Tanbi Novels and Fujoshi: A New Romance for Young Chinese Women

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In the 1960s, tanbi comics and novels which focused on boy’s love came into being in Japan and was popular among young women. They, both readers and writers of tanbi, were women and called themselves fujoshi. At the late 1980s, Japanese tanbi comics but not novels became available in China. It was not until the end of the 1990s that tanbi novels with Chinese authors appeared in novel websites in China. Between 2005 and 2006, it became a main style of net novels in China. In this chapter, we first introduce the history of tanbi subculture in Japan, the two main types of tanbi texts, and the writing and publishing of tanbi novels in China. We then address the questions on why tanbi subculture is well accepted in China, what desires of young women are reflected in it, and how it challenges the mainstream culture.

15.1 Introduction

In the 1960s, tanbi comic came into being in Japan, the subject of which is boy’s love. Handsome young men and boys, beautiful love and hot sex are universal elements in tanbi comics and novels. Most of the readers and writers of tanbi are young women with ages from 15 to 30; they call themselves fujoshi. After the introduction of tanbi comics to China in the late 1980s, tanbi novels written by Chinese started to appear in novel websites in China at the end of the 1990s. In the subsequent several years, they have only a small number of readers and writers. However, between 2005 and 2006, tanbi novels suddenly began to have more and
more readers and writers, and became a main style of net novels in China.

Subsequently, in October 2009, Snda Net Novel Co.\(^1\) in Shanghai and the State Post Bureau of China issued five sets of stamps consisting of 64 pieces, on each of which was the portrait of a net writer. For each of the three novel websites owned by Snda—Jinjiang, Qidian and Hongxiutianxiang—there was 16 contract writers selected for the stamps. One of the 16 writers of Jinjiang was Smiling Cat, a writer of tanbi novels. What was unusual about this event was that while tanbi novels was (and still is) forbidden to be published in China,\(^2\) tanbi writers were allowed to appear on the stamps together with writers of romances, swordsmen novels and so on. In fact, some tanbi writers, such as Tianlaizhiyi and Fengnong, were more popular than Smiling Cat, but their works contain more sex and violence than hers. And Jinjiang chose Smiling Cat, a less popular writer, as the representative of its writers for the stamps.

Here, we see the interesting and ambiguous situation of tanbi novels in China. On the on hand, tanbi is one of the several main styles of net novels in China. For example, in Jinjiang, a very large and well-known novel website, about a quarter of the most popular writes are tanbi writers. On the other hand, tanbi novels are forbidden to be published in China, so tanbi writers cannot share with other popular writers the benefit of the large book market. Tanbi culture, as a subculture,\(^3\) like

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\(^1\) In July 2008, Snda Net Co. purchased three well-known novel websites including Jinjiang, Qidian and Hongxiutianxiang, and established Snda Net Novel Co. which possessed 80% market share of Chinese novel websites. In Dec. 2009, Snda Net Novel Co. purchased another famous novel website Rongshuxia and really became the monopoly in the market of Chinese novel websites.

\(^2\) A few novels about ambiguous emotions between males were published sporadically in China. For example, *Bad Boys in Class 7 Grade 10*, wrote by Qixi, was published by Yunnan People’s Publishing House in 2009. The novel is about the friendship and some ambiguous emotion between several boys. Some fojoshi regard it as a tanbi novel without sex description.

\(^3\) In the 1940s, the sociologists of the Chicago School were the first to introduce the idea of subculture. Their research of subculture was about the culture popular in some particular groups in cites. Gay, rock music and hippies are typical subcultures. In the 19x0s, culture scholars at University of Birmingham studied the subculture of young
many other subcultures in China, shares the values of the mainstream culture and challenge it at the same time.

In this chapter, after the cultural background and descriptions of tanbi novels outside and inside of China are presented, the following questions of interest are addressed: why tanbi subculture is well accepted in China, what desires of young women are reflected in it, and how it challenges the mainstream culture.

15.2 History of Tanbi Subculture in Japan

Tanbi means “being addicted to beauty” in Japanese, and refers to aestheticism in the history of Japanese literature. Tanbi literature, also called “new romanticism literature,” was a genre of literature in the beginning of the 20th century in Japan. It happened and developed on the basis of the objection to the influential naturalism literature at that time. The most famous tanbi writers were Nagai Kafu, Tanizaki Junichiro and so on. Tanbi writers argued that the ideas of naturalism writers such as “objectivism,” “truth is more important than beauty” and so on would “oppress human beings’ desire” so as to “lose beauty and human nature.” Accordingly, they insisted on “acute mental and emotional sensibility” [Ye, 2009].

At the end of the 1960s, a new phenomenon happened to girl’s comic. Some comic writers, represented by Takimiya Keiko and Yamagishi Ryouko, began to draw comics about boy’s love (Fig. 15.1). Due to its root in girl’s comic, the boys in tanbi comics at that time looked like girls. Since then, boy’s love comics have been popular among comic readers; most of them are young women and girls. They called these new comics tanbi partly because it had something in common with the tanbi literature at the beginning of the 20th century. And soon enough, tanbi novels appeared. Both the new tanbi

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4 Girl’s comic, appearing in the 1950s, is the comic in girl’s magazines. Most of their authors are women. Early girl’s comic authors regarded girls from age 12 to 18 as their readers. Then, the intended readership was expanded to girls from age 6 to 12 and young women from age 18 to 25. Most of girl’s comics are about romance.
comics/novels and the old, traditional tanbi literature have much detailed description of mind, sense and body; appreciate pure love beyond ethics and social codes; and made use of sad and blue atmosphere. The women readers called themselves *fujoshi* which means “women indulged in something.”

Fig. 15.1. Covers of the first *tanbi* comic, *The Poem of Wind and Tree*, Vols. 1-4 (from right to left, top to bottom) by Takimiya Keiko.
Under the influence of tanbi comics, many stories of boy’s love appeared in *doujin* comics and novels since the 1960s. Authors of *doujin* created many stories about love between two male characters in comics or video games, even though these characters did not fall in love at all in the original materials from which the *doujin* works were derived. As more and more stories about boy’s love appeared in *doujin* comics and novels, the term *doujin* referred specifically to recreated stories about love between two male characters. In this sense, *doujin* is equivalent to “slash” in the West. Fans of *doujin* are called *doujin’s onna*. Here, we should pay attention to the fact that with rare exceptions, both writers and readers of tanbi are girls and young women, indicating that it is not male’s desire but female’s that is reflected in tanbi.

Those tanbi and *doujin* novels and comics which have too much description of sex are called *yaoi*. Most of tanbi and *doujin* texts in comics and novels have sex descriptions. However, for fujoshi, a moving and romantic love story is as important as the sex description, or even more important than it.

### 15.3 Two Types of Tanbi Stories and the Binary Opposition of Seme and Uke

To understand the historical and cultural background of tanbi subculture, it is necessary for us to know something about the description of gay in the history of Japanese literature. Generally, such gay stories can be divided into two types. One type is gay *gigolos* who behave passively and have to depend on their masters as women have to depend on men in an ancient society. Their masters are the single and total meaning and

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5 *Doujin* means independent creation in Japanese, and refer to “fan fiction,” i.e., fictions created by fans of something. Authors of *doujin* use characters in comics and video games to create new stories, usually love stories. In the beginning, *doujin* was just stories about love between male and female. Afterward, more and more stories about boy’s love appeared in *doujin* comics and novels.

6 For example, the novels *The Persian Boy*, *Fire from Heaven*, and *Funeral Games* by Mary Renault and *24/7* by Xanthe are “slashes.” Renault’s three novels are about the love between Emperor Alexander and Hephaestion, his general. *24/7* is about the love between Fox Moulder and Walter Skinner, two characters in *X Files*, a popular TV program in the United States.
goal of their lives. Stories about noblemen and monks and their gay gigolos are recorded in many Japanese historical documents. For example, Tokugawa Iemitsu, the grandson of Tokugawa Ieyasu, had more than 100 gay gigolos.

Another type is young beautiful warriors who have wonderful swordsmanship. Different from gay gigolos, they are totally independent in their behavior and thinking, so their social position is not like that of women. Young beautiful warriors as men’s object of desire are also recorded in many Japanese historical documents. The most famous example is the love between Maeda Toshitsune and Horio Tadaharu. In his historical novel, Ihara Saikaku\(^7\) described the first date of the two warriors in detail.

Fujoshi divided the two male characters in tanbi stories into *seme* and *uke*. Seme means attack and is called the active side in the sex between two males; uke means accept and is called the passive side. By means of this division, fujoshi established the identities of the two males. Here, we see the binary opposition of seme and uke. As is known, binary opposition means ideology. *The binary opposition of seme and uke is the ideology of tanbi stories.*

The two types of gay stories are also the two types of tanbi stories. According to the position of uke, tanbi stories are further divided by fujoshi into two types: weak uke and strong uke. Weak uke, like gay gigolos, usually has lower social position than seme and depends on seme economically and emotionally. Differently, strong uke is usually on equal level with seme and has independent thinking and personal living goal. He does not depend on seme economically or emotionally. The division of strong uke and weak uke is the most basic division of tanbi stories. Presently in China, tanbi novels of strong uke are much more popular than those of weak uke.

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\(^7\) Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693) is a famous Japanese writer in the Edo Age. The subject of his novels is sex and love.
15.4 Texts about Gays as a Global Fashion

In the last dozens of years, political, economical and legal rights of homosexuals have been better approved and protected in many countries. Generally speaking, gays have been facing less and less discrimination in their careers. In many places in the world, laws have been passed to recognize gay marriage as legal. The global movement of homosexual resistance and the legalization battle is fading into history, or at least not as rigorous as before. However, and perhaps with regret from a literary point of view, the successful legalization of homosexuals also means that the movement of resistance upon homosexuality, as one of the many left-wing movements in the 1960s, becomes less and less rebellious. As commonly known, marriage is the outcome of our world based on patriarchy and heterosexuality. The legalization of gay marriage turned the homosexuals into good members of the mainstream society and stop challenging it.

It was in the background that texts about gays first came into the mainstream culture and eventually became a global fashion. In order to delete the challenge from the gay subculture, the mainstream culture adopted a strategy of removing the difference between homosexual and heterosexual and making homosexual look like heterosexual. Early texts about gays such as *In a Year of 13 Moons* (1978) and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985) are part of the cultural criticism beginning in the 1960s. They had much discussion on body and gender. Nevertheless, texts about gays in the past decade have been becoming more and more like romance. In *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Milk* (2009) and *A Single Man* (2009), the logic is that we should not discriminate against gays because like us, they have moving love. The discussion on body and gender which indicate the identity of gays disappeared, and love, the subject of romance, blurred the identity of gays. Such texts were no longer the rebellious subculture of gays but just texts about gays. On behalf of romance, the female in it as the object of males was replaced by a male. The colonization of gay texts by mainstream culture created a new romance which satisfied the “new young women” in China. We will discuss about it in Sections 15.5 and 15.6.
As pointed out by Dai Jin-Hua [1999], after the Cold War, the globalization of the mass culture of the United States made the voice of cultural criticism becoming smaller and smaller, and some rebellious subcultures in the 1960s and the 1970s (such as Punk and Rock) are just fashions today; they are no longer challenging. The gay subculture is such a fashion. In the last decade, in spite of some criticism, films about gays were so popular that the Film Festivals of Berlin, Venice and Cannes all set up special award for queer films. Meanwhile, ambiguous emotions between males began to appear in mainstream films, too. A case in point is *Sherlock Holmes* (2009). As well as in many other countries, China is actively sharing the mass culture of the United States. Films and TV programs with ambiguous emotions between males are popular in China, with *Nishuihan* (2004), *Qiuxi* (2009), and *Sound of Wind* (2009) as examples.

In Japan, similar change even happened to gay adult videos, unlike formerly that there were just texts for gays. In traditional Japanese gay adult videos whose audience is mainly gays, the characters usually are a beautiful boy and an ugly middle-aged man. But in 2005, Coat West, the subsidy of Coat 8 in the West, tried a new type. In these videos, two beautiful boys (Fig. 15.2) took the place of a boy and a middle-aged man in the old type. They were immediately welcomed by the market, especially the market of fojoshi. Sho, Nagi and Hikaru, the three most well-known actors of Coat West, suddenly became the idols of fojoshi. Since then, more and more of such new videos have been produced. They are even called “gay adult videos for fujoshi.” Of course, “gay adult videos for fujoshi” are not really just for fujoshi because gays like them, too.

More importantly, gay adult videos for fujoshi have another characteristic: sex with love. Sho, Nagi and Hikaru together played roles in two dozen videos. 9 After Hikaru quitted the job, Sho and Nagi continued costarring for several months. Fixed partnership made them look like lovers instead of just actors. These new videos are often shot in beautiful spots such as tideland, hot spring, skiing park and so on.

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8 Coat is one of the two largest companies producing adult videos; the other one is KO.
9 The most well-known videos among them are *Luxe* (6 parts) and *Nagi and Sho* (3 parts).
Different from traditional gay videos in which sex occupies most of the video time, 2/3 time of these new videos are spent on showing the travels and the intimacy between the actors. The characters play joyfully and intimately, just like ordinary lovers. Moreover, through its official blog, Coat suggested to the audience that Sho and Nagi are lovers in their real lives.

15.5 New Young Women in China and Their Desire

In their book *Slightly out of Character: Shonen Epics, Doujinshi and Japanese Concepts of Masculinity*, Megan Harrell and Mary College [2006] analyze the reason for the popularization of the tanbi comics in the 1960s in Japan. They point out that in the 1960s, Japanese women were changing from traditional, dependent women to modern women, but Japanese men whose typical image in mass culture was the salary man remained the same. These modern Japanese women felt unsatisfied with such men and began to construct new men mentally.

In the last decade, Chinese women were changing enormously. Unlike Japanese women, Chinese women have been economically independent since The People Republic of China was founded in 1949.
The government granted equal political and economical rights to men and women. In the last decade, many Western films and TV programs about love and sex of women were very popular among Chinese women living in big cities. A good case is *Sex and the City*. Meanwhile, some Chinese feminist scholars, Li Yin-He for example, introduced Western feminist theories to China and discussed women’s pleasure in sex.

According to Jacques Lacan, the “phallus” is a symbol of social rights. As mentioned above, Chinese women have been sharing equal social rights with men since 1949. When they were after the pleasure in sex, they tried to share the bodily pleasure produced by the phallus. It is the reason why gender-neutralization has been a fashion in young women in big cities since 2000. In 2005, because of her gender-neutral image, Li Yu-Chun, the champion of a TV singing competition, became the most popular pop star among Chinese young women.

Undoubtedly, most of the independent young women in China are heterosexual. Thus, their desire of sharing the pleasure of the phallus cannot be satisfied in romances since in an ordinary romance, the object of phallus is the female herself.

As mentioned above, in the recent decade, no longer rebellious, texts about gays became part of the mainstream culture and were seen as chic. Meanwhile, Japanese comics have immense influence among Chinese teenagers. Hiding in the background young Chinese women began to write texts about gays as their new romance. According to interviews with some fujoshi, Chen Jia-Qi and Song Hui [2009] said in their book *Survey Report on the Influence of Japanese Comics*, “Women feel themselves at a disadvantage in sex, so they want to be a male and be loved by a male at the same time. …In order to make sex fair, they create sex between two males.”

In this new romance, young women are free to regard the male as the object of their desire and enjoy the pleasure produced by the phallus. An interesting case is that several popular Chinese female tanbi writers,

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10 Li Yin-He is one of the most famous feminist sociologists in China. Her book *Love and Sex of Chinese Women* [1998] is very influential among women students in universities.
11 Jacques Lacan, the famous French poststructural theorist, argued that the social right is represented by “phallus” which is the center of the society. In this sense, females can share “phallus” and males may not have “phallus.”
e.g., Tianlaizhiyi and Jianzoupianfeng, falsely claimed they were men. Maybe they hope to be men. However, more importantly, readers hope to see male tanbi writers. And male writers are easier to be popular than female writers. Fujoshi might experience more real pleasure produced by phallus in novels by male writers than they do in novels by female writers.

In fact, fujoshi show some unconscious resistance to romance and the mainstream culture based on heterosexual. For example, many fujoshi said, "I feel great dislike when I see a boy and a girl fall in love." For this reason, they try their best to draw a clear dividing line between tanbi novels and romance. They argue that “We do not want weak uke!” and “Whoever watches gay adult video is real fujoshi.” As mentioned in Section 15.3, the position of weak uke is like that of the female. According to fujoshi’s concept, weak uke is female and tanbi stories about weak uke are romance. However, factually tanbi stories about strong uke are romance too. (See Section 15.6 for details.) For fujoshi, gay video means real male body. As we know, romance is the binary opposition of the subject and the object based on love. It is unimportant whether the binary opposition is between male and female, or between seme and uke. Tanbi novels are thus a new romance in which the binary opposition is between seme and uke. In this sense, for fujoshi, gay video is of course romance. Here, we can draw the conclusion that fujoshi’s discrimination of tanbi from romance is an attempt without meaningful result.

15.6 Fatherly Love in the New Romance

In *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, Ann Bar Snitow et al [1983] pointed out that in romance, a self-closed structure, except love, nothing is important. The only function of the stereotyped stories is to offer a place where the female will wait for the love of the male. This is also the characteristic of tanbi novels partly because tanbi comics were developed from girl’s comics in the 1960s in Japan (see Section 15.2).

More importantly, tanbi novels and romance share the same love—love to father and love from father. As mentioned above, phallus means social right, so females can share phallus and males may not have phallus.
In this sense, father is the male who have phallus, and he is the real governor of the society. In other words, the society is patriarchal rather than male-dominant. Romance is just the outcome of the patriarchal heterosexual mainstream culture.

Tanbi novels, as a romance, necessarily share the subject of fatherly love. Since his position is like that of female, the weak uke’s only meaning is to be the object of the male’s desire. Of course, the male’s desire is the desire of fujoshi who try to share the pleasure produced by phallus. Even fujoshi are aware that stories about weak uke are romance, so they try to abandon weak uke. However, the so-called strong uke, independent in behavior and emotion, does not look like female. This is the reason why fujoshi insist that stories about strong uke are not romance, but are real tanbi.

However, in the final analysis, these stories about strong uke are romance too because they are still the binary opposition based on fatherly love. In fact, the independence of strong uke is similar to that possessed by modern women. It is just based on the independence of themselves that fujoshi construct the independent strong uke. Unlike weak uke, stong uke is not female, so he can be free to love father and be loved by father.

However, fujoshi show confusion on fatherly love. On the one hand, they are deeply attracted by the fatherly love constructed by romance. On the other hand, unconsciously feeling dislike to the patriarchal heterosexual mainstream culture, they cannot justify female’s desire to love father and be loved by father. In order to delete the confusion, they construct in texts an independent male who loves father and is loved by father. The male is the strong uke that satisfies fujoshi’s desire to fatherly love. The desire of fujoshi has something in common with the fact that tanbi novels about love between father and son are very popular in China. Of course, as romance, tanbi novels do not really care about ethics. However, more importantly, it is the real desire of fujoshi. Here,

\[\text{Eq. 1}\]

When tanbi novels about love between father and son began to appear in China, fujoshi had bitter arguments on it. Many fujoshi showed intolerance of incest. However, afterward, the opposition made no difference to the popularization of such novels.
the binary opposition between strong seme and strong uke is the binary opposition between father and son.

In the modern discourse, the binary opposition between father and son is not the same as that between male and female because son will become father sooner or later, but female can never become male. In this sense, father and son are equals, and they are real males. It is for this reason that fujoshi do not think stories about love between father and son are romance.

However, stories about love between father and son are romance, too, because in such novels, the son does not become father. In fact, in tanbi novels, uke does not become seme, and the son never share the pleasure produced by phallus. The son is a male just because he will become father; if he never becomes father, he is not son but female. Fujoshi try to construct a real male as uke in tanbi novels, but the fact that tanbi novels are romance decides it to be a mission impossible.

15.7 Tanbi Novels in China: Writing and Publishing

Under the influence of Japanese tanbi subculture, at the end of the 1990s, some Chinese girls and young women, mostly from age 15 to 25, began to write tanbi novels on websites. They are the earliest fujoshi in China. However, even now, tanbi novels have been forbidden by the Chinese government to be published because the gay subculture is still regarded as pornographic in China, and pornographic works such as films and novels are illegal. By the same reasoning, romances with much description of sex are allowed being published since they are not considered as pornographic novels, but erotic novels. As mentioned above, a few isolated novels about ambiguous emotions between males were published in China. But these are too small in number to be taken into account.

In 2003 and 2004, several novel websites brought economic interest to writers of tanbi novels whose works could not be published officially in China. They are Jinjiang, set up in 2003; Qidian, in 2003; and Myfreshnet, based in the United States and paying attention to the market of China in 2004. Every writer was free to publish his/her works on these websites. Editors of the websites chose some popular novels from
abundant works and signed agreements with their writers. Then, the selected writers became so-called VIP writers and could gain payment from the websites according to the number of words they published because readers had to pay to read VIP novels. In fact, earlier than that, some novel websites such as Rongshuxia, set up in 1997, and Hongxiutianxiang, set up in 1999, began to pay VIP writers at the end of the 1990s. However, they did not publish tanbi novels. So writers of tanbi novels had to wait until 2003 and 2004 to receive any payment.

Right following the VIP payments, with the help of the websites, Chinese tanbi writers began to publish books in Taiwan. In 2004, Ueishiang Culture Press in Taiwan published *The Slave* by Fengnong, a very famous tanbi writer. It was the first Chinese tanbi novel ever published in book form. Afterward, following Fengnong many Chinese tanbi writers published their novels in Taiwan. Their income increased by a large margin for this reason.

Apart from publishing books in Taiwan and signing agreements with websites, tanbi writers made money by printing their novels and selling them to readers directly or through shopping websites. These are so-called “personal books” (Fig. 15.3). In China, the ISBN numbers for books are rigorously controlled by the government. The “personal books” do not carry ISBN numbers and are not officially “published.” In China where citizens are not free to publish books, the “personal books” run oppose the government’s control of publishing.

The economic factor did help the popularization of tanbi novels since 2005. In spite of that, it is necessary to mention that even now, the payments due the tanbi writers are very low. All of the three main means of income together do not make abundant economic interest. The Taiwan publishers seldom print a tanbi novel with more than 1,000 copies so that the royalty for the writers is very limited. In addition, the Chinese government often cleans up the net sellers who sell tanbi novels. Pirated books seriously influence the quantity of sale of tanbi novels published and printed by writers themselves. Many VIP novels are illegally copied and published on other free websites, reducing the number of readers who pay for the VIP novels and thus the payments received by the VIP writers. Consequently, the income of tanbi writers is much lower than
Tanbi novels cannot share the large book market of best sellers in China. This is the reason why tanbi writers are usually young, aged from 15 to 25. Writing tanbi novels, unlike writing other best sellers, cannot be a useful means of making a living. Only girls and young women without heavy living pressure can write tanbi novels in their spare time. For this reason alone, the tanbi subculture has not developed a whole system of production and consumption like that in a mass culture. It shows the opposition tanbi experiences as a subculture even though fujoshi are unconscious of it; they may have no other choice even if they are aware of it.

15.8 Conclusion

In the 1960s, developing from girl’s comics, tanbi comics appeared in Japan. In other words, tanbi novels originated from romance. Since the end of the Cold War, the gay subculture has gradually entered into the
patriarchal heterosexual mainstream culture and been constructed as a
global fashion. Texts about gays were no longer a cultural criticism as
before and became a new romance—the binary opposition based on love.
In the last decade, sharing social rights with males, young Chinese
women began their desire to share the pleasure produced by phallus. It
was through the back door that Japanese tanbi comics and novels slipped
into China and became more and more popular among young Chinese
women.

The end of the Cold War implies the end of the left cultural criticism
beginning in the 1960s. Many subcultures which had been rebellious in
the 1960s gradually became part of the mainstream culture. In this
environment, the tanbi subculture is just a new romance in the Chinese
mainstream culture. In this new romance, fujoshi regard the male body as
the object of their desire and experience the pleasure produced by the
phallus. In addition, in this new “game,” they can be free to love father
and be loved by father—without any confusion resulting from their
unconscious dislike of the patriarchal heterosexual mainstream culture.

However, even though fujoshi are unconscious of it and may have
no choice, tanbi, as a subculture, still shows some opposition to the
mainstream culture. For example, the tanbi “personal books” do oppose
the government’s control and the commercialization of publishing.

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