

The Cognitive Implication and Cultural Interpretation on Disaster Myths of Ethnic Groups in Yunnan

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【Abstract】 Myth is a compartment of historical and social memories. It is cosmology of relationship between human and physical environment, social culture, morality and philosophy. A lot of contents of myths are related to disaster and its mitigation and preventions. Disaster myths, including flood myth, drought myth, earthquake myth, fire disaster myth, and wind-thunder-rain disaster myth, present cognitive process from human beings and the way of environmental revolution. The disaster myths of ethnic groups in Yunnan are very abundant. These myths are handed down through oral conservation by generations. Disaster myths have deep cultural implications and cognitive styles. The purpose of researching disaster myths is to understand relationships between human behaviors and environment and disasters, and to probe their historical implications and the value of history, particularly the similarities and differences of disasters' recognition from ethnic groups, and also to probe the functions and values of myths related to disaster mitigation and prevention. Disaster myths are handed down through everyday life. For minority people, myths are not a matter in the history, but intimately have relationships with environmental and social realities in modern time. The interpretation to causes of disasters from myths, including natural and social factors, still has significant enlightenment today.

【Key words】 disaster myths, cognition, cultural interpretation, ethnic groups

Introduction

The ethnic groups in Yunnan Province are divided into Baiyue, Diqiang, Miao Yao and Austroasiatic groups. Chinese linguists think that the first three groups belong to the Sino-Tibetan family, the last one is a South Asian language. The myth story in this book is mainly about the Tibeto-Burman Branch and Kam-Tai Branch as well as the Miao Yao languages group and Austroasiatic languages group. Such choices can help to discuss the relationship between the these myths stories and disasters.

Myth and disasters are closely linked, there are a lot of such kind of stories. Many scholars believe that the study of myth at the same time is also the study of disasters. in another word disaster is the important theme of Chinese myth. In regard to the classification, the Chinese myth stories are divided into myth of flood, myth of drought, myth of earthquake, etc. For example, “Nuwa Mends the Sky” is a myth story which related to the earthquake, fire, lightning and so on. This situation is happened in the ethnic group of Yunnan province. Research on myth story of disaster is important, because the myth can bring people back to the ancient times, it combines

people's consciousness and understanding into a unified concept, it strengthens the Legitimacy in ethnic groups and the consciousness of the ethnic group. Therefore, the myth plays its Practical function. Another importance of myth is to make people remember what happened at the past, and make it become a part of social memory. Because of this, the myth can give a hand when the author discusses the relationship between culture and disaster.

Flood and its myth stories of ethnic groups in Yunnan province

Almost all of the ethnic groups in southern China have its myths, legends, folk songs and stories which are related to flood. The flood myth also has a lot of recorded in ancient history, such as "Shan Hai Jing", "Huai nan Zi", "Shang shu", "Historical Records", these can tell that flood had a widespread influence in history. The myth of flood are spread in the ethnic groups in Yunnan Province, the stories are almost the similar, including the content of flooding all over the sky, the destruction of humanity, the marriage of brother and sister or God, renewable and so on.

The Yi people have the most abundant flood myth. That is because the Yi people have many branches, different branches of Yi people have a different version of the flood myth and content. In the branches which has its own words can find the flood myth in their literature. For example, in the epic "Chamu", the first human are divided into one eyed man and the **straight eyed man**. These people are punished by the god Gezi through the flood because of their bad conscience. Then the God created the **cross eyed man**, from generation to generation to today. There is a "step on the Jiandao grass" ceremony in the funeral ceremony of Yi people. In the ceremony, people need to read the book of "step on the Jiandao grass", the part of the book records a legend of deluge, which means the Jiandao grass can be traced back to the era of flood. Almost all the flood myth of Yi people tell the story of God Gezi annihilate human by flooding. The Japanese scholar Nishiwaki Takao does the comparative study of 30 flood myth in Yunnan Yi area. He finds out that the flood myth was carried by oral poem, oral stories, ballads, epic literature and others. People in the myth are usually siblings, Ancestors Mudu Zuxian, three brothers, etc. The cause of the myth is almost the punishment of god. Then the human beings escape by taken gourds, wooden barrels, wooden boat and wooden coffin. Their marriage is usually relying on divination by millstones and dustpan or fairy sent by God. Their children, some directly been said that there are 6 children, some been said that the child is dumb, flesh and blood, and so on, through the help of God, these children become the ancestors of today's various ethnic groups.

The flood myth of Nisu Yi people is not only the escape story of the disaster it also reflects the ancestors Du Mu and the "sixth branch" story, Du Mu is the inheritor chosen by God Gezi. He hid in a gourd to escape the flood, his gourd was hanging in the cliff surrounded by the Jiandao grass after the flood. God Gezi send a eagle to save him, so the eagle become the hero of Yi people. When Du Mu came out from the

gourd, he found that he was the only person left in the world and he felt very anxious and painful. At that time, God Gezi sends fairy and married him. They gave birth to 6 children, two of them become the ancestor of Nisu people in south Yunnan, two of them become the ancestor of Nasu people in Guizhou and two of them become the ancestor of Nuosu people in the north. This is the famous "sixth branch" legend. The ancestors Du Mu is a real people record in Yi literature. Zhang Chunde, the scholar of Yi, believes that Du Mu was live in the fifth Century BC, the late Spring and Autumn period. The flood myth has important significance for Yi people in southern Yunnan. According to the survey and research, the ancestors of Nisu people create a dance named "Chuangshi Huagu" to representative the flood myth which is very popular in South Yunnan Lukuishan area. The main props of the dance are flat drum, trombones, Suona, gongs, cymbals. The flat drum is the symbolic of the gourd mentioned before. The women use the drum and the men use the gongs and cymbals. The women beat the drum from the bottom which represents the sound of water lashing the gourd. It is said that the Chuanshi Huagu has more than 20 kinds of routines, including Jiandaocao drum, Kaitian drum, sacrificial drums, Fanshan drum, Farming drum, harvest drums, etc. Some local scholars do the collection of them.

In addition to Yi people, other ethnic groups in Yunnan Province also have the flood myth. They have similar contents and circumstances. In Yunnan Xinping County, Mr. Dao tells the story of the flood myth of their stories:

People hide into gourd when they heard flood is coming. After three years they drift to the ends of the earth. When they came out from the gourd they found that there is no one in the world but them two. They met God and said to them "there is no one in the world now that you have to be a couple to multiply the later generation." The people in the gourd said, "We are brother and sister, we can't be couple." God said that I will throw the stone into the water, if the water naturally separate and close together, you can be a couple." Then the God throw the stone and ask Banyan Tree to witness their marriage. From that time Dai people treat Banyan Tree as their holy tree. Then the couple gave birth to a daughter and turns many trees to people. When the couple grow old, they ask their daughter to marry only Dai people.

The flood myth is widespread in the ethnic group of southern China. Such as Lahu, Lisu, Naxi, Jinuo, Hani, Wa, Miao, Yao and other ethnic groups. However, the flood myth is only a legend or the real existence of the flood disaster in the history? In order to find out the truth, scholars have done a deep research that many ethnic groups have such kind of myth stories. That means at least these stories tells us how the flood happed in the history. Some scholars firmly believe that the flood disaster has appeared in the history of china. Ten thousand years ago, many types of floods were happed in South China, which is been regard as the historical background of "Southern flood" Legend of. Mr. Zhang Qunhui wrote in a 1990 article:

A large number of floods occurred in late Pleistocene to early Holocene. During this

period, the global warming, the glaciers melting, the rainfall shot up and the new tectonic movement impact seriously. At that time the earthquakes happened frequently, plateau appeared Pan-Lake, the rivers and lakes change sharply. The Landslide and the Mountain torrents happened constantly in mountainous area. The transgression is continued outbreak in coast area. The great change of nature and environment, which caused great damage to the ancient ethnic groups.

Some scholars think that the big flood and some other huge disasters is happened in the 4000~5000 years ago. Their study tells that the phenomenon that floods have occurred in Chinese history, and more than once. In addition, there are a lot of myth stories about water that are closely linked to the disaster. For example, when Dai people talk about the flood myth they will mention the sacrifice of the water at same time. They think the water, flood and rainstorm are closely linked, that after a long time evolution of the flood myth that becomes the worship of specific rivers in real life.

The relationship between the flood myth and disaster can be summarized as follows: First, the flood myth has so many names. They all tell the similar story. We can find that the flood disaster happened in ancient times but they have different opinions of the time and range of floods. Second, the flood myth tells the god's punishment to human beings. They do have some flood myths which have no reason, but most of them have the closely with the God. The key reason is that God want to replace the people with the bad morality. Thirdly, the God replace the mankind based on moral standards. The God gave the people who have the bad morality an iron boat so they got no chance to live. For those good people they got wooden boat or guard that can survive in the flood. For those who survive fortunately, brother and sister, got help from the god. They got married and give birth to the children. Fourthly, the flood myth is widespread in the ethnic groups of southern China. Some scholars believe that the flood myth reflects a regional flood disaster in many parts of the world. Fifthly, the flood myth may involve many cooperation of the ethnic group. For example the Tibetan people, the Han people, the Hani people and Dai people appear in the flood myth of Yi people; the Han people, the Bai people and the Lisu people appear in the flood myth of Nu people; the Tibetan people, the Han people and the Kachin people appear in the flood myth of Lisu people; the Tibetan people and the Naxi people appear in the flood myth of Pumi people. These contents are not being accidental, it is shows that the influence of disaster is not just the single one ethnic group.

Drought and its myth stories of ethnic groups in Yunnan province

There is a lot of drought myth in the ethnic group of Yunnan, which means they all have the stories which related to drought. For example, in the book "Ji long ci", "The Originals", "Meige", "Chamu" and "the chorography of Yi people of southwest China", tells that drought was happened frequently in the ancient Yi area. The long poem "The Originals" record that

The drought makes the sea empty,
The fish and the loach got no place to live,
People find the duckweed as their vegetables,
Only Chinese yam can feed them to the full.

We can know from this poem that the drought at that time is a serious event. The epic “Meige” record that

There are nine suns and nine moons in the sky,
The sun is burning in the daytime,
Even the bone of the ox and the feather of turtledove are burnt...
God Gezi...
Just leave one sun and one moon in the sky...
He stops the water all over the world,
In the follower three years,
We can't see the lightning,
We can't hear the thunder,
The wind don't blowing,
The rain don't drop,
The earth burn to dry,
The grass and trees are withering,
The ground is cracking with smoke and dust,
The sea turns dry,
The fish and shrimp died,
We can't find the birds and the beasts on the land,
The whole world turns desolation and dark.

These records tell us the situation and the influence of the drought.

There are many other myth stories except the record above. Mr. Li Wangcai, leader of the Yi people of south Yunnan said that,

There are nine suns and nine moons in the sky that the crops did not to grow and the people and the animals were starving to death. People were trying to find a way to deal with the nine suns for years. Then a strong man shot eight suns, and the last sun was scared and hides into the mountain. People can't survive without the sun, so they plan to ask the sun back. The cattle, the goats and the duck tried to ask the sun, but none of them succeed. At last, the rooster cross the west sea with the help of duck, and wake the sun up. The God Sashen gave the rooster a comb as reward and nominates it as the necessities in human's important events. The duck find the God Sashen and express its unsatisfaction. The God Sashen then asks the rooster to brood for the duck.

The story shows that drought affects not only humans, but also other animals. People

and animals are all part of the ecosystem. So when we are fighting with drought, animals have their own responsibility. We know that animals cannot have the ability to "ask the sun to come out", but the story illustrates the importance of the ecosystem for us.

In addition to the Yi people, all ethnic groups in Yunnan have myths, legends and stories related to drought. For example, there nine suns and nine moons in the drought myth of Tibetan people. The nine suns burned everything, scorched the earth, so it was shot down by eight suns and eight moons. Such kind of stories was happened in ethnic group of Lisu, the ethnic group of Bulang and ethnic group of Pumi.

Most of the drought myths of the ethnic groups in Yunnan have the legend of 9 suns and the 9 moons, and of course there are legends of the 12 suns and 12moons. For example, Yi people, Lisu people, Pumi people, Dong people and the Buyi people have the similar story which mentioned before.

Drought is widespread in China, which provides a basis for understanding the myths, legends and stories related to drought. To sum up the relationship between drought myth and drought disaster, the author thinks that the following points should be paid attention to.

Firstly, Drought myths explain the causes and consequences of drought. The usual way is the God bring 9 suns or 12 suns to mankind. As a result, the earth was burn to dry, the river dried and the sea also dried. People cannot grow any crops that resulting in a serious famine. These explanations are similar to the drought and famine in history. Some drought did not explain the reasons for the occurrence, but only the results of drought.

Secondly, when drought occurred, people began to practice the shooting skill in order to shoot the sun. So there was a lot of myth of "shooting the sun". The myth of "shooting the sun" is a heroic myth, because the sun strikers almost all have specific names. We can know from this, the core of the drought myth is a large numbers of the sun and the solution is to shoot down the extra sun.

Thirdly, it turned into another disaster after the drought: cold and dark. As humans or gods shoot 11 or 8 suns, the last remaining sun was hidden by fear. The "shooting" action will become "asking" action. Finally, with the help of the rooster, the sun came out. That's why the rooster crows every morning. The sun rises when it crows, that indicating the beginning of a new day.

Earthquakes and its myth stories of ethnic groups in Yunnan province

Earthquake myths are not as rich as floods and droughts in China. Some scholars think that the myth of the "Goddess patching the sky" is the representation of the Earthquake myth. That is the symbol of the natural force which people want to conquer the earth. There are some earthquake myths, legends and stories which circulate among the ethnic groups in Yunnan. For example, the Nu people think that

the earth is like a house with flat roof. It supported by 9 golden pillars and 9 silver pillars. In order to turn the earth, God use a golden rooster and a silver rooster to pull the earth. When the roosters were moving, the earthquake happens. The Hani people think that the reason of the earthquake is because God Cuocuo Ma moves the tail of the goldfish Miwu Aixi Aima frequently. In order to stop the earthquake, people should stop production and do the sacrifice to Poseidon. Hani women wear short skirts pray to suppress the earthquake does not happen.

There are some differences between the Yi people and the Hani people in the earthquake. The Nisu Yi people believe that the earth is built based on a big fish, the earthquake is caused by turning over of a fish. In the epic “Mege”,

The biggest thing in the world is fish, said God Gezi.

The male fish is three thousand jin, the mother fish is seven hundred jin.

Let's go get the fish that we can use them to sustain the land.

If the fishes don't move, the land will be stable.

That is the explanations of the earthquake of ethnic people in Yunnan.