

# Historical Memory of Ethnicities in Mythology and Legend and its Modern Significance

Liya Deng

Marxism School of Zhaoqing College, Guangdong, 526000

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**Abstract:** The narratives of multiple ethnicities as brothers, and the similarity of myths among different ethnicities, reflect the commonalities and mutual influences of various ethnic cultures, and are key to understanding the origin and historical development of ethnic groups, have great significance for promoting national unity and the construction of a multiethnic Chinese community.

**Keywords:** Mythology; National history; Common roots

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Myths and legends are elements that are ancient and universal in traditional Chinese culture. A large number of ethnic myths are still living forms today, some integrated with national epics and poetry, others accompanying religious ceremonies, and still others becoming the concepts and faith of an entire people. Although these myths are ultimately fictional, they often contain deep historical information that is valuable for researching the origin and historical development of ethnicities, as well as the relationships between different ethnicities.

## 1. Clan Origin Myths Describe the Brotherhood of Multi-Ethnicities

In the Confucian classic “The Analects,” it is said: “Within the four seas, all are brothers.” The so-called “four seas,” according to the explanation in “Er Ya·Interpretation of Geography,” are: “nine Yi tribes, eight Di tribes, seven Rong tribes, and six Man tribes, which are referred to as ‘the four seas.’” This is not only a traditional belief in Han culture but also expressed in the clan origin myths widely circulated among minority nationalities.

Clan origin myths are the bearers of clan origin memory and serve to maintain ethnic. These myths generally focus on the homogeneity of different branches within the same ethnicity. In China’s minority ethnicities, myths about various ethnicities and multiple other ethnicities being brothers of the same ancestor are widespread, serving as a clear testament to the longstanding unity of the diverse ethnicities that make up China.

For example, the Hani epic says, in ancient times, there was a flood, and the siblings who escaped the flood through marriage gave birth to the ancestors of seventy-seven ethnicities. Lisu mythology states that after the flood, a brother and sister got married and gave birth to seven sons, who were the Han, Tibetan, Nu, Lisu, Naxi, Dulong, and Bai ethnicities. The Achang mythology says that after heaven and earth were created, a brother and sister gave birth to a gourd from which emerged Achang, Han, Dai, Lisu, Jingpo, Deang, and other nine ethnicities. The Deang mythology says that the ancestors of the Han, Lisu, Dai, Jingpo, Bai, Deang, Hui, and other ethnicities all turned into tea leaves. Yao mythology says that the female ancestor Miluo Tuo’s many daughters created the Han, Miao, Zhuang, and Yao ethnicities. Such myths also exist in other minority ethnicities such as Tibetans, Naxi, Nu, Bai, and Bulang.

These myths often mention the Han. For instance, a traditional Yi legend from the Yinxingping Lukuishan area states: “In ancient times, a catastrophic flood left only one man and three fairies on earth. Two of the fairies gave birth to a gourd, and when it was split open, there were four sons inside. The eldest became the ancestor of the Han people, the second the ancestor of the Black Yi, the third the ancestor of the Hani, and the fourth the ancestor of the Dai.” According to another myth from the Yi people of Yunnan: The Celestial God, angered by the lack of distinction between good and evil among humans, sent a flood to submerge everything. Only one man named Dutu survived who married a fairy who descended to the mortal realm. They gave birth to a meaty lump from which emerged the ancestors of the Yi, Dai, Lisu, Hani, Han and other ethnic groups.

In these myths, some depict a lifestyle of joint labor and equal distribution among the ethnicities. For example, the epic “Mu Pa

Mi Pa” of the Lahus illustrates:”The siblings Zadi and Nadi were born from a gourd and proliferated humanity. One day, they hunted a leopard and divided its meat among nine hundred people in rows, forming nine ethnicities. When they were roasting and eating the meat, they spoke in different languages, thus becoming the ancestors of the Lahus, Was, Enis, Han, Dai, and other ethnicities...” It also describes their collaborative efforts in cultivating the land, sowing and harvesting, and jointly building their homes..

## **2. The Similarities of Myths and Legends Reflect the Common Origin of Multi-Ethnic Cultures**

Myths and legends, as part of an ancient culture, are not only widely circulated in Han culture but are also found among Chinese minority ethnicities with many similarities. These myths are not only similar in themes but also share many common characters and plots, reflecting the shared origin of various ethnic cultures.

Firstly, the Pangu mythology is a familiar story among the Han Chinese. Among ethnic minorities, there are many different versions of the Pangu mythology, appearing under different names. For example, “Ancestor Pangu”, “Pangu Hun Dun”, “Tian Huang”, “Pan Lao Da”, “Pangu Ye”, “Yuan Shi Tian Wang”, etc. In the myths of the She, Li, Miao, and Yao ethnicities, Pangu is even equated with their ancestor “Pan Hu”. Similar mythical legends are also recorded in the “Ancient Songs of the Miao People”. For example, the Miao story of “Opening the Sky” tells of multiple celestial gods jointly pushing open the heavens and the earth, not solely the work of Pangu. While the story details differ, the core concept is still similar to the Han Pangu mythology. This shows that Pangu, as a common “cultural ancestor”, has widespread recognition among the various ethnic groups.

Secondly, myths about shooting the sun and controlling water are interpreted differently among various ethnicities. For example, in the Miao’s version of the “Shooting the Sun and the Moon,” there are twelve suns and twelve moons in the sky. The Han’s “Hou Yi Shooting the Sun” becomes “Sangza Shooting the Sun” in Miao mythology. Suns shot by Hou Yi turned into crows, while those shot by Sangza turned into roosters. Despite the differences in details, these myths still exhibit similar themes and structures, reflecting a shared cultural context. The story of Yu controlling water also has a similar version among the Miao. In Miao legends, it was a god named Xiuyu who volunteered to control water when the ancient floods raged. While the characters differ, the core theme of water control remains, indicating a common cultural root of these myths.

Thirdly, in the legends about remote ancestors, monkey ancestor myths are a significant example. According to scholars, monkey ancestor myths with primal faith significance mainly circulate in 13 ethnicities who speak the Tibeto-Burman languages. The Han and the Yao of the Miao-Yao language family, the Zhuang and Bouyei of the Zhuang-Dong language family, and the Dai also have monkey ancestor legends, which are evidently influenced by the monkey ancestor myths of the Tibeto-Burman ethnicities. For example, a monkey ancestor myth passed down in the Sandie Naxi tells about a pair of monkeys jumping out from rocks before humans existed, becoming human ancestors. The Tibetan monkey ancestor tale describes a macaque marrying a rock she-demon, producing six macaques, gradually multiplying into over 500 offspring, and eventually evolving into humans. According to historical records, monkey ancestor legends originated from ancient Qiang people. The “Annals of the Tujue” in the Book of Sui records: “The Tujue Qiang are descendants of the Three Miao, among them are the Tangchang and the Bailing, all claim to be of monkey lineage.” The present-day Qiang still retain the concept of the monkey ancestor and many related legends, all indicating that the Naxi and the Tibetans might have originated from the ancient Qiang.

Finally, the origin and destiny of the ethnicity are tied to the worship of the gourd. The gourd symbolizes the womb and the ancestors, or is regarded as the birthplace of humans - a worship tradition that even continues to this day. For instance, the Yi people of Ailao Mountain in southwestern Yunnan still offer gourds in niches or on supply boards on the main walls of their homes. The Bouyei people in Guizhou still mention phrases like “Pangu has a spirit” and “entering the gourd” during ancestor worship.<sup>1</sup> This kind of plant and animal worship is a common totem belief phenomenon in primitive clan societies, indicating the shared roots of the early cultures of these ethnicities.

## **3. Myths and Legends Carry the Historical Memory of the Blending of Multiple Chinese Ethnicities**

Through interpreting myths and legends, we can find disappeared life scenes of each ethnicity in ancient times. These myths bear the history of the formation and development of each ethnicity, with a focus not on truthfulness and objectivity, but on forming long-standing collective memories. Through the shared recollections of ancestors, the cultural identification and sense of identity of ethnic groups are continued.

Firstly, sibling marriages, as a form of kinship marriage, are the first form evolved from chaotic marital forms in primitive society.

With the development of productive forces, it was necessary to strengthen ethnic group connections and stability through marital forms in order to maintain production and the transmission of experience. However, with the passage of time, humans gradually realized the risks of sibling marriages and began to exclude intra-tribal kinship marriages, moving towards inter-tribal group marriages. This is not only the period when clan organizations were formed, but also when various ethnicities began to breed and develop. The clan origin myths of different ethnicities, produced by sibling marriages, reflect the era's characteristics of transitioning from kinship marriages to inter-tribal marriages, embodying a new ethnic concept while also indicating the long history of interaction and exchange among various Chinese ethnicities.

Secondly, the distribution of the monkey ancestor myth is closely related to its linguistic affiliation, it is essentially a clan myth, and it is inherited based on the blood ties of the population. Combining the historical facts of the migration of ancient Qiang people, some studies suggest that the ancient Qiang people, who were the origin of Naxi and Tibetans, brought the monkey ancestor legends of ancient Qiang culture with them to their new homeland during their westward and southward migrations. These legends became the legends and beliefs of the new ethnic community. Although some changes occurred later due to religious, cultural, and other reasons, the core content remained the same. Thus, the monkey ancestor legends of the Naxi and Tibetans align astonishingly with those of the Qiang. For instance, the monkey ancestor legend passed down in Sandie Naxi describes how humans evolved from monkeys, reflecting their worship of ancestors and their understanding of their own origins.

Thirdly, the Pangu legend also provides important evidence for exploring the history of ethnic evolution of the She people. The image of Pangu is an important cultural icon of the She people, and tracing back from this cultural marker, the Pangu legend was initially believed in by the "barbarians" during the Han-Jin era. The "Book of Later Han" first identified the descendants of Pangu as "today's barbarians of Changsha Wuling." Therefore, some studies suggest that during the Han-Jin period, part of the Wuling barbarians from the Changsha area migrated to nearby areas, with those migrating to the western part of the Wuling Mountains becoming the Yao people, and those migrating to the east developing into today's She people. In a development manner similar to the snowballing form of the Han ethnicity, the She people, over a long history, not only reproduced within their own ethnic group but also absorbed and integrated with other ethnic groups. Its source includes at least the ancient ethnic groups of barbarians, Yi, Yue, and Eastern China indigenous people. As a common cultural ancestor, the Pangu legend not only widely circulates among the She people, but also influences the cultural identity and ethnic group connections of other neighboring ethnicities.

#### **4. The Modern Significance of Ethnic Myths and Legends**

The study of ethnic myths and legends is not only a look back at past history; it also has important practical significance today.

Firstly, the educational significance. Myths and legends record the history of the origins, changes, and development of ethnicities, filled with historical memories of interaction and intermingling between ethnicities, and also contain values of different ethnicities, as well as the pursuit of ideal societies and a better life. They serve as excellent materials for patriotic education, historical education, and ethnic unity education. They should be fully utilized in citizen education to foster a mutual sense of identity, kinship, and awareness of ethnic unity among different ethnicities.

Secondly, through these myths and legends, we can glimpse at the historical facts of interaction, common struggle, and blending in the history of survival and development of different ethnicities, illustrating the blood ties, brotherhood, and aspiring for unity, cooperation, and harmony among different ethnicities. The excavation and dissemination of these myths and legends contribute to breaking down barriers and opposition between ethnicities, promoting mutual trust, equal respect, and the formation of mutual relations and cooperation in the present, and significantly prompt the formation of the awareness of a community of shared future for mankind among different ethnicities in the present day, reminding us to find common points, enhance mutual understanding and cooperation in a diversified world, and jointly face future challenges.

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