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**Ли Цзя**

магистр филологических наук,  
аспирант кафедры зарубежной литературы  
Белорусский государственный университет  
г. Минск, Беларусь

**Li Jia**

MA in Philology, PhD Student  
of the Department of Foreign Literature  
Belarusian State University  
Minsk, Belarus  
bo328229287@gmail.com

#### THE CONCEPT OF *THE FROG* BY MO YAN: HEROES IN THE CONTEXT OF NATIONAL MYTH AND HISTORY

Frogs have a multidimensional identity in the Chinese historical context and are an important component of national myths. In Mo Yan's *The Frog*, the national myth is cleverly combined with the changing times to give the frog a fuller image and color. By analyzing the symbolic meaning of frogs in the novel, he reveals that the natural environment has been artificially interfered with and explores the predicament and tenacity of the frogs' survival in the changing times, thus highlighting the heroic nature of frogs. Mo Yan calls for the importance of the dignity of individual life and reproductive rights while feeling the fragility of individual life.

*К е у w o r d s: frog; national myth; heroism; historical transformation.*

#### КОНЦЕПЦИЯ РОМАНА МО ЯНЯ «ЛЯГУШКА»: ГЕРОИ В КОНТЕКСТЕ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОГО МИФА И ИСТОРИИ

Лягушки в китайском историческом контексте обладают многогранной идентичностью и являются важной частью национальных мифов. В романе Мо Яня «Лягушка» национальный миф искусно сочетается с изменяющейся эпохой, что придает образу лягушки насыщенность и полноту. Посредством анализа символического значения лягушки в романе выясняется, что природная среда подверглась искусственному вмешательству; исследуются затруднительное положение и стойкость выживания лягушек в условиях меняющегося времени, что подчеркивает их героическую природу. Мо Янь призывает к уважению достоинства каждой отдельной жизни и репродуктивных прав, осознавая при этом хрупкость жизни.

*К л ю ч е в ы е   с л о в а: лягушка; национальный миф; героизм; историческая трансформация.*

In the course of China's historical and literary development, a large number of people, animals, and other carriers of memories and beliefs have emerged, reflecting China's style at different stages of development. And in the long course of literature, there has emerged such a brilliant writer as Mo Yan (莫言, b. 1955). «Mo Yan has transformed the geographical Gaomi Township of Northeast China into a 'Kingdom of Literature' with Chinese characteristics» [1, p. 125]. Mo Yan has made an immense contribution to the development of contemporary Chinese literature and the flourishing of world literature. He remarked at the Nobel Prize award ceremony: «I'd stop and pay my respects to a towering old tree; if I saw a bird, I was sure it could become human any time it wanted; and I suspected every stranger I met of being a transformed beast» [2]. Mo Yan's Nobel Prize acceptance

speech reveals that his imagination is rooted in the soil of traditional Chinese culture, continually drawing nourishment from myths and folk tales. With a powerful and unconstrained style of imagination, he endows creatures inhabiting the natural world with new identities and roles, transforming them from mere objective entities into beings intimately linked to the pulse of their era – both witnesses and participants.

*The Frog* was initially named *Tadpole Pill* (蝌蚪丸), and the source of the title was a comment in a newspaper in 1958: men and women could play a contraceptive role by swallowing fourteen tadpoles before having sex. This view was very prevalent at that time, and the absurdity of the objective reality of the act gave Mo Yan abundant inspiration for his creation. Given the prevalence of homophones and homonyms in Chinese characters, «The novel is named Frog, pronounced the same as Wa (child), which is Mo Yan's compassion for life» [3, p. 703]. By depicting this absurd phenomenon in *Frogs*, Mo Yan places frogs, a common animal in nature, in the era of the family planning policy (计划生育, in China, the population policy of planned parenthood is implemented to control the rate of population growth) and uses the novel's storyline and conflicts to give the frogs multi-dimensional symbolic meanings.

«He has constructed a multi-level and three-dimensional dialogue space by adopting the structure of epigraphy and narration in “The Frog”» [4, p. 57]. Through narration and recollection, the story gradually unfolds, exploring the essence of life through its cultural metaphors, the journey of personal growth, and the arduous process of nurturing new life. It fully embodies Mo Yan's strong narrative ability and innovative spirit.

«The reason why Mo Yan's novel creation can achieve great success is closely related to his conscious inheritance of Chinese classical and modern literary traditions in the process of writing» [5, p. 66]. The frog plays a variety of roles, which not only reflects the actual meaning of the frog as a creature of nature but also carries a lot of cultural and symbolic connotations. The symbolic imagery of the frog is not limited to the literary realm but is also contained in social history, politics, and mythology.

## **I. Symbols of the Frog in Myth and National History**

### **1. Symbol of Fertility and Reproduction Worship**

In the ancient times, when the living environment was harsh and wild animals were rampant, the forefathers needed to protect themselves from all kinds of aggressive and dangerous wild animals on top of satisfying the basic needs of survival, so they paid more attention to the creatures of the natural world. Frogs, being small in size and non-threatening to the ancestors, were rightly the object of frequent observation. It is easy to see that frogs are very fertile, giving birth to groups of tadpoles, which slowly evolve into two-legged and then four-legged creatures. This observation of the process of nurturing and growth of life was a novelty to the ancestors and inspired early humans to think about life and reproduction.

«Due to the frog's ability to reproduce, the fertility cult in some parts of ancient China was also related to the frog, which was regarded as a symbol of the god of fertility, symbolizing many children and many blessings» [6, p. 51]. For example, the fertility goddess 'Badin Lamu' worshipped by the Naxi people (China's ethnic minorities) in Sichuan is a frog, which was shaped by the ancestors into a cultural symbol with Chinese characteristics through observation and imagination, reflecting the ancestors' desire for reproduction and embodying the harmonious coexistence of human beings and nature.

## 2. Taoism and Mythological Symbols

«Daoism holds that humanity, heaven and earth, and all things are mutually utilized and interdependent» [7, p. 14]. As a native Chinese religion, Daoism (formed during the late eastern han dynasty) emphasizes the 'balance of yin and yang' (a key Daoist concept). The fact that frogs are living animals and can be regarded as 'yang', and that frogs are often found in places associated with water, which is regarded as 'yin', has led to frogs being regarded as a being that reconciles yin and yang. In the shaping of religion and mythology, the frog as a symbol possesses magical power and has important religious and cultural significance.

In Chinese mythology, frogs are not only animals in nature but are also often associated with mythological figures and events that are full of mystery. «The connection between frogs and the moon is especially prominent, and this view is most clearly reflected in the legend of 'Chang'e Runs to the Moon' (ancient Chinese myths and legends)» [8, p. 182]. The frog dwelling place on the moon is the Toad Palace (Architectural Structures on the Moon in Chinese Mythology), and the moon represents 'yin' power, and the frog act as a carrier of 'yang' power. The moon is also a carrier of supernatural power, and the moon is mythologically constructed. Through myths, legends, and religious teachings, the frog symbolizes the harmony of yin and yang and the symbiosis of nature.

## 3. Symbol of political power in ancient times

In ancient Chinese society, frogs were not only used as natural elements but also symbolized political power. Typically, during the Song Dynasty (960–1279), the government began to take control measures to prohibit people from catching and eating frogs. From a superficial analysis, the Song Dynasty was meant to protect the agro-ecology, and frogs could effectively remove pests, which was a favorable policy for the benefit of many people. However, from a deeper analysis, the ban on the capture and consumption of frogs reflects the absolute mastery of the feudal dynasty over natural resources, and frogs became a symbol of the power and order of the dynasty, reflecting the supremacy of the king's power while strengthening his rule.

In the ancient wars and military power, due to the slow development of iron smelting technology and war tools, the strength of military power was measured by the number of troops, and under the influence of folklore, the soldiers associated

the frog's amazing fertility with the army's prosperous development and strong power. As a common and ordinary element of village life, the frog showed resilience during major historical changes, representing the prosperity and flourishing of military and national power.

As symbolic imagery, the frog became a tool for the dynasty to rule and manage, providing new ideas for later generations to explore the management and operation of political power through symbolic imagery.

#### 4. Frog Imagery in Literature

In classical Chinese literature, frogs frequently appear in poems as important imagery. In the poem «The fragrance of rice flowers speaks of a good year, and the sound of frogs is heard» (Xin Qiji, Song Dynasty), frogs are closely associated with the rice harvest, creating a harmonious mood of harvest and nature, which also confirms the dependence of early Chinese agricultural farming on natural phenomena. At the same time, frogs, as animals, are also symbols of the natural environment. Especially in Tang poems and Song lyrics, the sound of frogs chirping is often intertwined with the scenes of fields after the rain and summer nights in the countryside so as to bring out the natural and tranquil atmosphere of the countryside with the help of the poet's artistic attainments. The sound of frogs has become a poetic symbol of vernacular culture, and by describing the sound from nature, a poetic picture of harmonious coexistence between man and nature is constructed.

In modern Chinese literature, after more mature and abundant artistic processing, frogs are often used as metaphors and become an important part of social and historical criticism. In Mo Yan's *Frog*, frogs have multiple identities and participate in the plot development of the novel, showing the impact of China's family planning policy at that time and highlighting the submission and struggle of the lower strata of society against reality.

In the evolution of classical Chinese literature to modern literature, the meaning of the frog as a carrier of imagery has gradually become multidimensional, discussing the interactive relationship between human beings and nature and human beings and society. While increasing the difficulty and complexity of understanding and analyzing the text, it also provides more possibilities for the future development of man and nature and man and society.

#### **II. Frog Imagery and Heroic Performance in *The Frog***

Based on the multiple symbolic identities and rich cultural connotations of frogs in Chinese historical development, it has directly influenced Mo Yan's creative thinking and approach in *The Frog*. The frog, as a part of nature, symbolizes the vitality and law of nature and represents the power of reproduction. When the policy of family planning covers the Chinese countryside, both human beings and other animals will be affected. Due to the demands of the country's situation at that particular time in history, it is impossible to judge whether the policy was good or bad. Mo Yan uses the frog's constraints on reproduction

as a metaphor for the control and restriction of individual reproduction and the fragility of individual life during the implementation of the family planning policy in China at that time.

By placing the frog and the aunt within the same context, Mo Yan constructs a 'maternal hero' in a modern context, in which the frog and the aunt echo each other. As a midwife, the aunt is not only a catalyst for new life and an enforcer of policy, but also an ordinary person. On the one hand, she needs to firmly follow the policy requirements to carry out her work, and on the other hand, she also has to bear the inner moral and emotional torment. And the frog, as a common animal in village life, lives in close proximity to human settlements but reproduces in large numbers in the water pond, becoming a symbol of fertility and the hope of giving birth to new life. Through their tenacity and reproduction, they show their determination to fight against external pressures, which is the same as that of the millions of Chinese working people who have good qualities.

### III. The Tragedy and Historical Transformation in *The Frog*

The frog, as a symbolic image rooted in traditional Chinese mythology, is used by Mo Yan in his historical development to deeply criticize some of the radical behaviors of the family planning policy and is thus given a new significance for the times. The frog in Mo Yan's *The Frog* has a multidimensional meaning, showing the natural elements and vitality of the frog itself, but also a unique tragic color, based on the historical context of the text.

Frogs are an important clue in the novel, the frog's call appears many times in the text, but it is also an observer of the contradictions in the novel's storyline. The frogs' calls appear frequently in the text, such as *It is often said that frogs sound like drums, but my aunt said that the frogs calls that night were like cries, as if they were thousands of newborn babies crying* [9, p. 300]. There was a kind of resentment and aggression in the frogs' calls, as if they were the sprites of countless hurt babies voicing their accusations. Although frogs cannot directly fight against some of the radical behaviors, they rebel by virtue of their continuous reproduction. Individual reproductive rights are curtailed, exposing the fragility of the individual within the torrent of historical development. The frogs continue their cries and protests, their ceaseless echoes as symbols of life rendering their plight uniquely tragic.

Ancient Chinese etiquette and indoctrination believed that 'three unfilial children are the most important' (*The Mencius*, Warring States period), and even with the emergence of individual freedom and pluralism today, the importance of fertility and reproduction in ancient times can still be seen. «The rural family is a civil society organization formed on the basis of blood relations» [10, p. 101]. Procreation is essential for the continuity of the family line, yet this traditional notion is being steadily eroded by state policy. As an enforcer of the family planning policy, my aunt's methods proved cruel and extreme during its

implementation, while afterwards she endured profound inner anguish and torment. The intense conflict within her soul compels readers to engage in profound reflection.

In the course of policy implementation, despite possessing formidable reproductive capacity, the frog lacks the power to alter reality and can only witness the unfolding tragedy. This embodies the submission of natural life to social systems, rendering the frog a tragic symbol constrained by policy and thereby elevating it to the status of a “tragic hero”. Mo Yan’s historical transformation of the frog’s symbolic imagery reflects a profound reflection on the family planning policy and the current state of human existence.

This article examines Mo Yan’s multi-dimensional portrayal of frogs in *Frog*, revealing them as symbols of life; of enjoying freedom and nurturing motherhood; and of individual fertility constrained under the family planning policy. It explores the merits and drawbacks of implementing such policies, offering particularly incisive criticism of the brutal and radical measures employed. Within this novel, there are no irredeemably villainous characters, and no fixed moral compass can measure right from wrong. All are wretched souls struggling to survive within a specific historical era, powerless to control their own destinies.

The frog, as a common element in nature, appears throughout both mythical lore and historical development, serving as a microcosm and symbol of natural life. In *The Frog*, through a meticulously crafted and innovative creative approach coupled with masterful narrative techniques, the frog as an image achieves a transformative transition from traditional mythology to historical significance. The frog’s multifaceted symbolism offers a fresh perspective for analyzing this work, prompting reflection on the humanistic concerns and moral sentiments underlying contemporary family planning policies. It underscores the importance of individual rights to life within the context of national development and social progress, providing new dimensions for contemplating the balanced development of nature and society and society and the individual.

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