as Thailand. This is because of religion. As Roman Catholics, we are quite conservative. The Bible says that a man must be with a woman. When I see that Thai society accepts gay people, it completes me. It makes me feel content. (Christopher, m, 21, Philippines)

In the Philippines, our Catholic religion is against homosexuality. Actually, there is no reason to discriminate against us. We are human. They want to convert us to be boys. If people see two men holding hands, they'd say 'Oh they are gay. They do not accept God.' I wished that I could be part of a society that tolerates homosexuality, to provide a better social environment for homosexual groups like Thailand. (JJ Mar, m, 18, Philippines)

The comments from Chinese and Filipino gay male audience members illustrate that Thai BL provides them with comfort for being different from the norm. The idealised portrayal of pure love and family and friends' acceptance of love between men in Thai BL invokes the image of a gay paradise that demonstrates a lack of local understanding among Chinese and Filipino audiences. While Thailand is more accepting of the LGBTQ+ community than many other countries in the region, discrimination and inequality still exist. Although a gay paradise image in Thai BL is problematic,^[56] reading it can provide an escape and rejection of heteronormativity among many who experience social disenfranchisement.

Conclusion

In this paper I have demonstrated different ways in which Chinese and Filipino women and gay men engage with Thai BL dramas. Women show that they like Thai BL dramas because of good-looking actors onto whom they can project their female gaze. The evidence also shows that they like Thai BL dramas for their idealised, pure love narratives. Thai BL dramas fulfill their heterosexual desires when they see the couples commit to each other and overcome challenges to be together, and when eventually the relationship between men is accepted by their families and the society around them. In addition, they project the expectation of fixed roles between the *seme* and *uke* characters. All of the above arguably resemble heteronormativity.

In arguing that Chinese and Filipino women read Thai BL dramas according to a heterosexual frame, it is not to suggest that their engagement is simply in conformity to a heteronormativity that the industry tries to perpetuate and manipulate. Thai BL should be viewed as the deployment of romantic fantasy to an imagined world in which women engage with heterosexual hegemony in several reversing manners. Martin has argued that fantasy worlds in fictional representations allow for productive forms of gendered

identification, which 'transcend' and implicitly critique the constraints of normative femininity.^[57] While Chinese and Filipino women in this study show their engagement with Thai BL as non-resistance to heterosexual normativity, they are at the same time using Thai BL as a means to explore alternative sexual and gender politics under the constraint of normative femininity in their own lives.

As for the gay audience in this study, their referential reading and 'queering' of Thai BL reflects the harsh reality of the discrimination they face in their societies. Thailand, as represented in Thai BL dramas, is seen as a gay paradise for those living under the heteronormative hegemony of the state and religion such as that of China and the Philippines. Although, in reality many in the LGBTQ community in Thailand still face strong discrimination, the liberty and the inclusiveness of Thailand portrayed in BL dramas brings admiration towards Thailand as a utopian world. My findings, however, differ from the findings in a previous study by Jerome, Hadzmy and Ting Su Hie, which argues that gay male audiences in Malaysia found that Asian BL dramas did not represent the problems they faced in reality, and were skeptical of the way the characters in Asian BL dramas were portrayed as gay men.^[58] While these differences show the diversity of use and appropriation of the BL genre among different audiences, Thai BL dramas have proven to be more than just an entertainment that has been manipulated by the industry. Similar to what Yanrui Xu and Ling Yang have argued in the case of Chinese women consuming *danmei*^[59] and Santos Fermin in the case of Filipino women reading BL texts,^[60] the world that Thai BL represents has become a zone of contestation surrounding gender and sexual politics. Viewers engage in an ongoing process of reflecting and negotiating with their own social reality as women or gay men.

The question remains: Can and will Thai boys' love culture evolve to become an alternative representation of LGBTQ people to the point where it can challenge heteronormativity? In fact, the popularity of Thai BL owes so much to the relatively openness and acceptance of the LGBTQ community in Thailand. Although the production companies have done and continue to promote the image of a 'gay paradise,' which is problematic, we have begun to see new narratives, and more realistic and diverse representations of the LGBTQ community in the newer Thai BL series. The genre as a whole has helped open up space for discussion about LGBTQ issues; it may also help to increase tolerance towards sexual minorities. As Thai BL series are still evolving, there is hope for new representations to contribute to the openness of gender and sexuality in Thai society and beyond.

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Notes

[1] 'Boys' love' and 'yaoi' are terms used to describe similar genres in fictional works that depict homoromantic or homoerotic relationships between male characters. In Japan, *yaoi* was used earlier to refer to fans' creation of *manga* and *anime*, whereas boys' love referred to more commercial productions. Akiko Mizoguchi argues that boys' love is the term most commonly used in Japan today to refer to commercial male homosexual fiction, whereas *yaoi* is used in the discussion of the phenomenon itself. I use the term 'boys' love' to describe the genre as a whole whereas 'yaoi' is used when referring to works originating in Japan. Some scholars refer to the genre as *yaoi/BL*, in which case I keep the original usage. In China, BL is referred to as '*danmei*.' In the Philippines, fans generally use 'BL.' In Thailand, television series related around boys' love themes are called '*series wa*' or '*series Y*.' While the confusing proliferation of terms is common to the genre, my solution is to opt for 'boys' love' as a term to describe the genre outside Japan. For a detailed history and definitions of the genre see: James Welker, 'A brief history of shonen'ai, yaoi, and boys love,' in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, ed. Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaïke, Katsuhiko Suganuma and James Welker, 42–75 (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), doi: [10.14325/mississippi/9781628461190.003.0003](https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781628461190.003.0003). See also Akiko Mizoguchi, 'Male-male romance by and for women in Japan: A history and the subgenres of 'yaoi' fictions,' *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 25 (2003): 49–75.

[2] See James Welker, 'Boys love (yaoi) manga,' in *Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer*

(*LGBTQ History Vol. 1*, ed. Howard Chiang, et al., 262–67 (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2019), p. 265.

[3] See Thomas Baudinette, 'Lovesick, the Series: Adapting Japanese 'boys love' to Thailand and the creation of a new genre of queer media,' *South East Asia Research* 27(2) (2019): 115–32, doi: [10.1080/0967828X.2019.1627762](https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2019.1627762); Anthony Thien Pham, 'What it means to love a man: The evolution of the boys' love industry in Thailand,' *Southeast Asian Media Studies Journal* 3(2) (2021): 107–26.

[4] [Top Koaysomboon](#), 'Everything you need to know about Thailand's thriving Boys Love culture,' *Time Out*, 11 Jun. 2020, accessed 4 Jun. 2023.

[5] See Mark McLelland and James Welker, 'An introduction to 'boys love' in Japan,' in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, ed. Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaike, Katsuhiko Sukanuma and James Welker, 3–20 (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), specifically p. 3; Yao Zhao and Anna Madill, 'Female-oriented male-male erotica: Comparison of the engaged Anglophone demographic and that of the Greater China area,' *Sexuality & Culture* 25 (2021): 562–83, specifically p. 563, doi: [10.1007/s12119-020-09783-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09783-9).

[6] See Hitoshi Ishida, 'Representational appropriation and the autonomy of desire in yaoi/BL,' in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, ed. Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaike, Katsuhiko Sukanuma and James Welker, 210–32 (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), doi: [10.14325/mississippi/9781628461190.003.0011](https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781628461190.003.0011). See also Mizoguchi, 'Male-male romance,' p. 66.

[7] See Thomas Baudinette, 'BL as a 'resource of hope' among Chinese gay men in Japan,' in *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*, ed. James Welker, 42–53 (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023), doi: [10.2307/j.ctv1xcxqw2.9](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1xcxqw2.9); Collin Jerome, Ahmad Junaidi bin Ahmad Hadzmy and Ting Su Hie, "'I can see myself in them, but they are not me": Asian boys' love (BL) drama and gay male viewers,' *Social Sciences* 11(163) (2022): 1–14, doi: [10.3390/socsci11040163](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11040163).

[8] See Aleardo Zanghellini, "'Boys love" in anime and manga: Japanese subcultural production and its end users,' *Continuum* 23(3) (2009): 279–94, doi: [10.1080/10304310902822886](https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310902822886); Kazumi Nagaike, 'Perverse sexualities, perverse desires: Representations of female fantasies and yaoi manga as pornography directed at women,' *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 25 (2003): 76–103, doi: [10.1163/9789004227002_008](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004227002_008).

[9] Yukari Fujimoto, 'Transgender: Female hermaphrodites and male androgynes,' *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 27 (2004): 76–117. See also Tricia Abigail Santos Fermin, 'BL coupling in a different light: Filipino fans envisioning an alternative model of intimacy,' in *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*, ed. James Welker, 153–66 (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023), doi: [10.2307/j.ctv1xcxqw2.17](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1xcxqw2.17).

[10] Yukari Fujimoto, 'The evolution of BL as "playing with gender": Viewing the genesis and development of BL from a contemporary perspective,' in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, ed. Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaike, Katsuhiko Sukanuma and James Welker, 72–92 (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

[11] Andrea Wood, 'Boys' love anime and queer desires in convergence culture: Transnational fandom, censorship and resistance,' *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 4(1) (2013): 44–63, specifically p. 46, doi: [10.1080/21504857.2013.784201](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2013.784201).

[12] Mizoguchi, Akiko. 'Reading and living Yaoi: Male-male fantasy narratives as women's sexual subculture in Japan.' Dissertation, University of Rochester 2008.

[13] Ishida, 'Representational appropriation,' pp. 210–32.

[14] Yao Zhao and Anna Madill, 'The heteronormative frame in Chinese Yaoi: Integrating female Chinese fan interviews with Sinophone and Anglophone survey data,' *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 9(5) (2018): 435–57, doi: [10.1080/21504857.2018.1512508](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2018.1512508).

[15] See Yanrui Xu and Ling Yang, 'Chinese danmei fandom and cultural globalization from below,' in *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, ed. Maud Lavin, Ling Yang and Jing Jamie Zhao, 3–19 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017), doi: [10.5790/hongkong/9789888390809.003.0002](https://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/9789888390809.003.0002); Eve Ng and Xiaomeng Li, 'A queer "socialist brotherhood": The Guardian web series, boys' love fandom, and the Chinese state,' *Feminist Media Studies* 20(4) (2020): 479–95, doi: [10.1080/14680777.2020.1754627](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1754627).

[16] See Yanrui Xu, and Ling Yang, 'Between BL and slash: Danmei fiction, transcultural mediation, and changing gender norms in contemporary China,' in *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*, ed. James Welker, 19–30 (Honolulu, HI: University

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[19] Baudinette, 'Lovesick, the Series,' pp. 115–32.

[20] Thomas Baudinette, 'Creative misreadings of 'Thai BL' by a Filipino fan community: Dislocating knowledge production in transnational queer fandoms through aspirational consumption,' *Mechademia: Second Arc* 13(1) (2020): 101–18, doi: [10.5749/mech.13.1.0101](https://doi.org/10.5749/mech.13.1.0101).

[21] Xu and Yang, 'Between BL and slash,' pp. 19–30.

[22] Ng and Li, 'A queer socialist brotherhood,' p. 481.

[23] Santos Fermin, 'BL coupling,' p. 156.

[24] [Harriette Chan](#), 'Queer mythology in the Philippines,' *Making Queer History*, ca. 2018, accessed 4 Jun. 2023.

[25] Santos Fermin, 'BL coupling,' p. 156.

[26] See Baudinette, 'Lovesick the Series,' p. 116; Natthanai Prasannam, 'The yaoi phenomenon in Thailand and fan/industry interaction,' *Plaridel* 1(2) (2019): 63–89, specifically p. 69, doi: [10.52518/2020.16.2-03prsnam](https://doi.org/10.52518/2020.16.2-03prsnam).

[27] Prasannam, 'The yaoi phenomenon,' pp. 63–89.

[28] Pham, 'What it means to love a man,' p. 112.

[29] Prasannam, 'The yaoi phenomenon,' p. 73.

[30] Natthanont Sukthungthong and Poowin Bunyavejchewin, 'Wai series: a preliminary statistical study,' *Thai Journal of East Asian Studies* 23(2) (2019): 360–83.

[31] It should be noted, however, that this interview was conducted in 2017, before the genre had become hugely popular outside Thailand, and has since then included many new characteristics such as sexual relationships between two male lead characters and lead characters self-identifying as gay.

[32] Certainly, there are a few parents in Thai BL series who do not accept that their children like men, but in many series, parents are generally accepting. In *Love by Chance* (2018), for example, Pete's mother understands that Pete has liked men from a very young age. In *Dark Blue Kiss* (2019), Pete's father and Kao's mother accept it after their kids disclose their love toward each other. Knock's parents in *2Gether with Me the Series* (2017) accept that Knock is having a relationship with another man, Korn. In *He is Coming to Me* (2019), when Thun came out to his mother, he received a warm hug and support from his mother. See also Zhang, Junqi, 'The reception of Thai Boys Love Series in China: Consumption, imagination, and friction,' Senior Honors thesis, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2021, pp. 71–72.

[33] Dredge Byung'chu Kang-Nguyen. 'The softening of butches: The adoption of Korean 'soft' masculinity among Thai toms,' in *Pop Empires: Transnational and Diasporic Flows of India and Korea*, ed. S. Heijin Lee, Monika Mehta and Robert Ji-Song Ku, 19–36 (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021), doi: [10.2307/j.ctv7r429w.7](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv7r429w.7).

[34] Fran Martin, 'Girls who love boys' love: Japanese homoerotic manga as trans-national Taiwan culture,' *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13(3) (2012): 365–83, specifically p. 368, doi: [10.1080/14649373.2012.689707](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2012.689707). See also Ishida, 'Representational appropriation,' p. 221.

[35] See Kang-Nguyen, 'The softening of butches,' pp. 19–36 for a discussion on the growing popularity of fans of gay couples.

[36] Pham, 'What it means to love a man,' p. 109.

[37] Pham points out that hard masculinity is usually expressed through physical sports, active violence, the use of casual and vulgar language, muscularity, untempered passion, and even explicit, intense sexuality. Soft masculinity is displayed by kindness, softness and deep respect for individual autonomy and consent. See Pham, 'What it means to love a man,' pp. 107–26.

[38] Kang-Nguyen, 'The softening of butches,' p. 27.

[39] Stuart Hall. 'Encoding and decoding,' in *Culture, Media and Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis, 117–27 (London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2004).

[40] She referred to titles such as *Counterattack* (2015) *Addicted the Series* (2016) *Yandai Byway No. 10* (2016) before the release of the *Untamed* (2019) which has become hugely popular.

[41] See Martin, 'Girls who love boys' love,' pp. 368–70.

[42] *Kilig* is a Tagalog term, referring to a feeling of exhilaration or elation caused by an exciting or romantic experience.

[43] Shipping in fandom culture is a desire by followers for two people or more to be in a romantic or sexual relationship.

[44] To 'main' someone means to admire a person, character, or work of fiction, and that person or character then becomes most important.

[45] Santos Fermin, 'BL coupling,' p. 161.

[46] Fujimoto, 'The evolution of BL,' pp. 76–92.

[47] Baudinette, 'BL as a resource of hope,' pp. 42–53.

[48] Zhao and Madill, 'The heteronormative frame,' pp. 435–57.

[49] See Fujimoto, 'The evolution of BL,' pp. 76–92.

[50] Zanghellini notes that one possible reason that some fans dislike female characters in BL is because BL is considered a voyeuristic practice, where the objects of the gaze are men, and therefore, the presence of female characters is distracting and interfering with the consumption of BL. Another reason is the ways women are represented in BL texts, echoing conventional female characters which the audience finds alienating. See Zanghellini, 'Boys love' in anime and manga,' p. 287.

[51] See Baudinette, 'Creative misreadings,' pp. 101–18 for a reference on 'creative misreading.'

[52] Santos Fermin, 'BL coupling,' p. 156.

[53] As I have stated in many BL series, parents are generally accepting that their children like men, although some are homophobic and do not accept it. As for friends of the main characters, they appear comfortable when they find out that their friends like men. There are many examples such as *SOTUS the Series I and II*, *Two Moon the Series*, *Bad Romance*, *Love Sick the Series*, *I Told Sunset about You*.

[54] Baudinette, 'Creative misreadings,' pp. 101–18.

[55] Jerome et al., 'I can see myself in them,' pp. 1–14.

[56] See Peter Jackson, *First Queer Voices from Thailand: Uncle Go's Advice Columns for Gays, Lesbians and Kathoey*s (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016). For the myth about a gay paradise image see pp. 37–40.

[57] Martin, 'Girls who love boys' love,' p. 377.

[58] Jerome et al., 'I can see myself in them,' pp. 1–14.

[59] Xu and Yang, 'Between BL and slash,' pp. 19–30; Xu and Yang, 'Chinese danmei fandom,' pp. 3–19.

[60] Santos Fermin, 'BL coupling,' pp. 153–66.

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