

The Rising Girl Love Factor in Thailand's Soft Power

Written by Nguyen Le

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

The Rising Girl Love Factor in Thailand's Soft Power

<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/09/04/the-rising-girl-love-factor-in-thailands-soft-power/>

NGUYEN LE, SEP 4 2024

Thailand has long leveraged its cultural assets to carve out a unique space in the global soft power arena. In recent years, one of the most significant cultural exports has been its film and television industry, particularly in the realm of LGBTQ+ content. The success of "Boy Love" (BL) series during the COVID-19 pandemic opened the door to a new wave of content centered on LGBTQ+ narratives. Now, "Girl Love" (GL) series are emerging as a potential rising star in Thailand's soft power canon, offering unique opportunities for economic gains, cultural influence, and positive image projection.

The surge in GL series production is not a coincidence but rather a strategic extension of the success found with BL content. Initially, same-sex female couples were often peripheral characters in mainstream or BL dramas, rarely enjoying the spotlight. This began to change with the release of "GAP The Series" in 2022, marking a pivotal moment for GL content in Thailand. The show's success indicated a significant appetite for sapphic narratives (girls x girls focus), prompting both private companies, ranging from small enterprises, like Idol Factory, Snap25 to more established entertainment houses, like GMMTV, as well as national television channels such as CH3, to invest in the production of GL series. Prominently, signs of public-private partnership in GL series have been recorded between the Ministry of Commerce and Idol Factory Company to produce a GL series with history-based theme, namely "The Loyal Pin".

Overall, the 2023-2024 period has seen a boom in Thai GL series in quantity showcasing diverse social aspects of Thai's society —from high school lovebirds ("23.5") to mature plots ("The Secret of Us"). Besides huge investments channel into this genre, the production process of these series is remarkably efficient, often moving quickly from novel adaptations to short web series, which then gain traction on streaming platforms, such as YouTube and Netflix. This model not only ensures a steady flow of content but also broadens the reach of Thai GL series, making them easily accessible to international audiences.

The economic potential of GL series can be significant, particularly when considering the broader impact of the "Y Economy" (implying economic benefits derived from the BL genre). BL content has already demonstrated its ability to generate substantial revenue within Thailand's creative industries, and GL series are poised to follow a similar trajectory creating a synergy for cultural industries of Thailand.

Out of all the current markets, China emerges as the most promising one for Thai GL series exports. The Chinese government's restrictions on LGBTQ+ representation and de facto ban on Korean cultural content between 2017 and 2023 have created a demand for foreign content, which Thai GL series are well-positioned to meet. As the T-Wave led by Thai GL content gains momentum, it has the potential to make a significant cultural impact in China, similar to the early success of the K-Wave in the Chinese market where the term "Hallyu" was coined, and could propel Thai film exports to new heights. Simultaneously, the booming e-commerce scene in China further amplifies opportunities for Thai GL stars to both penetrate into the market and bring back some purple cash. Cases of some Thai GL couples, such as Freen-Becky, Milk-Love, and Ling-Orm, have been featured on Chinese magazine shoots and live streaming with Chinese e-platforms.

For years, Thailand has cultivated a reputation as a welcoming destination for the LGBTQ+ community, both within its borders and abroad. This nation brand is crucial for its tourism sector, with campaigns exclusively attracting

The Rising Girl Love Factor in Thailand's Soft Power

Written by Nguyen Le

LGBTQ+ travelers. From external perceptions, Thai society is often viewed as relatively open-minded compared to other countries in the region, and this perception has been carefully nurtured through a combination of policy, culture, and media. The rise of GL series in Thailand reinforces this image, sending a strong message that the country is not only accepting of diverse sexual orientations but is also willing to celebrate and promote them.

Thailand's recent strides in LGBTQ+ rights, particularly the historic legalization of same-sex marriage, have positioned it as a leader in Southeast Asia on this issue. This legislative progress is not just a domestic achievement but a powerful signal to the international community about Thailand's commitment to human rights. In this context, GL series serve as a cultural expression of these legal advancements, translating policy into relatable stories that resonate with both Thai citizens and global audiences.

Despite the promoted LGBTQ+ friendly brand, Thailand remains a society that is historically ruled by authoritarian cultural thinking and repressive modern state. The increased visibility of LGBTQ+ content promoted as a statecraft tool could provoke backlash domestically. The acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights also vary worldwide hindering the broadcast of Thai GL series to those conservative countries. This is where diplomatic engagement becomes crucial for both Thai and international publics. Thailand's government and cultural institutions can work together to frame GL series not as controversial or subversive, but as part of a broader, globally recognized push towards human rights and equality. If done right, this connection between media content and legislative frameworks is a critical aspect of how soft power operates. By producing and exporting GL series, Thailand is effectively showcasing the tangible outcomes of its pro-LGBTQ+ policies and strengthening Thai's global appeals by framing LGBTQ+ rights as an integral part of pro-human-rights narrative.

Building on the success of BL content, GL series are emerging as a powerful asset, particularly in key Asian markets. These series align with Thailand's strategic efforts to enhance its nation brand through LGBTQ+ rights, serving as both entertainment and a reflection of the country's progressive values—potent tools in its public diplomacy toolkit.

About the author:

Nguyen Le is a Ph.D. candidate in public diplomacy at the University of Nottingham, Ningbo China (UNNC). Her research interests include public diplomacy strategies, soft power analysis, and nation branding of East Asian and Southeast Asian countries.