

# Exploring Folk Culture in Mo Yan's Novels from an Animal Perspective: A Case Study of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*

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**Abstract.** In the novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Mo Yan integrates extensive folk culture, including proverbs, folklore, and folk art, which carries significant cultural meaning. This paper systematically analyzes three primary types of folk culture present in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* through the lens of animal narration: agricultural customs, market customs, and folk beliefs. Regarding agricultural customs, this study illustrates the unique folk agricultural practices of Gaomi from the perspectives of animal husbandry and land cultivation. In terms of market customs, the paper examines changes in market folk culture through livestock trading and processions, reflecting the era's characteristics. As for folk beliefs, the discussion is divided into reverence for humanity and admiration for wildness, showcasing the animal worship mindset prevalent in Gaomi. This approach further expands and innovates the research perspective on the folk culture within *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, enabling a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the significance of the author's folk writing.

## 1 Introduction

Since Mo Yan published *Transparent Carrot* in "Chinese Writers," his works have drawn significant attention from numerous researchers. According to statistics from "China National Knowledge Infrastructure," there were 1,572 related articles from 2000 to 2011 alone, using "Mo Yan" as a keyword. Following his receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Mo Yan and his novels have become focal points of research in both Chinese and global literary circles. In 2012 and 2013, stimulated by Mo Yan's Nobel Prize win, the number of related academic papers reached 1,812 and 1,604, respectively, highlighting the substantial volume of scholarly interest in Mo Yan [1].

The remarkable influence and resonance of Mo Yan's novels can be attributed to the rich cultural factors and research value contained within. Studies examining Mo Yan and his works from a cultural perspective encompass folklore, regional culture, religious culture, and more. For instance, Liu Liling's *The Folkloric Significance of Mo Yan's Novels*, Zhang Zhizhong's *Expanding Research Spaces of Mo Yan from the Perspective of Regional Culture*, and Lu Daoxin's *The Relationship between Mo Yan and Religious Culture* are notable

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examples [2-4]. However, current research largely focuses on Mo Yan's overall oeuvre, lacking an in-depth exploration of specific works.

In addition, in every work by Mo Yan, there is almost always a depiction of animals. The unique animal narrative is one of the compelling reasons for the charm of Mo Yan's novels and has become a hot topic of research. For instance, studies such as Dong Yingxue's *Research on Animal Narrative in Mo Yan's Novel Creation* and Chen Jiajie's and Xiong Yaojie's *Humanity, Animality, and the Imagination of Rural China — "Animal Narrative" in Mo Yan's Novels* further explore Mo Yan's reflections on social humanity and the essence of life based on an analysis of animal narrative methods [5,6]. However, in Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, he directly places donkeys, cows, pigs, and dogs at the forefront of the narrative. Through the animals' storytelling and experiences, readers glimpse the changing tides of the times and feel the rich folk culture from the animals' perspective.

Therefore, this paper focuses on Mo Yan's novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, expanding the scope to human perspectives. It explores agricultural customs, market traditions, and folk beliefs depicted through Mo Yan's "animal perspective," uncovering the elements of folk culture and analyzing their implications for contemporary literature and the spiritual enlightenment of modern humanity.

## **2 Agricultural customs: animals as labor partners**

Agricultural customs represent a cultural product gradually formed by farmers through long-term production practices. They emerge as a cultural phenomenon alongside the development of agricultural economic life [7]. Growing up in the densely populated region of Mo Yan, he possesses rich local experience and is very familiar with farmers' agricultural labor, as well as the indispensable animal partners in the labor process. Thus, in Mo Yan's depiction of animal husbandry and land cultivation, readers can discover the unique folk agricultural customs intertwined within these aspects.

### **2.1 Animal husbandry**

*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, the donkey, cow, and pig appear as common farm animals in rural settings. Readers gain insight into the agricultural customs of Gaomi through the farmers' care for these animals. Mo Yan writes that the Ximen donkey "grows up drinking thin porridge made from sorghum" and experiences pure joy while chewing and swallowing "stir-fried black beans mixed with chopped straw." The Ximen cow feeds on "grass sifted with a sieve" during solitary farming but enjoys "chopped bean stalks mixed with short-cuts of sweet potato vines" once it joins the commune. The Ximen pig, during the era of intensive pig farming, eats "sugar-feed fermented from chicken droppings, cow manure, and green plants mixed with brewing grains," yet in times of famine, it resorts to "a pile of rotten cottonseed husks mixed with snow [8]." These detailed descriptions of animal feed familiarize readers with the local customs of animal husbandry and provide an understanding of the crops grown in the Gaomi area. Mo Yan's adept presentation of animal husbandry customs, along with the homemade feed used during economic hardships, showcases the various agricultural raw materials. This allows readers to genuinely experience the strong connection to rural life and perceive Mo Yan's subtle expression of his affection for his hometown.

## 2.2 Land cultivation

In the 20th century, donkeys and oxen served as vital tools for farmers, acting as partners in their labor [9]. Understanding farmers' land cultivation customs sheds light on rural agricultural practices. Mo Yan, in the first part "Donkey's Struggles" and the second part "Ox's Rigor" of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, presents numerous depictions of land cultivation. Before the Ximen donkey begins work, the blue-faced man takes it to the blacksmith to "hang the hoof." Before the Ximen ox plows, the blue-faced man "trains" it in the threshing yard. When the Ximen ox plows for the first time, it uses a wooden plow instead of the iron plow from the production brigade [8]. As farming tools, animals play a significant role in agricultural customs. In northern wheat-producing areas, farmers commonly use donkeys and oxen for plowing. Mo Yan's descriptions vividly illustrate the agricultural practices of traditional Chinese farmers, bringing thousands of years of agrarian culture to life in written form from an animal's perspective, while also showcasing the unique folk culture of the Gaomi region.

## 3 Market customs: animals as exhibitions

The history of markets is long-standing, tracing back to the barter system of early societies. In rural areas, markets serve as essential venues for purchasing daily necessities and conducting trade, typically characterized by regular schedules and locations. Mo Yan takes the perspective of animals to objectively portray two activities: livestock trading and parades. This allows readers to understand that traditional market customs do not endure indefinitely but are influenced by broader societal conditions. Consequently, the role of markets also evolves under the weight of changing times.

### 3.1 Livestock trade

In animals, livestock refers to domestic animals that assist humans in their work. The livestock trade depicted in Mo Yan's novels represents one of the traditional trading methods and reflects local market customs [10]. In "The Bull's Strength," Mo Yan describes the livestock market in Ximen Tun. Lan Jiefang follows Lan Lian to the market to buy cattle. The author uses lengthy passages to illustrate the bustling scene of the livestock trade, especially the depiction of a thriving cattle market, even providing detailed introductions to different cattle breeds [7]. The donkey market only has two donkeys, "the white-faced donkey and the sterile donkey," while the cattle market features "Lunan cattle, Qinchuan cattle, Mongolian cattle, and Yuxi cattle, along with crossbreeds." When Hong Taiyue arrives to purchase cattle, the author also includes the common scene of "bargaining" at the market. Hong Taiyue wants to negotiate with the seller as per the market norms of cattle brokers, but the seller waves his hand, saying, "No need for that, let's be clear. These cattle and calf are sold together for 500 yuan; not a single cent less [8]." These vibrant life-like actions and dialogues quickly bring the livestock trading scene to the readers' eyes. The author's portrayal of the market showcases local commercial customs while enriching the article's appeal and adding a rustic flavor to the novel.

### 3.2 Team parade

The customs of fairs have evolved with the times. The animal parades in Mo Yan's novels reflect the heightened political enthusiasm of that era [10]. During the "Cultural Revolution," fairs served not as marketplaces for trade but for parades. Especially in rural areas, there was no better venue for parades than the fair. For those lacking in spiritual fulfillment, it provided

the best form of entertainment, drawing many to join in the spectacle [10]. Even during this tumultuous period, characters like Ximen Niu, who maintains a partnership with Lan Lian, became subjects of the parades [7]. "You have two torn shoes hanging on your corner, a prank by that lad Suns who mishandles the gas lamps, merely to tarnish your image [8]." The author's portrayal of the changing customs at fairs subtly reflects the social characteristics of the entire era, moving the commercial function to a secondary position while emphasizing political function. When a pig, startled, crashes into a wall, a hen flaps in panic, a dog barks incessantly, and a goose falls from the sky due to the noise, people still disregard order, excitedly scrambling for the goose. The chaos of the fair and the frenzy of the crowd serve as a sharp satire of human desire, simultaneously evoking introspection on society and human nature, thus enriching the text's spiritual depth.

## **4 Folk beliefs: animals as objects of worship**

Folk beliefs, also known as popular beliefs, arise from a long historical accumulation of divine worship. Generally, folk beliefs have specific objects of veneration, such as natural deities, ancestors, spirits, and animals [11]. In the folk beliefs of Gaomi, pantheism and animal worship dominate. Animals like foxes, magpies, and ancient trees are often regarded as supernatural entities, earning reverence and respect from people [7]. The admiration for the humanity of animals and the celebration of their wild nature are two manifestations of animal worship in Mo Yan's narrative from an animal perspective.

### **4.1 Admiration for humanity**

Admiration for the humanity in animals reflects people's worship of them. This theme influences Mo Yan's portrayal of animal humaneness in the text. When Ximen's donkey suffers a leg injury, it endures pain to pull the cart for its master, Lan. After the defeat, Diao Xiaosan decisively rejects Ximen's pig's offer to mate with a sow out of sympathy. Pig Sixteen leaps into icy waters to save a child, sacrificing itself without hesitation. Such qualities—gratitude, resilience, and kindness—embody the reasons for human admiration. Furthermore, Mo Yan, while showcasing the humanity of animals, also reflects contemporary complex human nature to a certain extent. The stark contrast presented in the comparison between the two highlights Mo Yan's call for the humanistic spirit of rural China. Ximen the donkey protects the mother donkey, using intelligence to defeat two wolves; Pig Sixteen, under attack by wild boars, still does not give up on rescuing Little Flower; Ximen the cow insists on working alone, refusing to betray Lan Lian until death; Dog Xiao Si diligently escorts Lan Kaifang to and from school, never showing any negligence. In contrast, among humans, the hunter shamelessly seizes the donkey's spoils, claiming to have killed the wolves; Wu Qiuxiang retaliates and slanders Ximen Nao; Lan Jiefang breaks promise, betraying Lan Lian by joining the collective; and Ximen Jinlong forgets the grace of nurturing, deliberately harming Lan Lian. Thus, the "humanity" of animals and the "animality" of humans form a clear contrast and comparison, reflecting Mo Yan's critique, hope, and emotional investment in contemporary China, all embodied in the imagination and construction of the ideal character of animals [6,7].

### **4.2 Advocating for wildness**

The admiration for wildness reflects another manifestation of folk animal worship. It expresses Mo Yan's appreciation for the wildness and spirit of resistance in animals and acknowledges the presence of a certain "animal nature" within humans. Lan Jiefang liberates

himself from moral constraints and regards fame and fortune with indifference; Xi Menhuan discards pretenses and roams freely, devoid of desires; Pang Fenghuang breaks free from constraints, achieving transformation. The characters in these novels all shatter their own limitations, follow their true nature, and along the path to spiritual freedom, grow and discover themselves. Despite societal progress and development, modern individuals gradually escape savagery to enter a civilized era. However, human nature does not equate to a complete abandonment of innate instincts and characteristics of animals. Such abandonment signifies stagnation and even indicates a regression. One must never discard animal wildness, as it aids in the elevation of human nature. Humanity requires this wildness to continually infuse fresh vigor [7]. Thus, the relationship between human nature and animal nature cannot be severed. The existence of animal traits highlights the imperfections in human nature, making it more authentic and relatable, bringing people down from their pedestals back to the vibrant and lively world.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper analyzes the narrative perspective of animals in Mo Yan's work. It studies the connection between the life experiences of animals and folklore, the relationship between their fates and the times, and the differences in emotional traits and humanity. It reveals a close link between animals and agricultural customs, market customs, and folk beliefs. Through the research presented in this paper, readers can learn about agricultural practices from animal husbandry and land cultivation, experience market customs through livestock trading and parades, and understand folk beliefs through admiration for humanity and respect for nature. Ultimately, it concludes that animals serve as productive resources in agriculture, as observers of their times, and as a source of spiritual solace for people. This reflects Mo Yan's appreciation of the noble qualities of animals and his hope for the beauty of rural humanity, while also opening a new avenue for writing about the relationships between animals and humans, and between humans and their era, achieving advancement and transcendence in folk writing.

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