

# *The Ethical Dilemma of Tanbi Culture in New Media Age:*

## *A Case Study of Tanbi Internet Drama in China*

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**Abstract**—With the help of internet technology, media culture and marketing, the presenting ways of literary works have become more diverse. The network dramas, adapted from boy's love stories, have been widely sought after, which has not only changed the audiences' viewing habits and acceptance criteria of traditional TV series and web TV series, but also updated audiences' cognition about mainstream value system, such as traditional culture, heterosexuality, interpersonal relationships, etc.. From the perspective of media ethics, this paper uses case analysis and information analysis methods, interprets the impact of Tanbi culture on the ethical values of mainstream culture in the new media age. Through the comparison of Tanbi culture with traditional culture, we can grasp the value cognition of network drama audience, in order to provide reference to the audiences' mainstream values construction and the development of Tanbi works.

**Keywords**—*Tanbi network drama; usage and satisfaction; conception of sex; characterization; ethical dilemma*

### I. INTRODUCTION

In the Internet era, media have great impact on content generation. With the popularization and application of the Internet, network drama catches people's attention and spread widely. At the same time, along with the prevalence of youth subculture, especially the spread and development of Tanbi culture, Tanbi network drama begins to appear in China. Originally, "Tanbi" means "indulging in beauty", that is, the interaction between the pretty individuals of the same sex is beyond the daily behavior, and now it is often used to refer to handsome males and the love attitude between man and man without involving reproduction. In the 1990s, Tanbi culture was introduced from Japan to China by a comic named Bronze. The love story of the two male protagonists in this comic is adapted as a Tanbi fan novel, and then, the related forums and websites sprung up.

The appearance of Tanbi network play has broken the heterosexual domination on the small screen and a variety of ethical values show up in the cyberspace. According to theme and style, Chinese Tanbi network drama can mainly be divided into three categories: the ones focusing on homosexual love and desire, the ones showing the love between teenage boys, and the ones recording the collision and conflict between different ethical values. Through the description of males' love

story in various cultures and times, Tanbi works are once sought after by plenty audience and launch thousands of reports by Internet media. In this kind of network series, although some ethical principles are obviously contrary to the mainstream values, we have to say that the new media brings us more ethical resources to choose from and promote the rational and tolerant treatment to gender ethics of homosexuality.

### II. ANALYSIS OF THE RATIONALITY OF THE EXISTENCE OF TANBI NETWORK DRAMA

American sociologist Katz studied the audiences' usage of media and the consequent satisfaction, and then concluded that "the audiences' social and psychological roots lead to demand, which causes the expectations in mass media and other information sources, and generate different forms of contact with the media (or engage in other activities), resulting in the satisfaction of needs and most other unintended consequences"[1]. Based on the causal chain process, "social factor + psychological factor—media expectation—media contact—demand satisfaction"[2], a summarized version of audiences' media contact behavior, the audience who watch the Tanbi network dramas are usually driven by the following motivations:

#### A. Large Audience Base of Popular Tanbi Novel

The prevalence of Tanbi literature creates a number of open-minded fujoshi who have strong desire to read. The description of pure love between males in Tanbi literature shows a unique beauty of the world for the fujoshi. They immerse in the beautiful illusion of male love in virtual communities, comics, novels and movies, and has great enthusiasm in Tanbi web drama. The existing Chinese Tanbi network dramas, such as "addiction", "Counterattack", are mostly adapted from the Tanbi network novels, which already have fixed audience. After the novel is adapted into a network drama, the readers of the novel will watch the network drama.

#### B. Publicity and Word of Mouth

By observation, Tanbi network drama promotes its plot and starring roles through topic settings, trailer releasing, and micro interviews of executive producers on Weibo (microblog) before the release, especially when "addiction" is on the air, the related topics heat last for a while. "Pretty face", "excellent

acting", "pure love", "homosexuality", these labels are enough to make the most audience to watch the play by ignoring the defects of the plot and production. In this case, most audience will go with the flow, so that they can get the topic of conversation in the social network.

#### *C. Curiosity about homosexuality and reverse psychology from the ban*

If Tanbi literature leaves some imagination to audiences about characters, the network drama put their imagination into reality. Fujoshi will watch the drama out of curiosity for the adaptation and the general audience will watch it out of curiosity about the plot and male love model. After the "Crown Princess Promotion Notes", "addiction" and other popular network deleted and banned, in National TV Industry Annual Meeting 2015, SARFT (the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television) states that the network TV review standards will rise to the same standards with the TV series, "the contents that can not broadcast on TV are also can not broadcast on internet.". Actually, the ban evokes audiences' curiosity and desire to explore, and prompts the audience searching for other channels to get the banned web drama.

#### *D. Female audience's desire to break the mainstream discourse to meet the gaze desire of men*

In Tanbi network play, women can stay away to create their own ideal male image, such as Gu Hai in *Addiction* and Chi Cheng in *Counterattack*, who are handsome, aggressive and rich, realizing their emotional state early and striving for it actively and finally staged a love story—a male version of "high-handed president fell in love with me". At the same time, women, as outsider, view men's bitter entanglements in love and get rid of the state of being stared, which means that men also experience pain, sadness and disappointment like women do when they are in love, so that female audience gain pleasure from gazing male.

#### *E. Providing a Voicing Platform for homosexuals*

As sexual minorities and marginalized groups of society, more and more homosexuals are brave enough to speak out because of changes in social environment. Tanbi network dramas can focus on the living and emotional states of homosexuals, narrating their aspiration to true love and making the audience gradually recognize the diversity of the world and accept the difference, so that most audience consider that their existence is necessary for the development of society; sub-cultural groups use new media to spread their claims, which makes Tanbi culture accepted by most of young people in the virtual world. These all play a significant role in the rational treatment of society to homosexual ethics.

### **III. THE ETHICAL DILEMMA OF TANBI NETWORK DRAMA**

#### *A. Conflict with the traditional gender concept*

The concept of "Man for the outside and woman for the inside", which originated from the Western Zhou Dynasty, is the most important norm of traditional gender relations. It emphasizes the infinity and openness of man's external space, and the limitation and closeness of woman's internal space. Male has natural advantage in sexual relations. In modern society, woman's status has been increasingly improved in all

aspects, but compared to man; woman is still the object of being gazed. The traditional love drama almost continues the narrative of gender ethics in the male-dominated social context. Love means all in a woman's life. Even a self-reliant and independent woman still considers that "marrying a good man" is the ultimate goal. Yet, in Tanbi network drama, males in a relationship are equal, breaking away from the traditional gender relations, so that female audiences can gain satisfaction when they imagine themselves in this equal and independent relationship, which is the reason why the Tanbi network plays are highly respected. This kind of thought frees female from male's control and turns to gazing the male, which directly challenges the ethic of male dominating and female subordinating and makes the Tanbi network drama into the ethical dilemma in real life.

Meanwhile, the traditional gender system has strict norms on man and woman's behavior. Physiological and psychological gender nonconformity are regarded as weird and discriminated by others. This nonconformity not only violates the heterosexual hegemony, but also violates the yin and yang of nature laws. Therefore, homosexuals are labeled with "moral corruption", "sexual immorality", and often appear in "sissy" image. In Tanbi web drama, the depiction of love between male is focused on "beauty", whether is the character or the emotion. "Beauty" is the main feature in Tanbi network drama. The true and pure love in this kind of works hits the audience's desire for true love, but the mass media's praise about the homosexual love can not make the audience ignore the reproductive consequences and sexual taboos, even if it is out of the aesthetic demand, the spread of Tanbi network drama is still facing many difficulties in existing social and ethical order.

#### *B. Displacement of Characters*

##### *1) Both heroin—"ideal male"*

The expression of men and men love relationship, without exception, the way of getting along with homosexuals into heterosexual love mode. Most male images are perfect lovers in traditional concept, dominant in relationship, with greater advantage in career, family background and personality. And their feminized partners are mostly dedicated to love selflessly after self-ideological struggle and torture, who are always in disadvantaged position in the love relationship. But when facing love decisions, they are more brave and stronger than the so-called "man". If not because of their physiological identity, in traditional culture, they can be considered good "wives."

##### *2) Female character—"twisted as evil"*

In Tanbi network drama, female character is absent, or portrayed as evil or ugly. Those demonized women tend to be selfish, jealousy, materialistic, hedonistic, unruly, etc., which is opposite to the traditional Chinese women who are elegant and virtuous, such as Yue Yue in *Counterattack*, mammonish and fickle, dumping her boyfriend to attempt to marry a wealthy man to meet her own vanity; Jin Lulu in *Addiction*, ugly and jealous, Jiang Yuan, abandoning her husband and child, and snobby. These kinds of images not only make the audience exclude the female characters, and imply heterosexuality is full of treachery, which is based on external material conditions,

while homosexual love is unswerving and beyond the mundane.

### 3) *Spectator—"just passer-by"*

Most conflicts in the network play are between homosexuals and the representatives of the traditional ethics, such as, parents, neighbors and classmates, who believe that gay love is immoral and filthy, and without exception, mark homosexuality with "dirty", "Simon" and other labels with obvious discrimination. Loving and kindhearted mother, serious and strong father in traditional films, have become the spokesmen of heterosexual hegemony and traditional patriarchy in Tanbi web dramas. They strongly oppose to their sons' sexual orientation and choice of partner and make every effort to free them from the evil. Beside the idealization of male characters, the deliberate discrediting and vilification of female characters to highlight the "true love first" among men, and the passers-by' discrimination and exclusion to highlight the hero's courage to dedicate to love, those settings about plot and characters deviate much from the reality.

## C. *Challenge to existing social culture and order*

### 1) *Persecution of gay's wives.*

The current mainstream culture is still not tolerant enough to homosexuals, which makes a large number of homosexuals hide their sexual orientation and marry with heterosexuals out of pressure from society or family. This kind of marriage leads the wives live a life without sexual satisfaction, suffering neglect and the threat of STDs and AIDS, completely in the disadvantageous position of a family relationship. In "I and Mr. X", the protagonist shows up as a "victim" of love, but ignores that he himself is the "perpetrators" in the marriage, bringing about the endless pain to himself and his spouse.

### 2) *Harm to teenagers' personality shaping.*

At present, the type of Chinese Tanbi web drama is single, the plot is simple and tedious, and the content is superficial and lack of cultural connotation. The producers often employ homosexual topic as a gimmick to construct an entertainment place for youth groups to release emotion and get pleasure. The web drama aiming at produce pleasure and make topics can not consciously express and reflect social existence, but more point to the self-satisfaction and self-entertain of the modern people in the predicament of reality. There are full of vulgar contents in web dramas, for instance, juvenile puppy love, school bully, sexual violence, indifferent personal relationships in remarried family and other social problems. The joke attitude towards emotional life and exaggerated actions take away from the artistic quality of the drama, and have bad effects on the adolescent audience who may regard homosexuality as fashion and a trend to follow and imitate.

### 3) *Stars's binding hype from online to offline.*

The click rate and the topic heat is significant criterion for the success of a web drama. Audience, as consumers, has already become the focus of the competition among stars and media. The stars and their companies manufacture topics to pursue sensational effect; the media make agenda setting for interest and let the star respond according to the audience's feedback to accomplish a series of self-hype. The heroins who are made famous by Tanbi web dramas like Counterattack and Addiction, still hype off the line, by being gay to attract the

audience to consume. As public figures, they set a bad example for the audience, which is not conducive for the normal development of art, and also hide dangers for their own development.

## IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Chinese Tanbi network drama has many restrictions in plot, characterization, and perspective and so on. Its existence has always been suppressed and excluded by the mainstream culture, but the online interactive feature of Internet offers a space for its growth, and makes the individuals from different classes, different backgrounds and different education experience can participate in viewing and commenting of the network drama, which results in a variety of ethical values in the cyberspace, so that the homosexual groups will not be depressed by losing their voice. But in face of the above-mentioned ethical dilemma, Tanbi web drama needs to stand on the social reality of homosexuals, enhance the depth of the story, grasp the boundaries between spoof and comedy, and seek the balance between commercial efficiency and artistic value. Using the form of web drama is not attention-seeking and plays to the gallery, but to call people to embrace the world with love and tolerance, present the current state and survival context of Chinese homosexuality. Through the realistic expression, the drama conveys the potential will of the marginalized groups, so that the Tanbi culture can become new ideas and new forces, which has constructive significance for the contemporary social and cultural development and the mainstream values.

The rise of Tanbi culture and the hit of Tanbi web dramas are not only a cultural phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon. Despite of plenty of criticisms, strong suppress from SARFT, and the ethical dilemmas to explore and breakthrough, as long as there is the existence of fujoshi, the desire for pure beauty and homosexuals' pursuit for equality in social status, Tanbi web drama will not disappear.

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