

Chinese Fandom of Thai Boys' Love Dramas: Shipping the Queer Romance and Fan Service Practices

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Abstract

Due to government restrictions on domestic BL content, Chinese viewers have increasingly turned to Thai boys' love (BL) series, which depict homoromantic relationships between male characters. Thai BL is distinctive in its encouragement of both on- and off-screen intimacy among actors. This paper examines Chinese fans' engagement with Thai BL dramas, highlighting how their participation in "shipping" and "fan service" practices creates a "hyperreal" experience in which the boundary between fiction and reality becomes blurred. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 Chinese viewers, the study argues that fans actively co-construct this hyperreality to fulfill emotional and social needs, rather than being mere passive consumers manipulated by the industry. Beyond its hyperreal appeal, Thai BL also shapes Chinese fans' perceptions of Thailand, offering a contrast to China's restrictive social environment by imagining Thailand as a land of freedom and acceptance. This engagement extends beyond romantic fantasy to a broader cultural imagination, with Thai BL presenting an "alternative civility"—a vision of tolerance, love, and respect for differences. By immersing themselves in these dramas, fans momentarily escape their own social realities, negotiating between fantasy and resistance in ways that redefine their relationship with both media and society.

Keywords

Thai Boys' Love, shipping, fan service, hyperreal, alternative civility, Chinese fandom

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In recent years, China has seen a rising interest in Thai boys' love (BL) series, a genre that depicts homoromantic or homoerotic relationships between male characters. Thailand is by far the world's leading producer of live-action BL series, surpassing other major Asian countries like China, Korea, and Japan, where BL originated in text form. Despite the BL market's high purchasing power and its robust fan economy, these major producers of Asian popular culture have not produced as many live-action BL series. China has restricted BL content for political reasons (Ye, 2023). In Korea and Japan, societies' relative lack of acceptance of LGBTQ+ issues (Kwon, 2023) have limited the production of live-action BL series. Thailand's openness to gender diversity and LGBTQ+ content has thus enabled it to become a dominant player in BL production.

Thailand's open environment has also fostered a distinctive commercial culture within Thai BL, particularly in the industry's integration of "shipping" and "fan service." Shipping refers to the practice where fans imagine fictional characters in the series as having romantic or sexual relationships. It is common in the industry for fans to be encouraged to imagine romantic relationships between characters, while actors actively blur the lines between fiction and reality through public displays of affection and off-screen interactions (Baudinette, 2023; Zhang & Dedmen, 2021). This blending of fiction and reality creates a "hyperreal" experience, making the boundary between the show and real life almost indistinguishable for fans.

Although Thai TV dramas have traditionally been regarded in China as culturally less prestigious or even intellectually shallow (Jirattikorn, 2021), the genre's popularity among Chinese audiences offers a unique lens for examining how social and political environments influence media reception. Chinese fans make up a significant part of the global Thai BL audience and are deeply involved in the fan economy, often to the extent of being labeled "obsessive" due to intense support and online behaviors (Garg & Yang, 2024; Tang, 2023). This paper examines Chinese fans' engagement with Thai BL series in two key aspects. First, it explores fans' interaction with the series and the associated practice of shipping. Second, it investigates how viewing Thai BL dramas influences Chinese fans' perceptions of Thailand. In particular, I ask whether the genre's depiction of same-sex romance and fan-oriented culture fosters an image of Thailand as more LGBTQ+ inclusive, and what desires Chinese audiences project onto Thailand through BL series. Ultimately, I contend that Chinese fans' participation in shipping and BL fan economy plays a key role in reshaping both their fantasies about, and their perceptions of, contemporary Thailand.

Theoretical Framework: The Hyperreality of Shipping Queer Romance

Over the past two decades, boys' love (BL), a genre depicting romantic or sexual relationships between male characters, has developed into a robust subculture across Asia. Primarily consumed by heterosexual women, previous research suggests that BL allows women to fulfill heterosexual desires, either by objectifying men or exploring different sexual roles and challenging oppressive gender structures (McLelland, 2005; Nagaïke, 2003). The emergence of live-action BL series featuring human actors over the past decade, along with the growing number of gay male fans, has significantly transformed the genre's impact. Scholars argue that these dramas bridge the gap between fiction and real-life gay individuals, contributing to the normalization of same-sex relationships (Fujimoto, 2020; Lin, 2023). In many Asian countries where homosexuality faces social condemnation or legal repercussions, BL dramas empower gay individuals to challenge heteronormativity and provide models of self-expression and openness (Baudinette, 2023; Jerome et al., 2022; Jirattikorn, 2023).

The growing influence of live-action BL series is closely linked to the shipping of stars who portray male couples in these stories. Fans' imaginations are often captivated by the romantic

pairings of characters, particularly in genres like BL, where homoromantic relationships are integral to the narrative (Baudinette, 2023; Tang, 2023). While shipping generally enables fans to distance themselves from culturally stigmatized sexual “deviance” (Williams, 2011), its practices exhibit significant variations between Western and Asian contexts. Williams (2011) argues that in Western media, creators of media encourage fan engagement in shipping the couples onscreen while maintaining authority over the narrative. Fans channel their enthusiasm into fan productions and transformative works centered on the celebrities or characters they ship, often operating independently from the creators or actors (Jenkins, 1992). This balancing act of encouragement and restriction is a way for producers to keep fans invested in the show without losing creative control. Additionally, actors often distance themselves from fan-generated narratives to preserve their professional image.

In contrast, in Asia, creators of the media and actors actively engage in fan service to encourage and sustain shipping practices. Choi (2023) refers to the staged romantic portrayals among male idols in the K-pop industry as “business gay performance,” emphasizing the deliberate, public performance of intimacy by idols who are publicly known as heterosexual males. For fans, the idol’s body becomes a site through which their sexual desire can be projected and materialized. Similarly, Kwon (2015) observes that while the Korean entertainment industry capitalizes on producing male-male romance within heterosexual idol groups, fans appropriate these performances for their own enjoyment.

In the context of Thai BL, Baudinette (2023) notes that the *khujin* practice—a term combining *khru* (couple) and *jin* (imagined)—parallels strategies in the K-pop idol industry, where policies such as dating bans and the discouragement of public relationships help maintain what is known as the “fantasy of availability.” This fantasy of availability refers to the carefully crafted illusion that idols are romantically unattached and thus potentially available to fans, encouraging fans’ personal investment and emotional attachment. While I agree that this fantasy allows female fans to enjoy their idols without the perceived barrier of real-life relationships, I argue that Thai BL enacts this fantasy differently from K-pop industry. K-pop idols often belong to groups with multiple possible pairings conjured by fans whereas Thai BL actors are usually cast as specific romantic pairs. Their on-screen chemistry is established by the drama’s narrative, and this fictional romance is extended into their off-screen personas. The actors are encouraged to perform couple-like interactions—going on dates, live streaming together, exchanging gifts, and even visiting each other’s families—creating a hyperreal continuation of their on-screen relationships.

In fact, K-pop idols also engage in off-stage interactions that encourage shipping among fans. However, I would argue, the Thai BL industry takes a step further. It systematically incorporates these romantic performances into official promotional activities, award shows, and fan service events. In this context, these displays become a central part of an actor’s professional identity rather than just the result of fan imagination. This is what I call “lived text performances,” the enactment of scripted romance narratives from the series within real-life public engagements. In other words, actors and the industry consciously perform elements from the drama in everyday settings, blending fiction with reality. These lived text performances not only create a sense of authenticity for fans but also blur the boundaries between the characters and the actors themselves.

Baudrillard’s (1994) concept of “hyperreal” helps explain this phenomenon. Hyperreality is a condition where representations, such as images, signs, and media, become so real that distinguishing between the original and its reproduction is impossible. In this state, fulfillment is derived not from engaging with any “real” reality but through simulated realities that feel even more authentic than the original. Media studies often use this concept to examine how fiction can be perceived as truth and how technology immerses audiences in these experiences (Rodowick, 2007).

While much of the existing scholarship on the hyperreal emphasizes the role of technology and media forms in creating these experiences, I shift the focus to the role of human agency, both on the production and consumption sides, in shaping hyperreality. Zhang and Dedmen (2021) briefly note how the Thai BL industry and actors turn fiction into simulated reality through their performances. Their analysis, however, primarily relies on textual analysis and the industry's influence in shaping this phenomenon. My research, in contrast, argues that fans are active participants who help co-create the hyperreal, further blurring the line between reality and representation.

Fans' pursuit of pleasure is complex and deeply influenced by social norms, state regulations, and industry dynamics. Wang and Ge (2023) highlight tensions within Chinese fandoms, particularly between "Only-fans," who support individual actors, and "CP-fans," who treat on-screen pairings as real. The controversy surrounding the *Untamed*'s star Xiao Zhan exemplifies how these divisions escalate into conflicts, prompting state intervention. In response to fandom disputes, Chinese authorities banned a fanfiction platform linked to the controversy and introduced stricter policies under the 2020 "Sweep-Up Campaign" to regulate fan behavior. Wang and Ge argue that such measures reflect broader anxieties around gender and sexuality, as well as the persistence of heteronormative hierarchies within fan communities, where Only-fans assert superiority over CP-fans by positioning their admiration as more socially acceptable. These industry and state regulatory dynamics shape how fans engage with BL narratives, influencing the ways they negotiate pleasure, identity, and belonging within fandom spaces.

Tang (2023) describes how Chinese fans adapt their shipping practices to state regulations, homophobic social norms, and restrictive platform rules, calling this "precarious shipping." Facing censorship and uncertainty, fans develop creative strategies like hiding romantic references, avoiding explicit LGBTQ+ terms, and adhering to norms that protect idols. These measures help shippers maintain their community and interests despite regulatory pressures. By upholding the principle of "doing no harm to idols," shippers navigate these complexities to protect their interests and maintain a supportive community despite persistent regulatory pressures.

China presents a unique case where the online space does not provide fans unrestricted freedom to engage in shipping practices. While existing literature offers valuable insights into how Chinese fans navigate social and state constraints, it often overstates the divide between Only-fans and CP-fans, without acknowledging the fluidity between these groups. In reality, many fans appreciate strong on-screen pairings regardless of their classification, and the boundaries between Only-fans and CP-fans frequently overlap. Focusing too rigidly on this binary overlooks how broader state regulations shape the fandom as a whole. Restrictions on domestic BL content, I would argue, have inadvertently fueled the popularity of Thai BL, which stands in stark contrast to China's highly regulated environment. The prohibition of Chinese BL actors appearing together publicly (Hu et al., 2024) further drives fans toward Thai BL, where *khujin* actors not only portray queer relationships on screen but also engage in extensive fan service off-screen. Free from domestic constraints, these practices amplify the hyperreal allure of Thai BL as a space for imagined freedom.

But how does the hyperreal experience offered by Thai BL media shape fans' perceptions of Thailand? Baudinette (2023) examines BL audiences across Asia and notes that many fans are unaware that the series originate from Thailand. While he attributes Thai BL's appeal largely to its positive portrayal of queer romance, I argue that the Thai context is more significant than he suggests. Although Baudinette acknowledges Thailand's role in furthering positive queer representation, his focus on universal queer narratives overlooks Thailand's unique socio-cultural context. The "Thai Wind," referring to the growing popularity of these series, highlights not only the global appeal of queer stories but also the unique cultural and ideological influence of Thailand within these fandom spaces.

In a wider context, scholars highlight how popular culture circulates through specific socio-political relationships. Examining the flows of Asian popular culture two decades ago, Iwabuchi (2002) and Chua and Iwabuchi (2008) highlight the relationship between pop culture consumption and capitalist development in both sending and receiving countries. They suggest that audiences in less developed countries aspire to the consumerism of more developed nations like Japan, while those in more developed contexts adopt a nostalgic gaze toward media from less developed countries. These cultural flows in Asia, shaped by what they term “Asian modernity,” present an alternative to Western models (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 21).

While earlier scholarship emphasized the significance of modernity and consumer aspirations in shaping media consumption, the current context in China reveals a notable shift. With the maturation of Chinese capitalism and the evolution of media platforms, Chinese audiences today are less motivated by the desire for modernity than they were two decades ago. Rather than seeking what has been described as “non-Western modernity,” or what I infer as “alternative modernity,” characterized by material progress, consumerism, and the negotiation of local and global cultural flows (Iwabuchi, 2002), contemporary audiences are increasingly drawn to what I term “alternative civility.” Traditionally, civility refers to behaviors or attitudes that are polite, respectful, and considerate in social life. Schak (2018) observes that Taiwan is often seen as more “civil” than mainland China, pointing to qualities like cleanliness, orderly queuing, politeness, and hospitality. By “alternative civility,” I refer to a shift in focus toward identity and personal politics, rather than material aspirations that were foregrounded in earlier studies on Asian popular culture flow (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Iwabuchi, 2002).

Civility, on the one hand, entails restraining impulses and conforming to social expectations. Yet, its scope can extend beyond polite behavior. Schak further defines civility as “toleration of other views, agreement to disagree” (2018, p. 7). Building on this, I emphasize respect for others’ dignity, opinions, and rights. Traditional conceptions of civility often serve as a form of social discipline, demanding self-restraint and conformity (Elias, 1994). In contrast, the “alternative civility” I propose embraces multiplicity and the everyday normalization of difference. The appeal of Thai BL narratives, I argue, lies from their depiction of Thailand as an accepting society, a paradise of love, happiness, and inclusivity. This portrayal stands apart from the more overtly activist models of LGBTQ+ representation often seen in Western discourses on LGBTQ+ rights (Rimmerman, 2002). Instead, Thai BL offers a softer, everyday form of acceptance that neither challenges existing power structures nor conveys overt political messaging or resistance. It cultivates a form of civility grounded in the rhythms of everyday life, where queerness is rendered ordinary, familiar, and emotionally resonant. This approach both resonates with Chinese fans who desire civil rights and social freedoms that they feel are absent in their own society and provides a compromise for those who recognize that explicit activism is unlikely within their context. Ultimately, this paper illustrates how the everyday performances of *khujin* and the representations of queer romance in Thai BL foster cross-cultural appeal and help to shape new possibilities for alternative civility in Asia.

Methodology

From June to November 2023, I conducted in-depth interviews with 30 viewers in China to explore various facets of consuming Thai BL dramas. The interviews were held in two cities: Kunming and Shanghai. This research utilized the snowball sampling method and relied on assistance from local people in China to find informants. The selection of these two cities was based on several criteria. Both cities offered local connections that can facilitate access to diverse groups of participants, particularly university students in Kunming and Shanghai and a broader demographic range in

Shanghai. Kunming, as a regional hub in Southwest China, provided insights into perspectives from smaller-tier cities and regions that might differ from more metropolitan contexts. In contrast, Shanghai, being an international megacity, enabled access to a diverse and cosmopolitan population, capturing the viewpoints of various age groups and genders, as well as individuals with different levels of exposure to global media trends.

Among these 30 participants, five were interviewed online, and three were interviewed in person in Thailand, including one fan I met at a concert featuring Thai BL idols. Of these participants, there were 27 women and three cisgender men. Among the 27 cisgender women, two identified as lesbian and one as bisexual. Of the three cisgender men, two identified as gay and one as straight. Their ages ranged from 18 to 32 years, with the exception of one woman who was 42 years old. All participants had completed university education or were currently attending university. In addition, I interviewed two key figures from the production side: one being the Managing Director of GMMTV, a major producer of BL series, and the international content manager of Channel One 31. Although the interview with GMMTV's Managing Director was conducted prior to this research project, it is included here to highlight the company's strategies for attracting Chinese viewers. All the names of Chinese participants presented in this paper are pseudonyms.

The interviews in Thailand followed the same approach as those conducted in China. The selection of the sample group was based on the willingness and availability of the informants. The in-depth interviews with Chinese fans were primarily conducted in Chinese with the assistance of a translator proficient in both Thai and Chinese. In some cases, interviews were conducted in English and Thai by the author. The interviews typically lasted between one and 2 hours, covering aspects such as audience reception, fan practices related to Thai BL dramas, and the perceptions of Thailand shaped by watching these series.

Chinese audiences primarily access Thai BL series through online platforms, mainly via fan-subtitled versions. Since international platforms like YouTube, Netflix, and Amazon Prime are banned in China, most Chinese viewers rely on fan-subtitling groups who dedicate time to translating the content into Chinese. These translations are then hosted on local platforms, which are subject to government censorship. Although the Chinese government cannot monitor all content in practice, once a platform becomes known for hosting BL content, it risks having its material taken down.

In China, about ten fan-subtitling groups regularly translate Thai dramas into Chinese, with Tianfutaiju and CFan being the most prominent groups specializing in Thai BL series. The advantage of fan-subtitling is that these groups can quickly and diversely translate Thai BL content. However, the downside is that these websites are susceptible to being shut down, forcing fans to constantly search for new locations to access the series if their preferred site goes offline.

The Appeal of Thai BL: The Actors and the Hyperreal of Live-Action

When asked audience members what attracted them to Thai BL, the most common answers were the beauty of the actors, the accessibility of Thai celebrities, and the open portrayal of male-male love. Chinese viewers often say Thai actors have distinctive looks. Although recently Thai actors have started to resemble Korean actors in appearance, in the eyes of Chinese fans, they still possess more distinct characteristics. One unique aspect that sets Thai actors apart from actors in other Asian countries is their blend of Thai/Asian and Western features. Audience also see Thai actors as possessing a more masculine and taller appearance.

In addition to the appearance of the actors, nearly all participants described their enjoyment of Thai BL series as closely linked to the way Thailand can express love openly. They viewed this as

sharply different from China, where government restrictions tightly control male-male romance on screen. As one participant noted,

I've seen a lot of Chinese BL dramas and they bored me. Chinese dramas don't dare to express love openly because the government doesn't allow it. Thailand dares to create BL openly, and actors also dare to perform. (Yu Kong, 23)

These fan perspectives indicate that open displays of affection between men are a central attraction of live-action BL series. Participants frequently emphasized that such series bring characters to life through real actors, making the viewing experience more immersive and emotionally engaging. For many, the tangible qualities of performance, such as the physical presence, facial expressions, and body language of good-looking actors, are key to their enjoyment.

Compared to reading danmei (BL novels in Chinese), watching Thai BL series shows us a lot more than what BL novels in China can offer. We get to actually see the characters kiss, have sex, and express their love. Their emotions make sense, and I feel excited seeing it all play out on screen (Emily, 28).

Another fan highlights how live-action performances shift her experience from imaginative engagement with text to a direct connection with performers.

When reading novels, you get to use your imagination more because you can't see anything. When watching series, the focus shifts to the actors. You watch to see if they are handsome, what their personalities are like, and you become more interested in the actors. Even after the series ends, you still care about the actors. (Qingyi, 23)

The heightened emotional engagement and focus on real actors become even more significant when considering the restrictions Chinese fans face around accessing such content. A recent pattern among Chinese fans is a preference for consuming short clips rather than full episodes. Chinese bloggers often edit and upload these clips on platforms like Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) or Weibo, summarizing key moments or highlighting specific scenes. One participant mentioned that she has edited several such clips herself, most of which feature intimate moments between her favorite actors. This preference for short-form content may be influenced by limited time, censorship concerns, or platform restrictions. Because these fan-made videos are not full-length episodes, they are less likely to trigger copyright issues or attract the attention of censors. Uploading entire episodes is usually not permitted and could lead to the removal of the entire series from the platform. As a result, most of the clips shared tend to focus on N/C (No Children under 18) or intimate scenes between male couples, providing fans with the emotionally engaging content they seek while navigating regulatory and technical barriers.

By watching short clips, you can already understand the plot. The reason I watch these clips is that I want to see these sexy scenes. It's not necessary to know the whole story or understand everything. I just want to watch the bed scenes. (Zhang, 19)

Although these remarks come from only a few participants and might initially seem at odds with my later observations about fans' attraction to pure love, it is important to note that an interest in bed scenes can coexist with an appreciation for romantic storylines. From the business side, the above comments may align with the concept of "queer baiting," where tokenistic queer representation is

used in mainstream media for economic exploitation (Brennan, 2019). Baudinette (2023) argues that GMMTV's production is designed to utilize staged homoeroticism to generate revenue. GMMTV, a major producer of Thai BL dramas, and other productions have faced criticism for promoting an idealized image of young men, turning them into sexual objects for fan consumption without engaging with the real-life experiences of gay men (Koaysomboon, 2020). However, fan responses do not necessarily contradict these critiques. Rather, many fans acknowledge and even embrace the objectification of male bodies and the allure of idealized fantasies as part of their enjoyment.

I don't watch Thai BL to understand men. I watch them because the men are handsome, and the stories are fun and interesting. I know it's just a series. In real life, men might not be that perfect. (Liang, 21)

In sum, the appeal of Thai BL among Chinese audiences centers on the distinctive looks of Thai actors, the ability of Thai series to portray male-male love openly, and the immersive quality that comes from watching real performers bring these stories to life. These attractions are heightened by the differences fans perceive between Thailand and China, particularly in how love and intimacy can be openly articulated on screen. The creation of short clips and the curation of emotionally charged scenes further reveal how fans navigate restrictive environments, actively participating in the shaping and circulation of content. While industry strategies may encourage "queer baiting" and objectification of male bodies, Chinese fans also demonstrate agency by embracing, remixing, and celebrating the aspects that most resonate with their own desires and circumstances. Rather than seeing their participation as purely passive or manipulated, these fans make deliberate choices, balancing aesthetic appreciation, fantasy, and creative involvement in constructing their own viewing experiences.

Heterosexual Readings of Thai BL

Chinese female viewers in my study expressed their appreciation for the way Thai BL series portray love stories between two men as pure, genuine love. Most viewers mentioned that the love between two men faces significant obstacles, which makes them admire the characters' courage. According to the fans, in China, same-sex relationships encounter legal restrictions and are rarely accepted by families. In a society where marriage and having children to continue the family lineage are paramount to parents, such love stories stand in stark contrast to male-female relationships rooted in patriarchal norms.

Their love is pure, without ulterior motives because legally they can't get married anyway. The love between a man and a woman in China is like a business transaction. Getting married involves thinking about buying a house, paying a dowry. Another good thing about male-male love is that they don't get pregnant. (Li Yu, 20)

Chinese women these days do not want to get married. We lose confidence in marriage because of the news reports about husbands cheating or even killing their wives. When we see love between men, we feel more confident in their love because they face many obstacles before they can be together. (Maya, 23)

The opinions of Chinese viewers reflect the social reality of Chinese women and may be similar to women in Asian societies in general. Stories of infidelity, materialistic aspects of marriage, and the heavy burden placed on women to bear and raise children lead many to question the institution of marriage. In contrast, the love depicted in BL series, seen as pure and beautiful, offers inspiration,

hope, and confidence in love. For viewers who feel constrained by the demands of the family institution, BL narratives provide a compelling and liberating alternative.

This preference for pure love aligns with Zhao and Madill's (2018) argument that Chinese fans favor stories where romantic relationships between two men endure over time, with the couple ultimately committing to each other. Such reception reflects a heteronormative reading by the fans. The valuing of heterosexual love norms is evident not only in the preference for everlasting love between two men but also in the preference for characters where one man embodies more masculine traits while the other adopts more feminine traits. This dynamic, originating from Japanese *yaoi* comics, includes the roles of *uke* (passive) and *seme* (active), which are referred to in Chinese terminology as *gung* or 1 (the more masculine character) and *shou* or 0 (the more feminine counterpart). Many viewers engage with Thai BL by projecting themselves into this 0/1 relationship dynamic.

I like 0 because they are willing to be submissive. They sacrifice a lot. (Ping, 26)

I like the bottom's gentleness; it makes me want to protect him. (Liang, 21)

Many women identify with the role of 0 because they perceive 0 as similar to a woman who often endures more in romantic relationships. Meanwhile, some women express a preference for 1, as they desire a partner with masculine traits. As Fujimoto (2004) has argued, women use BL to play with gender by freely adopting various sexual roles and power dynamics. Similarly, some Chinese fans alternate between identifying with more feminine or masculine roles in the story, though still through a heteronormative lens.

I like 0 because 0 tend to be caring and giving. I like the idea of someone taking care of me like this. I also like 1 because he's manly. He is a real man who can be a good husband. (Snow, 23)

Although the above opinions reflect that viewers are still bound by interpreting gender roles in heteronormative terms, this interpretation also reflects deep-rooted gender bias and the devaluation of femininity prevalent in Chinese and other Asian societies. In this regard, Thai BL series present a vision of happiness linked to disregarding gender roles, reflecting a desire for freedom from societal expectations and an aspiration for egalitarian relationships not typically found in conventional heterosexual relationships. This is also evident in the preference for characters who are neither purely dominant nor unconditionally submissive.

I want the bottom and top to be equal. I don't like it when the top insults the bottom by saying they have a woman's personality. They're a male couple, I want them to be equal, with no one being stronger or weaker. (Maya, 23)

The interpretations by Chinese viewers reveal several compelling perspectives. These viewers construct a romanticized fantasy world that distorts the reality of same-sex relationships. In this imagined world, only attractive individuals can be gay, and such relationships are idealized as monogamous and eternally faithful. This heterosexual framing of BL media is not a new phenomenon. Scholars have noted that women often engage with BL media through a lens of heterosexual desire, focusing on masculinity, monogamy, and idealized notions of love, while interpreting dominant and submissive roles within a heterosexual framework (Xi, 2024; Zhao & Madill, 2018; Zhou et al., 2018). What set Thai BL apart, however, is the unique social and cultural

context in which it is produced. Originating in a society with more openness to LGBTQ+ issues, Thai BL fosters the belief that such love stories are not merely fictional fantasies but could indeed happen in real life, especially when compared to depictions constrained by Chinese state norms. This belief is evident in the words of one viewer:

We, as women living in China, never knew before that men could love men. When we watched, we realized that gender does not determine love. As long as two people love each other, that's enough. Same-sex love faces many obstacles, but despite the obstacles, they are not afraid and try to solve problems to be together. Watching this makes us admire their courage. I believe that this could happen in Thailand but not in China. (Liang, 21)

The portrayal of an accepting society resonates deeply with Chinese fans, who long for representations of love unburdened by family expectations, material concerns, or gendered constraints. While fans recognize the constructed nature of these narratives, the association with Thailand as a society perceived to be more open and accepting than their own makes such stories seem plausible and emotionally accessible. Fans fluidly shift between critical detachment and emotional immersion, maintaining a nuanced awareness of what is real and what is imagined. At the same time, their engagement with Thai BL reveals further complexity. Chinese fans' heteronormative interpretations often coexist with subtle acts of resistance to institutionalized norms. While some reproduce traditional notions of gender and romance by viewing Thai BL through a heterosexual lens, they also use these stories to question and push back against prevailing social norms. This dual engagement, both conforming to and challenging expectations, underscores the unique appeal of Thai BL. It offers a space where contradictory desires, hopes, and critiques can not only coexist, but also enrich the significance of the fandom experience.

The *Khujin* and Fan Service of Thai BL

Chinese viewers clearly state that their admiration for Thai actors goes beyond their handsome appearance; they are also drawn to the actors' easy accessibility. In contrast to the precarious fandom described in [Tang's \(2023\)](#) work, where Chinese fans of Chinese BL series must establish norms and regulations within their community to navigate government censorship and platform restrictions, Thailand imposes fewer limitations. As a result, being a fan of Thai actors feels like a form of liberation, allowing fans to pursue their desire freely. This pursuit takes place both online and offline. In online space, Chinese fans play a crucial role in fan support by participating in voting competitions, boosting data metrics, and creating shipping videos and fan art. Meanwhile, offline engagement includes purchasing merchandise, photobooks, concert, and fan-meeting tickets—key revenue streams for the industry. Many Chinese fans also travel to Thailand to meet BL actors in person. Despite ongoing online censorship and platform restrictions in China, fans recognize that their shipping activities do not pose a threat to the Thai actors.

Nearly all Chinese fans enjoy when actors participate in off-screen activities together, particularly appreciating high levels of fan service. Fans who cherish the on-screen relationships often wish to see those dynamics continue off-screen. They feel that Thai actors are responsive to their desire, frequently displaying their affection for one another outside of the screen.

After finishing a series, Thai actors remain friends and have off-screen relationships, which makes fans happy. In China, after finishing a series, they often go their separate ways. Sometimes, they don't remain friends and might even become enemies. (Liu, 30)

In China, actors who perform in *dangai* (live-action adaptation of BL novels) rarely collaborate again after completing a series, and the lead actors are often prohibited from making public appearances together (Hu et al., 2024). In contrast, Thai BL production studios, particularly GMMTV, not only promote off-screen fan service, but also frequently pairing actors in subsequent series following successful collaborations. This practice has encouraged many Chinese viewers to closely follow Thai actor pairs. Among Chinese fans, support for these pairs is intensely emotional, with fans often investing significant financial and emotional resources to express their admiration for their favorite artists.

Thai production studios are well aware of the Chinese fan economy. In an interview with a managing director of GMMTV, while he did not explicitly state that GMMTV manipulates fan service, he highlighted how the company capitalizes on the fan economy.

In 2017, when I flew to China for the first time, I was shocked to see how famous our actors were, almost like Korean pop stars. When I returned, I realized that if we wanted to make our actors beloved by the Chinese audience, we need a continuous stream of BL series to capture their interest. That could pave the way for us to break into that market. To be honest, in terms of selling copyright, we knew we couldn't go officially in China because of censorship. We didn't make a single baht from them watching the series. Instead, we benefited from taking our actors there for fan meetings, or from Chinese fans traveling to Thailand, buying merchandise, and attending concerts. (Interview with Sataporn Panichraksapong, GMMTV, 10 August 2017)

Baudinette (2023) refers to this strategy as the “BL machine,” highlighting its deliberate manipulation of fans' shipping desires by promoting off-screen fan service and pairing the actors in subsequent series. This longing for actor pairs to remain together indefinitely is reflected in the sentiments of many viewers, with some fans stating that they would stop watching if actors were paired with someone else shortly after a series.

I wouldn't accept it if they paired up again with someone else right after this. It would feel wrong. I've just finished watching this and still see them as a couple. (Chen, 21)

Beyond the wish for actors in BL series to remain paired together, this attachment extends beyond the screen. Fans often “ship” couples outside of the show, creating a parallel universe where on-screen narratives merge with reality. The world on the screen represents one universe, while the world outside the screen operates as a parallel universe that runs alongside it. This form of shipping allows fans to extend their emotional connection to the characters, enriching their enjoyment and prolonging their happiness over a much longer period.

Yingying, 42, is a devoted fan of the Thai BL couple Nunew (Chawarin Perdpiriyawong) and Zee (Pruek Panich) from *Cutie Pie the Series* (2022). Her experience exemplifies how shipping fosters deep emotional connections, not only to the fictional characters but also to the actors themselves. To support her idols, she began learning Thai and now translates event clips into Chinese to share with fellow fans. She also plays an active role in their fandom, boosting votes, managing their official fan club on Weibo, and organizing fan activities.

Yingting points out that Chinese fans are drawn to Thai actors because they offer better fan experience. Not only are the actors more willing to engage in fan service, but they are also more accessible and affordable compared to Korean or Chinese stars. For example, attending an event for Zee-Nunew in Thailand costs far less than similar events in China or South Korea.

I once attended an event for Zee-Nunew, I could sit in the front row as a VIP by paying little money. In the past, Chinese people were fans of Korean stars, but now they've turned to Thai stars because the benefits for fans in Thailand are much better. Buying a 7,500 baht (around \$200 USD) ticket, you can take a backstage photo with the idols.

She also notes that fans may be aware that the actors are not gay, yet still enjoy watching the chemistry between them. What fans want is for the actors to "[In their public appearances,] make us believe that they are real. Then, we are willing to spend money to support them." Yet, when asked if she would feel disappointed if a couple from the dramas turned out to be a real gay couple, she replied, "If we can't have them, then only they should have each other – no other women. If another woman has them, we feel jealous, like 'Why not me?'"

The hyperreality created within Thai BL fandom becomes apparent in the way fans, although often aware that the actors are not a real couple nor necessarily gay, still want to believe in the "realness" of both the on- and off-screen romance. An interview with a production company reveals that this attachment extends beyond fiction and can significantly impact the actors' personal lives. Fans' love for the on-screen couple can lead them to police the actors' private lives as if the shipped romance were real, with "cancellations" as consequences for breaking the illusion. As Wannida Boonprasertwatthana, international content manager for Channel One 31, explained, production companies must take precautions to avoid leaking images of actors with real-life girlfriends, as even a single candid photo can trigger backlash and mass ticket cancellations from Chinese fans.

The actor in our studio is about to go on vacation with his girlfriend. We need to be very careful that someone will secretly take pictures of them. Chinese fans will take it as a big deal. This actor still has concerts all year round. If anyone accidentally takes a picture and posts it on social media, Chinese fans will cancel all concert tickets. (Interview with Wanida, August 25, 2023)

These industry responses to fan expectations, as described by Wannida, point to a larger question about the locus of power in sustaining the hyperreal. Do business entities alone hold this power, or do consumers, through their purchasing power and belief, play an equally significant role? The interplay between media producers and consumers underscores a shared responsibility in constructing and perpetuating the hyperreal. The rise of the Chinese female gaze, driven by their increasing economic power, significantly shapes the dynamics of *khujin*—the hyperreal experience of shipping. As Sataporn, GMMTV's managing director, explained in an interview, the company actively encourages fan service, recognizing the importance of the hyperreal fan experience.

Some of our actors may wish to grow outside the BL genre, and that is fine. But many of our main actor pairings remain. For instance, Off-Gun recently celebrated their sixth anniversary. We aim to maintain these established pairings while also creating new ones. If they continue working with us, we will ensure they have new series and projects that sustain their momentum. (Interview with Sataporn, The Standard, 7 October 2023)

As shown above, the hyperreal world of BL is mutually sustained by industry strategies, such as pairing actors, fostering off-screen interactions, and carefully managing public image, and by fans who embrace and emotionally invest in this simulation, even while knowing their constructedness. Ultimately, Chinese fans engage with the hyperreal world of BL through their own unique socio-cultural and political lenses. The examples in this section show how fans navigate, and sometimes resist, the heteronormative expectations imposed by both the state and their families. By actively

participating in shipping practices, they immerse themselves in a space where fan-constructed narratives blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, allowing them to explore same-sex romance beyond the reach of state censorship and social stigma. Their financial investment in fan culture further empowers them to express admiration publicly and without regulatory restriction. Thai BL thus offers a space for fans to imagine alternative forms of intimacy that challenge the constraints of their everyday heteronormative environments. Paradoxically, some fans reinforce those very norms by insisting that BL actors remain in monogamous pairings, expecting them to work together in future series and sometimes even policing their off-screen relationships. In this way, engagement with *khujin* becomes a complex cultural negotiation, as fans both contest and help uphold the very norms they seek to transcend.

Thailand Through the Eyes of the Chinese Audience

For Chinese fans of Thai BL, their engagement with the hyperreal extends beyond the fictional narratives of BL dramas and influences how they perceive Thailand itself. Through the lens of hyperreality, Thailand is not just a production site for BL but an imagined land of freedom, one that exists in contrast to the rigid structures of Chinese society. Fans see Thailand as a place where alternative social norms thrive, offering a vision of life beyond the constraints imposed by the state, parents, and the education system. The way fans co-construct these hyperreal representations is deeply intertwined with their socio-cultural and political environment, reinforcing certain fantasies while also negotiating real-world limitations.

When asked what Thailand represents to them, the most common answer among Chinese viewers is that Thailand is a land of freedom. Many see Thailand as a freer, more open society, not only regarding LGBTQ+ issues but in other spheres of life as well.

I feel that Thai people are very free. I once watched a series where a character was a student living in a dormitory and wanted to have fish and grow plants in their room. They could participate in extracurricular activities outside of school. I want to attend a university like this, with so much freedom. (Song, 23)

With regard to the portrayal of parents in Thai BL, most fans view Thai BL as depicting accepting parents and a more liberal environment. This perception contrasts with their own societal constraints and pressures to conform to expectations by the state and parents to find a partner and marry to have children.

I feel that Thai parents are very kind and understanding towards their children. When their children tell their family, parents will say that they are interested in whether their children will be happy or not. There is a very high level of understanding. (Emily, 28)

Furthermore, Thai BL series serve as a catalyst for Chinese viewers to explore and accept diverse sexual identities, challenging their preconceived notions shaped by Chinese media and state propaganda. In a cultural context where being gay is often viewed as taboo by the state and parents, the portrayal of alternative civility in Thai BL, where differences are not only embraced but sometimes celebrated, offers Chinese audiences a new framework for understanding LGBTQ+ identities. As a gay-identifying fan reflected:

Watching Thai BL series makes me feel that not everyone in this world looks down on people like us. BL series show that Thailand is also developing in this regard, and in the future, things will keep getting better. Eventually, the world itself might become a better place. It makes me feel more confident. (Wang, 21)

As for female audiences, exposure to male–male love stories contributes to a broader acceptance of LGBTQ+ issues among Chinese viewers. Many fans note that after watching Thai BL series, they come to perceive love between men as normal.

At the age of 15-16, I thought that being gay was abnormal because I had never met gay people in my life. Now that I have watched Thai series, I feel accepting and respectful toward them. (Lin, 23)

Watching BL has changed my thoughts and opened my heart to accept gay people. To the extent that if some people show anti-gay attitudes, I will condemn them. (Jang, 19)

This discussion resonates with the arguments of [Fujimoto \(2020\)](#) and [Lin \(2023\)](#) that live-action dramas can bridge the gap between BL fiction and real-life gay individuals, contributing to the normalization of same-sex relationships. However, it may be overstated to claim that this impact arises solely from watching BL dramas. Greater openness and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals might instead reflect a broader shift in the “structure of feeling” ([Williams, 1977](#)) among younger generations in China, who are not only technologically adept but also open to global ideas, diverse viewpoints, and changing norms, including attitudes toward gender and sexuality. Cross-cultural media like Thai BL simply resonate with these newly emerging emotions within a society undergoing significant changes in its structure of feeling.

However, while fans project their aspirations onto a version of Thailand that is portrayed in BL dramas as more open and accepting toward LGBTQ+ individuals than their own cultural context, audience responses to this portrayal are not uniform. Some viewers celebrate Thai BL’s positive representation of LGBTQ+ identities as a step toward greater visibility and acceptance, while others engage with these dramas as a form of escapist fantasy, detached from real-world queer experiences.

I am bisexual, and I want others to know that women don’t watch BL just to see handsome men. In reality, aside from gay men, there are also bisexuals and many other LGBTQ groups. Thai BL can represent the LGBTQ community because it helps us understand that being in a same-sex relationship is normal. (Yuya, 21)

When we watch BL series, we want to feel happy – watch good-looking guys, cute stories, and beautiful cinematography. We don’t want to see the real lives of men who love men. We don’t want to watch that. We know that the reality of gay society is not that beautiful. They don’t have to stay with just one partner forever. (Yingying, 42)

These contrasting perspectives highlight the dual nature of Thai BL as both a medium for LGBTQ+ representation and a carefully curated fantasy space. For some, Thai BL fosters understanding and acceptance of different identities within the LGBTQ+ spectrum, promoting empathy toward same-sex relationships. For others, the appeal of BL lies primarily in its idealized and escapist world, distinct from the everyday complexities of real gay life.

This dynamic demonstrates fans’ active agency to move fluidly between the hyperreal world of the series and their awareness of real-world realities. Rather than being contradictory, fans’ simultaneous critical awareness and emotional immersion exemplify the condition of hyperreality as theorized by [Baudrillard \(1994\)](#). Fans know the stories and relationships are carefully constructed

but invest in them emotionally as if they were true, finding pleasure and meaning in the boundary's ambiguity. The power of Thai BL, then, is that it allows fans to consciously switch between detachment and belief, between critical distance and immersive enjoyment. This capacity to embrace both awareness and affect is not a contradiction, but rather the very mode of engagement that the hyperreal makes possible. In this alternative civility, differences are respected and mutual understanding is nurtured, not despite but because of the fans' ability to occupy both the real and the imagined at once.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to intertwine two distinct yet interconnected concepts—hyperreality and alternative civility—to illuminate how Chinese fans engage with Thai BL media. The hyperreal emerges through the collaborative orchestration of the *khujin* by the industry and actors. Simultaneously, fans actively co-construct the hyperreal, not only by believing in it but also sustaining it through their own desires, which they project and amplify onto it. The consumption of Thai BL by Chinese fans presents a unique case, diverging from previous research by illustrating that the hyperreal is shaped more by human agency than by technology. This phenomenon is further enabled by the rise of the Chinese female gaze, driven by women's increasing economic power, which provides the resources and agency to make the hyperreal possible.

Female consumption of Thai BL texts is undeniably complex and paradoxical. Literature consistently highlights that while BL series can promote openness to diverse sexual orientations, they can also reinforce heteronormativity and perpetuate misconceptions about real-life LGBTQ+ experiences (Xi, 2024; Zhao & Madill, 2018; Zhou et al., 2018). For Chinese fans, the desire to keep actor pairs in an idealized, perpetual relationship, both on- and off-screen, illustrates a problematic trend of misogyny and heteronormativity within the fandom. This tendency highlights a contradiction inherent in BL media. While these series foster acceptance of same-sex relationships, they can simultaneously reinforce patriarchal ideologies. The preference for male-male couples among fans may signify a rejection of traditional heterosexual norms, but it can also marginalize female characters and real-life women.

The interplay of fantasy, reality, and imagination is central to understanding the Chinese fandom of Thai BL. The findings in this paper reveal that this fandom exists precisely in the productive tension between critical awareness and imaginative immersion. Fans navigate, and at times embrace, both the knowledge that these narratives are constructed fictions and the desire to experience them as deeply emotionally real. This dynamic showcases the agency of fans in consciously engaging with these fantasy spaces. Fans are not passive consumers, but rather active participants who choose when to suspend disbelief, when to critique, and when to invest. Hyperreality here is not a confusion between truth and illusion, but the very condition that allows fans to find meaning, connection, and pleasure through creative engagement. Yet, it would be a mistake to view this as entirely up to fans' interpretation. Their understandings are also shaped by the norms and conditions of both the sending and receiving countries.

Crucially, understanding these transnational popular culture flows demands attention to the relationship between countries producing and receiving media and the socio-cultural conditions that fans bring into their engagement. For Chinese fans, Thailand emerges not merely as a setting, but as an imagined space of possibility—one that appears more open and accepting of LGBTQ+ relationships than their own society. This imaginative geography allows fans to find plausibility in the stories while retaining awareness of their constructed nature. Moreover, not only does Thailand provide an alternative framework that Chinese fans employ to challenge heteronormativity, it also

offers a critique of the lack of freedom and civil rights in their own society. Through the portrayal of an accepting, inclusive society, Thai BL presents an “alternative civility,” a vision of tolerance, love, and respect for differences, grounded not in overt activism but in quiet imagination and hope for a more open, accepting way of being. Ultimately, this transnational fandom demonstrates how hyperreality, creative agency, and socio-political dynamics intersect, shaping new possibilities for cultural flow and everyday visions of acceptance in Asia today.

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