

# Thai Boys Love (BL)/Y(aoi) in Literary and Media Industries: Political and Transnational Practices

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Boys Love (BL) is a truly transnational, transcultural genre that unsettles gender and sexual norms, including increasing support for the LGBT(Q) community and its allies, and in so doing has tangible culture-political effects that, on the whole, play a positive role in the lives of fans and others.<sup>[1]</sup>

Above is the gist of the recent edited volume by James Welker: *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia* (2022). The volume was timely, launched as the 2020s is becoming a new vibrant decade of Boys Love (BL) or *Yaoi* (hereafter Y or *wai* in Thai).<sup>[2]</sup> Two chapters on Thai BL or Y were included. They laid out the history of Thai BL since its manga form and the coupling culture that was closely involved with fandom. Among the case studies of BL culture across Asia, Welker remarks that the BL industry in Thailand has championed 'the broadest regional and global appeal.'<sup>[3]</sup> Nevertheless, the body of knowledge on Thai BL has yet to keep up with the accelerated growth of transnational and political practices, which are highly contextual.

The breakthrough of Thai BL/Y in the regional market can be traced back to February 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand first broke out and led to the country's first lockdown in March 2020. The lockdown coincided with the emergence of a Thai Y series called *Phro rao khu kan* [เพราะเราคู่กัน]/*2gether the Series* (dir. Weerachit Thongjila, 2020), which was aired between late February and mid-May. The series offered viewers a form of escape amidst a worsening pandemic situation across Asia when outdoor activities were restricted. The two leading actors of the series are thus called 'the quarantine couple.'<sup>[4]</sup> Fans' engagement on digital platforms drastically increased. The series made its way to Netflix; the premiere was aired in July 2020. Its success can be measured by its spin-offs. *Still 2gether the Series* (dir. Noppharnach Chaiwimol, 2020) was launched in August 2020; *2gether the Movie* (dir. Noppharnach Chaiwimol, Kanittha Kwanyu, and Weerachit Thongjila, 2021) also garnered audience approval in Tokyo through its premiere in June 2021. The success was followed by a manga adaptation of the franchise in July 2021.

The *2gether* franchise represents the transnational expansion of Thai BL/Y media. *2gether* could well be 'the most prominent BL drama in [Japan].'<sup>[5]</sup> The phenomenon was heightened by Japan's BL fans and mix media culture.<sup>[6]</sup> Transmedia storytelling is a mechanism behind the expansion of Thai Y industry;<sup>[7]</sup> it elevates the industry to a transnational scale.

Welker stresses the association of BL with political movements.<sup>[8]</sup> In April 2020, *2gether the Series* unexpectedly ignited a war on Twitter and other digital platforms, giving birth to the widely used hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance or *chanom khon kwa lueat* [ชานมข้นกว่าเลือด] in Thai (meaning 'milk tea is thicker than blood'), which demonstrated solidarity among Thai, Taiwanese and Hong Kong netizens against threatening attitudes and geopolitical demands of fans/anti-fans from the People's Republic of China.<sup>[9]</sup> This is an example of the reciprocity between transnational and political practices of Thai BL in the 2020s. Our special issue of *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* (2023) explores this particular subject, deploying different frameworks: literary studies, translation studies, cultural studies, and fan studies. The special issue can be regarded as the 'voices of Y studies from Thailand'

that remain underexplored.

Transnational and political practices manifest in Y literary and media industries. The interplay between these two industrial domains can be traced back to the revival of Y culture since 2014. Scholars have agreed that *Love Sick the Series* (dir. Rachyd Kusolkulsiri, 2014) is an entry point to the 'yaoi Boom' or 'Y Boom' in Thailand.<sup>[10]</sup> That was when the book-to-series business model was initiated. The model was subsequently pursued by influential studios, such as GMMTV, Studio Wabi Sabi and TV Thunder. Major publishers supplying their books to screen include EverY, Deep Publishing, Hermit Books and Nabu Publishing. To understand the Y industry in Thailand, the link between the literary and media industries should not be overlooked. Notwithstanding the growing amount of scholarship on Thai BL or Y series, this special issue uniquely focuses on Thai Y writers and their reading public vis-à-vis Thailand's media industry, digital platforms and socio-political activism.

The expansion of Y in Thai literary industry has also been enhanced by translation. Some prominent Y novels have been translated into English, Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese, not to mention pirated translations and fanfiction inspired by Y literary and audio-visual texts in other languages. This phenomenon did not happen in a single direction as Thai Y media has been fostered by Japanese BL in translation. The Thai literary industry has likewise embraced a sister genre of Y in the English language. To name a few, there are the late M/M romance<sup>[11]</sup> mainly published by Pride by Kaewkarn, Taisei M under Nabu Publishing, and Rose Publishing under Amarin Printing and Publishing, the last of which runs one of the largest bookstore chains in Thailand—Naiin Shop. Apart from M/M romance, Chinese BL novels in translation, particularly Chinese historical BL, have also been popularised among Thai readers.

Translating Chinese BL into Thai is a cultural transfer. It has inspired Thai writers to create Thai versions of the subgenre. In Jooyin Saejang's article: 'Chinese Historical BL by Thai Writers: The Thai BL Polysystem in the Age of Media Convergence,' the phenomenon is investigated through case studies of Thai writers. The study was completed by conducting interviews, and it was framed by two strands of theories from translation studies and media studies: polysystem theory and convergence culture. Saejang's findings reaffirm the industrialisation of Thai Y novels through digital platforms. The collected data from Thai Y writers can help contextualise the Thai Y literary industry of the 2020s concerning demographic background, labour and capital. By comparing the profiles of writers active in the latter half of the 2010s, the article contributes to the literary historiography of the Thai Y genre.<sup>[12]</sup>

Conventional literary historiography tends to focus on literary canons and canonisation. In this special issue popular fiction is instead foregrounded. In tandem with its reading public, Y fiction depicts the 'real-world reading'<sup>[13]</sup> in Thailand that remains underrepresented. Readers of today are not merely message receivers. In digital space, the interaction between writers, readers and texts is intensified. In the context of Thailand's Y industry, literary consumption is likewise interconnected with other modes of media consumption. The circuit of popular culture and media consumption can be a source of and is influenced by political practices.

Since 2020, some audiences, such as LGBTQ groups and their allies in Thailand, have also voiced their discontent with Y media for its stereotypical portrayals of gender. The Thai Y industry was thus mired in subsequent campaigns throughout 2020 on political correctness and the legalisation of same-sex marriage with political activism against Thailand's military-installed dictatorship and expanding authoritarianism.

The political and cultural sentiments formed the backlash against Y writers, audiences and the reading public, who prioritised 'queerbaiting,' promoted sexual fantasy, and perpetuated 'homophobic, transphobic, fatphobic, and colourist stereotypes.'<sup>[14]</sup> Consequently, on the day the last episode of *2gether the Series* was aired (15 May 2020), JittiRain, the novelist who wrote *Phro rao khu kan* [เพราะเธอคู่กัน]/*Because We Belong Together* (hereafter *2gether* the novel), made a public apology on her

Facebook account for gender insensitive contents in her novel. Echoing the political correctness campaigns, JittiRain also revised and republished *Pla bon fa* [ปลาบพื้]/*Fish upon the Sky* before the television adaptation was screened in April 2021.

JittiRain's moves are explored by Natthanai Prasannam in his article: 'Authorial Revisions of Boys Love/Y Novels: The Dialogue between Activism and Literary Industry in Thailand.' Through the lens of literary activism and print culture studies, the article outlines the interrelationship between literary activism and other political movements. Mobilised by social media and the woke culture of the 2020s, literary activism and other forms of political activism cannot be easily separated. The campaigns running against sexual violence and stereotyping in Y literary and media texts have been embraced by the Y industry. This can be regarded as an emerging feature of the genre since the Y Boom in Thailand.

Another case study of Y fans, as readers and screen audiences, is investigated in Veluree Metaveevini's article. The article 'Boys Love (Yaoi) Fandom and Political Activism in Thailand' examines the case of *Not Me the Series* (dir. Anucha Boonyawatana, 2021). The series initially earned a controversial reaction from fans questioning the novel as it was transformed from fan fiction without acknowledging the source. This kind of writing is called *Y chup* [วายชูป] (coated Y) in Thai. The series nonetheless redirected the discontentment, illustrating a powerful scene of a same-sex marriage campaign joined by the protagonists. The very plot of the series also converses with anti-authoritarian sentiments among Thai audiences.

The reception of *Not Me the Series* is a testimony to a different form of fan/industry interaction in the context of Thai Y media.<sup>[15]</sup> The interaction has political potential, which is endorsed by fans in trans-Asian contexts as part of what scholars have called a 'socio-political force in the world.'<sup>[16]</sup> Y media has helped trans-Asian fans rethink LGBTQ issues by disrupting gender and sexual norms.<sup>[17]</sup> Amporn Jirattikorn's article: 'Heterosexual Reading vs. Queering Thai Boys Love Dramas among Chinese and Filipino Audiences' addresses this particular issue.

Jirattikorn explores the engagement with Thai BL among Chinese and Filipino women as well as gay audiences. Thai BL enables women to explore alternative sexual and gender politics and, at least discursively, free themselves from the constraints of normative femininity. For gay audiences, Thai BL can be positioned as a social outlet. Compared to China and the Philippines, Thailand, through BL media, is perceived as a gay paradise liberated from heterosexist and religious limitations. Although the so-called gay paradise portrayed through Thai BL is still problematic,<sup>[18]</sup> the heterosexual reading proposed by Jirattikorn's study should be mapped with 'aspirational reading' adopted by Chinese gay men reading Japanese BL.<sup>[19]</sup> By means of such reading strategies, Thai BL texts can be viewed as a 'resource of hope'<sup>[20]</sup> which appeals to a wider cycle of international audience.

Thailand's Y industry allocates a special space to Chinese fans; Chinese cultural heritage is utilised in *Plae rak chan duai jai thoe* [แปลรักฉันด้วยใจเธอ]/*I Told Sunset about You* (dir. Naruebet Kuno, 2020). The series, whose screenplay is not adapted from a Y novel, is groundbreaking BL work by Nadao Bangkok. The setting shifts from Bangkok to Phuket, where Chinese popular culture, overseas Chinese and Peranakan heritage converge. The series has been well-received by Thai fans and fans in the Sinophone world, and the second installment—*I Promise You the Moon* (dir. Tossaphon Riantong, 2021) was secured a place right after the first season. The cultural setting refashioned by *I Told Sunset about You* experimented with a diversified version of Thainess, which was minimised in the early stages of the Y Boom.

However, the diverse cultural setting of Phuket is not politicised in terms of regionalism and cosmopolitanism in the Thai context, compared to what we will learn from Chairat Polmuk's 'Provincialising Thai Boys Love: Queer Desire and the Aesthetics of Rural Cosmopolitanism.' Theoretically framed by the concept of rural cosmopolitanism, the article examines *Y Isan* [วายอีสาน]

through *Thai ban* [ไ้บ้ำน] aesthetic practices. The convergence between Isan folk culture and the BL genre formerly dominated by Bangkok's middle class reimagines alternative queer desire and positionality of Isan citizen in popular culture and the contemporary world.

This introductory essay has identified political and transnational practices as evolving around Thai BL fandom as well as the media and literary industries in Thailand. With their traditional focus on a fictional world of sexual minorities, Y texts tend not to engage with LGBTQ socio-political issues, having done more to fetishise and commodify young male bodies[21] in 'exploitative and appropriative'[22] manners. To establish 'Y Studies' or *Y sueksa* [วายศึ้กษา] in Thai,[23] this special issue provides some possible approaches to tackle the BL phenomenon in Thailand outside the commodified as yet unpoliticised male beauty, romantic love fantasy, and methodological nationalism.

Previous research on the Y industry in Thailand has leaned towards addressing issues of the grammar of the genre,[24] gender and sexuality,[25] and the interaction between audiences or fan culture and the media industry.[26] Other scholarly writings have examined GMM Grammy's entertainment empire. Building on and moving beyond the increasingly rich corpus of studies on Thai BL, this special issue aims to explore the political and transnational practices of Thai BL-related players both within and, perhaps more importantly and uniquely, beyond the domain of GMM Grammy. The collected articles explore the important role of Thai BL in print culture, which has sustained the 'Y Boom' in Thailand since its formation in the 2000s. Premised on the 'Inter-Asianess' of Y culture, they also aim to integrate Thai-language scholarship with that in the Anglophone world. Together, they highlight the immense potential of BL to not only speak to its fans, who create a parallel and more tolerant world of reality for themselves, but they also articulate for its producers and writers a political agenda for greater social justice. The definition and existence of this political agenda are increasingly plural and autonomous vis-à-vis state forces and heteronormative preferences. BL has empowered a generation of fans by constructing aesthetic and narrative alterity, and it will empower a new generation of political and social activists fighting for change in a repressive structure.

## Notes

[1] James Welker, 'Afterword,' in *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*, ed. James Welker, 272–77: Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2022, specifically p. 272, doi: [10.2307/j.ctv1xcxqw2.25](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1xcxqw2.25).

[2] The term Boys Love or Boys' Love (BL) is more popularised in English scholarship compared to *yaoi*. The term *yaoi* or Y used here stands for original and fans' creative works shaping what is called *watthanatham wai* (*yaoi* culture). The term *yaoi* is somewhat preferred by fans in some countries—such as Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea. Among Thai fans, the abbreviated form Y or *wai* [วาย] is also preferred. In this introductory essay, the terms BL and Y are used interchangeably.

[3] Welker, 'Afterword,' p. 273.

[4] Miguel Antonio Lizada, 'A new kind of 2Getherness: Screening Thai soft power in Thai Boys Love (BL) Lakhon,' in *Streaming and Screen Culture in Asia-Pacific*, ed. Louisa Mitchell and Michael Samuel, 125–43, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, specifically pp. 135–36, doi: [10.1007/978-3-031-09374-6\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-09374-6_7).

[5] Welker, 'Afterword,' p. 274.

[6] Welker, 'Afterword,' p. 274.

[7] Natthanai Prasannam, 'Yu kap fan: bantheong khadi yaoi khong Thai kap watthanatham muanchon nai boribot khamsue [Being with fans: Thai yaoi fiction and mass culture in the transmedia context],' in *Being with: The World, Technology, Inequality and Otherness*, ed. Channarong Boonnoon et al., 572–605, Nakhon Pathom: Silpakorn University and Thailand Research Fund, 2018

[8] James Welker, 'Introduction: Boys Love (BL) media and its Asian transfigurations,' in *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love*

*Media in Asia*, ed. James Welker, 1–16, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2022, specifically pp. 10–11, doi: [10.2307/j.ctv1xcxqw2.6](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1xcxqw2.6).

[9] Adam K. Dedman and Autumn Lai, 'Digitally dismantling Asian authoritarianism: Activist reflections from the #MilkTeaAlliance,' *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest* 9(1) (2021): 97–132, doi: [10.3167/cont.2021.090105](https://doi.org/10.3167/cont.2021.090105); Veluree Metaveevinij, 'Asian youth and resistance in transnational media,' in *Routledge Handbook of Asian Transnationalism*, ed. Ajaya Kumar Sahoo, 406–15, London and New York: Routledge, 2022, doi: [10.4324/9781003152149-37](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003152149-37).

[10] 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; Poowin Bunyavejchewin and Natthanont Sukthungthong, *Lok khong wai* [The Y(aoi) World], Pathum Thani: Thammasat University Research Unit in History and International Politics, 2021.

[11] M/M or M M is derived from 'man-on-man.' The genre has developed from slash fiction produced by fans. M/M romance or M M romance is published by both small publishers and big romance novel publishers such as Harlequin. The genre presents men falling in love with each other. It shares a literary convention with romance novels; it is written by women and for women. Jonathan A. Allan, *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance*, Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2020, p. 69.

[12] See Orawan Vichayawannakul, 'Phuying kap kan sang nawaniyai chai rak chai' [Women and the creation of Boys Love novels], MA thesis, Thammasat University, 2016.

[13] Suman Gupta, *Contemporary Literature: The Basics*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 9, doi: [10.4324/9780203153062](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203153062).

[14] Jung-Whan Marc de Jong, 'Entertainment,' in *Cultural Appropriation in Fashion and Entertainment*, ed. Yuniya Kawamura and Jung-Whan Marc de Jong, 103–47, London: Bloomsbury, 2022, specifically p. 120, doi: [10.5040/9781350170582.ch-004](https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350170582.ch-004).

[15] See more in Natthanai Prasannam, 'The yaoi phenomenon in Thailand and fan/industry interaction,' *Plaridel* 16(2) (2019): 62–89, doi: [10.52518/2020.16.2-03prsnam](https://doi.org/10.52518/2020.16.2-03prsnam)

[16] Welker, 'Introduction: Boys Love (BL) media and its Asian transfigurations,' pp. 9–10.

[17] Welker, 'Introduction: Boys Love (BL) media and its Asian transfigurations,' pp. 7–9.

[18] Poowin Bunyavejchewin, 'The queer if limited effects of Boys Love manga fandom in Thailand,' in *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*, ed. James Welker, 181–93, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i, 2022, specifically pp. 187–89, doi: [10.2307/j.ctv1xcxqw2.19](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1xcxqw2.19).

[19] 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, 42–54, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022, doi: [10.2307/j.ctv1xcxqw2.9](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1xcxqw2.9).

[20] Baudinette, 'BL as a "resource of hope" among Chinese gay men in Japan,' pp. 42–54.

[21] Jaray Singhakowinta, 'Thot pha khai rang nai lakhon sao wai [Undressed body for sale in Y series],' in *Muea rang klai pen phet: Amnat seri niyom mai khong phetwithi nai sangkhom Thai* [When the body turns into sexuality: The neo-liberal power of sexuality in Thai society], 150–86, Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2017; Narupon Duangwiset, 'Chainum pen watthu thang phet lae kan prap khabuan phetwithi nai lakhon chai rak chai [Young boys as sex objects and sexual deployment in yaoi series],' in *Muea rang klai pen phet: Amnat seri niyom mai khong phetwithi nai sangkhom Thai* [When the body turns into sexuality: The neo-liberal power of sexuality in Thai society], 188–223, Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2017.

[22] de Jong, 'Entertainment,' p. 120.

[23] The author (Prasannam) would like to thank Artch Bunnag for his encouragement for using this term.

[24] Baudinette, 'Lovesick, The Series: Adapting Japanese "Boys Love" to Thailand and the creation of a new genre of queer media,,'; Ying-kit Chan, 'A heteropatriarchy in moderation: Reading family in a Thai Boys Love lakhon,' *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 7(1) (2021): 81–94, doi: [10.1386/eapc\\_00040\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc_00040_1).

[25] Anucha Pimsak, 'Attalak chai rak chai lae kan rue sang nai nawaniyai wai run naew wai' [Male homosexual identity and deconstruction in Yaoi novels], PhD thesis, Mahasarakham University, 2020; Natthanai Prasannam, *Nawaniyai yaoi khong Thai: kanmueang khong phetsathana lae phetwithi nai romance prachaniyom: Raingan kanwijai chabapsombun* [Thai Yaoi novels: The cultural politics of gender and sexuality in popular romance—final report], Bangkok: Research and Innovation Unit, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University, 2021.

[26] Saksorn Sriprasong and Kullathip Satararuji, 'Love Sick the Series: Kan sang khwam phukphan khong klum fan phan kan lao rueang kham sue nai boribot chai rak chai [*Love Sick the Series*: Transmedia storytelling and community engagement in the context of men love men],' *Journal of Communication and Management NIDA*, 2(2) (2016): 78–95; Prasannam, 'The yaoi phenomenon in Thailand and fan/industry interaction'; Bunyavejchewin and Sukthungthong, *Lok khong wai* [The Y(aoi) world]; Amporn Jirattikorn, 'Between ironic pleasure and exotic nostalgia: Audience reception of Thai television dramas among youth in China,' *Asian Journal of Communication* 31(2) (2021): 124–43, doi: [10.1080/01292986.2021.1892786](https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2021.1892786).

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Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

URL: [http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue49/prasannam\\_chan.html](http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue49/prasannam_chan.html)

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Last modified: 3 Jul. 2023 1059