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Reclaiming Youth and Desire: Alternative Civility and Japanese Middle-Aged Women's Fandom of Thai Boys' Love Dramas

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ABSTRACT

The article explores Japanese fandom of Thai boys' love (BL) TV dramas, a genre that depicts homoerotic relationships between male characters. Thai BL has gained significant popularity among Japanese viewers in recent years, particularly among middle-aged women. Focusing on this demographic, the article examines how these fans engage with Thai BL to navigate age-related social norms, resist ageism, and reclaim their lost youth and desires. Central to the appeal of Thai BL is the concept of *alternative civility*, which the article introduces as a framework for understanding how gender, age, and emotion are negotiated through media. While traditional civility in Japan emphasises emotional restraint, conformity, and moral discipline, alternative civility allows for affect, multiplicity, and emotional expression without judgement. Thai BL offers a vision of love and identity that transcends normative constraints, depicting queer relationships not as marginal or transgressive, but as ordinary and celebrated. This resonates deeply with middle-aged Japanese women, who find in Thai BL a liberating space to explore non-normative attachments and ageing identities. Their engagement also takes the form of maternal care, expressed through nurturing and emotionally invested responses that reflect a negotiation of ageing and emotional fulfilment often overlooked in everyday life.

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In recent years, the popularity of Thai boys' love (BL) series that depict homoromantic or homoerotic relationships between male characters has surged among international fans. Of all the countries consuming Thai BL, Japan provides a unique case for examining the rise of this genre's popularity. Japan has officially purchased the most broadcasting rights of Thai BL series (Department of International Trade Promotion, Thailand, 2023). Despite being the birthplace of BL, which was originally consumed in the form of *manga* and *anime*, Japan has lost its dominance in BL production to Thailand. Baudinette (2023) notes that Japanese scholars are astonished not only by the potential of Japan to lose its dominance as the leading BL cultural hub to what was previously perceived as a 'secondary player' such as Thailand, but also by the fact that Japanese consumers are now captivated by media from Southeast Asia, a region they previously viewed as culturally and economically 'backward'.

Another unique characteristic of Japanese fans of Thai BL is the diversity within the fanbase. Unlike in other countries where fans tend to be younger, the Japanese audience includes a large, visible portion of middle-aged people. Japanese fandom of Thai BL is primarily divided into two demographics: women aged 40 and above – often housewives or long-time workers with significant purchasing power – and younger fans, many of whom are not yet in the workforce and therefore have limited financial means.

The intersection of a large middle-aged women fandom and the shift in the cultural epicentre of BL production from Japan to Thailand invites an exploration of these two related aspects. While younger BL fans have been widely studied in existing literature, the experiences of middle-aged fans remain largely unexplored. The article asks two key questions. First, how do middle-aged fans consume Thai BL, and how does their involvement influence their identity and self-perception in relation to age? Second, how does consuming popular culture from a country considered ‘less developed’ influence Japanese viewers’ perceptions of Thailand and, in turn, shape their own self-perceptions?

Previous studies on Asian popular cultural flows in the 2000s often emphasised hierarchical structures of consumption. For example, Iwabuchi (2002) and Chua and Iwabuchi (2008) argue that audiences in less developed countries tend to aspire to the consumerism of more developed ones such as Japan, while those in more developed contexts adopt a nostalgic gaze towards media from less developed ones. However, I contend that these hierarchical frameworks, along with the notion of ‘alternative modernity’, which aims to de-Westernise modernity and reimagine Asian cultural expression, are less applicable today. In this context, Chin and Morimoto’s (2013) concept of transcultural fandom, which emphasises affective affinities that transcend national origins, provides valuable insight. Yet, I contend that these affinities are shaped less by national hierarchies and more by culturally specific narratives and the social meanings attached to media texts. Understanding Japanese middle-aged fans of Thai BL thus requires us to consider not just cross-border flows, but how age, gender, and fandom intersect in shaping transnational media engagement.

As I argue, age significantly shapes the engagement of middle-aged fans through the lens of maternal care. Japanese middle-aged fans often view their support for young Thai actors as an extension of their capacity for nurturance and affective labour. Their fandom involves not only admiration but also a sense of care and patronage. Through financial and emotional investment, they reaffirm their role as nurturers. Alongside this, I propose the concept of *alternative civility* to describe the vision of social belonging found in Thai BL. This vision is one in which differences are embraced and the freedom to be oneself is celebrated. While civility traditionally connotes politeness, respect, and social consideration (Benesch, 2015; Schak, 2018), it can also reinforce conformity and limit individuality. In contrast, the alternative civility depicted in Thai BL offers a utopian space where love transcends social constraints and difference is openly valued. With Thailand’s relative openness to LGBTQ+ identities and recent legalisation of same-sex marriage, it has come to represent a more inclusive society, one that Japan is perceived to lack. For middle-aged Japanese women, this dynamic offers a way to resist ageism and rigid norms through their engagement with Thai BL.

Boys' Love, Middle-Aged Fandom, and the Politics of Alternative Civility

In Asia, the boys' love market is a fast-growing industry, but it is clearly segmented by country, with each nation developing distinct production styles, distribution platforms, and regulatory environments. The genre originated in Japan as a *manga* form (McLelland, 2005). Although Japan began producing live-action BL series before Thailand, it has not developed a large-scale industry, with relatively few productions to date. China adopted Japanese BL *manga* but cultivated its own *danmei* web novel culture. Some *danmei* novels have been successfully adapted into popular dramas but later faced strict censorship, with many BL series being banned or cancelled (Ye, 2023). Korea focuses on webtoons, which are similar to *manga* but published online and designed to be read on smartphones (Kwon, 2023). In Taiwan, while society is generally more open and some BL series have been produced, the domestic market is not large, which has resulted in few BL series compared to Thailand. Capitalising on its openness to gender diversity and LGBTQ+ content, Thailand has produced more than 200 BL series to date.

Research on why women consume BL media is well-established. Previous research on Japanese BL suggests that the genre allows women to fulfil heterosexual desires, either by objectifying men or exploring different sexual roles and challenging oppressive gender structures (Fujimoto, 2004; McLelland, 2005; Nagaike, 2003). More recently, the shift from illustrated characters in *manga* and *anime* to real human actors has profoundly transformed the genre's impact. Along with the growing number of gay male fans, scholars argue that these dramas bridge the gap between fiction and real-life gay individuals, contributing to the normalisation of same-sex relationships (Baudinette, 2023; Fujimoto, 2020).

With the shift from *manga* to live-action series, recent scholarship has increasingly come to focus on Thai BL. This emerging body of work has explored the distinctive characteristics of the genre (Baudinette, 2019; Chan, 2021), the idolisation of actors within the industry (Baudinette, 2023; Bunyavejchewin, 2023), and the evolving interactions between fans and producers (Prasannam, 2019). Of particular relevance here is the transnational reception of Thai BL. Baudinette (2020) shows how Filipino fans creatively misread Thai BL to subvert local heteronormativity, viewing it as both 'uniquely Thai' and 'authentically gay', in contrast to Japanese *yaoi*, which they see as 'inauthentic' or 'heteronormative'. Jirattikorn (2023) compares audiences in China and the Philippines, showing how heterosexual women tend to read Thai BL through a heteronormative lens, while gay men view it as a space for resisting dominant norms of sexuality.

As Japanese interest in Thai BL grows, a small but increasing number of studies have begun examining this form of fandom. Baudinette (2023) and Shimauchi (2023) note that fans often refer to their immersion as *tai-numa* (the 'Thai swamp'), a metaphor for the deep, almost inescapable allure of discovering Thai BL fandom, which is akin to sinking into a swamp that is difficult to escape. In one of the pioneering studies on Japanese fans of Thai BL, Shimauchi (2023) examines the rise of this form of fandom, highlighting how Japanese fans have experienced a sense of nurturing and responsibility for the fandom's growth. This growth surged in early 2020 due to its novelty and the active involvement of new members. Baudinette (2023) contrasts Japanese fandom of Thai BL with the Japanese BL subculture centred

on *manga*. Unlike the 2D characters of Japanese BL, Thai BL fans are drawn to real-life actors, viewing them as K-pop-like idols and forming parasocial bonds that elevate them to celebrity status in Japan.

Despite some existing literature, a critical gap remains in understanding how middle-aged fans, who make up a significant portion of *tai-numa* fandom, engage with this media. How do both gender and age shape their engagement with Thai BL, and in turn, how does this engagement influence their perception of age? Additionally, how do middle-aged fans, who have financial independence, navigate parasocial relationships, where fans form one-sided connections with celebrities, creating an illusion of closeness (Horton & Wohl, 1956)?

Middle-aged women's participation in fandom must be understood within the broader social context of Japanese womanhood and ageing. In Japan, married women have historically faced barriers in employment and family life. They are often expected to leave the workforce after marriage or childbirth (Aronsson, 2020), while single women are stigmatised as 'leftovers' or 'parasite singles' (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). Lie (2016) discusses the term *obasan*, a neutral kinship term for 'aunt' that has taken on negative connotations, often suggesting an ordinary housewife perceived as lacking professional prestige or sexual appeal. Besides the image of the ordinary housewife implied in the term *obasan*, Lock (1993) explores another dominant representation of middle-aged Japanese women as caregivers, who are often portrayed as stabilising figures in the family through their unpaid labour. In postwar Japan, the mechanisation and commodification of housework reduced the burden on middle-class housewives, leading to portrayals of them as idle consumers with excessive leisure. However, Lock's interviews with middle-aged women revealed that they rejected the notion of being idle, instead attributing their challenges to stress or family issues.

While studies on Japanese women in recent decades often highlight their increasing agency in the workforce and engagement in leisure activities (see Aronsson, 2020; Kelsky, 2001), research on middle-aged women remains limited. Of the few existing studies, Melby (2016) found that many midlife women (aged 45–55) regarded this stage of life as a turning point. This shift was shaped by social and familial factors, including caring for ageing parents, children leaving home, and concerns about their husbands' impending retirement. These women also perceived themselves as caught between their mothers-in-law and potential daughters-in-law, occupying a low status within intergenerational family dynamics. Nevertheless, these evolving dynamics have created opportunities for self-reflection, with many women seeking self-actualisation and more authentic ways of living.

Lock (1993) argues that many middle-aged Japanese women continue to perceive their caring duties as inevitable, with gendered socialisation, economic dependence, and societal pressures reinforcing their caregiving roles and limiting overt resistance. Traditionally associated with care work, middle-aged housewives have long been positioned as providers within the family. Given that caregiving is often associated with middle-aged women in Japan, this article asks: can this caregiving identity be reimagined through new forms of consumption, particularly in popular culture? Unlike obligatory caregiving, fandom participation offers an alternative space where nurturing becomes an act of joy rather than duty. Supporting their idols allows these women to engage in caregiving in a way that is emotionally fulfilling rather than socially imposed.

In a study on middle-aged fandom, Loh and Gilmour (2022) examine how middle-aged female fans in Malaysia engage with K-pop, arguing that their fandom is shaped by maternalism and familial affection. These fans perceive their connection to K-pop band members through a lens of care rather than romantic or physical attraction, often describing their relationships in terms of brother–sister or mother–son dynamics. This framing may reflect a desire to align their fandom with societal norms and gender expectations in Malaysia, where such attachment might otherwise be seen as transgressive. In contrast, Petersen (2017), in a study on the middle-aged fandom of *Sherlock* (2010), a TV series centred on the detective Sherlock Holmes, finds that middle-aged Western fans express a mix of maternal or protective affection alongside physical attraction to the stars.

While these two studies illustrate how cultural norms around ageing (whether in Asia or the West) shape media consumption, both agree that fandom provides older women with a unique space to sustain enthusiasm and creativity. This, in turn, shapes their subjective experience of ageing and enables them to challenge societal expectations. This article argues that Japanese middle-aged fans of Thai BL share similarities with other middle-aged fans in using fandom to explore and negotiate their identities, but they differ in two key ways. First, unlike studies on middle-aged fandom that focus on TV actors or K-pop idols, this study examines BL content, where romance between men is central to the narrative. This distinction is crucial, as BL's emphasis on idealised same-sex relationships offers a unique space for middle-aged fans to engage with notions of love, desire, and self-expression in ways that may not conform to traditional heteronormative frameworks. Second, existing studies of middle-aged fandom (e.g., Loh & Gilmour, 2022; Petersen, 2017) often overlook the broader dynamics of cultural exchange between the countries involved.

Prior research on middle-aged Japanese women's engagement with transnational media has largely centred on their consumption of Korean popular culture. Mori (2008) examines how Japanese middle-aged women engaged with Korean dramas such as *Winter Sonata* (2002), finding that the series reshaped their perceptions of Korea and fostered a deep emotional connection. Jung (2006) further argues that this fascination stemmed from a nostalgic longing for an imagined past, with Korean masculinity embodying virtues that Japanese middle-aged women associated with Japan's earlier era. However, Jung's notion of Korea as less developed than Japan has become increasingly outdated given Korea's emergence as a global cultural powerhouse.

While such studies reflect academic trends of the time, when Japan–Korea cultural flows were often analysed through the lens of historical conflict, the cultural relationship between Japan and Thailand lacks this specific baggage. Rather, it is informed by a perception of Thailand as both geographically distant and less economically developed than Japan (Shimauchi, 2024). This assumption introduces a different set of dynamics that complicate the affective and cultural negotiations of fandom. Moreover, existing research on Japanese fandom of Thai BL has largely focused on younger audiences and framed its appeal around Thailand's perceived openness to LGBTQ+ issues (Baudinette, 2023; Shimauchi, 2024). While important, such framings may overlook the specific desires, affective investment, and socio-cultural negotiations of middle-aged fans.

Japanese middle-aged women's engagement with Thai BL aligns with broader discussions on how Japanese women use media to challenge gender roles

(Muramatsu, 2002). However, what distinguishes this fandom is the intersection of age and gender norms, especially the societal expectations placed on middle-aged women in Japan. Similar to middle-aged K-pop fans in Malaysia (Loh & Gilmour, 2022), Japanese middle-aged fans of Thai BL show maternalism and familial affection. However, their engagement is also shaped by intergenerational and international class privilege. As financially independent women with established careers, they act as patrons within the fandom, with their socioeconomic capital and status as Japanese nationals amplifying their privilege. Unlike Korean idols, who were once seen as more attainable but have become increasingly distant with the industrialisation and global expansion of K-pop, or Western celebrities, who have always felt distant, Thai BL actors are perceived as more approachable and relatable. This fandom is thus not just about admiration but also about maternal community, personal fulfilment, and self-actualisation – a collective form of care cultivated through parasocial relationships with Thai stars.

With regard to same-sex media content, Japanese society has a long tradition of androgynous performances, such as the Takarazuka Revue, *kabuki* theatre, and the BL genre. Robertson (1992) notes that the Takarazuka Revue, where female performers take on male roles, subtly blurs traditional gender lines. The show allows predominantly female (often middle-aged) audiences to explore fluid identities and resist strict gender binaries. Lie (2016) similarly argues that the appeal of Korean drama actors among Japanese middle-aged fans aligns with longstanding cultural fantasies of male beauty and romance found in Takarazuka and BL *manga*. This longstanding cultural familiarity with gender fluidity and idealised masculinity helps explain Japanese middle-aged women's receptiveness to Thai BL aesthetics. Beyond the maternal care these women extend towards nurturing Thai actors, it is also essential to recognise the genre's content, whose allure lies in what I call an 'alternative civility'. It represents a mode of social imagination not limited to formal civil rights discourse, but grounded in the everyday acceptance of difference. While Thai BL narratives may explicitly focus on LGBTQ+ relationships, the world they depict evokes broader forms of inclusivity, implicitly embracing variations in age, gender expression, and emotional intimacy. For middle-aged Japanese women, this alternative civility offers a space in which their desires, ageing bodies, and emotional investments are not sidelined but quietly affirmed.

Conventionally, civility is closely intertwined with civilisation, which encompasses both material development and social norms (Elias, 1994). In Japan, Ikegami (2005) examines how civility developed in post-Tokugawa Japan during the second half of the 19th century when individuals began to perceive social boundaries as one possible way to organise society. This era marked the emergence of a more fluid and inclusive society, contributing to Japan's transformation into a modern nation-state. During this period, Japanese civility also incorporated aesthetic life, expressed through the appreciation of beauty in everyday experiences and elaborate codes of etiquette. In modern societies, civility often refers to behaviours and attitudes that are polite, respectful, and considerate in social interactions (Schak, 2018). Schak argues that Taiwan is frequently perceived as more 'civil' than mainland China, citing its cleanliness, orderly queuing, politeness, and hospitality. In Japan, Benesch (2015) notes that the rigid norms of Japanese society, which emphasise politeness and self-control of emotions have developed to become 'the characteristic of a whole nation'.

While civility often involves individuals restraining their impulses and adhering to social expectations, its scope extends beyond polite behaviour. Shils (1997) links civility to the idea of civil society, emphasising tolerance and the acceptance of values and political preferences different from one's own as essential to social cohesion. The concept of alternative civility that I propose, as represented through Thai BL, differs from the frameworks offered by Elias' notion of civilisation, Shils' concept of civil society, and Ikegami's aesthetic life. Traditional notions of civility often function as mechanisms of social discipline, requiring self-restraint, emotional control, and conformity, whereas alternative civility permits affect, embraces multiplicity, and refrains from moral policing. Thailand's alternative civility incorporates both formal civil rights, such as the recent legalisation of same-sex marriage, and the everyday normalisation of difference through popular media. While it shares with Shils' vision of civil society a foundation in tolerance, it is 'alternative' in that it emerges primarily through affective and media-based practices rather than institutional or rational discourse, as seen in Western LGBTQ+ movements that foreground legal rights and visibility (Newton, 1994; Rimmerman, 2002). Thai BL dramas present queer love as soapy, romantic, and emotionally resonant. This increasingly mainstream representation of same-sex relationships not only normalises one form of difference (namely, gender), but also creates space for a broader social receptivity to diversity in general. By presenting queerness as ordinary and desirable, Thai BL cultivates an alternative civility that embraces multiplicity across age, gender, and sexual identity.

The question remains: what distinguishes this notion of alternative civility from existing discussion around positive LGBTQ+ representation in Thai BL? I argue that its distinctiveness lies in the absence of an explicit activist agenda. While many scholars highlight Thai BL's embrace of gender diversity through the lens of rights-based discourse, liberal values, and social activism (Baudinette, 2023; Prasannam & Chan, 2023; Shimauchi, 2024), alternative civility operates differently. It does not rely on overt political messaging or resistance. Rather, its power lies in the normalisation of same-sex love within an idealised, imaginative world that centres affection, care, and emotional resonance without necessarily invoking confrontation. Of the more than 200 Thai BL series produced between 2014 and 2024, only a few directly address legal issues such as marriage equality. Most present what might be called 'everyday queerness', where same-sex love is seamlessly woven into daily life and accepted by family, friends, and society at large. This is evident in series such as *Cutie Pie* (2022), *KinnPorsche the Series* (2022), *2Gether the Series* (2020), *Moonlight Chicken* (2023), and *Bad Buddy* (2021). Rather than directly challenging social hierarchies or questioning established gender norms as forcefully as some Western queer narratives do (see e.g., Ahmed, 2010; Warner, 2000), Thai BL offers a softer, affective mode of inclusion. It cultivates a form of civility grounded in the rhythms of everyday life, where queerness is rendered ordinary, familiar, and emotionally fulfilling. For Japanese middle-aged women, it provides not only a vision of queer love unburdened by social stigma but also an escape from the responsibilities and gendered expectations of ageing.

Methodology

The in-depth interviews with audience members in Japan were conducted in 2023 and 2024. I conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with 18 viewers in October 2023 and

with 12 viewers in May 2024 in cities including Tokyo, Osaka, and Sendai. Of these, 28 were women, and two were men. Since the primary audience for Thai BL series is women, the interviews predominantly focused on female viewers. During the in-depth interviews, I did not ask viewers about their sexual orientation, unless the viewers voluntarily disclosed this information. Among the 30 viewers interviewed, one man identified as bisexual and the other identified as gay.

The Japanese viewers I interviewed were split into two age groups: students or early career workers aged 18 to 25, and those aged 40 and above. Of 30 viewers, 11 were over 40, and they are the focus of this article. Of these 11 middle-aged participants, six live in Tokyo and five in Osaka. A limitation of this data collection was the inability to access viewers aged 30 to 40, who are often married with family responsibilities, unlike the younger and older viewers. Many of the middle-aged women reported having grown children, which allowed them more time to engage with BL series and follow Thai BL actors.

This research used the snowball-sampling method and relied on assistance from local people in Japan to find informants. The selection of the sample group was based on the willingness and availability of the informants. Interviews were conducted with the aid of interpreters who translated from Japanese to Thai or Japanese to English. The interviews with older fans included two focus-group sessions with a total of nine participants, as well as two individual interviews in English with participants who were not part of the focus groups. I also conducted in-depth interviews with two translators of Thai BL texts; one is a translator for BL dramas imported to broadcast on online platforms and the other is a Thai language teacher who also translates Thai BL fictions into Japanese. While most of my informants were younger fans, this article focuses on middle-aged female fans (aged 40+), with only one interview from a younger fan included to provide a comparison regarding the affordability of concert tickets.

Although ethical review was not required by my institution, I obtained ethics approval from the universities in Japan where the interviews were conducted. I received verbal consent from all participants during the interviews with older fans, as well as written consent when required by the universities involved. Data from the interviews, most of which lasted between one and two hours, were transcribed verbatim into English and analysed using thematic analysis. Table 1 provides a list of the research participants from this age group, who are all referred to by pseudonyms.

Japanese viewers initially accessed Thai BL series through YouTube, with most watching with English and Japanese subtitles. By mid-2020, the growing popularity of Thai BL led to the purchase of broadcasting rights by Japanese online platforms such as U-Next, TV Asahi, WOWOW, and Rakuten TV, as well as international platforms such as Amazon Prime and Netflix. This shift resulted in geo-blocks on YouTube, removing many series that were previously available for free. Now, viewers can only watch Thai BL series through licensed platforms, which can be costly, especially for students with limited purchasing power.

Falling into *tai-numa*

Japanese middle-aged fans reveal that they are attracted to Thai BL dramas for two key reasons: the actors' appealing appearances and the light, heartwarming storylines.

Table 1: Demographic Features of Research Participants (Interviews)

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status
Harumi	52	single
Tetsuko	45	single
Saori	42	single
Fuku	50	married
Akiko	43	married
Rika	53	married
Momoko	51	single
Kuro	42	single
Megu	42	single
Kiri	45	single
Ryoko	43	single

Regarding the actors, many fans emphasised that their good looks and distinct appearance, which are different from the East Asian beauty standards they are accustomed to, were a major draw. Most had never consumed Thai media before and expressed genuine surprise at the attractiveness of Thai actors. As one fan shared: ‘Previously, I didn’t know any Thai people or have any particular image of them in my mind. Watching it, I was surprised that Thai people could be so good-looking’ (Tetsuko, 45).

While the initial surprise at Thai actors’ attractiveness echoes Shimauchi’s (2024) observation that Japanese fans often describe them as ‘more than expected’, thereby framing their beauty in ways that can exoticise them as unexpected or other, my findings suggest a more nuanced response among middle-aged fans. Rather than framing Thai actors as exotic others, these fans see them as distant yet non-threatening and as an appealing alternative to the hyper-professionalised, politically charged image of Korean and Western celebrities. Again, this aligns with Shimauchi’s (2024) argument that Thai dramas offer a kind of psychological escape for viewers who find it difficult to watch Korean dramas due to unresolved historical guilt.

Many expressed a sense of relief in Thai actors’ detachment from the historical and political tensions that continue to shape Japan–Korea relations. A decade ago, Lie (2016) argued that Korean actors struck the ‘right distance’ for Japanese audiences. They were exotic and different enough to be intriguing, but not as culturally or geographically distant as Western celebrities. However, for many middle-aged Japanese fans today, that distance no longer feels quite so ‘right’. As Korean pop culture has become increasingly global and targeted towards younger audiences through the K-pop phenomenon, Korean stars have come to feel more distant, hyper-professionalised, and even politically fraught, especially when historical tensions between Japan and Korea are publicly invoked. In contrast, Thai actors are seen as approachable and refreshingly unfamiliar, unencumbered by unresolved regional history. As one fan explained:

My generation started with Korean dramas, but at some point, we began looking for something new. As Korean pop culture has increasingly focused on younger audiences due to the K-pop trend, we came across Thai series. We wanted something simple, light, and easy on the eyes. Thai BL series perfectly meet the needs of people like us. It’s simple, pure, and clean. At the same time, we’re bored with Korean actors who often discuss political and historical issues, such as Japan’s misdeeds during the World War era. We just want to watch fun, entertaining series without the headache of political issues (Rika, 53).

In addition to the appeal of Thai BL actors, middle-aged Japanese fans are drawn to Thai BL by what many describe as a ‘fantasy’ version of romance: one that feels soapy, romantic, and emotionally heightened. While reminiscent of the narrative structure of earlier Korean dramas, Thai BL uniquely centres on younger male couples, offering a fresh and idealised take on romantic love. These fantasy elements are marked by light, playful storylines typically set in school or early adulthood, where friendship, leisurely moments, and romantic tension are foregrounded. At the heart of these dramas is often a portrayal of ‘pure love’ between two boys who struggle to be together, against the odds, yet always in ways that avoid heavy conflict. This romantic ideal feels tender and liberating, offering a contrast to the social constraints fans associate with real-life same-sex relationships in Japan.

When I watched *2Gether: The Series*, I felt envious of the love the two characters had for each other. It was really cute and so different from my previous understanding of BL. I used to think that anything involving gay couples had to be sad, suppressed by society, or about AIDS (Kiri, 45).

Thai BL is also known for its comedic absurdity, with scenes that may appear illogical or exaggerated but which add to its light-hearted and comforting charm. This is amplified by the visual fantasy of two attractive men expressing affection in ways that are emotionally generous and idealised, sometimes even more so than what is typically depicted in heterosexual pairings. As one fan put it: ‘Of all the BL series I’ve seen, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Filipino BL series, Thai shows feel the most like a fantasy. They don’t really reflect the real world’ (Akiko, 43).

When asked what she meant by ‘fantasy’, Akiko explained that it refers to romantic stories with happy endings, even when the same-sex love is against social norms. The two male characters are sweet and caring towards each other, and there is no mention of serious, heavy problems. Megu, another respondent, also believes that Japanese women aged 40 to 50 like herself are drawn to Thai BL series precisely because of this fantasy element. These affective responses, I argue, reflect a particular kind of nostalgia, one not grounded in the developmental stage of a country, as seen in earlier scholarship on pan-Asian media flows (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Jung, 2006), but rather in a personal, age-based longing. This is a nostalgia that brings viewers back to their own ‘good old days’, whether real or imagined, when romance felt innocent and unburdened by the responsibilities and compromises of adulthood. The youthful university settings, sweet portrayals of first love, and lighthearted tone of Thai BL series evoke memories of a simpler emotional landscape. Unlike the nostalgia tied to national modernity or cultural proximity in earlier regional flows, such as Iwabuchi’s (2002, 174) notion of ‘borrowed nostalgia’, where Japan’s past is located in another country’s present, this is a deeply personal nostalgia, shaped by age, gender, and affect.

Maternal Care and the Nurturing of Thai BL Idols

Of the 11 older fans I interviewed, three are married while the rest are single. The married informants said that they were able to become fans of Thai artists due to their children being grown up, along with the availability of time and money:

I never thought I would attend fan meetings or go to concerts for artists. I'm very surprised at myself. I went to Thai artists' concerts every time they came to Osaka (Fuku, 50).

As a resident of Osaka, I had only visited Tokyo about four times in my life. After I began following Thai artists, I went to Tokyo several times in a single year to attend fan meeting events. When I was in my twenties, I was busy raising my children and couldn't do much. Now that my kids are grown up, Thai series have come along at just the right time (Akiko, 43).

Financial stability and having independent children allow these fans to attend multiple concerts and travel domestically and internationally for events. When asked where they attended Thai BL celebrities' concerts, several said there were 'too many' to count. This financial security enables them to purchase tickets and merchandise, a privilege they recognise as enhancing their fandom. Younger Japanese fans I interviewed often said that they are in the minority at Thai BL concerts in Japan due to the high cost of tickets. Yim (23) explained how she spent money on a Thai actors' fan concert, which she finds a bit too expensive: 'Altogether, I spent 40,000 yen [about US\$280], which is quite a lot for a student like me. I think this is why Thai actor concerts are mostly attended by people of my parents' generation'.

Some participants explained that in Japan, being an older fan does not carry a social stigma, as Japanese culture encourages older people to have an '*oshi*' (favourite idol). All the women I interviewed (who were aged 42 and above) grew up in the 1970s and early 1980s, before the rise of K-pop and Korean dramas in Japan. Some were fans of domestic idols such as those from Johnny's Entertainment, who represented the pinnacle of boyish charm and carefully curated innocence. However, after discovering Thai BL, several described their experience as 'falling into the Thai swamp' (*tai-numa*). Unlike the distant, tightly managed image of Japanese or Korean stars, Thai BL actors are perceived as more accessible and down-to-earth. Their active engagement in fan service, through social media, fan meetings, and personalised interactions, offers older fans a sense of intimacy and emotional connection:

I think that women aged 40 and above, like myself, want to support actors and feel that we have the financial means to do so. We enjoy seeing actors grow alongside us, and it's a joy we're willing to pay for. However, I don't think these women extend this support to artists from every country. Perhaps Thai artists are more accessible and haven't yet become as commercialised as those in South Korea (Rika, 53).

I like the Thai BL industry more because it is not as huge as K-pop. When you go to a K-pop concert, there are just too many people. It's kind of overwhelming. But Thai events are smaller, more intimate. With K-pop idols, getting a photo with them is basically impossible, you have to win a lottery just to meet them. But with Thai actors like Tay and New, I've done hi-five with them so many times (Kuro, 42).

These comments suggest that for some women in their 40s and beyond, fandom may involve a sense of care or support, especially when the actors still feel accessible and not (yet) overly commercialised. When it comes to spending money on the artists they admire, many were open about the financial strain fandom can impose, often joking or sighing about how much they have spent on concerts, merchandise, or trips to Thailand. Yet, they did not see this spending as a burden. Instead, they described it as something they do 'for their own happiness' and for the joy of watching these young actors grow:

When my friends invited me to go for dinner, I said no because just one meal can cost around 7,000 yen [about US\$50]. But when there is a fan meeting, I could spend 16,000 yen [about US\$112] without hesitation. If it's overseas, it will cost even more. But somehow, I feel like now I can spend freely on things that make me happy (Momoko, 51).

I am willing to spend money because I want them to grow and mature within the industry. I don't mind if they are not paired with their BL co-star in the next series (Ryoko, 43).

For the Japanese women I interviewed, engaging in Thai BL fandom evokes a sense of nurturing and patronage, where emotional investment is paired with material support. This echoes maternal dynamics, particularly when the actors are still seen as approachable. Supporting these young actors becomes not only a personal joy but also a way to participate in their development and feel a sense of connection to their growth.

This sense of care mirrors the figure of the *mae yok* in Thailand's traditional *likay* theatre. *Likay* is a popular form of folk drama known for its melodramatic performances and emotional audience engagement. *Mae yok*, who are often wealthy older women, devote themselves to supporting handsome young *phra ek* (leading male performers), whose soft voices, delicate gestures, and gentle manners embody a non-threatening form of masculinity (Mitchell, 2011). These women offer flowers, jewellery, cash, or even domestic services such as cooking or cleaning, seeking both intimacy and status. Similarly, some Japanese middle-aged fans I interviewed said they occasionally gather to cook for Thai BL actors they admire. They also spoke of other fans who do the same, including making elaborate *bento* boxes to give to the actors. In both Thai and Japanese contexts, older women's support can be seen as a strategic investment in youthful, aesthetically pleasing masculinity, one that offers personal joy, symbolic capital, and a sense of contribution to an artist's rise. And just like *mae yok*, who are often mocked or sidelined in the Thai media despite being vital to the *likay* scene, Japanese middle-aged fans play an essential but frequently overlooked role in the economic and emotional structure of Thai BL fandom in Japan.

Reigniting Youthfulness through Thai BL

For many middle-aged women, engaging with Thai BL is more than just a hobby. It becomes a powerful means of emotional renewal. Rather than seeking to date the actors or immerse themselves in the fantasy of availability (Baudinette, 2023, 88), these fans often turn to BL to reawaken long-dormant feelings of excitement and vitality. Watching beautiful young men fall in love on screen allows them to experience emotions they may have once assumed were behind them. In this context, fandom becomes not only an escape but also a way to reclaim pleasure, youthfulness, and even desirability in a society that often renders older women invisible. Momoko, a woman in her 50s, offers a striking example of how Thai BL helps to reignite this inner spark. She describes being a fan of Thai BL actors as feeling 'super-hot':

I felt super excited when I started looking at young guys in the series. In 2016, after ending my relationship with my boyfriend, I realised I was too old and felt unnoticed. After discovering the Thai industry, I'm now deeply into it. Every day, I feel very happy watching attractive actors, talking with my friends about them, and enjoying the escape from my real life (Momoko, 51).

She further explained how she felt ‘desexualised’ in the eyes of those around her: ‘People treated me like an elder, always asking, “Are you okay?” or “Are you tired?” But no one ever says, “Oh, you’re *kawaii* (cute). Let’s go out for a drink”’.

Momoko’s comment speaks to broader cultural narratives surrounding middle-aged women in Japan. Her account of being treated ‘like an elder’, with people constantly asking if she was tired or okay, reflects Lie’s (2016) comment about the term *obasan* (aunt), which often implies a lack of sexual appeal. Momoko contrasts this treatment with a yearning for recognition as someone still desirable, someone who could be called *kawaii* or invited out for a drink. Such yearning illustrates how Thai BL fandom can serve as a site of emotional and even sensual reawakening, an imaginative space where middle-aged women feel seen, energised, and reconnected with desires that mainstream society encourages them to suppress.

While fandom of any popular culture or idol can spark feelings of youthfulness (Loh & Gilmour, 2022; Petersen, 2017), being a fan of Thai BL appears distinct in several ways. First, Thai BL dramas are rich in skinship – the physical intimacy between male leads, including hugging, kissing, and touching – which provides a sensual and emotionally charged viewing experience. When I asked one fan how she felt about these intimate scenes, her face flushed and she exclaimed, ‘*Arigato, arigato*’, expressing gratitude for the emotional and physical thrill the scenes gave her. Second, age plays an important role in shaping how these women experience romance onscreen. In heterosexual narratives, a younger female protagonist often ends up with the male lead, which can intensify feelings of being ‘past their prime’ for older women viewers. BL, by contrast, removes this gendered comparison. With two male leads, there is no direct female rival, no implicit comparison that might reinforce age-based insecurities. This erasure of female competition makes space for a more unburdened enjoyment of romance and attraction. While fans certainly have diverse ways of consuming Thai BL, this is just one possible pathway through which middle-aged women find pleasure and renewal.

Another interesting aspect of middle-aged fandom is how it fosters passion, creativity, and engagement, which in turn helps shape these fans’ identities. This aligns with what Loh and Gilmour (2022) call ‘forward learning’, where fans acquire new skills to enrich their engagement with pop culture. Many of my participants engage in creative fan activities such as drawing fan art, photography, and learning the Thai language to enhance their fan experiences. A few of my participants found themselves travelling alone for the first time in their lives. While the creativity aspect may be similar among fans of all ages, older fans often have a greater capacity for this due to the availability of time and resources.

Harumi, a devoted fan of the series *Bad Buddy* (2021), rediscovered a talent she had set aside for a long time:

After watching *Bad Buddy*, I felt very moved and really impressed by the actors’ performance. I didn’t know how to express my emotions, so I drew a cartoon and posted it on Twitter. At first, I didn’t know the actors ‘liked’ my drawing until my friend told me. I was so thrilled. I had to walk around my house to keep myself calm (Harumi, 53).

Harumi’s experience reveals not only how fandom can reignite creative passions, but also how Thai BL artists actively cultivate parasocial relationships. Even small gestures, as simple as liking fan posts on social media, can make fans feel seen,

appreciated, and emotionally connected to the artists they admire. Other fans have shared how, inspired by Thai BL, they began travelling internationally, sometimes even on their own:

I feel like Thai BL changed my life a lot. My first solo trip abroad was to Thailand. The reason I went wasn't to meet the actors, but because I wanted to see what the country where the actors live is like (Kuro, 42).

In addition to travelling, nine of my 11 respondents have taken up Thai language classes after becoming fans of Thai BL dramas. They explained that they want to understand what their idols say on social media. Kuro (42), for instance, said: 'When we went to concerts in Thailand, the artists would perform for four to five hours, but we couldn't understand a thing. That's why I want to learn Thai'. Many also note that without financial stability, they would not be able to afford private language lessons. Beyond language learning, many fans engage in photography, painting, and baking, sharing their creations with both the artists and their friends. Creativity in fandom is closely tied to self-identity, and for many fans their creative work becomes an extension of their fan identity (Petersen, 2017).

Besides discovering their own identity, many of the participants expressed appreciation for how being fans of Thai BL dramas helped them find a 'community' of like-minded people. They are happy to have someone to share their love of Thai idols with. Nine of the 11 participants formed new communities centred on Thai BL after attending concerts in Japan. One group resides in the Kansai area, while another is based in Tokyo. These connections often began on Twitter and were followed by in-person meetings at concerts or in Thai language classes that participants decided to take after becoming fans:

BL makes my life much better. For people my age, it is more difficult to make friends. But now I have many new friends who share the love of Thai BL (Megu, 42).

I'm surprised at how much I've changed. I didn't used to go out much, but now I go out more often, meet friends who also like BL, and even travel abroad (Harumi, 52).

Engaging in Thai BL fandom has provided these middle-aged fans with a renewed sense of identity and youthfulness. Fandom has become a way for them to negotiate their age, bringing feelings of youthfulness, pleasure, and excitement into their current life stage. With the financial stability and time that come with middle age, these fans have embraced a 'new lifestyle' centred on their love for Thai BL dramas. Fandom, which has increasingly been viewed as part of a lifestyle, not only reignites a sense of vitality but also fosters deep connections with like-minded individuals. Through social media, concerts, and language classes, they have built vibrant communities that extend across Japan and beyond, transforming their social lives and offering them a fresh, invigorating perspective on life.

Thailand in the Eyes of Japanese Fans

Unlike younger fans, whose limited economic resources restrict their opportunities to travel internationally, all the middle-aged fans I interviewed have visited Thailand multiple times. Some even travelled outside Japan for the first time in their lives, saying that

watching Thai BL sparked their desire to fully experience what Thailand is like. When asked about their perceptions of Thailand before and after watching Thai BL series and visiting the country, many expressed surprise at how modern it is:

I had a vague idea that Thailand was a Buddhist and a poor country. But after watching the dramas and visiting Thailand, I saw that it is modern, the cities are developed with rich and fascinating culture (Tetsuko, 45).

I didn't know anything about countries in Southeast Asia. I thought Thailand was just another poor country, but after watching the series, I saw that Thailand is very developed and modern. It made me want to visit Thailand (Fuku, 50).

Initially, Japanese fans' perceptions of Thailand were shaped by limited exposure and stereotypes. They often saw it as a poorer, undeveloped nation, but their engagement with Thai BL and their subsequent visits altered this view. They came to view Thailand not only as modern but also as a friendly nation, rich in unique cultural aspects and full of excitement:

Bangkok is just like Tokyo now. But it is the nearest, friendliest Asian country you can feel. If you're going to America or Europe, you feel like you can't speak English that well. There is a sense of barrier. But Southeast Asia feels closer, friendlier than Korea or China (Akiko, 43).

Although viewers' perceptions may shift from seeing Thailand as undeveloped to recognising it as modern after watching Thai BL or visiting the country, this does not erase the underlying hierarchical thinking. Japanese views of the world still tend to follow a broad structure in which the West is seen as aspirationally superior, and neighbouring countries such as Korea and China are entangled in unresolved historical and political tensions. Thailand, by contrast, occupies what I earlier described as a 'right distance': familiar yet exotic, emotionally accessible yet culturally distinct. This aligns with Shimauchi's (2024) analysis that Japanese fans' limited knowledge of Thailand enables unproblematic enjoyment of Thai media, free from the weight of cultural or historical entanglements.

Yet this entrenched hierarchy is not absolute. What emerges from the fans' narratives is more complex and includes an unexpected admiration for Thailand's perceived progressiveness in LGBTQ+ acceptance. For some, Thailand appears more advanced than Japan in embracing gender diversity. This complicates traditional hierarchies, allowing fans to imagine modernity not just in economic or technological terms, but through emotional openness and inclusivity. In this way, while certain cultural hierarchies remain, they are being renegotiated through the affective and social values that Thai BL brings to light.

This reimagining of modernity also contributes to subtle shifts in public discourse. Thai BL has played a significant role in sparking conversations about LGBTQ+ issues that were previously seldom discussed. As Japanese fans engage more deeply with Thai BL, they not only explore similar content from other countries but also become increasingly aware of broader topics surrounding gender diversity. This growing awareness has gradually created space in Japan for discussions on LGBTQ+ issues, which were once largely considered taboo:

In the past, I rarely saw anyone openly discuss LGBTQ+ issues in our society. Now, I see more people coming out as LGBTQ+. I believe Thai BL has sparked awareness and encouraged Japanese people to pay more attention to these issues (Fuku, 50).

I agree that Thai BL has contributed to making Japanese people more open about this issue. It's probably not just from Thailand alone but from many different directions, and Thai BL is one part of that. Japanese society is quite conservative, so new ideas and thoughts often need to come from outside for us to consider (Rika, 53).

These reflections highlight how Thai BL, beyond its surface-level appeal of attractive, accessible actors and the depiction of modern, youthful lifestyles, creates a fantasy space free from historical or cultural tension. This space subtly encourages conversations around gender equality in Japan. This again aligns with Shimauchi's (2024) observation that Thai BL encourages Japanese audiences to reconsider LGBTQ+ issues and broader questions of social inequality. However, I argue that for these middle-aged fans, this engagement is not framed as explicit activism. Rather, Thai BL offers what can be understood as an 'alternative civility', a fantasy space where same-sex love is seamlessly integrated into everyday life, without the stigma or constraints often associated with it in Japanese society. In this imagined world, differences are problematised yet rendered ordinary:

The first Thai BL series I watched really surprised me. Everyone around the main characters accepted their relationship so easily. In Japan, that kind of open support is almost unthinkable. Japanese BL often focuses on how others perceive the couple, but Thai BL centres on the relationship itself. It feels natural, like gender doesn't even matter (Tetsuko, 45).

Watching Thai BL does more than reshape Japanese fans' perceptions of Thailand. It also prompts a subtle re-evaluation of themselves and the emotional norms they inhabit. As Benesch (2015) notes, Japanese society has long valued self-restraint and emotional control, creating a national culture of politeness that often suppresses personal expression. In contrast, Thai BL shows a world where emotions are visible, relationships are openly affirmed, and love between two men is treated as normal. This imaginative space offers what I call an 'alternative civility', one that affirms difference not through legal frameworks but through everyday feelings of joy, connection, and acceptance. Rather than demanding overt activism or rights-based discourse, this civility allows fans to quietly imagine a more open and inclusive way of being. In watching Thai BL, they are not only revising their image of Thailand, but also pushing back, in small but meaningful ways, against the ageism and gendered constraints of Japanese society.

Conclusion

Using Japanese middle-aged women as a case study, this article has explored how these fans use Thai BL to resist ageism and reclaim desires and identities in a society that often sidelines them as they age. Thai BL offers a space to reconnect with a sense of youth and excitement. The politics of these women, which are shaped by age, gender, and cultural identity, question dominant norms and point to new ways of imagining society in which desires traditionally associated with youth such as passion, sensuality, and freedom are reimagined and embraced in later life. Unlike the media from Korea or China, which carry historical and

economic tensions, Thai BL provides a refreshing alternative, offering an inclusive fantasy free from such baggage and the inferiority complex often associated with the Western media.

On a deeper level, Thai BL's appeal among middle-aged Japanese women resonates with the concept of maternal care. These women extend a form of care to the actors they adore, which is nurturing, protective, and empathetic, through a lens of affection that reflects the maternal roles many play in their lives, regardless of whether they are married or single. This dynamic is rooted in a form of emotional labour that extends beyond passive fandom. It fosters a reciprocal relationship that affirms their identities and emotional well-being. Through this nurturing of Thai actors and the roles they play, these fans reaffirm their sense of self-worth and vitality. This active participation challenges ageist perceptions, allowing them to be seen as integral to the emotional and relational dynamics of the fandom.

This engagement with Thai BL also aligns with the concept of alternative civility. In contrast to traditional notions of civility, which often demand self-restraint and conformity, alternative civility embraces affect and multiplicity, and refrains from moral policing. Thai BL presents a world where same-sex love is normalised and celebrated without the constraints of rigid social structures. Despite being criticised for reinforcing heteronormativity and promoting lookism, Thai BL's idealised vision of freedom resonates deeply with middle-aged Japanese women. It offers a model of inclusivity that enables middle-aged Japanese women to see themselves as part of a world that accepts not only diverse sexual identities but also the ageing process as a natural, valued part of life. Alternative civility, as portrayed in Thai BL, creates a space for these women to imagine a life unencumbered by the burdens of traditional gender roles and expectations of youthfulness.

This case study invites us to rethink cultural flows and the exchange of media in a way that transcends traditional notions of cultural hierarchy. The evolving relationship between Japan and Thailand in the context of BL media reflects a multidirectional flow of ideas, values, and practices. Thailand's adoption and re-circulation of BL back to Japan enables Japanese fans to revisit their desires and identities while engaging with a more inclusive view of gender and ageing. This exchange disrupts the dominant narratives of cultural superiority or inferiority, offering a more nuanced understanding of how global media shape both entertainment and everyday social values.

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