

# From Criticism to Empathy: A Study on the Historical Transformation and Symbolic Generation of "Mr. Pan"

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**Abstract.** Ye Shengtao's "Mr. Pan in Adversity" stands as a classic masterpiece in modern Chinese literature depicting the predicament of intellectuals. Set against the backdrop of warlord conflicts, the work portrays the absurd and despicable conduct of Mr. Pan, a primary school principal, during his flight from turmoil, thereby crafting a quintessential character archetype. This figure underwent a historical evolution from criticism to empathy before gradually becoming symbolized—a process and its symbolic attributes form the core of this thesis. This study focuses on three key questions: how the author encoded the "Mr. Pan" symbol, how its symbolic meaning evolved, and what drove this evolution. Through close textual analysis, it explores the factors shaping this transformation and deepens our understanding of the logic behind the creation and interpretation of Mr. Pan as a classic literary symbol.

## 1 Introduction

In the process of literary character symbolization, archetypal figures in modern literature often transcend textual boundaries to evolve into epochal symbols bearing specific cultural meanings. Lu Xun's "Madman," Lao She's Xiaozi, and Qian Zhongshu's Fang Hongjian all ascended from specific roles to become carriers of metaphors for national character. This phenomenon of symbolization is particularly pronounced in twentieth-century Chinese

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literary history. When writers employed realist techniques to dissect social structures, the characters they created often crystallized the collective traits of specific social strata, ultimately being abstracted into cultural symbols through dissemination and reception. Ye Shengtao's 1925 work *Mr. Pan in Trouble* stands as a quintessential example of this symbolic practice. The protagonist, Mr. Pan, a petty-bourgeois intellectual during the warlord era, evolves from an initial portrayal as a "selfish and petty" subject of criticism into a "sympathetic ordinary person" in contemporary eyes. This transformation reflects profound shifts in Chinese societal values over a century.

## **2 How writers encoded "Mr. Pan"**

### **2.1 The origins of the "Pan" surname as a symbol of ambiguity**

Before analyzing Ye Shengtao's symbolic coding of the surname "Pan" for Mr. Pan, it is worthwhile to trace the symbolic origins of the surname "Pan" in classical Chinese fiction. Throughout classical Chinese novels, the surname "Pan" is predominantly associated with negative characters: the selfish and scheming Pan Jinlian and the frivolous Pan Qiaoyun in *\*Water Margin\**; Pan Feng, the outwardly formidable yet inwardly weak in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; Pan Renmei, the treacherous villain who harmed loyal subjects in *The Yang Family Generals*; and Pan San, the corrupt and arrogant official in *The Scholars of the Imperial Academy*. These negative labels have long permeated readers' cultural memory, forming deeply ingrained perceptions.

Ye Shengtao's choice of the surname "Pan" for his protagonist actively invokes this cultural lineage. When readers encounter the name "Mr. Pan," they subconsciously summon these negative associations, generating anticipatory criticism. This selection of the surname "Pan" thus prefigures a critical undertone for the symbol of "Mr. Pan," constituting a pivotal step in the author's coding process.

### **2.2 Linguistic symbolism of the character "Pan"**

Beyond cultural lineage, the linguistic symbolism of the character "Pan" itself subtly reinforces Mr. Pan's petty nature.

Structurally, "潘" combines the water radical ( 氵 ) with "repeated" ( 番 ), evoking associations of "wavering stance and inconsistent behavior": fleeing with his family at war's onset yet returning for his duties as principal; simultaneously fearing warlords while actively currying favor within a besieged city; and swiftly joining celebrations after hostilities cease—this pattern of "repeatedly changing sides" further solidifies the negative perception of his "lack of firm conviction."

Phonetically, "潘" (pān) resonates with negative-meaning homophones like "攀" (climbing the social ladder), "盼" (hoping for survival), and "叛" (betraying principles), respectively mirroring Mr. Pan's sycophantic flattery of warlords, his desperate clinging to life during exile, and his abandonment of educational responsibilities. These phonetic interpretations complement the gray origins of the "Pan" surname, collectively encoding the petty nature of "Mr. Pan."

### **2.3 Early criticism shaping the critical image**

If the phonetic and semantic structure of "Pan" represents the author's "internal coding," then early commentaries from the 1930s to the late 20th century constitute the "external coding." Critics solidified "Mr. Pan" as a critical archetype embodying the "vices of petty bourgeoisie," deeply binding his character's meaning to the era's theme of enlightening national character.

Mao Dun explicitly identified Ye Shaojun as a representative writer dedicated to portraying the gray existence of petty-bourgeois intellectuals [2], positioning Mr. Pan as "a typical example of a selfish and vulgar petty bourgeois." *Thirty Years of Modern Chinese Literature* defined him as a gray character embodying "a multifaceted yet unified petty-bourgeois personality" [3].while *A History of Modern Chinese Literature* emphasizes his soul's "petty selfishness, lack of justice, and moral consciousness" [4].Early critiques aimed at enlightenment and moral instruction, narrowing the symbolic significance of "Mr. Pan" to a critique of national character. This aligned with the era's demand for "national salvation and enlightenment" but obscured the text's polysemy, laying the groundwork for interpretive shifts in the 21st century.

## **3 How the symbolic meaning of "Mr. Pan" evolved**

### **3.1 Survival choices: active calculation or lack of options**

Amid warlord chaos, Mr. Pan's actions—clutching his black briefcase while jostling for space on crowded trains and revering the concession as "sacred ground"—appear opportunistic. Yet as Gao Hongying observes, these are passive adaptations shaped by Confucian culture, lacking free will rooted in independent thought [5].This illusion of choice was fundamentally a "no choice" forged by turbulent times, cultural constraints, and a distorted personality—each retreat and compromise represented the helpless efforts of a petty intellectual to protect his family and livelihood in chaotic times.

### **3.2 Is humility self-serving by nature, or a misplaced critique?**

Traditional interpretations labeled Mr. Pan's actions—rushing to open the school and demanding a Red Cross badge—as "humble self-interest." Yet this judgment has gradually been deconstructed. Zhang Fugui argues that literary history's critique of Mr. Pan is misplaced, overlooking his survival struggles and genuine emotions. Such harsh judgment stems from society's excessive moral demands on intellectuals [6]. Yao Na, drawing on reception aesthetics' "shift in the horizon of expectation," points out that textual details—such as Mr. Pan clutching his leather bag, his disheveled state while jostling for space on the tram, and his cautious manner when demanding the badge—were previously simplified as evidence of self-interest. Today, these are seen as instinctive expressions of individual survival in turbulent times [7], shifting the singular judgment of self-interest toward an acknowledgment of human complexity.

### **3.3 "Ordinary people deserving sympathy" in the context of contemporary ideals**

Shang Sichuang systematically traces the evolution of Mr. Pan's character, attributing it to the interplay of multiple factors [8]. Actions once mocked—such as "squeezing onto the tram with his black leather briefcase," "the contrast of hailing two taxis," and "'fleeing to the concession to save his life, returning to the university to save his livelihood.'" These actions are now interpreted as survival instincts to protect the missionary case, a dignified appeal to reassure his family, and a reluctant compromise in a predicament. Behind this shift lies the rise of humanitarian values in times of peace—society no longer judges Mr. Pan by the idealized standards of a perfect intellectual, but instead focuses on his survival struggles as an ordinary person.

Contemporary readers' strong resonance with this interpretation stems from modern society's heightened attention to "grassroots narratives" and its growing capacity for empathy. The struggles of groups like "working stiffs" and "internal competitors" spark widespread discussion. Contemporary readers are accustomed to viewing others' choices from an "ordinary person's perspective," recognizing in Mr. Pan the shadow of those around them who toil for survival: his fears, compromises, and lowering of standards all stem from a simple desire to live. This projection of "ordinary experiences" completes the emotional acceptance and value reconstruction of this character.

## **4 Why does the symbolic meaning of "Mr. Pan" evolve?**

The symbolic meaning of "Mr. Pan" has evolved from criticism to empathy through the interplay of three driving forces: internal textual factors, external environmental influences, and subjective motivations. These three elements are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing, collectively propelling the character into a cultural symbol that transcends a

century.

#### **4.1 Internal textual factors: objective narrative strategy**

The objective and detached narrative of Mr. Pan in *Adversity* laid the foundational groundwork for the symbolic figure's multiplicity of meanings. This approach restrains explicit value judgments through a "restricted viewpoint," "conflicted psychology," and "implicit irony," thereby preserving expansive interpretive space for readers.

The novel employs an "internal viewpoint" to reveal Mr. Pan's inner conflicts—such as "My family is in trouble; my life has no meaning" and "Without the school, how can I support my family?"—laying the groundwork for empathetic interpretation. Through behavioral details, it portrays his dual nature: compliance with the Education Bureau's directives and petty calculations with the hotel clerk, reflecting both survival anxiety and self-preservation instincts [10], positioning him as both a "family-oriented ordinary man" and a "compromising self-interested individual." The happiness Mr. Pan feels beneath the "Congratulations on the Restoration" banner at the conclusion can be interpreted either as a critique of complacency or as sympathy for the helplessness of individuals in turbulent times [11]. This non-judgmental narrative allows both symbolic meanings to coexist, forming the foundation of a text rich in ambiguity.

#### **4.2 External environmental factors: Dialogic evolution of the era's context**

The evolution of the era's context serves as the key external force driving the fluidity of symbolic meaning, deeply intertwined with subjective motivations. The "dominant social values" of different historical periods filter and amplify semantic elements within the text that relate to the existential contradictions faced by intellectuals, causing "Mr. Pan" to manifest distinct symbolic characteristics.

In the 1930s, "enlightenment and national salvation" and "collectivism" dominated as prevailing values. Facing national crisis and social upheaval, literature focused on critiquing national vices. During this period, Mr. Pan's selfishness and complacency were amplified, resonating with the intellectuals' conflict between their enlightenment mission and survival pressures, transforming him into a "symbol of national character critique." After the 21st century, society's dominant values shifted toward "humanitarianism." Reform and opening-up brought stability, shifting social focus to individual survival and development rights. Literary attention moved from "collective criticism" to "individual care." Now, the semantic connotations of "Mr. Pan" as embodying "the helplessness of survival" and "family responsibility" were activated. This resonated with the contemporary intellectuals' conflict between "idealistic pursuits and practical pressures," transforming the image into a "vehicle for empathy." As Kang Cheng observes, "the generation of symbolic

cultural meaning is closely tied to cultural memory mechanisms" [12]. The semantic evolution of "Mr. Pan" fundamentally reflects how different eras' "cultural memory" reconstructs textual meanings—a reconstruction that consistently revolves around the core existential contradictions of intellectuals.

### **4.3 Subjective motivation: The inherent paradox of intellectual identity**

The enduring resonance of the "Mr. Pan" symbol across a century stems from its core identity paradox: the tension between being a "petit bourgeois intellectual" and an "ordinary survivor." This paradox represents not only Mr. Pan's personal predicament but also the universal existential conflict of modern Chinese intellectuals, continuously interacting with the context of each era.

Intellectuals of the 20th century grappled with the contradiction between "enlightenment mission and survival pressures," while those of the 21st century confront the tension between "idealistic pursuits and practical pressures." Readers across different eras recognize their own reflections within this paradox. Du Rui's theory of symbolic construction [13] offers insights for interpreting this paradox: "Mr. Pan," as a constructed "truth," not only embodies literature's observation of the intellectual's condition but also serves as a vessel for intellectuals across different eras to project their own predicaments. The interaction between his identity paradox and the context of the times ensures his enduring vitality, with his symbolic meaning continually reconstructed.

## **5 Conclusion**

The metamorphosis of "Mr. Pan" from textual character to cultural symbol fundamentally stems from the coupling of dynamic forces: textual ellipsis, historical context, and the subject's internal contradictions. His shift from critical archetype to vessel of empathy reflects not merely the semantic flux of a singular image but also the symbiotic logic between literary symbols and societal values.

The value of this metamorphosis extends far beyond mere character interpretation. As classic literary figures transform into representative symbols, their shifting meanings encapsulate the deepening of social cognition and mirror the spirit of the times. This perspective aims to reexamine the path of classic characters becoming symbols, deepen our understanding of the relationship between literature and society, and provide new theoretical perspectives and methodological references for modern literary studies.

### **(1) Research limitations**

This study primarily focuses on close textual analysis and social context examination,

presenting two limitations: First, the research perspective remains concentrated within literary and macro-social dimensions, with insufficient attention to the influence of communication media. The impact of different communication carriers across eras on readers' reception and interpretation of the "Mr. Pan" symbol remains under-explored. Second, the research relies primarily on qualitative analysis, lacking interdisciplinary quantitative support—such as statistical analysis of reader reception data across eras or quantitative studies of psychological empathy mechanisms—thus failing to comprehensively present the multifaceted factors influencing symbolic evolution.

## **(2) Future research directions**

Given these limitations, future research may expand in three directions: First, integrate media studies to examine the dissemination pathways and semantic reconfiguration of the "Mr. Pan" symbol in the digital age, analyzing how media forms influence symbolic interpretation. Second, conduct cross-cultural comparative studies by contrasting "Mr. Pan" with similar intellectual symbols in modern literature from other countries (such as the "alienated petty bourgeoisie" in Western literature), exploring the generative logic and evolutionary differences of analogous symbols across cultural contexts; Third, introduce interdisciplinary research methods by integrating quantitative analytical tools from psychology and sociology to deeply explore readers' reception mechanisms of the "Mr. Pan" image. Quantify empathy differences across different eras and groups, providing more persuasive empirical support for literary symbol reception studies.

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