Rethinking the Crisis of Reading: Literary Ecosystems and Reading Culture in Contemporary Thailand

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This article challenges the widely circulated claim that Thailand is a non-reading society. Public discourse frequently reduces reading culture to quantitative indicators such as the number of books read per year, obscuring the complex institutional environments that shape reading practices. Drawing on the concept of the literary ecosystem, this study examines how reading culture in Thailand is structured through the interaction of three key institutions: schools, literary markets, and digital platforms. While schools are formally tasked with cultivating reading habits among children and youth, their emphasis on standardized assessments and instrumental approaches to reading often limits the development of sustained reading engagement. At the same time, popular genres such as manga and Boys' Love fiction, together with emerging digital reading platforms, have created alternative pathways through which readers develop long-term relationships with books and storytelling. The article argues that the perceived crisis of reading in Thailand reflects not simply a decline in reader interest but the structural imbalance of a literary ecosystem in which institutional support for reading culture remains uneven. By reframing reading as a socially embedded cultural practice, this study contributes to broader debates in cultural sociology and book studies about the institutional conditions necessary for sustaining reading cultures in the digital age.

Keywords: Book Studies; Digital Reading Platforms; Literary Ecosystem; Reading Culture; Thailand

INTRODUCTION

In many societies, concerns about declining reading habits have become a recurring theme in public discourse. Governments, educators, and cultural institutions frequently express anxiety about the supposed erosion of reading culture, particularly among younger generations. These concerns are often supported by quantitative indicators – such as the number of books read per year, the amount of time spent reading, or standardized literacy scores – which are used as proxies for evaluating the health of a nation's reading culture. However, scholars of reading and literacy have long argued that such metrics provide only a partial understanding of how reading operates within society (Chartier, 1994; Darnton, 1982; Darnton, 2009; Street, 1984). Reading

is not merely an individual cognitive activity, but a socially embedded cultural practice shaped by institutions, infrastructures, and forms of cultural value.

The idea that societies may experience a 'crisis of reading' has therefore been widely debated in the fields of book history, literacy studies, and cultural sociology. Rather than interpreting declining reading rates simply as evidence of cultural decline, many researchers emphasize the need to examine the broader institutional environments in which reading practices are produced and sustained (Bourdieu, 1993; Long, 2003; Thompson, 2010). From this perspective, reading cultures are formed through complex interactions between educational institutions, cultural industries, and systems of cultural mediation that influence how texts circulate and how readers develop attachments to particular forms of literature.

This article draws broadly on cultural sociology, which examines how meanings, values, and cultural practices are produced and sustained through social institutions rather than emerging solely from individual preferences. From this perspective, reading is understood not simply as a personal activity but as a socially organized practice shaped by educational systems, literary markets, cultural intermediaries, and media infrastructures. The concept of the literary ecosystem developed in this article builds on this insight by focusing on the institutional conditions that enable particular forms of reading to flourish while limiting others.

In Thailand, public discussions about reading culture are similarly dominated by statistical narratives. Statements about how little Thai people read – sometimes expressed through simplified indicators such as the number of lines read per year – have become widely circulated in media and policy discourse[1]. These claims often reinforce the perception that Thailand is a "non-reading society" (Sangkapinyo, 2020, p. 8), framing reading primarily as a national deficiency that must be corrected through educational campaigns and policy interventions. However, such narratives obscure the complex institutional and cultural conditions that shape how people encounter, interpret, and engage with texts in their everyday lives.

This article argues that understanding reading culture in Thailand requires a shift from behavioral indicators toward an institutional perspective. Drawing on the concept of the literary ecosystem, the study examines how reading practices emerge through the interaction of multiple actors and institutions that collectively shape the circulation of texts and the formation of readers. It focuses in particular on three domains that play crucial roles in the development of reading cultures: educational institutions, literary markets, and digital reading environments. While schools are often expected to cultivate reading habits among young people, the broader literary ecosystem – including publishers, cultural intermediaries, and digital platforms – also plays an essential role in sustaining engagement with books and storytelling.

By situating the Thai case within broader debates on reading culture and literary sociology, this article contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to move beyond deficit narratives about declining readership. Instead of asking whether people read enough, the analysis explores how institutional arrangements shape the conditions under which reading becomes meaningful, desirable, or sustainable within contemporary cultural life.

[1] The dominant discourse holds that Thai people read only eight lines per year (The Standard Wealth, 2023). While some organizations, such as the Publishers and Booksellers Association of Thailand (PUBAT), have challenged this long-circulated claim by presenting survey findings that Thai people now read an average of two hours per year (The Standard Wealth, 2023), this counternarrative remains within the same framework of statistical measurement as a proxy for reading culture.

The analysis draws on qualitative interviews with readers, writers, and publishing professionals, observations conducted at major book fairs in several Thai cities, and survey data collected from more than one thousand book fair participants. Through these multiple sources of evidence, the study explores how readers navigate different reading environments and how their reading trajectories are shaped by institutional contexts. Particular attention is given to the ways in which readers describe their encounters with books across different stages of life – from school-based reading experiences to voluntary engagement with popular genres and digital platforms.

The empirical research for this article was conducted in 2025 and draws on respondents from different age groups within Thailand's contemporary literary field. While younger readers – particularly members of Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) – feature prominently in the analysis because they constituted the largest group of survey respondents, the article does not seek to develop a generational analysis of reading practices. Rather, generational references are used to illuminate broader transformations within Thailand's literary ecosystem. Comparisons between earlier and younger readers refer broadly to the contrast between cohorts whose reading habits were formed within the print-oriented literary culture of the 1970s-1990s and those whose reading practices have developed within the digital media environment of the 2010s-2020s.

By situating reading within a broader literary ecosystem, this article challenges the dominant narrative that Thailand faces a simple decline in reading. Instead, it argues that the perceived crisis of reading reflects a structural imbalance among the institutions that sustain literary culture. While schools emphasize standardized and instrumental forms of reading, other sectors of the literary ecosystem – especially popular publishing and digital platforms – have emerged as important spaces where reading practices are reimagined and revitalized. Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond the measurement of reading habits toward a deeper examination of the cultural infrastructures that make reading possible.

Although this article focuses on Thailand, the issues it examines – changing reading practices, the expansion of digital reading platforms, and the evolving relationship between educational institutions and literary markets – resonate with broader discussions concerning reading culture in contemporary Southeast Asia. The Thai case contributes to these regional conversations by highlighting the importance of institutional and infrastructural conditions in shaping reading cultures under conditions of rapid media change.

READING AS SOCIAL PRACTICE AND CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Traditional discussions of reading often treat literacy as a technical skill that can be measured through educational performance or cognitive ability. However, research in the New Literacy Studies has challenged this view by conceptualizing reading as a socially situated practice embedded within cultural and institutional contexts (Street, 1984; 2003). From this perspective, reading practices vary across communities and social environments, reflecting different values, purposes, and forms of cultural participation.

This approach emphasizes that literacy cannot be separated from the social conditions that shape access to texts, opportunities for reading, and the meanings attached to particular forms of literature. Scholars have shown that reading habits develop not only through formal education but also through everyday cultural experiences, including family practices, peer communities, and media environments (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Howard, 2011). As a result, reading cultures are better understood as dynamic systems of practice rather than as static indicators of individual ability.

The sociological dimensions of reading can also be approached through Pierre Bourdieu's work on culture and the literary field. Rather than treating literary value as an inherent property of texts, Bourdieu argues that cultural production takes place within structured fields composed of authors, publishers, critics, educators, and readers, all of whom participate in defining what counts as legitimate culture (Bourdieu, 1993; 1996). Reading practices are therefore shaped not only by individual preferences but also by institutional processes that influence which texts become visible, valued, and widely circulated. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding reading culture as a socially organized domain sustained through networks of schools, publishers, bookstores, literary awards, and other cultural intermediaries that mediate relationships between texts and readers.

Subsequent studies in the sociology of reading have expanded this perspective by investigating how readers interact with texts in everyday life. Research on book clubs, for example, demonstrates that reading is often a collective activity embedded in social relationships and communities of interpretation (Long, 2003). Similarly, studies of popular literature show that readers actively negotiate meanings and cultural identities through their engagement with texts (Felski, 2008; Radway, 1984).

Within this body of scholarship, reading is understood not only as an individual skill but also as a social practice embedded within networks of institutions and cultural infrastructures. These insights provide an important foundation for examining contemporary debates about reading culture, particularly in contexts where public discourse tends to frame reading primarily through quantitative measures of literacy or consumption.

THE LITERARY ECOSYSTEM

Recent scholarship in book studies has increasingly adopted the concept of the literary ecosystem to describe the complex networks through which books and reading practices are produced and sustained. Rather than focusing solely on authors or readers, this perspective emphasizes the interdependence of multiple actors within the cultural system of literature, including publishers, booksellers, libraries, educational institutions, and digital platforms (Murray, 2018; Thompson, 2010).

Within this ecosystem, the circulation of texts is shaped not only by market dynamics but also by cultural intermediaries who influence how literature is valued and consumed. These intermediaries include critics, educators, translators, and cultural institutions that mediate between producers and audiences (English, 2005; Squires, 2007). Their activities contribute to the formation of reading publics and to the construction of literary legitimacy.

The rise of digital media has further transformed this ecosystem by introducing new modes of textual production, distribution, and engagement. Online platforms, social media communities, and digital publishing infrastructures have created alternative pathways through which readers encounter literature and develop reading practices (Baron, 2015; Jenkins, 2006; Murray, 2018). These developments complicate traditional assumptions about the decline of reading by demonstrating that literary engagement may be shifting across different media environments rather than disappearing altogether.

By adopting the framework of the literary ecosystem, this study examines how reading culture in Thailand emerges from the interaction of institutional forces operating across educational systems, literary markets, and digital platforms. This perspective allows the analysis to move beyond simplistic narratives of reading decline and instead explore how structural conditions shape the possibilities for sustaining reading cultures in contemporary society.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study examines reading culture in Thailand through the concept of the literary ecosystem, focusing on the institutional environments through which reading practices are cultivated and sustained. To capture these dynamics, the research combines three sources of evidence: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and a survey of book fair attendees.

Fieldwork was conducted in 2025. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 respondents, including 20 readers, five writers, and five publishing professionals (publishers and editors), selected through purposive sampling. These groups were chosen because they occupy different positions within the literary ecosystem and offer perspectives on the production, circulation, and consumption of books. Interviews explored reading trajectories, experiences with schools and libraries, perceptions of contemporary reading culture, and the impact of digital media on reading practices.

Participant observation and survey research were conducted at major book fairs in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, and Phitsanulok. These sites were selected because they represent important regional centers within Thailand's contemporary book market and provide opportunities to observe interactions among readers, publishers, authors, and booksellers across different parts of the country. The survey collected responses from 1,065 participants and was used primarily to provide contextual information regarding reading preferences and purchasing patterns among active readers. The survey population was not intended to be statistically representative of Thailand’s population as a whole. Book fair attendees constitute a self-selected group already engaged in reading and book consumption. Consequently, the survey findings are interpreted as evidence of the practices and preferences of active reading publics rather than as measures of national reading behavior. The article's central concern is therefore not whether Thai people read enough, but how institutional arrangements shape the conditions under which reading cultures are sustained.

In addition to demographic characteristics and genre preferences, the survey collected information on book purchasing behavior, participation in book fairs, perceptions of reading environments, and obstacles to reading. These data are used throughout the article as contextual evidence for understanding the broader institutional conditions that shape reading culture in contemporary Thailand.

Interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and survey findings were analyzed through thematic analysis. Coding focused on recurring themes related to schooling, literary tastes, publishing infrastructures, and digital reading environments. While many respondents emphasized the vitality of contemporary reading cultures, others expressed concern about the declining visibility of literary fiction and the growing influence of market logics. These divergent perspectives are treated not as inconsistencies but as competing interpretations of ongoing transformations within Thailand's literary ecosystem.

WHEN READING BECOMES DISCIPLINE: SCHOOLING AND THE INSTITUTIONAL LIMITS OF READING CULTURE

Educational institutions are often regarded as the primary sites where reading habits are cultivated. Schools do not simply teach literacy as a technical skill; they also play a central role in shaping students’ relationships with texts and in defining what kinds of reading are culturally valued. Research in literacy education has shown that classroom practices, curriculum design, and assessment systems strongly influence how students experience reading, often

determining whether it becomes a meaningful cultural activity or merely an academic obligation (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Schwartz & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2013).

From a sociological perspective, schooling functions as a key mechanism for the transmission of cultural capital. Through the selection of canonical texts, pedagogical methods, and evaluation criteria, educational institutions contribute to the formation of literary taste and reading dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984; 1993). However, scholars have also noted that school-based literacy practices can sometimes narrow students' engagement with reading by emphasizing comprehension tests and standardized performance rather than fostering sustained reading experiences (Howard, 2011).

Understanding the role of schools within the broader literary ecosystem therefore requires examining how educational structures shape the motivations, expectations, and cultural meanings associated with reading among young people. In the context of Thailand, several scholars have noted that the modern school system, despite being modeled after Western educational institutions, has historically retained important elements of older pedagogical traditions (Anawatchiriwong & Anawatchiriwong, 2011; Boonaree, 2020; Sangkapinyo, 2020). The historian and leading public intellectual Nidhi Eoseewong has argued that although the expansion of printing and modern education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries introduced new textual environments, the structure of learning in Thai schools remained heavily oriented toward the memorization of established knowledge. In a lecture on Thai reading habits, he observed that when education is organized around the retention of fixed truths, reading becomes an activity aimed at memorization rather than reflection, and at the reproduction of knowledge rather than its exploration (Eoseewong, 2011).

From this perspective, the problem is not simply that students read too little but that reading within the institutional environment of schools is structured in ways that limit its cultural possibilities. When reading is primarily associated with academic performance, it is framed as an obligation rather than a form of intellectual engagement. The transformation of reading into a disciplinary practice resonates with broader sociological analyses of education, particularly the work of Bourdieu. Bourdieu's concept of habitus emphasizes that educational institutions shape not only knowledge but also dispositions toward cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1984). When schools organize reading through mechanisms of evaluation and authority, they may fail to cultivate what might be described as a reading habitus – a durable disposition toward voluntary and sustained engagement with texts.

Empirical studies of reading environments in Thai schools suggest that institutional priorities often reinforce this instrumental orientation toward reading. Educational policies and library practices frequently emphasize textbooks and curricular materials rather than recreational reading. Research on school libraries has found that textbooks significantly outnumber leisure reading materials, limiting students' opportunities to encounter literature outside the framework of formal instruction (Wimolsittichai, 2017). As a result, reading in school environments is commonly associated with examinations, summaries, and comprehension exercises rather than with exploration, discussion, or imaginative engagement.

Such formulations reveal how reading is frequently embedded within broader state narratives of economic development and human capital formation. Within this framework, reading acquires value primarily as an instrument for improving productivity, innovation, and competitiveness. Activities such as recreational reading, literary exploration, or imaginative engagement with texts are therefore more difficult to justify within policy discourse because their benefits cannot easily be measured through indicators of economic performance.

Contemporary educational policies continue to reflect this instrumental orientation. Reading promotion initiatives implemented by the Office of the Basic Education Commission increasingly align with international assessment frameworks such as the Programme for International Student Assessment, which evaluates students' reading abilities through standardized measures of comprehension and analytical reasoning (Office of the Education Council, 2025). While such frameworks may contribute to strengthening functional literacy, their adoption as a central reference point for educational policy risks narrowing the meaning of reading to a technical competency oriented toward testing.

When reading is framed primarily as a measurable skill, the broader cultural dimensions of reading – imagination, reflection, and the formation of personal identity – tend to recede from institutional attention. Reading becomes something students perform for evaluation rather than an activity embedded in everyday life. Within the routines of schooling, practices such as reading logs or mandatory book reports often function less as invitations to explore literature than as mechanisms for monitoring compliance. Without meaningful discussion, interpretation, or connection to students' interests, such practices transform reading into a bureaucratic requirement rather than a cultural experience.

Interviews with readers from different generations suggest that many individuals experienced reading in school precisely in this instrumental form. Several respondents described school reading programs as activities focused primarily on completing assignments rather than cultivating genuine interest in books. One middle-aged reader who actively encouraged reading among his own children described his child's school reading assignments as largely procedural:

> It's all fake. My kid's school promotes reading by requiring students to complete five reading logs. They even specify that the books should preferably not be novels but knowledge-based pocketbooks. And that's it – there's no real process involved. Just write a summary and say what you learned. (Interview with an anonymous dentist and avid reader, 25 November 2025)

For this reader, the institutionalization of reading through administrative procedures undermined the possibility of genuine engagement. The exercise became a technical task rather than an intellectual experience.

Younger readers expressed similar sentiments. A university student who had become actively involved in literary production described the role of schooling in cultivating his reading habits as minimal. In his recollection, school curricula focused primarily on basic literacy skills rather than encouraging sustained engagement with literature. Textbooks themselves were often perceived as unengaging, both in their content and design, limiting their ability to stimulate curiosity about reading.

Another respondent, a recent university graduate who described reading as central to his intellectual life, similarly reflected that his reading habits developed largely outside the formal school environment. As he explained, the common message conveyed by teachers was simply that reading would make students more knowledgeable, yet little guidance was offered about how to approach texts critically or interpretively. In his words, "no one ever really taught us how to read" (Interview with a young scholar-fan reader, 22 November 2025).

These accounts suggest that the institutional organization of reading within schools may inadvertently discourage the development of sustained reading habits. When reading is framed primarily as a compulsory task linked to evaluation, students may come to associate books with academic pressure rather than intellectual curiosity. The problem, therefore, cannot be reduced to individual motivation; it reflects the ways in which institutions structure relationships between knowledge, authority, and cultural practice.

This does not mean that schools are incapable of fostering meaningful encounters with literature. Some interviewees recalled particular teachers or classes that introduced them to literary works in ways that sparked curiosity and deeper exploration. Yet such experiences often appeared as exceptions rather than the norm, depending largely on the initiative of individual teachers rather than on the institutional structure of the educational system itself.

Within the broader literary ecosystem, these dynamics reveal an important paradox. Schools are widely assumed to be the primary institutions responsible for cultivating reading cultures, yet their pedagogical structures may limit the forms of reading they are able to sustain. When reading is primarily organized through discipline and evaluation, the cultural dispositions necessary for long-term engagement with literature may instead emerge in other parts of the literary ecosystem – beyond the institutional boundaries of formal education.

READING BEYOND THE SPACE OF DISCIPLINE: MARKET FORCES, POPULAR GENRES, AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF READING TASTE

If formal schooling tends to transform reading into a disciplinary activity oriented toward evaluation and memorization, the cultivation of reading culture among Thai youth has often taken place outside the institutional space of schools. In practice, the formation of reading habits frequently occurs within alternative environments – bookstores, online communities, fan cultures, and informal peer networks – where reading is not governed by curricular authority or institutional assessment. Furthermore, reading cultures are also shaped by the structures of literary production and distribution. The publishing industry, bookstores, literary prizes, and media coverage collectively influence which texts become visible and accessible to readers. Scholars of book history have emphasized that literature circulates within systems of cultural mediation in which publishers, critics, translators, and other intermediaries play crucial roles in shaping literary value (Darnton, 1982; Squires, 2007; Thompson, 2010).

Bourdieu's concept of the literary field provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. Within this field, different actors compete to define the legitimacy and prestige of literary works, while market forces influence the economic viability of publishing activities (Bourdieu, 1996). As a result, the availability of books and the diversity of literary genres within a given society depend not only on readers' preferences but also on the institutional conditions that govern cultural production.

Examining the literary market as part of the reading ecosystem allows us to explore how publishing infrastructures, commercial pressures, and cultural mediation shape the range of texts that readers encounter and the possibilities for sustaining a vibrant reading culture. In the Thai context, the disciplinary organization of reading within schools has coincided with a growing tendency for reading cultures to develop beyond institutional control. School libraries frequently restrict certain genres considered morally or culturally inappropriate, including manga and Boys' Love (BL) fiction[2], particularly because of their representations of sexuality and

[2] Over the past decade, Boys' Love (BL) fiction – known in Thai as *niyai wai* or *niyai Y*– has emerged as one of the dominant forces in the contemporary Thai publishing industry. What was once a niche genre has undergone a marked shift in status, establishing itself as a mainstream market segment characterized by strong sales figures, sustained production output, and a capacity to generate broader economic ecosystems around its texts. Unlike other genres within contemporary Thai literature, which tend to suffer from unpredictable sales, BL fiction demonstrates a distinctive market resilience in the absence of state subsidization. This resilience is underpinned by several structural features: a clearly defined and loyal readership, sustained relational bonds between authors and their audiences, and a proven ability to cross over into adjacent media industries, including television series, online platforms, and fandom merchandise. Historically, BL fiction occupied a marginal position within Thai literary culture. It was not only banned from library collections but was

gender diversity. These exclusions reflect broader normative frameworks governing educational institutions, in which reading is expected to reinforce socially sanctioned values. As a result, many genres that resonate strongly with young readers circulate primarily outside school spaces. Bookstores, online platforms, and digital reading communities have therefore become crucial arenas in which reading practices are cultivated beyond the boundaries of educational discipline. In these environments, reading is organized less by curricular authority than by the dynamics of cultural markets and participatory media. Rather than being assigned by teachers, books are discovered through peer recommendation, social media discussion, or algorithmic visibility. These processes have reshaped not only where young people read but also what they read.

Since the 2010s, the reading preferences of younger generations in Thailand have undergone significant transformation. Earlier generations of readers – particularly those emerging from the middle-class reading culture of the 1970s through the 1990s – were strongly associated with socially engaged literature and the tradition often described as *literature for life* (*wannakam phuea chiwit*). Such works frequently addressed questions of social justice, political struggle, and the lives of marginalized communities. Reading, in this context, functioned as a form of civic engagement and intellectual debate.

The prominence of *wannakam phuea chiwit* among earlier generations cannot be separated from the broader political environment in which these readers came of age. From the democratic opening of the 1970s through subsequent decades of student activism, rural development movements, and debates over social justice, literature often served as a medium through which middle-class readers engaged with questions of inequality, state power, and national development. Reading was therefore embedded within wider political and intellectual currents that shaped the concerns of an earlier generation of readers.

The declining visibility of *wannakam phuea chiwit* in contemporary reading culture must also be understood in relation to broader political transformations in Thailand. The political polarization that intensified following the 2006 military coup, together with the conflicts that culminated in the 2014 coup, reshaped not only public debate but also the media environments through which political ideas circulated. While earlier generations often encountered political questions through literary works, student publications, progressive intellectual networks, and alternative print cultures, younger generations increasingly engage with politics through social media, online commentary, digital activism, and popular culture. This shift does not necessarily indicate a decline in political interest. Rather, it reflects a reconfiguration of the communicative spaces through which political concerns are articulated and debated. As one publishing executive observed, much contemporary literary fiction continues to reproduce familiar narratives associated with "October 14, struggles of marginalized people, and politically charged narratives." While acknowledging the continuing importance of these themes, he suggested that they are often repeated in ways that no longer resonate with younger readers, who "no longer have a direct connection to the historical experiences from which these stories emerged" (Interview with Monthon Praphakornkiat, Director, Matichon Publishing House, 30 May 2025). The changing position of socially engaged literature within Thailand's literary ecosystem should therefore

also absent from mainstream bookstore shelves. Acquiring such novels required visiting specialist retailers discreetly, as though purchasing contraband. With the expansion of digital platforms, BL fiction has developed widely in online spaces such as fan fiction communities and niche reader forums. From these informal origins, the genre has since developed into a commercially formalized industry encompassing print books, e-books, pre-order systems, and reader-facing events such as fan meets. In doing so, it has given rise to a publishing model that is sustained primarily through direct reader engagement, rather than reliance on state cultural policy or large-scale retail infrastructure (Narin & Phimmasri, 2020).

be understood in relation not only to market transformations but also to broader changes in the country's political and media landscape.

The contemporary book market is now dominated by a very different range of genres, including self-help literature, translated fiction, manga, and Boys' Love (BL) novels. Many of these works emphasize personal development, emotional relationships, lifestyle aspirations, or narrative entertainment rather than the overt political themes that characterized much of the literature-for-life tradition. This transformation in reading taste has often been interpreted by cultural commentators, writers, and publishing professionals as evidence of cultural decline or depoliticization. Concerns about the declining visibility of literary fiction and socially engaged literature frequently appear in public discussions of reading culture and in debates within Thailand's publishing industry. For example, the SEA Write Award–winning novelist Veeraporn Nitiprapha expressed concern that younger readers are increasingly unfamiliar with literary fiction and with the intermediate genres that once connected popular reading to more demanding literary works. In her view, contemporary genres such as BL fiction often rely heavily on plot, information, and excitement, while offering less of the reflective value she associates with literature. For Veeraporn, a work that is "good enough to be read to the end" should leave readers with something to think about – whether questions of class, inequality, disappointment, or social injustice (Nitiprapha, interview, 28 October 2025). Her concern, therefore, is not simply that popular genres sell well, but that the literary field may be losing works that cultivate deeper forms of reflection.

However, such interpretations may overlook the changing nature of political and social concerns within contemporary reading culture. While earlier generations were often drawn to literature addressing class inequality, rural marginalization, democracy, and social justice, younger readers increasingly engage with questions of identity, sexuality, gender relations, emotional life, and personal autonomy. Genres such as BL fiction, graphic narratives, and other forms of popular literature have become important sites through which these issues are explored and debated. Public discussions surrounding BL literature, for example, have generated debates concerning gender norms, LGBTQ+ representation, and the relationship between popular culture and social change (Chanthraphichit & Phiu-ondee, 2021). Rather than signaling the disappearance of political engagement, these developments suggest a transformation in the issues, publics, and cultural forms through which social concerns are articulated in contemporary Thailand. One interviewee, for example, described BL fiction as contributing to her understanding of gender equality and sexual diversity. Reading BL novels, together with participation in online discussion communities, had made her "more open-minded about issues of gender and sexuality" and encouraged reflection on questions of equality, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights (a recent university graduate, interview, 8 December 2025). For her, these discussions extended beyond fictional narratives and became connected to broader conversations about the lived experiences and social recognition of sexual minorities.

Survey data collected by the author from 1,065 participants attending book fairs in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, and Phitsanulok in 2025 provides insight into these shifts. The largest group of book buyers consisted of readers aged 21–30, who accounted for nearly 40% of respondents and predominantly belonged to Generation Z. Across all four locations, the most popular categories included translated literature – particularly Japanese and Korean works – alongside manga, detective fiction, and Boys' Love novels. By contrast, interest in Thai literary fiction, especially creative literary works associated with the *literature for life* tradition, has declined significantly.

The survey findings also suggest that the challenges facing reading culture in Thailand extend beyond individual reading preferences. While the respondents represented an active reading public, nearly half (49%) viewed the social environment for reading in Thailand as only moderately supportive, and fewer than one-third considered it highly supportive. Respondents identified a range of obstacles to reading, including competition from other forms of entertainment, limited leisure time due to work and everyday obligations, the high cost of books, and inadequate cultivation of reading habits during childhood. At the same time, many respondents expressed a desire for more accessible reading spaces, community-based reading activities, and stronger public support for libraries and reading promotion. These findings suggest that the issue is not simply whether people read, but whether the institutional and cultural conditions necessary for sustaining reading practices are adequately developed.

Such concerns reinforce the article's argument that reading culture should be understood as an ecosystem shaped by infrastructures, social environments, and systems of cultural support rather than by individual preferences alone. They also suggest that shifts in reading taste cannot be explained solely through changing reader preferences but must be situated within broader transformations in the institutions and markets through which literature circulates.

From the perspective of cultural sociology, shifts in reading taste can be understood as part of a broader transformation in the structure of cultural production. As Bourdieu famously argued, cultural fields are shaped by tensions between symbolic value and market value (Bourdieu, 1993). Works oriented toward symbolic prestige – such as prize-winning literary fiction – often occupy positions distinct from those driven primarily by commercial success. In Thailand's contemporary literary field, this tension has become increasingly visible as market-driven genres expand while traditional literary institutions struggle to maintain cultural influence.

Writers themselves express differing interpretations of these developments. Some view the transformation of reading taste as evidence that Thai literature has failed to evolve alongside its readership. Novelist Kittisak Khongkha, whose works span multiple genres including detective fiction and Boys' Love novels, argues that many writers remain attached to familiar narrative structures and historical themes that no longer resonate with younger readers. In his view, a significant gap has emerged between literary production and the interests of contemporary audiences (Khongkha, interview, 15 July 2025).

According to this perspective, the decline of certain forms of literary fiction cannot be explained solely by market pressures; it also reflects the inability of some writers to adapt to changing cultural contexts.

Editors within the publishing industry express similar concerns. Representatives from established publishing houses note that the publication of Thai literary fiction has declined sharply in recent years, with many titles now produced only through small-scale or on-demand printing. From the perspective of publishers, this contraction reflects both declining demand and structural shifts in the literary market, where translated literature and genre fiction increasingly dominate sales (Praphakornkiat, Director of Matichon Publishing House, interview, 30 May 2025). These developments highlight the changing role of the writer within the contemporary literary ecosystem. In earlier decades, authors often occupied positions defined primarily by symbolic prestige, literary awards, and cultural recognition. Today, however, many writers operate within hybrid roles that combine creative production with marketing, audience engagement, and cross-media collaboration.

For writers such as Kittisak Khongkha, literary production must therefore be accompanied by proactive marketing strategies. Rather than waiting for readers to discover their work

through traditional literary institutions, authors increasingly interact directly with readers through social media, fan communities, and collaborative promotional events. In this environment, understanding reader preferences and communication channels becomes an essential part of literary production (Khongkha, interview, 15 July 2025). Kittisak's approach to reader engagement has been facilitated by the rise of digital media and new forms of cultural mediation. Social media platforms, online reviewers, and reading communities have become increasingly important in shaping reading trends and connecting authors directly with readers. Influencers, online reviewers, and social media communities now play an increasingly important role in shaping reading trends. Figures such as BookTok creators and YouTubers function as intermediaries linking readers, publishers, and authors.

The growing influence of digital intermediaries has altered the mechanisms through which literary value is produced and circulated. Traditionally, publishers, literary critics, newspapers, and literary awards played central roles in determining which books gained visibility and cultural legitimacy. Today, however, social media influencers increasingly participate in these processes. Through book reviews, recommendation videos, reading challenges, and online discussion communities, influencers can introduce books to large audiences who may have little connection to conventional literary institutions. In many cases, publishers actively collaborate with influencers by providing advance review copies, sponsoring promotional content, or inviting prominent creators to participate in book launches and literary events. These developments have not eliminated traditional forms of literary authority, but they have diversified the channels through which books acquire visibility. As a result, genres that have historically occupied marginal positions within literary hierarchies – including manga, fantasy fiction, and Boys' Love literature – can achieve substantial readership through online recommendation networks even when they receive limited recognition from established literary institutions.

From the perspective of cultural production, this phenomenon reflects the growing importance of attention economies in shaping literary consumption. Books compete not only with other books but with a vast range of digital content for readers' limited attention. The creation of 'buzz' or online visibility thus becomes a crucial factor determining commercial success.

The rise of genres such as manga and Boys' Love fiction has generated considerable debate within Thai literary circles. Some critics argue that the growing dominance of commercially successful genres has marginalized more serious forms of literary expression (Nitiprapha, interview, 28 October 2025).

Yet other writers adopt a more pluralistic perspective. Another SEA Write Award–winning author Jidanun Lueangpiansamut argues that literary fiction and popular fiction should not be viewed as mutually exclusive domains. Instead, they perform different functions within the literary ecosystem, addressing different audiences and forms of cultural engagement (Wanlayangkun, 2022). From this perspective, popular genres may play an important role in sustaining reading cultures even when they do not conform to traditional literary hierarchies.

Manga, for example, has been recognized by scholars as a sophisticated narrative form requiring specialized reading competencies. Scholars working in the field of manga literacy have emphasized that manga should not be dismissed as a simplistic or inferior form of reading. Research by Adam Schwartz and Elisabeth Rubinstein-Ávila demonstrates that reading manga involves complex interpretive skills, including the ability to navigate visual grammar, panel sequencing, narrative pacing, and multimodal storytelling (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2013). From this perspective, manga reading constitutes a sophisticated literacy practice that combines textual and visual interpretation rather than a reduction of reading to entertainment.

Judging manga as culturally inferior therefore reflects a hierarchical distinction between 'high' and 'popular' culture rather than an objective assessment of reading practices.

Interviews with readers indicate that engagement with manga often precedes exploration of other literary traditions, including Japanese classical literature by writers such as Osamu Dazai and Natsume Sōseki[3]. In this sense, popular genres may serve as gateways rather than obstacles to deeper literary engagement.

Boys' Love fiction represents another important dimension of this evolving literary ecosystem. Unlike many traditional publishing genres, BL fiction has developed closely alongside online fan communities. Readers often participate actively in discussions, reviews, and fan fiction production, transforming reading into a collective cultural practice rather than an individual activity.

These communities generate strong emotional attachments between readers, texts, and fictional characters. They also create alternative systems of production and distribution, including pre-order models that reduce financial risk for publishers and cross-media adaptations into television series, merchandise, and other cultural products.

In this sense, BL fiction functions not merely as a literary genre but as a complex cultural institution connecting publishing, media industries, and participatory fan cultures. Its success demonstrates that reading cultures continue to thrive when supported by vibrant social infrastructures – even in contexts where state institutions have failed to cultivate strong traditions of reading.

THE MEANING OF READING IN THE AGE OF E-BOOKS AND PLATFORMIZED READING MARKETS

The rapid expansion of e-books and online reading platforms over the past decade has frequently been interpreted through the lens of technological competition. Within this perspective, digital reading is assumed to threaten the survival of printed books by competing for readers' attention, purchasing power, and leisure time. Such interpretations are particularly common in literary markets where digital platforms have expanded rapidly, especially in genres such as romance, fantasy, and Boys' Love fiction.

Yet viewing the transformation of reading culture primarily in terms of technological substitution risks oversimplifying the relationship between print and digital media. In practice, printed books and digital texts rarely function as perfect substitutes. Rather, they coexist within different contexts of everyday life, fulfilling distinct social and cultural functions. From the perspective of the literary ecosystem, digital platforms do not simply replace printed books; they reorganize the ways in which texts circulate, are consumed, and acquire meaning within readers' lives.

This transformation reflects broader changes in the infrastructures through which reading takes place. As sociologists of media have noted, contemporary cultural consumption is increasingly shaped by digital platforms that structure access to content, patterns of attention, and forms of community. Within such environments, reading becomes embedded in what might be described as 'platformized' cultural ecosystems, where texts circulate not only as intellectual

[3] Osamu Dazai and Natsume Sōseki are two legendary figures of Japanese literature, each distinguished within their respective eras. Dazai (1909-1948) is renowned for his darkly confessional, semi-autobiographical fiction marked by despair and disillusionment, as exemplified by No Longer Human. Sōseki (1867-1916), by contrast, represents the Meiji period, and is celebrated for classic works that illuminate society and the human condition.

artifacts but also as nodes within networks of recommendation, serialization, and audience interaction.

Online reading platforms have facilitated a mode of reading characterized by convenience, continuity, and accessibility. Serialized fiction, in particular, has become one of the defining formats of contemporary digital reading cultures. Through mobile applications and online platforms, readers can access new chapters instantly, follow ongoing narratives, and interact with other readers through comment systems and fan communities.

This mode of reading aligns closely with the fragmented temporal rhythms of contemporary life. In societies where work schedules, commuting patterns, and digital communication increasingly fragment leisure time, reading practices must adapt to shorter and more flexible intervals of attention. Digital reading platforms accommodate these conditions by enabling readers to access texts anytime and anywhere, often at relatively low cost.

From this perspective, digital reading does not necessarily undermine reading culture. Rather, it expands opportunities for reading under conditions in which sustained leisure time has become increasingly scarce. Instead of demanding the uninterrupted attention traditionally associated with printed books, digital texts integrate reading into the micro-temporalities of everyday life – during commuting, waiting periods, or short breaks between activities.

Such transformations resonate with broader analyses of contemporary media environments. Thompson (2010) argues that the digitization of publishing reshapes the relationships between authors, publishers, and readers by altering the channels through which texts circulate and gain visibility. Digital platforms create new intermediaries and new forms of audience engagement, thereby transforming not only the distribution of books but also the social experience of reading itself.

Despite the growth of digital reading, printed books continue to occupy a distinctive position within contemporary reading cultures. For many readers, the value of printed books cannot be reduced to the textual content they contain. Instead, books function as material cultural objects, embedded within emotional, mnemonic, and sensory relationships. This material dimension of reading has been emphasized by scholars in book history and cultural sociology. As Roger Chartier (1994) has argued, the meaning of texts is always shaped by the material forms through which they are encountered. Reading is not simply an abstract cognitive activity; it is also a physical interaction with objects, spaces, and sensory experiences.

Readers interviewed for this research frequently emphasized the tactile and spatial qualities of printed books. The ability to turn pages, annotate margins, or quickly return to earlier passages creates a form of bodily engagement with texts that differs fundamentally from digital reading. One reader described this difference in terms of control over the reading object:

> I started reading printed books because of my mother when I was very young, and I've been attached to them ever since. When I tried using an e-book reader, I realized it wasn't the same. If I'm on page 120 and suddenly want to return to page 20, I can do it instantly with a book. With an e-book you have to scroll back. With a printed book it feels like I control the object in my hands. (a Gen Z reader and writer, interview, 22 November 2025)

For this reader, the printed book is not merely a container for information but a physical artifact that allows readers to navigate texts spatially and intuitively. Another reader emphasized the cognitive and sensory dimensions of physical interaction with books:

> Having books is important because we interact physically with them. Writing in a book, touching it with our hands – we don't understand it only by reading. We also understand

> it through the muscles we use and the hands that write. (a young scholar-fan reader, interview, 22 November 2025)

Such accounts highlight the embodied nature of reading practices. Whereas digital platforms prioritize speed and accessibility, printed books often cultivate slower forms of engagement that involve concentration, reflection, and physical interaction.

Although younger readers increasingly read through digital platforms, many continue to purchase printed books. This pattern challenges the widespread assumption that younger generations are abandoning print culture altogether. Instead, readers frequently distinguish between different forms of reading depending on context.

Digital reading is often associated with continuity and convenience – for example, following serialized fiction or reading casually during short periods of free time. Printed books, by contrast, are frequently purchased more deliberately. Readers may acquire physical books as collectible objects, special editions, or works they wish to preserve within personal libraries.

From the perspective of cultural sociology, such practices suggest that printed books increasingly function as symbolic and identity-forming objects. Owning books allows readers to construct visible representations of their intellectual interests, aesthetic preferences, and reading histories. Bookshelves themselves become cultural displays that communicate aspects of personal identity.

In this sense, the relationship between digital and print reading is better understood as one of functional differentiation rather than technological replacement. Digital texts support flexible, ongoing reading practices, while printed books foster deeper relationships between readers and texts through material presence, memory, and collectability.

For some readers, printed books also carry symbolic meanings that extend beyond individual reading experiences. Books may represent connections to historical traditions of knowledge and cultural expression, linking contemporary readers to earlier generations. Books also open spaces in which readers can encounter worlds different from their immediate experience (Felski, 2008; Nussbaum, 1997). One young reader described books as embodying a form of human continuity:

> For me, books are proof that humanity still has hope. As long as people still want to write something for others to read, that hope exists. When we read the same books that people read two hundred or three hundred years ago – when people still read Shakespeare or Behind the Painting – we remain connected to humanity across generations. (a Gen Z reader and writer, interview, 22 November 2025)

The reference to William Shakespeare and the Thai classic *Behind the Painting* illustrates how printed books can serve as cultural bridges linking past and present forms of intellectual life. Such reflections reveal that reading is not merely an individual act of information consumption. It is also a practice through which cultural memory, intellectual traditions, and human experiences are transmitted across time.

The coexistence of digital and printed reading suggests that the current challenges facing reading culture cannot be explained simply by technological change. While the expansion of digital platforms has transformed reading practices, it has not eliminated readers' attachment to books as cultural objects.

The deeper issue lies in the broader institutional environment in which reading takes place. As discussed in earlier sections, the Thai state has struggled to establish robust infrastructures supporting reading culture – from school libraries to youth literature programs and

public literary institutions. In the absence of such structural support, the responsibility for sustaining reading practices has increasingly shifted onto individual readers and market actors.

Within this context, readers adapt pragmatically, combining digital and printed forms of reading according to the constraints of everyday life. Digital platforms facilitate accessibility and convenience, while printed books provide material continuity and symbolic meaning. Together, these parallel reading systems form part of the contemporary literary ecosystem.

The persistence of printed books alongside digital reading therefore suggests that the crisis of reading in Thai society does not lie in the format of media itself. Rather, it lies in the absence of institutional frameworks that ensure equitable access to reading resources and support diverse forms of literary production. Without such structures, access to reading remains unevenly distributed, shaped primarily by market dynamics and individual initiative rather than by collective cultural policy.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the transformation of reading culture in Thailand through the concept of the literary ecosystem. Rather than treating reading as an individual habit or educational outcome, it has argued that reading practices are shaped by a broader network of institutions and actors, including schools, publishers, writers, bookstores, digital platforms, and readers themselves. The vitality of reading culture therefore depends not only on individual motivation but also on the infrastructures through which books are produced, circulated, and discussed.

The findings suggest that the contemporary challenges facing reading culture in Thailand cannot be explained simply by declining interest in books or by technological change. Rather, they reflect deeper transformations in the institutions that sustain reading. While schools remain the primary institutions expected to cultivate reading habits, the evidence presented here indicates that reading within the Thai educational system is often organized around evaluation, memorization, and measurable performance. As a consequence, many readers develop sustained reading practices outside formal educational settings through bookstores, online communities, book fairs, and reader networks. The broader literary ecosystem has therefore become an increasingly important arena for the cultivation of reading among younger generations.

Another transformation concerns the restructuring of the literary marketplace itself. The growing popularity of genres such as manga, translated fiction, and Boys' Love novels illustrates how reading tastes evolve in response to broader social and cultural changes. Rather than interpreting these developments simply as evidence of cultural decline, this article suggests that they reflect the adaptive dynamics of the literary ecosystem. Popular genres often create accessible entry points into reading cultures, particularly in contexts where institutional support for youth literature and literary diversity remains limited.

At the same time, these developments also reveal structural imbalances within the Thai literary field. The relative decline of certain forms of Thai literary fiction and the scarcity of children's and young adult literature indicate that important segments of the literary ecosystem remain underdeveloped. When particular genres dominate the market while others struggle to survive, the long-term sustainability of reading culture may be affected. A diverse literary ecosystem requires a wide range of texts capable of engaging readers at different stages of their intellectual and emotional development.

The findings also suggest that transformations in reading culture should not be interpreted simply as a shift from political to apolitical forms of reading. The restructuring of the literary marketplace has also altered the kinds of social and political concerns that readers

encounter through books. While earlier generations often encountered social critique through literature associated with the literature-for-life tradition, younger readers increasingly engage with questions of identity, sexuality, gender relations, and personal autonomy through genres such as BL fiction, graphic narratives, and digital reading communities. The political dimensions of reading have therefore not disappeared; rather, they have been reconfigured through different genres, publics, and media environments.

These changing forms of reading are also linked to transformations in the media environments through which texts circulate. The growing influence of digital platforms and online reading markets has also reshaped the contemporary reading-scape. The expansion of e-books, serialized fiction, and social media-driven recommendation systems has reshaped the ways in which readers encounter texts. Digital reading platforms accommodate the fragmented temporal rhythms of contemporary life by enabling readers to access stories quickly and conveniently through mobile devices. At the same time, printed books continue to retain distinctive cultural meanings as material objects associated with memory, identity, and long-term intellectual engagement.

The relationship between digital and print reading is therefore better understood as coexistence rather than substitution. Digital platforms facilitate accessibility and continuity, while printed books cultivate slower forms of engagement and material relationships with texts. Together, these parallel reading systems form part of a complex literary ecosystem in which different formats serve different cultural functions.

Beyond these institutional transformations, the survey findings further challenge the image of Thailand as a non-reading society. Although the survey revealed a substantial and active reading public, respondents also identified weaknesses in the broader reading environment. These concerns suggest that the question is not whether people read, but whether the infrastructures necessary to sustain reading cultures are adequately developed.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the central challenge facing reading culture in Thailand is not a simple decline in readers but the absence of a coherent structural framework capable of sustaining diverse forms of literary production and access to reading resources. When the state withdraws from active cultural policy, responsibility for sustaining reading cultures tends to shift toward market actors and individual readers. Under such conditions, literary markets may prioritize genres that generate immediate commercial success, while other forms of literature – particularly youth literature and experimental literary works – remain under-supported.

From the perspective of cultural sociology, reading culture can be understood as a form of cultural infrastructure. Libraries, educational institutions, publishing industries, translation networks, literary awards, bookstores, and reading communities all contribute to the circulation of books and ideas. When these elements are unevenly developed or poorly coordinated, access to reading opportunities becomes fragile and literary diversity may be diminished.

Ultimately, the future of reading culture in Thailand depends not only on the enthusiasm of individual readers but also on the capacity of institutions to sustain a diverse and accessible literary environment. Strengthening youth literature, expanding access to libraries, supporting independent publishing, and fostering spaces for literary discussion remain important components of such an ecosystem. Seen in this light, the question is not whether Thailand is a reading or non-reading society, but what kinds of literary ecosystems are being created, sustained, or neglected. The future of reading culture depends less on the habits of individual readers than on the institutional environments that make diverse forms of reading possible.

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