Behind online Y counterculture: The role fansubbing groups and social actors play in driving online Y counterculture

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Abstract

In recent years, Y series and BL series have gained popularity in both Thailand and China, respectively. The Thai and Chinese offshoots of the same Japanese subculture constitute a counterculture as defined by Bennett (2014). When Y series have become subject to much more vigorous scrutiny due to their oftentimes problematic messages including their romanticisation of sexual abuse and fetishisation of homerotic relationships, the Thai Y fandom has instead gravitated towards Chinese BL content, which has earned more positive reception for the latter's more nuanced portrayals of gay characters thanks, ironically, to China's ban on queer representation on screen. In light of the burgeoning demand for Chinese BL, communities of Thai fansubbers – a portmanteau word made up of "fan" and "subtitling" – devoted to translating Chinese BL series gratis have surfaced. These fansubbing groups mostly operate on social media platforms which over the decade have been employed in the spirit of socio-political activism. Apart from Chinese Y series and Thai Y fans of Chinese Y series that have played a part in driving this Y counterculture, other social actors including Thai fansubbing groups, Thai Y audiovisual productions and their Chinese counterparts, Y novels, critical Y fans as well as Y publishing houses have also contributed instrumentally to spurring the Y counterculture on social media by stimulating public conversation about LGBTQ+ related issues that might subsequently effect social change.

Keywords: activism, fansubbing groups, LGBTQ+, Y fans, Y/BL novels, Y/BL productions

บทคัดย่อ

ในช่วงไม่กี่ปีที่ผ่านมา ความนิยมของซีรี่ส์วายไทยและจีนเติบโตขึ้นอย่างมากในทั้งสองประเทศ วัฒนธรรมวายไทยและจีนซึ่งแตกกิ่งก้านออกมาจากวัฒนธรรมย่อยเดียวกันของญี่ปุ่นได้ก่อร่างสร้างตัวเป็นวัฒนธรรมปรปักษ์ตามที่เบ็นเน็ตต์ (2014) ให้คำจำกัดความไว้ เมื่อซีรี่ส์วายไทยถูกเพ่งเล็งและวิพากษ์วิจารณ์มากยิ่งขึ้นจากเนื้อหาที่มีปัญหาอยู่บ่อยครั้ง รวมถึงการนำเสนอการทารุณกรรมทางเพศให้กลายเป็นความโรแมนติก การหมกมุ่นกับความสัมพันธ์แบบโฮโมอิโรติก แฟนคลับวายไทยจึงหันไปบริโภคซีรี่ส์วายจีนแทน ซึ่งได้รับการตอบรับที่ดีกว่าจากการถ่ายทอดตัวละครเกย์ที่มีความซับซ้อนนุ่มลึกมากกว่า การที่ประเทศจีนห้ามฉายความสัมพันธ์แบบรักร่วมเพศในสื่อส่งผลตรงกันข้าม กล่าวคือ ทำให้ซีรี่ส์วายจีนถ่ายทอดตัวละครออกมาได้นุ่มลึกและสลับซับซ้อนยิ่งกว่าเพื่อหลบเลี่ยงการเซ็นเซอร์ ความต้องการซีรี่ส์วายจีนในไทยก่อให้เกิดกลุ่มชุมชนแฟนซับชาวไทย (คำว่า “แฟนซับ” เป็นคำผสมระหว่างคำว่า “แฟน” กับ “ซับไตเติ้ล”) ที่อุทิศตนให้กับการแปลซับซีรี่ส์วายจีน กลุ่มแฟนซับเหล่านี้ส่วนใหญ่ดำเนินการบนช่องทางโซเชียล มีเดียที่มักถูกใช้เป็นเครื่องมือขับเคลื่อนกิจกรรมรณรงค์ทางสังคมและการเมืองในช่วงทศวรรษที่ผ่านมา นอกจากซีรี่ส์วายจีนและกลุ่มแฟนซับวายจีนชาวไทยที่มีส่วนขับเคลื่อนวัฒนธรรมปฏิปักษ์นี้แล้ว นักแสดงทางสังคมกลุ่มอื่น รวมทั้ง ผลงานสื่อโสตทัศน์วายไทยและจีน นิยายวายและแฟนคลับวายที่ตื่นตัวต่อประเด็นปัญหาทางสังคมต่างก็มีบทบาทสำคัญในการขับเคลื่อนวัฒนธรรมปรปักษ์วายโดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งทางโซเชียล มีเดียด้วยการกระตุ้นให้เกิดการอภิปรายสาธารณะในเรื่องที่เกี่ยวข้องกับกลุ่มบุคคลที่มีความหลากหลายทางเพศ (LGBTQ+) และอาจกระตุ้นให้เกิดการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางสังคมในวันข้างหน้าเช่นกัน

คำสำคัญ : กิจกรรมรณรงค์, กลุ่มแฟนซับ, กลุ่มบุคคลที่มีความหลากหลายทางเพศ (LGBTQ+), แฟนคลับวาย, นิยายวาย, ซีรี่ส์วาย

1. Introduction

Previously dismissed as a form of pornography, boys' love (BL) series have emerged as a major cultural force that has attracted large followings especially in Thailand and China in recent years. The origins of the once underground genre can be traced back to as far as the 1970s in Japan when *Shonen-Ai* materialised as a type of male-male romance manga written by women (Prasannam, 2019a, p.17). Later in the mid-1980s, *Shonen-Ai* evolved into *Yaoi*; the former of which focused on tender, romantic involvement between two male protagonists while the latter placed greater emphasis on hardcore male-male sexual intercourse (Sington, 2007, p.236) and was primarily self-published (Prasannam, 2019a, p.17). Boys' love, abbreviated to BL, arrived on the Japanese scene in approximately 1992 as a genre of male-centred homoerotic manga and novels in its own right (Prasannam, 2019a). In Thailand, the year 1992 also marked the first appearance of Japanese Y comics as bootleg imports (Sukthungthong & Bunyavejchewin, 2019, p.364). Since then, the term *yaoi*, often abbreviated to mere Y, has taken root and become the all-encompassing denomination for "manga, anime, original fiction, fan art, fan texts, commercials, films, television series, and television adaptations" (Prasannam, 2019b, p.65) featuring homoerotic stories between boys.

The Chinese offshoot of the same Japan-born subculture, billed collectively as *danmei* in Chinese or as BL[1], was similarly brought to China for the first time in the early 1990s as pirated Japanese BL manga along with other Japanese manga genres (Yang & Xu, 2017, p.4). Soon after its introduction to Thailand, Japanese BL manga was frequently liable to government suppression due to its explicit sex scenes (Prasannam, 2019b, p.66). The migration to online platforms of the Y fandom in the 2000s served to counteract official efforts to crack down on the distribution of Y material (Prasannam, 2019b). Furthermore, in both countries, the predominantly comic strip format of Y/BL content was overtaken by web fiction as the genre's prevalent literary form. The popularity of online Y/BL novels in turn gave rise to Y/BL audiovisual productions adapted from their written predecessors. In fact, Y/BL fiction and, by extension, series have established themselves as a staple of both Thai and Chinese entertainment industries. In Thailand, not only did the consumption of Japanese Y content begin in the 1990s, the creation of local Y novels by Thai fans facilitated by the growing availability of the Internet also emerged in the same decade (Sukthungthong & Bunyavejchewin, 2019, p.376).

The Thai and Chinese outgrowths from the same original Japanese subculture have concurrently thrived in both countries. Against different socio-political backdrops, however,

Thai Y and Chinese BL have evolved their own narrative conventions. As more and more Thai Y dramas have been called out on their problematic storylines, the Thai Y fandom has increasingly turned its attention to Chinese BL series instead. As a result of the growing demand in Thailand for Chinese BL programmes, communities of Thai fansubbers – a portmanteau of the words "fan" and "subtitling" – dedicated to translating them have emerged. Drawing on the conceptualisation of counterculture first put forward by Roszak in 1969 and expanded upon by Bennett in 2014, I argue that the Y culture constitutes a counterculture as defined by Bennett. And since a counterculture usually encompasses a heterogenous range of competing values and ideologies, I would also argue that not only have the fansubbing groups that operate mainly on social media platforms been driving the counterculture, albeit unintentionally, but many other agencies including, most notably, critical Y fans who have played an instrumental role in spurring the Y counterculture may consequently serve as inadvertent actors of LGBTQ+ awareness and, potentially, social change.

2. Y/BL Counterculture

The term 'counterculture' was originally conceived in Theodore Roszak's 1969 seminal monograph entitled *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969) to specifically describe the radical left anti-techno movements prevalent in the 1960s Europe and North America. In the aftermath of the second world war and against a backdrop of the Cold War, middle-class youth in the USA, disenchanted and disillusioned with the socio-political mores at the time, promulgated competing values and spearheaded a counterculture which eventually came to be known as "the hippie movement" characterised by the use of psychedelic substances, rock music, and the rise of communes as an alternative lifestyle *(*Bennett, 2014, p.18*)*. However, despite the movement's popular association with white middle-class youth, Clecak (1983) insisted on the heterogenous nature of the demographics involved in and driving the counterculture. Indeed, as observed by Clecak (Clecak, 1983), 'counterculture' itself "was an umbrella term for an amorphous range of activities and ideologies" which included, for instance, the civil rights movement, the LGBT movement, and the feminist movement, all of whose members belonged to (and still do) marginalised constituencies in the US at the time.

In this socio-political climate of co-occurring ideologies, counterculture has morphed into a fluid and inclusive entity with diverse self-expressions contingent on local conditions (Bennett, 2014, p.22). In other words, the denotation of counterculture has expanded to encompass any:

> point of disjuncture between what are represented as *dominant* and *mainstream* values and alternative value systems that, although the purview of a minority, are articulated through various forms of media – music, writing, art, protest and so on; these serve to amplify the collective voice of a counterculture in such a way that a minority becomes a 'significant' minority (Bennett, 2014, p.17)

Bennett's reworking of the term 'counterculture' from its original myopic focus on white actors has served as essential groundwork for an understanding of counterculture in broader socio-political contexts, not least because it acknowledges the reality that the reordering of cultures is historically steered by more than one single social agency, and that oftentimes marginalised groups are more likely, and more motivated, to bring about socio-cultural restructuring. The description of counterculture by Bennett can well be applied to the rise to popularity of Y subculture which has potential, for all intents and purposes, to effect social change. This is particularly evident in the case of Thai Y and Chinese BL series in conjunction with their fansubbing groups.

In Thailand, Y series are a genre of homoerotic audiovisual productions that originated in Japan and have been steadily gaining in popularity over the past decade. The letter 'Y' stands concurrently for *yaoi* and *yuri*, which refer, respectively, to same-sex love stories between boys and girls, although the former has far outshone the latter in terms of popularity and recognition to the extent that the abbreviation 'Y' has been exclusively associated with boys' love (Prasannam, 2019a). In the late 2000s when Y cartoons and novels were first introduced in Thailand, save their niche fandom, they were disdained by the general public as pornography for explicitly sexual scenes were an integral part of early Y content (Sington, 2007, p.236) and attempts were made by government authorities to stem the dissemination of Y fiction including the shutdown of Y publishing houses and apprehension of some Y publishers (Lertwichayaroj, 2017, p.73).

Since the television broadcast in 2014 of *Love Sick the Series*, the first Thai Y TV production, the tide started to turn as various production companies looked to new sources of content into which they could tap. In 2016, *SOTUS the Series*, adapted from an online Y novel of the same name authored by Bittersweet, was aired on One 31 and became an instant sensation. The 2016 series subsequently paved the way for the mass production of Y commodities. Nowadays, Y products constitute a highly lucrative market sector with multiple mainstream publishers that once dismissed Y content now scrambling to release Y titles,

sometimes under newly established imprints aimed specifically at the Y customer base (such as Deep Publishing under Sathaporn Books and EverY under Jamsai), not to mention the mushrooming of infant publishing houses targeting the Y audience. Additionally, Y series have become such a brisk trade that the annual tallies of Y broadcasts launched in recent years have been on the rise.[2]

Interestingly, the emergence and popularisation of Thai Y goods occurred almost in tandem with those of their Chinese counterparts known domestically as *danmei* or BL which stands for boys' love. The consumption and distribution of Chinese BL commodities have thrived not only on their home soil, *in spite of* the Chinese state broadcast directives prohibiting homosexual portrayals (Karoonporn Chetpayark, 2019; Lavin, Yang, & Zhao, 2017, p.xvi), but also abroad in Thailand where burgeoning demand for Chinese BL content has led to a proliferation of Chinese BL-oriented Thai fansubbing communities. Despite both branching off from the same Japanese roots, Thai Y and Chinese BL have developed their own storytelling tropes somewhat unique to their socio-political backgrounds. For instance, while Thai Y stories typically feature university students or young adults in the contemporary world as love interests, numerous Chinese BL novels and their audiovisual adaptations are set in historical times as a buffer against state censorship since period settings are typically regarded as divorced from the present state of affairs, thereby carrying no real-world meaning for the presence of flesh and blood homosexual men.

In an additional attempt to evade official suppression, physical and verbal expressions of homoeroticism are not straightforwardly conveyed; instead, the homoerotic overtones in Chinese BL series are often toned down and/or painted as brotherly love (Wang, 2020) through use of props, symbolism, or implicatures. For example, in *The Untamed,* the most successful Chinese BL television series of 2019 adapted from an online novel titled *Mo Dao Zu Shi* [*The Grand Master of Demonic Cultivation*] by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, Wei Ying, one of the two male protagonists, is occasionally spotted wearing Lan Zhan's white undershirt, which is unique to the Lan Clan to which Lan Zhan belongs. For another instance, Lan Zhan invariably sports his clan headband, a sacred accessory that can be touched only by the wearer's parents, offspring, or lover. That Wei Ying repeatedly touches Lan Zhan's headband and Lan Zhan allows the former to do so time and again is a symbolic transgression to indicate their (un)brotherly bond. In as early as episode 6, when the two of them tumble down a cave, Lan Zhan ties Wei Ying to himself with the headband to protect Wei Ying from an assassination technique lurking in the cave. The series also abounds with instances of animal symbolism like rabbit and chicken.

In Chinese myth, Tu'er Shen, literally meaning 'the Rabbit God', is the god of homosexual love and sex. Early on in the show, rabbits are presented as a gift from Wei Ying to Lan Zhan and later appear as a constant motif to remind the audience of their intimate relationship. Chickens, on other hand, are a gift from a drunken Lan Zhan to Wei Ying in episode 36. In ancient China, chickens are typically used as a wedding proposal gift from the groom-to-be to the bride-to-be. It should also be noted that the original online novel on which the series is based is not only unanimously categorised as BL, but also contains explicit lovemaking scenes between the two characters. Therefore, even though the homoerotic hue of their relationship is subtly represented on the screen, its audience can immediately make the intertextual connection that enables them to recognise the homoerotic symbolism.

Without state censorship, the Thai Y series industry has greater leeway to incorporate homoerotic references in their Y productions. This has, however, proven counterproductive and led to periodic censure of Thai Y for various reasons, such as its absurd plots, hypersexualisation of male characters, homophobic/transphobic/sexist/misogynistic elements, or normalisation of sexual harassment and abusive relationships with the most common criticism levelled against Thai Y content (both in novels and series) and Y fans being the repeated denial of male love interests' homosexuality or even bisexuality. The most recent case in point is *2gether: The Series* (Thongjila, 2020) which premiered in February 2020. The Y show follows the life of Tine, a first-year university student who self-proclaims as a 'chic' guy who has already dated 'all' kinds of girls including a nerdy girl, a selfie-obsessed girl, an indecisive girl, and an irritable girl. Tine is pursued by Green, a gay freshman who refuses to back down despite Tine's rejection and assertion that he still likes girls. Tine then devises a puzzlingly counterintuitive plot to fend off Green's courtship by relentlessly asking (or similarly harassing) Sarawat, a first-year heartthrob, to pretend to chase after himself to discourage Green. Later, Sarawat's friends help him intoxicate Tine with alcohol so that he can take a suggestive photo of Tine and post it on Instagram to declare to the world that Tine is already taken. When Sarawat and Tine's relationship arc is already resolved, Man, Sarawat's best friend, is obsessively stalking Type, Tine's elder brother, on whom Man has a crush. Man crashes Type's dinner with his colleagues and tells them personal details about Type even when Type looks evidently uncomfortable. Additionally, it is revealed that Green is only persistently going after Tine to shake off Dim, his ex-boyfriend who is still bothering him. To coax Green into getting back together, Dim goes so far as to beat Green up. These scenes would not have been so problematic had they not been portrayed as indicative of the characters' overwhelmingly

intense love, instead of toxic behaviour. The public backlash against the show led, Jittirain, the author of the original web novel (although she maintained that she was not responsible for the scriptwriting process of the television adaptation) to issue an apology for the elements of sexism, sexual harassment, and sexual violence[3] while citing her inexperience when writing the novel five years ago as the cause of her ignorance and lack of awareness about those issues raised by the public ("Author of 2gether the Series apologises, Inexperience leads to drama," 2020).

TharnType: The Series is another Thai Y series that recently faced strong pushback from the public with its inclusion of numerous sexual assault scenes and mishandling of the representation of childhood rape victims. The show features Type, an openly homophobic first-year student who happens to have a gay roommate, Tharn. Type's homophobia is later justified by his past sexual trauma when he was sexually assaulted by a gay man as a kid. As soon as Type finds out Tharn's sexuality, He declares to the latter's face repeatedly that he hates gays and demands that Tharn move out of their shared dorm room. Toward the end of episode 1, when Type is drunk asleep, Tharn seizes this opportunity to exact his revenge by kissing and groping Type. Throughout the entire show, Tharn repeatedly forces himself on Type by, for another instance, giving him a hand job in episode 3 without Type's consent. Apart from its perpetuation of gay men as sexual predators, the series never resolves Type's homophobia. Rather, Type's so-called personal growth comes in the form of his acceptance of Tharn, and Tharn alone, I may add, as gay.

In its early days, Y/BL culture in both Thailand and China operated as an underground faction with both its producers and consumers having to actively evade suppression efforts by the authorities; the Thai and Chinese offshoots of the Japanese subculture were placed on the cultural periphery. Nowadays, as an immensely popular genre of entertainment media that runs counter to the heteronormative mainstream culture, both Thai Y and Chinese BL are situated at what Bennett (Bennett, 2014, p.17) terms "the point of disjuncture between what are represented as *dominant* and *mainstream* values and alternative value systems". Furthermore, the abundance of fan creativity that results in the production of fan art, fan videos (Jenkins, 1992) and fan-led events prompted the commercial Y industry in Thailand to take the Y fandom seriously and subsequently make several attempts to boost its engagement with the Y fans by co-opting fan practices of, for instance, shipping defined as "an act of pairing characters/stars from existing media content then reimagining the romantic relationship among them" (Prasannam, 2019b, p.76). In Prasannam's (2019b) work on the *Yaoi* phenomenon in

Thailand, the scholar exemplifies this type of fan/industry interaction with the role GMMTV, one of the largest media entertainment companies in Thailand, has played in commercialising and further popularising the Y culture. Evidently, in the eyes of the industrial players, the Y fandom is a significant enough minority that warrants their attention and whose collective voice they have helped amplify with their co-optation of fan practices such as shipping and the creation of OPVs (Other People's Videos).

The significant standing of the minority Y audience has been additionally accentuated by the recent greenlighting of the adaptation of a Y novel entitled *คุณหมีปาฏิหาริย์* [Khun mee patiharn; Mr. Miracle Bear], into a TV series of the same name to be aired on Channel 3, one of the most prominent and longest-standing TV channels in Thailand (Nongpon, 2020). This development marks the very first time that a Thai Y series will be given airtime on such a well-established and mainstream platform; previously domestic Y productions were comprehensively bypassed by elite TV stations and commissioned exclusively by relatively new digital or online TV channels that were mostly inaugurated in the mid-2010s including GMM 25 and One31 which are owned by GMMTV.

Granted, a counterculture is not necessarily a precursor to social change. It could, however, serve as a catalyst for more public debate on LGBTQ-related issues in Thailand, as Thai Y has regularly come under fire, particularly on Twitter, for its fetishisation of homoerotic relationships without acknowledging the identity of sexual minorities, and romanticisation of abusive relationships, and sexual harassment[4]. Indeed, the characterisation of the two male protagonists in Thai Y series is often predicated on the entrenched concept of gender binary; they are thus customarily assigned rigid heteronormative roles – one designated as *ke* (short for *uke*) placed at the masculine end and the other as *me* (short for *seme*) fixed to the feminine (Taesilapasathit & Wongkom, 2017, p. 129). Chinese BL productions, on the other hand, have garnered more support and approval from their Thai following with their more nuanced portrayals of male homosexual characters thanks, ironically, to the Chinese state's de facto ban on LGBTQ presentation in popular media, hence the common practice of self-censorship on the part of Chinese BL producers. *Guardian (*Zhou, 2018*)*, *The Untamed* (Zheng & Chen, 2019), and *The Sleuth of Ming Dynasty (*Guo & Yang, 2020*)* are some of the most recent Chinese BL dramas that have been overwhelmingly positively received in Thailand. Even though all of the aforementioned series were officially translated, the growing demand for Chinese BL dramas in the Southeast Asian nation has provided several online Thai fansubbing groups dedicated to Chinese BL with much material to work on. As a parallel

counterculture, Thai Y is currently subject to much scrutiny and criticism while Chinese BL is gaining greater traction. It could be argued then that Thai fansubbing of Chinese BL offerings together with the controversial nature of Thai Y could prove to be vital as a stimulant to social change when it comes to progress towards LGBTQ acceptance. The following section details how fansubbing has come into existence and how it can be utilised as a tool for social change.

3. Fansubbing and online Y communities: A competing counterculture

The practice of fansubbing first arose in the 1980s in response to the growing popularity of Japanese animated pictures and TV serials, known collectively as *anime* (Bold, 2009; Diaz-Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Dwyer, 2018; Pérez González, 2007). Since its inception, fansubbing has been adopted by an eclectic number of other fan communities as a tool to help disseminate their favourite audiovisual content, provide fellow fans with linguistic access to and, in so doing, popularise their shared objects of interest, despite their contributions being largely underappreciated (Bogucki, 2009; Diaz-Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; O'Hagan, 2009; Pérez-González, 2013). Prior to the social media era, fansubbing communities mostly gathered in online forums (alternatively called web boards and message boards). Over the last decade, however, with the expansion and diversification of social media platforms, the practice and cultural products of fansubbing are no longer restricted to ardent fans whose decent level of technological know-how was at times required in order to navigate the members-only online clubs and to gain access to their target media content. In discussing general online practices by fandom, Lucy Bennett (2014, p. 7) points out how the advent of technological advances and social media has served to shape "four key, often interconnected areas of fandom [including] communication, creativity, knowledge, and organisational and civic power" which, in my mind, are equally applicable to the specific practice of fansubbing.

In the realm of communication, "the Internet and social media has allowed for the development, and fragmentation, of networks and communities comprised of fans even further" (Bennett, 2014). Indeed, at present fansubbing groups tend to run their operations on multiple social media platforms all at once such as Facebook, YouTube, Dailymotion, and Twitter, where different stages of their content distribution process take place. For instance, in Thailand, Facebook is the platform on which fansubbing contingents devoted to international BL productions such as ซับไทย by Cooki3fairy Sub, 2NL SUB, หนังวายซับไทย by JPolly Wu, and BlackWhiskey, to name but a few, share their fansubbed content and publish posts that promote new releases among their followers, while their fansubbed episodes of Chinese BL

series are hosted on YouTube and/or Dailymotion, the second biggest video-sharing site preferred by uploaders wishing to stay under the radar of YouTube's stricter copyright policing policy. Of all the BL Facebook pages, BlackWhiskey, boasting almost 800,000 likes, is the biggest and additionally reachable via Twitter with the same profile name. Public and personal accounts publicising BL productions of all nationalities abound on Twitter with the former including WeLoveYThai (@WeLoveYThai), and Hermit Books (@hermitbooks). The use of varied platforms even by the same group has attracted both overlapping and different segments of the same fanbase. Moreover, the sophistication of communication technologies has not only transformed the way in which fans connect with their object of fandom as explained by L. Bennett (2014, p.8), but it has also fostered and strengthened relationships between fans themselves as fan members of these pages can sometimes be seen requesting videos of their choice to be fansubbed for their consumption.

This type of interaction among fans has further engendered the sharing of fan creativity and knowledge as exemplified by the 2NL SUB fansubbing group. This fansubbing page occasionally posts fancam videos (video footages taken by fans) of fan meetings or fan-made videos that it has helped fansub. For example, in August 2019 when the main cast of HIStory, a popular Taiwanese BL drama, held a fan meeting event in Thailand, 2NL SUB was tasked with fansubbing a project video that replays those romantic moments between the protagonists in the series and shows touching messages from fans to the cast. 2NL SUB additionally fansubbed and posted a fancam video of the fan meeting event that had been supplied by another fan. Perhaps the best example of knowledge sharing among fans or what is termed "collective intelligence" (Jenkins, 2006) is manifested when admins of those pages recruit more fansubbing staffers from the pool of page members to satisfy some members' demand for new fansubbed videos to be uploaded faster. For fansubbed videos that have been removed on copyright infringement grounds from YouTube and DailyMotion, some of these pages like 2NL SUB and ซับไทย by Cooki3fairy Sub have managed to come up with creative workarounds to circumvent piracy policing mechanisms by, in the case of 2NL SUB, creating a private Facebook group whose request to join must be approved individually or, on the part of ซับไทย by Cooki3fairy Sub, uploading their videos to Google Drive instead.

It is with such expansive reach of the multifunctional social media that now "the organisational and civic power" (L. Bennett, 2014, p.9) of fandom is wielded. The once subcultural goods have ultimately succeeded in casting their net far and wide, bringing themselves to the forefront of public conversation surrounding LGBTQ+ issues. Despite

domestic Thai Y series' societal values being frequently called into question, the said fansubbing communities and social media users' commitment to further exposure to more meaningful foreign BL productions has undoubtedly unveiled the extent of power they could wield to direct public attention and world views. In fact, the role fansubbing groups play in raising awareness beyond marketing arenas is not a novelty; fansubbing efforts have been put in voicing political standpoints and undermining state authorities. Take Ansarclub, for example, a Spanish cybersubtitling collective that translated, José Aznar, former Prime Minister of Spain's English speech on an international stage, into Spanish accompanied by the group's own disparaging comments aimed at eroding his political credibility (Pérez-González, 2013). Fansubbing carried out for socio-political ends is alternatively called "guerrilla subtitles" (Dwyer, 2017, p. 110) employed primarily to "subvert media regulation and circumvent censorship in authoritarian political regimes" (Díaz-Cintas, 2018, p. 134). Examples include "[g]roups like AJ+ (www.ajplus.net), J'ai un doute (https://jaiundoute.com), Spanish ®evolution (https://spanishrevolution.wordpress.com) and Hartos.org (www.hartos.org)" (Díaz-Cintas, 2018.)

In China, a nation characterised by its "monotonous entertainment environment" where authorised access to foreign media is to a great extent curtailed, fansubbing groups in the country's online communities are dubbed *jianghu* which is an anachronistic reference to "martial heroes who gather to form an alliance against dysfunctional laws and powerful evil organisations through acts of chivalry" (Li, 2013). Against this backdrop, "fansubbing and the consumption of fansubbed media constitute one facet of resistance to state domination" (D. Wang & Zhang, 2017). In fact, fansubbing is not the sole fan-made medium of defiance; fandubbing too has been employed in a spirit of socio-political criticism following, for instance, the state-issued ban on the broadcasting of *Big Bang Theory* in China (D. Wang & Zhang, 2016). Indeed, fandubbing, also known as fundubbing for its primarily humorous and satirical effects, is a well-recognised means by which discontent and satire are manifested (Baños, 2019).

In the case of Thai fansubbing groups, while their fansubbing activities were not originally stimulated by any socio-political cause, they have later come to embrace and advocate for the pro-LGBTQ+ movement. For instance, in early July, some of the aforementioned Chinese BL-oriented Thai fansubbing groups like BlackWhiskey and 2NL SUB have expressed their support for the legalisation of same-sex marriage and invited their page membership to get involved in the process by leaving their comments on the draft of the civil partnership bill and the proposed amendments to the Civil and Commercial Code pertinent to LGBTQ+ couples available on the website of the parliament from 2 July 2020 to 6 August

2020. It could also be argued that the mere act of subtitling Chinese BL material with subtler and more nuanced queer representation inadvertently subverts skewed depictions of queerness, which are by and large deemed problematic by LGBTQ activists and socio-politically conscious readers as well as viewership. On Twitter, specifically, two arms of the same Y fanbase regularly engage in heated arguments concerning the societal values of Y content. While the ardent Y fans consume Y products as romance[5] whose function as a provider of emotional pleasure for the audience is prized over its potential as a conduit for the lived experience of LGBTQ+ individuals, those more critical of Thai Y content who are also typically more politically conscious expect Y series to shed light on the LGBTQ+ struggles in society. The latter faction of the Y fandom demands that the former acknowledges the *me* and *ke* characters' homosexuality since the prevailing rhetoric among the former is such that these two characters are not gay; they are merely men that are attracted to one another and one another only. As Y novels and series profit from the identity of a sexual minority, i.e. that of homosexual men, Y fans who revel in the homoerotic fantasy have confronted mounting pressure to, at the very least, display their sympathy for the pro-LGBTQ+ cause by first and foremost recognising the marginalised group of sexual minorities as such.

Indeed, Thai Y fans put off by the self-indulgent Y novels and dramas have increasingly turned their attention to the Chinese counterparts for more creative storylines and characterisation. Capitalising on the growing exposure to and demand for Chinese BL products in Thailand facilitated at first by Thai fansubbing contingents, more and more Thai TV stations have taken, too, to bring in Chinese BL imports to air. As a result, some of the Thai fansubbing teams and individuals like BlackWhiskey that once helped broaden the circulation of the East Asian BL broadcasts by providing linguistic accessibility for fellow fans have announced their cessation of gratis subtitling labour and instead channelled their effort into reporting on latest Chinese BL releases. The part that these online social media communities of fansubbing-cum-PR teams has evidently played in propelling the counterculture of Y/BL series to the centre is not an unprecedented phenomenon, however. By supplying the Chinese equivalent of the Thai Y series to Thai fans, the Thai fansubbing communities have engaged in a countercultural campaign whereby original countercultural media are relocated to the target countercultural setting, in line with Dwyer (2018, p.443)'s observation that "fandom has become a key means by which 'cult' and 'niche' media are increasingly marketed to the masses".

And since a counterculture is usually heterogenous in nature, it could then be argued that the original Y counterculture has had a significant hand in spurring a competing

counterculture within. As previously mentioned, several Thai Y broadcasts have provoked denunciations - mainly among fans who are highly cognizant of political matters; they are self-proclaimed Y fans, on the one hand, they are also very critical of Y productions with disturbing plots, on the other. As recent as 12 July 2020, a new Y publishing house, Lobster Publishing, was founded and carved its first social media presence on Twitter with its opening tweet being its publishing manifesto as follows:

> Hello, everyone
>
> We are lobsters*
>
> a Y publishing house who believes that we can build a good culture by taking action. Y novels should not be mere entertainment media written without responsibility for, understanding, and respect of LGBTQ+ identities. We will not reproduce distorted views through literature, but we will record the beauties of diversity on book pages so that one day those beauties could fly out of ink and paper and flap their wings soaring into the world truly free of discrimination.[6] (my translation)

Within minutes of its first tweet going live, Lobster Publishing has won acclaim on Twitter, amassing, as of 17 July 2020, over 6,000 retweets and almost 2,000 likes, impressive figures considering that it was practically unknown before. Most retweets of the manifesto express support and delight in such a breath of fresh air in the Y entertainment industry. In response to a query about potential staff recruitment raised by a Twitter user, the publishing house encourages people to be their 'staff' by leaving their feedback on the draft of the civil partnership bill and the proposed amendments to the Civil and Commercial Code pertinent to LGBTQ+ couples available on the website of the parliament between 2 July 2020 and 6 August 2020.

The founding of Lobster Publishing does not negate the Y counterculture that preceded it – if anything, it has emphatically solidified Bennett's expanded definition of counterculture as "a contemporary social process through which the cultural fabric of everyday life is diversifying in ever more rapid cycles of change" (Bennett, 2014, pp. 23-24). Bennett further elaborates that:

> The terrain of everyday life in late modernity is such that a variety of different lifestyle sites and strategies emerge and coalesce into collective forms of social life, each embodying specific sets of aesthetic and political sensibilities through which groups and individuals articulate their sense of 'difference'

> from others who occupy the ideological positions in which aspects of, for example, personal taste, political, religious, sexual and ethnic identity are imbricated in myriad ways, fashioning collective identities that resonate sharply with specific local, trans-local and, increasingly, global circumstances.

As such, all the social actors including Y productions, Y novels, Y production companies, Y publishing houses, Thai fansubbing groups of Chinese BL, and critical Y fans who run the gamut of LGBTQ+ related ideologies have simultaneously engaged in a social act that has driven the online Y culture one way or another. Admittedly, not all of their roles have been positive, but one could also argue that it is precisely their harmful messages that expose the status quo and invite onto the scene critical actors who might, collectively, be able to effect social change.

Notes

[1] In this study, both designations Y and BL are understood as referring to the same genre of male homoerotic fiction.

[2] Information gleaned from @BlackWhiskey, a Twitter account dedicated to promoting Y and BL series both domestic and foreign.

[3] Since Jittirain did not play any part in the scriptwriting process and the inclusion of the plot involving a secondary character getting drugged as this story arc is a new addition to the TV adaptation, she mainly apologised for those problematic elements in her original novel which is mostly relayed from Tine's first-person point of view, where Tine persistently refers to Green as a '*toot yak*' [giant toot] with *toot* being a derogatory term for *kathoey*, another term referring to a range of queer identities in Thailand.

[4] Many Y writers and audiovisual productions have faced waves of fierce backlash from Y fans themselves and passers-by who chanced upon snippets of Y dramas shared by the former that contain problematic and disturbing tropes or scenes. That this pushback occurs most often on Twitter is, I believe, not coincidental since the majority of politically minded young population have long gravitated towards Twitter as their main social media haunt.

[5] In his analytical study of a Y novel titled *My Accidental Love Is You*, Prasannam (2019a) concludes that its storytelling formula is similar to that of romance novels. This finding suggests that Y novels and series should be consumed as romance for sheer emotional pleasure, rather than as LGBTQ+ literature that is meant to advance social progress on issues regarding LGBTQ+ people.

[6] The Twitter handle of Lobster Publishing is @LobsterPub. The publishing house is additionally accessible at <www.lobsterpub.com> and <https://web.facebook.com/LobsterPub/>.

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