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The Gourd as a Spiritual and Cultural Symbol Among the Yi People in Southwest China

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Abstract: In the Yi ethnic group in southwest China, the gourd is a prominent symbol, collectively imbued with imaginative and spiritual significance. It maintains a profound connection to the Yi people's way of life, manifested in both ancient mythological narratives and contemporary social practices. Given the pivotal role of the gourd in the Great Flood, reconstituting the world and birthing humanity, this study delves into its intricate associations with fertile imagery and thinking, provides an interpretation of the gourd's mythological archetype, elucidates religious practices, and explores the cultural interpretations conveyed through gourd imagery. The cultural traditions of the gourd within Yi culture operate through both mythological narratives and lived practices, forming an integrated cognitive framework through which people perceived and interpreted the world. Presently, research specifically focusing on the gourd symbol in Yi mythology and rituals is limited. This article, offering a perspective grounded in classical textual interpretation, aims to understand the culture of the Yi people. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the gourd's symbolic significance and enriches broader discussions on cultural diversity in contemporary society.

Keywords: Yi ethnic group; gourd; practice; cultural interpretation; myth; spirituality



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1. Introduction

Gourds have a ubiquitous presence in China, serving multifaceted roles in daily life, from a culinary delicacy to a canvas for crafts. They even serve utilitarian functions, such as water containers in specific regions. Historically, gourds have been significant agricultural resources in China. Moreover, their young fruit and leaves are edible. These uses are exemplified in the ancient Chinese book 詩經 *Shijing* (*The Book of Songs*)¹, which notes, “幡幡瓠葉,採之亨之。君子有酒,酌言嘗之” (Flutter go the gourd leaves; We pluck them and boil them. Our lord has wine; He fills his cup and tastes it) (translated by Waley [1937] 1988, p. 189); “瓠有苦味葉” (The gourd has bitter leaves) (ibid., p. 54); and “七月食瓜,八月斷壺” (In the seventh month we eat melons, In the eighth month we cut the gourds)” (ibid., p. 166). The words “瓠”, “匏”, and “壺” all refer to gourds, but they represent different types of gourds. These varied names for gourds can also be found in the writings of several famous philosophers of ancient China, including Zhuangzi and Confucius. For example, 莊子逍遙遊 *zhuangzi-xiaoyao you* (Kwang tze—enjoyment in untroubled ease) says “魏王貽我大瓠之種,我樹之成而實五石,以盛水漿,其堅不能自舉也。剖之以為瓢,則瓠落無所容。非不鳴然大也,吾為其無用而培之。” (The king of Wei sent me some seeds of a large calabash, which I sowed. The fruit, when fully grown, could contain five piculs of anything. I used it to contain water, but it was so heavy that I could not lift it by myself. I cut it in two to make the parts into drinking vessels; but the dried shells were too wide and unstable and would not hold the liquor; nothing but large useless things! Because of their uselessness I knocked them to pieces) (translated by Legge 1891, p. 172). Furthermore, the 論語 *lunyu* (*The Analects*) says, “吾豈匏瓜也哉?焉能繫而不食?” (Am I indeed a bitter gourd! Can I, like that, be hung up and not eaten!) (translated by Soothill 1910, p. 825). From philosophical and ideological standpoints, gourds are imbued with deeper meanings, symbolizing an ideal life characterized by freedom and detachment.

However, its significance extends beyond the practical to the realm of culture, notably evidenced in ancient Chinese mythology. For example, sanhu (三壺²: fanghu (方壺), Penghu (蓬壺), and Yinghu (瀛壺), shaping the mythology of the pursuit of immortality (Wang 1988, p. 23); 人用瓠蘆盛水喝能使身體變得香淨而昇仙 (people use gourds to hold water, which made body pure, and they could turn to immortals) (Jingshu Liu 1996, p. 10); 懸壺貯丹藥 (Hanging gourds to store panacea) (Cao 2005, p. 60). In these descriptions, the characters (壺) Hu and (瓠蘆) hulu both denote gourds, with the imagery of gourds intricately woven into the fabric of mythological narratives.

Mythology holds a significant place within Yi folk literature. The four major classic epics of the Yi people encompass accounts of the flood myth, constituting the primary corpus of Yi mythology. The interpretation of these mythological texts offers profound insights into Yi culture and the poetic imagination of its people. This study explores the myths and ancient texts of the Yi ethnic group in southwest China, where a unique dimension unfolds, wherein the word “gourd” takes on various symbolic forms in this culture, such as the striking similarity between the ancient Yi word for the universe “〇〇” (X. Ma 1986, p. 367) and the inverted shape of a gourd. Similarly, the pronunciation of “axpu”³ (Chinese and Yi Dictionary Compilation Committee [CYDCC] 1989, p. 1123), meaning grandfather or ancestor in Yi, mirrors the Lolo branch of the Yi term for gourd (Pu 1993, p. 120). Scholarly insights from Liu Yao Han and Liu Xiao Xing reveal that the Yi people in Yunnan⁴, upon returning to their homeland, would inter their ashes in gourds, symbolizing harmony with the gourd universe.

Thus, in the Yi culture, the words “gourd”, “universe”, and “grandfather”, which have the same script or the same pronunciations, reflect inextricable links. By unraveling its sacredness, building upon this exploration of symbolism and myth, the significance of the gourd can be examined in the context of the Yi ethnic group in southwest China. As Roy Rappaport notes, with symbolic transmission, individuals can learn from the accounts of others as well as from their own direct experience, and this learning may be transformed, via its mere recounting, into public knowledge that can, by further recounting, be preserved as tradition (Rappaport 1999, p. 4). This investigation extends beyond abstract notions and delves into the concrete culture. As an artifact embodying the life practices of the Yi ancestors, gourds emerge as a promising avenue for understanding the cultures of the Yi people.

2. Theoretical Review and Methodology

The Yi are the sixth largest ethnic minority group in China and have their own language and script. The extensive distribution of the Yi ethnic group across southwestern China, with different regions and sub-groups utilizing distinct scripts, has presented significant challenges for scholars. The initial Han Chinese scholars to study the Yi people included Lv (1933), Zeng (1945), and Jiang (1948). These scholars examined the formation and ethnic characteristics of the Yi people from a historical perspective. Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, increased attention from both the government and scholars was directed towards ethnic minority groups. This period saw the discovery of numerous ancient Yi texts and inscriptions. Simultaneously, notable contributions came from scholars such as C. Ma (1987), T. Chen (1987), Lin (1987), and You (1987), who meticulously documented the socio-historical development of the Yi people. Their work provided rationality and legitimacy for ethnic identification within the national discourse. The initial Western scholars who encountered the Yi people were predominantly missionaries, including Alfred Lietard (1811), Paul Vial (1898), and Samuel R. Clarke (1911). Their contributions primarily consisted of documenting information about the Yi across various regions, focusing on tracing their ethnic origins through local cultural characteristics and mythological narratives. By the 1970s and 1980s, scholars such as David Bradley (1977, 1979) and Thomas Heberer (1984) expanded the scope of study to include the Yi language, culture, and other aspects of their society. Since the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the study of Yi literature has garnered signif-

icant attention from Western scholars, and some scholars, including Stevan Harrell, have, critically and beyond, historically reassessed these earlier studies. Prominent researchers, such as Stevan [Harrell \(1989, 1990\)](#), [Harrell and Ayi \(1998\)](#), Mark [Bender \(2011, 2015\)](#), and David [Bradley \(2009\)](#), have focused on the folklore and oral literature of the Sichuan and Yunnan regions, examining the Yi culture through the lens of linguistics. Additionally, [Harrell \(2000, 2012\)](#), [Harrell and Li \(2003\)](#) and Erik [Mueggler \(2001\)](#), among others, have conducted in-depth analyses of the Yi ethnic group, exploring themes of ethnic relations, identity, and cultural practices from an anthropological perspective. From the above review, scholars have primarily approached the study of the Yi ethnic group, integrating theories and methods from ethnology, sociology, anthropology, and related disciplines. Research conducted by both Chinese and Western scholars reveals differing focal points regarding the Yi ethnic group. Western scholars primarily concentrate on the ethnic group, ethnic identity, and kin terms. In contrast, Chinese scholars focus on correlating the history of the Yi people with that of the Han Chinese. This interdisciplinary approach has brought new vitality and development to the field of Yi studies, providing a broad historical and cultural context.

The study of myths and symbols spans various disciplines, such as religion, anthropology, and cognitive psychology. Analyzing the relationship between mythological texts, rituals, and culture has garnered significant scholarly attention in recent decades. From the late 19th to the early 20th century, myth and ritual studies grew significantly, intersecting with classical anthropological evolutionism. Scholars like Edward Burnett [Tylor \(1871\)](#) and James George [Frazer \(1922\)](#) recognized the symbolic importance of rituals and their connection to myths. Later, researchers such as Joseph [Campbell \(1949\)](#), Victor [Turner \(1967\)](#), and Clifford [Geertz \(1973\)](#) expanded this framework, emphasizing the interpretive nature of cultural symbols and enhancing the understanding of culture and ritual. From the 1970s to 1990s, scholars from diverse cultural backgrounds ([Clark 1978](#); [Kuklick 1972](#); [Marling 1984](#); [Heyden 1989](#); [Barnes 1990](#)) began exploring and critiquing mythological texts and symbols. In the 21st century, S. Brent [Plate \(2005\)](#), David M. [Smith \(2012\)](#), and [Kim and Jang \(2015\)](#) highlighted the enduring significance of myths and symbols in understanding the world through art and cultural narratives.

Secondly, the perspective of myths and their inherent structures is important, with scholars such as Nurith [Gertz \(1986\)](#), Susan [Weiss \(2009\)](#), and Deden [Nugraha \(2017\)](#) contributing valuable insights. Drawing inspiration from Roland [Barthes's \(1967\)](#) theoretical framework, these scholars delve into the intricate nature of myths, elucidating how their essence and structure are intricately linked to the systems within which they operate. Their contributions provide a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced interplay between myths, cultural reality, and the semiotic frameworks employed in their analysis. From the sign to the myth to the concept, the connection between language and the thinking of an ethnic group can be seen.

In the 21st century, cognitive psychology has led scholars to explore cultural phenomena from a linguistic perspective. Lawrence [Hirschfeld \(2007\)](#), Pascal [Boyer \(2007\)](#), and [Atran and Henrich \(2010\)](#) analyzed the construction of cultural practices and human psychology from religious and cognitive perspectives, providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between myth and culture. Additionally, the characterization of the mythical object presented can achieve greater innovation by incorporating insights from cognitive anthropology and recent developments in linguistics. In linguistics, Vyvyan [Evans \(2014, 2015\)](#) proposed that language serves as a cultural construct, offering insights into the expression of mythological narratives.

While numerous studies have been conducted on the Yi people, research specifically focusing on the gourd symbol in Yi mythology and rituals remains limited. This article aims to fill that gap by providing a detailed analysis of the gourd's symbolic significance, ensuring that the interpretation and analysis are grounded in the Yi people's own perspectives and customs. This work contributes to the broader discourse on mythology and rituals in human societies. Moreover, in a globalized world, the study of ethnic minorities,

such as the Yi, and their cultural symbols is increasingly pertinent. This research can enrich broader discussions on cultural diversity, heritage preservation, and the role of traditional knowledge in contemporary society.

Early myth studies primarily focused on the treatment of traditional texts, the reinterpretation of literary works, and the collection of mythological tales. Later, the focus shifted to ritual structure and psychological–cognitive levels of myth analysis. These perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the symbolic, ritualistic, and cognitive aspects of Yi gourd mythology, highlighting the connection between mythological texts and culture. However, understanding the complex interactions between myth, ritual, and cognitive processes requires a broader theoretical perspective. Roy Rappaport’s “Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity” (Rappaport 1999) offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing the fundamental role of rituals and symbols in constructing social order and cultural continuity. Rappaport’s central thesis posits that religion emerged concomitantly with humanity and language as humans developed symbolic frameworks to mitigate the disruptive impact of deception through religious practices. He contends that ritual plays a crucial role in establishing the authoritative “True Word” by intertwining it with self-referential (Rappaport 1999, p. 52), performative messages that reflect the current condition of participants, thereby shaping both social and religious truths. His insights into the communicative representation of rituals are pivotal for examining how Yi gourd symbols reinforce ethnic values and culture. Using Rappaport’s framework, which emphasizes the centrality of ritual in the formation of human society and religion, this paper aims to understand the complex interplay of myth, ritual, and social structure within the Yi ethnic group. This approach, rooted in Yi traditional epics (please see Appendix A for an introduction to the epics quoted in this study), seeks to understand how gourd mythology shapes and expresses Yi culture, offering a perspective grounded in classical textual interpretation.

3. The Gourd Saves People: The Construction of a Sacred Narrative

The gourd holds significant symbolic value in the mythologies of various ethnic groups across southern China. Among the Yi, the gourd often features prominently in creation and flood myths, serving as a vessel of life and continuity. However, it is important to recognize that similar gourd myths are prevalent among other ethnic groups in the region, including the Zhuang, Miao, and Yao. These parallels suggest the possibility of cultural exchanges and the diffusion of mythological motifs. While it is challenging to ascertain the precise origins and pathways of these myths, the widespread nature of gourd symbolism indicates a shared cultural heritage or mutual influence among these groups. The Yi people’s national epic, <Chamu> (查姆), renowned throughout Yunnan province in southwest China and integral to the cultural upbringing of the Yi from childhood, is a classic that describes the origin of all things in the world; this epic details the story of the Great Flood. The immortals, led by the king of gods 𐌂𐌆𐌃𐌆𐌃𐌆𐌃𐌆 (nyiep norp lo zzop pop)⁵, recognize a decline in the moral character of the current generation. As a response, they use a flood to purify the world. To ensure the survival of a chosen few, 𐌂𐌆𐌃𐌆𐌃𐌆𐌃𐌆 (sa seht)⁶ encounters 𐌂𐌆𐌃𐌆𐌃𐌆𐌃𐌆 (apu jjutmu)⁷ and provides a gourd seed, initiating a sacred narrative of salvation. This gourd, unique in its growth cycle and divinely ordained attributes, becomes a refuge from the impending flood, signifying conferred sanctity. Further elaboration can be found in the subsequent detailed description:

“In March the gourd is planted, in June the gourd grows, in September the gourd turns yellow, in October the gourd is hard and firm. The gourd is picked in the lunar month, and it is as big as a house, and when it is hollowed out, it is a boat, and you and sister live in the middle of it.” (三月種瓜子，六月葫蘆就長成，九月葫蘆皮變黃，十月葫蘆硬又堅。臘月摘葫蘆，葫蘆有房子大，挖空葫蘆就是船，你們兄妹住中間) (Guo and Tao 2009, p. 61)

Similarly, the epic from the Yunnan province <Meige> (梅葛) narrates the god 𐌂𐌆𐌃𐌆𐌃𐌆𐌃𐌆 (nge tit gge zzy)⁸, and he bestows three gourd seeds upon a human,

“Plant the gourd seeds in January, water them once every three days, three days after planting they will sprout, after three days the vine will climb, after another three days the white flowers will bloom, after another three days the gourd will bear fruit, and in the last three days it will grow large. The gourd vine was as thick as a stretcher, and the gourd leaves were as big as a dustpan, and a single gourd was formed, and the gourd was formed like a hoard. Your brother and sister moved into the gourd and ate the seeds when they were hungry.” (正月栽下葫蘆籽，三天要澆一次水，栽下三天會出芽，過了三天藤就爬，又過三天開白花，再過三天結葫蘆，最後三天會長大。葫蘆藤有擔子粗，葫蘆葉有簸箕大，結了一個獨葫蘆，葫蘆結得象囤子。你兄妹搬進葫蘆裏，餓了就吃葫蘆籽)⁹ (Yunnan Ethnic Folklore Survey Team [YEFST] 1960, pp. 35–37)

The version still passed down in folk tradition closely resembles that recorded in the <Meige> and <Chamu>, albeit with some variations in terms of dialect and detail. These two passages imbue the growth process of gourds with divinity, detailing their transformation from seedlings to colossal vessels that ultimately serve as sanctuaries or havens for the survivors in the context of deluge mythology, initiating a cycle of growth and symbolizing a rite of passage from the secular to the sacred. The gourd serves as a sacred space during the flood, representing symbolic death and eventual rebirth.

After the flood, the ㄣㄣㄣ (nge tit gge zzy) found the gourd on the seashore, and the siblings broke out of the gourd. In addition to these two epics, a similar description is found in a collection of flood stories, which states that in ancient times, humankind went through three generations: the One-Eyed Man, the Straight-Eyed Man, and the Cross-Eyed Man. But the last generation was so unkind-hearted that the God of Heaven decided to punish the world with a flood. However, just before the flood, he went to Earth and found a kindly man, ㄣㄣㄣ (at pu ddu mu), giving him a gourd to avoid the flood.

“Taking out the gourd, he gave it to the poor man, and when the gourd grew up, this one gourd, which was one chi¹⁰ (庹) long and half a chi thick in diameter. The gourd grew in front of the door, from the time it was planted to the time it was harvested, for a year.” (拿出小葫蘆，交給那窮人，葫蘆長大後，這一個葫蘆，足有一庹長，直徑半庹粗。葫蘆長門前，從種到收穫，足足有一年).¹¹ (Yunnan Provincial Minority Ancient Books Organizing and Publishing Planning Office [YPMABOPPO] 1987, pp. 8–9)

In this context, when a catastrophic flood occurs, the enormous gourd serves as a temporary shelter, allowing individuals to take refuge within its sturdy confines. The gourd’s robust structure and buoyancy enable it to withstand the deluge’s onslaught, providing a safe place during the disaster. In several of the above flood stories, the two surviving siblings/ancestors survive by hiding in the gourd, which becomes a sacred object for preserving the human race and plays a vital role in the narrative. The flood serves as a critical precursor for the emergence of the sanctified gourd, acting as a cleansing force that paves the way for new life. The gourd’s role as a refuge not only signifies physical protection but also embodies a profound symbolic journey. Through the gourd, individuals experience a rite of passage, transitioning from the mundane to the sacred, from death to rebirth. Moreover, the gourd’s sanctification is a multifaceted process.

Firstly, its divinely given nature sets it apart from earthly artifacts, with a growth cycle and size that defy conventional norms. The divine bestowal of gourd seeds and cultivation methods imbues the gourd with a sacred character, making it an instrument of refuge under the guidance of the gods.

Secondly, the gourd transforms into a sacred space during the flood, symbolizing a “symbolic death” and the subsequent rebirth of surviving human beings. The gourd, acting as a shelter, becomes a sacred space where individuals experience a transformative journey from one state of being to another.

Thirdly, the gourd assumes the role of a sacred representational object, divinely assisted to ensure the survival of its inhabitants, while the secular world succumbs to the

flood. This distinctive space within the gourd becomes “a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred” (Eliade [1963] 1987, p. 26), symbolizing the connection between gods and humans that is crucial for the proper functioning of the new world.

In essence, the gourd is not merely an object in these flood narratives; it is a manifestation of the profound links between the divine and the human, securing the continuity of life. The flood, as a necessary precursor, gives rise to the gourd, an artifact that not only preserves humanity but also embodies the very source of life. Through this exploration, the gourd emerges as a symbol of sanctity, deeply embedded in the myths and cultures of the Yi people, embodying the enduring cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

In conclusion, the gourd has emerged as a pivotal artifact, serving as a conduit in the transformation from death to life amid flood myths. It has become the vessel bridging the sacred and secular realms, intricately tied to the survival and preservation of the human race.

4. The Gourd Births People: A Metaphor for Reproductive Imagery

As gourds gain sacredness in mythological texts, they evolve into objects of nature worship for the ancestors. In the myth epics, the gourd became closely associated with the nurturing of humanity. The epic <Meige> (梅葛) vividly narrates the process of human-making via the gourd.

“One day, the brother washed his body at the head of the river, and another day, the sister held water at the end of the river and ate it once a month, and after nine months of eating it, the sister became pregnant, and after nine months of pregnancy, she gave birth to a strange gourd. Brother is not at home, the sister is so afraid and gourd thrown in the river side ... gourd found, the gods open the gourd with a gold cone and a silver cone, the people who first came out are Han (漢) people then Dai (傣), Yi (彝), Lisu (傈僳).....” (see Note 11) (Yunnan Ethnic Folklore Survey Team [YEFST] 1960, pp. 53–57)

The transformation of the ancestors into the gourd, the creation of man, and the identification of the gourd as a human being are intricately woven into the narrative. This metaphorical presentation is echoed in related mythological texts, highlighting the gourd’s growth process as akin to the gestation period of human beings. For example, “The gourd grows in front of the door, from planting to harvesting, it takes nine months”¹² (Yunnan Provincial Minority Ancient Books Organizing and Publishing Planning Office [YPMABOPPO] 1987, pp. 8–9) and “The gourd is planted in March ... October the gourd is hard and firm.” (Guo and Tao 2009, p. 61). Thus, we can see that the growth process of the gourd occurs over nine or ten months, which is very similar to the gestation time of human beings. In addition, before the gourd made man, the two siblings embarked on a complete process of planting, harvesting, and using the gourd: sowing the gourd, opening the gourd, and removing the seeds. These actions correspond to the human reproductive process, i.e., conception, birth, and new life, offering a profound metaphor for fertility and creation.

Beyond mythological narratives, the gourd’s reproductive imagery extends into the life practices of the Yi people. In southern Yunnan, there is an ancient wedding custom practiced by Yi people, the 破壺成親 (break the gourd and get married) (Pu 1993, p. 1). The customs involve the symbolic breaking of a gourd filled with stove ash, connecting the gourd to the union of bride and groom (Figure 1).

Moreover, the term “gourd” refers to a pregnant woman’s protruding belly (Yahu Liu 2020, p. 209), further emphasizing the intertwining of the gourd and human life and solidifying the gourd’s role as a symbol of human creation.

The Chinese poet Wen Yiduo once examined the relationship between the “Flood Myth” and the “Gourd-Born people” in detail and compiled six basic concepts, the first of which is “man and woman emerge from the gourd” (Wen [1943] 1993, p. 108). After analysis, he also found that the gourd exists in the flood narrative as an object that serves as an adhesive between “rescuing” and “creating”, and that there is a logical unity between the gourd’s avoidance of death via flood and the gourd’s birthing of human beings

(ibid., p. 109). Other scholars disagree with Wen's deduction. Among the 49 flood myths counted by Wen Yiduo, there are 17 in which gourds are used to avoid death via flood, while there is only one human-making story. According to the scholar Lu YiLu, "the two mother-themes of gourd to avoid water and gourd to create man are not connected, and they should be viewed separately, with the function of water-avoidance being related to naturalness and mundanity, and the subsequent emergence of the gourd as a sacred belief." (Lu 2002, p. 67). After analyzing 682 flood stories, mythologist Chen Jianxian found 256 in which gourds were used to avoid death via flood. At the same time, there were only 17 cases in which gourds were used to give birth to people (J. Chen 2019, p. 103). Therefore, he argues that the two matrices of using the gourd to avoid death via flood and gourd-born people originally belonged to two different subtypes, and it seems insufficient to explain the matrices of gourd-born people purely from the fact that the flood symbolizes the continuation of human life and that survival and reproduction are the most important aspects of ancient life.



Figure 1. Break the gourd and get married. Source: <https://www.163.com/dy/article/F1BJFRMK053680K6.html> (accessed on 20 November 2024).

Scholarly perspectives vary on the logical unity between using the gourd to avoid death via flood and the gourd creating people. While some argue for a unified interpretation, others emphasize their separate origins and functions. Regardless, a consensus exists: the flood narrative's core purpose, centered on the gourd, is the continuation of mankind. The flood, representing the destruction of the old world, subsequently symbolizes the construction of a new world. Thus, the gourd functions in connecting the old world and the new world, symbolizing both deconstruction and construction. These flood survivors, regardless of their identities (brother and sister/human and god), always go through trials and tribulations before finally creating human beings. In religious terms, humankind was purified to give birth to a newer, elevated humankind (Eliade 1949, p. 182). The protective nature of the gourd is the foundation, but the gourd creating people is the core result.

As Giovanni Battista Vico notes, the early language used in metaphors presents inanimate objects as sensory and erotic (Vico 2020, p. 148). In the Yi myths, the gourd becomes a concrete container, more tangible than the abstract image of ancient ancestors, leading to its association with reproduction and birth. The gourd, therefore, emerges as a sacred space for the creation of people, a metaphorical representation deeply embedded in the Yi people's understanding of life. The gourd's transformation from a metaphor for ancestor regeneration to the creation of human beings signifies a gradual evolution in primordial thinking.

5. The Soul Returns to the Gourd: Symbolic Representation of the Gourd Universe Concept

The emergence of myths shows that ancient people could understand and perceive the world and the universe through linguistic symbols, thus forming a preliminary concept and form, which, over time, became central to the emotions and spiritual practice of the whole community. From this point of view, what lies behind these myths is a deeper expression of people's perceptual understanding and abstraction of the world. Therefore, the myth of the gourd as a carrier not only shows the use of the gourd in their daily life but also the cultural and cosmological attributes present in the process of text generation. The gourd, laden with metaphorical connections to reproduction and life, holds profound symbolism for the Yi people. Beyond its association with the cycles of life, it extends into the realms of sacred spaces and the universe of the gourd. This section explores the intricate belief that the human soul, after death, returns to the gourd, a belief deeply intertwined with Yi traditions and cultural practices. The following examples shed light on this phenomenon:

“In the Temple of Weishan (巍山) County, Yunnan Province, besides enshrining the founder Xi nuluo (細奴邏) of Meng, the Soul Collecting Ancestor, holding a gourd in hand, is placed on the right side of Xi nuluo. This signifies that even after death, a person originating from a gourd is destined to return to the gourd. The local Yi people, upon a death at home, bring offerings such as incense, ritual money, chicken, wine, and rice to the temple. There, they pray for the Soul Collecting Ancestor to guide the departed soul into the gourd.” (Zhang 2008, pp. 61–65)

Historically, mourners would insert a wooden stick with an upside-down gourd near a freshly constructed grave. A hole was pierced in the gourd to facilitate the entry of the deceased soul. This practice illustrates the intimate connection between the gourd and the soul's journey (Pu 2001, p. 311).

Yi scholar Liu Yao Han, in his examination of gourd culture, notes the following:

“Traditionally, when the mother passes away, a sorcerer is summoned to guide her soul into a gourd. Subsequently, upon the father's death, the father's soul takes the place of the mother's in the gourd. This ritual involves exchanging the old gourd for a new one to accommodate the souls of both parents.” (Yaohan Liu 1987, pp. 6–14)

As Rappaport notes, in human rituals, the utterances are usually predominantly verbal—expressed in words—and have symbolic significance; the acts, in being formalized, are then invested with meaning (Rappaport 1999, p. 29). In these widely spread stories, gourd and their use have been formalized and are symbolic signifiers. Gourds function as bridges between the earthly realm and the world of ancestral spirits, allowing the departed souls to traverse and enabling ancestral spirits to return to Earth through the small holes left in the gourd. Ancient Yi texts emphasize the return of souls to the land of ancestors after death. Liu Yao Han, reflecting a local Yi Bimo's oral collations, states the following:

“According to the migratory routes of the ancestors, individuals are guided, one step at a time, to the designated places of their ancestors' residence.” (Zehuo 1990, p. 73)

The concept of the ancestral dwelling place, resembling a round gourd, is described as follows:

“The city of the underworld is large, surrounded by a group, and at a glance, the town is rounded and rounded.” (陰間城大到，陰城圍團團，那兒一眼看，城鎮圓溜溜). (Guoji 1993, p. 145)

Yi people rely on symbolic systems to interpret their existence and environment. This connection between the gourd and their ancestral home explains the Yi custom of placing

the ashes of their grandfathers in a gourd, symbolizing a return to their ancestral land (Figure 2). The notion of the soul returning to the gourd intertwines with the broader Yi cosmology, eventually evolving into the idea of the soul returning to the gourd universe (魂歸壺天).



Figure 2. A gourd shrine with ancestral ashes. Image sourced from Liu (1990, p. 51).

Humanity is a species that lives and can only live in terms of meanings that it must invent (Rappaport 1999, p. 8). This transformation is rooted in the Yi people's profound imagination of the relationship between humanity and the universe.

"In ancient Yi language, the universe is represented as '〇◎', where '〇' signifies the vastness of the universe, and '◎' represents the 'egg' from which heaven, earth, sun, moon, and all things emerge." (Yang 2003, p. 18)

The gourd, as the nurturing vessel for humans and all things, shares a symbolic relationship with the universe. According to French researchers of Yi culture, the Yi script, from an ideographic perspective, emphasizes the gourd as a symbol of the universe (Vial and Lieda 2014, p. 65). The gourd and the universe share common functions and implications, serving as symbols of the birth of all things and the maternal source of humankind. Gombrich's perspective on symbols resonates here: "the common factor, was function rather than form." (Gombrich [1963] 1978, p. 4). In other words, the juxtaposition of dissimilar objects is possible due to the similarity in function. Similarly, the gourd and the universe, while dissimilar in form, share the common function of symbolizing the birth of all things.

Initially, the gourd serves as a connection between the human body, self-identity, and the world. Subsequently, it transforms into a sacred space, providing a transcendent experience for humans. Eventually, the gourd becomes a miniature universe in their imagination, encompassing all things and symbolizing the human matrix. Under the influence of this primordial thinking, the gourd, like the universe, encompasses everything and becomes the place of origin of the new world, from which all things in Heaven and Earth are born. From the gourd to the ancestors, the universe, and the gourd universe (壺天), the ancient Yi underwent a process of transmuting their thinking. Human beings are nurtured by the space of the gourd, which is shaped like the universe, and thus, the gourd embodies the universe. Over time, the ancient Yi refined the concept of the soul returning to the gourd, elevating it to the profound notion of a gourd universe (壺天).

6. The Mythology of the Gourd: Interpretation of Yi Culture and Thought

Myth, as a precursor to modern thought, unveils the subconsciousness of earlier societies and encapsulates their experiential understanding of nature and life. The spiritual practices manifest distinctive characteristics, primarily through the cultural interpretation of symbols and metaphors, demonstrating their thought and philosophy.

6.1. Cultural Interpretation Methods of Symbolism and Metaphors

This fundamental role of metaphor, crucial to understanding, serves as a conceptual tool to transform complex abstract ideas into tangible images, facilitating the comprehension of the otherwise abstract. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) assert, “The essence of metaphor is to understand and experience the present through something else”. The gourd concept, as a metaphor, was pivotal in helping the Yi people grasp elusive concepts and spaces.

Complementary to metaphor, symbolism plays another integral role in creating thought: “In structure or culture-as-constituted signs are in a state of mutual determination” (Sahlins 1981, p. 71). Approaching the subject from a structuralist standpoint, the gourd, functioning as a symbolic instrument, recurrently appears in Yi mythological narratives and concepts, aligning with similar entities. The gourd not only symbolizes the preservation and creation of life but also serves as the repository for the spirits of Yi ancestors. Gourds, through their shape, pronunciation, and symbolic meaning as a circle, represent the birth of all things and the continuous cycle of life. The universe, the mother, the ancestor, and the round gourd symbol are then interactively associated, embodying the beginning of all things. This association characterizes the most basic logic of the mythological narratives present in Yi culture: the gourd provides mythological narratives with the natural materials and basic elements for the construction of the world and cultural narratives with collective unconscious ways of thinking and concepts such as space, characters, and time. The unique symbol of the gourd reproduces the universe, serving as a presentation of their thinking that connects the representation with the reality of their feelings and wishes and the symbols and metaphors of the gourd.

6.2. The Interpenetration of All Things in Yi Thought

Gourds provide numerous practical benefits as agricultural and practical resources, such as their use for storing water, food, and other essential items, and were vital for the ancient Yi culture. Their robust structure and buoyancy made them ideal containers and flotation devices. Furthermore, the prolific growth of gourds and their symbolic association with fertility and protection reinforced their cultural and spiritual significance in Yi society. Just as the mythologist Yuan Ke regarded the mixture of things and self as the most prominent feature of early thought (Yuan 1985, pp. 33–40), the mythological narratives of the ancient Yi about gourds represent their view of the world and their understanding of existence. Taking the phenomenon of reproduction as an example, they did not have rational knowledge of it; it was only the accumulation of experience that gave them the representational symbols of reproduction. For example, a woman’s bulging belly and female fertility are representations of reproduction, and the round gourd is particularly similar to these representations. Xiao Bing, a Chinese anthropologist, associates a woman’s abdomen and uterus with the symbol of the gourd (Xiao 1986, p. 374). Thus, their early thought associated reproduction with the imagery presented by the gourd, and as time progressed and experience accumulated, they continued to reinforce this imagery. In this process, the gourd’s ability to become an image of reproduction in the Yi people’s conception is rooted in its similarity to a woman’s pregnant belly, which is also the basis for the combined interpenetration of the gourd and the human being. Subsequently, under the influence of the law of interpenetration, the gourd became a symbol of reproduction and life, and the characteristics of the gourd, such as its many seeds and strong reproductive ability, further strengthened the reproductive imagery of the gourd. Finally, the gourd is endowed with sacredness. When the ancestors could feed on the gourd in times of hunger and gain strength, they would think that the soul of the gourd was transferred to their own bodies. When young men and women became married and broke the gourd containing stove ash, the stove ash served as a substitute for the gourd’s seeds. The ash filled up the whole house, which meant that they gained mystical power from the gourd and were able to have many children like the gourd, and the strong reproductive capacity of the

gourd would also interpenetrate people. These images of the gourd were generated by the repetition of various representations in daily practice.

Through their imagination, the early Yi people juxtaposed the material object “gourd” with the immaterial “universe and ancestral spirits”, presenting the same connotations, and concluded that the gourd created people and the universe. This expression of the anthropomorphism of the object presents their interpenetrating and intermingling thought.

6.3. The Philosophical Concept of the Harmony Between Heaven and Human

The philosophical concept of “harmony between Heaven and human” points to the unique philosophy of the Yi people. Behind the imagery of the gourd is the significance of the universe and life; in other words, this significance embodies the questioning and exploration of the essence of life contained in the spirit of reason. In many ancient Yi texts, human ancestors and all things in Heaven and Earth are always interrelated and refer to each other. According to the *Xinan Yizhi* (西南彝志), human beings evolved from the two qi (氣)¹³ of the universe, the pure air (清氣) and impure air (濁氣) (Bijie Regional Ethnic Affairs Committee [BREAC] 1991, pp. 5–8). In addition, in the *Cuanwen Congke–Rensheng Lun* (爨文叢刻人生論), the ancestor symbolizes all things in the universe:

“The top of the human head symbolizes the round sky, the eyes are like the sun and the moon, the air in the nose is like the wind, and the hair and blood are like the water plants on the ground.” (底基厚牢牢，旋力厚以靠，廣遠闊以法，二目光閃閃，榮太陽。耀月亮以有，鼻有氣過，毛生血行……春肝夏心，秋肺冬腎 ... 脈長絡伸). (X. Ma 1986, pp. 20–21)

“The breath becomes Qian, the life becomes Kun, the skin becomes heaven, the flesh becomes earth, the blood becomes water, the teeth become rock, the bones become wood, and the hair becomes grass. ...” (氣變成了乾，命變成了坤，皮變成了天，肉變成了地，血變成了水，牙變成了巖，骨變成了木，毛變成了草……). (Guizhou Provincial Minority Ancient Books Arrangement Leading Group [GPMA-BALG] 1989, pp. 399–402)

In their eyes, the human body is modeled on all things in Heaven and Earth, and the human body is like a figurative miniature universe. According to the structuralist anthropologist Levi-Strauss, the basic characteristic of the thinking of pre-modern people is “analogy” (Levi-Strauss 1962, p. 348). This can be seen as people in ancient times reinforcing their knowledge with the help of figurative representations and building the same mental system as the images that motivated their understanding of the world. Combined with the previous statement that the souls return to the gourd, the following interpretation can be presented: the relationship between ancestors and the universe is interchangeable. On the one hand, the universe is transformed by the ancestors’ corpses; on the other hand, the universe gives birth to human beings and all things in the world. The ancestral spirits reside in the gourd, and the return of the souls to the gourd symbolizes their return to the universe and the natural earth and their integration with all things in the world. In the world of imagery they constructed, the gourd is the symbol of the universe and their ancestors, and the unique space and texture of the gourd inspired them to construct a sacred place in their hearts, making it the world of the gourd and their ancestors. This contains various intricate psychological states and thoughts. The Yi people explain the secret of the origin of human beings; understand the relationship between the universe, the world, and human beings; and inquire about the meaning of life through the interconnection and imagination of these words, thus presenting the philosophical viewpoint that human beings and the natural world are one and Heaven and humans are in harmony.

7. Conclusions

The symbolism embedded in representations of the gourd served as a foundational pillar in the construction of the religious spirituality of the Yi. In their daily lives, the Yi people astutely employed creative techniques, notably metaphors and symbols, seamlessly

weaving gourd culture into the fabric of their cognitive landscape. Building upon this foundation of thinking—a symbiotic intermingling and interpenetration of concepts—the myriad images encapsulated within the gourd narrative serve as poignant expressions of the Yi people’s fundamental perspectives, portraying the fusion of their thought and cosmology. Furthermore, these diverse gourd representations embody ancestral insights into and comprehension of the world, serving as a testament to their distinctive religious and philosophical outlooks.

Through the nuanced intricacies of the myth of the gourd, the Yi people express profound connections between humanity, their forebearers, the expansive cosmos, and the terrestrial expanse. In tandem with their imaginative faculties, they explore the subtle interplay and resonance between human existence and the broader milieu of being—a reflective process that is a testament to their spiritual practices and original cogitation.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Introduction of each oral epic.

Epic Name	Epic Type	Spread Area	Known Usage	Collected and Translated by the Author	Date
<Chamu> 查姆	Creation epic	Yunnan shuangbo	The basic theory of Yi ancestors’ understanding and interpretation of the universe is referred to as the “root spectrum” of the Yi ethnic group; Bimo 畢摩 (Yi’s shaman) will sing some texts from <Chamu> during the rituals.	Guo Sijiu and TaoXueliang 郭思九、陶學良	2009
<Meige> 梅葛	Creation epic	Yunnan chuxiong	Often presented through singing, the Yi ethnic genre known as ‘Meige’ is prominently performed during festivals by individuals across different age groups, including children, youth, and the elderly.	Yunnan Ethnic Folklore Survey Team 雲南省少數民族民間文學楚雄調查隊翻譯整理	1960
<Eleteyi> 俄勒特依	Creation epic	Sichuan liangshan	Today, among the Yi ethnic group in Liangshan, a traditional oral debating practice known as kezhi 克智 incorporates numerous stories from the <eleteyi>. Kezhi is integral to various folk rituals including weddings, funerals, and birthdays.	Qubi Shimei, Lu xueliang et al. collect and translate. 曲比石美、蘆學良等	1978
<Yi-zuyuanliu> 彝族源流	Migration epic	Guizhou province	Understanding where the Yi people come from and the development of humankind. Nowadays, Bimo 畢摩 (Yi’s shaman) will sing some texts from <Yizuyuanliu> during the rituals.	Guizhou Provincial Minority Ancient Books Arrangement Leading Group 貴州少數民族古籍整理領導小組編 Bijie Regional Yi Translation Group 畢節地區彝文翻譯組翻譯	1989
<Xinan Yizhi> 西南彝志	Cosmological epic	Guizhou Province	The Yi people’s understanding of the origin of the universe and the development of humankind. Nowadays, Bimo 畢摩 (Yi’s shaman) will sing some texts from <Yizuyuanliu> during rituals.	Bijie Regional Yi Translation Group 畢節地區彝文翻譯組譯	1991

Notes

- ¹ 詩經 Shijing (*The Book of Songs*) is the first collection of poems in China. It contains 305 poems and is one of the Five Confucian Classics. *The Book of Songs* is the oldest collection of poetry in world literature and the finest treasury of traditional songs.
- ² In Chinese mythology, this represents the three mountains in the sea.
- ³ The Yi language is different from Chinese Mandarin; hence, the pronunciation here is the international standard pronunciation of the Yi language, as translated by the Chinese and Yi Dictionary Compilation Committee.
- ⁴ Yunnan is a province in southwestern China inhabited by several different ethnic groups.
- ⁵ The god 𐄌𐄌𐄌𐄌𐄌𐄌 (nyiep norp lo zzop pop) is the king of gods, mainly responsible for managing all living things on the ground, derived from the <Chamu>, an oral tradition that has been widely circulated in the Yunnan shuangbo region.
- ⁶ The god 𐄌𐄌𐄌 (Sa seht) is the second son of nyiep norp lo zzop pop, derived from the <Chamu>, an oral tradition that has been widely circulated in the Yunnan shaungbo region.
- ⁷ 𐄌𐄌𐄌𐄌 (atpu ddupmu) is the ancestor of human beings in Yi oral epics. In the Yi minority areas of Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi, apu jjutmu is the common ancestor honored by all the Yi people, as well as the ancestor of the people in the widely circulated oral epics such as <Chamu> <Meige> and <Yizu yuanliu>.
- ⁸ The god 𐄌𐄌𐄌𐄌 (nge tit gge zzy) created mankind and everything in the world, derived from the <Meige>, an oral tradition that has been widely circulated in the Yunnan chuxiong region.
- ⁹ This is a book of folktales collected, translated, and collated by the Yunnan Provincial Ethnic Folklore Survey Team of Chuxiong, originally written in the Yi language and later translated into Chinese.
- ¹⁰ Chi is a unit used for measuring length in China; one chi is one-third of a meter.
- ¹¹ This is a book derived from folktales, collected and organized by the Yunnan Provincial Minority Ancient Books Organizing and Publishing Planning Office.
- ¹² This book was compiled by the Yunnan Provincial Minority Ancient Books Organizing and Publishing Planning Office.
- ¹³ The concepts of “qi” possess specific philosophical and cosmological implications, intricately intertwined with the natural philosophies of Yin-Yang, the Five Elements, Heaven, and Earth. They serve to delineate the various natures and hierarchical energies or vital forces that pervade the universe.

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