

Breaking Stereotypes: The Evolution of LGBTQIA+ Representation in Thai Dramas

Ms. Rakshita

Student

Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of representation of LGBTQIA+ people through the prism of the modern Thai series Tonhon Chonlatee, etc as well as older works. In terms of changes in societal acceptance in Thailand, struggles faced, and other nuances, Thai dramas like Tonhon Chonlatee offer a much more positive and articulate representation of LGBTQIA+ relationships. This study sets off to explain how the narratives serve as evidence of such changes in societal attitudes of the people towards the LGBTQIA+ community. This paper also draws attention to the importance of media and art in combating such stereotypes such as gender identity within the context of the society we live in.

Keywords: Thai drama, LGBTQIA+ community, societal structures

Introduction and Historical Overview

Thailand's popular culture negotiation of gender and sexuality has been long contradictory: institutionally closeted but culturally visible. Kathoey ("ladyboys") have appeared on screen in Thai film since the 1950s, usually as comic relief or tragic victims (Winter 47). Mainstream Thai cinema—starting with *Love of Siam* (2007)—only started to depict gay romance at narrative center in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a response to a change in audience demand (Wikipedia). Jimmy Pham and Mark Smith observe that the success of *Love Sick: The Series* (2014–15), the first Thai BL series on prime-time television, spawned a domestic BL boom; between 2014 and 2020, 57 BL dramas were produced in Thailand (Wikipedia).

In spite of the social conservatism that pervades society and the lack of legal tolerance of same-sex marriages, these TV shows, commonly known as BL, have been able to thrive economically and culturally. According to Time, a study asserts that the financial success of BL shows has caused even institutions that have traditionally held homophobic views to tolerate BL themes and narratives, if only due to the money they make (Chad de Guzman). However, there are some worried voices in the Thai LGBTQIA+ community that caution that BL narratives tend to revolve around heteronormative fantasies of men and commodify queerness without actually engaging with and critiquing the structural discrimination that exists in society ("Thailand's Boys' Love Dramas").

Queer Theory: Frameworks for Analysis

Butlerian Performativity

Judith Butler's groundbreaking theory of gender performativity contends that gender is not a thing that exists internally in people but is instead produced and constructed through a series of repeated performances and acts that are repeated over time, rather than being a natural quality or essence (Butler 2). In the narrative of Tonhon Chonlatee, we observe that the characters repeatedly perform and subvert

the hegemonic norms and scripts of masculinity. Tonhon's early and dogged insistence on traditional heteronormative norms—such as dating a girlfriend and teasing Chonlatee for openly expressing his affection—offers a stark illustration of the conception of gender as performance, as opposed to a static identity. As the narrative proceeds, however, we find him growing more uncomfortable with these rigid scripts, which gradually disintegrates, and he finds himself—literally—experimenting and rehearsing new ways of producing intimacy with Chonlatee.

Sedgwick's Epistemology of the Closet

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to the sincere manner in which contemporary societies impose a rigid binary opposition between the "homosexual" and "heterosexual" categories, effectively relegating all shades of complexity and nuance to the domain of what is referred to as the "closet" (Sedgwick 4). Chonlatee, who is unabashed about his identity as openly gay to his group of friends, does not have a closet—his desire is out and simply understandable to his friends. In contrast, Tonhon, who is socialized to be seen as straight in line with the standards of his family, maintains a middle ground of a "provisional identity" (Sedgwick 43) as he navigates and copes with his feelings. As such, the series offers a strong consideration of the dynamic tension between being "closeted" and being "outed," a concern that strongly resonates with Sedgwick's insightful critique.

Queer Polylocality

Recent research on the concept of "queer polylocality" examines how transnational queer media within the multicultural cultural spaces of Asia creates sites for people to identify with multiple, intersecting identities and affiliations (Chiang et al. 95). A good example of this is the movie Tonhon Chonlatee, which is made available on the popular site YouTube, with English and Malay subtitles for wider accessibility and understanding. This particular movie is a good example of how Thai viewers perceive it as a strong local affirmation of their queerness and sexual identity, but regional viewers perceive it as a soft power which works effectively in exporting freer and more progressive sexual norms to nations surrounding them where media censorship is much tighter and more pervasive (Academic.oup).

The Rise of BL in Thailand: Cultural and Industrial Context

Thailand's media landscape, largely dominated by the massive reach of GMMTV and Line TV, witnessed very early on the sheer profitability of Boys' Love (BL) content creation. GMMTV's hit drama, 2gether: The Series, which originally debuted in 2020, accumulated an eye-popping total of over 100 million YouTube views, which in turn generated a plethora of international licensing agreements ("Thailand's Boys' Love Dramas"). Nevertheless, whereas BL's fan-based model—firmly based on Jenkins's theory of textual poaching (Jenkins 12)—has afforded the audience the right to appropriate and recontextualize content on its own terms, it has also led to the dominance of formulaic tropes within the genre. These are the reassuring puppy-love pining, the bipolar seme/uke split, and pandering to the heteronormative male gaze, specifically engineered to provide women spectators with pleasure.

Scholars Mills and Griswold make a strong case that early versions of BL, or Boys' Love, gave some exposure to the queer community but at the same time helped to perpetuate negative stereotypes: hyper-masculine heroes, queer character deaths, and token queer supporting characters who are punished for their coming out stories (Mills 76; Griswold 135). But as time went on, television shows such as Dark Blue Kiss, which aired in 2019, and Until We Meet Again, released in 2020, started to have more diverse body types and more varied storylines that captured a broader spectrum of queer experiences. The TV show Tonhon Chonlatee is the standard in this development, as both heroes—Tonhon and Chonlatee—

are emotionally complex characters who are shown as complex agents in their own stories and not caricatures of stereotypical tropes.

Case Study: *Tonhon Chonlatee*

Narrative Summary

Tonhon Chonlatee centers on Chonlatee, a soft-spoken and sweet first-year university student studying food science. He has secretly adored his neighbor, Tonhon, since they were kids. When unexpected changes in Tonhon's family situation force him to live with Chonlatee, their new domestic arrangement becomes the catalyst for a string of farcical misunderstandings, heartfelt confessions, and trials of customary gender roles that they both endure.

Character Analysis

Chonlatee: Gay, soft-spoken, and stoic. Contra the "tragic gay" trope, he is a lesson in emotional labor and self-confidence, thus turning Sedgwick's "acceptable" vs. "deviant" queer binary on its head (Sedgwick 67).

Tonhon: First tries hypermasculinity—football, having a girlfriend—to meet paternal expectations (Reddit). His search for feelings demonstrates Butler's theory that gender is fluid through performative actions (Butler 25).

Queer Theoretical Interventions

1. **Performativity in Domestic Space:** Their common living environment then becomes an environment marked by ongoing and recurrent enactments of gender. The environment is marked by common blankets, the swapping of silent jokes, and fleeting careless touching, all of which create an environment full of intimacy. These engagements and interactions come to take on new meanings beyond heteronormative scripts, subverting and recharting the terms of their relationship.
2. **Negotiating the Closet:** The series never has a monolithic or traditional "coming-out" moment anywhere in the series. What we instead have is Tonhon's gradual and step-by-step move away from performing heteronormativity, which works to demonstrate and validate Sedgwick's contention that one's identity need not necessarily be openly "labeled" in order for it to be valid and real (Sedgwick 51).
3. **Emotional Intimacy vs. Sexual Expression:** The series is more interested in creating emotional intimacy and establishing close personal connections rather than mere physical consummation. This choice serves to subvert the common expectations that audiences will have of Western romantic narratives as well as from previous Boys' Love (BL) genres, as is discussed in scholarly work that Sagepub published.

Breaking Stereotypes: Themes and Tropes

Subversion of Toxic Masculinity

Tonhon's father is a hard and classic definition of masculinity that demands the hiding of tears, the prohibition of softness, and a tough exterior, and he actively punishes any sign of deviation from this ideal (Reddit). The tale effectively criticizes this harsh standard by demonstrating the stark contrast between Tonhon's initial feeling of disconnection from himself and his subsequent ability to open himself up to vulnerability.

Fluidity of Desire

The show also manages to steer clear of strict bisexual identification and the often tense "gay panic" dynamics by portraying desire in a situationally and constantly shifting way. In this case, Tonhon's stubborn refusal to be labeled until the final episode strongly speaks to Judith Halberstam's radical notion of "female masculinity," which is a rejection of the normative gender binarisms that are so often foisted on society, and intriguingly, this idea is applied here directly to male bodies (Halberstam 82).

Participatory Fan Culture

The global fan base on sites like Twitter and TikTok is ever more expanding the interpretative spaces in which fans interpret their favorite TV shows and characters. Fans, in a very active way, produce "ship" stories and queer readings that, at times, move beyond the show's original text material. This is a phenomenon that visually illustrates Jenkins's notion of "participatory culture," as elaborated in his work (Jenkins 45).

Critiques and Commercialization

With all its progressive corners and even some contemporary flair, Tonhon Chonlatee has certain corners that cannot be ignored. Both of the series' lead protagonists adhere very closely to traditional standards of beauty as well as able-bodied norms, which eventually pushes out genuine representations of trans people and plus-sized people from the frame (LSEe PDF). Additionally, it is noteworthy to see how critics such as Baudinette state how commercial Boy's Love (BL) presents a sanitized view of queerness that is separate from the real legal and social struggles of the LGBTQ+ community of Thailand (Newcastle). The commodification argument—queerness as market niche—is an elaboration of Warner's thesis that assimilationist queer media threatens to neutralize queer insurgency (Warner 123). Although BL's growing visibility can help to bring about acceptance, it can also depoliticize queer identities.

Comparative Reflections: Past vs. Present

LGBTQIA+ characters were left on sideplots or as sitcom relief in the 2000s (Jirattikorn 90). Love of Siam bucked the trend by making gay romance the point of the narrative but ending on a tragic note, affirming queer suffering (Wikipedia). Tonhon Chonlatee, on the other hand, provides a peaceful, optimistic close: mutual respect and the option of an acknowledged relationship.

This transformation reflects the world in general: Western television series such as Schitt's Creek and Pose have made queer chosen-family and gay enjoyment commonplace. Thai BL, having originated as derivative of Japanese manga convention, now establishes its own cultural logics of closeness and care-based relations.

Conclusion

The development of LGBTQIA+ representation in Thai television dramas, from the simplistic and stereotypical kathoey caricatures to the emotionally complex and multidimensional storytelling of Tonhon Chonlatee, beautifully demonstrates the vast potential of television to undermine deeply ingrained stereotypes in society. Employing a multidisciplinary approach drawing upon the theories of queer performativity, the epistemology of the closet, and polylocal queer identities, this paper has been able to clearly demonstrate how Tonhon Chonlatee works actively to undermine traditional gender scripts, advocates the value of emotional intimacy between characters, and encourages a wide range of audience members to engage with the stories presented. Yet, as much as these advances have been made, the

ongoing issues of commodification within media representation and the residual impact of normative standards of beauty serve to highlight the bleak reality that advances within queer media are, at best, only partial. In the future, it will be absolutely imperative that there is a much higher level of integration of stories being told by trans, disabled, and nonbinary individuals in order to create a truly intersectional Thai queer television landscape that fully represents the full range of queer experiences.

References

1. Baudinette, Travis. "Japanese 'Boy-Love' Comics a Hit Among Thais." *CBS Business Network Resource Library*, 31 Aug. 2001, CBSnews.com/news/japanese-boy-love-thais.
2. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
3. Chiang, Siwan, et al. "Queer Polylocality Across Thailand, Hong Kong and South Korea." *Screen*, vol. 66, no. 1, Mar. 2025, pp. 92–111. Oxford UP.
4. de Guzman, Chad. "Boys' Love: The Gay Romance TV Genre Taking Over Southeast Asia." *Time*, 16 June 2020, time.com/6208817/thailand-bl-dramas-popularity/. □cite□turn1news10□
5. Griswold, Wesley. "Representation of LGBTQ+ Characters in Thai Entertainment." *Asian Media Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2013, pp. 130–45.
6. Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Duke UP, 1998.
7. Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Routledge, 1992.
8. Jirattikorn, Teeraphon. "The Kathoey Experience in Thailand: A Historical Perspective." *Asian Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2018, pp. 88–103.
9. Mills, David. "Exploring Legal and Social Recognition of Same-Sex Unions in Thailand." *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2020, pp. 243–56.
10. Reddit. "Question About Tonhon Chonlatee." *r/boyslove*, 15 Mar. 2022, reddit.com/r/boyslove/comments/118lnhz/question_about_tonhon_chonlatee/. □cite□turn0search0□
11. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California P, 1990.
12. Smith, Mark, and Jimmy Pham. "How LGBTQ+ Groups Are Portrayed in Queer Television in Thailand and Its Influence on Real Lives." *ResearchGate*, May 2025, researchgate.net/publication/389512318. □cite□turn1search0
13. "Thailand's Boys' Love Dramas Are Changing the Way Many People View Gay Romance." *Time*, 11 Oct. 2020, time.com/6208817/thailand-bl-dramas-popularity/. □cite□turn1search12□
- Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Free Press, 1999.
13. Wikipedia contributors. "Boys' Love." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 8 May 2025, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boys%27_love. □cite□turn1search12□
- Winter, Sam. "Thai Transgenders in Focus." *International Journal of Transgenderism*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2006, pp. 47–63.