

## Bodies that Become Content: Reading *Fujoshi*'s Voices and Discursive Construction of Cuteness in Thai BL Novels

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**Abstract:** This article discusses BL, a literary genre depicting male-male homoerotic relationships, together with the representation of the *fujoshi*, a term which refers to female fans of BL media. The article explores an issue in the Thai BL industry from a literary angle, focusing on the use of *fujoshi* voices in Thai BL narratives and its implication with regard to practices of consumeristic engagement encouraged by the industry in question. An examination of the selected BL texts reveals that *fujoshi* voices are employed performatively to denote and enact social approval in these narratives, a feature of which this article seeks to be critical. To further reflect on this issue, the discussion in this article incorporates the theory of cuteness as an aesthetic category into its investigation of the commercially-driven facets of the BL industry, arguing that the act of rhetorically attributing cuteness to the main characters in the selected BL texts ultimately mirrors and reinforces a highly consumeristic mode of engagement with them. The last portion of the article offers a comparative discussion of Thai BL texts and a few Anglophone young adult novels with gay characters to show the transcultural influence of *fujoshi* hermeneutics and sensibilities.

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**Keywords:** cuteness, *fujoshi*, popular fiction, Thai BL, yaoi

## Introduction

This article investigates an issue surrounding BL fandoms from a literary angle. It discusses fantasy in Thai BL texts, in conjunction with the commercially-driven affective practices prevalent in the BL industry. The label *BL* (Boys Love), sometimes used synonymously with the term *yaoi*, designates a genre of fiction which caters mostly to female readers. It encompasses different types of media depicting same-sex romance between good-looking men (Welker 42). According to Mark McLelland, the BL genre first emerged in the 1970s as a reaction against “the contrived and formulaic heterosexual love stories marketed at a female audience” (67). Still, despite its departure from heterosexual romance fiction, BL stories often follow conventions of *shōjo* manga, a Japanese genre targeting teenage girls (Meyer 76). Male-male romances depicted in BL narratives are usually marked by highly binaristic dynamics between two male characters, with one normally labeled as *seme* (“dominant insertive” top) and the other *uke* (“passive receptive” bottom) (Turner 459). In line with Janice A. Radway’s observation that the hero in romance tends to embody “spectacular masculinity” (128), the *seme* character in most BL narratives is usually depicted as an “alpha male,” whose coveted hyper-masculine traits make him an epitome of desirable maleness in the story. This means that the *seme* is coded as masculine whereas the *uke* is coded as feminine, a trope which reinforces heteronormative gender roles and thereby leads to the criticism that the genre “exploits harmless fantasy of homosexuality in order to appeal to the heteronormative desire of (presumably) heterosexual female readers” (Hemmann 88).[1] In this light, “homosexuality” or “queerness” depicted in a large number of BL texts is anything but queer since it perpetuates rather than critically challenges conventional gender constructions. Male-male romances in these texts are thus mere permutations of heterosexual relationships, defamiliarized and repackaged primarily to please a female readership.

When it comes to championing the political cause for gay men, critics of the genre often remark that BL generally fails to engage with the liberatory politics that gay people need the most[2], not to mention the depoliticized sexualization of gay men as well as the commodification of their lives and lived experience. These problematic aspects of *yaoi* or BL stories have been discussed in several academic works on the genre, such as Antonia Levi et al.’s *Boys Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-Cultural Fandom of the Genre* and Mark McLelland et al.’s *Boys Love Manga and Beyond*. In his essay, published in *Boys Love Manga*, for instance, Neal K. Akatsuka discusses the queering potentials of the recurrent discursive disavowals of homosexuality in Japanese *yaoi* texts, arguing that this plot component produces a paradoxical outcome. That is, in rejecting homosexual subjectivities, BL is both “too queer” and “not queer enough” (172). Such an issue is not limited to the BL genre in Asia. In *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance*, Jonathan A. Allan has made a similar observation about Anglophone male-male popular romance novels aimed at female readers. According to Allan, the male-male popular romance novel “never does away with the hegemonic masculinity” (93). This implies that contemporary male-male popular romance fiction may be less politically progressive than it seems to be, though its plots and narratives are centered upon gender-nonconforming subjects.

Still, it should be noted that some scholarly works, such as those by Levi (2008), Nagaike (2015), and Baudinette (2017) have also presented a competing viewpoint. These works have pointed out that this assumption about the exclusively female-oriented nature

of the genre can prove to be either too simplistic or rather contestable, and even the assumption that effeminate portrayals of gay men usually reinforce heteronormativity can also be reconsidered.[3] These observations prove especially relevant to the contemporary media landscape in Thailand, in which the genre itself has become more politically engaged and continues to evolve, not to mention the country's legalization of same-sex marriage in 2025.

Whether or not the BL genre has truly played an instrumental role in advancing a cause for LGBT people, however, is beyond the scope of inquiry in this paper. Instead, this article offers a reading of some BL texts by situating them in the context of Thailand and its media consumption cultures. It aims to address the question of how BL texts mirror or reinforce a form of cultural practice in need of critical discretion. My argument is that, regardless of the genre's social merits and political potentialities, one troubling trope in the genre is worth attending to, for it sheds light on a problematic proclivity characterized by a postmodern, consumeristic mode of textual engagement. Central to my reading is the concept of the *fujoshi*, a person who takes pleasure in fantasies predicated upon male-male romance. Their voices, albeit minor and oftentimes anonymous in BL media, pervade a number of BL narratives. An examination of selected BL texts shows that the anonymous voices of *fujoshi* tend to be used as a sign that validates and gives approval to the male-male relationships depicted in the stories. That is to say, this recurrent trope positions male-male relationships as a spectacle for pleasure while ironically rendering them precarious and contingent upon the positive affects they can generate for the public.

To further reflect on the issue surrounding female audiences and the structure of fantasy in BL media, the discussion in this article seeks to be critical of some common narrative devices and literary motifs in Thai BL fictions. It pays particular attention to moments where performative acceptance of homosexuality is narratively enacted and articulated via a discursive attribution of cuteness to male-desiring male characters. This focus is meant to provide another means by which one can interrogate the thematization of queer subjectivities in popular fiction.

## ***Fujoshi* Fans in/of BL Stories**

The term *fujoshi* should be far from foreign for those well-versed in Japanese popular culture. As explained by Jeffrey T. Hester, *fujoshi* is a "self-mocking appellation for 'a rotten or depraved girl(s),'" serving as "an inclusive term for the female fandom of *yaoi*/BL" (169). In general, the term refers to female fans of BL manga (Baudinette, *Boys*, 22). Their predilection for a literary genre, however, is not the only characteristic that defines what a *fujoshi* is. Equally of importance is the mode of hermeneutic engagement they are normally associated with. Considering the *yaoi* genre's affinity with *dōjinshi* (self-published derivative works by fans), Hiromi Tanaka and Saori Ishida have posited that one of the modes of reading practiced by *fujoshi* readers is that of replacement, wherein readers transpose homoeroticism onto non-romantic interactions between male characters in shonen manga (213). This form of replacement reading exemplifies a practice called "shipping," a term defined in the *OED* as the act of "discuss[ing], portray[ing], or advocat[ing] a romantic pairing" of fictional characters, especially when the original work does not feature such a pairing. In Tanaka and Ishida's words,

[...] these female manga fans have created their own media spaces in an androcentric heteronormative society. Replacement reading is a radical practice because it transforms men's manga media into a completely different type of media for female audiences about male homosexuality. Women called *fujoshi* create homoerotic narrations for themselves and enjoy these narrations. (213)

As this article will later demonstrate, in the current BL media landscape, shipping is no longer limited to reading textual materials. Moreover, with BL media becoming more popular, one should also note that *fujoshi* readers can now enjoy a myriad of original BL texts without relying on non-canonical replacement reading. Given the contemporary BL media culture, I deem it best to characterize a *fujoshi* as an individual, usually female, whose mode of hermeneutic engagement entails either perusing materials intentionally created as BL narratives or eliciting homoeroticism from texts that are not meant to feature male-male romance.

According to Patrick W. Galbraith, the appeal of male-male romance to female readers lies in the "pure fantasy" it yields, as opposed to male-female relationship, which is "too close to reality" (213). Galbraith also notes that *fujoshi* fantasy, which usually revolves around a sense of intimacy, "is something that coexists with reality as a separate set of possibilities" (213). This condition wherein reality and fiction become entangled is the subject of inquiry for this article. As I shall discuss in this section, the practice of shipping is oftentimes featured in Thai BL texts. The way it is depicted in fiction, however, proves concerning to a certain extent, especially when shipping goes beyond the textual level. Situating my reading in conversation with other scholars' observations about the Thai BL industry, my discussion of selected texts will highlight how some BL stories encourage the practice of non-textual shipping and how such a motif is far from innocuous.

To unpack this issue, one must first draw the connection between texts and the culture from which they emerge. In the context of Thailand, BL fans do not only consume BL fictions and TV series adaptations. Rather, they are also provided with copious paratexts by which they are encouraged to ship and apply what Thomas Baudinette terms "the *fujoshi* gaze" to actors' interactions off-screen ("Lovesick" 127). Furthermore, instead of drawing the boundary between reality and fiction, many producers of BL shows intentionally shower BL fans with staged performances, fan-service interviews, and public events, all of which encourage off-screen shipping as well as paratextual and epitextual consumption. Although this article will not directly scrutinize the Thai entertainment industry, its discussion will highlight how some literary texts mirror and encourage this cultural trend, which is marked by hypercommodified affective relations and a semiotically promiscuous mode of reading. In this light, my reading suggests that the Thai BL texts discussed in this article reveal that the performance of acceptance as well as the enactment of validation in these texts mirrors problematical practices in the Thai BL industry itself.

While the BL genre has its origin in Japan, the last decade has witnessed the proliferation of BL media in Asia, especially in Thailand, where the entertainment industry has capitalized on the trend to a great extent.[4] In his article on *Love Sick: The Series*, an early Thai BL series, Baudinette explains that the series in question has helped introduce Thai audiences to *yaoi* stories and the mode of affective textual consumption associated with the genre. This is mainly achieved through the narrative reinforcement of the *fujoshi gaze*,

filled with swooning reactions of Pang, a *fujoshi* character in the series who is supposed to act as a “stand-in” for the audience while demonstrating to them the “correct” way by which one can, in accordance with the *fujoshi* subculture, affectively engage with male-male romantic rapport (“Lovesick” 127).

A character like Pang, one should note, is prevalent in a number of BL narratives. Serving as a synecdochic representation of the public, *fujoshi* voices are oftentimes employed in Thai BL narratives to signify public approval of the same-sex relationship between the main characters. One can see examples of such a narrative device in BL novels by JittiRain, such as *2gether* and *Fish upon the Sky*, both of which have been adapted into TV series by GMM, a leading Thai entertainment company well-known internationally for its production of BL-oriented content. With a university setting, both stories focus on a comedic courtship between two male characters. The *seme* characters in both novels, Sarawat and Mork respectively, can each be described as one of the most desirable bachelors on campus. Good-looking, charismatic, and talented in their own ways, the two characters epitomize the hero in romance conventions who “occupies the top of the pyramid” as explained by George Paizis in *Love and the Novel* (85).

Although both Sarawat and Mork exude security and appear nonchalant about their own popularity as do most heroes in romance, they fall head over heels in love with the *uke* protagonists. One notable element about the narratives in both novels is that the romance and courtship between the two main characters are portrayed as a spectacle for the public, usually because of the quasi-celebrity status of the *seme* characters. The protagonists’ activities and online exchanges are also of interest for the *seme*’s “fan club,” whose affirmative opinion regarding male-male pairing is meant to signify support and acceptance. Given this element, one can further argue that the narratives in *2gether* and *Fish upon the Sky* make use of the social media culture since they are interspersed with dialogues taken from the characters’ posts and comments on social media platforms. With this storytelling technique, readers are positioned as a voyeur, shipper, and fan who is encouraged to intrude upon and seek pleasure in the highly-exposed personal romantic lives of the protagonists. To give an example of such a private-turned-public relationship and the dynamics it entails, one can look at the following passage, which takes place right after the taciturn Sarawat posts a vague yet suggestive message on his Instagram account, hinting that he has feelings for Tine, the *uke* protagonist. In an online group chat entitled *TeamSarawatsWives*, Sarawat fans immediately make speculative comments about the posts and the relationship between Sarawat and Tine:

*‘Really, they are just friends’*

*‘I don’t think they’re just friends. Sarawat is really hitting on him.’*

*‘Has my heart been broken?’*

*‘If it’s that new varsity cheerleader Tine, I’m okay with it. So cute.’ (2gether vol. 1 375)*

It should be noted here that these comments, albeit plaintive, are light-hearted in tone and not hostile towards Tine. They are meant to create a comic effect and at the same time

accentuate Tine's enviable position as the person who wins the heart of the most eligible "hunk" on the scene. If anything, they connote "a happy ending" for the couple who manage to secure support from the heteronormative public.

Similar motifs are also observable in *Fish upon the Sky*. In some parts of the novel, the narratives are told through a *fujoshi* character's point of view. This character, named Prik, fervently ships Mork and Pi. To promote her favorite pairing, the character creates a Facebook fan page entitled "MorkPi Fanclub," where she posts content for like-minded Mork/Pi shippers. One of the comments from her page, for example, states, "Mork and Pi had ice-cream together. So cute. I ship them a lot. They have goooood chemistry" (JittiRain, *Fish upon the Sky* vol. 1 129). Despite the character's clear invasion of the two male characters' privacy, the narrative does not present this behavior as concerning or problematic. Pi is not happy with the page and demands that Mork ask his fans to close it down, but that is mainly because he wishes the pairing would be between him and Nan, another male character he is infatuated with, rather than with Mork. This nonchalant proclivity with regard to invasion of one's privacy is even less surprising if one considers the storytelling technique used in *Fish upon the Sky*, in which a few portions of the narrative employ a chat fiction format. By constantly showing private online conversations between the two main characters, the narrative reinforces and normalizes the voyeuristic position of readers even further.

The issue relating to the novel's treatment of its characters' private lives can further be illustrated with Mork's interaction with his online followers. In the following passage, Mork replies to one of his friends who asks him why the page dedicated to him and Pi is discontinued. The narrative in this section is told from Pi's perspective:

Since the page got deleted, I'll check Mork's profile page to see his fans' response.

*'Why did you make them shut the page?'*

It's probably his friend. Since Mork's account is set to public, his profile page is accessible to everyone, including the fans following him.

***Sutthaya Nithikornkul*** [Mork] *He asked me to do it. I didn't wanna upset him, or he'd whine. (Fish upon the Sky vol. 1 139)*

This equivocal reply, which is playfully suggestive of the intimacy between the two boys, leads to more squealing and swooning reactions from Mork's fans, especially Prik. The intrusive *fujoshi* gaze, it seems, is welcome and even serves as one of the forces that brings the two characters closer:

*'So we can't ship you and him? You two are a thing for sure.'*

*'It's fine. I know you care about Pi. We can create the page again in the future. #priktheheadofMork' (Fish upon the Sky vol. 1 139)*

The invitation of the public into one's private life as exemplified in this passage mirrors the affective operation that is characteristic, if not symptomatic, of the Thai BL industry itself. It

can be said that this is an aspect of Thai BL media that proves to be relatively different from its Japanese counterpart, where male characters' demonstrations of affections towards one another are rarely made a public matter. In JittiRain's novels, on the contrary, interest and emotional investment from the public serve as a blessing for the protagonists, placating fear of homophobia that often haunts, albeit not always explicitly, stories about male-male desire.

This theme of homosexuality and its contingency upon public approval is not limited to Jittirain's works. *Dai Daeng (Red Thread)*, a BL novel by Lazysheep, is another notable example of BL stories whose narrative relies on the motifs of celebrity statuses and fan cultures facilitated by social media. The story is centered upon the romance between two university students named Dean and Pharm. At the beginning of the story, readers learn that they were also lovers in their past lives. The seclusive Korn and the cheerful Intouch met and fell in love when they were students at university. Being both men already made it difficult for the couple to be accepted by the parents on both sides, but Korn's tyrannical father was also a notorious loan shark. This made Intouch's father despise and resent Korn even more. In the end, Korn and Intouch committed suicide and are reincarnated as Dean and Pharm respectively. Similarly to what happens in the two novels by JittiRain, the relationship between the two main protagonists attracts attention from a sizable number of people on campus. There is also a group chat and a fan page created by their friend to share the story about the couple online. The two protagonists, apart from being unbothered by these online activities, are also shown to be happy with the supportive responses from their shippers. At one point, the narrative also reveals that Pharm feels relieved that people's reactions to their relationship are positive (*Dai Daeng vol. 1* 191). There is also an instance where Dean tells a man who approaches Pharm in public that Pharm is his boyfriend. Performative jealousy and overt possessiveness, one should note, are common motifs in romance fiction, highlighting a clichéd trope where the alpha males reveal their intense feelings towards their love interest. When the interaction between Dean and his romantic contender is shared on social media, people respond to it with glee. Some of the online comments emphasize how cute Pharm is while some focus on the sense of intimacy the two men exude (*Dai Daeng vol. 1* 196). These online comments represent approval from the public, and such narrative enactment of acceptance is meant to counter the discrimination both characters had to deal with in their past lives, when Intouch's father describes his son's relationship with Korn as "disgusting" (*Dai Daeng vol. 1* 191). The anonymous voices of the public are thus supposed to provide an antidote to homophobic disapproval that haunts the story from the very beginning.

As stated earlier, the motifs of the public's involvement in the characters' private lives are a reflection of the commercially-driven modus operandi prevalent in the Thai BL industry itself. When viewed realistically, this facet of these BL novels is nothing to be embraced. The narratives prove too uncritical of and thereby are complacent about the situations in which one's pursuit of a non-heteronormative romance and its success must culminate in public validation. This tendency in a number of BL novels is attributable to a few cultural factors that shape the BL media in Thailand.

First and foremost, the popularity of the BL media in Thailand is facilitated by the internet era, which allowed shipping practices to become widespread in the 2000s among those who enjoyed shipping public figures, such as actors, singers, or idols (Prasannam, "The Yaoi Phenomenon" 65-66). Equally of note is the rise of the "cute boy culture" in Thailand, made possible by social media. This trend has emerged from the proliferation of social media pages dedicated to promoting good-looking young men and turning them into

“microcelebrities” with their own fan club (Bunyavejchewin et al. 5-6). Though merely fictional, practices of shipping in JittiRain’s novels represent this trend in contemporary youth cultures where celebrities’ selfhood as well as their private lives turn into virtual texts to be consumed for pleasure.

Another cultural factor worth considering is that Thai BL media has also been shaped by Japanese and Korean idol celebrity cultures, wherein homoeroticism is “strategically deployed” to expand the industry’s markets (Baudinette, *Boys* 5-6). One can see a trace of this cross-cultural influence in the way Thai BL actors often perform affection towards their co-stars off-screen when they appear together for some public events. This kind of performance normally prompts swooning from their fans. As pointed out by Baudinette, the Thai BL industry is considerably driven by consumeristic cultures, an issue the author thoroughly explores in *Boys Love Media in Thailand*. In this book, Baudinette addresses the role of GMM, a media conglomerate, as a “BL Machine” which creates BL idol couples who are “explicitly designed to be ‘shipped’ by consumers” (85). Insightfully discussed is the extent to which certain forms of emotional involvement and parasocial affective attachments among BL fans are promoted. Performance of homoerotic romance is not merely limited to acting in the series but rather is maintained even when actors appear on variety shows or stage performance, where fan service, flirtation, skinship, and performative jealousy are the norm.

According to Baudinette, one of the strategies employed by GMM is the use of staged intimacy in GMM’s own BL variety shows, where BL pairs are “placed in situations that are already coded as potentially romantic, [thereby] triggering the expectations of viewers who are familiar with the couples and preparing them for moments of staged homoeroticism” (*Boys* 98). These actions are often captured and shared online, inspiring more shipping and online activities from *fujoshi* fans. Admittedly, in the Thai entertainment industry, this issue concerning off-screen shipping is applicable to actors and actresses playing heterosexual couples too, but in the BL genre the expectations to maintain the shippable personas is even greater. Moreover, when an actor has formed an established pair with another actor, he is expected to star opposite this same partner in other projects featuring romantic stories too. Fans also tend to get upset when an established shippable pair gets discontinued. There are also several cases where *fujoshi* fans of BL series became angry and expressed their disappointment in online platforms when BL actors reveal to the public that they date women (Prasannam, *Thai Yaoi Novels* 92). Presumably, for some fans, such a form of imaginary coupledness functions as an embodied fantasy of an idealized relationship. Actors’ actions in turn can always become “content,” their statements can turn into hashtags on social media, and the success of their work and their public appearances is often measured by fans’ algorithmically quantifiable online activities.

As Baudinette points out, GMM is highly adept at creating a sense of intimacy between actors and their fans through strategic management of its actors’ fandoms and fans’ affective practices (*Boys* 85). This illusory intimacy, however, creates its own problems, for it can destabilize the boundaries between actors’ private and public lives even further. The collapsing of the line that separates the actors’ selves and the fictional role they play may end up commodifying actors’ own personal lives and meanwhile reinforces an invasive sense of entitlement to actors’ privacy, which is anything but uncommon in Thailand’s BL media landscape as fans expect that the fantasy they enjoy should continue even after their favorite series ends.

In light of such problems, the troublesome aspects of the texts discussed here can help draw our attention to a form of postmodern entanglements wherein facts, fiction, and fantasy driven by consumeristic cultures end up cross-pollinating one another. Actors perform their roles off-screen, fashioning themselves after a fictive persona upon which their stardom is founded. Their staged homoeroticism in real life is meant to please *fujoshi* fans and instigate their affective reactions predicated upon the fictional fantasies they consume. Meanwhile, performance of affection by fictional characters in the BL texts is a reflection of the cultural reality outside, where individuals' lives are made a matter of public interest and are contingent upon affect-driven approvals. In both fiction and real life, albeit staged, the representations of male-male romance become something to be digitally mined and consumed.

When it comes to the problems surrounding commercialization and commodification of homosexual subjecthood in BL texts, one Thai BL novel merits a close examination because of the way it addresses and offers a meta-commentary on the genre as well as the Thai BL industry: *Nubsib Ja Joob (Nubsib will kiss)* by Wankling. The novel was adapted into a TV series named *Lovely Writer* in 2021, focusing on the romance between a BL novelist and a BL actor. Gene, the protagonist, is a writer who ends up dating Nubsib, a young actor playing the leading role in a BL series based on a novel Gene wrote. Despite its use of common BL tropes, the novel simultaneously provides its readers with a critique of the BL industry in Thailand. For instance, the narrative highlights the deliberate homoerotic performance which actors are expected to carry out in order to please the fans of their series, a requirement that creates tension between the two main characters. When the relationship between the two protagonists is discovered, there are two camps of shippers locking horns with each other. One is those who ship Nubsib and Aeoy, his co-star. This group claims that the news about the actor's private love life ruins the series for them. Such responses eventually prompt the show producer to forbid Gene and Nubsib to go out together in public. The situation draws a parallel to an actual problem in the Thai BL industry. BL actors, many of whom are straight, usually avoid revealing who they date to the public lest they upset their BL fans.

As for the other camp, some shippers decide to ship Nubsib and Gene after witnessing the "chemistry" between the two men on social media. Though these groups show support for the main characters, their intrusions equally cause Gene discomfort. It can be said that *Nubsib Ja Joob* paints *fujoshi* and their consumption of anti-heteronormative semiotics in a rather ambivalent light. This idea is best illustrated in a chapter towards the end of the novel, in which the story is told from the point of view of two minor characters, both of whom are *fujoshi*. After Nubsib quits the entertainment industry, he goes on a trip to Japan with Gene. Their intimate moments are captured by the two shippers, who see the protagonists by chance. They follow them as they want to witness the sweet moments between the two individuals. The two girls also decide to take some photos and post them online, confirming to the fandom that their "ship" has been sailing well. Gene remains oblivious to their presence whereas Nubsib seems to be aware of them and appears unbothered by their stalking. The latter, in fact, has always been keen on making the public know that he is dating Gene. Still, towards the end of the chapter, after following the two protagonists to different places, the two girls decide to leave Nubsib and Gene alone when they arrive at a quiet shrine. They tell themselves that the couple must want to enjoy some privacy and plan to apologize to Gene later for sharing his photos online (*Nubsib Ja Joob vol. 2* 333). Before the two girls leave the shrine though, they witness the last intimate moment between Nubsib and Gene as

Nubsib gives his lover a kiss on the cheek. This scene fills the two girls with excitement. The chapter then ends with the overjoyed *fujoshi* feeling emotionally fulfilled with what they witness. Simply put, the *fujoshi*'s gaze and their voices are still used to a certain extent in the construction of a “happy ending” moment between two male-desiring male characters. The narrative in this chapter, therefore, oscillates between the use of *fujoshi* gaze to yield a sense of satisfaction and the awareness of how invasive the gaze and the act of shipping itself can be.

## On Being Cute: Discursive Construction of Cuteness in Thai BL Texts

Apart from the issue surrounding the *fujoshi* gaze, it should be noted further that, in BL narratives, the enactment of approval or acceptance via *fujoshi* voices is often articulated with the notion of “cuteness.” My discussion in this section will demonstrate how such articulation demands our critical attention too. In BL narratives, cuteness is usually articulated in two ways. First, this aesthetic category rhetorically serves as a marker for an *uke* character, underscoring their attractively feminine characteristics. In *2gether*, for instance, the idea that Tine is cute is reiterated again and again in the story. As shown in the passage quoted earlier, a comment from an anonymous fan of Sarawat even states, “If it’s that new varsity cheerleader Tine, I’m okay with it. So cute” (*2gether* vol. 1 375).[5] The implied logic in this statement is that the speaker can accept the relationship between the two men because one of them, the *uke*, is “cute.” The discursive use of cuteness in this novel as well those in other BL texts thus ends up reinforcing a heteronormative fantasy wherein *uke* characters embody romanticized femininity and stand in contrast to their “cool and handsome” *seme* counterparts. As suggested in the quoted text, the relationship between two men can only be accepted and become intelligible when their union conforms to conventional gender norms. Ironically, whilst BL texts appear to affirm male-male romantic relationships, they do so by relying on highly gendered and dichotomous portrayals of same-sex couples. This situation also reflects a tendency among Thai BL fans to rhetorically attribute feminine traits to BL actors who play *uke* characters too.

The discourse of cuteness, however, has another use in BL texts. The expression “cute” can also be employed by shippers to describe their shipped couples collectively. Akin to the expression of *kawaii* in Japanese, the word *narak* (cute or lovely) in Thai can serve a similar function, which is to ascribe cuteness to something or someone and at the same time express the joy of seeing it.[6] This Thai expression can be used with shipped couples, be they fictional or real, heterosexual or same-sex. In the case of BL media in Thailand, the expression is frequently employed by fans and *fujoshi* to express pleasure when they see a romantic interaction performed by their favorite pairing. Furthermore, such an expression can often be found in BL narratives to connote a sense of approval. For example, in *Nubsib Ja Joob*, one of the comments by Nubsib/Gene shippers says,

โวยแม่ ไม่นาฟอลไอจีพีสลิป ตอนแรกก็เฉย ๆ กับคุณจีนคนแตงนะคะ  
แต่เวลาอยู่ด้วยกันนี่เป็นอะไรที่น่ารักมาก มาก ๆ มากกก  
ตอนนี้คืออินกับสลิปจีนมากกว่าสลิปเฮย์อีก

(Oh gosh. I shouldn't have followed Sib's IG. At first, I didn't feel anything about Mr. Gene the writer. But when they are together, it is so cute. So so cuteeee. Now I ship them more than Nubsib and Aeoy. (*Nubsib Ja Joob* vol. 2 158; my translation))

The use of the word “cute” here does not merely state information about the quality of a person or thing but rather performs an interjective function. Moreover, this exclamatory expression can also signal a form of hermeneutic engagement characterized by affective consumption as it reflects the cultural trend where performance of homosexuality in public spaces turns into material to be viewed, evaluated, and consumed for pleasure. My reading here is informed by the notion that cuteness is inextricably linked to modern consumer culture and capitalism (Kao and Boyle 15). As Sianne Ngai explains in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, cuteness exemplifies one of the aesthetic categories that has been transformed by “the hypercommodified, information-saturated, and performance-driven conditions of late capitalism” (1). In this light, BL media can epitomize what Eva Illouz terms *emodities* in her introductory chapter to *Emotions as Commodities*, where she posits that under capitalism both emotional life and consumers' acts have become deeply entangled and that emotions are as a result “created as commodities” (11). This postulation proves instructive when one considers the consumption of BL media in Thailand, where “cute moments” performed through staged intimacy between actors are intentionally executed to generate affective satisfaction among fans. Nevertheless, this performative and commodified construction of cuteness is nothing to be embraced when one takes into account the logic it may give rise to. As shown in *Nubsib Ja Joob*, cuteness is verbalized at the moment when the narrative is meant to affirm the relationship between two male-desiring characters through the voice of their shippers. The problem with the discursively constructed cuteness in Thai BL culture, however, lies in the logic that conflates elation with approval, as both tend to be evoked in conjunction with each other in Thai BL texts. This element risks presupposing that approval can be gained when one's relationship produces affective satisfaction to others, a logic that renders non-heteronormative unions contingent upon affective consumption by the public.

It should be further noted here that cuteness as an aesthetic category involves a question of power too. As observed by Frances Richard, the cute underscores the absence of malice, yet this absence is anything but organic:

In its manufactured forms cute remains a major locus for—in some ways is synonymous with—the manipulative gesture, the prepackaged, consumable demonstration of (necessarily factitious) innocence, spontaneity, and need. Cute arises by manipulating the guarantee of non-manipulation.

In tandem with this characterization of cuteness, Ngai explains, “Cute is in fact an aesthetic ‘of’ or ‘about’ minoriness – or what is generally perceived to be diminutive, subordinate, trivial, and above all, unthreatening” (“Introduction”). In a similar vein, Joshua Paul Dale explains that cuteness should be regarded as “a disarming surge of purely positive feelings such as affection and tenderness that also involves a cognitive reaction in which the power differential between subject and object comes into play” (52). This characteristic of cuteness is also discussed in Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories*, where she explains that the experience

of cute “depends entirely on the subject’s affective response to an imbalance of power and the object” (54). The attribution of cuteness to an entity usually occurs when a person positions themselves in a more powerful stature than those deemed cute. Despite Ngai’s focus on artistic works, I contend that this logic can also be applied to critique the consumeristic edge of the BL cultures. In Thai contexts, utterance of the cute is commonly employed to express elation at witnessing romantically charged interactions between two male characters as well as homoerotic “moments” rendered by actors. Fans oftentimes compliment their shipped pairing on the cuteness they exude too. This attribution of cuteness to characters or actors in BL media may suggest an effort to envision a non-threatening and emotionally pleasing form of maleness as well as an attempt to destigmatize homosexuality. Nonetheless, when mainly framed with cuteness, male-male intimate relations become something innocuous, merely meant to be enjoyed and consumed.

In fact, the construction of cuteness also marries well with the sense of fabricated intimacy between fans and actors. As discussed by different scholars working on theories of cuteness, this aesthetic category has a social dimension to it. For example, revising a postulation made by Konrad Lorenz (1971) that cuteness helps release parental instinct (qtd. in Sherman and Haidt 246), Gary D. Sherman and Jonathan Haidt assert that cuteness is best understood as “a mechanism that ‘releases’ sociality” (246). Sherman and Haidt also add that, rather than caregiving, cuteness can invite different forms of “affiliative” responses and behaviors (249). In a similar vein, Lori Merish posits that cuteness represents the aestheticization of powerlessness while implying “a need for adult care” (187). The concept of cuteness itself, according to Merish, assimilates “commodity desire into a structure of familial, expressly maternal emotion” and at the same time generates “an aesthetic response mediated through familial semblance” (186). It is thus far from surprising how the use of cuteness can also create imaginary familial bonds. In Thai culture, fans often employ kinship terminology to refer to idols and actors they support. This partially results from the characteristics of the Thai language itself, which, similarly to many Asian languages, uses kinship terms as a form of address. A female fan, for instance, may call their favorite idol “brother” or even “son” regardless of the age difference between the two parties. This phenomenon is not limited to Thai fandom practice. Zhenyu Zhang discusses in her article the imaginary mother-child relationship between Chinese fans and the idols they support and explains that this phenomenon can be attributed to “the idol raising mechanism” practiced in the East Asian entertainment industry (413). Examining similar issues, Qing Yan and Fan Yang describe this new practice of fans with the word *parakin* as opposed to parasocial relations characterized by non-reciprocal relationships between idols and their fans. Instead, “parakin fans” interact with idols as if the idols they follow were their family members (2595). To quote the two authors,

Fans are not just “interacting” with their idols parasocially, instead, they are co-cultivating idols as their “sisters,” “brothers,” “mothers,” “fathers,” so on and so forth. Empowered by interactive communication technology, parakin fans take on a significant amount of responsibilities as well as a certain degree of control toward their idols on social media. (2595)

Yan and Yang’s remark in this context helps shed light on the power which fans now wield in the contemporary media landscape. To a certain degree, they exercise some power over

the actors they support, the result of which is the media culture where actors are encouraged, if not expected, to curate their off-screen persona so as to maintain favor from fans of their series.

In the Thai BL context, use of aesthetics of cuteness abounds. One notable example is the recent creations of different cartoonish mascots by BL media companies to represent each of their BL couple. Not only do these cute mascots symbolically represent each pair of BL actors and their fandom, but they are also supposed to act as each couple's "child," an imaginary role that deepens a fantasy of the heteronormative nuclear family even further. *Fujoshi* fans, on the other hand, can also partake in this fictitious familial structure. They are even encouraged to call themselves "grandmas" or use other similar words of kinship when interacting with the mascots or talking about them online. Merchandise based on each mascot is also available for purchase, providing another means by which fans can support their favorite BL couples. This creative model, therefore, instantiates the situation where cuteness is employed to evoke a pseudo-familial relation for a mercantile purpose. Bonds between actors and supporters are ultimately rendered even more consumable and profitable.

## BL and Its Transcultural Influences

My discussion so far has invited caution to the hermeneutic practice and the cultural logic encouraged by some Thai BL texts while highlighting also how the concept of cuteness dovetails with the dynamics within the Thai BL fandom culture. Discursive attribution of cuteness can even suggest an attempt to reconfigure the relationship between fans and idols when it subsumes them under a familial fantasy whereby the former is emotionally invested in the lives and subjecthood of the latter to a certain degree. It can be said that the fantasy co-opted by BL fans is underpinned by a structure of power which is far from organic. With such cultural dynamics, homoerotic fantasies that fans consume from BL media end up transcending their fictional origin and pervade reality, a quintessential example of postmodern entanglements emerging from our consumeristic contemporary culture.

In this final section, my discussion turns to Anglophone texts. Examining some contemporary romances and YA fictions about LGBTQ+ subjects in Anglophone literary circles, I contend that the rhetorical use of cuteness discussed in the previous section is, in fact, transcultural. For example, in Kevin van Whye's *Date Me Bryson Keller*, the motif of public declaration of love is not only present but narratively functions as a means to an end for the main conflict of the story. Inspired by *Seven Days*, a Japanese *yaoi* manga by Venio Tachibana, the plot of the novel centers around a dare and Bryson Keller, the most eligible highschooler in Fairvale Academy. The dare stipulates that every week he must date the first person who asks him out for seven days. Bryson continues this cycle with several girls for a while until Kai, the closeted protagonist, asks him out on the spur of the moment, reminding Bryson that the dare never specified that he must go out with girls only. The two boys then date in secret and develop feelings for each other. When their seven-day relationship is about to end, Kai is outed by one of Bryson's friends, who does not want Bryson to socialize with Kai. With every person at school knowing his sexuality, the protagonist suffers bullying from homophobic schoolmates. Following the convention of both coming-of-age story and melodramatic romance, the novel resolves this tension with two incidents. First is Kai's

reconciliation with his religious parents who eventually learn to look past their faith and embrace their child's sexuality. The reconciliation within the family, nevertheless, does not suffice to create a "happy ending" in this story. Instead, the narrative ends with Bryson posting a message on his Instagram account, making it known that he has feelings for Kai. While Kai's being outed results in bullying and mockery at school, Bryson's performative declaration of love garners positive responses from people online:

*OMG. IS THIS REAL?!*

*Is Bryson dating Kai?*

*THEY LOOK SO CUTE!!!!!!*

*Is the dare really over?*

*I ship it!*

*Seriously? I can't believe this. (309-310)*

The author here makes use of a narrative device reminiscent of aesthetics in BL media. Declaration of romance is enacted for the public eye, followed by swooning voices of approval. Although Bryson tells Kai that he does not care what the public thinks (313), one can argue that the narrative still cannot do away with instances of social validation. In fact, it is this moment of self-imposed exposure that leads the two characters to their reconciliation and fulfillment.

Such a plot trajectory is also discernible in some other contemporary romances with gay or bisexual protagonists, such as *Red, White & Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston (2019), *If This Gets Out* by Sophie Gonzales and Cale Dietrich (2021), and *Fake Dates and Mooncakes* by Sher Lee (2023). All of these novels feature a romance between the two main characters that culminates in melodramatic declarations of love between them in public. In *If This Gets Out*, which focuses on the romance between Ruben and Zach, two singers in a boy band named Saturday, the two protagonists even directly ask for their fans' support after they defy their agency by announcing their relationship to the public. Their action puts their careers at risk, and their agency, Chorus, threatens to sue. The fans, however, come to their rescue by tweeting and posting on social media to show their support to the two boys and their band. Here is how the narrative depicts fans' support for the two protagonists:

We love you. We won't let them treat you like this #SaveSaturday.

zach and ruben you're the best people and also jon and angel, the four of you saved my life. now we're returning the favor #SaveSaturday

Everyone make sure you buy and stream End of Everything. If you can't afford to buy, stream on repeat (turn the volume down if you need to do other stuff, we just want the hits up). YouTube helps too! #SaveSaturday

#SaveSaturday KEEP TWEETING ABOUT OVERDRIVE AND SATURDAY. KEEP IT TRENDING. SHOW CHORUS WE WANT TO SEE THE BOYS AS THEY ARE. SHOW #ZUBEN WE CARE. (383-384)

In response to these online reactions, Zach addresses his fans on a livestream, emphasizing to them how crucial their support is to his and Ruben's careers in the entertainment industry:

"Thank you all for speaking," Zach says. "Thank you for being here from the start. And thank you most for being here when we needed you."

"We don't want to ask for more from you when you've already given so much," I say. "But there are some people who might expect Saturday to fade out of the spotlight after yesterday. If the opposite of that were to happen? If you can help us? You could change everything. Right now, today, you have the power to change everything. You always have." (386)

His message to his fans accentuates the vulnerable position of a queer subject and the power the public has over individuals, especially in the circumstances where support is measured in a rather algorithmically quantifiable term. The agency's executives eventually change their attitude towards the couple's coming out, but the protagonists decide to leave the company and work for a rivaling one instead. The story thus ends with the characters' victory after they are empowered by the supportive public. When stripped of the romantic elements, however, the two protagonists' ability to overcome obstacles is largely dependent upon the goodwill of their fans, hence the jarring invitation extended towards the public to determine the prospects of their livelihood.

This problem of public exposure is addressed in at least one of Alexis Hall's novels. Though Hall is mostly well-known for light-hearted rom-com romance, the author's 2022 novel entitled *Paris Daillencourt Is About to Crumble* offers a very realistic portrayal of how public exposure can sometimes be detrimental to individuals. The novel focuses on the eponymous character who has low self-esteem and suffers from constant anxiety. Despite these problems, Paris decides to participate in a British baking-show, a decision that ends up subjecting him to the public eye and various forms of online abuse from audiences who find themselves annoyed by Paris's insecure and unstable personality. For each episode aired, the narrative gives readers a recap of online comments on the episode, which can be thoughtlessly cruel to participants of the show. Paris suffers more online abuse than his co-competitors, ranging from mockery to sexual harassment. One saving grace of the experience is that Paris gets to meet Tariq Hassan, another contestant whom he later goes on a date with. On an occasion when the two of them encounter two girls who are fans of the show, the conversation between the two fans reveals how the characters are subject to the imposing gaze of the public, who feel entitled to intrude upon their private lives:

"Oh my God," came a worryingly teenage voice from the other side of Caffe Nero. "It's that guy and the other guy. From *Bake Expectations*."

Her friend immediately bounced up. "See, I told you they were dating. I have incredible gaydar." (321)

The two then approach Paris and Tariq and start asking them questions:

“So”— Ellie seemed to be literally bouncing— “when did you start going out?”

Ella elbowed her. “You can’t ask them that. It’s fetishising.”

“No, it isn’t. I’m *interested*.”

“We’re just friends,” said Tariq, with crushing sincerity.

Ellie looked even more disappointed than Paris felt. “Oh.” Then she brightened up. “Can we get a selfie anyway?”

They didn’t exactly wait for, well, consent. But Tariq made affirmative-type noises and did a really good job of corralling the four of them into an Instagrammable position. (322)

In this scene, the narrative immediately reminds readers how invasive the fans’ sense of involvement can be despite their good intentions. Upon encountering their shippers, the characters do not feel flattered or experience contentment in the same way other characters in the novels discussed in this article do. Paris feels he is misunderstood as one of the fans tells him that she loves how he refuses to “conform to the toxic standards of masculinity that are so pervasive today,” referring to how Paris often cries in the show (321). After the two fans leave, the confounded Paris tells Tariq, “I was crying because I’m mentally ill, not because I’m making a big political statement” (322). The girls’ interpretation of Paris, is, however, characteristic of a shipping culture where fans adopt a hermeneutic practice in which significance of one’s gesture, action, or statement can be amplified and turned into mass-oriented content.

## Conclusion

In writing this article, I hope to contribute to the conversation surrounding the BL genre and its implication in the contemporary media landscape, offering another means by which one can be critical of popular tropes in BL fiction as well as the media culture from which BL texts emerge. My discussion so far investigates how *fujoshi* voices and gaze function in BL narratives while also reflecting on the problems that may arise when their blessings are employed as a sine qua non to validate non-heteronormative unions. This issue hidden in fictional texts also sheds light on reconfigured power dynamics within the fan cultures in the Thai BL industry, a trend that is also discernible in popular Anglophone texts featuring male-male romances.

To end this article, I deem it best to draw attention to a Japanese manga with a less typical *fujoshi* protagonist: *BL Metamorphosis* by Kaori Tsurutani. The series is noteworthy for the way it offers a different way to imagine the reading practice of *fujoshi* readers, one that is not marked by a fetishizing gaze. One day, as she browses through books in a local bookstore, Yuki Ishinoi, a widowed septuagenarian and calligraphy teacher, comes across a BL manga section. Captivated by the beautiful art style, Ishinoi decides to buy a manga entitled *You’re the Only One I Want to See* and reads it with interest. She later becomes a fan of the BL genre and ends up befriending Urara Sayama, a timid teenage *fujoshi* girl working as a clerk at the bookstore. Both enjoy reading and discussing BL stories, and the narrative

is interspersed with pages from the BL manga that the two protagonists read. There are some instances in the narratives where what happens in the manga resonates with the two characters' daily lives too. Nonetheless, the narrative draws a clear-cut line separating fiction in BL manga and the characters' real life, and the two *fujoshi* protagonists never employ *fujoshi's* hermeneutic gaze onto others. They simply enjoy fiction with passion. Ishinoi and Sayama even go to a comic book convention together, after which Ishinoi encourages the latter, an aspiring manga artist, to open a stall at another comic con. Eventually, Sayama, accompanied by Ishinoi, opens a small stall to sell her amateurish self-published BL works. Sayama's books may not sell well, but one of the people who purchases her work is none other than the manga artist Komeda Yu, who wrote *You're the Only One I Want to See*. Months later when Ishinoi goes to Komeda's signing session, Komeda recognizes Ishinoi and tells her that she enjoys the BL manga she bought from her stall very much. What follows is a genial and sincere exchange between the two characters:

Komeda: The alien was so cute. Reading it when I had the writer's block cheered me up!

Ishinoi: Oh...that book...I wasn't the one who drew it actually. It was my friend. Her name is Urara-san. She just ...!

Staff: I'm sorry to interrupt but ... the next person is waiting.

Ishinoi: Er! Just one more moment! And you see... she's here today too. I think she's near the end of the line. The two of us became Friends...thanks to your manga. Thank you so much for drawing it. (128-131)

The panel in which Ishinoi states the last sentence occupies two thirds of the page, emphasizing the cathartically heartwarming effect this exchange generates. Ishinoi's journey into the BL world gives her an opportunity to explore new things, the fruit of which is her friendship with Sayama. In other words, reading BL in *BL Metamorphosis* results in formations of different congenial connections as the three characters' lives are linked in a constructively transformative fashion. Tsurutani's manga series thus serves as a good reminder to us that there will always be more than one way to engage with fictional texts, including popular mass-oriented ones, and that reading can be most rewarding when it allows us to form a genuine, well-grounded connection with those around us.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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[1] For this reason, some readers try to distinguish between BL and *bara*; the former is believed to cater to female readers and differs significantly from the latter, which is another genre focusing on male same-sex relationships but is created for gay male audiences.

[2] This issue was addressed in the *yaoi ronsō* (*yaoi* dispute) during the 1990s. For more information about this dispute, see Wim Lusing (2006).

[3] See Prasannam (2024).

[4] For discussion on the rise of BL media in Thailand, see Prasannam (2019) and Bunyavejchewin (2022).

[5] The logic of the statement is less clear in the translated version. In the Thai version, the sentence reads “ไหนด? ถ้าคนที่เป็นลีดมอปีล่าสุด เรายอมอะ โคตรน่ารักเลย” (278). This statement means that the speaker is ready to concede and accept that Sarawat is in love with Tine, because Tine is very cute.

[6] I should note here that in *The Cool-Kawaii* (2011) Thorsten Botz-Bornstein asserts that the word *cute* is not the equivalent of the Japanese word *kawaii* (41). I deem it important to acknowledge this point; nevertheless, in the context of my argument, I would like to maintain that both words as well as the word *narak* in Thai are conceptually close and share comparable pragmatic functions. That is, all of them can be used interjectively when one encounters an affectively pleasing entity and wishes to stress the harmless satisfaction they experience from it.

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