

From the "Goddess of Fertility" to the "Policy Priestess": A Case Study of *Frogs* on the Cultural Identity Crisis of Rural Goddess Images

Lebin Zhang

School of Liberal Arts, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, Jiangxi, 330022, China

ABSTRACT

Mo Yan's *Frogs* centers on the character of Auntie, presenting a complex and legendary female figure whose life spans six decades of dramatic rural fertility history. While previous studies have primarily focused on the causes of Auntie's tragedy, her character transformation, or the novel's critical perspective, this paper diverges by examining the underlying cultural subjectivity issues. The implementation of the national family planning policy profoundly impacted rural fertility concepts, transforming Auntie from the revered "Goddess of Fertility" to the life-indifferent "Policy Priestess," and ultimately returning to human kindness. This process encapsulates deep reflections on cultural subjectivity.

KEYWORDS

Frogs; Auntie; Symbolic violence; Cultural subjectivity

1 From "goddess of fertility" to "policy priestess": identity transformation and cultural incorporation under symbolic violence

In traditional Chinese rural culture, the "Goddess of Fertility" is a prominent symbolic figure embodying the rural society's aspirations and reverence for fertility. She is often depicted as a kind, compassionate, and supernaturally powerful woman who grants children to infertile women, serving as a symbol of comfort and hope for rural women facing fertility challenges. In rural society, fertility is considered a woman's primary duty, and the "Goddess of Fertility" is seen as the guardian and facilitator of this mission. Thus, her image is deeply ingrained, becoming an indispensable part of rural culture.

In Mo Yan's *Frogs*, the character of Auntie Wanxin inherits the cultural archetype of the "Goddess of Fertility" to some extent. As an obstetrician, Wanxin's work is closely tied to fertility. In the early part of the novel, she assists countless rural women in childbirth with her exceptional medical skills and profound compassion, earning her the revered title of "Goddess of Fertility." She not only brings the dawn of new life to women but also provides them with spiritual support and encouragement. She views all life equally and harbors indignation towards the preference for sons over daughters. A particularly telling dialogue occurs after a cow gives birth to a female calf: "Father excitedly said: Good, it's a female calf. Auntie angrily retorted: It's strange, when a woman gives birth to a girl, men frown; when a cow gives birth to a female calf, men smile! Father said: A female calf can grow up to reproduce calves! Auntie said: What about humans? Can't a girl grow up to have children too? Father said: It's not the same. Auntie said: What's the difference! Seeing Auntie's anger, Father stopped arguing." Father's approval of the female calf is tainted by utilitarian values, valuing its economic potential, while Auntie's compassion is universal, viewing all life, whether male or female, as equally valuable. Her empathy enhances her "divine" qualities. In rural society, Wanxin's image mirrors the "Goddess of Fertility," serving as a metaphorical expression of rural women's cultural characteristics.

The impact of the family planning policy on rural society extended far beyond population control, undermining the foundations of rural culture. In this context, Auntie's identity underwent a significant transformation, shifting from a compassionate "midwife" to a ruthless "family planning official." This was not merely a change in role but a result of cultural incorporation. As the head of the obstetrics department, Wanxin was tasked with enforcing the policy, becoming not just a doctor assisting women in childbirth but also a propagandist and enforcer of the policy. This role transformation fundamentally altered her image in rural society. In the process of policy enforcement, she had to balance policy requirements with women's fertility aspirations, placing her in a dilemma. She could not entirely abandon her emotional and moral responsibilities as the "Goddess of Fertility," yet felt compelled to fully implement national policy. This led to a complex and contradictory identity, gradually eroding people's respect for her, with some even vilifying her as a "demon."

Symbolic violence, as conceptualized by Bourdieu, is a subtle and often unnoticed form of violence that reshapes individual identities and cultures through language, symbols, and cultural practices. The family planning policy, as an

expression of national will, deeply reformed rural society's culture and values through language and symbols, aligning with this logic. Traditional rural society's core ethical norms, such as "continuing the family line" and "more children, more blessings," viewed the continuation of family lineage as a sacred duty, with fertility being the sole means to achieve it. Family planning, through slogans, posters, and broadcasts, promoted concepts like "fewer but better births, a happier life" and "late marriage and childbirth, better births," framing "fewer but better births" as a sign of "science" and "progress." This gradually led farmers to adopt the new cultural logic of "fertility as a burden"[5]. Such slogans were not just policy demands but also cultural disciplining, reconstructing rural society's fertility concepts and diluting traditional fertility ethics.

From the perspective of cultural incorporation, the emergence of the "Policy Priestess" identity represents the modernization process's transformation and integration of traditional rural culture. The family planning policy, as a vehicle for modern national will, permeated every corner of rural society through figures like Wanxin. Wanxin's identity transformation is not just her personal tragedy but also a reflection of traditional rural culture's struggles in the face of modernization. Her transition from "Goddess of Fertility" to "Policy Priestess" illustrates how traditional rural culture, under the impact of modernization, gradually lost its independence and autonomy.

2 The alienation of the "frog" imagery and the modern conflict with traditional beliefs

The frog, known for its remarkable reproductive capacity, shares homophonic associations with "child" (娃) and "Nüwa" (娲) in Chinese. The mention of Nüwa naturally evokes the myth of "Nüwa creating humans," and when connected with the concept of "child," many perceive the frog as a symbol of fertility and abundant progeny. Consequently, the frog gradually evolved into a totem of reproductive worship. In early folk traditions, many people abstained from consuming frogs. As depicted in the novel "Frog," it is stated at the outset, "Our family harbors a strong aversion to those who eat frogs. I believe our family members would rather starve than consume frogs." Even when beaten, Qin He persists in dissuading others from eating frogs, exclaiming, "Good brothers, if you beat me to death, I would thank you. But please do not eat frogs... Frogs are friends of humanity and should not be eaten..." Ke Dou himself also declares, "I'm sorry, I don't eat bullfrogs." Set against the backdrop of the 1950s and 1960s, when national policies encouraged unrestricted procreation, the frog became closely associated with the notion of abundant offspring, elevating its status in people's minds and making it a rare inclusion in culinary practices.

However, with the advancement of modernization, particularly the implementation of the family planning policy, the imagery of the frog underwent a significant transformation. In the latter part of the novel, the croaking of frogs no longer symbolizes the continuity of life and hope but instead becomes an omen of death and despair. Ultimately, it becomes intertwined with monetary interests, serving as a veil for surrogacy. The "children" it symbolizes are commodified, with some individuals, under the guise of noble intentions, engaging in clandestine transactions, forming a disgraceful industry that sacrifices the physical and mental health of mothers. Consequently, the traditional beliefs once symbolized by the frog were abandoned and forgotten in the wake of modernization. This phenomenon is vividly illustrated by the actions of Little Lion, who initially strictly enforced national policies, ruthlessly preventing any form of excessive childbearing, but later, driven by personal desires, joined Yuan Sai's so-called frog farming company, participated in illegal activities without remorse, and took away Chen Mei's child. The former symbolism of the frog was thus desecrated, forgotten, and alienated. The traditional rural culture's emphasis on procreation and reverence for life gradually dissipated, leading to profound changes in the value systems and belief structures of rural society.

The alienation of the "frog" imagery reflects the struggles and dilemmas of traditional rural culture amidst the waves of modernization. Within the context of traditional rural culture, procreation was regarded as a crucial mission for women, and the frog, as a symbol of fertility, embodied the rural society's reverence for life and its fervent desire for the continuation of the family line. However, as modernization progressed, these traditional beliefs faced significant challenges. The family planning policy, embodying the modernizing will of the state, reshaped and integrated the procreation concepts of people within traditional rural culture during its implementation. The aunt's work was closely tied to procreation, and with the formal implementation of the family planning policy, her identity shifted from a "living bodhisattva" supporting women's fertility to a "law enforcer" curbing excessive childbearing. This abrupt transformation in identity not only marked a personal tragedy but also served as a clear manifestation of the clash between traditional beliefs and modern ideologies.

3 The tearing of rural cultural identity and the predicament of subjectivity

The psychological journey of the aunt in the novel can be divided into three stages: initially, she is a "goddess of fertility" with a divine compassion for all living beings; then, she becomes a cold and unfeeling "policy priest"; and finally, in her later years, she experiences a return of maternal and human nature, becoming a "penitent" constantly seeking redemption. The aunt's method of atonement is realized through the creation of clay dolls. After a night of being frightened into shock by frogs, she "awakened," transitioning from a staunch materialist to an idealist. She became acutely aware of the grave sins she committed during her middle years by "killing children" and sought to redeem her soul by "creating children." Therefore, rather than attributing my aunt's actions to atonement, it is more accurate to interpret her behavior as an expression of reverence and compassion for life itself, signifying a profound connection and nostalgic remembrance of the essence of existence.

In her later years, the aunt found herself in an awkward position. Having committed numerous "sins," which, in terms of their nature, were "necessary evils" — actions taken to achieve a greater "good" — she could no longer return to her original image of a "goddess of fertility" filled with maternal and divine qualities due to the unease of her soul and external criticisms. This identity was almost completely torn apart. Simultaneously, she reflected on and questioned some of the inhumane actions she took during her strict enforcement of policies, believing herself to be the primary culprit behind the deaths of Wang Xiaomei and Wang Dan. Consequently, she could no longer firmly adhere to her former beliefs. Fortunately, through grappling with and reflecting on her internal conflicts, the aunt achieved a form of self-awakening, albeit incomplete. For instance, her covert assistance in Ke Dou and Little Lion's taking of Chen Mei's child, which sought to compensate for her past mistakes at the expense of others' happiness, lacked justification. However, viewed holistically, the aunt's reflection led to a return of her human nature, which is indeed valuable.

The clay doll atonement ritual in the novel serves a dual narrative function: it not only embodies the aunt's individual identity crisis but also implicitly raises profound questions about the rupture of rural cultural identity and the perplexities of subjectivity. Through the depiction of this folk custom, we gain insight into the survival dilemmas and self-adjustments of traditional rural civilization under the impact of modernization, as well as the implicit resistance to the expansion of modernity. I believe the novel contains a critique of the lack of consideration for the subjectivity and transitional nature of rural culture in the process of modernization. As modernization accelerates, rural society is experiencing the disintegration of its belief systems and the shifting of its value coordinates, leading to a profound crisis in the construction of local cultural subjectivity.

Regarding the various abnormal forms of rural culture presented in the novel, they can be summarized into several typical dimensions. Firstly, there is the distortion of the family ethics paradigm. In traditional Chinese family structure, the "filial piety ethics" and "inheritance of the ancestral line" occupied the core position. However, after the implementation of the family planning policy, they were restructured into a "state obligation" nature of reproductive behavior. Some families with excessive births were labeled as "illegal households", and the grassroots law enforcers even caused structural damage to the kinship relationship during the policy implementation process. For instance, Wang Xiaomei's resentment towards her aunt in the text, and the dramatic transformation of villagers' attitude towards the aunt from respect to hostility - all these together led to the anomie state of rural moral order.

Secondly, it presents a fragmentation phenomenon at the cultural memory level. Traditional fertility rituals such as worshipping "the Goddess of Procreation" were gradually abolished, and instead, the widespread application of cold medical tools like operating tables took their place. The "sacred space" of folk beliefs was occupied by the "administrative space" of policy implementation. In people's cognitive system, the benevolent "Goddess of Procreation" image they believed in internally transformed into a cold "policy priest". This transformation essentially reflects the deep-level replacement of the cultural symbolic system - the operation of state power through symbolic means replaced the original religious symbolic system in the rural society. When it comes to the topic of fertility, people no longer hold an attitude dominated by optimism. What first comes to mind is no longer the warm image of "the Goddess of Procreation" and the scene of a family full of children and harmonious family life, but rather the cold objects like medical equipment and the anxiety and fear of punishment measures for "excessive births". The coercive sterilization measures, artificial abortion methods, and economic penalties used during the implementation of the family planning policy, not only standardized the reproductive behavior itself, but also changed the way people perceive the concept of the body. Under the background of strict regulation of reproductive behavior, women's exercise of autonomous rights over their bodies was significantly restricted. The core concept of "the sacredness of the body" in traditional fertility culture showed a trend of weakening, and the concept of the body became "instrumentalized". The behaviors of choosing to terminate pregnancy or undergoing sterilization surgery were once rare, but became common after the policy was implemented. The

implementation of these measures collectively led to the interruption of the cultural memory chain in the rural society.

In addition, it is worth noting the alienation phenomenon presented in the knowledge and technology dimension. Rural witchcraft is gradually being replaced by modern medical science and technology. The folk belief forms like "worshipping gods" that were common in traditional fertility behaviors have now given way to the implementation of sterilization surgeries, the application of B-ultrasound technology, and the popularization of contraceptive drugs. The examples show that these technical means have integrated fertility activities into the standardized system of national medical management. Symbolic expressions with medical authority features such as "scientific contraception" and "eugenics and procreation" have relegated traditional fertility knowledge like "taboos of the fetal deity" to backward superstition. Thus, this transformation process has significantly impacted the maintenance of the cultural subjectivity of the rural society. The strong intervention of the medical discourse system has led to the fundamental questioning of the status of traditional fertility.

4 Conclusion

Mo Yan integrated his strong spirit of realistic criticism and rich artistic imagination and creativity into his works. In the form of a drama, he presented the history of that period in a relatively complete manner, allowing the Chinese people to confront the pain directly. Through the pen of the protagonist "Toad" in the novel, the struggles and pains of people at that time were vividly depicted. The return of the aunt's self-awareness in the text represents Mo Yan's profound reflection on culture and history. Here by, I urge rural communities to re-examine traditional beliefs, reflect on the impact of the modernization process on rural culture, and seek to reestablish the subjectivity and autonomy of local cultural identity.

About the Author

Lebin Zhang, 2174974590@qq.com.

References

- [1] Yu Lianfeng. Analysis of the Prototype Images of Nuwa, Xi Wangmu and Guanyin [D]. Shandong University, 2018.
- [2] Zhang Yan. Frog, Child, Nuwa - On the Three Stages of the Transformation of the Aunt Character in Mo Yan's "Frog" [J]. Guangzhou Radio and Television University Journal, 2013, 13(1): 44-48 + 109.
- [3] Sun Zhengjun. "Aunt is the God in My Heart" - On the Image of Aunt in Mo Yan's Novel "Frog" [J]. Journal of Changchun University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition), 2016, 29(5): 114-118.
- [4] David Swartz. Culture and Power - Bourdieu's Sociology [M]. Beijing: Translation Press, 2006.
Nie Guilan. Linguistic Analysis of the Legitimacy of Rural Family Planning Proclamation Sentences and Slogans [J]. Journal of Jinggangshan Normal University, 2004, (3): 52-54.
- [5] Wu Yiqin. Original Sin and Redemption - Reading Mo Yan's Long Novel "Frog" [J]. Southern Literature, 2010, (3): 43-45.