# Chinese Historical BL by Thai Writers:
## The Thai BL Polysystem in the Age of Media Convergence

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## Introduction

Since the mid-2010s, a genre of once underground novels and audiovisual productions known in English as Boys' Love, or BL for short, has been catapulted to the centre of popular culture in East and Southeast Asia. In Thailand, the origins of the genre can be traced back to the 1970s when Japan's girls' comics contained elements of *shōnen-ai* or boys' love which, in the 1980s, evolved into *yaoi*—mostly self-published stories of homosexual romances between boys—and, in the 1990s, BL prominently featured homoerotic scenes.[1] Thanks to their thematic similarities, *yaoi* and BL have since morphed into the same genre of homoerotic romance.[2]

Despite both originating from Japan, Thai *Y* and Chinese *danmei*—as BL is known in local languages—have evolved their own narrative tropes specific to their sociopolitical landscapes.[3] Thai BL stories are often set in contemporary universities and revolve around homoerotic relationships between male undergraduates, whereas Chinese BL commonly takes place in the fictitious past of ancient China where supernatural events and suprahuman abilities among cultivators are common along with the dilution of homoerotic hues. In 2019, the online screening of *The Untamed,* a Chinese historical fantasy BL series adapted from the web novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi,* further propelled the popularity of Chinese BL—particularly fantasy and historical fantasy—in Thailand, where Chinese BL productions have become a staple of online entertainment. This has in turn stimulated an enormous inflow of Chinese BL translations to Thailand and, interestingly, an emergence of so-called 'Chinese historical BL' works by Thai writers on readAwrite, one of Thailand's largest online reading/writing platforms.

Writings from this subgenre of BL are characterised by Chinese names of characters, places, eras, fantastic elements and, most notably, language style prescribed by the publishing industry to be the linguistic norm for Chinese historical/period settings, despite being penned by Thai authors. Some of the Chinese historical BL web novels previously serialised on readAwrite have been purchased by BL publishers for licensed publication. The website also hosts Thai translations of actual Chinese BL novels obtained from its Chinese counterpart, Jinjiang Literature City. However, once the acquisition of publishing rights to a translated BL title is announced by a publishing house, its fan translation on readAwrite is removed immediately.

There is no denying that the widespread availability of and exposure to Chinese BL imports has driven Thailand's domestic BL economy. On Chinese *danmei,* Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu offer a reflection equally applicable and relevant to Thai BL, 'danmei is no longer solely associated with Japanese popular culture. Instead, it has successfully merged with a diverse range of local and global media and celebrity cultures, and developed into a transnational, all-inclusive, and female-dominated meta-fan culture,'[4] engendered, I may add, nonetheless by translation. By conducting a bibliographical survey of Thai and translated Chinese BL and by interviewing eight Thai authors of Chinese historical BL, in this paper I attempt to understand how the widespread availability of Chinese historical BL translations—whether in audiovisual or book format—have inspired the birth of a new BL subgenre, that is, Chinese historical BL by Thai

writers. Polysystem theory and convergence culture will be applied to contextualise the interviews.

## Polysystem theory and convergence culture

Polysystem theory was initially conceived by Itamar Even-Zohar (1979) as 'a theoretical framework for the descriptive study of literature and language in their cultural context';[5] the scholar soon applied it to his investigation into translation regarded as 'a complex and dynamic activity governed by system relations,'[6] which inspired several studies on translation grounded in an exploration of various polysystems of translated literatures. According to Even-Zohar,[7] translated literature is not necessarily inherently secondary to the polysystem of national literature. On the contrary, it can occupy a primary position under the following three scenarios: 1. when the target literary polysystem is still young and crystallising; 2. when the target literary polysystem is either weak or peripheral; and 3. when the target literary polysystem faces a turning point, a crisis, or a literary vacuum. Although some aspects of the three cases have been disputed on the grounds of their empirical flimsiness,[8] the point remains valid that, in certain contexts, translated literature can expose a literary polysystem to alternative styles.

Polysystem theory, in essence, is a framework to uncover 'the struggle for power'[9] between translated literature and home literature. When a literary polysystem is either weak or absent in a given culture, import of foreign literature can enrich the target literary polysystem by introducing 'new models of reality to replace the old and established ones that are no longer effective [and] a whole range of other features … such as a new (poetic) language, or compositional patterns and techniques.'[10] Under this scenario, translated literature takes a central position in the target culture and accordingly dictates the very selection of foreign texts to be translated. Alternatively, if the polysystem of a national literature is already strong, translated literature will yield to existing norms and conventions, thus functioning merely as 'a means to preserve traditional taste.'[11]

As argued by Nitsa Ben-Ari,[12] the enduring relevance of polysystem theory as a framework for translation studies lies in its incorporation of cultural factors in the analysis of literature and its aversion to a value judgement of cultural products. Polysystem theory has been employed mostly to analyse literary texts and, as a result, belies its stated aim of conception as an interdisciplinary model for research on translation in general—literary or otherwise.[13] In this study, I employ polysystem theory as a foundation for my investigation into: 1. translated Chinese BL texts—both audiovisual and literary—in Thailand and 2. the positions they occupy in relation to the polysystem of national BL literature in an effort to contextualise the emergence of Chinese historical BL.

The concept of convergence culture first proposed by Henry Jenkins[14] was also adopted to complement the understanding of the Thai BL polysystem in a world mediated by digital technology. Convergence culture is a conceptual and theoretical expansion of Jenkins's [15] earlier conceptualisation of participatory culture, which represented the first attempt to advocate the legitimacy of fans and their life-worlds as opposed to the regular pathologisation of fans in earlier media and academic discourses. The revised framework explores 'the relationship between three concepts—media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence.'[16] In this paradigm, the ' circulation of media content—across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders—depends heavily on consumers' active participation.'[17] To media companies, the process of convergence provides either an opportunity to absorb more sectors of the media industry into their already massive conglomerates since successful content on one platform can also be distributed or reproduced across others, or a risk to their market share due to the general phenomenon of consumers' declining loyalty to a specific network. As a result, convergence should be understood as 'both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process.'[18] As with Even-Zohar's polysystem, convergence culture recognises the struggle for power. However, my study emphasises the distribution and control of content production as 'unparalleled forms of fan/user productivity and connectivity—collective action and interest-centred

networks, groups and communities.'[19]

## Literature review

The introduction of polysystem theory in the 1970s spawned a number of discussions and studies such as those by Zohar Shavit,[20] Ben-Ari[21] and Chris Kwame Awuyah.[22] Shavit's and Ben-Ari's studies examined the translation of children's literature from English and German, respectively, into Hebrew. They arrived at similar conclusions that translated children's literature was perennially on the periphery of the literary system and was subject to translation norms that had once rigidly governed adult literature of the same genre, even though those norms were no longer imposed on adult literature. In Ben-Ari's case, the most dictating norms for the translation of children's literature were those with didactic and pedagogic functions. Beyond children's literature, polysystem theory was also influential in the critical interrogation of colonial literature. For instance, as a comparative literature scholar situated in the context of post-colonial Africa, Awuyah advocated the application of polysystem theory to the formation of national literature on the continent due to its capacity to trace the connections within the larger African literary polysystem.[23]

Although polysystem theory fell briefly out of favour with researchers of comparative literatures and translation studies alike at the close of the twentieth century,[24] it was revived in the new millennium through publications by, for instance, James Rampant,[25] Chia-hui Hsing[26] and Elaine Indrusiak.[27] Rampant's book chapter illustrates how fan-produced scanlations of Japanese manga in the US contributed to the shift towards foreignisation as a main translation strategy by manga publishers, while Hsing's doctoral thesis investigated the effects of translators' gender on the subversion or reproduction of social and gender norms in the Chinese translations of English children's literature in China and Taiwan. Of particular note is Indrusiak's case study on how the film adaptations of the *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy contributed to renewing and enriching the Brazilian literary and cultural polysystem.

In Thailand, the relevance of polsystem theory is less apparent not least because it is barely known beyond the discipline of translation studies which is still at a nascent stage. To date, studies by Thai academics drawing on polysystem theory amount to two. The first is by Phrae Chittaphalangsri,[28] who tapped into Even-Zohar's polysystem concept of dynamic canonicity to explain how three novels translated into Thai before 1929 posed a challenge to static (conservative) Thai canonicity and blazed the trail for the quality of *verisimilitude* in Thai prose fictions. More recently, Koraya Techawongstien (2020),[29] by employing both polysystem theory and Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts of field, habitus and capital, discovered that the 2000s import of youth fantasy fiction into Thailand had significant effects on the field of Thai youth fiction, one of which was the local production of youth fantasy fiction, which bore some resemblance to its imported predecessors, although there was no discernible influence of translated youth fantasy fiction on adult literature in Thailand.

That said, the original conception of convergence culture was critiqued by Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg[30] and Laurie Ouellette and Julie Wilson[31] for neglecting the effects of media convergence on such gendered practices as fan fiction writing and media self-empowerment regimens. Suzanne Scott's doctoral thesis serves as yet another significant contribution to the debate on the viability of convergence culture as an umbrella concept to attribute to the current manifestation of digital media culture.[32] In her thesis she discusses the high visibility of fanboys in the US, compared with the low visibility of fangirls despite the preponderance of the latter, which leads to the former's disproportionate influence over fannish spaces and practices as well as the latter's unpaid nature of their textual labour. The gap in Jenkins's first theoretical contouring of convergence culture is filled by his later co-edited and co-authored works [33] that draw on examples beyond the Global North. The feminist lens through which the analysis of these three works engage is of great importance to this study, given that the local production of Chinese historical BL is also highly feminised. Rather than acting as a deterrent to the application of convergence culture in this paper, the critical examination of its (in)adequacy allows me to approach the

topic at hand with greater caution and sensitivity.

## Methodology

This paper obtained its data from two sources: the Internet and writer participants. To gain an overview of the Chinese BL landscape in Thailand and, by definition, the Thai BL polysystem, the first set of data on the availability of Chinese BL products — whether in book or audiovisual form — was needed. Since there was no centralised database, catalogue, or archive of all publications categorised by genre, this set of data was obtained from naiin.com, a bookstore website with the most comprehensive list of BL publishers, by searching for titles by genre and sorting them by publisher. As the most active online hub of Asian drama, the website MyDramaList was additionally surveyed to acquire as exhaustive as possible a list of mainland China BL audiovisual productions that was later crosschecked with online channels hosting East Asian programs in Thailand.

The second set of data was extracted from in-depth interviews with Thai authors of Chinese historical BL who initially published their works on readAwrite that were later commissioned to be released in print by BL publishing houses. The data collection was part of my research on the polysystem of BL literature in Thailand as influenced by translated BL content from China. Due to time constraints on the research project, interview requests were sent out to fifteen Chinese historical BL writers with the aim of receiving positive responses from at least half of the pool. Eventually, eight agreed to participate.

As shown in Figure 1, all of the interviewees are women whose ages range from 21–30 years, save one who was in her late thirties, at the time of data collection; five of these women have taken up freelance writing as their full-time jobs while the other three work as: a full-time media content translator, salesperson and software programmer. Out of eight, five reported possessing a university degree in either liberal arts or social sciences, one holds a BA in computer science; two completed high vocational education programs with certificates in Business Computer and Information Technology, respectively; and, lastly, one did not finish middle school due to her economically disadvantaged background.

Five of the writers interviewed started off by authoring BL stories as a pastime but, once realising it could provide an adequate means of monthly subsistence, they quit their full-time jobs and switched to a full-time BL writing career. Book royalties are not their sole source of income; they accrue extra earnings by locking some of their content that readers can unlock by paying in 'meb coins,' readAwrite's own currency. Additionally, the website provides a donation feature with which readers can donate any amount of money or items to authors as a token of appreciation. Some authors serialise their work on more than one reading/writing platform, making it possible for them to collect payments from multiple websites at once. The interviews that were conducted in March and April 2022 via Google Meet lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and covered their profiles, their induction into the BL world including its affective appeal for them, their perceptions of Chinese BL in comparison with Thai BL, and their motivations and incentives for writing Chinese historical BL.

## The Thai BL polysystem

Several publishing houses in Thailand have long been supplying the Thai market with translated Chinese works of fiction from a wide range of themes and genres, most notably martial arts, or *wuxia* in Chinese. Indeed, since the first introduction of Chinese martial arts novels to Thailand in 1957,[34] the genre instantly rose to popularity and enjoyed its golden years from the 1950s to the 1980s. Despite its brief commercial downturn in the 1990s, the genre quickly regained popularity in 2000.[35] In twentieth-century China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, from which most writers of the genre originated, martial arts novels proliferated in times of political instability and social unrest as they offered a form of escapism where

'missing and collapsed values could be found in perfect shape and imagined heroes could right all wrongs and fight for justice.'[36] In Thailand, however, this genre was appropriated by both authoritarian regimes and their critics as political distractions and political outlets. For instance, in the late 1970s numerous magazines and newspapers were encouraged by the military dictatorship to serialise the translations of Chinese martial arts novels to distract the public from a state-sanctioned massacre.[37] Furthermore, the language style unique to Chinese martial arts fiction as well as its heroism were both adopted by Thai journalists to write political tales and satire on the political actors of the time.[38]

In the mid-2010s when BL—Thai or otherwise—started to gain popularity, new publishers were founded along with imprints of existing publishers devoted to the BL genre. A survey of naiin.com, returned a total of 130 BL publishers when filtered by genre (BL). Upon closer inspection, 31 publishers turned out to be mislabelled, and six publishers categorised as BL did not have any record of BL publications. Nonetheless, most of them indeed focused their publication output on BL. Lastly, only four publishers produce GL, a shorthand for girls' love—a genre of homoerotic romance between girls—also known as *yuri.* Out of 90 publishers specialising in BL (see Figure 1), 15 are imprints of existing publishers that branched out into the BL sector while 16 are self-publishers, meaning the authors published their BL works under their self-launched publishing company names. The remainder include existing publishing houses tapping into the BL market and those newly established for the sole purpose of dispensing BL offerings.
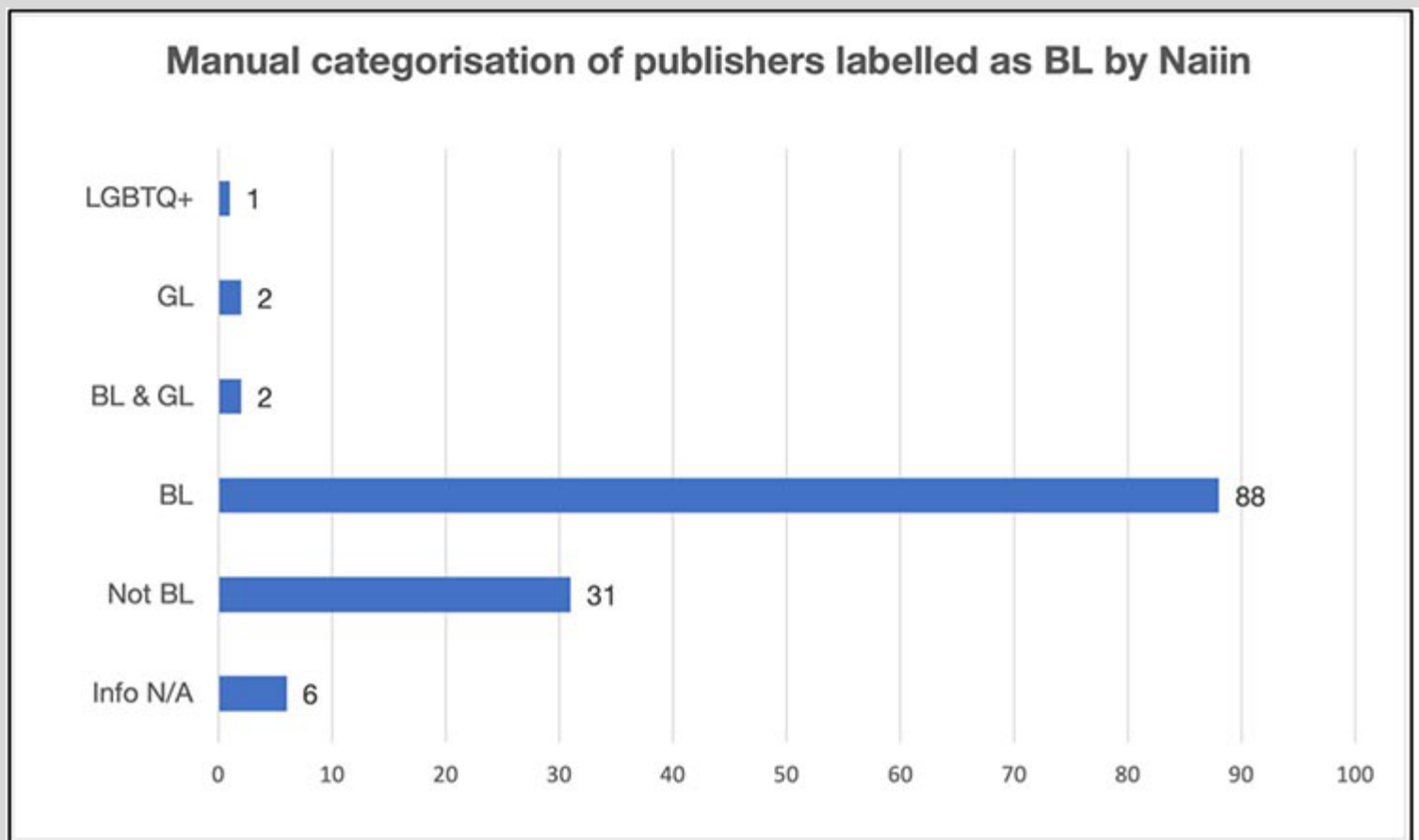


Figure 1. Manual categorisation of publishers labelled as BL by Naiin

More than half of all publishers (54) are oriented toward Thai BL while 26 mainly supply its Chinese counterpart. Ten of them offer both Thai and translated Chinese BL; among those are EverY, Rose and Mee-D, imprints of such large, well-established publishers as Jamsai, Amarinbook and Siam Inter Book, respectively. Sense Book targeted the heterosexual romance segment at its inception in 2015 but has

since 2018 shifted its publishing output exclusively to Thai and translated Chinese BL. The year 2018 also marked the emerging proliferation of BL publications—Thai or otherwise—in the Thai market. In this year alone, a total of 48 Thai BL titles were released by the four biggest BL publishers, namely, Deep, EverY, Rose and Sense Book. Certain medium-sized publishers such as Nabu, NanaNaRiS and Hermit Books were no less productive with their combined output of approximately 300 Thai BL titles from 2018 to early 2022. These figures are by no means conclusive since, as Writer H (f, 39-year-old programmer) noted, BL has become such a lucrative commodity that not only new bricks-and-mortar publishers and imprints but also online-only publishers that exclusively release BL e-books were born in the wake of its rising popularity. Some publishers sell their BL releases on a pre-order basis by mailing them directly to their customers without ever displaying them in online or physical stores. Accordingly, the total numbers of BL publishers currently in operation and BL titles in circulation are likely to be higher.

The preponderance of Thai BL-oriented publishers does not, however, reflect the current publishing trend and the Thai BL market's favourites. As Writers A, C, and H remark, translated Chinese BL still far outperforms the BL of any other nationality;[39] bookstore shelves are mostly occupied by translated Chinese works of all themes including palace drama, historical drama, historical fantasy, time travel, body swap, contemporary life, interstellar travel and systems. A print run of 1,500–2,000 copies per Chinese BL title is guaranteed to be sold out; even contemporary Chinese novels sell better than their Thai counterparts at 1,000–1,500 copies. Rose and Mee-D are the two most prolific imprints of translated Chinese BL. Small to medium publishers like BiLi, Bookish House, Caihong, Minerva Book and Narikasaii are also known for their Chinese BL publications. Although annual tallies of Chinese BL publications by each publisher in Thailand are difficult to determine because publication years are seldom provided, over 500 Chinese BL titles are estimated to have been released in Thailand as of May 2022. Meanwhile, Chinese historical BL by Thai authors makes up about 15–20 percent of all BL publications in the Thai market.

It is noteworthy that despite the relatively low number of published Thai authors of Chinese historical BL, the import of Chinese BL has greatly enriched the domestic BL scene. Recent Thai BL titles have incorporated into their stories, concepts, themes and elements beyond adolescent/young adult romance, campuses and workplaces.

> We must admit that translated [BL] novels expand the range of BL plots [in Thailand]. The element of time travel came from China. Zombies also came from China first. Once they were introduced to [Thailand], Thai authors also wanted to write along those elements. Otherwise, we might only get to read students' love life and workplace romance. It might not be this diverse. We might not get to read fantasy that much. (Writer B, f, 25-year-old full-time writer)

Writer F (28-year-old full-time writer) similarly opined that Thai BL writing trends are set by Chinese BL imports and that once certain elements are popularised by the latter, new BL stories with identical elements by Thai authors will mushroom on readAwrite. For instance, the current prevalence of live streaming and system elements in Chinese BL has led to the ubiquity of Thai live streaming and system-themed BL novels even though such themes were previously unseen in Thai BL. Interestingly, all the authors interviewed seemed to share a penchant for non-romantic storylines which predisposed them toward favouring Chinese BL in the first place.

Except for Writers C and D (both female, 21- and 23-year-old full-time writers, respectively), whose impression of *The Untamed,* a 2019 Chinese BL series sensation, spurred them to write Chinese historical BL themselves, the others were inspired to assume the role of Chinese historical BL writers by way of reading. Due largely to the latter type of authors' prior exposure to printed Chinese historical BL works which contain explicit love-making scenes between the two male leads, they concurred that *The Untamed* is, in fact, not BL. Rather, the drama along with other Chinese productions of the same nature should be categorised as portraying brotherhood since they exclude all physical displays of affection present in their written predecessors. Writer H, who had been following Chinese BL from the outset,

pinpointed *Addicted,* a 2016 Chinese high school BL drama, as the last Chinese BL audiovisual production to be released before this sector of the Chinese BL industry was heavily suppressed. Accordingly, in these authors' views, China has not delivered another BL production since the ban on *Addicted* in early 2016.
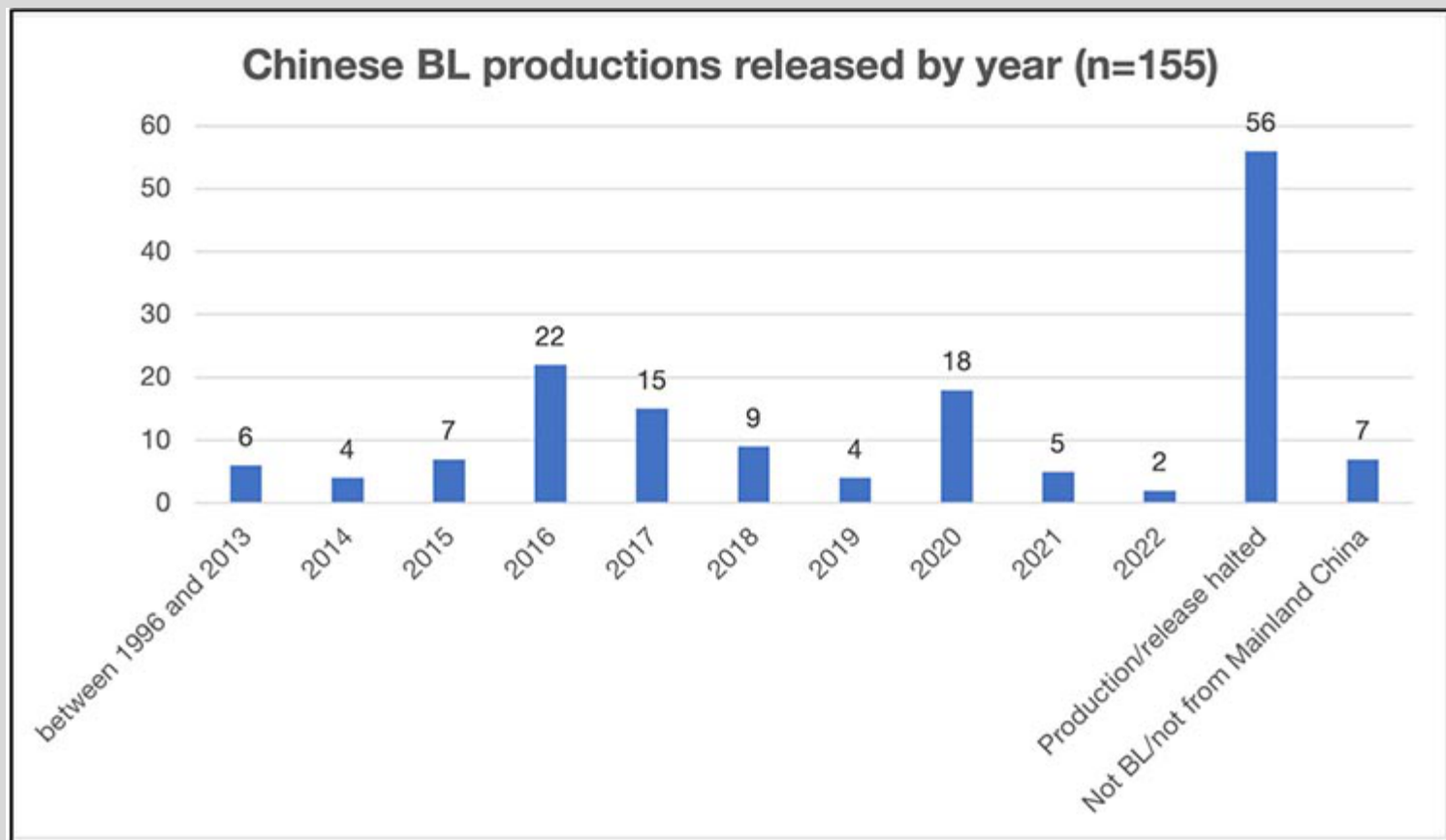


Figure 2. Numbers of Chinese BL productions released by year.

As shown in Figure 2, 2016 saw the highest number of Chinese BL releases in a single year. Chinese BL dramas released henceforth substantially toned down or omitted altogether their homoerotic cues; some went to extreme lengths to evade Chinese censorship by substituting a male love interest with a female one so that the main romantic pairing became heterosexual. Writers C's and D's' reading of *The Untamed* as BL is thus predicated on the intertextual preconception of the original novel. Furthermore, it is precisely the subtlety of the homoerotic undertones both on- and off-screen that makes the romantic relationship in the Chinese production 'more natural' in Writer C's opinion. Conversely, fan service defined by Lucy Glasspool as 'the emphasized performance of homosociality' delivered excessively by Thai BL actors for the sole purpose of fans' pleasure undermines the authenticity of their homoerotic portrayals. [40]

The phenomenal success of *The Untamed* on a global scale in 2019 reignited another flurry of BL programming in 2020. Following the National Radio and Television Administration's latest announcement of literary and artistic program guidelines in September 2021 reiterating its prohibition on 'abnormal aesthetics of effeminacy'[41] and the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Radio and Television's press release on 7 January 2022 banning BL dramas altogether,[42] at least 56 planned BL adaptations have been either put on hold or pending screening. Although only about 30 were—and still are—accessible via commercial video-streaming platforms like iQiyi, WeTV, Viki, GagaOOLala, Bilibili, and Netflix, most were once available fansubbed into Thai on individual YouTube channels and the Facebook pages of fansubbing groups.

## Spatial, temporal, and affective distance

In the interviews with the authors, I attempted to determine the reason they took up writing Chinese historical BL specifically. While their preference for the genre might be the obvious answer, it does not explain why they chose to write Chinese historical BL of all the other genres they have consumed. One recurring theme in five authors' responses was the greater leeway that setting their stories in China afforded them. Thus, the advantage of China as a narrative setting whether it is contemporary or historical lies in its spatial, temporal and affective distance.

Writer A (f, 30-year-old media content translator) started off her BL writing career by reading mainly translated Chinese historical novels that were not BL. Yet, historical China was her scene-setting choice for authoring BL because she wanted to 'read political or war drama, but these elements cannot be found in our country or if you include those elements from our country, it will result in a charge.' Due to her educational background in history, Writer A's published Chinese BL oeuvre extensively explores power struggles between ordinary people and authorities in historical China—albeit fictitious.

Writer B, too, penned Chinese historical BL not only because she liked Chinese historical dramas that often feature extravagant settings and costumes, but also because she could use 'their history and beliefs as storytelling materials without worrying about any "drama". For example, if I want my male protagonist to be a ruling monarch, I can do it [in a Chinese setting], but if I do it in a historical Thai setting … [laughs].' Writer B added that:

> Actually, it's not just politics. Religious beliefs are also the same. For instance, I write about Chinese gods and spirits, I can reference the Bodhisattva without worrying about any drama because it is fantasy. But if I use the Bodhisattva in a Thai setting, then I might face a backlash like 'why did you do this to other people's belief?' It is more sensitive. I feel like when everything I include is historical Chinese, then people will understand that it's just fiction, just fantasy. They can see it as unrealistic. I read a novel like this but set in Thailand before. It touched on people's religious beliefs, so the reception was not so good. A lot of people were against it because it was in their daily life. They didn't want anyone to touch on it. It was their belief.

When asked why she did not attempt a Thai BL period drama, Writer C similarly cited historical China's affordance of surrealism which allowed her to avoid any backlash.

> With historical China, I can portray things that are surreal. There are eras that have Chinese gods, spirits, and demons. If you ask me why I won't write a Thai BL period story, mainly because I am not well-versed in Thai history and because historical Thailand is quite sensitive in Thai society. Anything about Thai is very sensitive. We cannot do anything with it. If I do something with it, there will be those curious people who are always like, 'Why is it like this? Why is it like that? No, it shouldn't be like this. It should be like that.' Cut to the Chinese historical setting, I claim that it's about gods and spirits, then nobody will question me. Or even if there is, I can argue that my story is not based on anything. Don't use it for your history test.

Writer E (f, 29-year-old hotel salesperson) and Writer B share their aversion to BL stories set in Thailand. According to both writers, their embeddedness in Thai society limits their range of imagination instead of forging a greater sense of relatability. To Writer E particularly, physical proximity to Thai gay men serves as a reality check that curbs her imagination. Likewise, Writer B found it difficult to relate to characters that live in the same society as she does because stories like workplace romance between, for instance, an overbearing boss and a subordinate are unlikely to happen in real life. Writer G (f, 27-year-old full-time writer) offered the other side of the same coin as she ascribed China's narrative affordances to its geographical enormity.

> Chinese novels have one advantage, that is, because the country is big and ranks high among the powerhouses in the world, their novels have a lot of plotlines. … Like interstellar, contemporary, historical, ancient, fantasy plots. And because it's Chinese, the setting is China, their fantasy can be overexaggerated. It's not going to be out of place. For example, if you write an interstellar plot and your characters have Chinese names, it still makes sense … I must say it's their advantage.

> Their country can be a setting for any novel. It doesn't sound forced or out of place. It can be aligned with any reality. Your writing can be exaggerated or realistic. It can be many things. … No matter how fantastic the plot is, it still seems possible.

Based on the responses, China as a narrative setting provides a liminal zone where both realism and surrealism can be attained. On the one hand, the authors' spatial, temporal and affective distance from the geographical location of historical China frees them from the imaginative barrier of daily reality, making it easier to create characters and stories to which they relate. This spatio-temporal and affective distancing, on the other hand, allows them to indulge their unbounded imagination without fear of backlash. In the latter case, an exotic and mythological gaze at China is evoked to transcend realism into the realm of surrealism.

Drawing on Beng Huat Chua and Koichi Iwabuchi's[43] theorising of intracontinental pop cultural flows in Asia, Amporn Jirattikorn[44] describes the Chinese viewership of Thai dramas' gaze upon Thailand as one that is both exotic and nostalgic, typical in contexts where pop culture flows from a less developed capitalist-consumerist country to a more developed capitalist-consumerist country. Consequently, the foreignness and difference of Thailand serve both as 'a desired object of tourist imagination' and a(n) (imagined) past and memory of the Chinese audience's present.[45] Moreover, pop cultural flows from a more developed capitalist-consumerist country to a less developed counterpart evoke what Beng Huat Chua terms a 'future-oriented gaze' through which the present of the former is envisioned as the future of the latter.[46] However, in the case of the Thai authors, the gaze upon China cannot be explained in such dichotomous terms as the country conjures up both the imagery of a mythical era and a futuristic hinterland. The ancient China mythologised by Thai authors of Chinese historical BL is different from the 'less modern' Thailand the Chinese audience feels nostalgia for as it does not embody a past for which they long. Instead, it represents a mythological era where anything surreal could happen. By the same token, the (a)historical China that does not exist serves conveniently as a *tabula rasa* onto which a future-oriented gaze can be cast, and futuristic imagery of China can be projected.

The current BL landscape in Thailand additionally harks back to the golden era of the Chinese martial arts genre in the 1970s when the genre was appropriated for political ends both by those in power and in opposition. Likewise, since the mid-2010s, the burgeoning of BL in Thailand has been tolerated, first, by the military government and, currently, by the military-dominated, civilian government due to BL's commercial success and its affordance as a veneer of progressive gender politics. Meanwhile, Thai BL fans-turned-authors have also capitalised on the popularity of Chinese historical BL by using it as a cloak for their political expression as, for instance, in the case of Writer A.

## Experiences of feminised authorship in convergence culture

During the interviews, the authors recurrently gave an account of their authorship that points to the textual, social, affective, emotional and financial potentials of such a feminised practice as BL writing. Their textual and affective investment in the Chinese historical BL writing circle not only provides an outlet for their creative outbursts, but also empowers them, albeit differently and to varying degrees.

For instance, when asked about her way of overcoming writer's block, Writer F mentioned her habit of talking to fellow writers and illustrators that belong to the same BL writer groups on Discord and Facebook to seek advice and help with plot ideas. The writers in the groups often gather to 'show off' and 'scream' about their 'children' (referring to the characters they created), volunteer plot or character ideas for other writers with which to start a new story and ask for help to promote their own work. Writer F described the community of writers as identical to a 'family' where help and advice are mutual and reciprocal. The advising and sharing of plot and character ideas exemplify collective intelligence that typically arises out of fandoms. As they straddle the roles of both Chinese BL fans themselves and BL creators, these BL authors bring with them the fan-as-consumer practice to the fan-as-producer space. While collective

intelligence by fans-as-consumers 'expands a community's productive capacity because it frees individual members from the limitations of their memory and enables the group to act upon a broader range of expertise,'[47] its counterpart by fans-as-producers helps unclog their creative blockage and fosters a greater sense of collectivity. To Writer D, whose economically disadvantaged background has deprived her of access to various kinds of textual and affective resources, her participation in the writer space has expanded her social circle and enabled her to enlist the help of a fellow BL writer she knew through a mutual backlash to prepare and self-publish her new BL manuscript. Collective intelligence, in this regard, is productive not only of textual output but also 'socioemotional'[48] meanings whereby emotional alliances are formed.

Although Writer F's talk of screaming about their 'children' is figurative, rather than literal, unlike music fans discussed by Mark Duffett,[49] the framework the scholar employed to understand music fan screaming proves equally relevant to the Thai BL authors, not least because in this social media age, 'screaming has been amplified and reconstituted'[50] instead of vanishing altogether. The dismissal of fan screaming simply as emotional excess that furthers negative stereotypes about fans does a disservice to the social, affective and political meanings the gendered act of screaming invokes. Borrowing sociobiologist Desmond Morris's[51] formulation of pop fan screaming through a sociobiological lens, Duffett elaborated that screaming is: first and foremost, not natural but deliberately stylised as a 'networking tool'[52] for emotion inexpressible in words; second, an act of defiance against 'a taboo that upholds more sedate kinds of female behavior in public';[53] and, last, a form of affective citizenship since we seldom become a fan of someone whose political values contradict ours.[54] In the case of Thai BL authors, the Chinese BL writer groups on Discord and Facebook into which they virtually and textually screamed about their 'children' functioned both as a public space where they could abandon themselves to pleasure derived from self-invented fannish objects and a personal space where their suspension of emotional self-regulation could circumvent gendered policing of their fan activity and passion.[55] Meanwhile, that the targets of their screaming were merely fictional characters of their own creation—as opposed to real-life musicians mentioned by Duffett—does not diminish the relevance of affective citizenship as they represent a kind of idealised personhood with which their creators could align themselves affectively and, in the process of showing them off to fellow Chinese historical BL authors, foster a sense of ideological belonging. After all, 'screaming is always *for* someone and not for anyone else.'[56]

Finally, for many of the interviewees, their leisure pursuit of writing Chinese historical BL has provided them with a gateway to a greater degree of personal and financial autonomy. As mentioned previously, once realising its financial viability, five of the authors left their full-time jobs to become full-time BL writers. Writer B, for instance, discovered her preference for work-from-home arrangements during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when she did not have to commute to work and see anyone. Coupled with emotional and financial fulfilment, the peace of personal autonomy encouraged her to take up a full-time career in Chinese historical BL writing. She set her sights on self-publishing her BL stories and reaching the one-million-baht benchmark of monthly income in the future.

While Chinese historical BL writing released Writer B from the mundanity of an office job, it liberated Writers C and F from the drudgery of factory work. Writer F talked of her 12-hour workdays involving prolonged standing with just a few short breaks which caused her fatigue and sleep deprivation. Conversely, Writer C's internship experience at a factory deterred her from staying long-term in factory employment. Initially posting BL stories on readAwrite as a way to destress from work, Writer C decided to make a living out of it once its financial reward proved sufficient as a means of subsistence. Most notably, Writer D, whose limited formal education and health condition often subjected her to employment discrimination has been able to help relieve some of her family's financial burden with her Chinese historical BL book royalties. Indeed, her successful foray into Chinese historical BL writing has become a springboard for her family's total relief of their financial burden. Due to her immediate priority for financial

return, Writer D recently veered towards Thai BL stories because it took her less time to complete one compared with Chinese historical BL despite her greater passion for the latter.

Financial security is especially significant for those authors who reside in a Global South country like Thailand. To Writer F who has worked and lived in an advanced capitalist country in the Global North for almost two decades, the income from her BL publication in Thailand is rather negligible. Convergence culture thus allows Writer F to reap the social and affective benefits of engaging in a Chinese historical BL circle in Thailand from the other side of the world without pressure for sales performance.

## Conclusion

By investigating the availability of Chinese BL novels and audiovisual productions in Thailand as well as interviews with eight Thai authors of Chinese historical BL, in this paper I have shed light on how such Chinese BL imports have driven Thailand's domestic BL economy and, more importantly, contributed to the birth of a new BL subgenre, that is, Chinese historical BL by Thai authors.

The multiplicity of Thai BL-oriented publishing houses and domestic BL productions has attested to the status of BL as no longer a mere subculture. The import of Chinese BL publications has further enriched the BL scene in Thailand by introducing a range of new features—be it thematic, poetic, or structural—to the domestic BL composition. The primary position in the Thai BL polysystem that Chinese historical BL translations occupy has in turn catalysed the emergence of locally authored Chinese historical BL. The immense popularity of *The Untamed* has additionally ignited an authorial interest in Chinese historical BL, although the much homoerotically diluted Chinese BL drama seems to have had a limited impact on the Thai BL literary and audiovisual landscape.

Even-Zohar has long postulated that translated literature can shape the target literary system if the latter is still 'young' and/or 'crystallising,' however, literary activities in the target polysystem have rarely, if ever, been explored from the perspective of domestic authors in the target polysystem. In a similar vein, the concept of convergence culture was first formulated without translation in mind despite its indispensable role in intercultural exchange. I have sought to bridge the gap between the two frameworks using both bibliographic and interview data. While the popularity of a translated genre fiction might be a natural precursor to domestic emergence or enrichment of the same genre, the interviews with the Thai authors in this study have brought to light greater nuances of their reasoning behind authoring Chinese historical BL that goes beyond the genre's mere popularity.

Indeed, apart from the authors' preference for the genre, my interview data revealed that the spatial, temporal and affective distance of China as a narrative setting gave them greater leeway to, first, write without fear of backlash and, second, to achieve both realism and surrealism. China is thus seen through an exotic, mythological gaze, on the one hand, and a 'future-oriented gaze,' on the other. Facilitated and enabled by the prevalence of digital technology, the authors recounted various experiences of their feminised authorship in such a mediated world characterised by media convergence, participatory culture and collective intelligence. Textual, social, affective and emotional potentials were realised in the form of such community activities as sharing plot or character ideas, showing off their characters, and sharing the know-how for self-publishing. Most notably, Chinese historical BL writing has served as a gateway to a greater degree of personal and financial autonomy as it liberated five of the eight authors from the mundanity and drudgery of their previous jobs to pursue a full-time career as a BL writer.

As with East Asia,[57] in Thailand the hyper-profitability of BL as a commodity has been exploited both by industry players and fans to the extent that they have formed a symbiotic relationship with one another—a process that is indeed both 'top-down corporate-driven' and 'bottom-up consumer-driven.'[58] However, to avoid the determinism of fandom as 'an a priori space of cultural autonomy and resistance'[59] and, by

extension, of fandom activity as its *a priori* enactment, I should note that the personal and financial autonomy the women in this study currently enjoy might not be sustainable in the long run given the precarity of freelance work in Thailand. This is not to mention that the hyper-profitability of BL is achieved at the expense of the objectification and commodification of certain sexual minorities. It thus remains to be seen whether the increasing mainstreaming of BL can destabilise the entrenchment of heteropatriarchal paradigms and perhaps realise a new gender order.[60]

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