

The Images of Thailand in Thai Television Dramas and Their Impacts on Vietnamese
Audiences



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for the Degree of Master of Arts in Thai Studies

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ภาพลักษณ์ของประเทศไทยในละครโทรทัศน์ไทยและอิทธิพลต่อผู้ชมชาวเวียดนาม



สารนิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรปริญญาอักษรศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต

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ลิขสิทธิ์ของจุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

เขียน ทิ จ็อก ทวา : ภาพลักษณ์ของประเทศไทยในละครโทรทัศน์ไทยและอิทธิพลต่อผู้ชมชาว
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งานวิจัยฉบับนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษาหน้าที่ของภาพลักษณ์ที่ดีของประเทศไทยที่ปรากฏในละคร
โทรทัศน์ไทย และศึกษาอิทธิพลของละครโทรทัศน์ไทยที่มีต่อผู้ชมชาวเวียดนาม โดยวิเคราะห์จากละคร
โทรทัศน์ 2 เรื่อง ได้แก่ แปลรักฉันด้วยใจเธอ และนิทานพันดาว ประกอบกับการเก็บข้อมูลภาคสนามจากผู้ชม
ชาวเวียดนาม ผลการศึกษาพบว่าประเทศไทยในละครโทรทัศน์เป็นประเทศที่มีทรัพยากรธรรมชาติและ
วัฒนธรรมที่หลากหลาย อีกทั้งผู้คนมีนิสัยโอบอ้อมอารีและเป็นมิตร ผู้ชมชาวเวียดนามยังสามารถรับรู้ถึง
สังคมไทยที่มีการยอมรับและความเคารพความหลากหลายทางเพศอย่างเหมาะสม ภาพลักษณ์ที่ดีดังกล่าว
เป็นแรงบันดาลใจให้ผู้ชมชาวเวียดนามศึกษาเกี่ยวกับประเทศไทยมากยิ่งขึ้น และทำให้ตัดสินใจมาท่องเที่ยว
ประเทศไทยเพื่อสัมผัสประสบการณ์ในด้านของสังคมและวัฒนธรรมอย่างแท้จริง ไม่เพียงเท่านั้นความนิยม
ของละครโทรทัศน์ไทยกระตุ้นให้ผู้ชมชาวเวียดนามเรียนภาษาไทย ศึกษาต่อในระดับอุดมศึกษาที่ประเทศไทย
และเลือกประกอบอาชีพที่เกี่ยวข้องกับประเทศไทย ผู้ชมชาวเวียดนามยังมีแนวโน้มที่จะซื้อสินค้าและ
ผลิตภัณฑ์ตามตัวละครที่อยู่ในละครโทรทัศน์ โดยแสดงให้เห็นอิทธิพลของละครโทรทัศน์ที่ทำให้การบริโภค
สินค้าของไทยเพิ่มสูงขึ้น กล่าวโดยสรุปคือความนิยมละครโทรทัศน์ไทยในหมู่ผู้ชมชาวเวียดนามช่วยสร้าง
คุณค่าในด้านสังคม วัฒนธรรม และเศรษฐกิจ โดยคุณค่าในด้านสังคมและวัฒนธรรม คือ ผู้ชมชาวเวียดนาม
ได้ซึมซับภาพลักษณ์ที่ดีของประเทศไทยและรับรู้ถึงด้านดีของสังคมและวัฒนธรรมไทยมากยิ่งขึ้น ส่วนคุณค่า
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ช่วยดึงดูดผู้ชมชาวเวียดนามให้ท่องเที่ยวและศึกษาในประเทศไทย อีกทั้งสนับสนุนการใช้สินค้าและ
ผลิตภัณฑ์ของไทย

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Nguyen Thi Ngoc Thoa : The Images of Thailand in Thai Television Dramas and Their Impacts on Vietnamese Audiences. Advisor: Asst. Prof. Kanya Wattanakun, Ph.D.

The study aims to explore the function of good images of Thailand represented through Thai television dramas, and their impacts on Vietnamese audiences. An analysis of the two series "I Told Sunset About You" and "A Tale of Thousand Starts" and a field research reveal that Thailand portrayed in the series is the country possessing a diversity of natural resources and cultures with hospitable and friendly people. Remarkably, in the series audiences can see a society where gender diversity is accepted and respected in a proper way. Positive images of Thailand as represented via the series inspire Vietnamese audiences to learn more about the country and induce their desire to visit Thailand to get authentic experience of Thai society and culture. Furthermore, the popularity of the series among Vietnamese audiences motivates them to study Thai, pursue their higher education in Thailand, and work in the fields that relate to Thailand. Besides, watching leading characters using Thai products in the series, Vietnamese audiences tend to purchase those products used by the characters. This helps increase the consumption of Thai products. In conclusion, the popularity of the series among Vietnamese audiences has both socio-cultural and economic benefits. In socio-cultural respect, the audiences absorb good images of Thailand and develop positive perceptions of Thai culture and society. In economic respect, the series have positive impacts on Thai economy because they attract Vietnamese audiences to travel and study in Thailand, and use Thai products as well.

Field of Study: Thai Studies

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1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale

In recent years, the international market has witnessed the spread of Thai television dramas, which is supposed to be a result of the shift of broadcasting platform from traditional television channels to online platforms (Shi, 2020: abstract) that creates more opportunities for foreign audiences to get access to Thai television dramas. At the same time, audiences of Thai television dramas have also changed from working adults to students around the age of twenty (Shi, 2020: 678). Noteworthy, in the case of the Chinese market, the popularity of Thai television dramas declined considerably since after the year 2012 because the majority of Thai television dramas broadcasted in China during that time followed such an old motif (Shi, 2020: 679). However, the appearance of “Lovesick The Series” along with new genres in Thai television dramas have drawn great attention to Chinese audiences since 2014 (Shi, 2020: 679). In the Vietnamese market, Thai television dramas have received warm welcome from Vietnamese audiences. Through watching Thai soap operas, Vietnamese audiences develop better understanding about the country, especially cultural similarities and differences between the two countries (Nguyen, 2016: 199).

In terms of Boys’ Love content, Baudinette (2019) points out that Boys’ Love series (in other words BL series or Y series), which belong to a homoerotic genre and originate from Japan, highlights its difference from other genres by featuring homosexual boys, “flower boys” as main characters and presenting their romantic love in a positive way (as cited in Chan, 2021: 2). In recent years, Thai film industry has witnessed a rapid growth and success of Thai Boys’ Love series genre. In 2019 – 2020, Thai Boys’ Love series

contributed more than one billion baht to the country's Covid-affected economy with over 40 titles produced (Usnewswire.org, accessed on 24 February 2022). In 2021, the number of Boys' Love series was approximately 90 titles (Usnewswire.org, accessed on 24 February 2022). The strong growth of Thai Boys' Love genre is not only expressed through its increasing quantity, but its quality. For example, the Thai Boys' Love series "I Told Sunset About You" won "International Drama of the Year" prize in Seoul International Drama Awards 2021. And the series "2gether", broadcasted in 2020 gained approximately 100 million views on Thai platform LINE TV (Time.com, accessed on 6 October 2022). Surprisingly, the majority of audiences of Thai Boys' Love series come from quite conservative countries such as ASEAN countries (especially Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia), East Asia region (especially China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan), and Latin America region. It is clear that this success not only brings pride to Thai film industry, but also reflects great influence of Thai Boys' Love series genre in the international market.

It can be claimed that Thai Boys' Love series address a variety of aspects. Apart from love between homosexual men, audiences also see public attitudes towards homosexual couples. Despite obstacles, their love is accepted by family and society eventually. Furthermore, Thai Boys' Love series also show the beauty of natural resources, friendliness of the local, as well as a diversity of local culture, which gives audiences good impression. All components are combined together and rendered in an ingenious manner, which makes Thai Boys' Love series attractive among foreign audiences. As a result, the popularity of gay-romance series and actors is beneficial to promote

Thailand's tourist attractions, rich local cultures and commercial products presented in the series.

1.2 Research questions

1.2.1 What are the good images of Thailand that are promoted via the selected Thai BL series?

1.2.2 In what way do good images of Thailand presented in the selected Thai BL series contribute to Vietnamese audiences' positive perceptions of Thailand and influence their attitudes towards Thailand?

1.3 Objectives

1.3.1 To examine good images of Thailand promoted via the selected Thai BL series.

1.3.2 To assess the impacts of those good images on the Vietnamese audiences' perceptions of and attitudes towards Thailand.

1.4 Hypotheses

1.4.1 Thai television dramas play an important role in conveying outstanding images of the country to foreign audiences. Not only a country that accepts gender diversity, audiences also see the country with a rich diversity of local culture, the beauty of natural sites and sceneries, along with friendliness of local people. These positive representations render Thailand more attractive as a popular tourist destination, a land of smile.

1.4.2 Among Vietnamese audiences, Thailand as depicted in the selected series is a country of beautiful natural sites and alluring local cultures. It is also a place where freedom of gender is accepted and respected. These ingredients, combined with a

portrayal of romanticized homosexual love, attract Vietnamese audiences who were inspired by the series to gain real life experience of Thai culture and society.

1.5 Research Methodology

In order to investigate images of Thailand through Thai television dramas and their impacts on Vietnamese audiences, a case study of Thai Boys' Love series is chosen as a sample because of the popularity and influence of this genre in the international market. In this research, I select two Thai Boys' Love series: "I Told Sunset About You" (Part 1) (แปลรักฉันด้วยใจเธอ) produced by Nadao Bangkok and broadcasted in 2020, and "A Tale of Thousand Stars" (นิทานพันดาว) produced by GMMTV and screened in 2021. I choose these two Thai Boys' Love series because of their success at the international level that attests to the popularity of this genre among foreign audiences. Remarkably, both series won prestigious awards. While the former won "International Drama of The Year" from "Seoul International Drama Awards 2021", the latter won "Best LGBTQ+ Programme Made In Asia" from "Content Asia Awards 2021" hosted by Content Asia, the leading media having both printed publication and online platform based in Singapore. On the one hand, both series portray the homosexual relationship of gay male couples that is accepted and respected by the society. On the other hand, these two series also showcase different types of asset that Thailand has. For example, "I Told Sunset About You" exhibits a rich diversity of local culture and the beauty of nature in the Southern part of Thailand which partly make Thailand become an attractive tourist destination among foreigners. "A Tale of Thousand Stars", highlights genuine friendship between young voluntary teachers and local people living together in perfect harmony in a remote area

in the North of Thailand. Friendliness of local people brings newcomers a warm feeling. Besides, the series also introduces the beautiful scenery in the North of Thailand along with local products to audiences. After analyzing good images conveyed via these two series, the research further explores how those good images influence Vietnamese audiences' perceptions of Thailand and brings benefits to the country. To complete this part, the theory of nation branding is used in the analysis.

In order to respond to the second research question about impacts of Thai television dramas, particularly Thai Boys' Love series in this context on Vietnamese audiences, the researcher distributes an online questionnaire to 161 informants. The questionnaire asks informants to write 3 things in the series – “I Told Sunset About You” and “A Tale of Thousand Stars” – that impress them. Afterwards, an in-depth interview is conducted for 8 respondents among them to investigate the impacts of the two series on audiences. In the interview section, the researcher concentrates on 3 questions, including 1) What do you like about the series? 2) What do you think about Thailand after watching the series? 3) Do you think the series influence your perception of Thailand or urge you to visit/learn more about Thailand? If yes, please explain how.

In terms of informants, they are undergraduate students at the age from 18 to 25 years old¹. In addition, they have already watched both series. The researcher selects this group of informants because they are familiar with the Internet, so they can easily access websites that have Thai Boys' Love series broadcasted. It should be noted that Thai Boys' Love series have not been

¹ Basically, the age of undergraduates range from 18 – 22 years old in Vietnam. However, there are some may extend their study until 25 years old.

screened on national television channels in Vietnam, audiences can get access to them through online platforms only. Besides, this group of informants is independent enough to decide their actions.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

In this research, a framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) introduced by Fairclough (1989, 1995) (as cited in Janks, 1997) is used to analyze good images of Thailand presented via Thai Boys' Love series. The researcher analyses both verbal and non-verbal components of the selected series. In addition to the theory of CDA, according to Mallinger and Rossy (2003:1), dramas and films are considered as cultural representations because they tell stories of people, their hopes, obstacles, fears, relationships, social acceptance and rejection (as cited in Makanishe and Khuluse, 2018: 15). Similarly, Dupont and Augros (2013) and KwaZulu-Natal Film Commission (2017) also note that films and soap operas are part of human culture, they play an important role in promoting and preserving culture because through films audiences are able to identify themselves as members of a group where they share similarities in culture (as cited in Makanishe and Khuluse, 2018: 8). For example, Boyd (2015) opines that being filmmakers, or writers of their own stories, American Indians portray images of their community and culture in the media that differ from stereotypes (as cited in Makanishe and Khuluse, 2018: 15). Based on this example, it reveals the power of films in reflecting culture or reinforcing images of the culture being represented; because media producers have their own agendas and tend to shape their target audiences according to such agendas. This causes a strong influence on the discourse or media manipulation in other words (Hoepfner, 2006: 9, 23). Besides, Manomaiphibul (2006) claims that soap opera is not simply a reflection of the

people's real lives, it instills values and ideologies to audiences. In other words, soap opera mirrors the ideal lives that the society desires (Manomaiphibul, 2006: 82).

In addition, the concept of nation branding is useful in this research that examines how films shape images of Thailand among foreign audiences and their impacts. Firstly, nation branding means how a country is viewed by others through the represented images, verbal expressions, or perceptions acquired via real life experiences (Fan, 2010: 98 as cited in Lee, 2021: 94). It is a process in which images of a nation can be created and changed (Fan, 2010: 101 as cited in Lee, 2021: 94). And Fan (2006) mentions that every country has a brand with or without any attempts in nation branding (as cited in Lee, 2021: 94). In developing countries, tourism promotion tends to dominate their nation branding activities (Avraham 2018; Fan 2006; Scott et al. 2011 as cited in Lee, 2021: 95). To reach foreign audiences, films are known as one of the most powerful media thanks to their ability to reach wide audience . Films not only are for entertaining, but also crossing borders to enhance mutual understanding through cultural exchanges (Lee, 2021: 95). Sharing the same viewpoint, Kaewthep (1996: 300) states that people tend to refuse to learn something when they are forced or pressured; however, television soap opera has the power to spread a dominant ideology of society to audiences because it is a form of entertainment that people voluntarily watch out of their own consent (as cited in Manomaiphibul, 2006: 84). Therefore, television soap opera can be used as an effective instrument to implant certain ideas or values in the people's minds.

1.7 Literature Review

Previous studies about Thai Boys' Love series focus on exploring messages conveyed through the series, and fans' attitude towards actors. Firstly, it can be seen clearly that through Thai Boys' Love series, Thailand is recognized as "gay paradise"² where gay couples are free to express their love. Zhang (2021) states that Thai Boys' Love series play a powerful role in shaping images of the country in general and Thai gay men in particular among Chinese viewers (p.80). In almost all Thai Boys' Love series, although gay male couples face obstacles in their relationship for example rejection from family, they receive tolerance of the society and people surrounding them, and usually have a happy ending at the end. In comparison with Chinese society where children are forced to get married by their parents as a social norm to maintain the continuity of a family line, especially with families which have the only child, so Thai Boys' Love series provide them a utopian world, a feeling of escapism (Zhang, 2021: 65 – 69). Secondly, Thai Boys' Love series shape images of Thai gay men that Zhang (2021) calls it "gay archetype". Thai Boys' Love series lead audiences to the standardization of Thai gay men represented by young, physically attractive, cute men who possess soft masculinity (Zhang, 2021: 89). "Gay archetype" is reinforced when Sukthungthong & Bunyavejchewin (2019) use words such as good-looking, effeminate, and fashionable to describe characters in Thai Boys' Love series. This shapes images of Thai gay men among audiences. Actually, it has a reason to claim that Thai Boys' Love series shape "gay archetype" just like the case of Korean series. The popularity of Korean series results in the

² The term "gay paradise" was introduced by Jackson to describe the image of Thailand (as cited in Zhang, 2021: 82).

perception of Korean men who are gentle, romantic, and handsome among foreign audiences. Thirdly, family problems and social norms have been portrayed in Thai Boys' Love series. The rejection of family that gay men couples face possibly results from an influence of patriarchy on Thai society. However, gay men couples in Thai Boys' Love series gradually win their family's acceptance at the end, which implies that patriarchal domination in Thai society is strong but not absolute (Chan, 2021: 14). In terms of fans' attitudes towards actors, Gu (2020) reveals that a number of Chinese fans plan to travel to Thailand in order to chase their favorite celebrities after watching Thai Boy's Love dramas, which evinces a positive impact of Thai Boys' Love series on Thai tourism industry. Besides, Parnpiamkiat (2019) mentions that main actors of Thai Boys' Love series have many fan clubs both in and outside of the country, which helps commercial products presented by them to reach more new customers.

In conclusion, previous studies reveal that Thai Boys' Love series portray Thailand as a "gay paradise" with good-looking and soft masculine homosexual males. The previous studies also discover that the popularity of the series builds up international fan base who are potential patrons of Thai tourism and products. To fill in the field, this study analyzes the representations of local culture, scenery, and people in Thai Boys' Love series in the society where gender diversity is accepted and respected, including the impacts of such representations on Vietnamese audiences.

2. Images of Thailand in Thai Boys' Love series

2.1 The representations of Thailand in "I Told Sunset About You"

"I Told Sunset About You", produced by Nadao Bangkok and broadcasted on LINE TV in 2020, is a romantic high school drama series. The

series consists of 2 parts, and 5 episodes each. In this study, the researcher focuses on part 1 of the series only. The series is a love story between Teh and O-aew living in Phuket, Southern Thailand, they are close friends since secondary school. Teh was born in a Sino-Thai family living in Phuket, he loves acting and dreams of becoming a martial art hero like the main character Yong Jian (หย่งเจี้ยน) in กระบี่เขี่ยจันทรา (Laughing in the Wind), a Chinese play. A conflict happens when O-aew is chosen to perform Yong Jian in Chinese New Year Festival, which then inspires a love of acting in him. As for Teh, he thinks that he supports O-aew in this performance because of their good friendship, but it turns out that O-aew is his competitor. Because of the conflict, they stop talking to each other. It is not until when both of them together join a Chinese tutorial class in the last year of high school that they start talking to each other again. Teh, who is good at Chinese, tutors O-aew in Chinese to prepare for University Entrance Examination. Their relationship grows as they spend time together and gradually fall in love with each other. It is noteworthy that apart from the love story of the main characters, and a journey to explore themselves, the series presents a diversity of local culture and awe-inspiring natural sites in the South of Thailand at the same time.

First of all, the series highlights the uniqueness of Phuket local culture which is the mixture of different ethnic groups, particularly Thai local culture, Hokkien culture, and a part of Portuguese culture. The uniqueness of Phuket local culture is first reflected through its local cuisine. O-aew (โอ๋เอ๋ว)³, shaved

³ O-aew, an ingredient in Hokkien Chinese cuisine, was introduced by Hokkien migrants who migrated from China to Phuket, Thailand during a boom in tin mining industry in Phuket from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O-aew>, accessed on 9 October 2022).

ice dessert, which is a local speciality of Phuket, originated from Hokkien cuisine and presented in the series as the nickname of one of the main characters. This seems to be a purpose of the producer because it is Phuket in which the series was filmed. Therefore, naming a main character after a local speciality maybe a subtle way to furnish the series by the uniqueness of Phuket's distinctive local culture. Aside from O-aew, the series introduces a traditional Hokkien noodle that is sold by Teh's mother. In the first episode when Teh talks about his childhood, the series presents a scene that Teh's friends including O-aew gather at his house, eat Hokkien noodle, and watch a Chinese drama. Through a reference to specialities of Phuket, the series reflects the influence of Hokkien cuisine on local cuisine in the Southern Thailand, especially in Phuket. This influence is believed to be a result of Chinese migration to Thailand. According to the history of Chinese migrants to Thailand, there are five main dialect – speaking groups of Chinese migrants in Thailand, including Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese, and Hokkienese (Bao, 2005: 752-753). An analysis of local cuisine of Phuket presented in the series, together with referring to the history of Chinese migrants to Thailand reveals cultural contributions of Hokkien people to the pluralistic cultural landscape of the Thai society in the Southern Thailand, especially in Phuket, which agrees with the result of the study conducted by Pinnukul et al. (2020)⁴.

⁴ The result of the study conducted by Pinnukul et al. (2020) reveals that when oversea Chinese people, mainly Hokkien Chinese people, migrated and settled down in Phuket for the purpose of tin mining, they brought Hokkien culture with them. The influence of Hokkien culture reflected through Chinese shrines, Chinese traditions and rituals, and the Sino-Thai community contributes to uniqueness of Phuket, which turns the city into a popular cultural tourist destination in the world.

In addition to local cuisine, Thai language used by the local Phuket also has a slight difference from central Thai language and colloquial Thai spoken by Sino-Thai families in other parts of Thailand. Unique Sino-Thai dialect spoken by the characters marking Phuket as a special tourist attraction unlike others. For instance, Teh's mother calls female customers by using the word อาจี้ (aajêe means older sister) instead of using พี่(สาว) or เจ๊ (pêe saao means older sister in Thai, *jáy* is a term used by both Thai and Sino-Thai people to address or refer to a woman older than the speaker). Or Teh calls his older brother by using the word ก๊อหู้้น (kó means older brother) instead of using พี่ชาย (pêe chaai), which is more common. Some other examples can be enumerated, for instance หมี่หู้้น (*mèehûn*) that is equivalent to เส้นหมี่ขาว (*sên mée kaa*) in the central Thailand (rice vermicelli) or อี้ม (*ám*) that refers to ศาลเจ้าจีน (*saanjâo jeen*) (Chinese shrine). Moreover, the highlight of local culture also lies in Phuket's architectures that feature a mixture of Chinese and Portuguese architectural styles. Through the series, audiences have a chance to virtually visit popular destinations in Phuket such as Chinese shrines and Old Phuket Town famous for its Chino-Portuguese buildings. Chino-Portuguese architectures in Phuket make the city geographically and culturally distinct in comparison with other places in Thailand. In summary, images of different cultures such as Chinese and Portuguese cultures presented in the series "I Told Sunset About You" in a combination with local culture reveals a fascinating mixture of local culture and foreign cultures, which creates cultural diversity and uniqueness in Phuket.

Secondly, apart from the uniqueness of local culture audiences have a chance to enjoy the wonderful scenery, and well-known destinations in Phuket, one of the most famous tourist provinces in Thailand. The beautiful natural

sites of Phuket are exhibited adequately in the series. Teh's family, a Sino-Thai family operates a Hokkien noodle restaurant in Old Phuket Town, O-aew's family, a local Thai family manages a resort located on the seacoast in Phuket. The choice of setting cannot be dismissed as random selection because Phuket is a tourist destination that has been promoted for its rich culture and beautiful scenery. The trades that the two families conduct seem to highlight these natural and cultural assets of Phuket. As proof, It is "Cape Panwa Hotel" one of the places chosen for filming sites in the series (as shown in picture 1, appendix 1). This resort is owned by O-aew's family in the series, and it is also the place where O-aew and Teh's friends gather to prepare for their Chinese examination (as shown in picture 2, appendix 1). The fantastic scenery of Cape Panwa resort located along the seacoast, in combination with sweet moments of the two main characters when they spend time together results in a peaceful and romantically charming scene that leaves lasting impression among viewers (as shown in picture 3 and 4, appendix 1). Furthermore, popular destinations in Phuket such as Old Phuket Town, and Promthep Cape which are selected to film daily activities of characters popularize those places among wider audiences. Those places witness growing up of main characters in the series. For example, throughout the series audiences seem to gradually become familiar with streets in Old Phuket Town because these are the roads that Teh and O-aew usually take from school to their houses (as shown in picture 7 and 8, appendix 1). Or in the afternoons, Teh and O-aew together run to Promthep Cape to watch the sunset (as shown in picture 5 and 6, appendix 1). These scenes showcase beautiful natural sites enveloped by romantic atmosphere thus leaving deep impression on audiences. In conclusion, it shows that the producer of the

series “I Told Sunset About You” made a good decision when choosing Phuket as the major filming location because the romance at a coastal resort in Phuket, beautiful beaches, and a spectacular sunset at Promthep Cape in association with the antiquity of Old Phuket Town create a romantic atmosphere that makes the relationship between two main characters, Teh and O-aew, even more enchanting and impressive.

2.2 The representations of Thailand in “A Tale of Thousand Stars”

“A Tale of Thousand Stars” was made by GMMTV and was broadcasted on GMM 25 and LINE TV in 2021. The series is a story of Tian Sopasitsakun performed by Sahaphap Wongratch (Mix) who suffers from a heart disease that needs a surgery. Tian receives a heart transplant which is donated by Torfun who dies in a car accident. By reading Torfun’s diary, Tian knows about Torfun’s wish to count 1000 stars in Pha Pun Dao village (หมู่บ้านดาว), a village located in a remote area in the Northern Thailand where she works as a voluntary teacher. In order to make Torfun’s dream come true, Tian travels to Pha Pun Dao village and works as a voluntary teacher there where he meets Phupha Viriyanon played by Pirapat Watthanaset Siri (Earth), a chief forest ranger. Tian grew up in a wealthy family with all modern conveniences, so living in the remote area with a lack of facilities seems to be an obstacle for him. During the time when he works as a voluntary teacher there, he receives great support from the chief forest ranger, Phupha. Thenceforth their relationship gradually becomes more intimate, and they fall in love with each other. The series not only highlights homosexual love between a voluntary teacher, Tian and a chief forest ranger, Phupha, but also addresses the beauty of nature and the friendliness of local people in the Northern Thailand.

As a central motif of Thai Boys' Love series genre, the series highlights homosexual love that is accepted and respected by their families and friends. Particularly, when Tian and Phupha realize their feeling for each other, and reveal their relationship to their close friends, surprisingly their relationship receives support from their families and close friends without rejection. Also, their friends even create opportunities for two main characters to be closer and enhance their mutual understanding when some misunderstandings happen between them. For example, when Tian tells his close friend that he likes a man, his friend replies that “It is your choice, the important thing is that you understand yourself” (without any surprise). A conversation between Tian and his friend reflects the series’s advocated attitudes toward homosexual relationship, namely open-mindedness and acceptance⁵:

Tian: How would you feel if I said that I like a man?

Tun: It is your own matter.

Tian: That’s all?.

Tun: So, how do you expect me to feel?

Tian: I think that you will be shocked.

⁵ The original version of the conversation as follows:

“Tian: มึงจะรู้สึกยังไงถ้ากูบอกมึงว่ากูชอบผู้ชาย

Tun: เรื่องของมึงดิ

Tian: แค่นี้เลยหรอ

Tun: แล้วมึงจะคาดหวังให้กูรู้สึกยังไง

Tian: กูคิดว่ามึงอาจจะตกใจมากกว่านี้

Tun: แล้วถ้ากูบอกว่ากูชอบผู้หญิง มึงจะตกใจปะ...ก็ในเมื่อมึงแค่รู้จักตัวมึงเองมากขึ้นซึ่งกูว่ามันก็โอเควะ”

Source: A tale of thousand stars, episode 5

Tun: So if I said I like a girl, would you be shocked?...The important thing is you understand yourself. If you do, then I think it's okay.”

The above-mentioned example and many other scenes in the series show that the Thai society as represented in the series is quite open-minded towards a homosexual relationship. The same-sex relationship is accepted with proper respect by the society.

Aside from the issue of homosexual relationship, the series also emphasizes the diversity of natural resources, especially in the Northern Thailand. If comparing two selected series analyzed in this study, it can be seen that while the series “I Told Sunset About You” feature the beauty of nature in the Southern Thailand famous for blue sea and beautiful white sand beaches, the series “A Tale of Thousand Stars” highlights the beauty of nature in the Northern part of Thailand with mountain ranges, waterfalls, and terraced tea fields which are considered the key attractions of this region. As proof, the scene (as shown in picture 1, 2 appendix 2) in which Phupha drives Tian through mountain passes in combination with the film soundtrack and deep affection between the characters produce an impressive romantic moment that highlights the purity of nature and peaceful countryside. Or the scene in which Tian with students at a waterfall brings audiences a feeling of country life, a simple and quiet life in which people live in harmony with nature (as shown in picture 3, appendix 2). These peaceful scenes seem to be hard to find in urban areas where life is very fast and chaotic. Furthermore, audiences have a chance to admire the beauty of terraced tea fields in the series, this is also one of distinguishing features of the Northern part in comparison with other parts of Thailand. The image of terraced tea fields is demonstrated in a scene that a forest ranger takes the new voluntary teacher, Tian, to introduce

to the local and the area where he will work. This scene partly provides audiences better understanding about regions in the Northern Thailand, especially the regions located near the border in which the local live by agricultural activities, for instance tea cultivation (as shown in picture 4, appendix 2).

In addition, the series portrays friendliness, simplicity, sincerity of the local particularly people living in a remote area in the Northern Thailand, which is supposed to be a major cause of collectivism where people live together in harmony, so the series presents an ideal life of people living in rural areas. These characteristics of the local are shown clearly through activities and interaction between the local who live in Pha Pun Dao village and a new voluntary teacher, Tian who comes from Bangkok, as well as the former voluntary teacher, Torfun. The local people express their love towards voluntary teachers clearly and sincerely. With the former voluntary teacher, Torfun, both students and villagers usually mention her in their conversations, and ask about the time when she will come back to work as a voluntary teacher there. The villagers even ask a forest ranger for his help to deliver Torfun's favorite food to her. When villagers know that Torfun died because of a car accident in Bangkok, a sorrowful atmosphere befell the whole village. The villagers set up a small altar inside the village to commemorate her, which reflects sincere affection towards the voluntary teacher. For the new voluntary teacher, Tian, it takes a little time for him to win villagers' hearts. To some extent rural people seem to be shy with strangers in comparison with urban people. However, when both sides gradually understand each other and become closer, villagers tend to treat newcomers as though they are members of the family, which indicates the hospitality and friendliness of Thai people in

general, the local community in remote areas in particular. Obviously, this is one of the strengths of the country because as a tourist country the hospitality of local people brings tourists, especially foreigners, a good impression that makes them feel at home.

2.3 The attractiveness and influence of Thai Boys' Love series

In this section, the researcher investigates reasons for the popularity of Thai Boys' Love series genre and why they should be used to promote good images of Thailand, especially the image of Thailand as a popular tourism country. First of all, it should be emphasized that it must be Boys' Love content instead of a heterosexual relationship as common in other genres of Thai television dramas. In general, images of a heterosexual couple in a beautiful and romantic setting seem to be too familiar and too typical to attract audiences. It is undeniable that those scenes are romantic and beautiful, but not refreshing, it is something outdated. Imagine a scene that a heterosexual couple spends time together, for example lying on the beach, holding their hands, and enjoying a slow and peaceful life. This motif has been reproduced to the point that it becomes conventional, which is hard to draw audiences' attention. However, when it comes to Boys' Love content, homosexual love presented in a beautiful and romantic context in the Thai society which welcomes and respects gender diversity makes a homosexual relationship even more ideal and attractive in the eyes of audiences. At the same time, Thai Boys' Love content conveys a meaningful message that love has no borders. Therefore, novelty in Thai Boys' Love content helps this genre become the selling point of Thai entertainment industry, and attract a large number of viewers. As proof, in the "Quora" website when being asked about reasons that make Thai Boys' Love series popular among international

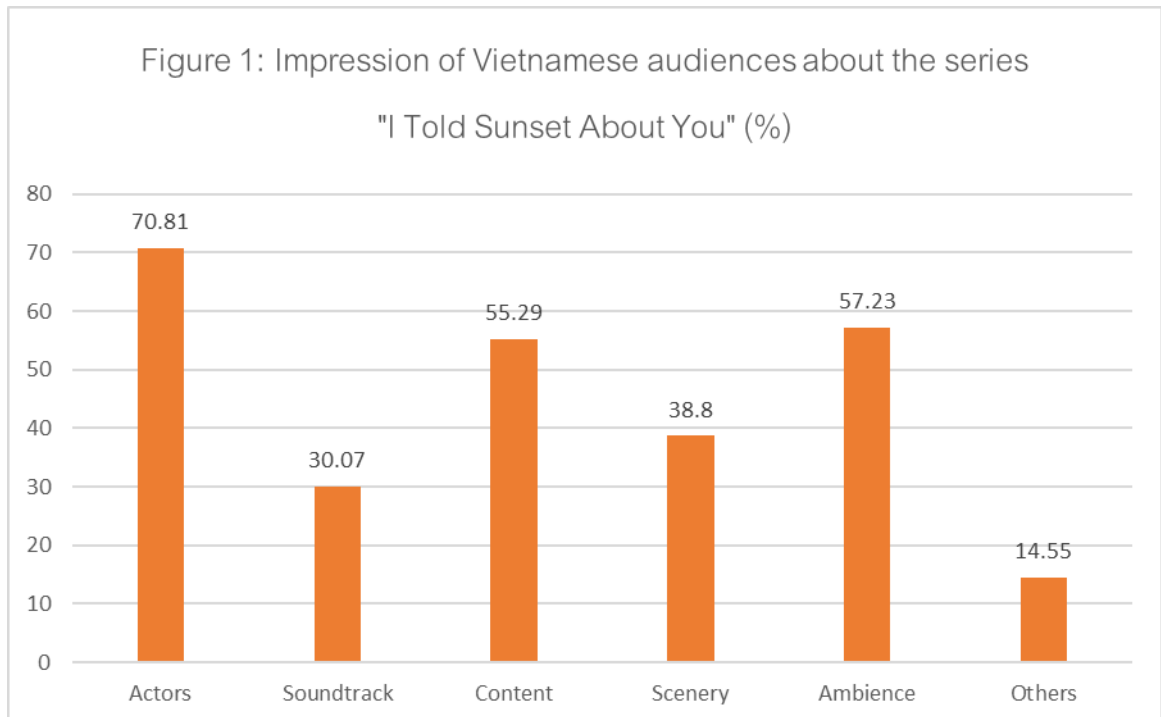
audiences, most users reply that they are attracted by creativity and novelty in contents of Thai Boys' Love series in comparison to typical melodramas that depict heterosexual love. Particularly, a user named Dimitrie Vatler reveals that the key reason that makes Thai Boys' Love series famous among foreigners is because they do not contain cliché scenes featuring a weak female character and a strong, handsome male character (Quora.com, accessed on 5 November 2022). Sharing the same point, another user in the name of Kajhal Kasraei states that the first reason which makes Thai Boys' Love series attractive is because this genre is new. This user points out that "First it's new. I mean we have millions of straight shows with the same storyline and boring ups and downs . BL genre is new and exciting." (Kajhal Kasraei, Quora.com, accessed on 5 November 2022). Agreeing with these opinions, another user named Panisara Sutsukon also observes that Thai Boys' Love series are different from most Thai melodramas that include unoriginal motifs (Quora.com, accessed on 5 November 2022). An analysis of Thai Boys' Love series in a connection with responses coming from foreign viewers affirm the important role of Thai Boys' Love series in conveying positive images of Thailand, which turns this genre into a cultural asset of Thailand that generates benefits for the country. Through Thai Boys' Love series, audiences not only see a society in which gender diversity is accepted, but also admire the beauty of nature, a country with diverse culture and friendly people. These are ingredients that enable Thai Boys' Love series to attract more tourists to Thailand. This is in line with Sukontasap's study (2018), indicating that Thai dramas and films are effective instruments to promote Thai culture and tourism.

The popularity of Thai Boys' Love series among international audiences brings considerable benefits to the country, especially to tourism industry. Through the series, the country and the people are represented positively, which helps to promote the country among foreigners. As proof, in the Japanese market, Kyodo News reported that a Japanese tour agency named H.I.S. Tours held a virtual tour to filming locations of a Thai Boys' Love series "2gether: The Series" (Bangkokpost.com, accessed on 5 November 2022). Impressively, the virtual tour attracted approximately 250 people, and about 99% of them were women (Bangkokpost.com, accessed on 5 November 2022). Moreover, Thai Boys' Love series show their power in attracting foreigners to Thai language. In particular, Monruethai Harada, a Thai language teacher at Jaya & 3S Groups in Tokyo, reveals that there is an increase of about 20 to 30% of students who want to study Thai after Thai BL series became popular in Japan in 2020 (Theguardian.com, accessed on 5 November 2022). In the case of two Thai Boys' Love series selected to analyze in this research, Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) Ho Chi Minh office, Vietnam organized a virtual event of "Exploring Thailand through TV series" on 25 September 2021. The event attracted a high number of Vietnamese audiences, more than 700 participants, including influential Youtubers, TikTokers, and Bloggers. Many interesting promotional activities were held in this event, for example studying Thai and having a virtual visit to Thailand through the two series "I Told Sunset About You" and "A Tale of Thousand Stars". Minigames about filmmaking locations, sharing stories about travelling, studying, and living in Thailand were also provided (Facebook: TAT Hochiminh, accessed on 10 November 2022). This promotional event was well received by Vietnamese people.

In conclusion, the above-mentioned examples confirm the significant influence of Thai BL series among international audiences. In the Vietnamese market, it is supposed that Thai Boys' Love series are as well-received as they have been in other countries. Vietnam is one of potential and important markets of Thai Boys' Love series products. Particularly, Vietnam together with Japan and Taiwan are in top 3 buyers of Thai Boys' Love content, according to a report of the Department of International Trade Promotion, Ministry of Commerce, Thailand in the business matching event organized in June 2021 (Bangkokpost.com, accessed on 5 November 2022). This is discussed in more detailed in the section 3 of the research.

3. The impacts of Thai Boys' Love series on Vietnamese Audiences

In order to figure out whether Thai Boys' Love series have impacts on audiences' perceptions of Thailand, a field research was carried out. The total number of participants is 161 participants. After a comprehensive check, the researcher gets 97 qualified samples that meet three criteria of the research as mentioned in the methodology section. In particular, they are undergraduate students at the age from 18 – 25 years old, and have already watched both series. The average age of informants is 20.57 years old. The number of female participants is 85 participants out of 97 participants in total, accounting for 82.45%, which implies that the majority of Vietnamese audiences and fans of Thai television dramas, particularly Thai Boys' Love series are females in their early twenties. Results of the survey are displayed in figure 1 and 2.



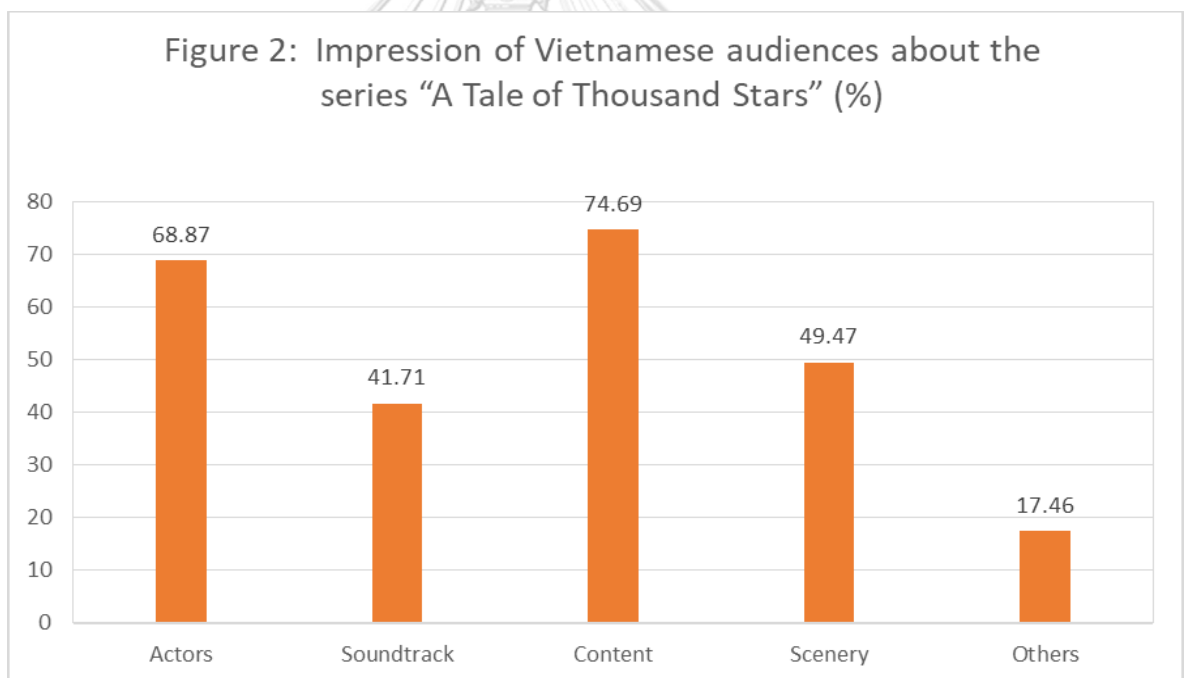
The figure 1 shows impression of Vietnamese audiences about the series "I Told Sunset About You". To assess the impacts of the series, informants were asked to write 3 things in the series that impress them. In general, results of this question are categorized into 6 groups, including impression about 1) actors, 2) soundtrack, 3) content, 4) scenery, 5) ambience, and 6) others. Firstly, 73 out of 97 participants respond that they are impressed by the two main actors of the series, accounting for 70.81%. Actors rank first among other reasons mentioned by the informants. Responses from informants reveal reasons for this selection are because of good appearance of two main characters. Most informants reply that they are attracted by two handsome and lovable main actors in the series, Billkin and PP Krit. Besides, by their excellent acting together with chemistry between the two main actors, they act love scenes in the series so sweetly as if they are real couple, which very well suits the romantic storyline of the series.

Secondly, 59 out of 97 participants say that they are impressed by the ambience of the series, which makes up 57.23% of the total participants. More than half of informants highly appreciate colors and lighting used in the series that make the series appear classical and artistic. For example, an informant replies that ambience of the series is so beautiful that the series reminds her about images of the sunset just like the title of the series (Informant No.15, 20 years old, University of Greenwich, Vietnam). Thirdly, content is also one of strengths of the series "I Told Sunset About You" which attracts a large number of Vietnamese viewers. Particularly, 57 out of 97 informants, making up 55.29% state that they love the content of the series because of several reasons. Most informants agree that content of the series is refreshing and inspiring, mainly because progressive and positive thinking about gender diversity is introduced in the series. Particularly, the series portrays two main characters, Teh and O-aew, who are immature high school students on the journey to explore their gender identity, which sometimes causes immaturity in their actions, as well as uncertainty in their relationship, but in the end they are supported and accepted by their families and friends (Informant No.64, 19 years old, FPT University, Hanoi, Vietnam). Besides, Teh was born in a traditional Sino-Thai family where expectations of the family towards him tend to be high. He is expected to be as good at studying as his older brother, and then get married and have children (Informant No.64, 19 years old, FPT University, Hanoi, Vietnam). These are taken as granted in many Thai families. However, once Teh becomes aware of his sexual orientation, he can be sincere to everyone and gets acceptance. Fourthly, 40 out of 97 participants, accounting for 38.8% are impressed by filming locations of the series, especially geographical and cultural endowments of Phuket and popular

tourist destinations there which are so beautiful that inspire them to get real-life experience of these places. In addition, the series portrays local culture in details and in a vivid manner. This helps informants understand the local culture more, especially the prevalence of Chinese culture in Phuket that makes the city special in comparison with others (Informant No.92, 20 years old, Can Tho University; Informant No. 143, 19 years old, FPT Polytechnic). Moreover, the Vietnamese audiences assert that the series “I Told Sunset About You” promotes Thai tourism industry ingeniously. As proof, an informant reveals that film-making locations of the series are so charming, they also introduce good images of Thai culture, cuisine, and people to audiences, which attracts audiences very much (Informant No.32, 19 years old, Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema). Another informant says that “I am impressed with film-making locations. Phuket is so beautiful that induces me to travel there immediately” (Informant No. 76, 21 years old, Hanoi University). Similarly, another informant also states that “the beauty of Phuket in the series is so charming. I wish to travel there once” (Informant No.135, 25 years old, Open University). Lastly, the minority of informants mention other aspects of the series that attract them, for example meanings of the series, LGBTQ+ issues, Thai cuisine, local culture and Chinese culture presented in the series. In particular, in terms of LGBTQ+ issues, an informant mentions that the series implies a positive message that love is love no matter what gender you are (Informant No. 124, 21 years old, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh city).

In conclusion, in comparison with traditional Thai television dramas, the series “I Told Sunset About You”, one of the most well-known Thai Boys’ Love series, attracts the Vietnamese audiences because of its novelty and freshness, that lie in, according to the Vietnamese audiences’ comments,

actors, content, and film-locations. Love is presented through a homosexual couple instead of a heterosexual couple as normal in combination with progressive thinking about gender equality, which makes the series not only romantic but has a meaningful social implication. Besides, the presentation of local culture and beautiful scenery as the setting of the homosexual love between the two main characters makes the series more attractive to the Vietnamese audiences. In summary, the way in which the series highlights local cultural aspects and beautiful natural resources has strong impacts on the Vietnamese audiences. The series inspire them to get to know more about the country as well as travel to Thailand to have real-life experience.



In terms of the second series, "A Tale of Thousand Stars", when being asked the same question as the former series, impression of Vietnamese audiences about this series is divided into 5 main categories, including 1) actors, 2) soundtrack, 3) content, 4) scenery, and 5) others, which are displayed in the figure 2. First of all, 77 out of 97 participants, accounting for

74.69% are attracted by content of the series which highlights the life of people who live in a remote area of Thailand, images of forest rangers and voluntary teachers are totally new and different from stories of high school students normally shown in Thai Boys' Love series. Almost all participants agree that the series touches audiences' hearts because of humanistic values conveyed through the series. The series does not contain many conflicts in comparison with the series "I Told Sunset About You"; however, it broadens audiences' thinking about love, people-to-people relationships (Information No. 93, 22 years old, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education; Information No. 64, 19 years old, FPT University). Besides, the series reflects a moving story about the life of underprivileged people, students living in a remote area of Thailand in which luxury and material wealth are absent, but people live happily together, which makes viewers feel so peaceful and quiet (Information No. 92, 20 years old, Can Tho University). It totally differs from complicated life in urban areas. Secondly, alike the first series the large number of Vietnamese audiences is impressed with actors of the series "A Tale of Thousand Stars", 71 out 97 participants making up 68.87%. Attractive appearance of the two main characters and a great connection between them, a chief ranger forest Phupha and a voluntary teacher Tian contribute significantly to the success of the series in terms of drawing audiences' attention. Thirdly, filmmaking locations are another outstanding element that makes the series special. Settings in a mountainous area in the Northern Thailand show various aspects of a famous tourist country, which implies that attractive features of Thailand not only concentrate on lively cities like Bangkok or tourist cities like Phuket, but also at peaceful areas in which people live in harmony with nature. As proof, the Vietnamese audiences give positive feedbacks to locations shown

in the series. For example, an informant reveals that the series shows new tourist destinations that are well worth traveling apart from Bangkok which has already been so famous among tourists around the world (Informant No. 32, 19 years old, Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema; Informant No. 126, 25 years old, Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City). Similarly, other informants agree that landscape in the Northern Thailand presented via the series is so beautiful, which is far different from metropolitan areas (Informant No. 34, 20 years old, University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University; Informant 78, 20 years old, Hanoi University). Lastly, soundtrack and other elements for example ambience used, meanings and the ending of the series draw Vietnamese audiences' attention to the series, accounting for 41.71% and 17.46% respectively. In short, the same question asked for the second series in the survey affirms elements of Thai Boys' Love series that have ability to draw Vietnamese audiences' attention to this genre, and impact the audiences' perceptions. Similar to the first question, fresh ideas in the way that Thai Boys' Love series feature a homosexual couple make this genre attractive and special among Vietnamese audiences. Because Thai BL series cater to the taste of Vietnamese young audiences it can influence the audiences' perceptions of Thailand far better than the conventional melodramas that do not interest the audiences.

The attractiveness and popularity of Thai Boys' Love series in the Vietnamese market have strong impacts on the Vietnamese audiences. Not only for entertainment purposes, Thai Boys' Love series propagate good images of Thailand among Vietnamese audiences, particularly alluring representations of Thai landscape, culture, people, and the society, which inspire the Vietnamese audiences to get to know more about Thailand as well

as to visit the country in order to have real-life experience. One of informants reveals that she has known about O-aew dessert thanks to the series “I Told Sunset About You”. The dessert looks delicious in the series and closely resembles a Vietnamese dessert made of Chia seeds, so she really wants to taste it (Interviewee No.6, 20 years old, USSH, VNU - HCMC, interview conducted on 7 November 2022). Besides, Thai Boys’ Love series inspire the Vietnamese audiences to study Thai and use Thai products introduced in the series more. In general, comments from the interviewees about Thai Boys’ Love series and their impacts on them coincide with Lee’s argument (2021) in terms of roles of films and television dramas. In particular, all of interviewees reveal that they desire to visit Thailand after watching Thai Boys’ Love series for different purposes, travelling or working as a voluntary teacher as Tian does in the series “A Tale of Thousand Stars” for instance. One of them has already made a plan to visit Thailand soon at the end of this year. In addition, she tells that GMM Grammy building, which is a house of Thai Boys’ Love series, also the production company of the series “A Tale of Thousand Stars”, is one of destinations where she will visit on her travelling trip to Bangkok this time (Interviewee No.1, 21 years old, Hanoi University, interview conducted on 6 November 2022). Outstandingly, although an interviewee has not had a chance to visit Thailand yet, as an assignment of her course at the university that required students to design a package tour, she designed a tour that takes tourists to filmmaking locations in the series “I Told Sunset About You” in Phuket. She says that she also wants to take the tour designed by herself in the near future (Interviewee No. 3, 21 years old, Hanoi University, interview conducted on 6 November 2022). Furthermore, watching Thai Boys’ Love series motivates Vietnamese audiences to study Thai more. For example, an

interviewee mentions about his decision to study Thai because of the series “A Tale of Thousand Stars”. He first enrolled a Thai language course at the university, and then quickly quitted because of the difficulty of learning Thai alphabets together with lack of motivation. However, after watching the series “A Tale of Thousand Stars” he was motivated to study Thai again. Afterwards, he re-enrolled the Thai language course at his university, and then continues studying this language up until now (Interviewee No. 2, 20 years old, University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, interview conducted on 6 November 2022). Sharing the same point, another interviewee also says that because of her love for Thai Boys’ Love series, she enrolled a private Thai language course to be able to watch Thai dramas and clips on her own. By doing so, she does not need to wait for subtitles and can enjoy Thai dramas and clips as soon as they are broadcasted (Interviewee No. 3, 21 years old, Hanoi University, interview conducted on 6 November 2022). Furthermore, more and more Vietnamese audiences have used Thai products used by characters in the series, which contributes to the increased rate of Thai product consumption. Two of informants reveal that they initially bought a Thai product, Peppermint Field Black Inhaler (ขากดม) used by the main characters in “Bad Buddy Series”, another popular Thai Boys’ Love series. They had never used Inhaler before. However, the characters’ habits of consumption and the objects they use in the series inspire the informants to use the same products. After using the Inhaler, they feel that it is also good in quality (Interviewee No. 3, 21 years old, Hanoi University, interview conducted on 6 November 2022; Interviewee No. 7, 19 years old, Academy of Journalism and Communication, interview conducted on 8 November 2022). Besides, some other products introduced in

the Thai TV series are also sought after and purchased by the Vietnamese audiences such as Thai seaweed snacks and Thai drinks, for example C-vitt, a Thai brand of vitamin C beverage (Interviewee No. 3, 21 years old, Hanoi University, interview conducted on 6 November 2022; Interviewee No.6, 20 years old, USSH, VNU - HCMC, interview conducted on 7 November 2022). Last but not least, several informants tell that because of their love for Thai Boys' Love series, they develop the motivation to work in the fields related to Thailand. In particular, Interviewee No.1 says that apart from her major in English, she is going to find a part-time job as an English – Thai – Vietnamese translator, mainly translating Thai dramas and clips from Thai or English into Vietnamese. To reach the goal, she will practice Thai more to improve her skills, and Thai TV series are good sources for her to practice her Thai skills. Besides, another informant also reveals that although his major is Chinese Language Teacher Education, he plans to apply for the position of reporter in Thai at Voice of Vietnam (VOV) after graduation as he is now more interested in Thai language which he chose as a minor when he first entered the university (Interviewee No. 2, 20 years old, University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, interview conducted on 6 November 2022).

4. Discussion

Through an analysis of images of Thailand presented in the selected Thai BL series and an evaluation of their impacts on Vietnamese audiences, the research reveals the significant role of this genre in promoting good images of Thailand among foreign audiences and having great impacts on them. At the same time, Thai BL series help to generate high income to the country through exporting Thai Boys' Love series products. It is clear that the

important contribution of Thai Boys' Love series to Thai economy and to the reputation of the country is undeniable. And government agencies also recognize great influences and advantages that Thai Boys' Love series are able to bring to the country, which is proved through their activities in making use of the popularity of this genre to promote and gain benefits for the country. As mentioned above, Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has used Thai Boys' Love series to promote Thailand in its promotional event recently. Besides, Department of International Trade Promotion (DITP), Ministry of Commerce has hold a business matching activity, especially for the Boys' Love series. However, despite the notable influence of Thai Boys' Love series, there are no official policies by the government to support this genre in particular. "Thailand's strategies for film and video promotion phase III (2017 – 2021)" by Ministry of Culture, the newest official policy on film promotion emphasizes on promoting Thai film products at international level. Later, the government has launched Thailand's Soft Power "5 Fs", including films for the purpose of connecting Thai culture closer to the international community. On the one hand, what the government has done is a very good start, which asserts that the government cares deeply about the power of films as an effective medium to communicate with the international community. On the other hand, the research argues that the official policies, which have been developed, seem to be pretty general. As proof, "Thailand's strategies for film and video promotion phase III (2017 – 2021)" refers to films in general instead of concentrating on genres which are considered as the strength of Thai film industry in particular, Thai Boys' Love series' popularity and influences, as demonstrated in earlier sections cannot be ignored. Furthermore, previous scholars argue that new and contemporary concept of Thai culture seems to be seldom accepted by

the Thai authorities (Channuntapipat, 2022 as cited in Sawasdipakdi, accessed on 16 December 2022). Because Thai culture according to the Thai authorities tends to refer to traditional culture and values of the country, for instance Thai martial arts, Thai traditional dance, and Thai traditional fabric (Sawasdipakdi, accessed on 16 December 2022). Meanwhile, contemporary Thai culture, Thai drama series for example that address characters of non-binary gender and have the power to draw great attention from a large number of foreign audiences seem not to be qualified to get official support from the authority (Sawasdipakdi, accessed on 16 December 2022). To be more precise, the graphics used by the Government Public Relations when introducing Thailand's Soft Power "5 Fs" under the caption "Make It Better Known Worldwide." on its official Facebook page showcases Love Destiny (2018), a well-known Thai historical drama, a perfect representation of Thai traditional culture as an authorized representative of Thai films (thethaiger.com, accessed on 16 December 2022).

In reality, it can be seen that obstacles that Thai Boys' Love series face are also impediments to LGBTQ+ community in Thailand. It is acknowledged that homosexual relationships in reality are not always as beautiful as what is displayed in the series although there have been positive changes in public attitudes towards LGBTQ+ community to some extent. On the contrary, there are still many setbacks that are difficult for homosexual relationships to overcome. At first, stereotypes, cultural and social norms are seen as invisible barriers. Thailand has been dominated with a patriarchal structure for a long time. Walby (1990) points out 6 factors of patriarchy, including sexuality that heterosexuality is and should be considered as the norm, so other sexual preferences are supposed to challenge patriarchal norms and need to be

punished (as cited in Rawat, 2014: 44). The domination of patriarchy partly shapes cultural and social norms in people's minds, especially among old generations and people living in rural areas. Those have less chances to get progressive ideas. Moreover, in the country where religion, particularly Buddhism, one of the three pillars of Thai nation, is seen as the root of the country, it still exists traditional perspectives against homosexuality. In particular, traditional views of Thai Buddhism emphasize on karma as an explanation of why people are the way they are, and homosexuality is a karmic consequence of violating Buddhist proscriptions against heterosexual misconduct (Jackson, 1993). As proof, the story behind the famous series "A Tale of Thousand Stars", adapted from the novel of the same name, partly indicates conservative ideologies existing in the society. Contrasting with positive images presented in the series, in reality a leading character was changed from a soldier in the novel into a forest ranger, Phupha in the series. The question is whether a soldier can be a homosexual? In Thai society, soldiers are compared with fence of the country (ทหารเป็นรั้วของชาติ). So images of soldiers according to social expectations are strong, masculine, thus shouldn't be presented as a homosexual.

Second, in terms of policy level the Civil Partnership Bill that defines a same-sex union between two people of the same gender was endorsed by the Cabinet in June 2022 (thailandnow.in.th, accessed on 16 December 2022). It is undeniable that the approval of the Civil Partnership Bill opens opportunities for LGBTQ+ community in Thailand to be officially recognized and protected by the law. However, it is argued that the Civil Partnership Bill more or less separates homosexual couples from married heterosexual couples. As soon as the Civil Partnership Bill was approved, a wave on Thai Twitter broke out with

hashtag #WeDoNotWantCivilPartnershipBill #MarriageEquality (bk.asia-city.com, accessed on 16 December 2022). In fact, the Marriage Equality Bill, which proposes changes in using gender-neutral terms, particularly “spouse” instead of “husband” and “wife”, or “person” instead of “man” and “woman” for the purpose of allowing all individuals to legally get married regardless of gender, has not been approved by the Cabinet (thailandnow.in.th, accessed on 16 December 2022).

In conclusion, although there are progressive changes towards homosexuality, if assessing deeply what presented in the series does not exactly 100% mesh with what happens in reality. It must be admitted that there are discrepancies between the representations in the series and the reality. Even so, thanks to the popularity among international audiences, Thai Boys' Love series create Thailand's brand in which audiences see a society possessing the uniqueness of local culture, the beauty of natural sites and people accepting gender diversity. The success of this genre strongly influences on the way Vietnamese audiences view Thailand, and helps to bring benefits to the country. Besides, it should be highlighted that it is not only one or two elements, but all of ingredients combine well, create the attractiveness of Thai Boys' Love series in Vietnamese audiences' eyes. Thence, messages are easily conveyed to audiences, and have powerful impacts on them.

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on investigating two research questions, particularly 1) the representations of Thailand in Thai television dramas, and 2) their impacts on Vietnamese audiences. After the analysis of the two Thai Boys' Love series, “I Told Sunset About You” and “A Tale of Thousand Stars”, the

results of the study reveal that the image of Thailand represented through the two series is the country which values diversity. The diversity of the country is reflected via different aspects. First of all, this is the country that owns a variety of natural resources, the beauty of landscape. Apart from Bangkok, a well-known tourist city on the travel map, which attracts a large number of tourists all over the world every year, Thailand also has many other beautiful places, which are portrayed clearly in the two series. The study shows that while “I Told Sunset About You” highlights the beauty of nature in the Southern Thailand, particularly Phuket, which has white – sand beaches with clear blue water in combination with a romantic scene of sunset on the sea, “A Tale of Thousand Stars” presents beautiful rural landscape in the Northern Thailand. The beauty of nature such as green mountains, a spectacular waterfall, and terraced fields of tea conveys a sense of peacefulness, quietness, and purity of the countryside which differs from crowded life in urban cities. Secondly, Thailand represented in the series is the country that has a cultural diversity. Through the series “I Told Sunset About You”, audiences can see the influence of Chinese culture and Portuguese culture on the local ways of life in Phuket, which is evident on local architectures, for example the appearance of Chinese shrines and Portuguese architecture in Old Phuket Town. Besides, the diversity of culture is also reflected through local cuisine of Phuket which is strongly influenced by Hokkien cuisine, O-aew dessert or Hokkien noodle for example. The mixture of different cultures against the backdrop of a beautiful coastal town makes Phuket unique and different from other cities. Last but not least, the Thai society through Thai Boy’s Love series is an open-minded society in which gender diversity is accepted and respected. In both Thai Boys’ Love series analyzed in the study, although the homosexual relationship

between the two main characters encounters difficulties, it eventually ends with a happy ending because of the understanding and support from the characters' families and friends. The acceptance and respect of gender diversity are also highlighted in "A Tale of Thousand Stars". All supporting characters in the series lend support to the homosexual relationship between the two leading characters. They never impose any value judgment or show any bias against the leading characters. In conclusion, it can be claimed that beautiful natural sites, cultural richness, and respect for gender diversity shown by friendly and sincere people are vital ingredients that constitute a good image of Thailand conveyed via the two series. This representation has strong impacts on Vietnamese audiences.

In terms of the impacts of Thai television dramas on Vietnamese audiences, the study reveals that Thai TV series enhance Vietnamese audiences' perceptions of Thailand and promote positive understanding about Thai tourist attractions and Thai society. Informants reveal that after watching the two series they realize that Thailand does not have Bangkok only, but many other regions are also very attractive and worth traveling. Besides, Thai Boys' Love series widen their perspectives and increase their open-mindedness towards LGBTQ+ people and their relationship. The attractiveness and beauty of regions in Thailand represented through Thai TV series in a combination with the open-mindedness of Thai society inspire all informants to get to know more about the country and to travel there in order to get real experience of Thai society. In summary, an analysis of the two Thai Boys' Love series and the field research prove the validity of the two hypotheses proposed in the study.

Apart from aspects mentioned in the hypotheses, after conducting the field research the study additionally discovers that Thai TV series also have a strong influence on Vietnamese audiences in the sense that they desire to increase their contact with and experience of Thai society and culture. Some Vietnamese audiences reveal that Thai Boys' Love series motivate them to study Thai and pursue their higher education in Thailand because of their interest in this genre. The openness of Thai culture and society portrayed in the series makes audiences feel welcomed and comfortable. Even some of informants plan to work in the fields related to Thailand afterwards. In addition, many Vietnamese audiences have bought Thai products used by characters in the series, which increases the rate of Thai product consumption in general. In short, an analysis of the impacts of Thai television dramas on Vietnamese audiences indicates its role as cultural asset that contributes greatly to the good image of the country, hence generates economic benefits for the country.

In conclusion, audiences tend to search for novelty, escapism in entertaining products. The attractiveness and popularity of Thai Boys' Love series are also due to their novelty, creativity, social awareness about gender equality that they communicate with audiences. Through the representation of a romantic love between homosexual couples against the backdrop of beautiful natural sites in Thailand, the series are refreshing and impressive to Vietnamese audiences because they are very much different from typical heterosexual melodramas. Aside from non-judgmental representation of homosexual relationship, Thai Boys' Love series also showcase the honest and friendly Thai local people which make Thailand even more attractive to Vietnamese audiences as a destination of touristic, occupational, and

educational activities. Broadly speaking, Thai Boys' Love series promote a good image of Thailand among international audiences and prompt them to do activities that benefit Thailand economically and socio-culturally, especially in the domain of tourism.



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Appendix 1



Picture 1: I Told Sunset About You,
Part 1, Episode 3



Picture 2: I Told Sunset About You,
Part 1, Episode 3



Picture 3: I Told Sunset About You,
Part 1, Episode 3



Picture 4: I Told Sunset About You,
Part 1, Episode 3



Picture 5, I Told Sunset About You,
Part 1, Episode 3



Picture 6, I Told Sunset About You,
Part 1, Episode 5



Picture 7: I Told Sunset About You,
Part 1, Episode 4



Picture 8: I Told Sunset About You,
Part 1, Episode 5



Appendix 2



Picture 1: A Tale of Thousand Stars,
Episode 4



Picture 2: A Tale of Thousand Stars,
Episode 5



Picture 3: A Tale of Thousand Stars,
Episode 2



Picture 4: A Tale of Thousand Stars,
Episode 2

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