

**The Reception of Thai Boys Love Series in China:
Consumption, Imagination, and Friction**

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Abstract

Starting from the mid 2010s, the world has witnessed the spectacularly rapid rise of Thai Boys Love series, TV series produced in Thailand that center around the homoromantic and/or homoerotic stories of one or more young, physically attractive, and masculine-identified male-male couple(s). The prevalence of these series is not only present within China's intricate and distinctive social landscape. In fact, China, with millions of energized and devoted enthusiasts, is perhaps the most significant international market for Thai Boys Love series, and these series are indisputably the most popular non-animated male-male-love media in China nowadays. Guided by three subtopics, consumption, imagination, and friction, this thesis explores the reception of Thai Boys Love series in China, casting light on the Chinese consumers of these series, including viewers/fans, subtitle groups, and event organizers, in relation to the complex societal, historical, and ideological dynamics in contemporary China. The detailed introduction in the beginning on the development of Thai Boys Love series in Thailand and their trajectory in China sets the stage for this thesis to delve into four noteworthy aspects regarding the reception of these series in China. First, it unveils the carnivalesque consumption of Thai Boys Love series safeguarded largely by the various self-censoring strategies most consumers are practicing to get around the dominant but porous governmental censorship. Second, it examines the alternative unbounded world portrayed in these series that appeals to most viewers given the pressures and difficulties they have to confront in their day-to-day lives. Third, it indicates the problematic consequences these series may render in terms of how they promote and reinforce the fantasized "gay paradise" stereotype toward Thailand and the hegemonic "gay archetype" image to regulate gay men and marginalize some members in the gay community. Fourth, it explicates the actual vulnerability

of the alleged “Chinese-Thai romance” under the rise of nationalistic sentiments as well as the comeback of Sinocentrism among most Chinese people. It ends with a reflective discussion about this thesis, the limitations, and possible directions for future research. This thesis is based on my close reading of the most well-received Thai Boys Love series from 2014 to April 2021, my extensive online observations since 2016, and a wide variety of secondary sources in English, Chinese, Japanese, and Thai.

Keywords: Thai Boys Love series, contemporary China, transnational/transcultural media flow, reception

Notes on Romanizations, Names, and the Series

Throughout this thesis, other than English, I include a range of terms, concepts, and names in Chinese (Mandarin), Japanese, and Thai. To avoid creating potential confusion or alienation, I situate the native Asian scripts and details in the footnotes and provide only romanizations in the main text. For Mandarin, I use the internationally accepted *Hanyu Pinyin* system. Exceptions include place names and personal names outside of mainland China, which are in line with local conventions. For Japanese, I follow the Hepburn system and present them in *Rōmaji*. Please note that macrons signifying long Japanese vowels are applied in every case, such as Ōsaka (rather than Osaka). For Thai, there is an absence of a standard and universal system for transcribing Thai into Latin alphabets. Although I am informed by the system developed by the A.U.A. Language Center, all Thai words and names contained in this thesis have previous conventions for romanizations, such as *kathoey*, *lakhon*, place names, and personal names. Therefore, I adopt them directly.

Personal names from the East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) cultural sphere are written with surname first, except names for citation usage and the author's name (Zhang Junqi in natural order). Some names contained in this thesis are pseudonyms. Please keep in mind that the natural order of Japanese names is preserved as well, such as Miyazaki Hayao (rather than Hayao Miyazaki). Outside of the East Asian cultural sphere, I present given name followed by surname in most cases. Within this thesis, exceptions include Chinese names of Chinese-Thai people, such as Chen Binglin for Chinese-Thai actor Ohm Pawat Chittsawangdee. Most Thai people have both a long, more formal name as well as a shorter, more frequently used nickname (a.k.a. "play name"). Thai nicknames are diverse, usually monosyllabic, and may or may not be

relevant to the “formal” names: AJ, Arm, Boss, Can, Frank, Gameplay, In, Japan, M, Ma-prang, Nice, Pi Pi, Praepailin, Third, and Top are all examples of such nicknames. For Thai people (mostly Thai actors and directors in this thesis), I follow the “nickname, given name, surname” format, such as Jaylerr/JJ Kritsanapoom Pibunsonggram and New Siwaj Sawatmaneeekul. For Thai characters in media representations, since their given names and surnames are not always indicated or called, I only use their nicknames, such as Kit in *2 Moons* (dir. Meesuwan; 2017), played by Copter Panuwat Kerdthongtavee.

One sector this thesis is based on is the most well-received Thai Boys Love series from 2014 to April 2021. Let me elaborate on the word “well-received” here. I have evaluated each series chiefly on its domestic and international popularity (particularly in Thailand and China), including but not limited to the popularity of the series itself, its actors, and its related products (such as music videos and boxsets), how many people are acquainted with it and are willing to discuss it online, and the efforts of promotion. In addition to these most well-received Thai Boys Love series, I refer to other media works from Thailand and elsewhere whenever necessary. I am informed by some episodes of the Thai Boys Love series released in 2021 but before April (the month of thesis defense), such as *1000stars* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2021). Please see Appendix for all included media works in this thesis and other informative ones.

In terms of the English title of Thai Boys Love series, some are in the format “XXX: The Series,” such as *SOTUS: The Series* (dir. Samajarn; 2016), while some go without “The Series,” such as *I Told Sunset About You* (dir. Kuno; 2020). In the case of most series, it is fine to refer to it with or without “The Series.” For the purpose of staying consistent and orderly, in this thesis, I omit “The Series” at the first place if a series has one. In addition, for each series, I introduce its director(s) and its release year only when it shows up the first time in the chapter. For example,

in Chapter One, I introduce *Love by Chance* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2018) first, and it becomes *Love by Chance* hereafter within that chapter.

Last but not least, it is important to clarify that although this thesis tends to investigate Thai Boys Love series as a “group” and oversimplification seems inevitable, I strive to avoid structuring these series as a monolithic group or making any blind generalization. Recognizing the diversity and nuances among these series, I attempt to illuminate a range of shining points and noteworthy patterns of them and discuss the significance in a boarder context, while being aware of and respecting the differences inside.

Chapter One

Introduction

In early 2019, an “idol group” named “HS Boys,” consisting of eight good-looking young men from Thailand, successfully finished their fan-meeting tour to mainland China. Tickets in Wuxi, Xiamen, Wuhan, and Chengdu¹ were sold out within minutes after they were released. Fans, in a carnivalesque manner, expressed their exhilaration, circulated related information on online sites, and prepared themselves for the group’s upcoming arrival to China, regardless of whether they could attend the events or not. Each group member had a Chinese name and nickname, which were amicably called by the Chinese fans to display and continuously highlight the emotional as well as ethno-racial closeness with these Thai boys. However, the name “HS Boys” would sound unfamiliar for most people worldwide, except the Chinese fans of the imported and translated “Thai Boys Love series.” In fact, these same Thai boys were the main actors of *Love by Chance* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2018), one of the many immensely popular Thai Boys Love series. The so-called “idol group” under the umbrella name “HS Boys” was invented and advertised only for consumption within China’s complicated and unique milieu by distancing these boys from the male-male-love series and thereby avoiding censorship.

This story epitomizes the fascinating dynamics between the burgeoning Thai Boys Love series and their Chinese consumers that this thesis examines. I define “Thai Boys Love series”² as a group of TV series produced in Thailand that, in the main storyline and/or at least one of the notable side storylines, center around the homoromantic and/or homoerotic stories of one or

¹ This research inspects the reception of Thai Boys Love series in mainland China. Therefore, although a “HS Boys” fan meeting in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) was held in the same time period, I did not include it. In this thesis, “China” equals “mainland China.”

² Thai: *lakhon wai (thay)* ละครววย(ไทย) or *siri wai (thay)* ซีรีส์วาย(ไทย). ไทย means “Thai(land)” and is usually optional.

more young, physically attractive, and masculine-identified male-male couple(s). Examples are *SOTUS* (dir. Samajarn; 2016), *Our Skyy* (dir. Botta et al.; 2018), *Until We Meet Again* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2019) (fig. 1), *TharnType 2: 7 Years of Love* (dir. Passawut; 2020), and *Manner of Death* (dir. Sakveerakul and Aroonnet; 2020). Those series with male-male-love subplots are accounted as Thai Boys Love series as well because many viewers will skip the stories depicting heteronormative love and only consume the homoromantic and/or homoerotic counterparts. After the relationship between the two male characters in *Kiss Me Again* (dir. Thongjila; 2018), Pete and Kao, became much more popular among the audience than other male-female couples, the production company GMMTV edited another shortened version of this series focusing only on the stories between these two male characters and uploaded it to online platforms under the name “Pete-Kao Scene | Kiss Me Again.”³ One year later, *Dark Blue Kiss* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2019), a series devoted to the love stories between Pete and Kao and another male-male couple, was launched by GMMTV.

Another striking and somewhat formulaic feature of Thai Boys Love series is that most protagonists are university or high school students. A few have jobs, such as Arthit in *SOTUS S* (dir. Botta; 2017), but most are still around their 20s. However, increasing diversity among these series is noticeable, since they are no longer that school-love-centric.

Based on the discussion above, the following categories are excluded from Thai Boys Love series by my definition: series that contain male-male-love contents whereas the dominant genre is, for instance, action or thriller, such as *3 Will be Free* (dir. Pookaonthong; 2019); series that primarily use suggestive but intensive depictions of male-male sex as an appeal, such as *Bangkok G Stories* (dir. Intaraprom; 2017); and series that represent non-masculine-identified

³ See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jP1vOljyTLI> (รวมซีน พีท - เก้า ep.1-4).

protagonists, such as *Lady Boy Friends* (dir. Kullawas; 2015) and *Diary of Tootsies* (dir. Boonnitipat; 2016).

Here, I would like to elaborate on why I have adopted the term “Boys Love” to refer to this media genre. Despite certain nuances, the terms Boys Love (a.k.a. Boys’ Love, Boy’s Love, BL), *yaoi*, *shōnenai* (*shōnen-ai*), *tanbi*,⁴ *fu*, *danmei*,⁵ and *wai*⁶ can be used interchangeably to connote texts that portray romantic and/or erotic relations between young men, a phenomenon that originated in Japan in the 1970s.⁷ The choice is ultimately dependent on the consumer’s personal habit and cultural identification. The term “Boys Love” I am using not only can be better recognized in the anglophone context, but also showcases the crucial importance of “boys” in this genre. As noted by McLelland, “Boys Love” has nothing to do with pedophilia, an image that might be misread into this phrase.⁸ Instead, the prototype of “boys” delineates young men who are adorable, handsome, but not effeminate and hence deserve the attention and affection from a more mature person.⁹ Actors of Thai Boys Love series are always called “cute boys,” “sexy boys,” or “cool boys.”¹⁰ In addition, “Boys Love” echoes with my wording “male-male” instead of “gay” or “homosexual.” In Thai Boys Love series, many male characters in love with other boys do not disclose and articulate a gay identity, and some even refuse to embrace it. This topic is discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

⁴ Japanese (in order): *bōizu rabu* ボーイズ ラブ (a.k.a. *bīeru* ビーエル), やおい, 少年愛, 耽美.

⁵ Mandarin (in order): 腐 (derive from the Japanese term *fujoshi* 腐女子, “rotten women” who enjoy male-male love), 耽美 (share same Chinese characters with the Japanese term *tanbi*).

⁶ Thai: วัย (pronunciation: *wai/Y*; come from the Japanese term *yaoi*).

⁷ See, for example, Mark McLelland and James Welker. “An Introduction to ‘Boys Love’ in Japan.” *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, edited by Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaike, Katsuhiko Suganuma, and James Welker. University Press of Mississippi, 2015, p. 3.

⁸ McLelland, Mark. “The World of Yaoi: The Internet, Censorship, and the Global ‘Boys’ Love’ Fandom.” *University of Wollongong Faculty of Arts Archived Papers*, 2005, p. 14.

⁹ In China’s context, for example, there is a group of fans named “mom fans” (*mama fen* 妈妈粉). They see the young male actors in Thai Boys Love series as their sons who should be taken care of.

¹⁰ Prasannam, Natthanai. “The Yaoi Phenomenon in Thailand and Fan/Industry Interaction.” *Plaridel*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2019, p. 64.

Thai Boys Love series are indisputably the most famous and well-received non-animated male-male-love media in China nowadays. Broadly speaking, this thesis explores the reception of Thai Boys Love series in China. Guided by three subtopics, consumption, imagination, and friction, I look into, firstly, how these series are spread and consumed in China with individual, organizational, and governmental involvements; secondly, in which ways these series facilitate certain fantasies, promote certain images, and strengthen certain stereotypes among the Chinese viewers; and thirdly, what could be the potential conflicts simmering below the seemingly harmonious relationship between these series and their Chinese consumers.

Thai Boys Love Series: A Detailed Introduction

The emergence and development of Thai Boys Love series came in the wake of an epochal time period in Thailand's history. Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, witnessed a "queer boom" in the early twenty-first century,¹¹ along with concomitant growing recognition, political legitimacy, and social inclusiveness for non-heterosexual people,¹² relaxed state regulation on queer-related representations,¹³ as well as the popularization of televisions and the Internet. These evolving social changes in the 2000s paved the way for Thai Boys Love series.

I maintain that it was not until the mid 2010s that a significant amount of Thai Boys Love series were systematically produced, gaining both domestic and international popularity. Prior to the mid 2010s, there were sporadic productions of series with male-male-love contents. The earliest Thai series with relatively direct depictions of male-male love is considered to be *Love*

¹¹ Jackson, Peter A. "Bangkok's Early Twenty-First-Century Queer Boom." *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, edited by Peter A. Jackson. Hong Kong University Press, 2011, pp. 17-42.

¹² Ibid., pp. 22, 34.

¹³ Ünaldi, Serhat. "Back in the Spotlight: The Cinematic Regime of Representation of Kathoey and Gay Men in Thailand." *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, edited by Peter A. Jackson. Hong Kong University Press, 2011, pp. 59-80.

8009 (dir. Yojiew and Uppakarn; 2004; a.k.a. *Varieties of Love*). It has an entirely different feeling compared to contemporary Thai Boys Love series: the male-male stories are presented as a subplot and in a manifestly reserved manner.¹⁴ Most Thai series with male-male-love contents in the next ten years, like *Tomorrow, I'll Still Love You* (dir. Viravan; 2009) and *Qi Pao* (dir. Rungwongpanich; 2012), followed this fashion.¹⁵

The role *Love of Siam* (dir. Sakveerakul; 2007), a blockbuster movie, has played in Thai Boys Love media cannot be neglected. Part of the movie focuses on the reunion and love stories between two teenage boys, Tong and Mew,¹⁶ which became an important factor that helped make the movie successful and iconic worldwide. Many people know this movie for its Boys Love contents. The direct portrayal of the male-male romance and a one-time kiss shocked the audience who did not anticipate that,¹⁷ at the same time fostering a new consciousness regarding homosexuality in the Thai society. The two main actors of *Love of Siam*, Mario Maurer and Pchy Witwisit Hiranyawongkul, became popular globally. For example, they were invited by several Chinese companies to participate in various TV shows and even the state-sponsored Mid-autumn Festival Gala in 2012 (fig. 2).¹⁸ The “triumph” of *Love of Siam* gave the entertainment media companies in Thailand the “signal” to pay more attention to this genre and its enormous potential profits.¹⁹

¹⁴ See, for example, Kongkiat Limponsatorn (Alizabeth Lin). “Fuhua wuzui BL wansui! Taiguo BL jü yu kuaguo huaren guanzhong zhi yanjiu” 腐化無罪、BL 萬歲！泰國 BL 劇與跨國華人觀眾之研究 [*A Study of Thailand's Boys Love Drama and Its Transnational Chinese Audiences*] (Master's Thesis, National Taiwan Normal University). Airiti Library, 2020, p. 1.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 10-11.

¹⁶ It is always controversial that whether this movie should be regarded as a “Boys Love movie” (*nang wai* นังวาย) or not. According to the director, Matthew/Ma-deaw Chookiat Sakveerakul, this movie is celebrating a wide variety of loves, not just the male-male love between Tong and Mew.

¹⁷ Farmer, Brett. “Love of Siam: Contemporary Thai Cinema and Vernacular Queerness.” *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, edited by Peter A. Jackson. Hong Kong University Press, 2011, pp. 89, 92

¹⁸ Limponsatorn. *A Study of Thailand's Boys Love Drama and Its Transnational Chinese Audiences*. 2020, p. 7.

¹⁹ Bunyavejchewin, Poowin. “The Wai (Y[aoi]) Genre: Local BL Media in Thailand.” *Mechadamia Conference on Asian Popular Cultures*, Kyoto, 2018, p. 15.

The credit of “the first ever Thai Boys Love series” has been given to *Love Sick* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2014).²⁰ This is not exactly “accurate.” One year before the release of *Love Sick*, a series named *Hormones* (dir. Sugmakanan and Vachiratamporn; 2013) had already showed the love and other dynamics among high school boys in a moderately straightforward manner. A few lesser-known series, like *Love O-net* (dir. Throngprasit; 2014),²¹ are also about Boys Love stories and prior to the debut of *Love Sick*. However, *Love Sick*, the more carefully produced series with explicit male-male-love contents as the main storyline, drew huge attention from domestic and international viewers and created impacts considered to be tantamount to *Love of Siam* years ago. Its title as “the first ever Thai Boys Love series,” on this score, not only indicates that it is the earliest in the perception of most viewers, but also demonstrates that they, looking back from the current moment, acknowledge its vital role in the overall development of Thai Boys Love series. The year of 2014 and the release of *Love Sick* are even remarked as the “turning point” for Thai Boys Love series and movies.²²

Since 2016 and 2017, the world has observed the mushrooming of Thai Boys Love series, including but not limited to *Senior Secret Love: Puppy Honey* (dir. Thongjila; 2016), *Make It Right* (dir. Sawatmaneeikul et al.; 2016), *SOTUS*, *Senior Secret Love: Puppy Honey 2* (dir. Thongjila; 2017), *2 Moons* (dir. Meesuwat; 2017), *Make It Right 2* (dir. Sawatmaneeikul and Wongkulphat; 2017), and *Together with Me* (dir. Boonyoparakarn; 2017). These series utterly opened the global entertainment market, especially in Southeast Asia and East Asia. With the sweeping popularity of Thai Boys Love series, many consumers began to rediscover and redefine

²⁰ This is supported by many scholars (Thomas Baudinette, Kongkiat Limpongsatorn, Natthanai Prasannam, and etc.) and most viewers of Thai Boys Love series.

²¹ The release year of *Love O-net* is 2015 as shown on a few influential online sites, such as MyDramaList, but people can notice that this series had already been uploaded to YouTube back in May 2014.

²² Bunyavejchewin. “The *Wai* (Y[aoi]) Genre: Local BL Media in Thailand.” 2018, p. 23.

the weight of *Love of Siam* and *Love Sick*, entitling them the founder of Thai Boys Love media and Thai Boys Love series, respectively, in spite of a few dissents.

Henceforth Thai Boys Love series have maintained the momentum up to the present day, and Thailand has evolved into a stronghold of male-male-love media. In the year of 2020 alone, more than twenty Thai Boys Love series came out, making the audience titillated yet confused about which series they should watch first (fig. 3 and 4). Meanwhile, the “surplus” empowers the audience to freely choose what they actually like, thus establishing a hierarchy among Thai Boys Love series. Under this environment, the producers endeavor to enhance the quality of the series chiefly through two mechanisms: the physical attractiveness of the actors and the design of the storylines. This vehement competition makes Thai Boys Love series both formulaic and creative. Furthermore, Thai Boys Love series have become highly industrialized and commercialized, accompanied by related music albums, myriad derivative commodities,²³ lucrative offline events, and ubiquitous product placements, promotions, and endorsements (fig. 5).

Thai Boys Love Series in China

Based on my extensive online observations, in China, a sufficient number of viewers formed a decently sized fan community of Thai Boys Love series from 2014 to 2017. They became increasingly aware of the existence of this community and assembled to consume together on Chinese online platforms, such as Bilibili²⁴ and Weibo.²⁵ The earliest Thai Boys Love series,

²³ See, for example, GMMTV’s online shop (<https://www.gmm-tv.com/shop/>) that sells commodities (like T-shirts, cups, and boxsets) relevant to the series GMMTV has produced.

²⁴ Bilibili 哔哩哔哩 (弹幕网), a.k.a. B Site (B zhan B 站), is one of the most popular video sharing platforms in China. After years of development, it has become the Chinese version of YouTube, offering videos of all kinds. It is famous for the function “bullet screens/curtains” (*danmu* 弹幕). Before July 12, 2017, most imported and translated Thai Boys Love series could be watched directly on Bilibili. The *danmu* and the takedown of these series in 2017 are further discussed in Chapter Two.

²⁵ Weibo 微博, formally Sina Microblog 新浪微博, is one of the biggest social media platforms in China, with 523 million monthly active users in June 2020. It is known as a combination of Twitter and Facebook.

especially *Love Sick* (season 1 and 2; season 2: dir. Kusolkulsiri and Wongsukulphat; 2015), *Puppy Honey* (season 1 and 2), *Make It Right* (season 1 and 2), *SOTUS*, *2 Moons*, *Together with Me*, and the movie *Love of Siam*, fostered the initial formation and subsequent development of this community. On top of a Thai name, most Thai Boys Love series have their English name, which is widely used in Thailand and most countries. In China, each series has one or more Chinese name(s) as well that are put forward by the “subtitle groups” that translate these series to Mandarin, and the use of their English name is not as prevalent. For instance, *SOTUS* is referred to as *Yiniansheng* (meaning *Freshman*, which relates to its storylines)²⁶ in China.

The male-male-love genre, in general, is nothing new to the Chinese consumers. It was introduced to China in the 1990s with the influx of Japanese manga and anime and has gradually developed into an extremely popular Internet-based cultural form.²⁷ Japanese Boys Love manga and anime have always been influential in China. Thai Boys Love series, nevertheless, are easier for the Boys Love consumers to make connection to, empathize with, and build belonging in due to the non-animated characteristic. Previous studies concerning this phenomenon of Boys Love in China use mainly if not exclusively the term *danmei*. Yet, in fact, *danmei*, BL, and *fu* function basically the same and could be used interchangeably in the majority of cases. Among Chinese consumers, Thai Boys Love series are referred to as *taiguo danmeijū*, *taiguo BL jū*, and most notably, *taiguo fujū* (abbr. *taifu*).²⁸ As I have pointed out in the footnotes above, all these three terms have Japanese roots.

²⁶ Chinese name: 《一年生》.

²⁷ See, for example, Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu. “*Danmei*, Xianqing, and the Making of a Queer Online Public Sphere in China.” *Communication and the Public*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2016, p. 252; James Welker. “Bōizu rabu (BL) to sono ajia ni okeru henyō · henbō · henka” ボーイズ ラブ (BL) とそのアジアにおける変容 · 変貌 · 変化 [Boys Love and the Transfiguration in Asia], translated by Mana Satō. “BL ga hiraku tobira: henyōsuru ajia no sekushuariti to jendaa” BL が開く扉: 変容するアジアのセクシュアリティとジェンダー [BL Opening Doors: Sexuality and Gender Transfigured in Asia], edited by James Welker. Seidosha, 2019, p. 16.

²⁸ Mandarin (in order): 泰国耽美剧, 泰国 BL 剧, 泰国腐剧 (abbr. 泰腐).

In China, the consumption of Boys Love culture is dominated by young, heterosexual, and urban females.²⁹ Influenced by the Japanese term *fujoshi*, literally “rotten women” who are excited, energized, and infatuated when consuming male-male love, some Chinese female fans self-mockingly call themselves *funü*, which derives from the term *fujoshi* and also means “rotten women.”³⁰ At the same time, the more or less “invisible” men who enjoy Boys Love may call themselves *funan*,³¹ which means “rotten men.” Having long been deemed perverted and even abnormal, Chinese consumers of Boys Love culture, along with other gender minorities, are stigmatized and regulated by the public and others around them. A few of them exercise agency and disrupt the status quo in regard to the stigmatization, marginalization, and discrimination. Tian declares that the queer space of Boys Love in China equips and empowers its practitioners to question and challenge the policing heteronormative culture.³²

Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series tend not to collectively articulate their identity as *funü* and *funan*. They do so not merely to evade the negative connotations of these terms. Rather, *funü* and *funan* might be seen as no longer in vogue. Nowadays, “fan-community girls” (*fanquan nühai*)³³ is a much more fashionable word referring to female fans who exhibit extreme enthusiasm for their idols. In the fan community, the tie of girls (*nühai*) and boys (*nanhai*) to the notion of “fans” can be applied to numerous conditions. Female fans of Thai

²⁹ She’er. “Jiemi taiguo fujü zaoxing chanyelian: touzi zimuzu, ‘toudu’ jianmianhui” 揭秘泰国腐剧造星产业链：投资字幕组，“偷渡”见面会 [Uncover the Industry of How Thai Boys Love Series Produce Idols (in China): Invest Subtitle Groups, Hold Fan Meetings Secretly]. *Tencent News*. 30 Jan. 2019; Yang, Ling, and Yanrui Xu. “Chinese *Danmei* Fandom and Cultural Globalization from Below.” *Boys’ Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Culture in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, edited by Maud Lavin, Ling Yang, and Jing Jamie Zhao. Hong Kong University Press, 2017, p. 3; Tian, Xi. “Homosexualizing ‘Boys Love’ in China: Reflexivity, Genre Transformation, and Cultural Interaction.” *Prism: Theory and Modern Chinese Literature*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2020, p. 104.

³⁰ Mandarin: 腐女 (derive from the Japanese term *fujoshi* 腐女子).

³¹ Mandarin: 腐男 (derive from the Japanese term *fudanshi* 腐男子).

³² Tian. “Homosexualizing ‘Boys Love’ in China.” 2020, p. 108.

³³ Mandarin: 饭圈女孩. The corresponding term “fan-community boys” (*fanquan nanhai* 饭圈男孩) appears less frequently.

Boys Love series call themselves *ta*-Thai girls (*tatai nūhai*).³⁴ Male fans of Tin and Can in *Love by Chance* and *Love by Chance 2: A Chance to Love* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2020) call themselves “TC boys” (TC *nanhai*).³⁵ Moreover, within the fan community of Thai Boys Love series, the identifications of fans are sometimes specified, catering to the niche of each sub-community. To take a case in point, fans of the “couple” (CP)³⁶ Jimmy Karn Kritsanaphan and Tommy Sittichok Pueakpoolpol, main actors of *Why R U* (dir. Wongkulphat; 2020) and *SaifahZon Story* (dir. Wongkulphat; 2020), adopt the name “Mii2” (*mitu*),³⁷ which is in line with the convention of the international fan community. In many cases, local creations are used altogether. Fans of the “couple” (CP) Tay Tawan Vihokratana and New Thitipoom Techaapaikhun in *Kiss* (dir. Susiwa; 2016), *Kiss Me Again*, *Our Skyy*, *Dark Blue Kiss*, and *I’m Tee: Me Too* (dir. Mongkolsawas; 2020) use both the name “polca”³⁸ that obeys the convention of the international fan community and the names “*dainiu* girls/boys” (*dainiu nūhai/nanhai*),³⁹ “*dainiu* fans” (*dainiu fen*),⁴⁰ or “*dainiu* supporters” (*dainiu dang*).⁴¹ *Dainiu*, literally “adorable silly girls,” is a pronouncing play on the nicknames of these two actors, Tay and New.

³⁴ Mandarin: 他泰女孩. *Ta* 他 is the third-person pronoun usually used by people to indicate an “Other” vis-à-vis China or their cultural identifications.

³⁵ Mandarin: TC 男孩. T is for Tin and C is for Can.

³⁶ As the abbreviation of “couple,” “coupling,” or “character pairing,” CP is one of the most prevalent Internet languages in China. Nowadays, it is used more often to describe the (imagined) relations and intimacy of youth, especially celebrities, media characters, and anime figures. Take Japanese manga/anime *Detective Conan* (auth. Aoyama; dir. Kodama et al.; a.k.a. *Case Closed*) as an example. Some Chinese fans “support” (*zhan* 站) Kudō Shin’ichi 工藤新一 and Mōri Ran 毛利蘭 CP (*xinlan* CP 新兰 CP). In opposition, others “support” Edogawa Conan 江戸川コナン (whose identity is in fact Kudō Shin’ichi) and Haibara Ai 灰原哀 CP (*ke’ai* CP 柯哀 CP). These people identify as and are labelled as *xinlan dang* 新兰党 (*dang* originally means Party but means supporters in this context) and *ke’ai dang* 柯哀党, respectively. Due to different personal preferences and interpretations, people can have different and changing “subjective choices” when it comes to CP. CP is a very significant notion in order to understand Boys Love culture, and fan culture in general, in today’s China.

³⁷ Mandarin: 米兔. It literally means “rice bunny.”

³⁸ Thai: โปลคา.

³⁹ Mandarin: 呆妞女孩/男孩.

⁴⁰ Mandarin: 呆妞粉.

⁴¹ Mandarin: 呆妞党. *Dang*, as I have noted before, originally means Party but means supporters in this context.

Thai Boys Love series are mediated mainly by two Chinese subtitle groups, *Tianfu Taijü* (hereafter, Tianfu) and CFan (*Xifan*).⁴² Usually, Thai Boys Love series are uploaded by their production companies to YouTube or other mainstream platforms⁴³ with at least English subtitle so that domestic and international viewers can watch for free.⁴⁴ However, under the “great firewall” that isolates China’s Internet from the outside, most Chinese viewers without a stable Virtual Private Network (VPN) have to rely on the Thai-to-Mandarin subtitle groups. Tianfu was started in 2014 by a group of undergraduate students at Southwestern University of Finance and Economics (Chengdu, Sichuan Province) who heartily love Thai language and culture. *Tianfu* stems from one of Sichuan’s ancient names “land of abundance” (*tianfu zhi guo*),⁴⁵ signifying its birthplace, while *Taijü* means “Thai series.” This group became unexpectedly popular in 2015 among Chinese netizens⁴⁶ owing to its funny way of translating *Lady Boy Friends*. After that, it remained a voluntary and mostly non-profit group. On July 23, 2017, some Tianfu’s core members suddenly announced that they would leave Tianfu and establish a new group named CFan because some “outsiders” registered *Tianfu Taijü* as a commercial brand without their permission. As an underground group then, Tianfu could receive no legal protection for this kind of situation, so these members had to leave with indignation and grievance.⁴⁷ Up to this date, Tianfu and CFan developed separately with hostility toward each other. Because Tianfu has been commercialized and is backed up by companies like FunThaiCulture, it possesses significantly

⁴² Mandarin: 天府泰剧 (字幕组) and 喜翻 (译制组). There are other Thai-to-Mandarin subtitle groups in China, but these two unquestionably dominate the whole industry.

⁴³ For example, Line TV (one of the most popular video sharing platforms in Thailand) and WeTV (the international version of the China-based Tencent Video).

⁴⁴ There are exceptions, like *I Told Sunset About You* (dir. Kuno; 2020), of which certain dramas and documentary episodes were not free at first. However, they are free for the Chinese audience on Chinese platforms.

⁴⁵ Mandarin: 天府之国.

⁴⁶ Netizen, meaning “Internet user,” is a portmanteau of “(Inter)net” and “citizen.”

⁴⁷ I paid close attention to this incident from then on (July 23, 2017 and after) mainly on Weibo. However, some pieces of information might deviate from the so-called “truth,” because of the ubiquity of misinformation and disinformation online.

more resources than CFan, including the copyright of many Thai Boys Love series. Tianfu has 8.95 million followers on Weibo, the main device to circulate information and interact with the fan community, while CFan has 3.47 million.⁴⁸ In addition, Tianfu and CFan work on a wide variety of Thai series, movies, novels, and other cultural works, not just Thai Boys Love series, but what draws the most attention is, without a doubt, the Boys Love ones.

When it comes to Boys Love culture and Thai Boys Love series in China, it is inevitable to talk about governmental censorship. China's censorship on anything queer-related and many other terrains are habitually viewed as rigid.⁴⁹ It holds true if people only probe the provocative policies the state has enforced, such as the "ban" of *Addicted* (dir. Chaijidan; 2016) and the regulation of non-heteronormative media representations published on June 30, 2017. This topic is explicated in detail in Chapter Two, but here I want to illustrate that the degree of censorship in China should neither be downplayed nor be exaggerated. I would also like to clarify that I by no means intend to endorse what the Chinese government has done and is doing in this realm. However, it is necessary to offer a relatively objective evaluation of China's censorship, which is significant for people to better comprehend how Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series agentically respond to and cope with governmental censorship.

Literature Review

This section aims to cover some insights in "Boys Love" scholarship that I have not discussed in previous sections.

The link between Boys Love representations and gay men in reality is a focal point in the scholarly literature. McLelland and Welker state that the genre Boys Love is only tangentially

⁴⁸ Update on April 15, 2021.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Tian. "Homosexualizing 'Boys Love' in China." 2020, pp. 107-108.

connected with the lives of actual gay men.⁵⁰ Nagaike notes the incident in Japan from 1992 to 1996 that a number of gay men intensely criticized Boys Love on the basis of its limited and stereotypical images of the supposedly gay characters. In the opinion of these gay men in reality, on a subconscious level, the female Boys Love writers and readers are in fact homophobic.⁵¹ As a consequence, these Boys Love creators project an ideal regarding what gay men should look like and behave. Tian's research suggests a relatively distinctive trajectory in China. She declares that although Boys Love creators have claimed that male homosexuality in reality is in no way identical to the representations by writers in the genre, homosexuality and sexual minorities in China have become increasingly interwoven with Boys Love. She designates this social and cultural shift "the homosexualization of BL (Boys Love)," which in practice has generated a porous culture that embraces gender diversity and contributes to increasing the visibility of the gay community.⁵² By this token, there seems to be an "absolute" demarcation between Boys Love representations and gay men in reality, but the two sides are frequently entangled with each other wittingly or unwittingly.

The top/bottom (*seme/uke*) convention⁵³ is always under examination too. *Seme/uke* is a strict and obvious gendered relationship in the Japanese model of Boys Love: *seme* are taller, stronger, elder, and with smaller eyes, shorter hair, deeper voice, as well as more masculine traits, while *uke* are shorter, weaker, younger, and with bigger eyes, longer hair, softer voice, as

⁵⁰ McLelland and Welker. "An Introduction to 'Boys Love' in Japan." 2015, p. 3.

⁵¹ Nagaike, Kazumi. "Do Heterosexual Men Dream of Homosexual Men?: BL *Fudanshi* and Discourse on Male Feminization." *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, edited by Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaike, Katsuhiko Suganuma, and James Welker. University Press of Mississippi, 2015, p. 190.

⁵² Tian. "Homosexualizing 'Boys Love' in China." 2020, p. 108.

⁵³ Japanese: 攻め/受け. To learn more, see, for example, Akiko Mizoguchi. "BL shinkaron: bōizu rabu ga shakai wo ugokasu" BL 進化論: ボーイズラブが社会を動かす [*Theorizing BL as a Transformative Genre: Boys' Love Moves the World Forward*]. Ohta Publication, 2015, pp. 70-74.

well as more feminine traits.⁵⁴ Scholars like Welker⁵⁵ and Mizoguchi⁵⁶ regard this system as “roughly reproducing the male-female binary.” Nonetheless, this hegemonic structure has been exported to other societies via the influx of Japanese Boys Love manga and anime. Prassannam indicates that in Thailand’s context, the *seme/uke* trope has been widely employed by fans to describe the Boys Love stars based on their personas.⁵⁷ He astutely detaches the fan-community imaginations and practices from what Thai Boys Love series actually display, since a clear *seme/uke* parallel, in most cases, does not exist or prevail on the screen.

Several scholars contemplate why people consume and are addicted to Boys Love media, with a specific focus on escapism and imaginations. According to Fujimoto, Boys Love emerged as a mechanism offering an escape for women from the social realities of gender suppression and the avoidance of sex(uality), opening up possibilities for them to shift their own viewpoint from passive to active engagement.⁵⁸ Nagaike inspects the male audience of Boys Love, arguing that Boys Love provides them a space to reevaluate, negotiate, and dismantle the socially constructed model of “strong masculinity.”⁵⁹ Limongsatorn claims that Thai Boys Love series are appealing because the audience wants to reveal their awareness of equal rights for the queer community by consuming these series. Also, they long for a “pure relationship” embodied in the represented male-male romance that is not bounded up with marriage or social hierarchy.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ See, for example, Takano Masamune (*seme*) and Onodera Ritsu (*uke*) in Japanese manga/anime *The World's Greatest First Love: The Case of Onodera Ritsu* (auth. Nakamura; dir. Kon; 2011). In Japanese Boys Love culture, this rigid division is not that manifest now, but this influence persists.

⁵⁵ Welker, James. “A Brief History of *Shōnenai*, *Yaoi*, and Boys Love.” *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, edited by Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaike, Katsuhiko Suganuma, and James Welker. University Press of Mississippi, 2015, p. 46.

⁵⁶ Mizoguchi. *Theorizing BL as a Transformative Genre: Boys’ Love Moves the World Forward*. 2020, p. 70.

⁵⁷ Prassannam. “The Yaoi Phenomenon in Thailand and Fan/Industry Interaction.” 2019, p. 65.

⁵⁸ Fujimoto, Yukari. “*Shōnen-ai/yaoi*, BL: 2007-nen genzai no shiten kara” 少年愛/やおい・BL: 2007 年現在の視点から [*Shōnen-ai*, *Yaoi*, BL: From the Perspective of 2007]. *Yuriika*, vol. 39, no. 16, 2007, pp. 36-47.

⁵⁹ Nagaike. “Do Heterosexual Men Dream of Homosexual Men?” 2015, pp. 190-191.

⁶⁰ Limongsatorn. *A Study of Thailand’s Boys Love Drama and Its Transnational Chinese Audiences*. 2020, pp. 96-100.

In China's context, using Zhao et al.'s words, "Chinese-speaking popular cultures have never been so queer as in this digital, globalist age."⁶¹ The scholarship in this paragraph helps people (re)think about China's picture as a totally demonized place for anything queer. In their article, Zhao et al. highlight the Chinese government's "no encouraging, no discouraging, and no promoting" attitude toward any queer culture,⁶² instead of a completely suppressive one. In other words, the celebration of Boys Love can become nothing special, radical, or risky in China nowadays. Zhou analyzes Chinese netizens' party-like matchmaking of two reputational male artists, Wang Lihong (a.k.a. Leehom Wang) and Li Yundi. This fandom even extends to the CCTV Spring Festival Gala, the most influential show in China.⁶³ Zhao resonates with Zhou's finding, stating that the commercialization of same-sex intimacy is common in Chinese reality shows after 2010, such as *The Rap of China*.⁶⁴ Bunyavejchewin's discovery can be applied to China's landscape as well: young male bodies and masculine homoerotic expressions have increasingly become "selling points."⁶⁵ In China, there is a prevailing notion "selling gayness intentionally" (*maifu*).⁶⁶

In closing, in the last part of their article, Yang and Xu jump out of the "locus" of Boys Love and investigate Xianqing, a well-known website for original and adapted Chinese Boys Love literature, as "a nationalistic transnational Chinese sphere" where participants demonstrate a strong nationalistic and progovernment stance whenever political issues and discussion pop

⁶¹ Zhao, Jing Jamie, Ling Yang, and Maud Lavin. "Introduction." *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Culture in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, edited by Maud Lavin, Ling Yang, and Jing Jamie Zhao. Hong Kong University Press, 2017, p. xi.

⁶² Ibid., p. xvi.

⁶³ Zhou, Shuyan. "From Online BL Fandom to the CCTV *Spring Festival Gala*: The Transforming Power of Online Carnival." *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Culture in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, edited by Maud Lavin, Ling Yang, and Jing Jamie Zhao. Hong Kong University Press, 2017, pp. 91-110.

⁶⁴ Zhao, Jing Jamie. "Queerness Within Chineseness: Nationalism and Sexual Morality on and off the Competition Show *The Rap of China*." *Continuum*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2020, pp. 484-499.

⁶⁵ Bunyavejchewin. "The *Wai* (Y[aoi]) Genre: Local BL Media in Thailand." 2018, p. 26.

⁶⁶ Mandarin: 卖腐.

up.⁶⁷ This angle eschews the “male-male essence” of Boys Love culture, which inspires me to self-interrogate how to implement a more comprehensive analysis on the reception of Thai Boys Love series in China as a transnational/transcultural media flow. Male-male love, as the “nature” of Thai Boys Love series, is pivotal, yet I also need to avoid being trapped there and proactively dissect other noteworthy aspects.⁶⁸

Argument, Approach, Significance, and Outline

It is undoubtedly significant to construe Thai Boys Love series as a male-male-love media within China’s intricate and distinctive social landscape, but people should not limit their scrutiny to this predominant queer framework. They should also turn their attention away from the “male-male essence” of these series and (re)investigate them just like other transnational/transcultural media flows arriving in China. Put differently, when people analyze Thai Boys Love series, the male-male theme should not overshadow other attributes of these series, which affords a more profound understanding of Thai Boys Love series, contemporary China’s specific context, and the multiple connections in between.

This interdisciplinary thesis is built on my close reading of the most well-received Thai Boys Love series from 2014 to April 2021, my extensive online observations since 2016, and a wide variety of secondary sources in English, Chinese, Japanese, and Thai. This thesis contains some specific textual and visual analysis on Thai Boys Love series whenever necessary, but it mostly examines them as a “group.”

⁶⁷ Yang and Xu. “Chinese *Danmei* Fandom and Cultural Globalization from Below.” 2017, pp. 3-19.

⁶⁸ For example, in Chapter Five, I examine why the relationship between Thai Boys Love series and their Chinese consumers can be vulnerable under the rise of nationalism and the comeback of Sinocentrism among most Chinese people today. In such way, I treat Thai Boys Love series simply as one of the foreign media flows in China, like South Korean soap operas or Hollywood movies.

The results of this research are groundbreaking in their attention to the relationship between Thai Boys Love series, a globally outstanding media phenomenon, and their Chinese consumers under the specific context. “Thai Boys Love series in China” is going to illuminate people’s understanding toward transnational/transcultural media flow. Compared to the immense popularity worldwide, Boys Love culture is still an understudied realm in academia. Previous research on Thai Boys Love series, and Boys Love culture in general, is mainly from institutions around the Pacific, especially academies in Australia, Japan, Thailand, and China. This thesis hopes to draw attention from people in Euro-American societies to this burgeoning media trend and lay a solid foundation for future research.

This thesis attempts to delve into four noteworthy aspects of “the reception of Thai Boys Love series in China.” Chapter Two continues to explore how Thai Boys Love series are disseminated and consumed in China. It makes clear how the consumers agentically help these series elude governmental censorship through self-censoring strategies and uncovers a carnival under the censorship. Chapter Three concerns the lived experiences and day-to-day struggles most viewers are facing, elucidating how Thai Boys Love series provide a utopian unconstrained world for them. Chapter Four complicates the seemingly positive-only influences Thai Boys Love series might have in China, disclosing how these series could promote and reinforce certain stereotypes and ideals that are obviously problematic. It is divided into two parts: one is about Thailand as a fantasized “gay paradise,”⁶⁹ and the other is about the widespread “gay archetype” and its consequences. Chapter Five starts with the #nnevvy incident in April 2020 and then

⁶⁹ The image of Thailand as a “gay paradise” that this thesis revisits in Chapter Four was raised and discussed by Peter A. Jackson in 1999. See Peter A. Jackson. “Tolerant but Unaccepting: The Myth of a Thai ‘Gay Paradise.’” *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, edited by Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook. Silkworm Books, 1999, pp. 226-242. I had a brief conversation with Emeritus Professor Jackson regarding this in August 2020 by email.

unfolds the vulnerability of the alleged “Chinese-Thai romance” with the rise of nationalism and the comeback of Sinocentrism among most Chinese people in the wake of China’s impressive development. Chapter Six closes this thesis with a final discussion, the limitations, and a call for future research in this fascinating domain.



Figure 1. Poster of *Until We Meet Again* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2019), one of the many Thai Boys Love series. With a romantic ambiance, it features three male-male couples. Downloaded from Twitter account @theseriesy_th.



Figure 2. Mid-autumn Festival Gala in 2012. Mario Maurer and Pchy Witwisit Hiranyawongkul, main actors of *Love of Siam* (dir. Sakveerakul; 2007), performed *Mingyue Qianli Jixiangsi*, a Chinese song appeared in the movie. Screenshotted from Tencent Video.



Figure 3 and 4. “2020 New & Next” event hosted by GMMTV at GMM Live House, Central World (Bangkok, Thailand). This free event presented twenty-one series and one movie GMMTV planned to produce in 2020. Boys Love ones induced most ecstatic screams from the participants, especially those starring actors who had appeared in previous Thai Boys Love series, like Earth Pirapat Watthanaset Siri. These kinds of events are held by other production companies too. Taken by the author on October 15, 2019.



Figure 5. The advertisement of Beauty Buffet's whitening facial foam. It features Saint Suppapong Udomkaewkanjana in *Love by Chance* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2018) and *Why R U* (dir. Wongsukulphat; 2020). This facial foam is one of the most popular products among tourists who come to Thailand. Made by Beauty Buffet.

Chapter Two

Censorship, Self-Censorship, and Carnival Under Censorship

When it comes to fan culture in China, there is always a “competition” feeling pervading the dynamic cyberspace. Fans, with intense passion and motivation, are committed to glorifying the individuals or groups they like. In July 2019, for example, a weeklong “contest” took place on Weibo between fans of Cai Xukun, the then 20-year-old rising Chinese idol who is known for his “soft masculinity” and cuteness, and fans of Zhou Jielun (a.k.a. Jay Chou), the then 40-year-old Taiwanese singer who has dominated the Chinese-language pop world for years. It was triggered by Cai’s fans who uploaded posts on several online sites joking at Chou’s invisibility on Weibo. A multitude of Chou’s fans who did not frequent Weibo before immediately gathered and fought back, bringing Chou to the number one spot of Weibo “super topic” (*chaohua*)⁷⁰ ranking of that week and laughing at the ignorance and naivety of Cai’s fans.⁷¹

In contrast to the aggression of this competitive exchange, Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series usually behave in a relatively low-key manner. To be sure, they are willing to circulate related information online and are enlivened by the popularity of the series or the actors, but consumers who have spent a certain amount of time immersed in this community and know “the rules of the game” (hereafter, rules) would work together to prevent any of the series or the actors from becoming overwhelmingly popular. Nearly all Chinese consumers of Thai

⁷⁰ *Chaohua* 超话, literally “super topic,” is a public online space for all kinds of heated topics on Weibo, which includes idols, music, variety shows, TV series, and the list goes on. There is a weekly ranking, signifying who and what are most popular at the moment.

⁷¹ See, for example, “i21st.” “Zhou Jielun ‘zhongyu yingle’ Cai Xukun, zhonglaonian fensi huole! Ran’er beihou de zhaxieshi ni keneng hai buzhidao” 周杰伦 “终于赢了” 蔡徐坤，中老年粉丝火了！然而背后的这些事你可能还不知道 [Zhou Jielun Eventually Won Cai Xukun. “Elder” Fans are Ignited and Mobilized! Yet You May Not Know the Dynamics Behind It]. *i21st*. 23 Jul. 2019.

Boys Love series, including informed viewers/fans, subtitle groups, and event organizers, engage in self-censorship for the “survival” of these series and actors. This chapter continues with the discussion from Chapter One, aiming to cast light on the censorship from the Chinese state, the agentic and strategic self-censorship practiced by Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series, and the carnival under censorship.

China’s Censorship on Queer-Related Cultures

China’s state censorship is nothing unfamiliar for most readers, and it is, in most circumstances, automatically regarded as a stringent and non-negotiable system. Fueled by the ubiquity of media representations on discrete but interconnected issues like the crackdown of Hong Kong protests and the deployment of concentration camps in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region carried out by the Chinese government, the notorious image of China’s censorship, along with surveillance and suppression, appears to be unassailable. However, this oversimplified and to some extent manipulated impression will hamper people’s understanding about how censorship functions and how Chinese people, Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series in the case of this thesis, proactively and strategically get around the censorship.

As a matter of fact, China’s censorship is documented as porous⁷² instead of airtight, which is seconded by my online observations as well. As for queer-related cultures, the attitude of the state is actually laissez-faire, permitting consumers to exercise agency and find ways to grapple with the censorship. Having said that, I am not denying the might of the censorship that polices the whole society every single moment: anything disrupting and threatening the Party, the state, or the mainstream collectivity will probably confront censorship. For example, people

⁷² For details, see Margaret E Roberts. *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China’s Great Firewall*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

should be extremely careful when they talk about anything politically sensitive online, such as the status of Taiwan⁷³ and the past of the Communist Party of China (CPC).⁷⁴ In this light, queer-related cultures, particularly male-male-love representations, can be less troublesome if presented with due caution. Same-sex behaviors between males were decriminalized with the abolishment of the “hooligan” law in 1997, and it was further unlisted from the official register of mental illnesses in 2001.⁷⁵ Since the introduction of Boys Love from Japan in the 1990s, this genre has coexisted with governmental censorship and continued to flourish until the present, attracting millions of active consumers. Blued, launched in 2012 and developed by the Chinese company BlueCity, has become the largest gay dating app worldwide, with 24 million users in China alone as of early 2020.⁷⁶ The display of male-male intimacy has always been a popular and eye-catching theme on Douyin (Tik Tok) (fig. 6 and 7). Although these examples illustrate that queer-related cultures can be less sensitive in the context of today’s China, some did clash with governmental censorship. The most well-known incident so far is perhaps the takedown of *Addicted* (dir. Chaijidan; 2016), an unprecedentedly popular Chinese Boys Love series, which I explicate later in this chapter.

As can be seen, the extent of China’s censorship should neither be downplayed nor be exaggerated. It exists and never stops changing. Chinese people tend to see Hu Jintao’s regime (2003-2013) and Xi Jinping’s early years in power as tolerant, stable, ascendant, and heading to a liberal destination. It is possible that people collectively romanticize the past under Xi’s strict

⁷³ Nowadays, it is safer to use “China’s Taiwan” (*zhongguo taiwan* 中国台湾) instead of solely “Taiwan” as a reference. Even non-Chinese citizens in China and elsewhere are expected to obey it: a relevant event is detailed in Chapter Five.

⁷⁴ For example, on the Long March, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Zhou. “From Online BL Fandom to the CCTV *Spring Festival Gala*.” 2017, p. 96; Tian. “Homosexualizing ‘Boys Love’ in China.” 2020, pp. 115-116.

⁷⁶ Liu, Yiling. “How a Dating App Helped a Generation of Chinese Come out of the Closet.” *The New York Times Magazine*. 5 Mar. 2020.

domestic regulations and aggressive international policies in recent years, but governmental censorship in those years was probably at a historical low since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. For instance, during Hu's regime, queer-centered organizations developed with bravery and aspiration, such as Beijing LGBT Center (*Beijing Tongzhi Zhongxin*; founded in 2008), Beijing Queer Film Festival (*Beijing Ku'er Yingzhan*; founded in 2001), Common Language (*Tongyu*; founded in 2005), and ShanghaiPRIDE (*Shanghai Jiao'ao Jie*; founded in 2009).⁷⁷ Although there were regulations on queer-related cultures then,⁷⁸ the policies were not that strictly enforced compared to the situations nowadays. Most queer activism in China started in 2008,⁷⁹ when the Chinese state was starved to express its liberty and inclusiveness through the Beijing Olympics. During Xi's early years in power, for instance, a movie named *The Dead End* (dir. Cao; 2015), containing a kissing and sexually suggestive scene of two male characters, was screened in cinemas nationwide, which would be unimaginable for Chinese people today.

Xi gradually tightened the controls in China in almost all realms, including censorship. People can sense the tensions, and some claim that he wants to bring back the Mao Zedong-style dictatorship. Certainly, this change has seriously impacted queer-related cultures. On June 30, 2017, China Netcasting Service Association (CNSA), subordinated to and supervised by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT), published a new set of guidelines regulating online contents and programs. In this regulation, homosexuality, incest, and sadomasochism are listed together and categorized as abnormal sexual activity, and

⁷⁷ Mandarin (in order): 北京同志中心, 北京酷儿影展, 同语, 上海骄傲节.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Hongwei Bao. *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China*. NIAS Press, 2018, pp. 154-156.

⁷⁹ This statement came from Xu Bin from Common Language (*Tongyu*) during The 7th Chinese Sexuality Studies Conference 第七届中国性研究学术研讨会. I attended this conference (August 28 to 30, 2019) and the preceding academic seminar (The 9th Chinese Sexuality Studies Seminar on Theories and Practices 第九期“性社会学理论与实践”研讨班; August 24 to 27, 2019), which were “secretly” organized by Renmin University of China and Harbin Medical University and held in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province.

their media representations are banned.⁸⁰ Soon after, on July 12, 2017, a significant amount of media works of all kinds, including Thai Boys Love series and other male-male-love media from different countries, were removed from Bilibili, the then biggest online platform to watch the media works of this genre.⁸¹ Although this takedown was implemented in the name of copyright protection, people could not help but link it to the new regulation published days earlier. People were disappointed and speechless, and Thai Boys Love series were hit hard. Tianfu, as the single dominant subtitle group at that time, guaranteed the fan community that Thai Boys Love series could be watched through other methods, at least through Baidu Web Drive,⁸² a Cloud service for file storage. Tianfu, however, also reminded fans to keep an eye on future policies. On April 12, 2019, both Weibo “super topic” (*chaohua*) “les” and Douban⁸³ community “LesSky” were banned. In the same vein, on August 13, 2020, ShanghaiPRIDE abruptly announced that they would cancel all upcoming activities and take a break from scheduling any future event without indicating any reason.⁸⁴ This kind of “terror” continues to this date, and many people no longer feel surprised if anything sensitive disappears with no warning beforehand.

On the other hand, as I have mentioned above, China’s censorship is not airtight. Despite the fact that the censorship is there, and its degree keeps changing, there is always more or less room left for people to think up strategies to get around. Shanghai Queer Film Festival (*Shanghai Ku’er Yingzhan*; a.k.a. SHQFF; founded in 2016)⁸⁵ stays active and vigorous. The above-noted thriving Chinese Boys Love (*danmei*) literature, among other cultural products, and the portrayal

⁸⁰ See, for example, Tian. “Homosexualizing ‘Boys Love’ in China.” 2020, p. 118.

⁸¹ Although Thai Boys Love series are gone on Bilibili, lots of fan-edited versions of Thai Boys Love series can be found there even today, so is *Take Guy Out Thailand*, a gay dating show produced by TV Thunder, which is as sensitive as Thai Boys Love series.

⁸² Baidu Web Drive 百度网盘 (a.k.a. Baidu Wangpan or Baidu Net Disk).

⁸³ Douban 豆瓣, launched in 2005, is a famous website for culture-related activities and is particularly known for people’s discussion on media works of all kinds.

⁸⁴ See the official website of ShanghaiPRIDE: <https://www.shpride.com/?lang=en>.

⁸⁵ Mandarin: 上海酷儿影展.

of bromance (*jiking*)⁸⁶ in short videos also attest to the porosity of China's censorship. As such, countless queer-related cultures are still flourishing in contemporary China, although they are coexisting timorously with the censorship and heading to an unpredictable future. Meanwhile, Chinese people have been growingly aware of the deterioration of China's overall landscape for queer-related cultures and learned to behave accordingly. The immensely popular Chinese online series *The Untamed* (dir. Zheng and Chen; 2019) is a case in point. It was adapted from an original Chinese Boys Love website novel with homoromantic and homoerotic depiction,⁸⁷ but in the media representations, the relationship between the two male protagonists, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, is presented as a male-male "friendship" accompanied by a strong emotional attachment. The audience knows this is a *de facto* unspeakable romance masked under their brotherhood camouflage. Many male-male-love scenes were filmed, but ironically, they are only showed outside of China for international viewers.

Therefore, what is at stake is to self-regulate and successfully maintain a balance. If things are not radical enough to cross the threshold and hence "ostentatious" for the censors, they are mostly safe. More and more Chinese people are aware of the "rules" and welcome various tactics to deal with governmental censorship. This is exactly the case for Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series, a queer-related target of China's censorship.

Self-Censorship by Chinese Consumers of Thai Boys Love Series

To ensure the safety and prospects of Thai Boys Love series, almost all Chinese consumers, including individuals (viewers/fans) and organizations (subtitle groups, event organizers), are

⁸⁶ Mandarin: 基情. 基 comes from Cantonese pronunciation of "gay," and 情 means emotions or sentiments. This term does not necessarily relate to gayness. Instead, it is widely used to describe bromance (a portmanteau of "bro" and "(ro)mance") or simply closeness of males.

⁸⁷ The original novel is *Modao Zushi* 《魔道祖师》 (auth. Moxiangtongxiu; 2015).

practicing self-censorship. Meanwhile, they also constantly seek a balance: they manage to avoid governmental censorship with minimized self-censorship to gain the satisfaction from their participations in Boys Love culture. As a result, they always evaluate the social context and then adjust the degree of their self-censorship accordingly. They usually need to be very cautious, but they sometimes can relax a little bit and treat Thai Boys Love series in the same manner as those non-sensitive media products, such as the Thai crime thriller movie *Bad Genius* (dir. Poonpiriya; 2017). How they act and carry out the various self-censoring strategies is shaped by China's social context at the moment, which, as I said before, keeps changing. Additionally, they do not try to challenge the status quo but endeavor to live with the state apparatus.

Extracting insights from previous experiences, they collectively extrapolate methods that can distance Thai Boys Love series from governmental censorship. One incident they like to revisit is the aforementioned “ban” of *Addicted*. This series, depicting the male-male-love stories of Gu Hai and Bai Luoyin, drew unprecedented attention from the public. It received around ten million hits on January 29, 2016, the day it premiered. Within a month, this series garnered more than 100 million views on all video sharing platforms and the hashtag “Addicted” accumulated around 840 million views on Weibo.⁸⁸ Moreover, it generated a large scale of online discussion not only about the series or the actors, but also issues like same-sex marriage, human rights, and even the CPC. In the eyes of the censors, it went too far and thus “deserved” being censored: on February 22, 2016, this series was removed from all Chinese public online platforms. Through a nuanced investigation, it is not a “complete ban” per se. As noted by Roberts, in most cases, governmental censorship in China is more like a “tax” on information, which forces users to pay

⁸⁸ See, for example, Yang Lu and Rui Yang. “Wangjū ‘shangyin’ bei xiajia yin fenjizhi reyi” 网剧《上瘾》被下架引分级制热议 [The Takedown of *Addicted* Generated Discussion on TV Rating System]. *Beijing Business Today*. 24 Feb. 2016.

money or spend more time if they want to access the censored material.⁸⁹ Although *Addicted* could no longer be accessed directly online, it has been circulated on Baidu Web Drive and on platforms like YouTube that require VPN for mainland users. In addition, this series is still actively discussed on Weibo by a large number of participants, and its “super topic” (*chaohua*) has gained 330 million reads.⁹⁰ From then on, nonetheless, efforts are needed for Chinese people to access this series. The two main actors, Huang Jingyu and Xu Weizhou, were prohibited from appearing together on screen. Akin to *Addicted*, Thai Boys Love series involve male-male-love stories that are deemed sensitive by the state. For *Addicted*, the governmental censorship was rendered mainly by its overwhelming popularity but also by its intense description of male-male intimacy, including many sexually suggestive scenes. To some extent, this incident informs and enlightens Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series as for how they can help these series and actors eschew governmental censorship.

Controlling popularity is an important strategy. Online platforms where people can watch Thai Boys Love series directly have become increasingly decentralized. Take Tianfu, the most influential Thai-to-Mandarin subtitle group, as an example. After the takedown of Thai Boys Love series from Bilibili in July 2017, Tianfu started to cooperate with a considerable number of online platforms, including *Renren Shipin*, *Diyidan*, *Fantexi*, *Quanfen TV*, *Xigua Shipin*, Bilibili Live Stream, Weibo, and WeChat Mini Program⁹¹ where Thai Boys Love series can be shared. Tianfu also developed an app called *Sawadi*⁹² for Android users, which was available from late 2018 to late 2019. Among all these partnerships, some have entered the dustbin of history due to

⁸⁹ Roberts. *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*. 2018, p. 2.

⁹⁰ Updated on April 15, 2021.

⁹¹ Chinese names (in order): 人人视频, 第一弹, 范特西, 圈粉 TV, 西瓜视频, 哔哩哔哩直播, 微博, 微信迷你小程序. This is not an exhaustive list, and there will be more in the future.

⁹² The app's name *Sawadi* 萨瓦滴 is a parody on “hello/goodbye” in Thai (*sawatdee* สวัสดี).

sudden shutdown or conflict with Tianfu, while some are still in operation now. In addition, since both Tianfu and CFan always save the translated Thai Boys Love series to Baidu Web Drive for people to download and in case all direct online accesses would be invalidated, it is easy to get a copy of these series. Many other unauthorized platforms just upload these series for consumption without the approval from the subtitle groups. However, it appears that the subtitle groups do not mind. In this way, the viewers disperse to different platforms to watch Thai Boys Love series. Admittedly, there are major platforms with large gathering of viewers, but minor platforms can always dilute the “density” on the major platforms and thereby protect them from the gaze of governmental censorship. The existence of several major platforms further scatters the viewers.⁹³ Given that the total of the audience does not change, Thai Boys Love series would, in this way, seem “less popular” based on the data on each site.

At the same time, Chinese viewers/fans of Thai Boys Love series purposefully control the popularity on Weibo, the most saturated platform for online discussion and interactions of these series. “Hot search” (*resou*)⁹⁴ on Weibo is a real-time indicator of popularity, and there is a ranking. Informed Chinese fans of Thai Boys Love series will manage to prevent these series from appearing on the “hot search” list, let alone becoming one of the top trends. Consequently, although they are energized by Thai Boys Love series, especially the newly released ones, many will consciously restrain from their participations if there seems to have too many participants already. This is an attempt to keep these series away from the unwanted governmental attention. However, some fans are not familiar with these “rules,” and sometimes the series are just too stimulating to not discuss. On October 14, 2020, episode 8 of *Love by Chance 2: A Chance to*

⁹³ When I composed this thesis from August 2020 to April 2021, the major platforms to watch Thai Boys Love series directly were *Renren Shipin*, Weibo, and WeChat Mini Programs. It is probably not the case anymore the time you read this line.

⁹⁴ Mandarin: 热搜. It is similar to “Trending” on Twitter.

Love (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2020) was released. In this episode, Tin confesses his love to Can and they have sex (not directly portrayed, for sure), which was extremely exciting for the audience after a long time of waiting. Many rushed to Weibo to express their exhilaration, making this topic trending. Informed Chinese fans were anxious that this series would face consequences. As the only authorized translator of this series, Tianfu immediately reported this “trending” incident through its WeChat Public Platform.⁹⁵ Instead of explicitly divulging the “rules,” Tianfu selected several comments from the informed fans to “educate” the uninformed fans regarding how to behave appropriately and warn some of the possible consequences. For example, one comment Tianfu chose to present under its article argued, “do not make this series trending at all costs, or this series can only be watched on Baidu Web Drive in the future.”⁹⁶

Regulating sensitivity is also a remarkable tactic. Because Thai Boys Love series are sensitive in China’s context by nature, what the subtitle groups are able to do is making them less radical, should it be needed. In late 2019, it seemed that another round of strict governmental censorship was about to take place. Under this atmosphere, Tianfu and CFan self-censored the potentially provocative scenes for public representations. They cut, covered, or at least pixelated the intense contents, such as long kissing scenes and sexually suggestive scenes, when they translated Thai Boys Love series released at that time. It was particularly manifest in *TharnType* (dir. Sintanapardee; 2019), a series full of homoerotic scenes between the two male characters, Tharn and Type. They would then save the uncensored version of these series to the more private Baidu Web Drive that requires certain efforts from the audience to access. This vigilance is

⁹⁵ Mandarin: 微信公众平台. It is a platform on WeChat where people (including government officials) can register as “official accounts” and post their creations (mostly articles of all kinds). Most accounts can only post once per day or per week, which depends on the account type. To learn more about it, see Xianhui Che and Barry Ip. *Social Networks in China*. Elsevier Science, 2017, pp. 63-70.

⁹⁶ Mandarin: “千万别上热搜, 不然这剧以后只能(百度)网盘见了.” This comment received many likes, and many other comments echoed with it.

dependent on China's ever-changing big environment. As noted by Zhou, "one feature of China's online regulation and censorship of homosexuality is that it oscillates between being strict and being lax, and it is not always effective in practice, thus leaving a quite ambiguous space for netizens to test."⁹⁷ Sometimes, the subtitle groups do not self-censor any scenes from Thai Boys Love series. In mid 2020, for instance, they just translated and uploaded these series the way they originally are without any adjustment.

Chinese fans, on the other side, try to limit their public discussion on anything sensitive related to Thai Boys Love series, even if loosely. How to use VPN is a representative example. Many Chinese fans of Thai Boys Love series hope to access banned social media apps like Twitter and Instagram to stay closer to the actors and directors they are fond of. Unfortunately, using VPN, known as "climbing over the (fire)wall" (*fanqiang*) or satirically "scientifically surfing the Internet" (*kexue shangwang*),⁹⁸ is considered as illegal in China, notwithstanding the fact that the law is seldom stringently carried out. Therefore, it has become a taboo for most public online communities that are under governmental surveillance. Fans of Thai Boys Love series, unsurprisingly, do not want these series and actors to get into trouble because of this kind of "mistake." In the pinned post of Weibo "super topic" (*chaohua*) community for Thai actors Off Jumpol Adulkittiporn and Gun Atthaphan Phunsawat, the person in charge requests all participants to avoid mentioning "VPN" in this community, no matter in what format. Otherwise, they reserve the rights to block any post that violates this regulation (fig. 8) before the censors may do so. As demonstrated previously, Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series pursue a balance and are inclined to minimize their self-censorship whenever possible. Within relatively private online communities where censors do not visit as frequently, like WeChat groups for

⁹⁷ Zhou. "From Online BL Fandom to the CCTV *Spring Festival Gala*." 2017, p. 96.

⁹⁸ Mandarin (in order): 翻墙 and 科学上网.

fans, members usually assume that they possess more freedom to discuss sensitive topics than on directly accessible online platforms.

As I have discussed before, the takedown of Thai Boys Love series in July 2017 was enforced in the name of copyright protection. Learning also from this incident, the subtitle groups become more aware of copyright and always enunciate the legitimacy of translating these series. To be sure, Chinese subtitle groups of all kinds had been deeply involved in the informal cultural economy, making use of the media works without getting permission from the copyright owners. In recent years, however, more and more organizations have begun to spend money to acquire copyright.⁹⁹ This change remains applicable for Tianfu and CFan. According to members of Tianfu, nowadays, this group buys the copyright of Thai Boys Love series directly from the production companies. On condition that the copyright of a series is sold exclusively to Tianfu, members of CFan and other smaller Thai-to-Mandarin subtitle groups will not translate that series.¹⁰⁰ Freeing the dissemination of Thai Boys Love series from any copyright infringement provides another shield against censor attempts from the state.

Aside from subtitle groups and viewers/fans, Chinese event organizers also take pains to conduct self-censorship. The “HS Boys” story at the very beginning of this thesis vividly expounds such practices of detaching the actors from the Thai Boys Love series they are in and relinking them to an “idol group,” a non-troublesome image. Examples alike are too many to be enumerated. From mid 2017 to early 2018, when the six main actors of *2 Moons* (dir. Meesuwan; 2017) came to Chengdu, Hangzhou, Wuhan, Tianjin, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou for fan

⁹⁹ Hu, Kelly. “Between Informal and Formal Cultural Economy: Chinese Subtitle Groups and Flexible Accumulation in the Age of Online Viewing.” *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Popular Culture*, edited by Koichi Iwabuchi, Eva Tsai, and Chris Berry. Routledge, 2020, p. 49.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Limongsatorn. *A Study of Thailand’s Boys Love Drama and Its Transnational Chinese Audiences*. 2020, pp. 69-71; She’er. “Uncover the Industry of How Thai Boys Love Series Produce Idols (in China): Invest Subtitle Groups, Hold Fan Meetings Secretly.” 2019.

meetings, they adopted the name “GBKCTT,” a simple assembly of their nickname initials.¹⁰¹ GBKCTT was seldom used by Chinese fans. Rather, they clearly knew that it was an anonym that had to be created for these Thai boys to enter China (fig. 9). Granted that a few Chinese event organizers failed to dissociate these actors from the series they are in, such as “SOTUS S fan meetings” in Wuhan and Wuxi in mid 2018, it could be appreciated either as a “test” toward the “oscillation” of governmental censorship or as a “trust” toward China’s social context then. Moreover, these Thai actors behave in a reserved manner during fan meetings in China. Outside of the mainland, like in Hong Kong, Taipei, Bangkok, Manila, Seoul, or Tokyo, there is normally no constraint for them to show male-male intimacy on stage and sell gayness. In comparison, it often becomes a male-male brotherhood in China’s fan meetings, although they occasionally cunningly disclose “hints” of a supposedly closer relationship, such as looking right into each other’s eyes with smile. Interestingly, Chinese event organizers consciously abandon Beijing and Shanghai where governmental censorship is much more difficult to evade. Instead, they choose other modernized first-tier and second-tier cities with abundant fans of Thai Boys Love series to hold fan meetings.

I would like to rearticulate that these tactics and examples above apply only to the time periods when these consumers feel that self-censorship is necessary after assessing China’s social context at the moment. The degree of their self-censorship keeps changing accordingly as well. They sometimes are quite relaxed if not unrestrained. At the end of 2020, a huge group of fans of Thai Boys Love series were organized and mobilized, using their votes to make *I Told Sunset About You* (dir. Kuno; 2020) the “most popular overseas drama of the 2020 Weibo awards,” with its main actors, PP Krit Amnuaydechorn and Billkin Putthipong Assaratanakul,

¹⁰¹ GBKCTT is for God Itthipat Thanit, Bas Suradej Pinnirat, Kim Varodom Khemmonta, Copter Panuwat Kerdthongtavee, Tae Darvid Kreepolrer, and Tee Thanapon Jarujitranon.

the top two of the “most popular overseas star of the 2020 Weibo awards.” It was something risky, but luckily the series or the actors have not yet faced any consequences. Most of the time, Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series are aware of the might of governmental censorship and their “responsibility” to practice self-censorship, which, by this token, can be regarded as a meticulous act toward a potential threat. Thus, they stay cautious and alert, or at least they know they should.

In sum, through all these efforts by Chinese viewers/fans, subtitle groups, as well as event organizers, Thai Boys Love series and the actors seem to be attentively safeguarded. They exercise their agency and come up with strategies to make use of the space left under the porous governmental censorship. This is to ensure that these series remain safe and easily accessible under current circumstances.

Carnival Under Censorship

In spite of the hegemony of governmental censorship, almost no Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series tend to undermine it. It appears that most of them are pretty contented with the status quo and the flourishing of these series in China. Their collective reluctance to stand up and resist is caused by numerous societal, historical, and ideological factors. What they are always prioritizing is the carnivalesque consumption that is still possible under today’s social context. The idea of “90 percent freedom”¹⁰² in the novel *The Fat Years* (auth. Chan; 2009) can be applied to this scenario. Although Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series are not entirely satisfied for the reality that they need to continuously stay alerted and practice self-censorship

¹⁰² “90 percent freedom” (*jiucheng ziyou* 九成自由) is used by Chinese writer Chan Koonchung in his sci-fi (science fiction) novel *The Fat Years* to delineate people’s living conditions in the fictional Chinese society after China enters a “golden age of ascendancy” but is still under a one-party rule. See Koonchung Chan. “Shengshi: zhongguo 2013 nian” 盛世: 中国 2013 年 [*The Fat Years*, 2009], translated by Michael S. Duke. Anchor Books, 2011, p. 145.

under the state apparatus, this “90 percent freedom” is acceptable for them, and they prioritize to focus on enjoying consuming these series.

The carnivalesque consumption is vibrant and flamboyant, which is, in addition to the dynamic fan meetings or lively online discussion, well crystallized by the “bullet screens” (*danmu*; a.k.a. “bullet curtains”)¹⁰³ covered on these Thai Boys Love series. “Bullet screens” is a function on many video sharing platforms that enables instant comments from the audience to be overlaid on the screen directly and temporarily. Media works with popularity are always covered by plentiful interactive and sometimes colorful bullet screens (fig. 10), which can be turned off simply by clicking a button. Usually scrolling from right to left or popping up in the middle and then vanishing, bullet screens can be used by the audience to anonymously express excitement, confusion, complain, or just nonsense to all other viewers who are watching or later watch the same video. Studies suggest that this technology provides a more engaging “social viewing” experience for the audience.¹⁰⁴ This engaging viewing experience is exceedingly important for Chinese fans of Thai Boys Love series, which is another reason why they manage to protect the public online platforms that enable bullet screens to function, even though Baidu Web Drive (private and without bullet screens) is always available for them to watch Thai Boys Love series alone. Among all the major platforms in late 2020 for Chinese viewers to watch Thai Boys Love series, *Renren Shipin* has become the most welcomed one, which also reflects the crucial significance of bullet screens. This app enables the audience to send real-time colorful texts and emojis (fig. 11): this feeling of watching together and “talking with” others in the fan community is captivating, making Thai Boys Love series more compelling.

¹⁰³ *Danmu* 弹幕 (share same Chinese characters with the Japanese term *danmaku* 弹幕).

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Soussan Djamasbi, Adrienne Hall-Phillips, Zaozao Liu, Wenting Li, and Jing Bian. “Social Viewing, Bullet Screen, and User Experience: A First Look.” 49th *Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 2016, pp. 648-657.

On the organizational side, the subtitle groups play an irreplaceable role in maintaining this carnival by their informal and funny translation. As noted in Chapter One, Tianfu was first known for its casual way of translation, and many members of CFan were from Tianfu. Their casual way of translation is embodied in the deliberate lack of preciousness when translating but without disrupting the overall flow of the series or causing misunderstanding among viewers. Admittedly, the translation style ultimately depends on the specific members who are in charge, and a few series are indeed translated in a formal manner, but by and large, their informal and funny style is patently obvious and continues till now. This style is powerful in embellishing and even reframing Thai Boys Love series, and there are three noteworthy aspects.

First, the subtitle groups exhibit creativity and humor. It includes commenting, joking, transliterating, interpreting, highlighting, adapting to China's context, and simply mistranslating for certain effects. The goal, ultimately, is to amuse, relax, and attract the audience (fig. 12). In episode 5 of *Love Sick* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2014), the two male characters, Noh and Phun, have been close with each other, but neither goes further to initiate a boyfriend relationship. In one scene, Noh comes to take care of Phun, saying to him, "you will be fine, bro." Anticipating the moods of the audience facing their ambiguity, other than the translation, the translators insert a comment/joke, "can you just call him 'dear'"¹⁰⁵ (fig. 13), which must resonate with the thoughts of the viewers when watching this scene. In episode 2 of *TharnType*, there is a transitional scene depicting the reactions of different members in a private online group after someone mistakenly posts a porn clip. A member follows up a message, teasing that "if you want to send something, can it be more useful?"¹⁰⁶ Since this scene has nothing to do with understanding the main storylines, it is translated as "can you guys send something that aligns with the Core Socialist

¹⁰⁵ Mandarin: “叫亲爱的可好?”

¹⁰⁶ Thai: จะส่งสิ่งที่ ขอสร้างสรรคบ้างเออะ.

Values?”¹⁰⁷ Non-Chinese people may find it hard to comprehend, but Chinese viewers will get the point straight away. Through countless elements altered by the subtitle groups, Thai Boys Love series become funnier and more fascinating for the audience.

Second, the subtitle groups intentionally increase or even fabricate the intimacy of the male-male couple(s) in Thai Boys Love series. How they every now and then remold the pronoun *phi*¹⁰⁸ in the Thai language is noteworthy. *Phi* is a common pronoun in the Thai society, referring to anyone who is elder than the speaker. It is used in nearly every occasion, such as when young people chat with an elder taxi driver. Unsurprisingly, it is frequently used in Thai Boys Love series, but it sometimes carries a different tinge after being translated into Mandarin. In *Until We Meet Again* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2019), when the emotionally vulnerable Pharm talks to Dean, *phi* is occasionally translated as “little elder brother” (*xiaogege*),¹⁰⁹ referring to the cute and handsome young boys whom the speaker wants to be relationally close with. Owing to the usage of “little elder brother,” the relationship between Pharm and Dean suddenly becomes much more ambivalent and intimate. It might be the personal interpretations from the translators: in their opinions, the usage is probably appropriate for these scenes. Similarly, sentence-final Chinese modal particles, such as *la*, *ne*, *o*, and *ya*¹¹⁰ are manipulated by the subtitle groups when translating Thai Boys Love series. These uninflected words are at times added when these boys communicate with others (not only between the male-male couples), highlighting their cuteness and creating a more intimate vibe among them. By doing so, the audience is more excited and invigorated when watching these series.

¹⁰⁷ Mandarin: “你们能不能发点符合社会主义核心价值观的东西啊。”

¹⁰⁸ Thai: พี่.

¹⁰⁹ Mandarin: 小哥哥.

¹¹⁰ Mandarin (in order): 啦, 呢, 哦, 呀. In most cases, these sentence-final modal particles do not hold meanings but can have some connotations (like indicating the friendliness or cuteness of the speaker).

Third, the subtitle groups deliberately strengthen and underline the top/bottom binary in their translation that is by no means notable in Thai Boys Love series. However problematic, this gendered dichotomy guides the perceptions of Chinese consumers toward male-male love. According to Yang and Xu, the conventions of Japanese Boys Love help lay the foundation of the Chinese iteration.¹¹¹ The concept of top/bottom (*seme/uke*) has exerted tremendous impacts on Chinese people's knowledge of homosexuality. Both *seme* and *uke* have a Chinese character plus a Hiragana. The character means "attacker/aggressor" and "receiver," respectively, and are straightforwardly recognizable for Chinese speakers. These two Chinese characters have been adopted directly to replicate an equivalent top/bottom (*gong/shou*)¹¹² dualism: both *gong* and *shou* are indispensable in a male-male relationship, and not only do they complement each other, the rigid top/bottom stipulation is barely reversible. This dominant thinking is endorsed by Chinese fans of Thai Boys Love series, and the subtitle groups utilize their mindset and actively meet their expectations via intentional translation. Back in 2011, *Empresses in the Palace* (dir. Zheng), a Chinese series set in the Qing Dynasty, made popular the pronoun *bengong*.¹¹³ This pronoun, used by the empress or high-ranking consorts when speaking to people in lower status, literally means "I, who own this palace." Because the second Chinese character of this pronoun has the same pronunciation with "top" in Mandarin, Boys Love fans invented another *bengong*, which means "I, as the top." *Benshou*, meaning "I, as the bottom," was created simultaneously to match this notion.¹¹⁴ Based on the interpretations or imaginations of the translators, these two words are regularly assigned to the more active or aggressive side and the more passive or gentle side of male-male couples in these series. In episode 2 of *Dark Blue Kiss* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2019),

¹¹¹ Yang and Xu. "Chinese *Danmei* Fandom and Cultural Globalization from Below." 2017, p. 9.

¹¹² Mandarin: 攻/受 (stem from the Japanese notion *seme/uke* 攻め/受け).

¹¹³ Mandarin: 本宫, 宫 means "palace."

¹¹⁴ Mandarin (in order): 本攻 and 本受.

in one scene, Pete informs his boyfriend Kao “I will wait right here”¹¹⁵ with slight impatience and anger. Due to the personas of these two characters, this line by Pete is translated as “I, as the top, will wait right here” (fig. 14). Sporadic assignment of the pronouns “I, as the top” and the corresponding “I, as the bottom” penetrates this series and many other Thai Boys Love series.¹¹⁶ This transformation reinforces and normalizes the top/bottom binary in male-male couples. Furthermore, top/bottom seems to reflect the personalities of each individual, rather than merely representing an actually reversible coital role allocation.

Likewise, *faen*,¹¹⁷ referring to “boyfriend,” “girlfriend,” or partner of any gender in the Thai language, is from time to time translated as “husband” (*laogong*) or “wife” (*laopo*)¹¹⁸ in Mandarin by the subtitle groups. This also speaks to the hegemony of the top/bottom binary and the efforts of the subtitle groups. As can be noticed from the bullet screens and comments, many Chinese fans of Thai Boys Love series love this kind of translation and energetically discuss the top/bottom relationship of these characters. Through deliberate translation that strengthens and underscores the top/bottom binary, the subtitle groups not only cater to the needs of the audience, allowing the translated Thai Boys Love series to be much more arresting, but also further bring dynamics to the carnivalesque consumption.

Conclusion

This chapter started by elucidating the porosity of China’s censorship, indicating that there is always more or less room left for people to strategically get around governmental censorship. It

¹¹⁵ Thai: กูรอเม้งตรงนี้แหละ.

¹¹⁶ Many Thai Boys Love series are adapted from Boys Love novels. It is possible that the top/bottom relationship in the translation comes from the novels, but most series do not indicate that on the screen.

¹¹⁷ Thai: แฟน.

¹¹⁸ Mandarin (in order): 老公 (sometimes presented as 老攻; 攻, meaning “top,” has the same pronunciation with 公, which is another parody), 老婆.

continued to elaborate on the self-censorship practiced by most Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series, including viewers/fans, subtitle groups, and event organizers, in order to dodge the undesired attention from the censors. The tactics are extrapolated from previous experiences and constantly adjusted in response to China's ever-changing social context. Then, it unveiled the "carnival under censorship" by scrutinizing the carnivalesque consumption of Thai Boys Love series on individual and organizational level.



Figure 6 and 7. The display of male-male intimacy on Douyin (Tik Tok). Showing male-male intimacy has always been a way to attract viewers and popularize accounts. The two males in figure 6 declare they are “siblings,” and the two males in figure 7 say they are just “roommates.” Dissociating their closeness from a potential gayness may keep this kind of media representations away from the censorship. Despite that, a few Chinese men do avowedly articulate a gay identity on public online platforms, including their Douyin accounts. Screenshotted from Douyin accounts @guixiaogui and @zhongkexuezhong on October 25, 2020. The two short videos were uploaded by the creators on October 22, 2020 and October 17, 2020, respectively.

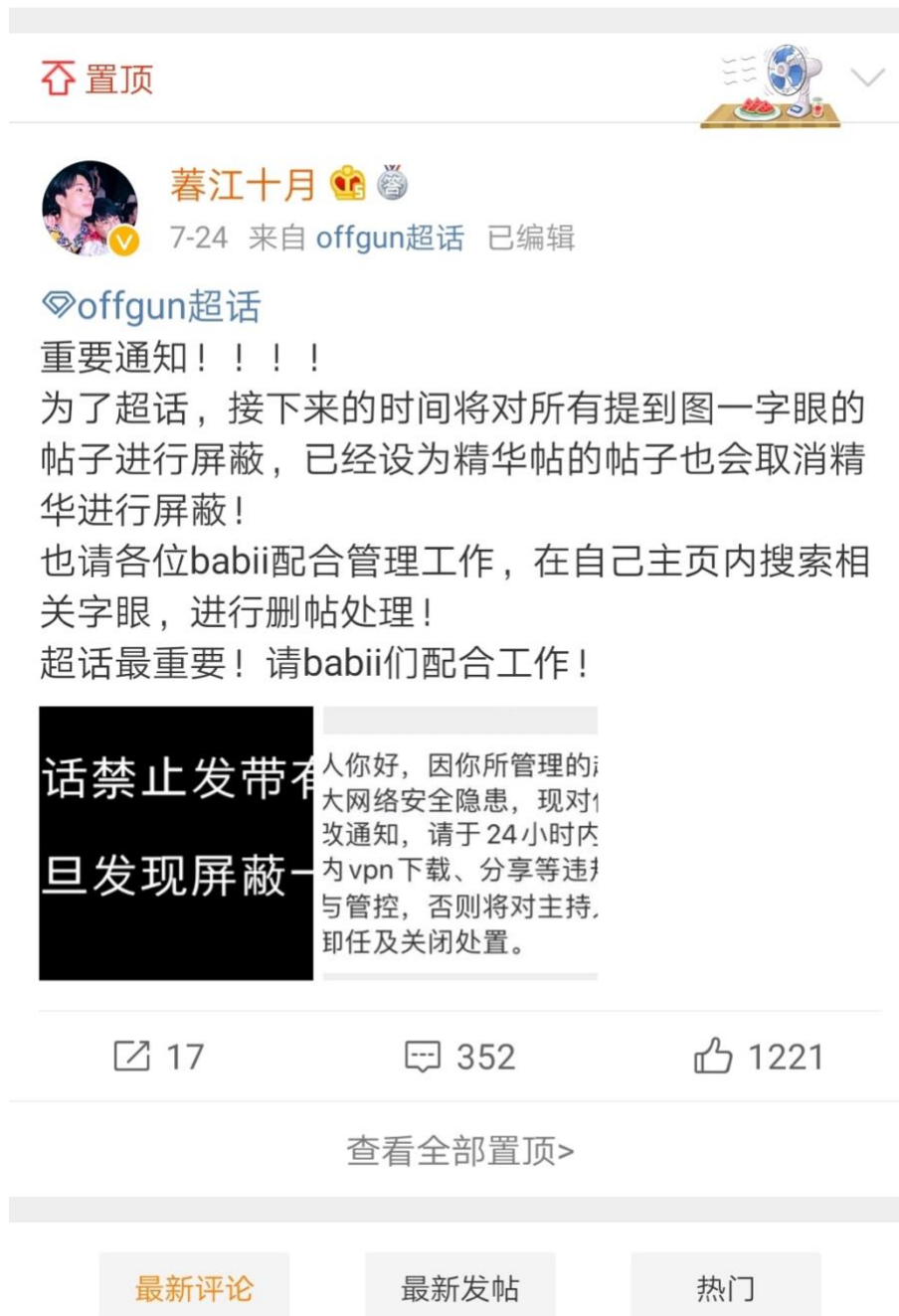


Figure 8. Announcement posted on July 24, 2020 and tinned at the offgun “super topic” (*chaohua*) community on Weibo. It requests all participants (“babii” is the name for fans of Off and Gun, which is in line with the convention of the international fan community) to restrain from mentioning “VPN” in their participations. The announcement itself does not mention VPN: it includes this three-letter taboo in the pictures and asks the fans to check. Screenshotted from Weibo on October 3, 2020.



Figure 9. Poster of “GBKCTT” fan meeting in Wuhan on October 28, 2017. These Thai boys are the main actors of *2 Moons* (dir. Meesuwan; 2017). In this poster, they are distanced from this Thai Boys Love series, and many Chinese elements are incorporated, making this event appear to be more admissible. Downloaded from FanThaiCulture’s Weibo account @fantaiwenhua.

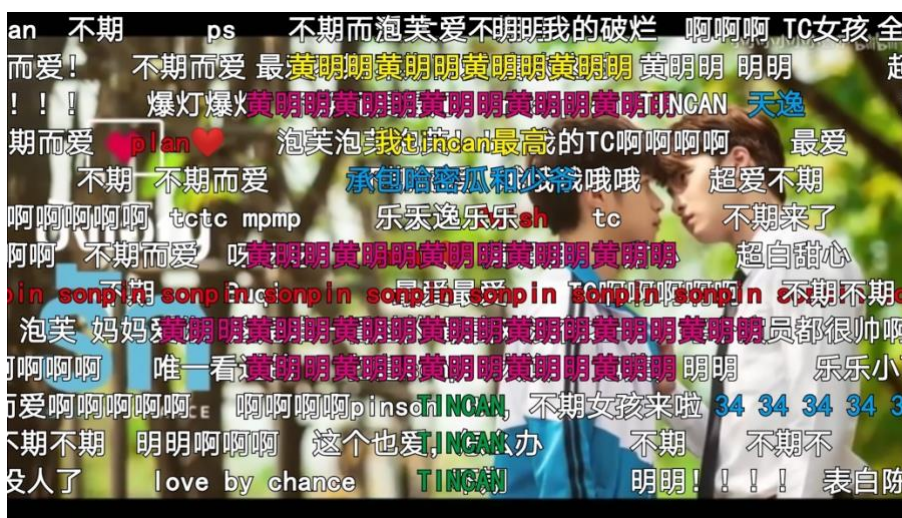


Figure 10. Fan-edited video displaying male-male intimate moments of the eight main characters in *Love by Chance* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2018). The bullet screens generated by the excited viewers are abundant enough to overlay the whole screen. Screenshotted from Bilibili.

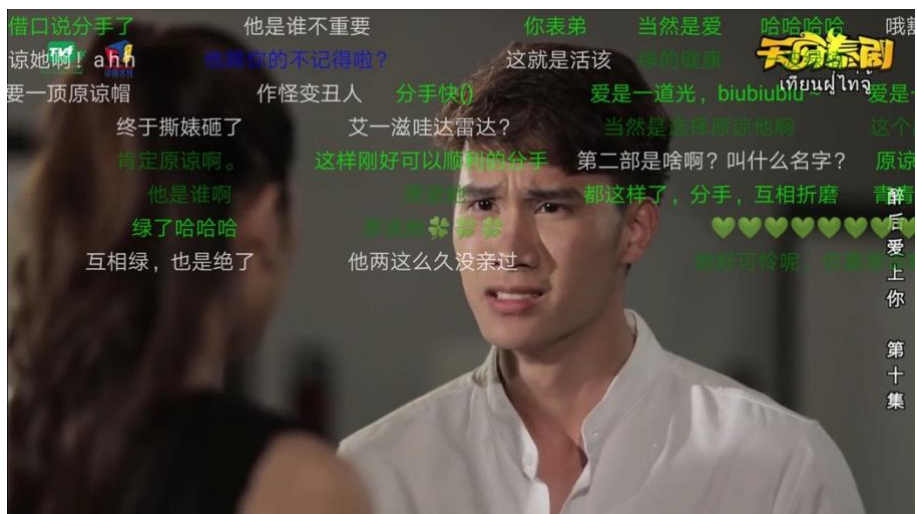


Figure 11. Episode 10 of *Together with Me* (dir. Boonyoprakarn; 2017). In this scene, Knock finds out that his girlfriend has affairs with another man. Most viewers collectively change the bullet screens to the green color. In contemporary Chinese popular culture, the green color is a signifier of being cheated in a relationship. Produced by TV Thunder and translated by Tianfu.



Figure 12. Episode 6 of *Cause You're My Boy* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2018; a.k.a. *My Tee*). Mork says to Tee, “if something else comes out, you will have to see for yourself.” However, in the Mandarin translation, it becomes some “dirty talk” that makes their relationship more intimate: “to see if other things are ‘hard’ or not, we need to try and see.” It is notable that in the Mandarin word for “try” (*shishi*), a male-sign emoji is inserted in between. In contemporary Chinese popular culture, this emoji can connote male-male intimacy and gayness. Produced by GMMTV and translated by CFan.



Figure 13. Episode 5 of *Love Sick* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2014). Produced by Middleman Media and translated by CFan (i.e., Tianfu at the time of translation).



Figure 14. Episode 2 of *Dark Blue Kiss* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2019). Produced by GMMTV and translated by Tianfu.

Chapter Three

The Alternative World to Escape from the Reality

Throughout all online platforms where Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series assemble, there is one topic they never stop talking about: the liberal and inclusive world of Thailand. They discuss, enjoy, and on occasion envy the liberty and inclusiveness of not merely the idealized, utopian Thailand depicted in these series, but the imagined Thailand in reality as well (the latter part is detailed in Chapter Four). This impression is well exemplified by the saying, “the summer of Thailand never ends, the boys I adore are always in love,”¹¹⁹ which conspicuously swept across Chinese consumers of Thai Boys Love series after the release of *I Told Sunset About You* (dir. Kuno; 2020). This unprecedentedly popular series is set in Thailand’s Phuket Province. The tropical climate and landscape there, like the breathtaking beaches and swaying coconut palms, have become another icon that speaks to the “freedom” of Thailand (fig. 15). Since the release of the “first” Thai Boys Love series, *Love Sick* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2014), the Thai-style college and high school life, characterized most remarkably by the school uniform (fig. 16), has always been a symbol that connotes the alleged liberty and inclusiveness of Thailand, especially in respect of male-male relationships. This impression has convinced countless Chinese viewers and has been reinforced by the continually emerging Thai Boys Love series.

The admiration toward this “liberal and inclusive place” is so prevalent among Chinese viewers of Thai Boys Love series that it has almost become a cliché. It is important, then, to contemplate why they love the world delineated in the series by taking into consideration both

¹¹⁹ Mandarin: 泰兰德的夏天永不停歇，我爱的少年永远热恋. The characters “泰兰德” (*tailande*), different from the standardized Chinese name of Thailand “泰国” (*taiguo*), is a transliteration of “Thailand.” The name “泰兰德” sounds more romantic.

the realities confronted by these viewers and what the features of the “alternative world” located in these series are. This chapter inspects the lived experiences and day-to-day struggles shared by most Chinese audience members of Thai Boys Love series, crystallizing some noteworthy traits of these series that are attractive to them.

Escapism and Utopianism

As the English film critic Richard Dyer shrewdly brings up in his “Entertainment and Utopia,” entertainment offers the image of “something better” to escape into, or something people want deeply that their day-to-day lives do not provide. Alternatives, hopes, and wishes are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized.¹²⁰ A later interpretation on Dyer’s idea contends that the audience consumes media products to escape social tension, inadequacy, and absence, so entertainment can provide “a utopian dimension and an escapist solution for day-to-day existence.”¹²¹

This model of people escaping into a utopian space and consuming the better alternatives, unsurprisingly, is prevalent within Boys Love culture since its birth. Scholarly interpretations of Boys Love phenomenon have often centered around the potential that its narratives may offer in enabling mainly young straight-identified women to express an indirect critique of the dominant, patriarchal, and (hetero)sexist cultural systems to which they are subject.¹²² For example, the love between two male characters allow these female consumers to imagine an egalitarianism between partners, which is less imaginable in cross-sex relationships.¹²³ Consuming Boys Love

¹²⁰ Dyer, Richard. *Only Entertainment*, second edition. Routledge, 2002, p. 20.

¹²¹ D’Angelo, Sandra. “Sampling the Sense of Place in Baile Funk Music.” *Relocating Popular Music*, edited by Ewa Mazierska and Georgina Gregory. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 49.

¹²² Martin, Fran. “Queer Pop Culture in the Sinophone Mediasphere.” *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Popular Culture*, edited by Koichi Iwabuchi, Eva Tsai, and Chris Berry. Routledge, 2020, pp. 191-201.

¹²³ McLelland, Mark. “Why are Japanese Girls' Comics Full of Boys Bonking?” *Refractory*, 2006, p. 10.

culture is also seen as a means for these girls/women to “sublimate negative notions concerning femaleness and femininity by imaginatively disguising themselves as boys/men.”¹²⁴ Why certain men like Boys Love is scrutinized too. Many male consumers of Boys Love culture identify with the “bottom” character and in this way challenge and reject the socially constructed powerfulness that men are expected to have. Through the process coined “self-feminization,” they enjoy the character’s dependency and reliance on a more competent and more masculine “other” in this alternative world.¹²⁵ It is obvious that entertainment as a whole and Boys Love culture can both embody and present “something better” for the consumers.

What the majority of Chinese viewers can get from Thai Boys Love series is precisely in concordance with these scholarly treatments toward entertainment and Boys Love culture. The things lacking in their daily lives can be found in the world portrayed in Thai Boys Love series, which offers them relaxation, pleasure, and hopes. They are captivated with the alternative world where they are able to escape from the somewhat unsatisfactory reality. Two aspects stand out, as can be discerned from what they like to talk about in the bullet screens and comments when consuming these series. As I said in Chapter One, this thesis is not confined to the “essence” of Thai Boys Love series, male-male love. The first aspect, “living conditions,” has nothing to do with love, while the second aspect, “freedom to love,” returns to the essence.

Living Conditions

It should be emphasized again that most Chinese viewers of Thai Boys Love series are women with an urban background. Cities that host the greatest number of viewers, Beijing, Shanghai,

¹²⁴ Nagaïke, Kazumi, and Katsuhiko Suganuma. “Editorial: Transnational Boys’ Love Fan Studies.” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, special issue, 2013.

¹²⁵ Nagaïke. “Do Heterosexual Men Dream of Homosexual Men?” 2015, pp. 189-209.

Chongqing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Shenzhen, are all populous, fast-paced megacities. Based on a research conducted on the demographics of several Weibo “super topic” (*chaohua*) of Thai Boys Love series, around 90% of the Chinese viewers are youth aged from 18 to 34, within which the amount of people with a job position slightly exceeds students.¹²⁶ Most people in both the leading groups are facing exhausting living conditions, largely because of the unaffordability, instability, and uncontrollability of housing.

For any Chinese office worker in big cities, finding a place to live is never easy, unless one enjoys the privilege of being a local, has very substantial income, or receives considerable financial support from others. China features the skyrocketing of housing prices in nearly all big cities since its economic takeoff, specifically since the early 2000s, sadly with no end in sight. Purchasing or renting a place to live, thus, becomes painfully unaffordable for most people. A 2014 report on housing situation of employed youth in Beijing clearly showcases that the housing problem is a main source of pressure and worry for Chinese young people today, which has severely influenced their quality of life and social mentality.¹²⁷ It is still the case during the completion of this thesis (2020-2021). According to price-to-income ratio, China now occupies more than half of the world’s top ten most expensive cities for residential property: in all first-tier and some second-tier and third-tier cities, housing prices have become out of reach for ordinary wage earners.¹²⁸ For example, in the four top-tier cities (*beishangguangshen*: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen),¹²⁹ average people’s yearly salary cannot even afford the

¹²⁶ She’er. “Uncover the Industry of How Thai Boys Love Series Produce Idols (in China).” 2019.

¹²⁷ Li, Chunling, Xuehong Li, and Haijuan Li. “Report on the Housing Situation of Employed Youth in Beijing 2014: Survey on the Development of Adolescents in Beijing 2014.” *Chinese Research Perspectives on Society: Social Analysis and Forecast of China (2015)*, edited by Guangjin Chen, Peilin Li, and Yi Zhang. Brill, 2018, p. 243.

¹²⁸ Hao, Pu. “China’s Urban Housing: Past and Present.” *Handbook on Urban Development in China*, edited by June Wang, Ray Yep, and Thomas Johnson. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019, p. 93.

¹²⁹ Mandarin: 北上广深.

housing prices of one square meter (approximately 10.76 square feet) in the central or promising districts.

As a result, many people have to squeeze in small rented apartments if they want to live closer to the core area of big cities. Most have one or usually more than one roommate(s), seeing slim hope of purchasing their own housing properties. For them, it is not astonishing if their per capita housing space is beneath, say, twenty square meters (approximately 215.28 square feet). It is particularly applicable to the “drifters” (*piao*), migrant workers who come to big cities to find opportunities in hope of becoming wealthier.¹³⁰ Increasing people have decided to live far away from the core area, with Yanjiao of Hebei Province right next to Beijing as a representative example, but they need to commute for around four to six hours every business day, because they can only afford public transportation. Not every landlord of theirs is kindhearted, making many people’s accommodation experiences further unstable. Notwithstanding their struggles, the loan (if they purchase with a down-payment) or the rent still wipes out a large proportion of their earnings. The living conditions of most Chinese office workers are this hard.

For any Chinese university student, the dorms most of them live in are uncontrollable and depressing to some degree. A typical Chinese university dorm is less than twenty square meters in size and accommodates at least four students, packed with students’ books, clothes, and other daily necessities (fig. 17).¹³¹ Facilities like bathrooms and laundry rooms are usually shared by dozens of students. Entering the halls of the other sex is strictly prohibited. Power and hot water are off at some points. Roommates cannot be changed once the assignment is finished prior to

¹³⁰ Mandarin: 漂. For example, “Beijing-drifters” (*beipiao* 北漂) refers to people without a Beijing household (*hukou* 户口) who work in Beijing, “Shanghai-drifters” (*hupiao* 沪漂) refers to this dynamic in Shanghai. It is difficult to get the *hukou* of big cities even though one has worked there for years. *Hukou* of big cities is an appeal in China’s “marriage market.”

¹³¹ Cai, Shenshen. *Contemporary Chinese Films and Celebrity Directors*. Springer Singapore, 2017, p. 99.

the first semester. For some extreme examples, air conditioners are not equipped and stairs are not renovated. There are better dorms for foreign students, but ironically, the main viewers of Thai Boys Love series do not have such privilege.

Despite the impressive affordability and the supposed sense of unity among roommates, university students are not endowed with the power to determine their own living conditions. To put it colloquially, they have to pay for the dorm they are assigned to without the possibility to upgrade to a preferable environment by spending a little bit more. Admittedly, they may choose not to live in the dorms after finalizing the payment, but off-campus options are much more unaffordable because most prestigious Chinese universities are located in big cities. Unless their home is close to school, most students ultimately live in the dorms. The lack of private space, the conflicts with roommates, inconvenience, messiness, and the ubiquity of noise are the most reported problems of their dorm experiences. Since they are powerless to determine or change the living conditions, for some students, negative emotions gradually pile up and eventually lead to depression and other mental concerns. Many Chinese university students list “living in the dorms” as the worst experience during their time in school.¹³²

Apparently, most Chinese people in the leading consumption groups of Thai Boys Love series view their own living conditions as undesirable and unsatisfactory. They seem to be stuck in this dark side of China’s rapid development in recent decades. To make matters worse, their anxiety toward housing and sometimes other capitals/properties keeps impacting them on the psychological level. Nowadays, owning a house (in big cities) is one of the most important goals for many Chinese young people and symbolizes one’s success and career status.¹³³ Many people

¹³² Some information comes from the answers under the Quora question “what does it feel like to live in a college dorm in China,” and some information comes from the casual conversations with my friends who study in Chinese universities.

¹³³ Li et al. “Report on the Housing Situation of Employed Youth in Beijing 2014.” 2018, p. 243.

endure this mindset, devoting their entire life to purchasing a decent apartment in big cities and expecting to maintain a harmonious family by doing so.¹³⁴ Exploiting themselves and sacrificing their own leisure time, they are making great efforts in order to achieve this goal. For the office workers, according to a survey covered by the state-sponsored *China Daily*, more than eighty percent of employees in China are overworked and under mental and physical stress at an average or higher level.¹³⁵ The prevailing “996 working hour system” (a.k.a. “996 practice”), requiring employees to work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days per week and endorsed by Chinese billionaire Ma Yun, appears to be at one extreme end of the spectrum, but it serves as a vivid microcosm of China’s stressful working milieu. For the university students, they are confronting an era of “involution” (*neijuan*),¹³⁶ a term popularized in the late 2010s to describe the overly excessive competition in many fields that is going to result in the increasingly higher standards and at length the energy exhaustion for all participants who get consciously or subconsciously involuted. For them, they strive to maintain a high GPA (ideally 3.8+ out of 4.0, but the standard keeps rising), take part in as many extracurricular activities as possible, and grab other chances to build their resume, with the unease toward their future that never gives them a break. Despite their endeavors and sacrifices of the current living conditions, no one can guarantee them “the best is yet to come.” This is something embedded in the state instrumentality and the society’s overall structure. Many people’s anxiety and discontent toward living conditions last throughout their lifetime, and “something better” can only be realized by imagination.

¹³⁴ It is a complicated and rich topic to talk about. For example, some young people complete the down-payment (*shoufu* 首付) of a decent apartment in big cities with almost all savings from their parents in order to successfully get married and spend the rest of their life paying the mortgage.

¹³⁵ “China Daily.” “Most Chinese Employees Overworked: Survey.” *China Daily*. 2 Nov. 2018.

¹³⁶ Mandarin: 内卷. This concept called “involution,” meaning an increasing elaboration within a fixed space or activity domain, originates from American anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s “Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia” published in 1963. The meaning can be slightly different in China’s widespread use of this concept today.

That is how Thai Boys Love series come into play by providing a utopian world for the Chinese audience to escape into and enjoy the better alternatives. These series can activate and prolong their imaginations toward what life can possibly become. Most main characters in Thai Boys Love series are from upper-middle-class background, which can be told directly from their skin color. Akin to the mechanism High discusses in her essay on Laos, skin color in Thailand and many Asian countries is not related to race by any means, but rather acts as an indicator of a person's social status, since a light skin color needs to be underpinned through wealth.¹³⁷ People in Thailand, a highly hierarchical society, are aware of their social status, using their skin color, location, and decorations (e.g., clothes, jewelries) to shape others' perceptions on them and make judgements on others.¹³⁸ The light skin color of most main characters in Thai Boys Love series indicates their relatively high social status, which echoes with their background as well as other behaviors in the series. They have very decent places to live in and seem not to worry about their living conditions at all. Since most Thai Boys Love series still focus on life in Bangkok, the only top-tier city and the absolute center of Thailand, their living conditions are more enviable for the Chinese audience.

The exquisitely decorated apartments and student dorms are the most shown residential places in Thai Boys Love series, and the main characters usually have their own bedroom and bathroom (a few have a roommate), such as Wayo in *2 Moons* (dir. Meesuwan; 2017), Tharn and Type (roommate) in *TharnType* (dir. Sintanaparadee; 2019), and Pharm in *Until We Meet Again* (dir. Sawatmaneeikul; 2019). Others live in their house with family, such as Fuse in *Make It Right* (dir. Sawatmaneeikul et al.; 2016), Mork in *Cause You're My Boy* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2018), and

¹³⁷ High, Holly. "Poverty and Merit: Mobile Persons in Laos." *Everyday Life in Southeast Asia*, edited by Kathleen M. Adams and Kathleen A. Gillogly. Indiana University Press, 2011, pp. 37-46.

¹³⁸ Spencer, Dale C. "'Authenticity', Muay Thai and Habitus." *Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports*, edited by Dale C. Spencer and Raúl Sánchez García. Anthem Press, 2013, p. 175.

Teh in *I Told Sunset About You*. To feature an attractive “identity” for the audience, some main characters are even set as the “young master” (*khun chai*)¹³⁹ of eminent or at least extremely rich family, such as Phun in *Love Sick*, Tin in *Love by Chance* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2018) and *Love by Chance 2: A Chance to Love* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2020) (fig. 17), and Tian in *1000stars* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2021), who live in huge and luxurious houses. From the perspective of most Chinese viewers, these characters are blessed by economic strength and adequate freedom to determine where to live. Even if a few main characters are devoid of money from the setting, such as Mork in *Dark Blue Kiss* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2019) and Tutor in *Why R U* (dir. Wongkulphat; 2020) who need to work part-time to earn their daily expense, the places they live in by no means align with the assumptions most Chinese viewers would have. Both Mork and Tutor live in a single room, and their condo must appear to be unreachable for them (fig. 18). The lived experiences and day-to-day struggles of most Chinese viewers in reality are at odds with the depicted lives of most main characters in Thai Boys Love series. From this point of view, Thai Boys Love series offer them a utopian space to consume the “better alternatives,” allowing them to establish attachment to the more satisfactory living conditions.

Given their material conditions, most main characters in Thai Boys Love series lead a relaxed and hedonistic lifestyle. Although they are supposed to be busy with schoolwork or jobs from the setting, it seems on the screen that they have inexhaustible leisure time for interpersonal communication and entertainment. When their friends or partners are in trouble or in bad mood, they always have the spare time to accompany them and deal with the problems. Their lives after class or after work, from partying at bars to going shopping with peers, reveal the abundance of freedom in terms of time and money. In spite of their carefree and relaxed attitudes, life does not

¹³⁹ Thai: คุณชาย.

fail to prepare them with a favorable future and an admiring living environment. Most Chinese viewers decipher this as a purely commercialized fictional media portrayal. Thus, instead of becoming cynical, they tend to obtain what they want (i.e., what they lack in real life) through consuming these series. They consider the living conditions of most main characters in the series as “better alternatives” vis-à-vis their own living conditions. For sure, better living conditions are hard to achieve in reality, but their dream toward “something better” is easy to be realized by getting involved in this alternative world. Many Chinese viewers imagine themselves to be the main characters who lead the desirable lifestyle without any worry about housing issues. Thai Boys Love series construct this utopian space for them to find a sense of belonging and enjoy the imaginary experiences, which at the same time compensates for the absence of such experiences in their real lives and brings them hopes toward a better future.

Freedom to Love

Love unquestionably is the core of all Thai Boys Love series. The male-male-love stories in the series represent how every love should be respected and make the Chinese audience jealous. For them, the “love” delineated in most Thai Boys Love series is in its pure and idealistic state, particularly compared to the way they choose, if not the way they are forced to choose, a partner in reality with significant social constraints in terms of how the partnership might be influenced by dominant norms and judged by other people. This section looks into the other trait, “freedom to love,” that renders Thai Boys Love series arresting for most Chinese viewers.

The pairing up between men and women has historically been China’s hegemonic social institution that governs its people. In spite of its rapid social transformations in recent decades, the institution of marriage remains normatively robust, and the traditional expectation that every

person will get married persists.¹⁴⁰ Most pressures come from people's own family, especially parents, because a successful marriage of their children is a matter of "face" as they interact with relatives, neighbors, and friends.¹⁴¹ The "marriage-matching corners" (*xiangqinjiao*)¹⁴² across Chinese cities is a case in point (fig. 20). Parents mostly in their 50s and 60s gather there to look for a partner for their children. The matching process is objectifying and depersonalizing, as the person being "advertised" is circumscribed to age, height, weight, education, *hukou*, occupation, income, health condition, marital status, and properties of the family (housing, car). Normally his/her picture is not attached. Nowadays, more and more Chinese youth realize that marriage is a social norm rather than a must. Most of their parents, however, do not attempt to understand this generational gap and still urge them to marry someone, which might destabilize the family's harmony.¹⁴³ The problem is further intensified by the one-child policy spanning 1979 to 2015. The "only child" in the aftermath of this controversial national policy shoulders much more pressures from the family: they are expected to not only get married, but also have offspring to continue the family clan of father's and mother's side. Unfortunately, most Chinese viewers of Thai Boys Love series now are the "only child" of their family.

Gay men make up a minor but nonnegligible part of Chinese viewers who consume Thai Boys Love series. Most of them are young people facing marital and parental stress. Marriage is conceivably their top concern among all the challenges, since most of them have no option but to negotiate this issue with their family.¹⁴⁴ Exposing their non-heteronormative identity is never

¹⁴⁰ Davis, Deborah S. "Demographic Challenges for a Rising China." *Daedalus*, vol. 143, no. 2, 2014, pp. 26-38.

¹⁴¹ Choi, Susanne YP, and Ming Luo. "Performative Family: Homosexuality, Marriage, and Intergenerational Dynamics in China." *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2016, p. 267.

¹⁴² Mandarin: 相亲角. The "marriage-matching corner" in People's Park of Shanghai is the most well-known.

¹⁴³ Ma, Chunhua. "The Pressure to Get Married is Tearing China's Families Apart." *Sixth Tone*. 3 Sep. 2018.

¹⁴⁴ Ning, Xuan, Chau Kiu Cheung, and Sijia Guo. "Negotiations Between Chinese Gay Men and Lesbians and Their Parents About Marriage." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 18, 2019, p. 1.

easy, to say nothing of pursuing the people they like freely. Even if they have a boyfriend or sexual partner(s), they are likely to keep it a secret within close friend circles. As of early 2020, Blued, a Chinese dating app for gay men, accumulated more than 24 million registered users in China alone,¹⁴⁵ but few Chinese gay men dare to embrace their identity in reality. Many Chinese gay men, those from lower-middle-class background in particular, will remain closeted and ultimately get married with a probably heterosexual woman as a means to be incorporated into the marriage and family system, eschewing the troubles from the family and fulfilling their filial piety.¹⁴⁶ This familial “oppression” not merely exists in China, but across East Asia: gayness is a “family problem,” as portrayed in many East Asian media products.¹⁴⁷ South Korean movie *Two Weddings and a Funeral* (dir. Kim; 2012) starts with the “contract marriage” between a gay man and his lesbian friend so that both can fulfill their family responsibility and satisfy their parents. Meanwhile, a few Chinese gay men question the heteronormative marriage system and manage to negotiate their individual autonomy with their family.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the regulative power of marriage as a hegemonic social institution should not be underestimated, under which Chinese gay men’s freedom to love is greatly undermined.

Young women in China, the leading consumption group of Thai Boys Love series, face similar pressures, which is well evidenced by the omnipresent “leftover women” (*shengnü*)¹⁴⁹ discourse targeting mainly urban unmarried women and carried out by China’s mass media

¹⁴⁵ It is common for a person to register multiple accounts and it is also possible that some non-gay people register just for curiosity, but many Chinese gay men have not yet registered on Blued. Nonetheless, this data released by Blued reflects the huge amount of gay men in China.

¹⁴⁶ Wang, Stephanie Yingyi. “When Tongzhi Marry: Experiments of Cooperative Marriage Between Lolas and Gay Men in Urban China.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2019, p. 16.

¹⁴⁷ Berry, Chris. “Asian Values, Family Values: Film, Video, and Lesbian and Gay Identities.” *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, edited by Gerard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson. Haworth Press, 2001, p. 215.

¹⁴⁸ Choi and Luo. “Performative Family.” 2016, pp. 260-280; Ning et al. “Negotiations Between Chinese Gay Men and Lesbians and Their Parents About Marriage.” 2019, pp. 1-10.

¹⁴⁹ Mandarin: 剩女.

campaign since 2007. The single women aged broadly 25 (27) or older are depicted as unwanted and thereby they must hurry up to find a partner to get married.¹⁵⁰ The term “leftover men” (*shengnan*)¹⁵¹ was invented simultaneously to ridicule men who are old enough to marry but do not for whatever reason. Although many Chinese women choose to prioritize their career or self-actualization over marriage, the society and people around them will constantly exert pressures on them through the regulative “leftover women” discourse. Their parents are noticeably more worried: they are afraid that their daughter will remain single, which means there will be no man to support her and no children to be at her side. Their daughter’s 25-year-old birthday is probably the watershed for their anxiety, after which they will spare no effort to “promote” their daughter, from advertising her online and offline to requesting her to meet all kinds of single men that meet their “standards.” They will ultimately encourage their daughter to get married, even if with someone she does not have much feeling toward. Under the dominant ideology that naturalizes and normalizes marriage, whether getting married or not seems not to be a negotiable issue, and most Chinese young women do not possess the freedom to decide when to get married, if they ever want.

Paradoxically, when Chinese young women have a boyfriend, their boyfriends are likely to face the strict “evaluations” from their parents and others based primarily on his appearance (especially height), education, *hukou*, job, income, and properties of his family (housing, car). The pivotal value orientation behind China’s traditional arranged marriage, “matching doors and windows” (*men dang hu dui*),¹⁵² is still prevalent nowadays,¹⁵³ which argues that the two people

¹⁵⁰ Fincher, Leta Hong. *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*. Zed Books, 2014, pp. 15-17.

¹⁵¹ Mandarin: 剩男.

¹⁵² Mandarin: 门当户对.

¹⁵³ Yang, Chao. *Television and Dating in Contemporary China: Identity, Love and Intimacy*. Springer Singapore, 2017, p. 118.

in a partnership should match with each other particularly as for age, family background (*hukou*, education level of the parents, properties), and economic power (income, savings). For instance, if a girl from a modern city is in love with a boy who is shorter than her, has an unstable job, or comes from a rural area, her parents probably will discourage the girl from an engagement and use their resources to introduce her to some “better candidates,” even if these two young people have “true love.” Not only the family, some of their friends will interfere and provide “advice.” Their love, regardless of their own perspective, is constantly judged and at times denied by the family and the society. In this sense, most Chinese young women do not possess the freedom to decide who to stay with or marry as well.

In sum, most Chinese viewers of Thai Boys Love series confront hegemonic obstacles to love the person they love and get support from others around them. Same to the dynamic in the “living conditions” aspect, these series provide a utopian world for them to escape into and enjoy better alternatives, which allows them to imagine a different life trajectory and develops a sense of belonging there. The portrayed love and how people treat it in most Thai Boys Love series are more than ideal for them.

On one hand, what Thai Boys Love series delineate is not the male-female love Chinese people are most familiar with, but male-male love instead. Still a heteronormative society, China holds heterosexual love as the norm. A person’s sex is the unspoken but indispensable “criteria” in love, much more significant than other standards, such as education or income. For example, in “marriage-matching corners,” parents would not deliberately articulate that they are looking for a person of the other sex for their son or daughter, but it is taken as the default. For Chinese gay men, the predominance of heteronormativity is challenged and sometimes dismantled in Thai Boys Love series, where the male main characters can freely express their love toward other

men. In episode 3 of *Until We Meet Again* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2019), In openly tells the boy he just encountered about his affection toward him directly in front of four friends of his, without receiving any undesired consequences afterward, like judgments or alienation. Many male-male couples in the series walk hand-in-hand in public, with smile and pride. Some even bring their boyfriend back home to meet their parents. These series offer an alternative space where their love toward the same sex is not discriminated and suppressed. For Chinese young women, the male-male love, exhibiting the very freedom to love, also resonates with their lived experiences. Limongsatorn, among others, points out that male-male love represents a “pure relationship” for many people. For them, male-female love is always entangled with various concerns of family, materiality, reproduction, and inheritance, but male-male love is about the “pure relationship” besides occasional sexual desire.¹⁵⁴ With regard to Chinese young women, if the “barrier” of the partner’s sex/gender can be overcome, then what else cannot. The world where male-male love is tolerated and even celebrated is the world where they, mostly as heterosexual women, can freely love the person they love, regardless of age, economic strength, and family background, and without prejudice and denial.

On the other hand, love, no matter in what kind of combination or format, is embraced and supported by people around the main characters in Thai Boys Love series. The series outline an extremely inclusive society, and the acceptance of male-male love, again, connotes the welcome of all sorts of love relationships (e.g., cosmopolitan girl and rural boy), since all are considered as more or less deviant from China’s predominant norm and probably will not receive support from people around them. This explains why the construction in Thai Boys Love series appeals to most of their Chinese viewers. In episode 11 of *SOTUS S* (dir. Botta; 2017), Arthit

¹⁵⁴ Limongsatorn. *A Study of Thailand’s Boys Love Drama and Its Transnational Chinese Audiences*. 2020, pp. 96-100. This kind of idea might be more popular in countries where same-sex marriage has not been legalized.

bravely comes out and confesses his relationship with Kongpob in the presence of the members of the company he works in, receiving applause and well wishes from all those present (fig. 21). They congratulate Arthit and are proud of his courage, rather than blindly judging him or feeling awkward or uncomfortable. In episode 1 of *Bad Romance* (dir. Boonyoprakarn; 2016), Yihwa runs into the intimacy of two male friends of hers, and she immediately conveys understanding before any of them explains what is going on (fig. 22). These two examples represent just a small sample of many similar examples. These friends are inclusive not only when the main characters disclose or are found out they like men, but also when they “switch” their sexual orientation.¹⁵⁵ From the setting, many main characters in Thai Boys Love series think they like women and even have a girlfriend at the beginning, such as Phun in *Love Sick*, Knock in *Together with Me* (dir. Boonyoprakarn; 2017), and Khai in *Theory of Love* (dir. Mongkolsawas; 2019). They all gradually realize their “real love” toward the other main character who “turns out to be a boy too.” For most Chinese viewers, it is no doubt a radical change, while most friends of the main characters in the series are not even surprised. In this respect, these main characters are blessed by precious and ubiquitous freedom and inclusiveness.

It is safe to conclude from previous discussion that family is the main source of stress for most Chinese viewers of Thai Boys Love series. In the everyday life, their family is indeed more troublesome to deal with in comparison to their peers, because increasingly Chinese young people are becoming more liberal and open-minded. Parents are more directly connected to them and therefore cause more stress. In opposition, most parents¹⁵⁶ of the main characters in Thai

¹⁵⁵ Again, many main characters of Thai Boys Love series do not equal their love toward other boys to a gay identity or sexual orientation.

¹⁵⁶ In most Thai Boys Love series, if the family of the main characters is to be depicted, usually only their parents are involved in their “love issue.” Sometimes, siblings or cousins are involved as well, but they are “automatically” set to be inclusive, such as Teh’s brother in *I Told Sunset About You* and Tonhon’s sister in *Tonhon Chonlatee* (dir. Trakulkasemsuk; 2020).

Boys Love series are depicted as accepting. To be sure, there are a few homophobic parents in these series who intervene and persecute the love of their children. In episode 1 of *Until We Meet Again*, the repression of In's family and Korn's family impels this male-male couple to commit suicide together, which leads to their reincarnation and later storylines. However, most parents in the series are exceedingly accepting. Their inclusiveness is best reflected before, during, and after their children's "coming out," although in many series, the "coming out" process is not included, and the parents just accept their son's love toward another boy. Kao's mother in *Dark Blue Kiss* is perhaps the most comprehensive image to elaborate on this point. Kao hesitates before telling his mother about his relationship with another boy Pete and keeps it a secret for the most of this series. Kao's mother notices some subtle hints and tells Kao she is always here if he wants to talk. When Kao eventually makes up his mind to admit he likes men, his mother shows support immediately, saying "I love everything about you no matter what." After Kao's coming out, the mother retains a good relationship with Kao's boyfriend Pete and Pete's equivalently inclusive father, happily living in this new form of "family" (fig. 23). Similar dynamics can be observed from Pete's mother in *Love by Chance* as well as Thun's mother in *He's Coming to Me* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2019) (fig. 24), for example. In addition, for the at-first homophobic parents, their "awakening" process is usually narrated, such as Mork's mother in *Cause You're My Boy* and Tonhon's father in *Tonhon Chonlatee*. They disallow their son's love toward another boy and interestingly attribute their attitude to their ethnic Chinese heritage. After a few instances of mental struggles, they finally give in, since they do not want to lose the emotional proximity with their son and, more significantly, they realize that male-male love is nothing abnormal or strange (fig. 25 and 26). Most parents in Thai Boys Love series are that or become that inclusive and supportive.

The freedom to love endowed by the portrayed inclusive society and the supportive people around the main characters in Thai Boys Love series is definitely a luxury most Chinese viewers crave. By entering the utopian world these series construct and getting immersed, they enjoy “something better” than the reality they are in fails to provide. It also compensates for the absence of the freedom to love in reality and brings them temporary pleasure through imaginary experiences. By identifying with the main characters, they are able to escape from the stressful reality, mitigate negative emotions, realize “the undone,” and experience the same within this alternative world. Undoubtedly, many people around the world are fighting with the depressing and unsatisfactory reality as for living conditions, freedom to love, and countless other struggles. Many of them will desperately turn to the alternative world of entertainment to escape into, build emotional connection with, experience alternatives, and even realize their dreams. To a certain extent, it can be viewed as a liberty-pursuit and a self-enrichment at people’s spiritual level under the reality that is arduous if not impossible to alter.

Conclusion

This chapter, informed by the notions of escapism and utopianism, examined why Thai Boys Love series appeal to most Chinese viewers in response to these people’s tough lived experiences in reality. It focused on two outstanding aspects, namely living conditions and freedom to love. For both aspects, Thai Boys Love series provide “something better” for the audience to consume and enjoy, which is hard to actually achieve in their daily life. This chapter also suggested that their imaginary experiences in the alternative world may yield certain positive consequences for them to navigate through their day-to-day struggles.

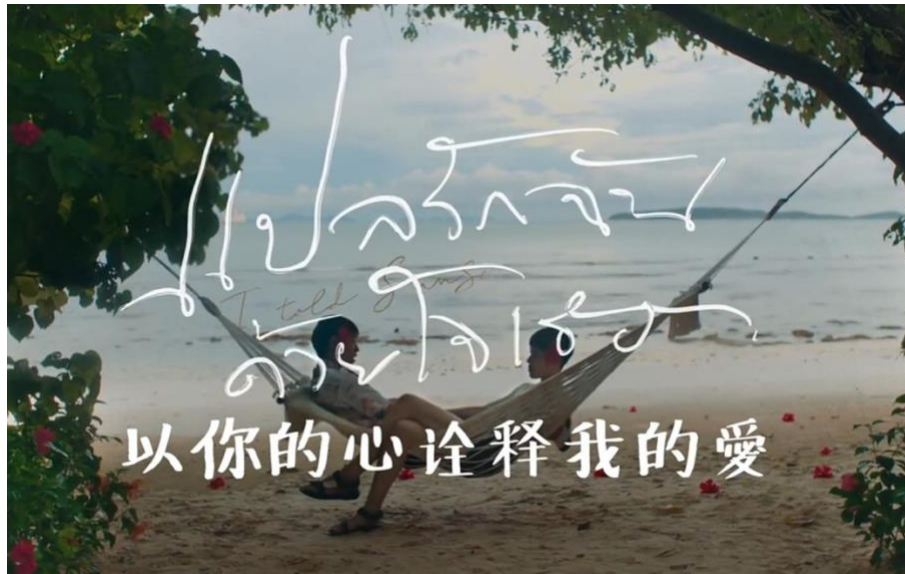


Figure 15. Cover of a fan-edited “Teh and Oh-aew Storyline” short video series on Bilibili that spotlights *I Told Sunset About You* (dir. Kuno; 2020). Beach, sea, sunshine, tropical plants, and things alike are all symbols of Thailand’s liberty and inclusiveness in the eyes of many Chinese viewers of Thai Boys Love series. Downloaded from Bilibili.



Figure 16. Poster of *SOTUS* (dir. Samajarn; 2016). The white-color long/short-sleeve shirt (left) and the working jacket of several dark colors (right) signify the “desirable” Thai college life. Downloaded from Netflix.



Figure 17. A typical look of student dorms in Chinese universities. Desk under bed and bunk bed are the two most used designs in student dorms. This picture is taken before the move-in of residents, and people can see the space scarcity and imagine how messy and noisy this room can become. Downloaded from Sohu.



Figure 18. Episode 1 of *Love by Chance 2: A Chance to Love* (dir. Sawatmaneeekul; 2020). Tin's huge and luxurious house in/near Bangkok (a representation of top-tier cities in a country) is impossible to achieve for most Chinese viewers in reality. Produced by Studio Wabi Sabi.



Figure 19. Episode 5 of *Why R U* (dir. Wongsukulphat; 2020). According to the setting, Tutor has to find a part-time job to sustain his college life, but he still lives in an exquisitely decorated single room. Produced by DoMunDi TV.



Figure 20. A “marriage-matching corner” in Xi’an, Shaanxi Province. Each paper condenses a person’s basic information, especially in terms of age, height, weight, education, *hukou*, occupation, income, health condition, marital status, and properties of the family (housing, car). People walking by can view their information and decide whether to reach out (the phone number probably belongs to that person’s parents). Downloaded from Sohu.



Figure 21. Episode 11 of *SOTUS S* (dir. Botta; 2017). Produced by GMMTV.



Figure 22. Episode 1 of *Bad Romance* (dir. Boonyopprakorn; 2016). Produced by TV Thunder.



Figure 23. Episode 12 of *Dark Blue Kiss* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2019). The male-male couple (Pete and Kao), Kao's mother, and Pete's father communicate smoothly and joyfully after both kids disclose their love toward each other. Produced by GMMTV.



Figure 24. Episode 6 of *He's Coming to Me* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2019). Thun makes up his mind to come out to his mother, fearing that he would sadden and disappoint her but receiving a warm hug and emotional support right after. Produced by GMMTV.



Figure 25. Episode 12 of *Cause You're My Boy* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2018). Tee is finally able to show his love relationship with Mork in front of his family after being impeded by his mother for a long time. Produced by GMMTV.



Figure 26. Episode 10 of *Tonhon Chonlatee* (dir. Trakulkasemsuk; 2020). Tonhon's homophobic father eventually becomes inclusive, apologizing for his previous deed and embracing his son's love with the boy Chonlatee. When he announces his acceptance, he is surrounded by his family members (including Tonhon), Chonlatee, and Chonlatee's always inclusive mother. Produced by GMMTV.

Chapter Four

Gay Paradise, Gay Archetype

Most Thai Boys Love series provide an idealistic and utopian space for their Chinese viewers to escape from the unsatisfactory reality and gain temporary liberty, pleasure, and enrichment. In spite of the benefits these series may bring to the audience that I discussed in Chapter Three, concurrent undesired consequences should not be ignored. This chapter attempts to problematize the seemingly benign information flows from Thai Boys Love series to their Chinese viewers, with a focus on the process of stereotyping and naturalizing. This chapter is initially inspired by a conversation between me and a middle-age Chinese woman on a high-speed train from Harbin to Beijing in August 2019. She started to talk to me because she has a daughter similar to my age who had just attended college, and when I told her that I would be studying abroad in Thailand for the upcoming semester, she joked, “are you going there to see *kathoey*?” She automatically associated Thailand with the image of *kathoey*, Thai transgender women (a.k.a. ladyboys), which is, frankly speaking, not “surprising” among Chinese people’s conversations when it comes to this country. However, at that moment, I began to think about what may have contributed to the “natural link” between Thailand and *kathoey*. From our following conversations, I knew that she had never been to Thailand before, and this impression was based on the words from others and the advertisement of travel agencies. In this sense, Thai Boys Love series can be viewed as a hegemonic and sometimes even sole channel, broadcasting mainly about Thailand and gayness to the Chinese audience. This media industry is one of the many powerful factors that expounds how their impressions toward what Thailand’s social landscape is like and what gay men are supposed to be like get continuously consolidated.

This chapter untangles and analyzes these two issues that Thai Boys Love series should be responsible for in the following sections. One concerns the “natural link” between Thailand and the image of a “gay paradise.”¹⁵⁷ The other concerns the “natural link” between gay men and a supposed physical attractiveness as well as certain characteristics. Drawing from my extensive online observations, both are dominant in the thoughts of most Chinese viewers of Thai Boys Love series.

Gay Paradise

Thai Boys Love series not merely offer the fascinating world for the Chinese audience to escape into and enjoy the better alternatives, but at the same time heavily shape their perceptions toward Thailand. The liberal Thailand and inclusiveness of most characters in the series orient them to view this country in reality as a “gay paradise” where people are endowed with enough freedom. Again, this paradise metaphor does not confine to gay men, but instead appeals to all the people whose loves and other behaviors are not considered normative and thereby not tolerated in the places they live. Nevertheless, what these Chinese viewers discuss the most is the ubiquity of gay men and the openness of male-male relationships in Thailand. Most of them think gay men’s love is unbounded if not celebrated in Thailand, which confirms what they get from the idealized Thai Boys Love series.

This stereotyping and naturalizing process toward a place is a common practice within transnational/transcultural media flows. In Baudinette’s research on several Chinese consumers of Japanese Boys Love culture who stay in Japan, many view Japan as progressively advanced in accepting people of different sexual orientations. A thirty-year-old respondent confesses that he

¹⁵⁷ This term “gay paradise,” again, comes from Peter A. Jackson’s essay, “Tolerant but Unaccepting: The Myth of a Thai ‘Gay Paradise’” in 1999.

used to regard Japan as the “most tolerant country in the world” in his teenage age on account of the influences of Japanese Boys Love manga and anime, although Japan is a heteronormative and patriarchal society in fact.¹⁵⁸ Similarly, Thailand (especially Bangkok) has a special weight, maintained by its media products and tourism, among gay men in Indonesia,¹⁵⁹ Singapore,¹⁶⁰ and other countries. By this token, their perceptions and impressions are mediated by the branding and promoting procedure, which might differ from the real-life situations.

At first glance, Thailand’s liberty and inclusiveness seem unquestionable. From gay bars in Si Lom to the non-heteronormative people who proudly express themselves on the streets, this country seems like a perfect fit for this image. Jackson coins the term “gay paradise” to describe this image of Thailand in most people’s mind. Although homosexuality is neither illegal based on Thailand’s laws nor immoral based on Buddhist teachings, and homophobic attacks against masculine-identified gay men are uncommon at the level of practice, gay men in Thailand are to some extent still suppressed.¹⁶¹ Anti-homosexual views have long permeated popular and official discourses,¹⁶² and homosexuality and transgenderism are always concerning for the government due to its relation to the public representation of the “Thainess.”¹⁶³ Compared to *kathoeys* who are generally regarded as Thai, safe, familiar, psychologically female, and hence can be appropriated

¹⁵⁸ Baudinette, Thomas. “Akogare no sekai wo yomitoru: ichijitaizai no chūgokujin gei ni taisuru ‘kibou no yori dokoro’ toshite no BL” 憧れの世界の読み取る：一時滞在の中国人ゲイに対する「希望のよりどころ」としてのBL [Aspirational Readings of Boys Love: BL as a “Resource of Hope” for Temporary Chinese Gay Migrants in Japan], translated by Asako Saito. “BL ga hiraku tobira: henyousuru ajia no sekushuariti to jendaa” BL が開く扉：変容するアジアのセクシュアリティとジェンダー [BL Opening Doors: Sexuality and Gender Transfigured in Asia], edited by James Welker. Seidosha, 2019, pp. 173-189.

¹⁵⁹ Murtagh, Ben. “Bangkok’s Beautiful Men: Images of Thai Liberality in an Indonesian Gay Novel.” *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, edited by Peter A. Jackson. Hong Kong University Press, 2011, pp. 163-179.

¹⁶⁰ Au, Alex. “Speaking of Bangkok: Thailand in the History of Gay Singapore.” *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, edited by Peter A. Jackson. Hong Kong University Press, 2011, pp. 181-192.

¹⁶¹ Jackson. “Tolerant but Unaccepting: The Myth of a Thai ‘Gay Paradise.’” 1999, p. 227.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁶³ Ünaldi. “The Cinematic Regime of Representation of Kathoeyes and Gay Men in Thailand.” 2011, p. 61.

within a binarized heterosexual framework, gay men are more likely to be treated as foreign, strange, potentially dangerous, if not criminal. A sex/gender conformity is enforced on them by the regime of shaming through discursive acts, like moral pressures from the family to align with heterosexual social norms.¹⁶⁴ It is evocatively supported by the repression and discrimination toward gender-nonconforming boys from their school and family in 1996's Pang Noi (set to be near Chiang Mai) portrayed in the movie *Dew* (dir. Sakveerakul; 2019) (fig. 27). Also, context specificity and social hierarchy play a crucial role in people's attitudes and responses toward gay men,¹⁶⁵ which means the treatment is diverse and fluent. As can be noticed, whether the Thai society is inclusive toward gay men has always been complex, instead of idyllically homogenous in most people's stereotypical view.

More than twenty years have passed since Jackson's problematization of this dominant impression toward Thailand. This country becomes more liberal and leads Asia in many aspects, reflected by the massive production and carnivalesque consumption of Thai Boys Love series, yet gay men are far from unrestrained. The dominant system accepts only one type of normative sexuality, comprised of a heterosexual orientation, sexual desire toward the opposite sex, and heterosexual sex for the purpose of procreation.¹⁶⁶ Under this persistent hegemonic system, public images of gay men are still kind of negative.¹⁶⁷ Many Thai officials always use Thailand's inclusiveness to attempt to attract queer tourists, but is Thailand really all-encompassing or not remains a question, given the discursive and sporadic assault and prejudice targeting gay men

¹⁶⁴ Jackson. "Tolerant but Unaccepting: The Myth of a Thai 'Gay Paradise.'" 1999, pp. 237-240.

¹⁶⁵ Jackson, Peter A. *First Queer Voices from Thailand: Uncle Go's Advice Columns for Gays, Lesbians and Kathoys*. White Lotus Press, 2017, pp. 129-161.

¹⁶⁶ Chonwilai, Sulaiporn, and Pimpawun Boonmongkon. "Key Findings." *Thai Sex Talk: The Language of Sex and Sexuality in Thailand*, edited by Pimpawun Boonmongkon and Peter A. Jackson, translated by Timo Ojanen. Mekong Press, 2012, p. 17.

¹⁶⁷ Chonwilai, Sulaiporn. "Chai Rak Chai (ชายรักชาย): Men Who Love Men." *Thai Sex Talk: The Language of Sex and Sexuality in Thailand*, edited by Pimpawun Boonmongkon and Peter A. Jackson, translated by Timo Ojanen. Mekong Press, 2012, pp. 125-133.

and many other gender minorities across the country. In this light, gay men's freedom becomes the "name card" for touristy cities such as Bangkok and Pattaya, while many gay men in reality are struggling with moral pressures from family and conservative voices from religions. The delineation of media and tourism might only focus on certain areas and is in conflict with the comprehensive picture. Granted that Thailand is relatively open to gay men and will possibly become the second in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, seeing this country as a monolithic "gay paradise" is still problematic, because this treatment over-fantasizes Thailand's society and serves as a misleading stereotype in essence.

Most Chinese viewers of Thai Boys Love series easily take the "gay paradise" image of Thailand. Indeed, nearly all Thai Boys Love series have a happy ending. That is, the love of the male-male couple(s) is always tolerated by the society and supported by people around them, after they overcome more or less obstacles. As I detailed in Chapter Three, almost all of them live together happily thanks to the inclusive social environment. This idealized portrayal invokes the "gay paradise" image and at the same time drives the audience to see the real-life situations in Thailand also in this illusory and phantasmic fashion.

In addition to the mediation effects of these series, the efforts of Thai actors/companies outside of the series and their knowledge about tourism in Thailand also come into play. But first of all, I would like to complicate the mediation effects of these series, concerning the reinforced perception of "gay men's ubiquity" both in the series and in reality. Equating the main characters with gay men is flawed, since a decent number of these characters do not disclose or embrace a gay identity. At the beginning, some have a girlfriend or a girl they are pursuing, such as Fuse in *Make It Right* (dir. Sawatmaneekul et al.; 2016), Khai in *Theory of Love* (dir. Mongkolsawas; 2019) (fig. 28), Teh in *I Told Sunset About You* (dir. Kuno; 2020), and Tan in *Manner of Death*

(dir. Sakveerakul and Arronnet; 2020). Some do not have one, but they believe they will not like other boys whatsoever, such as Arthit in *SOTUS* (dir. Samajarn; 2016), Ae in *Love by Chance* (dir. Sawatmaneeikul; 2018), Win in *2gether* (dir. Thongjila; 2020) (fig. 29), and Tonhon in *Tonhon Chonlatee* (dir. Trakulkasemsuk; 2020). Some are even very homophobic, such as Type in *TharnType* (dir. Sintanaparadee; 2019). In the end, all of them realize their “real love” toward the other main character who “turns out to be a boy too.” Instead of discussing identity (i.e., “I am gay”), these series focus more on the realization process. Most characters remain equivocal toward declaring a clear identity, which is best exemplified by one of last scenes of *SOTUS*. In episode 14 of *SOTUS*, after the male-male love between Kongpob and Arthit becomes public for some of their friends, Kongpob’s friend, M, jokes that “we have been friends for four years, but you never told me you like men.” In response, Kongpob argues, “I do not like men, I like Arthit. It is not the same. If he is not Arthit, then I will not like him.” In episode 6 of *TharnType*, the previously homophobic Type expresses a similar idea that “I am not interested in any woman at all. I do not want to sleep with other men. I can only do it (kiss and have sex) with you (Tharn, the other male main character).” Admittedly, it is possible that the “bending the straight men” (a.k.a. “making them like other men”)¹⁶⁸ process is utilized to attract the audience, but most main characters in Thai Boys Love series, displaying the sense of fluidity, are not constrained to the label named “gay.” For most Chinese viewers, naturally seeing these main characters as gay men has already been problematic, while some even take a step forward and bring this impression of “gay men’s ubiquity” to the reality.

However problematic it is, the efforts actors and production companies of Thai Boys Love series are carrying out keep strengthening the “gay paradise” image of Thailand. Although

¹⁶⁸ Tian. “Homosexualizing ‘Boys Love’ in China.” 2020, p. 113.

these actors are mostly heterosexual, they painstakingly sell gayness outside of the series to prolong the consumers' fantasy toward them as male-male couples in the real-life scenario. Max Nattapol Diloknawarit and Tul Pakorn Thanasrivanitchai in *Bad Romance* (dir. Booyoprakarn; 2016), *Together with Me* (dir. Booyoprakarn; 2017), *Together with Me: The Next Chapter* (dir. Booyoprakarn; 2018), and *Manner of Death* are seen as one of the highest “standards” as for devotion. They strive to represent real-life kiss with emotions in the series. Moreover, outside of the series, their male-male relationship is well managed to arrest the consumers. Both actors are in fact straight men, but their relationship is so immersive that many people think they are indeed a couple in reality (fig. 30). They always appear in pair in offline events, and every now and then post photos on social media showing their intimacy or sweet interactions (fig. 31). Akin to Max and Tul, most main actors of Thai Boys Love series are paired up by their production companies into male-male “couples,” and adopt the same approaches as for offline events and social media posts to sell gayness. Usually appearing in pair, they actively participate in all kinds of variety shows not only in Thailand and take intimate if not erotic cover shoot for numerous magazines, like *Kazz*, *Attitude*, and *Kullastree* (fig. 32).¹⁶⁹ It is apposite to use the term “erotic economy”¹⁷⁰ here, and the commodification of gayness in the sphere of Thai Boys Love culture should not be neglected. The efforts of these Thai actors and companies, then, can be regarded as meeting the consumers' needs and sustaining a lucrative business, rather than projecting or reflecting the real situations in Thailand. Lots of Chinese fans are passionate about saving anything related to these couples, like the photos of their offline events and their Instagram stories/posts and posting them on Weibo for the fan community, so their efforts are well-received in China even though they are

¹⁶⁹ Among these Thai magazines, *Kazz* and *Attitude* mostly use their English name, but *Kullastree* is better known in its Thai name, กุลสตรี.

¹⁷⁰ Farmer. “Contemporary Thai Cinema and Vernacular Queerness.” 2011, p. 71.

using some “censored” platforms. Owing to the high visibility and intimacy of these paired-up male-male couples in real-life scenario, it is not hard to understand why most Chinese viewers think that gay men and the celebration of male-male love are everywhere in Thailand.

Existed impression toward tourism in Thailand is another factor that explains why most Chinese viewers easily accept and naturally endorse the “gay paradise” image of Thailand they think is depicted in Thai Boys Love series. Thailand is a relatively affordable and arguably the most popular tourist destination for Chinese people. The number of Chinese tourists traveling to Thailand has been burgeoning since the Chinese and Thai governments agreed to have tourism cooperation in 1993. In 2019, the year before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, more than 10.98 million Chinese tourists traveled to Thailand, representing more than a quarter of all foreign tourists.¹⁷¹ In addition to the delicious Thai food and beautiful beaches, travel agencies in China always use *kathoey* (*renyao*)¹⁷² and the sex industry to portray Thailand and encourage prospective tourists to experience the “uniqueness” of this country. For this reason, most Chinese people naturally link Thailand with the image *kathoey*, and the existence if not ubiquity of these transgender women has been one of the first impressions that arises in their mind when it comes to Thailand. For many Chinese people, furthermore, there is no essential difference between *kathoey*, gay men, and other queer people, since they are all somewhat “deviant.” Although some people have never been to Thailand, like the middle-age woman at the beginning of this chapter, they more or less know something about this country from others or the promotions of tourism, and it is usually about these gender-nonconforming people. It is true that the Chinese audience of Thai Boys Love series is the group of people whose horizons are boarder, but this kind of

¹⁷¹ Panthamit, Nisit. “Impacts of COVID-19 on BRI: A Case Study of Thailand.” *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, edited by Nian Peng. Springer Singapore, 2021, p. 127.

¹⁷² Mandarin: 人妖. This term is considered by some people as derogatory since it literally means “human monster.”

preexisting impression toward Thailand still frames their mind, echoing with the “gay paradise” image they believe are delineated in the series.

How the portrayal in Thai Boys Love series is perceived, along with the efforts of Thai actors/companies outside of the series and the always prevalent impression promoted by tourism sector, results in the reinforcement of the stereotype that Thailand is a monolithic “gay paradise.” In his 1999 article, Jackson highlights “gay paradise” as “the myth.” Myth, by one version of definitions according to French literary theorist Roland Barthes, makes particular worldviews appear to be unchallengeable because they are “natural.”¹⁷³ This is exactly the case how the “gay paradise” image keeps being strengthened by the various factors elaborated above and thereby becomes unchallengeable. The naturalization process may bring about negative outcomes. Many Chinese viewers of Thai Boys Love series actively endorse “gay men’s ubiquity” in Thailand. As observed from their bullet screens and comments, some even explicitly state that they now view every man from Thailand as a “potential gay,” because “it is highly possible that a man is a gay there.” It further derives other tags toward this country, such as sexual promiscuity. With this impression constantly being reinforced, most of them have never thought about challenging this habitual perspective and are inclined to consume the romanticized Thailand in their mind. This treatment serves as an irresponsible stereotype and a blind generalization toward a country, and ignores gay men’s actual struggles across Thailand, especially in places out of people’s sight.

Gay Archetype

Another remarkable problem Thai Boys Love series may lead to among the Chinese audience is the standardization of gay men’s appearance and the promotion of a “gay archetype.” Almost all

¹⁷³ Barker, Chris, and Emma A. Jane. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, fifth edition. SAGE Publications, 2016, p. 91.

main characters in Thai Boys Love series follow the Asian young men's "standard of beauty" popularized by South Korean popular culture in the twenty-first century. This "standard" swept across Asia and elsewhere by Hallyu, which forms around soft masculine bodies: *kkonminam*¹⁷⁴ (a.k.a. "flower boys").¹⁷⁵ The *kkonminam* ideal refers to young men, mainly from East Asia and Southeast Asia, who possess soft masculinity but avoid becoming either too "manly" or too "effeminate." Thus, it is notable that nearly all main actors of Thai Boys Love series are young, physically attractive, fit, masculine-identified but not that muscular, fashionable, with light and smooth (hairless) skin, and without tattoo or glasses (fig. 33).¹⁷⁶ The "standard of beauty" has flowed from South Korea to China and Thailand, among many other societies, since the 2000s, which explains why the main actors of Thai Boys Love series perfectly match with the aesthetics of most Chinese viewers.

For most Chinese viewers of Thai Boys Love series, the physical attractiveness of the actors is of utmost importance. Although no one fails to be physically attractive according to the socially constructed and recognized standard, there is stratification among these already beautiful boys. As I briefly mentioned in Chapter One, the "mass production" of Thai Boys Love series generates a surplus, which empowers the audience the freedom to choose and forms a hierarchy among these series. On top of the design of storylines which requires the efforts of the directors, screenwriters, and many other production staffs, the physical attractiveness of the main actors influences if not determines whether the audience consumes the series or not. This dynamic is

¹⁷⁴ Korean: 꽃미남 or 꽃美男, known in China as 花美男.

¹⁷⁵ Jung, Sun. "Chogukjeok Pan-East Asian Soft Masculinity: Reading *Boys over Flowers*, *Coffee Prince*, and Shinhwa Fan Fiction." *Complicated Currents: Media Flows, Soft Power, and East Asia*, edited by Daniel Black, Stephen Epstein, and Alison Tokita. Monash University Press, 2010, pp. 1-8.

¹⁷⁶ There are, of course, few exceptions. For example, Drake Sattabut Laedeke, main actor of *Cause You're My Boy* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2018) and *Our Skyy* (dir. Botta et al.; 2018), is more hairy, Earth Pirapat Watthanaset Siri, main actor of *Water Boyy* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2017) and *1000stars* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2021), has tattoo, and Pod Suphakorn Sriphothong, main actor of *Dark Blue Kiss* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2019) and *Tonhon Chonlatee* is very muscular.

very noteworthy within the fan community in China. The “demand” of most Chinese viewers toward the physical attractiveness of the Thai actors is sometimes even disrespectful. After the main actors of *2 Moons* (dir. Meesuwan; 2017) quitted, new main actors were hired to continue the storylines of this well-received series. When the poster of *2 Moons 2* (dir. Soisangim; 2019) (fig. 34) was produced and circulated among China’s fan community in 2018, the physical appearance of the main actors received massive attacks from numerous fans. They complained that the new actors are “way uglier compared to the previous ones (in *2 Moons*)” and argued that “how can we watch this series with this sort of appearance.” Some took a more radical approach and requested the production company to stop tarnishing the “2 Moons” brand. Until now, many Chinese viewers still refuse to consume it. Similarly, on November 14, 2020, Tianfu (one of the leading Thai-to-Mandarin subtitle groups) posted an article on its WeChat Public Platform reporting that decreasing viewers were watching the new Boys Love series *Ghost Runner* (dir. Arnuparp; 2020) and suggesting this series had been abandoned due to the physical appearance of the main actors. The most liked comment Tianfu chose to present under its article asserted that “we cannot accept and consume every pair-up of two guys.”¹⁷⁷ Another popular comment teased that “are the main actors from Thai massage parlors?”¹⁷⁸ The central point of many fans was the main actors fall short of the “standard” of Thai Boys Love series.

The leading consumption group of Thai Boys Love series is young heterosexual women. Many of them like to consume the *kkonminam* in general. What Thai Boys Love series can offer them is the “doubled” happiness and satisfaction, because they are male-male couples in the series and usually appear in pair in reality. Tianfu and CFan, the two dominant Thai-to-Mandarin

¹⁷⁷ Mandarin: 这也不是随便两个男的就都能磕下去的。Ke 磕, an Internet language popularized in recent years, can be understood as “consume.”

¹⁷⁸ Mandarin: 演员是泰国按摩店找的吧。

subtitle groups, always evaluate the physical appearance (*yanzhi*)¹⁷⁹ of the main actors and the chemistry among them, and then “report” it to the fan community. In order to attract and secure the consumers in China and elsewhere, Thai Boys Love series deploy only *kkonminam* as the main actors. While the selection of only physically attractive boys to play male-male couple(s) in the series can be explained by the lucrative purposes of the production companies, still people should not overlook the harmful consequences it might give rise to in China. There is no doubt that selecting physically attractive actors is a common practice in the production of media works for the sake of its profits, especially those depicting youth’s love. Most Chinese viewers do not have real-life encounters with gay men and do not know what they are like in reality. To put it a more understandable way, take romantic series delineating male-female love and including only physically attractive characters as an example, they understand it as an idealized construction, since they have adequate experiences and knowledge about what male-female couples are like in reality. In contrast, as I discussed in Chapter Three, most gay men do not have the bravery to express their identity and love in China, so many viewers have not ever come across real-life male-male couples. Even though they might feel that Thai Boys Love series have nothing to do with a precise projection of the reality, many of them still regard the portrayal in these series, particularly in regard to physical appearance, among other attributes, as the “ideal” and “just the way it is (or it should be).”

Physical appearance is definitely not the only aspect of what the “gay archetype” Thai Boys Love series are promoting encompasses. For instance, the main characters are expected to not behave in a too “manly” or too “effeminate” (*niang* or *mu*)¹⁸⁰ manner. They are also expected

¹⁷⁹ Mandarin: 颜值.

¹⁸⁰ Mandarin: 娘 (as in *niangpao* 娘炮, which functions similar to the “f*g” discourse) or 母 (as in *muling* 母零, “feminized bottom”).

to have a metropolitan lifestyle, avoid being “nerdy,” and be good at sports (usually apply to the “top” in the audience’s mind). Physical appearance is nonetheless the most important one. The meaning of all aspects of the social world is given and installed,¹⁸¹ so is “being a gay.” From a constructionist perspective, reality, always a complex organization or configuration that is being put together constantly, is constructed rather than given.¹⁸² Otherwise stated, reality is produced, brought into existence, maintained, and sometimes repaired and transformed by the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms.¹⁸³ Through the rather monolithic representation of the male main characters in Thai Boys Love series, the model of gay men is constructed, and people aligning with or not aligning with this model are assigned meanings, framed as in-groups or out-groups, and directed to rewards or punishments. Since most Chinese viewers equate the male-male couples with gay men, these series frame their perceptions regarding “what gay men should be like” in terms of physical appearance and other characteristics.

The body, constantly assessed by oneself and others using the degrees of normativity, is central in social life: people are privileged by the degree to which they approximate the cultural ideal.¹⁸⁴ In many White-dominated Euro-American societies, for example, Black men are seen as “animal-like” and “hypersexual,”¹⁸⁵ while Asian men are seen as “feminine” and “asexual”¹⁸⁶ by nature. As can be seen, the body hierarchy privileges certain bodies and stigmatizes others.¹⁸⁷ It

¹⁸¹ Ingraham, Chrys. “One is Not Born a Bride: How Weddings Regulate Heterosexuality.” *Handbook of the New Sexuality Studies*, edited by Steven Seidman, Nancy Fischer, and Chet Meeks. Routledge, 2006, p. 212.

¹⁸² Grossberg, Lawrence. *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*. Duke University Press, 2010, p. 23.

¹⁸³ Carey, James. “A Cultural Approach to Communication.” *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. Unwin Hyman, 1989, pp. 23-25.

¹⁸⁴ Gerschick, Thomas J. “The Body, Disability, and Sexuality.” *Handbook of the New Sexuality Studies*, edited by Steven Seidman, Nancy Fischer, and Chet Meeks. Routledge, 2006, p. 272.

¹⁸⁵ Collins, Patricia Hill. “Prisons for Our Bodies, Closets for Our Mind: Racism, Heterosexism, and Black Sexuality.” *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Routledge, 2004, pp. 87-116.

¹⁸⁶ Kong, Travis S. K. “Sexualizing Asian Male Bodies.” *Handbook of the New Sexuality Studies*, edited by Steven Seidman, Nancy Fischer, and Chet Meeks. Routledge, 2006, p. 98.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-102.

is still prevalent in the queer community, a place considered to be all inclusive but unfortunately not. There is always an anti-Asian sentiment among White people in the gay community, since Asianness is “an exoticized and fetishized item” rather than an everyday-person thing. On the contrary, White gay men are idolized into the default and norm of sexual creatures.¹⁸⁸ Similarly, due to the influences of Thai Boys Love series and many other sources, gay men who match with the “archetype” (young, physically attractive, fit or muscular, masculine-identified, fashionable) is rewarded by other people’s collective acknowledgement that they are the “reference point,” while other gay men are more or less deviated and demeaned based on the distance they are from the disciplining model. It rhymes with the current environment in China’s gay community. Most people in the community collectively worship the image of jocks (*tiyusheng*;¹⁸⁹ sports students) for its supposed connection with attributes like young, tall, fit or muscular, energetic, and regard them as the ideal. Other gay men, old, short, overweight, slim, nerdy, “feminine/girly,” disabled, or simply differing from the “standard of beauty,” are treated as subordinate gay variants and as only attractive to people who have fetishization toward these “deviant” attributes.

Like a considerable amount of Chinese gay men, most Chinese viewers, influenced by Thai Boys Love series, consciously or subconsciously endorse this hegemonic hierarchal system. As reflected by their inhospitable responses toward *2 Moons 2* and *Ghost Runner* as well as their bullet screens and comments when watching these series, they evaluate, categorize, and discuss the characters by comparing them to the archetypal image, taking some’s privilege and some’s devalue as granted. This treatment is hard not to continue to the reality, which accounts for their “conditional inclusiveness” toward gay men. That is, if each side of the gay couple matches the archetype, they are more likely to support and celebrate it; otherwise, they may feel it difficult to

¹⁸⁸ Luta, Francis. “Project Gelb” [*Project Yellow: A Film by an Asian Guy About Asian Guys*]. 2014.

¹⁸⁹ Mandarin: 体育生.

accept. Most Chinese viewers of Thai Boys Love series automatically view it as a “reality” or “something natural.” However, the whole “standard of beauty” or “archetype” thing is socially constructed, normalized, and popularized. Let me elaborate this point with an example that these viewers must be familiar with. In 2016, the “A4 waist challenge” swept across Chinese social media sites. If women, sometimes men, can hide their waist right behind a sheet of A4 paper, the skinny body shape is regarded as desirable (fig. 37). Many women who failed to achieve that jokingly expressed their wish to go back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907), when a slightly plump body was the ideal (fig. 38).

It can be seen that the standard is historically and culturally specific and keeps changing. Having said that, it must be underlined that the whole “standard of beauty” or “archetype” thing is problematic and hence should be challenged, since it establishes a superior/inferior, good/bad, or desirable/undesirable dichotomy and allows this hegemonic hierarchal system to continuously judge, then award or discriminate people based mainly on their exterior traits. The binary system always belittles the “inferior” side,¹⁹⁰ but who belongs to which side and why on earth the binary system exists need to be scrutinized in relation to social construction. Everyone’s self-image is shaped by the process of evaluating oneself in comparison with the “reference group,” mirrored and framed by other people’s judgments.¹⁹¹ If a not-that-confident Chinese gay man notices a bullet screen, comment, or post arguing that “this character is too ugly to be a gay,” just imagine how he will relate it to himself and how damaging it is to his own self-esteem. The groups being put at the bottom of the sexual ladder tend to internalize some of the oppressions. People with disabilities frequently internalize societal negative stereotypes acting on them as if they are true

¹⁹⁰ Barker and Jane. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. 2016, p. 21.

¹⁹¹ Strickhouser, Jason E., and Ethan Zell. “Self-Evaluative Effects of Dimensional and Social Comparison.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 59, 2015, pp. 60-66.

and look down upon their own self-worth,¹⁹² many fat women “recognize” that their fatness is repulsive and makes them undesirable,¹⁹³ and gay men of color sometimes feel lucky when any White man wants to talk to them.¹⁹⁴ By the same token, with the still predominant and incredibly powerful regulation of the “gay archetype,” many gay men who are merely differing from the ideal will get tempted into the delusional sense that they are sexually undesirable, internalize the messages that they do not deserve the love or attention from other men, and prompt them to admire those gay men who happen to be in line with the ideal in this historically and culturally specific period.

Thai Boys Love series are one of many sources in China’s society today that constantly promote and reinforce the “gay archetype” among a certain group of Chinese people. The rather homogenous representation establishes and naturalizes a hierarchal system that values some gay men and devalues others based on their physical appearance and other characteristics, persuading the Chinese audience to take it as a static reality. It not only alienates and marginalizes a great number of members within the gay community, but also forces them to accept the unequal power relations and internalize the suppressions. The hegemony of the “gay archetype” should be destabilized and dismantled, which necessitates Thai Boys Love series and many other sources, like the culture in China’s gay community or the Asian young men’s “standard of beauty” from South Korean popular culture I discussed above, to go through some dramatic and substantial changes. The most idealized situation is to deconstruct the whole “archetype” stuff, since it can always yield the unequal power relations.

¹⁹² Gerschick. “The Body, Disability, and Sexuality.” 2006, p. 276.

¹⁹³ Harding, Kate. “How Do You Fuck a Fat Woman.” *Yes Means Yes!: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape*, edited by Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti. Seal Press, 2008, pp. 67-75.

¹⁹⁴ Luta. *Project Yellow*. 2014.

Toward a Better Future

Thai Boys Love series should be held accountable for promoting and reinforcing both the “gay paradise” image of Thailand and the “gay archetype” that polices many people. The final section of this chapter shares some of my own opinions about how the industry of Thai Boys Love series can make changes to challenge their dominance.

The “gay paradise” image is related to the monolithic representation of the always liberal and inclusive Thailand in these series. It is best signified by the happy ending of nearly all series, which is blessed by the support from people around the main characters and the tolerant social atmosphere. However, it undoubtedly does not project the real-life situations in every corner of Thailand, since many gay men across the country are indeed struggling with different familial or societal pressures. Media works that capture the reality are easy to empathize with and call for changes. *Love of Siam* (dir. Sakveerakul; 2007), the titled “first ever Thai Boys Love media,” did a great job. In the very last scene of this movie, Tong conveys to Mew, “I am sorry. I cannot be your boyfriend, but that does not mean I do not love you.” Tong explicitly avows his attitudes, while he has ultimately decided to put family and his duties as a good Thai son before his sexual and romantic desire toward Mew.¹⁹⁵ Likewise, in the well-known movie *Call Me by Your Name* (dir. Guadagnino; 2017), how powerless Elio and Oliver are in their affection toward each other under the social environment is depicted. There seems to be an intangible force that separates them apart. Both movies engagingly portray the barriers gay men might confront in their growth and love, instead of idealizing the society for people’s consumption purposes (i.e., whether the audience likes the storylines and ending or not). The latter is what most Thai Boys Love series have been doing since the release of *Love Sick* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2014).

¹⁹⁵ Farmer. “Love of Siam: Contemporary Thai Cinema and Vernacular Queerness.” 2011, p. 97.

The “gay archetype” hegemony is related to the monolithic representation of the male-male couples. There is no problem for Thai Boys Love series and many other media works to use physically attractive main actors because of lucrative purposes. I also do not think the “standard of beauty” will vanish anytime in sight. As a result, what is at stake is to seek for opportunities to challenge the idea of “what gay men should be like.” These physically attractive main actors can help the media works reach more viewers, which means more people can be educated if they take advantage of it and come up with strategies. The deployment of only physically attractive main actors is not totally incompatible with vitalizing people to deconstruct the “gay archetype,” since it is always feasible to delink them from the archetypal image. In episode 8 of *Love, Victor* (dir. Rubin et al.; 2020), sequel of America’s coming-of-age movie *Love, Simon* (dir. Berlanti; 2018), Victor, along with many viewers before the screen, is educated by Simon’s boyfriend Bram that “there is no one way to be gay.” They, as the handsome main characters, do not speak for an ideal. Instead, men like them, men doing crossdressing, men playing sports well, and men of all kinds are “ideal,” and their self-worth is recognized (fig. 39). It is necessary for Thai Boys Love series to have strategies alike to disassociate their physically attractive main characters from the “gay archetype,” which is almost invisible in their current practices.

The reluctance of Thai Boys Love series to carry out a “revolution” is mainly because of economic concerns. Depicting beautiful boys living intimately and happily in this romanticized all-encompassing society has become the formula to attract the audience and guarantee profits. However, if Thai Boys Love series want to shoulder more responsibility toward a better future by destabilizing the hegemony, as the influential and prestigious stronghold of male-male-love media worldwide, they can definitely accomplish that goal.

Conclusion

This chapter pointed out that Thai Boys Love series, together with many other factors in China's social landscape nowadays, should be responsible for advertising and strengthening the "gay paradise" image of Thailand and the "gay archetype" hegemony that causes harm to China's gay community. Both dynamics can be partly traced back to the depictions of Thai Boys Love series, proving that the media flow from these series to the Chinese audience is by no means entirely positive. They need to be challenged and undermined. The last section of this chapter included some of my viewpoints regarding how Thai Boys Love series may take pains to achieve that for a better future.



Figure 27. A scene from *Dew* (dir. Sakveerakul; 2019). In 1996's Pang Noi town, gender-nonconforming boys are accused and pushed out from the line by other students to attend the "training session" organized to "correct" them in the name of preventing the spread of AIDS/HIV and supervised by psychiatrists and soldiers. Produced by CJ Entertainment.



Figure 28. Episode 1 of *Theory of Love* (dir. Mongkolsawas; 2019). Khai is an extreme but illustrative example. He has dated at least one girl from every department at his school, except his own department. However, he eventually realizes his "true love" toward Third, the other male main character, who happens to be from Khai's own department. Produced by GMMTV.



Figure 29. Episode 1 of *2gether* (dir. Thongjila; 2020). Tine asks Sarawat a favor to pretend to be his boyfriend, so that he can evade the pursuit of another boy, Green. He firmly believes he like girls then and never assumes their relationship will turn into a romantic one. Produced by GMMTV.



Figure 30. Episode 13 of *Take Guy Out Thailand* (Season One). In this episode released in August 2016, Max Nattapol Diloknawarit and Tul Pakorn Thanasrivanitchai came to promote their new series, *Together with Me* (dir. Booyoparakarn; 2017). They confirmed that both of them are straight men but insisted that “straight men can kiss each other” to sell gayness in public and satisfy the consumers. Produced by TV Thunder.



Figure 31. Max and Tul showing intimacy on social media. This is a very common and frequent practice among paired-up male-male “couples.” Screenshotted from Instagram account @maxiin_ on January 23, 2020 and altered by the author.



KAZZ

E-MAGAZINE

167 VOL.13



Figure 32. Kazz 167, volume 13 (2020). It features the intimacy of Off Jumpol Adulkittiporn and Gun Atthaphan Phunsawat. Some other cover shoot for magazines can be erotically shirtless. Downloaded from Twitter account @kazzmagazine.



Figure 35. PP Krit Amnuaydechkorn, ranked number one in the “most popular overseas star of the 2020 Weibo awards.” In the viewpoint of most Chinese viewers, he is a perfect match of Asian young men’s “standard of beauty.” Screenshotted from the music video *Skyline* for the series *I Told Sunset About You* (dir. Kuno; 2020) produced by Nadao Music.



Figure 36. Poster of *2 Moons 2* (dir. Soisangim; 2019). The physical appearance of these main actors received many disrespectful attacks from the Chinese audience, who thought their physical appearance fails to reach the standard of Thai Boys Love series. Produced by Mello Thailand and Motive Village.



Figure 37. A4 waist challenge. The skinny enough waist that is able to be hidden right behind a sheet of A4 paper is considered to be ideal for Chinese women in recent years. Downloaded from Sohu and altered by the author.



Figure 38. A scene of *Tanggong Yeyan* in Henan TV's Spring Festival Gala in 2021. This extremely popular show revivifies women's lives in palace back in the Tang Dynasty (618-907). A slightly plump body shape was seen as ideal then. Screenshotted from Bilibili account @henangongqingtuang.



Figure 39. Episode 8 of *Love, Victor* (dir. Rubin et al.; 2020). This scene mainly promotes the idea that “there is no one way to be gay.” Produced by Temple Hill Entertainment, No Helmet Productions, The Walk-Up Company, and 20th Television.

Chapter Five

Vulnerability of the “Chinese-Thai Romance”

Chinese fans love Thai Boys Love series, and Thai Boys Love series love their zestful supporters in China. It is always the case. Many Chinese fans spare no effort to show their love and support toward Thai Boys Love series. The aforementioned packed fan meetings of Thai actors and vibrant participations online are just a tip of the iceberg regarding what they can do for the series, actors, or directors they love. With hundreds of millions of enthusiasts, they can achieve many spectacular and impressive things. After the release of *SOTUS* (dir. Samajarn; 2016), Thai actor Krist Perawat Sangpotirat quickly accumulated enormous popularity in China due to his role as a trying-to-be-fierce but intrinsically cute upperclassman in the series, along with the other main actor Singto Prachaya Ruangroj. In November 2017, Krist successfully graduated from Kasetsart University in Bangkok. In response, a group of his Chinese fans rented a huge billboard in Times Square, New York City to celebrate his graduation and his twenty-second birthday took place in the previous month (fig. 40). This example is perhaps extreme but precisely exhibits the love and support of these Chinese fans. Correspondingly, Thai Boys Love series love their Chinese fans. Most of these Thai actors embrace their native Chinese names (if they are Chinese Thai) and the Chinese names/nicknames assigned by their Chinese fans,¹⁹⁶ and they are managing to learn and speak Mandarin, at least some of the most basic phrases. When something important occurs in China, such as the Spring Festival each year and the initial outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan

¹⁹⁶ A considerable percentage of actors of Thai Boys Love series are Chinese Thai. On Instagram, the social media platform targeting for fans all over the world, Thai actors like Tul Pakorn Thanasrivanitchai (Wu Xudong), Tay Tawan Vihokratana (Lin Yang), and Toptap Jirakit Kuariyakul (Qiu Changyu) display their Chinese names in Chinese characters right on their profile names. Bas Suradej Pinnirat embraces the Chinese nickname *Pangpang* and shows it on his Instagram profile as well. Nearly all main actors of Thai Boys Love series have more than one Chinese names/nicknames. Please note that their Instagram profile may change after the completion of this thesis.

in January 2020, they always convey their greetings and wishes to all Chinese people through various ways and platforms (fig. 41).¹⁹⁷ This sort of treatment is inconceivable for the fan community of other countries, with the possible exception of the fan community in Thailand. It appears like Thai Boys Love series and their Chinese fans are on their long-lasting romantic honeymoon ever since *Love Sick* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2014) unlocked China's huge entertainment market several years ago.

However, no one anticipated this solid romance was to be significantly interrupted by an incident on April 11, 2020. Moreover, no one anticipated it was simply triggered by a Twitter repost and an Instagram post of a Thai actor's then girlfriend. This incident, known as #nnevvv, is reckoned by netizens to be the biggest civilian conflict online between Chinese and Thai people since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Thailand in 1975. By scrutinizing this incident in a "cross-cultural communication" framework, this chapter probes the vulnerability of the "Chinese-Thai romance" in spite of the harmony on the surface.

The #nnevvv Incident

Before April 11, 2020, #nnevvv did not carry any remarkable meaning. It was merely the Twitter and Instagram account name of Nnevvv Weeraya Sukaram, then girlfriend to Bright Vachirawit Chivaaree. Bright is the main actor of *2gether* (dir. Thongjila; 2020), a GMMTV-produced Thai Boys Love series that swept across the world in that time period. Due to his chemistry with the other main actor in this series, Win Metawin Opasiamkajorn, Bright was exceedingly popular in China. Their nicknames, Bright and Win, both have meanings in English, so their Chinese fans

¹⁹⁷ Behaviors of this kind are more noticeable for Thai artists of Handsome Entertainment (*Hansen Yule* 漢森娛樂), a company based in Hong Kong SAR and more connected to China's entertainment market.

translated these English meanings into Chinese and gave them their cute Chinese nicknames, *Liangzai* and *Yingzai*,¹⁹⁸ respectively. A young man with Thai, American, and Chinese descent, Bright attracted nearly one million Chinese followers on Weibo within days because of his physical attractiveness.

The relationship between Nnevvy and Bright is not a common thing among main actors of Thai Boys Love series. Please bear in mind that most fans of Thai Boys Love series are young, heterosexual, and urban women. Among fans all over the world, a certain proportion of them are what Chinese fan culture terms “girlfriend fans” (*nüyou fen*),¹⁹⁹ referring to female fans who actively imagine the actor(s) to be their romantic and even sexual partner(s). Certainly, there are also gay men who imagine these actor(s) as their boyfriend(s). To maintain their imagination and satisfy them, main actors of Thai Boys Love series, mostly heterosexual, are supposed to remain single or at least proclaim their single status if they are indeed in a relationship. The same dynamic applies to K-pop idol groups too, for example. In addition, many fans prefer to immerse themselves in the utopian world where they are enabled to gaze at and enjoy the male-male love among good-looking boys, and they normally will extend this male-male relationship to the real world. The existence of a girlfriend in reality definitely undermines their experiences of doing so. In this light, for Bright, admitting his relationship with Nnevvy was a brave act, with the risk of losing a great deal of fans. Fortunately, in China, fans liked him so much that they would support his relationship as long as they avoided showing off too frequently online. Prior to this incident, although many fans were sad, disappointed, or frustrated about the fact that Bright had had a girlfriend, a few of them who know how to use VPN and have an Instagram account would

¹⁹⁸ Mandarin: 亮仔 and 赢仔. The names literally mean Bright-*zai* and Win-*zai*, respectively. *Zai* is usually added after a one-character name to denote a “young male” image and connote a relational closeness. Also, in Mandarin, 亮仔 shares the same pronunciation with 靚仔, a Cantonese word for “handsome guy.”

¹⁹⁹ Mandarin: 女友粉. For “mom fans” (*mama fen* 妈妈粉), please revisit footnote #9.

go to Nnevvvy's account to leave some compliments or wishes, such as "you are so pretty" and "please be happy with Bright." Having said that, for another group of Chinese fans, her image had always been annoying when they navigated and consumed the Boys Love world, especially the series *2gether*.

For those enthusiastic fans who know how to use VPN to access foreign sites, they keep close attention on every move of the actors they like. On April 11, 2020, they noticed something "strange" of Bright: he liked Nnevvvy's retweet that seems to link the outbreak of the coronavirus to a Wuhan lab. Feeling both offended and puzzled, they went through Nnevvvy's social media accounts carefully and ended up in shock. On September 15, 2017, she posted a photo of her trip to Taiwan, below which Bright commented, "you are beautiful, look like a Chinese girl." She replied "what" in a cute fashion, whereas when another user asked her "what is your style," she answered, "Taiwanese girl~" Meanwhile, some fans exposed that prior to Nnevvvy's retweet, Bright also liked a tweet that lists "Hong Kong" in juxtaposition with other "countries," although he had apologized for that later, saying "I did not read the caption clearly." The screenshots went viral first among Chinese fans of Thai Boys Love series and were spread and circulated online in an unbelievably fast speed. The two leading Thai-to-Mandarin subtitle groups, Tianfu and CFan, immediately responded that from then on, they would stop translating *2gether* and promoting anything related to this series (fig. 42).

Most Chinese fans endorsed the "patriotic" rhetoric of Tianfu and CFan. They supported expelling Nnevvvy, Bright, and the series *2gether* out of China's entertainment market. Based on their comments on Weibo, many argued what Nnevvvy and Bright had violated was "a matter of principle" (*yuanze wenti*)²⁰⁰ regarding China's integrity and sovereignty. Many mentioned the

²⁰⁰ Mandarin: 原则问题.

humiliating past China had gone through and the unfair stigmatization China is facing in the current world order largely dominated by Euro-American countries.

Above all, this incident was collectively regarded as a “*ruhua*”²⁰¹ one. As a recurring and well-known concept in contemporary China, *ruhua*, literally “humiliating China,” is referred to when any subject wittingly or unwittingly offends Chinese people by failing to align with their collective perceptions or expectations toward China and how it should be treated, including but not limited to its people, culture, internal affair, territorial integrity, historical dispute, and even ruling party.²⁰² In the case of Nnevy, both retweeting a post that suggests the Wuhan lab’s potential link with the coronavirus and differentiating Taiwan from China were, without a doubt, considered as *ruhua*. Whether a saying, a behavior, or an incident is *ruhua* is largely subjective, but most Chinese people can reach an agreement in the majority of cases. The reason has a lot to do with education and media, growing nationalistic sentiments, and the Sinocentric view, which is expanded in the following sections. It is more than accurate to use the adjective “countless” to describe the individuals and organizations that have been involved in big or small *ruhua* events in recent years,²⁰³ from public figures or common people (e.g., Chou Tzuyu, Daryl Morey, Tian

²⁰¹ Mandarin: 辱华.

²⁰² This “definition” is come up with by me, so there is no citation. *Ruhua* is definitely an understudied cultural phenomenon of modern-day China.

²⁰³ Here, I select some of the examples and discuss why they are considered as *ruhua*. (1) Daryl Morey: in October 2019, this then Houston Rockets general manager tweeted in support of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong “protests” (a.k.a. “riots” for some people), triggering the temporary ban of NBA in China together with the NBA commissioner Adam Silver; (2) Yang Shuping: in May 2017, in her commencement speech at the University of Maryland, this Chinese international student praised the air in the United States as “so sweet and fresh, and oddly luxurious” and highlighted China’s severe air pollutions. She then talked about issues like democracy and freedom with a critiquing undertone toward China, which annoyed many Chinese people and even China’s press *Global Times*, an English-language newspaper under the state-sponsored *People’s Daily*; (3) Balenciaga: in April 2018, the staffs of the Balenciaga shop in Paris allowed non-Chinese costumers to cut in the line of the Chinese shoppers, and later subdued and assaulted these Chinese shoppers. It was seen as a mistreatment and discrimination toward Chinese people; and (4) Mercedes-Benz: in February 2018, this company used a quote from Dalai Lama in its Instagram post. For more about what might be categorized by most Chinese people as *ruhua*, please watch Chih-chyi Chang. “Zhe wujian shiqing qianwan buneng zuo! Xiang zhongguo daoqian daheji!” 這五件事情千萬不能做！向中國道歉大合集！[Stay Away from These Five Things at All Costs: Summarize All Situations That You May Need to Apologize to China]. *YouTube*. 21 Oct. 2019.

Jialiang, Ezequiel Lavezzi, Yang Shuping, Mark Horton, Hamzy, Trevor Noah) to international organizations (e.g., Dolce & Gabbana, Balenciaga, H&M, Marvel, Versace, Mercedes-Benz, APA Hotels, Lotte).

The two most noteworthy tactics most Chinese people use to fight against any alleged *ruhua* events are articulation of economic threat and cyber expedition. Expedition (*chuzheng*)²⁰⁴ is an Internet word meaning that a large group of netizens gather together, head to some specific sites/accounts, and “boom” them with overwhelming comments for certain purposes. Normally, there is an “enemy” image from whom the netizens demand explanation and apology. Both economic threat and cyber expedition are voluntary (i.e., initiated by civilians) and collective in most cases. For instance, Dolce & Gabbana released an advertisement in November 2018 which was considered to be essentially racist and surely insulting, looking down upon Chinese culture. Chinese people, including all the Chinese celebrities that Dolce & Gabbana had cooperation with, collectively boycotted this brand. Many netizens accessed foreign sites to bombard this advertisement, the brand, and the founders, threatening that Dolce & Gabbana would be forever boycotted in China. Among these cyber expeditioners, some were more rational, explaining why Chinese people got so irritated and emphasizing how China has been treated unfairly in modern history, while some adopted a more radical means, attacking this brand with words like “trash” and using equally racist approaches against the other side. This incident escalated within a week, and nearly all products of this brand were removed online and offline in China. Although the two founders, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, eventually apologized (they even said “sorry” in Mandarin) and asked for forgiveness from Chinese people, this brand is still on people’s “*ruhua* blacklist,” and the huge economic loss caused by this incident has continued till now.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Mandarin: 出征.

²⁰⁵ This incident is narrated based on my online observations then. There are a lot of articles about it online.

This advertisement from Dolce & Gabbana is indeed Orientalist and can be easily perceived as discriminative, and how it dealt with this crisis was problematic and hence led to a “brand fail,” but what I would like to illustrate by dwelling into this example is, first of all, the strategies and patterns of these Chinese netizens when facing this kind of circumstance, which can be noticed from the #nnevv incident as well.

In the same vein, the instant the #nnevv incident broke out, a group of Chinese netizens (mostly fans of Thai Boys Love series at the start) arrived at Twitter and Instagram, the main “battlegrounds” of this incident, to contend with Nnevv, Bright, and even Bright’s company GMMTV. At first, some stayed rational and requested merely an explanation and apology. For them, an explanation and apology were a matter of face, reflecting that Bright and his company still value China, at least the money from Chinese fans. Thai netizens (also, mostly fans of Thai Boys Love series) were surprised by the sudden appearance of them. Some kindly pointed out that it is nearly impossible that Nnevv and Bright did it out of spite, and Nnevv’s way of using “what” was assuredly not a denial of Bright’s comments “look like a Chinese girl” in the Thai language. They were confused, for sure, because in their mindset and worldview there is nothing wrong with questioning a state agency or saying “Taiwanese.” At this first place, sadly, many had already displayed explicit aggressiveness toward the other side. To make things worse, the results these expeditioners wanted did not come. Nnevv closed her accounts and began to delete comments in Mandarin. Bright posted a story on Instagram showing he was playing video games joyfully with his friend, a person who is said to support Hong Kong independence. GMMTV remained silent and did not address anything related to this incident at all. Hence the anger of these expeditioners got completely ignited. Some put more pressures on GMMTV by threatening to permanently “ban” all series from this company, while more people directly scolded Nnevv

and Bright using harsh words. Feeling the other side's hostility, Thai netizens fought back. The conflict soon evolved into an all-rounded battle, expanding far beyond the behaviors of Nnevy and Bright. Informed by the contents of Nnevy's retweet and Instagram post, many Chinese expeditioners attempted to use the same rhetoric to irk their Thai enemies, by saying things such as "Thailand's national power is so weak" and "southern Thailand²⁰⁶ should be independent." However, most Thai netizens were not that annoyed by these, but their sayings such as "China is an orphan on the global stage" and "Hong Kong and Taiwan are not China" could exasperate their Chinese counterpart, rising their anger to the next level.

Realizing the outbreak of this incident, many netizens from Taiwan and Hong Kong joined the battle (fig. 43). Since most of them who immediately came and helped Thai netizens out are anti-China and/or anti-CPC in essence, many of them started with an extremely sarcastic and offensive manner, such as using the word "pink maggot" (*fenqu*)²⁰⁷ to refer to these Chinese expeditioners. For these Chinese expeditioners, people from Taiwan and Hong Kong are their "compatriots" both politically and culturally, but their self-righteous acts reminded them of how some Western countries strive to disdain anything about China and has successfully brainwashed these non-mainlanders, which made them completely infuriated. Many Chinese "reinforcements" joined, and this conflict soon became an absolute chaos full of inflammatory, biased, and racist hate speeches from all parties. The focus of the Chinese expeditioners, without a doubt, was no longer the behaviors of Nnevy and Bright per se, but instead assaulting their "enemies" while

²⁰⁶ What they were referring to are Thai Provinces of Songkhla, Satun, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat where Muslims dominate (note that most Thai people believe in Buddhism). Part of this region overlaps with the Pattani Kingdom, a sultanate with part of the territory being incorporated into Thailand's map in the early twentieth century (the remaining territory was incorporated into today's Malaysia). Thai government always tries to assimilate people in this region but faces intense and sometimes violent resistance.

²⁰⁷ Mandarin: 粉蛆. 粉, pink, comes from the term "little pink red" (*xiaofenhong* 小粉红), an Internet meme broadly referring to any (young) Chinese citizen who extremely loves China and supports the government. 蛆, maggot, indicates that they do not have the ability to think independently and are controlled by the state.

safeguarding the image, sovereignty, integrity, and legitimacy of China. On the other side, these people from Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong were united under the “Milk Tea Alliance,”²⁰⁸ and the hashtag #nnevvv evolved into an icon for spreading any anti-China and/or anti-CPC sentiments. What is noteworthy and is explored later is that although both sides got angry when receiving personal attacks, these Chinese people felt annoyed and offended when their country and government were derided or despised and thus endeavored to defend for them, while their counterparts were much less responsive regarding that.

This incident went out of control²⁰⁹ and did not quiet down until a week later. Nnevvv, Bright, *2gether*, and the sequel of this series *Still 2gether* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2020) were since ostracized from China’s entertainment market, although a small group of fans still secretly like them. A few Thai actors unfollowed Nnevvv and Bright on social media, and a few Thai actors suggested in a very reserved manner that they were against the bully of Chinese fans, but most Thai actors and companies remained silent, as if there was no conflict happened at all. Bright has lost nearly two-thirds of his followers on Weibo, but ironically, he became much more popular outside of China and well-known for the people who never watch Thai Boys Love series. On June 20, 2020, Bright abruptly posted a nine-minute video on Weibo in which he explained and apologized. This late apology, unsurprisingly, was not acceptable for Chinese fans, especially after they got further irked during the online battle, and the comment with most likes under the video contained a picture showing one huge Chinese character, “fu*k off.” In spite of that, just a few weeks after the #nnevvv incident, most Chinese fans seemed to “forgive” and reconcile with Bright’s company GMMTV and Thai Boys Love series in general. The emerging series are

²⁰⁸ There are also people from Vietnam and other countries around the world joining in the battle. In addition, some non-Chinese people did support the Chinese side, arguing that many people (e.g., from Taiwan and Hong Kong) who are blindly pro-democracy had already become the poor puppets of the West.

²⁰⁹ For example, it became Thailand’s top trending on Twitter only a few hours since its outbreak.

warmly welcomed in China, except the ones starring Bright, and the fan community of Thai Boys Love series keeps enlarging. This time, however, no one dares to ever promise how long this “new chapter” of honeymoon will last.²¹⁰

The Rise of Nationalism

As mentioned before, the #nnevvy incident became unexpectedly famous, attracting attention from people of different backgrounds and nationalities. There are tons of related articles: most of them take an anti-China and/or anti-CPC stance, so their narratives are distorted and not helpful for people to comprehend the topic of this chapter. By using my narrative based on my extensive online observations when this incident occurred, I aim not to propose a biased/unbiased or right/wrong binary. Rather, I hope to lay the context in a more objective fashion for later analysis and raise some aspects that are going to be evident for the more theoretical contents remained. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to illuminate how the differing and sometimes contrasting mindset and worldview of people may impede effective cross-cultural communication and even cause friction. It is exactly the case concerning why the “Chinese-Thai romance” is always in danger, regardless of how stable and concordant it appears to be.

To explore this topic, it is significant to first understand why these Chinese fans became irritated at the very beginning and during the battle, vis-à-vis the *ruhua* (humiliating China) discourse. Most Chinese people are unable to tolerate any *ruhua* events, since in their mind, China must not be humiliated anymore. From a Sinocentric perspective, China had always been the center and the “superior” one, leading the neighboring cultures, bringing them civilization,

²¹⁰ This incident is narrated based on my online observations then. It is impossible to include every detail of this incident. For example, Bright also seemed to give Win names, which was another thing that annoyed Chinese fans at the very first place and motivated their cyber expedition.

and assimilating them. However, since the late Qing Dynasty, due to the fatuity of the Manchu rulers²¹¹ and the invasion of the imperialists, China was attacked, bullied, and torn asunder by Western powers and Japan from the mid nineteenth century to the mid twentieth century.²¹² China, with decreasing power, gradually lost its dominance on the global stage. This time period is referred to as “the century of humiliation” (*bainian chiru*; a.k.a. *bainian guochi*)²¹³ by Chinese people, which is always the center of patriotic education and political discourses (fig. 44 and 45).²¹⁴ According to the rhetoric, it is something sorrowful but able to alert Chinese people, since “humiliation” would only happen when China was weak in power. The ubiquitous appearance of “the century of humiliation” in education and media, using the vivid memories it provokes, keeps reminding today’s people of how Chinese people back then were called “the sick men of Asia,” how Chinese lands were conceded, how Chinese cities were looted, how Chinese cultures were disdained, and all in all, how China was humiliated by outside powers. It delineates the image of the past China being humiliated and calls for all Chinese people to work together to prevent the humiliation from happening again.

In this sense, the mindset of most Chinese people nowadays is peculiarly unique since it is heavily shaped by the mediated collective memories toward “the century of humiliation” in relation to China’s rejuvenation (*fixing*)²¹⁵ and prosperity in recent decades. With the economic reform (a.k.a. Reform and Opening-up) in China launched in 1978 by former Chinese President Deng Xiaoping, the world, including Chinese people who have more entries to the outside world,

²¹¹ Again, it is from a Sinocentric perspective brought up by the dominant Han Chinese.

²¹² The start is always marked by the First Opium War between Britain and the Qing Dynasty from 1839 to 1842, and the end is always marked by China’s victory over the Imperial Japan in 1945 and/or the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.

²¹³ Mandarin: 百年耻辱 (a.k.a. 百年国耻).

²¹⁴ Wang, Zheng. “National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China.” *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2008, pp. 783, 785.

²¹⁵ Mandarin: 复兴. This term is ubiquitous in China’s political rhetoric nowadays, such as in Xi Jinping’s “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (*zhonghua minzu weida fixing* 中华民族伟大复兴).

has witnessed China's rapid economic development and increasing international recognition. The year of 2008 is particularly memorable in the process of rejuvenation when the Beijing Olympics splendidly showed the world the comeback of a powerful China. These days, the magnificent skylines in big cities, the high-quality lives people share on social media, the record-breaking technologies, and many other things keep reminding and convincing Chinese people that they are truly in an era of *shengshi*.²¹⁶ The notion of *shengshi* refers to the golden years of prosperity and ascendancy, which is used to depict China's peak throughout the history, like the Han and Tang Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD; 618-907), the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong era (1661-1796) of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), and to be sure, the current moment. The saying "this *shengshi* is as you wish"²¹⁷ has been noticeably popular since the 2010s to commemorate the pioneers who overcame all kinds of difficulties in the "Old China" and used their blood, sweat, and tears to establish the "New China" which is now on its way to reach the pinnacle again.

These changes in recent decades empower the people to express their identity as a proud Chinese, invite them to safeguard China's interests in every aspect, and generate nationalistic sentiments. This nationalism is not a xenophobic one, but definitely is extremely patriotic and centric to their own beliefs. The impression that China is in *shengshi*, widely acknowledged by Chinese people, is in sharp contrast with the painful experiences and memories from "the century of humiliation." In their mind, the bully and humiliation, like discrimination toward Chinese people and culture, loss of territory, and groundless accusation and stigmatization, that happened in the past must not continue to the current stage, given the power and prestige China possesses now. As illustrated before, whether something is bullying and humiliating China is subjective, but influenced largely by education and media, most Chinese people have their unique but united

²¹⁶ Mandarin: 盛世.

²¹⁷ Mandarin: 这盛世如你所愿.

worldview and criteria. Things Nnevvv conducted at the first place crossed the line of tolerance for Chinese people, as the issues involved are provocative for them.

For most Chinese people, Nnevvv challenged China's territorial integrity concerning whether Taiwan belongs to China. In most places worldwide, these two are clearly two different and independent nation-states, no matter which one is the legitimate representative of "China."²¹⁸ In Taiwan, an increasingly well-received historiography views this island as being colonized by several foreign regimes since the seventeenth century, including the current regime, the Republic of China, which fled from the mainland upon the defeat of the Chinese Civil War and since then took it over.²¹⁹ In contrast, education and media in China have been emphasized on the territorial integrity, especially the "historical fact" that Taiwan belongs to China. It is a historical problem within China that will be solved, and both sides have already been unified under the "One-China Principle."²²⁰ A metaphor they adopt is to describe China's map as a powerful rooster, of which Hainan island and Taiwan island constitute the two feet of the rooster. Taiwan, Hong Kong SAR, Tibet Autonomous Region, and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region remain the four most sensitive regions to talk about.²²¹ Many individuals and groups I listed above were considered as *ruhua* because they did something that were not in line with most Chinese people's mindset and

²¹⁸ On October 25, 1971, the United Nations (UN) recognized the People's Republic of China (PRC) to be the only legitimate representative of China. Prior to this, this title was held by the Republic of China (ROC), which lost the Chinese Civil War and retreated to the island groups of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu in 1949.

²¹⁹ See, for example, Wi-vun Taiffalo Chiung. "Languages Under Colonization: The Taiwanese Language Movement." *Changing Taiwanese Identities*, edited by Bruce Jacobs and Peter Kang. Routledge, 2017, pp. 40, 51; Beng Su. "Taiwanren sibainian shi" 台灣人四百年史 [*Taiwan's 400 Year History*]. Paradise Culture Associates, 1980.

²²⁰ China stresses the agreement of both sides on the "One-China Principle" 一中原则 (a.k.a. 1992 Consensus 九二共识), which argues "one China" (一个中国). It deliberately does not mention an important part of this agreement, "different interpretations" (各自表述; a.k.a. 一中各表), meaning that both the PRC and the ROC can claim they are the only China. Also, it is an agreement reached between the CPC and the Kuomintang (KMT). Many Taiwanese people nowadays and the current President Tsai Ing-wen from the other dominant party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), refuse to accept it.

²²¹ Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Macao SAR are sometimes on this list too.

worldview of territorial integrity. As for Nnevy's Instagram post, replying "what"²²² toward Bright's comment "look like a Chinese girl" and announcing a "Taiwanese girl" self-image challenged the collective belief of most Chinese people that "Taiwan was, is, and will be part of China." Just imagine what if she said "Shanghaiese girl," "Sichuanese girl," or "Dongbei girl": even though she used "what" toward Bright's comment, she would be totally fine. The problem is that Taiwan is the most sensitive region to talk about when it comes to territorial integrity for most Chinese people.

Moreover, Nnevy's retweet that suggests a potential link between the coronavirus and a Wuhan lab was regarded as a groundless stigmatization toward China. This incident outbreaked on April 11, 2020, when the virus had been defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a global pandemic, causing chaos and death all over the world, with anti-Chinese/Asian sentiments climbed to the next level. The most well-known examples for most Chinese people must be the then President of the United States Donald Trump's wordings, such as "China virus" and "kung flu," and Taiwanese people's use of "Wuhan pneumonia" (*wuhan feiyan*).²²³ Both displeased and offended them, making them feel the world was looking for a scapegoat to blame for and justify their unsuccessful control of the virus. According to the Chinese state's rhetoric in April 2020, the virus might originate in Wuhan, but there has not been any scientific conclusion about its real origin yet. Furthermore, China was the first country to have effectively contained the spread and resumed people's lives back to normal, which is supposed to be learned from. More and more people began to buy into this rhetoric and feel proud of China's achievements. Many seemed to

²²² Again, Nnevy's way of saying "what" is not a denial toward "look like a Chinese girl." However, most Chinese people do not know Thai at all. They relied on translation tools, and the literal meaning was problematic to them.

²²³ Mandarin: 武漢肺炎. Although this name was used even by Chinese officials in the first days of its outbreak, only 新冠肺炎 (*xinguan feiyan*) or COVID-19 are used upon the creation of these two "non-discriminative" names, which applies to most Chinese-speaking places. However, Taiwanese people still use "Wuhan pneumonia," which disgusts most Chinese people and further dismantles the "emotional connection" in between.

forget that they themselves were very dissatisfied at first. After the death of the whistleblower Li Wenliang in early February, many Chinese people's discontent reached the apex. A multitude of them gathered online to criticize the lack of transparency and freedom of speech, prompting the state to employ censorship. Since around mid/late March, however, they were more inclined to endorse the "role model" image promoted by the government, thinking of outside critiques as disinformation and groundless stigmatization toward China, no matter how neutral or reasonable they seemed to be. For them, Nnevvvy's retweet supported the conspiracy theory that China intentionally unleashed the virus to the world and should be held accountable. This "bad devil" image of China acquired through these people's overinterpretation was definitely humiliating for them and contradictory to what they believed at the moment.

The dynamics behind Nnevvvy's Twitter repost and Instagram post, unsurprisingly, have their equivalents dating back to "the century of humiliation." Due to its weakness then, China continued to lose its territory, with Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Outer Mongolia (today's Mongolia) as classic examples. Also, China faced groundless accusation, racialized stigmatization, and outrageous bully then. For instance, the Imperial Japan baselessly accused China for the missing of a Japanese soldier in July 1937, thereby having the excuse to start the Second Sino-Japanese War. Through representations and amplification in education and media, the state depicts these painful memories and anything alike as entirely incompatible with the contemporary powerful China, generating and consolidating people's nationalistic sentiments. For most Chinese people, the biggest threat toward China is the "foreign forces" (*jingwai shili*),²²⁴ which refers to countries with power to "distort facts" on purpose to defame China and manage to make all people believe so. Euro-American countries, especially the Five Eyes,²²⁵ and sometimes Japan, South Korea,

²²⁴ Mandarin: 境外势力, sometimes as "foreign hostile forces" (*jingwai didui shili* 境外敌对势力).

²²⁵ The Five Eyes (FVEY) comprises Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

and India are among the list. In this sense, Nnevvvy's behaviors, in the understanding of most Chinese people then, were to endorse the "meticulously framed" rhetoric of foreign forces and stand in the opposing side to China. This mentality of most Chinese people is exemplified by the saying, "the desire of the imperialists to exterminate us has not dead yet,"²²⁶ which is frequently used when Euro-American countries and their allies, in their eyes, seek to divide and criticize China groundlessly. For them, Nnevvvy, a person from Thailand, one of China's closest allies, must be bewitched by the foreign forces. It also explains why these Chinese people went furious when seeing people from Taiwan and Hong Kong join the battle: they were brainwashed and orchestrated by foreign forces to counter their compatriots. Most Chinese people are determined to combat with the foreign forces to safeguard the integrity, spirit, and pride of China.

Another interesting aspect of the #nnevvvy incident is why these Chinese expeditioners were so irritated by the attacks from the other side. Most of them perceived the attacks on China, the CPC, and even the leadership as "personal" and closely linked to their self-image. That is, to attack the state, government, or Party is to attack them as individuals, which will stimulate a "defense mechanism" by resorting to nationalistic sentiments.²²⁷ It is also backed up by the myth China has been advocating that the destiny of every person is inseparably linked to the destiny of the nation.²²⁸ Thus, they were angry not only when the other side attacked them as individuals or attacked Chinese cultures, but also when the other side said something bad about the Chinese nation or the ruling party. These Chinese expeditioners took in the latter also as personal attacks. Conversely, this tactic did not work for their Thai "enemies" when they tried to insult them the same way. When Chinese expeditioners aggressively said, "Thailand's national power is so

²²⁶ Mandarin: 帝国主义亡我之心不死.

²²⁷ Yang and Xu. "Chinese *Danmei* Fandom and Cultural Globalization from Below." 2017, pp. 13-14.

²²⁸ Ringen, Stein. *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century*. Hong Kong University Press, 2016, p. 176.

weak” and “your King is sh*t,” Thai netizens simply replied, “I agree with you” and “yes, he definitely is.”²²⁹ In response to “southern Thailand should be independent,” Thai netizens joked that “not only southern Thailand, it is totally fine if you say Pattaya and Chiang Mai do not belong to Thailand, or you may even say Thailand belongs to China.”²³⁰ Many reports on this incident attribute Thai people’s reactions to their humor by nature, but what was at stake is people’s differences in mindset and worldview, and this characteristic was amplified during this hostile cross-cultural communication.

The rising nationalistic sentiments brought by China’s impressive accomplishments and earthshaking changes impelled the Chinese fans to protect themselves and China simultaneously. Collectively clenching the standard toward what *ruhua* is and how it should be dealt with, they were committed to forestalling the painful experiences during “the century of humiliation” from taking place again and utilizing China’s power today to compensate for the past. By this token, nationalism is one resolution when anyone or anything fails to be in line with their mindset and worldview. However, what matters to them might not by any means a big deal for other people, such as the Thai netizens in this incident. Even though that is the case, most Chinese people will attempt to impose their ideas on others and force others to accept theirs or at least surrender in the form of apologizing, and it is what the next section explicates.

The Comeback of Sinocentrism

The other mentality China’s high-speed development in recent decades has begat is the comeback of Sinocentrism. I use “comeback” instead of “emergence” because Sinocentrism has

²²⁹ Actually, it is illegal to denounce Thai monarchy (especially the King) according to the laws, but the anonymity on many social media sites create a safer space for Thai people to do so.

²³⁰ This is an irony that Thailand’s economy is too dependent on China, Chinese tourists and Chinese investments in particular. Also, Chinese-Thai people dominate many social arenas in Thailand now, such as media and business.

a rich history. It can be traced all the way back to the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BC) when the Chinese tributary system²³¹ and the *tianxia*²³² ideology began to develop across Asia. *Tianxia*, basically “all under heaven,” is an ancient Sinocentric idea that connotes China’s cultural and geopolitical dominance in the region (which equaled the world in people’s perception then).²³³ It portrays (ancient) China at the absolute center, bringing civilization to the “barbarians” nearby. There was definitely a superior/inferior hierarchy, and the more assimilated by China, the more civilized: ancient Kyoto’s city planning, Gyeongbokgung Palace in today’s South Korea, as well as Vietnam’s usage of Chinese characters are all such examples. Nearly all states around ancient China, including Siam (today’s Thailand), were China’s tributary states at some point.

There is no doubt that this system vanished upon the arrival of European colonizers. During and probably after “the century of humiliation,” China and Chinese people were put at the inferior side, and the dominance in the region no longer existed. Chinese people themselves even saw their own cultures as “backward” and turned to the West to seek for modernity. For example, the well-known writer Lu Xun (1881-1936), hailed as the “the sage of modern China,” advocated for abolishing Chinese characters and replacing them with the Latin alphabets. In his view, “Chinese characters constitute a tubercle on the body of China’s poor and laboring masses, inside of which the bacteria collect. If one does not clear them out, then one will die.”²³⁴ With China’s expeditious and astonishing development in recent decades, people now have returned to value and at times overly take pride of the traditional cultures. Popular music celebrating the

²³¹ Wang, David Der-wei. “The Panglossian Dream and Dark Consciousness: Modern Chinese Literature and Utopia.” *Utopia and Utopianism in the Contemporary Chinese Context: Texts, Ideas, Spaces*, edited by David Der-wei Wang, Angela Ki Che Leung, and Yinde Zhang. Hong Kong University Press, 2020, p. 59.

²³² Mandarin: 天下.

²³³ Basu, Dilip K. “Chinese Xenology and the Opium War: Reflections on Sinocentrism.” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 73, no. 4, 2014, p. 928.

²³⁴ Mullaney, Thomas S. *The Chinese Typewriter: A History*. MIT Press, 2018, p. 13.

richness and remarkability of Chinese characters reflects this pride, such as Taiwanese idol group S.H.E.'s *Zhongguohua* in 2001 and Chinese singer Chen Keyu's *Shengpizi* in 2017.²³⁵ The lyrics “people all over the world are speaking the Chinese language now” and “people with the yellow skin color raise (our/their) head with pride” explicitly reveal the Chinese language's influences worldwide and most Chinese people's increasing confidence toward it. Another quintessential example is the Hanfu Movement aiming to revitalize ancient customs of Han Chinese (fig. 46). The prevalence of this movement is partly because of the global recognition of Kimono of Japan and Hanbok of Korea. Many followers highlight Hanfu's status by using wordings like “Hanfu is the ancestor of Kimono and Hanbok,” hoping the world could grasp its abundance, splendor, and the upspoken “superiority” in the region, at least in the ancient setting.

Through a more nuanced investigation, in ancient China, the Sinocentric ideas prevailed only among the very few literate people in power: only they knew China's position in relation to other neighboring states. The vast majority of illiterate Chinese people identified with their local community (e.g., village) instead of the dynasty they were in, let alone the concept of “China.” However, in contemporary China, via education and media, the legacies of ancient China as the “influencing center” and the Sinocentric view have been spread to the mass. In this sense, what the comeback of Sinocentrism connotes is that in most Chinese people's perspectives today, the image of “China as the center” that requires enough power to sustain has come back. Also, they support this very ideology.

As Kissinger precisely elucidates in his book *On China*, “in the Chinese perception, China was considered the center of the world, the ‘Middle Kingdom,’ and other societies were

²³⁵ 《中國話》 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCKGoND0pS0> (by S.H.E.: Jen Selina, Tien Hebe, Chen Ella); 《生僻字》 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGmH7eanIQI> (by Chen Keyu).

assessed as gradations from it.”²³⁶ The depicted Sinocentric view definitely has come back in the wake of economic takeoff, and more and more Chinese people pay respect to the ancient legacies if not look forward to resuming the *tianxia* system. China’s regional dominance in the course of history (undermined by the Manchu-established Qing Dynasty and collapsed under European colonization) was maintained largely through its acknowledged cultural superiority and the ritual center it represented.²³⁷ Doubtlessly, this sort of civilizational hierarchy among different cultures no longer work today. However, education and media constantly portray China’s ancient legacies to the people, familiarizing and drawing them to the Sinocentric world order. Although what is portrayed is neither false nor exaggerated, overemphasis might lead to people’s condescending and patronizing attitudes when they come across scenarios like cross-cultural communication. Their pride always collides with the unsatisfactory reality, since many people in the world do not know China well and even still look down upon its people and cultures. There is a psychological gap between their expectations of China’s international status and how it should be treated and its disappointingly actual prestige.²³⁸ This imbalance will push some Chinese people to eagerly and sometimes aggressively demand others to recognize and respect China’s ancient legacies and the status it “deserves” for its contributions to the world. A lot of polemical issues in this facet arise between Chinese and South Korean netizens, with the origin of Hanbok (in relation to the Ming Dynasty-style Hanfu) and who has been stealing the culture from the other side as the most classic example. The initial form of Hanbok was hugely influenced by China’s Hanfu, while it also cannot be disavowed that it went through the local adaptation, transformation, and flourish. Both sides like to use antagonistic words toward each other. Facing assaults from South Korean

²³⁶ Kissinger, Henry. *On China*, illustrated edition. Penguin Books, 2012, p. 10.

²³⁷ Song, Nianshen. “Faxian dongya” 发现东亚 [*Discovering East Asia*]. New Star Press, 2018.

²³⁸ Yang, Lijun, and Yongnian Zheng. “*Fen Qings* (Angry Youth) in Contemporary China.” *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 21, no. 76, 2012, p. 652.

netizens, Chinese netizens tend to adopt Sinocentric discourses, such as “all Korean cultures were from China” and “do not forget your father even if you have a new father named America.” These radical hate speeches are rendered because the South Korean netizens fail to admit ancient China’s influences on Korea, which is, again, highly controversial and complex. Their conflicts derive from the very different socially constructed and organized historiography and interpretations since the birth of the nation-states as well as the rising nationalistic sentiments on both sides, and it is a topic of extreme complexity that might not be successfully elucidated within a book, not to speak of in a few sentences. What I want to draw attention to is people’s Sinocentric responses from China’s side.

The embodiments of Sinocentrism’s return match with the essence of ethnocentrism, which sees one’s own culture as superior to others. Nowadays, more Chinese people know that each nation’s culture should be treated with respect and try to refrain from being too explicit, but many still have the Sinocentric view and ancient legacies in their consciousness. What they want is a world where people can listen to (sometimes follow) China/Chinese people and pay respect (sometimes extra respect) to Chinese cultures. To put it more succinctly, they emphasize more on the status of and other people’s esteem toward China, possibly with a cultural hierarchy in mind. China used to be dominant within its *tianxia* due to its cultural hegemony collectively accepted by the neighboring states, but Chinese people need to find other ways to manage to reconstitute and represent its ascendancy in the contemporary world. China’s rapid development in recent decades, again, plays an irreplaceable role in this new approach, because it gives rise to Chinese people’s purchasing power.

Most people must be acquainted with how powerful it can be, and in many cases, Chinese consumers mean a lot to a brand or even a place. As noted above, articulation of economic threat

is a tactic most Chinese people use when confronting anyone or anything that is considered to be *ruhua*. It works. Many individuals or organizations that were drawn into *ruhua* events ultimately chose to apologize in order to save some of their Chinese consumers. In 2015, Taiwanese K-pop singer Chou Tzu-yu was found waving the flag of Taiwan (ROC) in a television program. Owing to that, any business between her and China was suspended, and her group TWICE and company JYP Entertainment were boycotted by Chinese netizens. She finally came out to apologize two months later. In the video officially uploaded by JYP Entertainment, this then 16-year-old girl read her apology entirely in Mandarin and claimed that “there is only one China, and I am proud of being Chinese” blankly. Similar to Chou, many individuals and organizations say “sorry” to China not because they agree with what Chinese people argue. Instead, their seemingly sincere apology may melt Chinese people’s boycott and secure some profits.

Most Chinese people know that their apology in no ways indicates they approve Chinese people’s mindset and worldview. Nevertheless, they still can use this method to manifest China’s “supposed” status and earn outward respect. The bottom line is not to lose face, which is implied by the “do not care” manner or insistence from the other side facing Chinese people’s request.

It came with no surprise that such strategy was adopted in the #nnevv incident. Despite their economic threat, there was no response from Nnevv, Bright, or GMMTV for a while. It brought negative consequences especially for Bright. Bright belongs to the four male “couples” GMMTV is currently promoting with most efforts.²³⁹ These eight men, undoubtedly, bring most profits to the company, from the calendars, mugs, key rings, and boxsets GMMTV is selling to the fan meetings and product endorsements. However, after the #nnevv incident, most Chinese

²³⁹ The four male “couples” (eight men) are: (1) Singto Prachaya Ruangroj and Krist Perawat Sangpotirat; (2) Off Jumpol Adulkittiporn and Gun Atthaphan Phunsawat; (3) Tay Tawan Vihokratana and New Thitipoom Tachaapaikun; and (4) Bright Wachirawit Chivaaree and Win Metawin Opasiamkajorn.

fans only recognize three of the four, with Bright and every series he is in on the blacklist. No one shall underestimate the amount of money Chinese fans are willing to spend on the people they like. Aside from Krist's example at the very beginning of this chapter, similar things occur every single moment, from putting their idol's posters on sky trains to sending gifts to their production companies to posting the birthday celebration videos they made across Bangkok's LED billboards. What Chinese fans can bring is absolutely not limited to these "direct" profits. After the release of *I Told Sunset About You* (dir. Kuno; 2020), the coconut-flavored shampoo Oh-eau uses in the series quickly became out-of-stock in China as well as numerous places in Thailand. Many viewers of this series have already set Phuket Province, the shooting location of this series, as the first stop of their post-coronavirus travel. The purchasing power of Chinese fans of Thai Boys Love series, in this light, is important not only for the production companies, but also for Thailand's economy to a certain extent.

It perhaps explains why the target of the Chinese expeditioners soon became Bright in the conflict. The economic threat tactic would not be that effective for Nnevvvy, since she has very few business connections with China's market. Collectively boycotting GMMTV might be way too unreasonable and unsafe, since around half high-quality Thai Boys Love series are from this company. Therefore, Bright was the best target to put pressures on and demand an apology. For them, whether Bright apologized or not was a symbolic move, indicating how much Thailand's side cared about their Chinese consumers. At the same time, they began the meaning-assigning process to convict Bright. His like of Nnevvvy's retweet and the tweet that lists Hong Kong as a country violated the mindset and worldview of most Chinese people. His unresponsiveness during the battle was interpreted as a silent consent toward what his then girlfriend and the Thai netizens had conducted. In this way, although Bright's attitudes were assumed by the Chinese

expeditioners without much evidence, they still reached the conclusion that Bright is intrinsically a person in support of splitting and defaming China.

It perhaps also explains why Bright eventually came out to apologize to Chinese people two months after the #nnevvy incident. Although his seemingly sincere apology did not change the collective boycott on him in China, he attempted to draw this incident to an end and clear out a potential “threat” for Thai Boys Love series in the future. Bright will definitely not be the last one to apologize under the pressures of Chinese people’s purchasing power, but Thai production companies are exercising extra caution toward their relationship with Chinese fans so that this kind of incident will not happen one more time. For example, on the Instagram profile of Toptap Jirakit Kuariyakul, an actor from GMMTV, the “caption” of the story highlight of his trip to Taiwan is an emoji of the flag of China (PRC) (fig. 47). According to my observations, it was an emoji of the flag of Taiwan (ROC) before the #nnevvy incident. By highlighting their purchasing power, Chinese people can force others to repeat their mindset and worldview at least vacantly, obtain seeming respect for China, and speak for its dominance. Their Sinocentric view is hence satisfied and reinforced.

As a matter of fact, Thai Boys Love series always take particular “care” of China. From their promotions in Mandarin (fig. 48) to their efforts to incorporate Chinese elements into the series (fig. 49 and 50) to their more frequent interactions with the Chinese fans, Thai Boys Love series try to show that they are paying special attention to their Chinese fans. This complaisant and compliant attitude has long been satisfying for those fans with a Sinocentric view. It echoes with the bigger myth of “Chinese-Thai romance,”²⁴⁰ which articulates the closeness between the two countries and their peoples in every aspect. That said, the #nnevvy incident exhibits how

²⁴⁰ Mandarin: 中泰一家亲; Thai: จีน-ไทย ครอบครัวเดียวกัน.

vulnerable the romance in fact is under the rise of nationalism and the comeback of Sinocentrism in contemporary China. The agonizing memories toward “the century of humiliation” create the unique mindset and worldview among most Chinese people, while the incredible purchasing power of Chinese people enables them to threaten other people to follow their demands and act obediently. Both are empowered by China’s economic takeoff in recent decades, and probably will continue for a long time. Thai Boys Love series have always been managing to meet the needs of their Chinese fans, but once something goes divergent from their collective mindset and worldview, they will request for more by asking Thai people to behave more acquiescently and intervening people’s freedom of speech outside of China. Nnevy or Bright is definitely not an exception: in terms of mindset and worldview, most non-Chinese people are differing from and even contrasting with their Chinese counterparts. The #nnevy incident broke out simply since it was found out and unexpectedly publicized and escalated. The unique mindset and worldview of most Chinese people can always be an obstacle toward effective cross-cultural communication, rendering any civilian relationship between China and other cultures fragile.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a detailed narration on the #nnevy incident that greatly interrupted the “honeymoon” between Thai Boys Love series and their Chinese fans, bringing up some aspects and paving the way for the later analysis. It then turned to inspect the rise of nationalism and the comeback of Sinocentrism among Chinese people empowered by China’s rapid development in recent decades and shaped by certain historical and societal factors. The distinctive mindset and worldview generated under this environment apply to most Chinese people, and they manage to force other people to endorse what they consider to be correct by any means. This chapter also

indicated that most Chinese people would prioritize China over the things they like. As a result, the “Chinese-Thai romance” and any cross-cultural relationship can be vulnerable, since their mindset and worldview are inflexible and thus easy to be infringed.



Figure 40. LED billboard in Times Squares, New York City displaying congratulations and wishes to Krist Perawat Sangpotirak from his Chinese fans. Wang Huizhen (the three Chinese characters) is Krist's Chinese name, which is frequently called by his fans. Screenshotted from Instagram account @kristtps and altered by the author.



Figure 41. Chinese New Year 2020 greetings video by Thai artists of Handsome Entertainment. In this part, Prem Warut Chawalitrujiwong and Boun Noppanut Guntachai, main actors of *Until We Meet Again* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2019), send their best wishes for the upcoming Chinese New Year to Chinese people. They are wearing Chinese customs, and many actors in this video manage to speak some Chinese. Produced by Handsome Entertainment.



天府泰剧

5小时前 已编辑

请叫我 红领巾



国家面前无大小，字幕组决定即日起停止直播和翻译
💎泰剧只因我们天生一对超话，我爱中国！💎
天府泰剧超话



我爱中国



点击★守护win ▶

94人发表了态度 😊

🔗 7095

💬 1.1万

👍 11.1万

Figure 42. Announcement by Tianfu right after the outbreak of the #nnevy incident. It says, “nothing can be more important than our country. The subtitle group has decided to stop livestreaming and translating *2gether* from now on. I love China!” This post garnered more than 111,000 likes within five hours. CFan, the other Thai-to-Mandarin subtitle group, posted a similar announcement the same day. Screenshotted from Weibo on April 12, 2020.



Figure 43. Wong Chi-fung amid the online battle. As one of the leaders of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, he posted it on his Twitter account to support people from Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong and encourage them to stand together against Chinese people's bully they all face. The picture on Switch is the poster of *2gether* (dir. Thongjila; 2020). Downloaded from Twitter account @joshuawongcf.



Figure 44 and 45. Pictures showing how China was carved up and occupied by Western powers and Japan during “the century of humiliation.” Most Chinese people must have seen both if they grow up in the education system in China. The left one was a French political cartoon published on *Le Petit Journal* in 1898, with the caption “En Chine - Le gâteau des Rois et... des Empereurs” (China - the Cake of Kings and... of Emperors). The right one, named *Picture of the Current Situation* (*Shijūtu*), was created by the Chinese Australian revolutionary Tse Tsan-tai also in 1898. Downloaded from Sina History.



Figure 46. Chinese people wearing Hanfu during a Hanfu Festival in Guangzhou in November 2020. It is increasingly prevalent to wear the traditional customs of Han people and claim its status in relation to Kimono and Hanbok. Downloaded from China Hanfu Website.

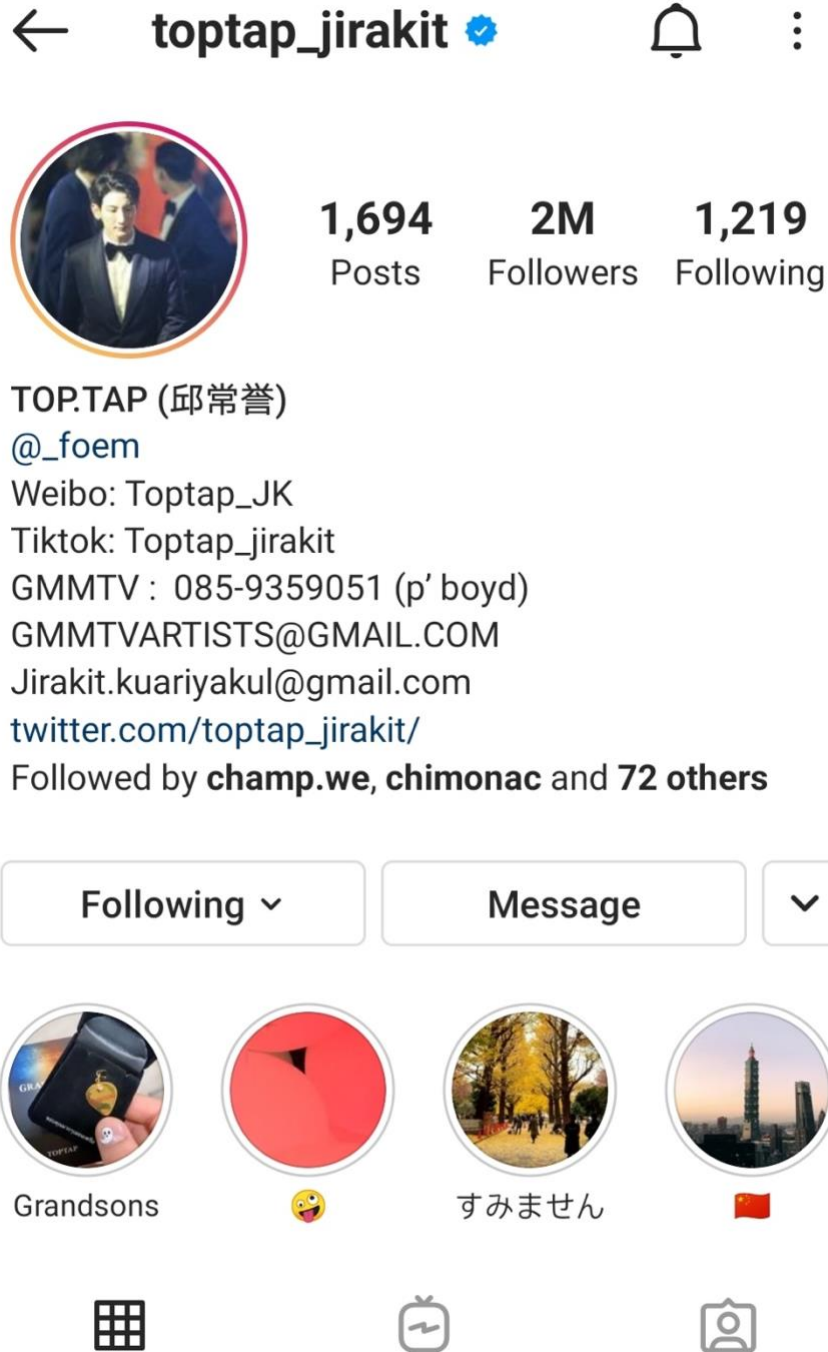


Figure 47. Instagram profile of Toptap Jirakit Kuariyakul. At the right bottom corner, he uses an emoji of the flag of China (PRC) for his story highlight of his trip to Taiwan. It used to be an emoji of the flag of Taiwan (ROC) prior to the #nnevy incident. The cover is even the iconic architecture, Taipei 101. Screenshoted from Instagram account @toptap_jirakit on January 24, 2021.



Figure 48. Poster of *Why R U* (dir. Wongskulphat; 2020) in Mandarin. It draws attention to the Chinese title of this series, featuring the two male actors with their cute Chinese names, Zhou Jieming and Zhao Tiantian. Co-made by its Thai production company DoMunDi TV and Thai-to-Mandarin subtitle group Tianfu.



Figure 49. Episode 1 of *Tonhon Chonlatee* (dir. Trakulkasemsuk; 2020). This series starts with a funny Chinese *wuxia* scene, generating laughs and resonance among the Chinese audience, as can be seen from the bullet screens. Produced by GMMTV and translated by Tianfu.



Figure 50. Opening song of *He's Coming to Me* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2019). This series incorporates many Chinese elements, and both of the main characters speak a few Chinese words at some point. Produced by GMMTV.

Chapter Six

Discussion

The preceding chapters inspected four noteworthy aspects of “the reception of Thai Boys Love series in China” in detail. There is no wonder that the interactions between these series and their Chinese consumers, including viewers/fans, subtitle groups, and event organizers, are fascinating and provide a rich terrain to explore. Thai Boys Love series begin to attain increasing influences not only within the Chinese consumers, but also in some parts of contemporary China’s society, which is known as “becoming popular outside of the circle” (*huochuquan*).²⁴¹ The extremely well-received series *I Told Sunset About You* (dir. Kuno; 2020) gained popularity among people who do not identify themselves as the “solid fans” of Thai Boys Love series, and Teh’s word to Oh-eaw in the final scene of episode 1, “*keyi ma*”²⁴² (in Mandarin, meaning “okay” or “can I”), has been massively cited and represented across Douyin (Tik Tok) and other online platforms in China. Similarly, the #nnevvv incident I elaborated in Chapter Five attracted attention from a considerable number of Chinese netizens, and many “cyber expeditioners” were not from the fan community of these series. Although the intra-Asian influences of Thai Boys Love series on China’s social landscape today are minor compared to, say, Japanese anime or K-pop, this media industry and its role in China are rising swiftly.

This thesis is guided by three subtopics, namely consumption, imagination, and friction. In terms of consumption, Chapter Two examined how Thai Boys Love series are disseminated in a cautious manner and then consumed in a carnivalesque manner under China’s currently porous

²⁴¹ Mandarin: 火出圈.

²⁴² Mandarin: “可以吗.” In this scene, Teh initiates to be Oh-eaw’s Mandarin tutor after they resume their friendship, which is the foundational step for the future development of their relationship. This half-shy and half-brave move from an adolescent boy to another excites and touches many Chinese people.

governmental censorship, with the strategic self-censorship carried out by almost all consumers. In terms of imagination, Chapter Three unveiled the unrestricted world portrayed in these series that offers a space for the Chinese audience to escape into and imagine the better alternatives given the pressures and difficulties most of them are facing in reality. Chapter Four complicated this seemingly benign flow and contemplated how these series promote and reinforce the “gay paradise” fantasy and the “gay archetype” hegemony, which resonates with their impressions and imaginations toward Thailand and the gay community. In terms of friction, Chapter Five started with the #nnevv incident in April 2020, looked into the rise of nationalism and the comeback of Sinocentrism with China’s rapid development in recent decades that expounds most Chinese people’s mentality during this unprecedented conflict, and indicated the actual vulnerability of the alleged “Chinese-Thai romance.” This thesis is organized in a progressive fashion, from the encounter (Chapter Two) to the exchanges (Chapter Three and Chapter Four) to the relationship (Chapter Five) of Thai Boys Love series and their Chinese consumers.

This thesis, without a doubt, cannot include every aspect of “the reception of Thai Boys Love series in China,” needless to say casting light on every aspect of Thai Boys Love series. I selected the aspects based on how noteworthy they were in this transnational/transcultural media flow and how I familiarized with them. My level of familiarity applied to Thai Boys Love series and the secondary sources too. As can be seen, some series were cited more often than others. It was simply impossible to watch and rewatch every Thai Boys Love series during the one-year period of working on this thesis when I was still busy with other courses as an undergraduate student. Also, since my Thai language was far from excellent when I completed this thesis, most information on Thailand’s side was acquired via English-language or Chinese-language sources. In addition, I aimed to grip the “thread” that connects all topics and holds the thesis together. For

example, in Chapter Four, I could have talked about the way Thai Boys Love series, along with Chinese movies filmed in and depicting Thailand such as *Lost in Thailand* (dir. Xu; 2012) and other powerful factors, promote and reinforce the Chinese audience's perceptions toward the monolithically chilled Thai people, reflected in their “just relax” (*jai yen yen*)²⁴³ discourses and behaviors. But I did not include that since it is trivial to the chapter's focus and unrelated to the thesis's thread. All of these discussed in this paragraph might be considered as the limitations of this thesis, and I admit that there must be a lot to improve. With that being said, I firmly believe that this thesis has delved into a decent number of topics in a groundbreaking manner, which can provide the readers many insightful, brand-new views.

There are numerous topics alike in “the reception of Thai Boys Love series in China” and Thai Boys Love culture that I did not or could not include in the previous chapters. I am going to introduce and briefly discuss them as potential directions for future research in the remainder of this discussion chapter.

China's fan community of Thai Boys Love series (*taiquan*)²⁴⁴ claims a solidarity and tries to keep this community away from the poisonous trend of China's own entertainment ambiance (*neiyu*).²⁴⁵ As revealed from the conflict between Cai Xukun's fans and Zhou Jielun's fans that I mentioned at the beginning of Chapter Two, this trend centers around these fans' undivided attention and love toward their idol(s). They strive to improve their idol's reputation and status partly by attacking and defaming other celebrities, who are seen as the competitors of their own idol. This trend, characterized by the mechanism known as “uplifting one and abasing the other” (*pengyi caiyi*),²⁴⁶ permeates the fan community of China's own entertainment products and, for

²⁴³ Thai: ใจเย็นๆ.

²⁴⁴ Mandarin: 泰圈. 圈 is the same character as in “fan community” (*fanquan* 饭圈) that I discussed in footnote #33.

²⁴⁵ Mandarin: 内娱.

²⁴⁶ Mandarin: 捧一踩一, also known as 踩一捧一 (different order, same meaning).

instance, K-pop. Since the fan community of Thai Boys Love series (and Thai media in general) was newly established within a decade and the size remains relatively small, most members hope to keep this community “clean.” Therefore, members are expected to share relevant information, support each other, and love these Thai boys altogether as a tight-knit, cohesive group. Members who violate this norm are labeled as the “canker” and requested to leave. Although this “clean environment” is desirable, it is maintained by the community’s relatively small size. People do have the freedom to not like and even speak ill of some celebrities: many of them have a good reason for doing so and stay rational (i.e., avoid insulting languages). As the community keeps enlarging, some people who “continue the bad trend in China’s own entertainment ambiance” have entered the fan community of Thai Boys Love series, and the “clean environment” most of them want to sustain is indeed in danger.

Many Thai Boys Love series are adapted from Thai Boys Love novels (fig. 51), such as 2 *Moons* (dir. Meesuwat; 2017) and *My Gear and Your Gown* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2020). The authors of these novels, like Hideko_Sunshine, are sometimes invited to the events production companies of Thai Boys Love series hold. The display of male-male intimacy, including kissing and intimate sex, is usually more straightforward in the novels. Similar dynamic happens in Japanese Boys Love manga and Boys Love anime. In the manga, even the penetration process is clearly showed, but the anime presents the intimacy in a more reserved manner on the screen. Some Chinese viewers of Thai Boys Love series also consume Thai Boys Love novels, mainly translated by the two leading Thai-to-Mandarin subtitle groups, Tianfu and CFan. The majority of Thai Boys Love series are categorized by the Chinese audience into the label known as “plain water series” (*qingshui jü*),²⁴⁷ such as *Love Sick* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2014), *SOTUS* (dir. Samajarn;

²⁴⁷ Mandarin: 清水剧.

2016), *Our Skyy* (dir. Botta et al.; 2018), and *Tonhon Chonlatee* (dir. Trakulkasemsuk; 2020). These series only include a few kissing scenes (merely once or twice is possible) and mostly no sexually suggestive scene. Although the viewers like this kind of series, many of them prefer to consume the “more intense” ones, such as *Together with Me* (dir. Boonyoparakarn; 2017), *Love by Chance* (dir. Sawatmaneekul; 2018), *TharnType* (dir. Sintanapardee; 2019), and *Why R U* (dir. Wongkulphat; 2020). These series include more explicit kissing scenes and some sexually suggestive scenes and are the “18+” ones under the Thai rating system for media products. Due to their perceptions toward Thai Boys Love novels, many Chinese consumers demand the series to be produced according to the standard of novels and make clear that what they want is intense male-male intimacy. Even though some novels are also “plain,” these consumers will bring their experiences from other sources (e.g., Chinese *danmei*) and actively imagine something intense is happening between the male-male couple(s). Why they prefer and even demand an intense male-male intimacy is worth scrutinizing.

The representation of gender-nonconforming or androgynous characters is concerning. Based on my definition of Thai Boys Love series, the male-male couple(s) in the series should be masculine-identified. Even if putting aside my definition, gender-nonconforming or androgynous characters who are portrayed to be essentially different with the male main characters exist in some series. These characters are called *kathoei*. Although this term carries a predominant image of transsexual women who have transitioned, it can refer to all transgender women, especially the “effeminate men” in Thai Boys Love series. Starting with the “first ever Thai Boys Love series,” *Love Sick*, the *kathoei* characters are utilized as a “comic relief” (fig. 52).²⁴⁸ In addition, they stand for the absolute opposition to the gender-conforming main characters who is seen as

²⁴⁸ Baudinette. “Adapting Japanese ‘Boys Love’ to Thailand and the Creation of a New Genre of Queer Media.” 2019, p. 118.

“normal” and whose love is celebrated in the series. On the contrary, the representation of these *kathoey* characters, how they speak and behave in particular, is problematic, which is evident from *Love by Chance* to *TharnType* to *2gether* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2020). The representation can be described as intentionally stereotypical: their “femininity” is amplified, and their behaviors are exceedingly dramatic. For example, in episode 3 of *TharnType*, when a transgender woman and her female friend (might be another transgender woman) meet the handsome and masculine Type on campus, they react with dramatically surprising voice, force him to take pictures together, and keep touching his body without any consent (fig. 53). Focusing on gender-conforming characters does not mean this kind of biased and misleading representation of the *kathoey* characters is fine, because it will probably give rise to the marginalization and stigma toward the transgender and transsexual community. Specifically, in China’s society, people already have stereotypes toward (Thai) transgender women, manifested in the term “human monster” (*renyao*) that I brought up in Chapter Four. This kind of representation will only worsen the situations. It is one reason that I exclude series that represent non-masculine-identified protagonists from my definition of Thai Boys Love series in Chapter One. Some Thai media products, such as *Diary of Tootsies* (dir. Boonnitipat; 2016), *Diary of Tootsies 2* (dir. Thongaoum; 2017) (fig. 54), and the sequel movie *Tootsies & The Fake* (dir. Thongaoum; 2019), do positively depict the *kathoey* characters who happily and courageously live their lives as their true selves.

Many Thai Boys Love series get involved in exhibiting and discussing social issues, from school/cyber bullying to depression to homophobia. Among these various social issues, same-sex marriage and surrogacy might more outstandingly raise the Chinese audience’s awareness about the issues themselves, since both are the *de facto* taboo to talk about, at least publicly, in China’s society nowadays. Under Thailand’s still heteropatriarchal system and the legitimate concerns of

the production companies, only a few Thai Boys Love series talk about these two social issues. However, most viewers actively continue their imagination that the male-male couple(s) will live together in the future with happiness and stability, and in this way, they need to think about how they will have legal protection toward their relationship and even how they can have kids. Thus, I argue that “same-sex marriage” and “surrogacy” are probably going to come to the audience’s mind when they consume the series, even if the series do not explicitly draw their attention to the issues. A few Thai Boys Love series have begun their exploration in this domain. In episode 8 of *Dark Blue Kiss* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2019), during a trip of the male-male couple Pete and Kao, they engage in a short conversation about “will we get married” (fig. 55). Pete insists that although they cannot get married in Thailand, they can do so overseas. In the end of *TharnType 2: 7 Years of Love* (dir. Passawut; 2020), the “marriage” of the male-male couple Tharn and Type with the company of their friends is grandly delineated (fig. 56). *Tonhon Chonlatee* even takes a step forward to include the more controversial issue of surrogacy. I mentioned in Chapter Three that Tonhon’s previously homophobic father finally gives in and avows his son’s love relationship with another boy Chonlatee, but he requests Tonhon to have offspring to continue the family’s line and prosperity. Miriam, a female friend/schoolmate of Tonhon and Chonlatee, is found and approved by his father as the surrogate mother (fig. 57). I do not know the audience’s reactions elsewhere, but this plot received extremely mixed reviews in China upon the release of this episode, with many viewers questioning the ethic and legitimacy of surrogacy.

Besides same-sex marriage and surrogacy, the perception of the Chinese audience toward the (ex-)girlfriends of the main characters in Thai Boys Love series is also interesting. As I have discussed in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, a great number of main characters think they like women and even have a girlfriend at the beginning, but they gradually realize their “true love”

toward another male main character and later break up with the girlfriend. This reminds the Chinese viewers of the “homowife” (*tongqi*)²⁴⁹ issue in contemporary China’s society. This term refers to the heterosexual women who unknowingly (or maybe knowingly) get married with gay men. According to the Chinese sexologist, sociologist, and activist Li Yinhe, there are more than sixteen million homowives in today’s China, part of which is because everyone is expected to get married under the familial and societal expectations.²⁵⁰ This social issue is well-known, and the Chinese audience perceives that these (ex-)girlfriends in the series, similar to the homowives, are as miserable and pathetic. Despite that, the audience is envious of the liberal and inclusive social landscape of Thailand portrayed in the series that prevents these “poor girls” from becoming real homowives. Their love toward the boy who is ultimately in favor of the same sex is another issue the audience likes to talk about and compare with China’s own situations.

From a larger perspective, the whole industry of Thai Boys Love series is important to Thailand’s economy, especially as for tourism. In Chapter Five, I disclosed that many Chinese viewers have already set Phuket Province as the first destination of their post-coronavirus travel due to the influence of the extremely well-received Thai Boys Love series, *I Told Sunset About You*. As a matter of fact, most Thai Boys Love series have a persistent focus on the campus lives in Bangkok or its immediate hinterlands (fig. 58), including but not limited to Nakhon Pathom Province (Mahidol University there is the shooting location of, for example, *Love by Chance*) and Pathum Thani Province (Rangsit University there is the shooting location of, for example, *SOTUS*). All feature the splendid cityscape under Thailand’s development and the metropolitan lifestyle of the characters. However, it is obvious that the shooting locations become more and more diversified. *I Told Sunset About You* in Phuket is definitely an example (fig. 59). Also,

²⁴⁹ Mandarin: 同妻.

²⁵⁰ Tan, Kenneth. “Li Yinhe on Homowives.” *Shanghaiist*. 5 May 2018.

Manner of Death (dir. Sakveerakul and Aroonnet; 2020) and *1000stars* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2021) are filmed in/near Chiang Mai, spotlighting the culture, scenery, and local customs of northern Thailand. *1000stars* is even set in a village up on the mountain near the national border (fig. 60), although the delicate makeup of the characters is at odds with this setting. Most viewers are willing to travel to the exact shooting locations to experience the series and emotions in person. This phenomenon is related to a notion named *seichi junrei*,²⁵¹ derived from Japanese popular culture and existing since the 1990s. The article analyzing Japanese popular culture and contents tourism concisely elaborates that “places of particular significance to anime fans have become known as ‘sacred sites’ (*seichi*) and the act of visiting these sacred sites is known as ‘pilgrimage’ (*seichi junrei*).”²⁵² Undoubtedly, this phenomenon has expanded well beyond the fan community of Japanese anime: the audience who likes *Empresses in the Palace* (dir. Zheng; 2011) and visits the Forbidden City is also regarded as conducting *seichi junrei*. The Chinese audience of Thai Boys Love series, among many other audience groups around the world, wish they can make a “pilgrimage” to the shooting locations of these series, particular the significant ones (e.g., where the male-male couples date). It is definitely a favorable circumstance the Thai government and travel agencies can harness to attract tourists and boost the economy.

Furthermore, the storylines and plots also become diverse. Thai Boys Love series used to be pretty homogenous, centering around the pure love of college or high school students in the campus-centric setting, but it is noticeable that more themes are being explored and presented to the audience. For instance, *He’s Coming to Me* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2019) is about the human-ghost love and a detective story. Much of *Until We Meet Again* (dir. Sawatmaneeikul; 2019) starts after

²⁵¹ Japanese: 聖地巡礼.

²⁵² Seaton, Philip, and Takayoshi Yamamura. “Japanese Popular Culture and Contents Tourism: Introduction.” *Japan Forum*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1-11.

the reincarnation of a male-male couple. *Manner of Death* comprises a series of very engaging criminal and detective scenes. Nowadays, although the “school love” theme still dominates Thai Boys Love series, more unique and refreshing elements are incorporated into the storylines, with more innovative and exciting themes being explored.

At this beginning of the 2020s, Southeast Asia and East Asia have indisputably become the stronghold of male-male-love media products. The Philippines, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, among others, continuously yield high-quality Boys Love works, while Thai Boys Love series endeavor to maintain the leading role within the region, if not the world. Meantime, the intricate and vibrant relationship between Thai Boys Love series and the Chinese consumers keep altering and being altered. Let us wait and see what the future has to offer.



Figure 51. A shelf of Thai Boys Love novels at B2S, CentralPlaza Salaya (Nakhon Pathom, Thailand). These novels of various themes are common and popular in Thailand's bookstores. Taken by the author on September 8, 2019.



Figure 52. Episode 6 of *Love Sick* (dir. Kusolkulsiri; 2014). This group of *kathoei* characters serves as the “comic relief” and the absolute opposition to the male main characters throughout the series. Produced by Middleman Media.



Figure 53. Episode 3 of *TharnType* (dir. Sintanaparadee; 2019). Produced by Me Mind Y.



Figure 54. Poster of *Diary of Tootsies 2* (dir. Thongaoum; 2017). This series features three transgender women, Gus, Golf, Kim, and their lesbian friend Natty. Produced by Jor Kwang Films.



Figure 55. Episode 8 of *Dark Blue Kiss* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2019). Produced by GMMTV.



Figure 56. Episode 12 of *TharnType 2: 7 Years of Love* (dir. Passawut; 2020). Tharn and Type are kissing in the wedding of Tharn's brother, and they have their own "wedding" later. Produced by Me Mind Y.



Figure 57. Episode 10 of *Tonhon Chonlatee* (dir. Trakulkasemsuk; 2020). Miriam is the surrogate mother for Tonhon and Chonlatee. Produced by GMMTV.



Figure 58. Episode 1 of *Theory of Love* (dir. Mongkolsawas; 2019). A modern-looking university campus in/near Bangkok has always been the main shooting location for the majority of Thai Boys Love series. Produced by GMMTV.



Figure 59. Episode 2 of *I Told Sunset About You* (dir. Kuno; 2020). The Phuket old town and the beautiful sceneries in the seaside portrayed in this series arrest the attention of many viewers worldwide and invite them to visit. Produced by Nadao Bangkok.



Figure 60. Episode 4 of *1000stars* (dir. Chaiwimol; 2021). This series is set in a northern village (near Chiang Mai) up on the mountain and right next to Thailand's national border. Produced by GMMTV.

Appendix

Featured Thai Boys Love series (most well-received ones from 2014 to April 2021)

English Title	Thai Title	Chinese Title	Release Time
Love Sick	เลิฟซิกเดอะซีรีส์ รักวุ่น วัยรุ่นແສບ	为爱所困	July 2014
Love Sick 2	เลิฟซิกเดอะซีรีส์ รักวุ่น วัยรุ่นແສบ (ฤดูกาลที่ 2)	为爱所困 2	May 2015
Senior Secret Love: Puppy Honey	รุ่นพี่ Secret Love ตอน Puppy Honey	我的狗狗男友	March 2016
Make It Right	รักออกเดิน	爱来了别错过	May 2016
SOTUS	วักตัวร้ายกับนายปีหนึ่ง	一年生	August 2016
Water Boyy	/	水男孩 or 游基队	April 2017
Senior Secret Love: Puppy Honey 2	รุ่นพี่ Secret Love ตอน Puppy Honey 2	我的狗狗男友 2	March 2017
2 Moons	เดือนเกี้ยวเดือน	逐月之月	May 2017
Make It Right 2	รักออกเดิน (ฤดูกาลที่ 2)	爱来了别错过 2	May 2017
Together with Me	อกหักมารักกับผม	醉后爱上你	August 2017
SOTUS S	/	一年生 2 or 二年熟	December 2017
Kiss Me Again	จูบให้ได้ถ้านายแน่จริง	爱我你就再亲我	April 2018
Cause You're My Boy (a.k.a. My Tee)	อาตี๋ของผม	唐人街探爱 or 我的 阿弟	June 2018
Love by Chance	บังเอิญรัก	不期而爱	August 2018
Together with Me: The Next Chapter	อกหักมารักกับผม (ภาค ต่อ)	醉后爱上你 2	September 2018
Our Skyy	/	我们的天空	November 2018
He's Coming to Me	เขามาแข่งแข่งข้างๆหลุม ผมครับ	清明时节爱上我	February 2019
Theory of Love	ทฤษฎีจีบเธอ	恋爱传播学 or 追爱 理论	June 2019
2 Moons 2	เดือนเกี้ยวเดือน 2	逐月之月 2	June 2019
TharnType	เกลียดคนมาเป็นที่รักกัน ชะด๊า	真爱墨菲定律 or 与 爱同居	October 2019

Dark Blue Kiss	จูบสุดท้ายเพื่อนายคนเดียว	深蓝之吻	October 2019
Until We Meet Again	ด้ายแดง	待到重逢时	November 2019
Why R U	เพราะรักใช่เปล่า	缘来誓你	January 2020
2gether	เพราะเรารู้กัน	只因我们天生是一对 or 假偶天成	February 2020
My Engineer	มีซ้อป มีเกียร์ มีเมียรัยยังวะ	程心程意 or 我的工程男友	March 2020
Still 2gether	เพราะเรา(ยัง)รู้กัน	依旧天生一对 or 假偶天成特别篇	August 2020
Love by Chance 2: A Chance to Love	รักนี้บังเอิญคือคุณ 2: โอกาสที่จะได้รัก	不期而爱 2 or LBC 2	September 2020
My Gear and Your Gown	เกียร์สีขาวกับกาวน์สีฝุ่น	白色齿轮	September 2020
I Told Sunset About You	แปลรักฉันด้วยใจเธอ	以你的心诠释我的爱	October 2020
Theory of Love: Special Episode “Stand by Me”	/	恋爱传播学特别篇 or 追爱理论特别篇	October 2020
TharnType 2: 7 Years of Love	เกลียดคนรักมาเป็นทีไรรักกันซะดีๆ 2	真爱墨菲定律 2 or 与爱同居 2	November 2020
Gen Y	วัยรุ่นรุ่นYรัก	谁的青春不乱爱 or 歪爱时代	November 2020
Thonhon Chonlatee	ต้นหนชลธิ	同心启航 or 心之航向	November 2020
Manner of Death	พฤติกรรมที่ตาย	亡者之谜	November 2020
SaifahZon Story	สายฟ้าชนStory	缘来誓你特别篇 SaifahZon Story	December 2020
1000stars	นิทานพันดาว	千星传说 or 心语星愿	January 2021
Lovely Writer	นับสิบจะจูบ	数到十就亲亲你	February 2021
Second Chance	จังหวะจะรัก	第二次	March 2021
Fish upon the Sky	ปลาบนฟ้า	天上飞鱼	April 2021
Close Friend	โคตรแฟน	密友	April 2021

Other Thai Boys Love series or Thai series with Boys Love contents (not an exhaustive list)

English Title	Thai Title	Chinese Title	Release Time
Hormones	ฮอร์โมนส์ วัยว้าวุ่น	荷尔蒙	May 2013
Love O-NET	รักต้องสอบ Love O-NET	爱的测验	April 2014
Hormones 2	ฮอร์โมนส์ วัยว้าวุ่น 2	荷尔蒙 2	July 2014
Club Friday The Series 5: The Secret of a Heart That Doesn't Exist	ความลับของหัวใจที่ไม่มีจริง	没有真相的内心秘密	February 2015
Hormones 3	ฮอร์โมนส์ วัยว้าวุ่น 3	荷尔蒙 3	September 2015
Kiss	รักต้องจูบ	爱我你就亲亲我	January 2016
Views of Love: Grey Rainbow	รู้สีเทา	灰色彩虹	April 2016
Bad Romance	ตกหลุมหัวใจขี้ปัสสาวะ	恶魔的浪漫	July 2016
My Bromance	พี่ชายเดอะซีรีส์	我的兄弟情人	December 2016
Club Friday The Series 8: True Love... or Confusion	รักแท้ มีหรือไม่มีจริง ตอน รักแท้ หรือแค่สับสน	真爱还是困惑	June 2017
My Dear Loser: Edge of 17	รักไม่เอาถ่าน ตอน Edge of 17	我亲爱的失败者之十七岁的边缘 or 十七岁的你我	July 2017
I am Your King	ผมขอตั้งให้คุณ	国王游戏 or 王的命令	August 2017
What the Duck	What the Duck รักแลนด์	爱的着陆	January 2018
My Dream	นายในฝัน	梦中注定	October 2018
Friend Zone	เอาไว้ให้ชัด	朋友界限	November 2018
What the Duck 2: Final Call	What the Duck 2 รักแลนด์	爱的着陆 2	March 2019
The Best Twins	รักจิ้น ฟินเฟร่อ	双子偷心	March 2019
ReminderS	เพราะคิดถึง	因为想(念)你	April 2019
The Effect	The Effect โลกออนร้าย	爱情效应	October 2019

I am Your King 2	ผมขอสั่งให้คุณ 2	国王游戏 2 or 王的命令 2	October 2019
2 Wish	/	有生之年	November 2019
The Moment	Moment แห่งความสุข	此刻我需要你	February 2020
Ingredients	Ingredients ส่วนผสมที่ลงตัว	爱的成分 or 爱情原料	April 2020
En of Love: Love Machines	โปรเจกต์ซีรีส์วาย: กลรักรุ่นพี่	爱情工(or 攻)心计	April 2020
YYY	มันส์เวอร์นะ	耽生公寓 or Y 情公寓 or YYY	April 2020
The Shipper	จิ้นนายกลายเป็นจิ้น	燃烧的腐魂 or 魂穿情移	May 2020
So Much in Love	นิยามรัก	爱的定义	August 2020
Club Friday The Series 12: Rak Sap Son	รักซับซ้อน	隐秘的爱之爱生孽	August 2020
Oxygen	ออกซิเจน เดอะซีรีส์ - ดั่งลมหายใจ	你是我的氧气	September 2020
Friend Forever	บทเพื่อน บทเพลง	男校风云	September 2020
Friend Zone 2: Dangerous Area	Friend Zone 2 เอาให้ชัด	朋友界限 2	September 2020
Ghost Runner	นักวิ่งผี	鬼逐	September 2020
My Bromance 2: 5 Years Later	พี่ชาย My Bromance 2: 5 Years Later	我的兄弟情人 2	December 2020
Y-Destiny	หรือนี่คือพรหมลิขิต	缘来天注定	March 2021
Call It What You Want	จะรักก็รักเหอะ	恋爱无名氏	April 2021

Other media works included in this thesis (in order of appearance)

English Title	Native Title	Country of Origin	Release Time
3 Will be Free	สามเราต้องรอด	Thailand	August 2019
Bangkok G Story	Bangkok G Story	Thailand	December 2017
Lady Boy Friends	เพื่อนกันมันส์ดี	Thailand	February 2015
Diary of Tootsies	ไดอารี่ตุ๊ดซี่ส์	Thailand	January 2016

Love 8009 (a.k.a. Varieties of Love)	รักแปดพันเก้า	Thailand	January 2004
Tomorrow, I'll Still Love You	พรุ่งนี้ก็รักเธอ	Thailand	November 2009
Qi Pao	กิ๊พ๊าว	Thailand	November 2012
Love of Siam	รักแห่งสยาม	Thailand	November 2007
I'm Tee, Me Too	คนละทีเดียวกััน	Thailand	September 2020
Detective Conan (a.k.a. Case Closed)	名探偵コナン	Japan	January 1996
Addicted	上瘾	China	January 2016
The World's Greatest First Love	世界第一初恋	Japan	April 2011
The Dead End	烈日灼心	China	August 2015
Take Guy Out Thailand	Take Guy Out Thailand	Thailand	May 2016
The Untamed	陈情令	China	June 2019
Bad Genius	ฉลาดเกมส์โกง	Thailand	May 2017
Empresses in the Palace	甄嬛传	China	November 2011
Two Weddings and a Funeral	두 번의 결혼식과 한 번의 장례식	South Korea	June 2012
Dew	คิวไปด้วยกันนะ	Thailand	October 2019
Call Me by Your Name	Call Me by Your Name	Brazil, France, Italy, United States	November 2017
Love, Victor	Love, Victor	United States	June 2020
Love, Simon	Love, Simon	United States	March 2018
Lost in Thailand	人再囧途之泰囧	China	February 2012
Diary of Tootsies 2	ไดอารี่ตุ๊ดซี่ส์ 2	Thailand	February 2017
Tootsies & The Fake	ตุ๊ดซี่ส์ แอนด์ เดอะเฟค	Thailand	December 2019

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Contact Me

Thank you for taking the time to read my thesis, “The Reception of Thai Boys Love Series in China: Consumption, Imagination, and Friction.” I hope it gives you some insights and makes you (re)think these topics more deeply. I completed it as the Senior Honors Thesis when I was still an undergraduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and my time was quite limited then. I clearly know there are a lot to improve, so I welcome any constructive comments and suggestions. If you would like to be in conversation with me, please contact my personal email at junqi_zhang@outlook.com.

