

# *Inversion, Confusion, and Escape: The Female Voices Behind the “Tanbi Popularization”*

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**Abstract:** In recent years, tanbi novels have gradually become commercialized, exerting an unexpected impact on the cultural market. Adopting gender semiotics theory, this research delves into the content of them from the perspectives of emotional activities and sexual politics. Through text analysis, this study finds that female creators of tanbi novels express the pursuit of gender equality and autonomy by crafting male protagonists and establishing dystopian worldviews. These male protagonists serve as avatars for the female audience, fulfilling not just their sexual fantasies and emotional needs but also shielding them from the oppression of a patriarchal society. This creative approach mitigates the risks and threats to women in sexual relationships, providing the females with a space for spiritual fulfilment. Additionally, the dystopian worldviews redefine gender norms and break down gender stereotypes, advocating for gender equality and freedom. This research provides fresh insights and reflections on gender issues in Chinese online tanbi literature.

**Keywords:** tanbi novels, network literature, semiotics of gender

## 1. Introduction

Originally referring to the “indulgence in beautiful things”, “tanbi” was later evolved as a synonym for BL (Boy’s Love), depicting male-male romances. At the end of the 20th century, the concept of “tanbi” spread from Japan to mainland China through the Internet, entering the literary market as an emerging trend [1]. Authored primarily by women, the storylines usually revolve around a pair of homosexual male protagonists, predominantly echoing a feminist narrative pattern where “women employ male characters to attain self-sexual gratification and liberation from oppression”. Therefore, “tanbi” represents an aesthetic portrayal of male homosexual relationships rooted in women’s fantasies, distinguishing it from “queer literature” [2].

This characteristic has attracted scholarly attention. However, reviewing academic discussions on “Tanbi literature” in recent years reveals that researchers are mostly keen on exploring the social factors behind the genesis and evolution of this novel genre. Many scholars have also noticed the potential and limitations of “Tanbi literature” in articulating female discourse. Nevertheless, given that the development of “Tanbi literature” in mainland China has been less than thirty years, most research adopts a literary history perspective to comb through and summarize, such as Li Xu’s “The Evolution and Aesthetic Features of Chinese Tanbi Novels in the Past 30 Years”, and Chen Ke’s “Tanbi Culture and Gender Consciousness: A Study Based on the Lens of Tanbi Text Production and

Dissemination”, among others. Limited focus has been placed on the interplay between the era when “Tanbi literature” rose in online fiction and the women of that period, lacking in articulating gender sore points within the paradox of “male characters and female authors”.

Therefore, this study will primarily concentrate on the concrete expression of gender predicaments in Tanbi novel texts, exploring how female writers navigate and reinterpret these challenges within the narrative.

Regarding timeline, the research decided to zero in on the 2016-2021 interval, marking when “Tanbi literature” was truly commercialized and entered public view. During this period, with the audience base of dramatizations, Tanbi literature saw a surge in readership and received more mainstream cultural attention and intervention. This research mainly chooses two nodes, starting from 2016 when Huang Jingyu and Xu Weizhou starred in “Addiction” and ending in 2021 with the disturbance of “Word of Honor”. During this period, Tanbi literature, at its peak, reached the fringe of “mainstream culture”. Therefore, the research selected three Tanbi novels between 2016 and 2021 from different online literature platforms, namely *Unable to Abandon (La Bu Xia)* from the Sosadfun Website, *The Mermaid’s Downfall (Renyu Xianluo)* from the Changpei Literature Website, and *Kill the Wolf (Sha Po Lang)* from Jinjiang Literature Website. Through relevant theories of “gender semiotics”, such as “gender is performative, gender is a product of power relations”, the research will explore from the dimensions of emotional activities and sexual politics [3] what desires of contemporary women were catered to in online Tanbi works during 2016-2021, and unravel the inherent contradictions and dilemmas they grapple with.

## 2. Gender Semiotics and Ideology

In her seminal work *Gender Semiotics*, D. M. Juschka rejects the idea that sex is a natural category and gender a social category, and instead treat both as social categories that are interrelated so that both work in tandem to produce a gender/sex signing system otherwise called gender/sex ideology [4]. It points out that humans have autonomously constructed gender and endowed it with unequal power. This consciousness permeates various realms such as literature, film, and religion, reflecting modern scholars’ inclination towards recognizing diverse genders, which correspondingly formed a theory for revealing gender symbols and their formation mechanisms—“semiotics of gender”.

In the creation of “Tanbi literature”, there is a recurring blurring and subversion of the conventional binary gender framework [5]. Female creators not only express the desire to resist the male gaze and participate in the construction of marriage systems through the dissimilated symbol of homosexual males but also articulate women’s dissatisfaction with sexual politics and the appeal to transform structural injustice. This often materializes as a dystopian literary outlook [5]. Dystopia, first proposed by the British philosopher John Stuart Mill in 1868, often represents the opposite of “utopia”—a terrifying dictatorship where human depravity and institutional collapse are distinct characteristics. After incorporating dystopian elements, some Tanbi novels transcend mere romantic narratives, opting to mirror reality. For example, *The Mermaid’s Downfall* explores marine crises, while *The Little Mushroom (Xiao Mogu)* contemplates human predicaments in an apocalyptic world. Behind these stories is a subversion of stereotypical impressions of women as “virtuous wives” or “objects” by female creators, as well as brave attempts by women to participate in national narratives [6].

## 3. Erotic Ethics and Romantic Relationships

From a semiotic perspective, when female readers create and consume Tanbi novels, they position the male protagonists as the “gazed” objects. Correspondingly, although female audiences are absent, they invisibly carry out the subject behaviour of “looking and appreciating”, becoming the

manipulators of these sexual relationships [7]. Through this symbolic delegation, the female gaze accomplishes a new allocation of roles in erotic activities.

*Unable to Abandon*, a Tanbi work published on the Sosadfun website in 2019, pivots around incestuous brothers. When creating this novel, the author mainly focused on expressing the emotions and erotic desires between the male leads [8]. The female creator invented these two male protagonists, projecting her imagination about sex onto their bodies, letting them replace female audiences in articulating sexual desire. When depicting the “homosexual male protagonists” eroticism, the creator removes women from the sexual space, completely making them withdraw from the arena in the text. This protects female readers—who express their sexual inclinations—from feeling indicted or demeaned by patriarchal notions of “chastity.” However, it still allows them to vicariously experience female-led sexual dynamics attuned to feminine aesthetics. Despite being peripheral in Tanbi tales, female readers can obtain a higher spiritual satisfaction than “actual participation”. In conducting such “female-exit” sexual writing, their demands and desires are completely split. Writers then position men as subjects to observe and describe, mitigating the perils women face from voyeurism and violation in male-predominated societies.

In contrast, in another work, *Kill the Wolf*, from the Jinjiang Literature Website, the two male protagonists have a relatively equal marital relationship. They are deeply in love with no obvious sexual oppression from either side, reflecting modern women’s updated notions of spouses [9]. These female audiences no longer voluntarily undertake the unequal distribution of social resources nor recognize themselves as vessels and tools for male sexual desires. Instead, they aspire to be acknowledged and esteemed by their significant others.

Taken together, the two works demonstrate that women’s creation and consumption of Tanbi literature mirror their desires: to uninhibitedly manifest erotic imaginations, to sketch ideal romantic ties, to sidestep subjugation within patriarchal marital systems, and to evade male sexual dominance.

#### 4. Violent Imagination about Dystopian

Dystopia refers to an imaginary community or society marked by bleakness and trepidation, the opposite of a utopia, representing an extremely perverse final stage of society. In the creative process of Tanbi novels, there also exists a dystopian worldview, namely ABO (Alpha, Beta and Omega), birthed and spread from fan fiction. It has gradually gained wide acceptance among Tanbi literature readers.

The novel *The Mermaid’s Downfall* adopts this peculiar dystopian worldview. Under the ABO social order, humans are assigned a primary sex at birth—penises denote males, vaginas symbolize females. However, during puberty, every individual undergoes secondary gender differentiation, classified as either Alpha, Beta, or Omega, each with unique social characteristics and hierarchical status. The Alphas, characterized by potent reproductive capacities and aggression, dominate this societal structure. Still, they are vulnerable to volatility, especially when exposed to Omega-emitted pheromones. The Beta gender is the backbone of society, no different from the gender in ordinary human worldviews. The Omega gender is viewed negatively by society and faces workplace discrimination due to weaker strength and fixed estrus cycles. The secondary gender is not merely a social categorization but also manifests in physiological changes. For instance, females who differentiate into Alphas grow a penis, while males who become Omegas develop a vagina. In gender semiotics, reproductive organs signify the division between male and female. However, in the ABO world, they no longer determine gender, subverting binary gender rules, dissolving this symbolism [10], and expressing female creators’ acceptance of gender diversity. This challenges real-world gender orders built upon reproductive organ differences.

Although Omegas are physiologically disadvantaged, *The Mermaid’s Downfall* endows the Omega protagonist with outstanding abilities and characterizes him as a “fierce commando”, while

the Alpha protagonist undertakes cerebral labour unrelated to physical superiority, breaking gender stereotypes and fixed social status frameworks.

The Mermaid's Downfall and most other female creators utilize the ABO worldview for Tanbi literature, establishing a dystopia where physiological advantages determine social status. However, within this framework, they also envision utopias where innate traits do not preordain skills or potential. It rebuts the contempt and prejudice imposed on the "disadvantaged" in patriarchal societies, emphasizing that everyone should have the right to pursue their potential and interests regardless of gender.

In summary, the ABO worldview weakens differences in reproductive organs by resetting the standards for gender categorization, reflecting females' pursuit of gender equality, diversity, and autonomy. By creating dystopian worldviews and inverting them to construct idealistic characters, female creators attempt to cast off inherent societal prejudices about gender roles and make their voices heard.

## 5. Female Writers' Rebellion Against Patriarchy in Tanbi Literature

*The Semiotics of Gender* argues that "gender is a social category that takes precedence over sex, which is constructed upon it". In other words, the characteristics and power associated with gender fluctuate according to changes in socioeconomic, political, and cultural conditions. The cognition and definition of gender symbols in Tanbi literature are even more radical than those proposed by Julia Kristeva.

This intense desire for reconstructing the order also leads Tanbi writers towards two extremes in their narratives. One type is rooted in the subject matter of homosexual narratives, completely discarding physiological gender differences by projecting idealized feminine images onto male characters [11]. Female creators think of this pattern as a way of opposing the patriarchal society's discrimination and oppression against women, with a focus on emphasizing the notion that "people who accept the penetration in the sex is not necessarily the weak one, and people who perform penetration is not necessarily the strong one". The other type constructs a world with a more diverse yet exaggeratedly oppressive gender order, in which Tanbi writers ruthlessly expose the cruel oppression suffered by "humans with uteruses and less physical strength" in the historical stage before completely departing from an agrarian society, with a tone of black humour. They are skilled at using metaphors to portray the irreversible harm people with feminine physiological characteristics suffer in such a society. However, these female writers also express their resistance and rebuttal by confusing the traditional order of gender and sex. Their works more or less reflect gender-political information. In contrast to the "pseudo-strong female" dilemma in romance novels at the time, which indulged in self-realization through male power, Tanbi novels played the role of speaking out for women.

From the perspective of Reception Aesthetics, such subject matter first exposes readers to unfamiliar gender politics and then leads them to contemplate the projected implications behind it [12]. The popularity of Tanbi novels represents a desire and appeal from women to participate in national narratives. This shift underscores the progression of women from passive acceptance of male-driven narratives to recognizing their individuality and, ultimately, actively shaping male-centric stories.

## 6. Conclusion

Through the study of gender dilemmas in Chinese online Tanbi literature, the research adopts the perspective of gender semiotics to conduct an in-depth analysis of how female writers of Chinese online Tanbi novels express and transform gender dilemmas. Through specific textual analysis of

three Tanbi novels, this study reveals how female writers, shaping male protagonists and dystopian worldviews, express the pursuit of gender equality, diversity, and autonomy during the creative process. This research perspective and methodology provide new ideas and analytical frameworks for thoroughly understanding gender issues in Chinese online Tanbi literature.

Secondly, this study focuses on the role and influence of female writers in Tanbi literature, as well as the impact of their works on female readers. By revealing the intentions and strategies of female writers in Tanbi narratives, as well as the resonance and acceptance of readers towards the works, the research expands the research scope of online Tanbi literature. It discusses women's subjectivity and discursive power in literary creation from the perspective of gender studies.

With the popularization of the Internet and the rise of social media, online literature has become an important part of mass reading. As one of its genres, Tanbi literature has attracted many readers and writers. Discussing its gender issues can lead to a better understanding of contemporary female writers' creative motivations and significance while also exerting a positive influence on the development of the entire literary market and advancing gender equality.

However, these alienated female aesthetic preferences still carry the influence and rendering of patriarchal discourse systems, limiting women to contemplating their new positioning in sexual relationships while not establishing new female images amid breaking conventional ones, thus confining them to a transitional form of female aesthetic art. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the portrayal of homosexual marriages and relationships in Tanbi literature reflects the contradictory reality that women are unable to find the subject position of their sexual desires yet strongly hope to grasp equal power through sexual relationships in such social conditions. In the future, this research believes that Tanbi literature still has many worthwhile directions for in-depth exploration, such as studying the expression of other themes in Tanbi literature, like changes in the marriage system and the weakening of family consciousness in romantic relationships, to more fully understand the gender issues within it.

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