

Article

Spatial Imagination in Sacred Narratives of Mountain Communities in Western Yunnan, China

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Abstract: Various sacred narratives have different emphases on the shaping of natural space. Creation myths reveal the basic structure of natural space. Sacred narratives of mountain gods focus on how and why mountain forests are the source of life and stability for nearly all the species in the area. The myth of the hunting god and the legend of the Flower Festival have a remarkable endemicity. The consciousness of the community of life, which is fundamentally constructed in creation myths, reveals visible and sensible pictures in these two types of narratives. The literary imagination of these sacred narratives focuses on establishing and breaking through spatial boundaries. In the intertwining of an imaginative narrative and a realistic existence, the sacredness of natural spaces is established and can be experienced. Mountaineers imbue their practices with gracefulness and nobleness in the dimensions of emotion and morality through storytelling in order to shape the morphological characteristics and the life essence of natural spaces. The shaping of beautiful places and sublime realms in these narratives is a vivid expression of cosmology.

Keywords: mountain community; natural space; sacred narrative; ritualistic practices



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1. Introduction

This article will discuss “the shaping of sacred natural spaces in origin narratives”. The mountain communities in Western Yunnan, China, are located on the eastern flank of the Himalayas; this is the heart of the Hengduan Mountains 横断山, where the main rivers of Asia flow southward in parallel gorges separated by high-altitude mountain ranges. The landforms of highlands and ravines are integral to local culture. For the ethnic groups living in the Yunnan region of the Hengduan Mountains, “how to understand the natural space in the mountains” is the core term in their cultural practice. This article is about topics related to sacred space, and the main examples used are the folk literature of this area.¹

1.1. Myth and Mythical Space

As far as the topic of “the sacredness of natural spaces in origin narratives” is concerned, two related concepts form the basis for this: myth and sacred space.

This article agrees that the core of myth is narrative and belief. In Alan Dundes’ view, “a myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form ... For myth may constitute the highest form of truth, albeit in metaphorical guise” (Dundes 1984, p. 1). Using symbols to express the ultimate truth is the mythical narrative’s peculiarity. In other words, “the basic mythic idea—that is, the concept of an intrinsic parallelism between the real and the ideal—is in itself implicit in the very process of apprehending phenomena or attributing significance to them” (Gaster 1984, p. 114). As the core of myth, the tracing of origin is often related to human beings’ exploration and confirmation of their own ultimate existence. Therefore, whether it is about the origin of the universe, human beings, culture, or the origins of some specific customs, they all carry the task of constructing sacredness. Based on the theme of this article, the myths that will be described and discussed realize the construction of sacred space in response to the question of origin.

In the mythical narratives of local communities, the concept of “the shaping of natural space” involves mountains, forests, and all places that appear in sacred events. These constructions of the sacredness of space are mainly found in creation myths, the sacred narrative of the mountain god, the myth of the hunting god and the legend of the “Flower Festival”. As two important types of creation myths, the myth about the separation of sky and earth and the myth describing creation through bodily dismemberment focus on narrating the origin or re-creation of natural space. In two types of myths from the Eastern Himalayas of China, the local characteristics of space are integrated into the construction of the macro-cosmic world. As genre-bending narratives that are both universal and local, sacred narratives of the mountain god tell us about the relationship between the mountains and the human world. As endemic narratives, the myth of the hunting god and the legend of the “Flower Festival” actually focus on the prosperity and decline of specific life-forms by narrating the origin of the hunting god and the origin of the Flower Festival.

It should be pointed out that the shaping of natural space can be seen not only in literary texts but also in folk rituals related to them. If we think of the construction of sacred ground in myth and ritual as “consubstantial” (Gaster 1984, p. 114), systematicness and connectivity are the essential attributes of the existing form of the myth that Gaster wished to emphasize: “for what we are really seeking is not the *reproduction* of the one in the other, but rather a *parallelism of expression* through two current media.” (Gaster 1984, p. 134). For this article, this goal will point to “a parallelism of expression”.

The natural space in the literary imagination and folk practices of mountain communities may also be called “mythical space and place” (Tuan 2001) as follows:

It is the spatial component of a world view, a conception of localized values within which people carry on their practical activities. (Tuan 2001, p. 86)

The second kind of mythical space functions as a component in a world view or cosmology. It is better articulated and more consciously held than mythical space of the first kind. World view is a people’s more or less systematic attempt to make sense of environment. To be livable, nature and society must show order and display a harmonious relationship. All people require a sense of order and fitness in their environment, but not all seek it in the elaboration of a coherent cosmic system. (Tuan 2001, p. 88)

The term “mythical space and place” represents the mutual shaping of man and environment. Thus, mythical space and place in folk narratives should be viewed within the system of a world view, and, in particular, the term should be understood within the formation and expression of a localized system. In this article’s argument for the concept, sacred space in mythological narratives is related to the spatial life and life philosophy of the specific community.

In learning how to understand the sacred space constructed by mythologies in the Eastern Himalayas of China, the term “sacred natural sites” is also instructive. The study of sacred space covered in this article overlaps with the definition of a “sacred natural site”. This concept was first introduced in 1992 at a conference at the University of Virginia. A clear definition was proposed in *Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for protected area managers*: “areas of land or water that have special spiritual significance for people and communities” (Robert and Christopher 2008, p. 6). In *Sacred Natural Sites (SNS): Culture and Biodiversity Conservation*, Pei Shengji defined this concept and introduced the related research and biodiversity protection in different countries (Pei 2015). Guo Jing summarized the characteristics of a SNS, and the most contributive point made was as follows: “beliefs, morals and rural rules and regulations are the main model of management of Sacred Natural Sites, and it requires the active participation of all community members.” (Guo 2004). The interactive relationship between man and nature can be expressed a “human beings and other living beings, nature and sacred things are all equal when they are in the process of change” (Guo 2004). In other words, although a “sacred natural site” has a specific geographical range, it is by no means just a static spatial concept. A sacred natural site is

managed and maintained, which means that members of the local community continue to participate in an interactive construction based on faith, morality, and emotion.

Finally, regarding the nature of nature constructed by myths and various folk activities, or the relationship between humans and nature, the term of “nature de-naturalised” proposed by Stéphane Gros, who is dedicated to the study of the Dulong people, is instructive: “If modernity naturalises nature (naturalises the natural and generates a single nature), multiplicity progressively disappears. Nature becomes a heterotopia, a context that juxtaposes several incompatible spaces” (Gros 2017). It goes without saying that Gros’s opinion works in coherence with the latest developments in anthropology².

1.2. Research Methods

This article mainly discusses the shaping of sacred spaces in mythical narratives. In the analysis of specific mythical texts, several research methods concerning mythology will be applied.

The first step is to identify the types of folk narratives based on the motif numbers in the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Thompson 1955–1958), so as to facilitate the discussion of the similarities and differences in the spatial shaping of diverse texts. It should be noted that folk narratives about sacred spaces are told in different genres, such as myths, epics, and legends. It is necessary to travel through a variety of genres of folk literature if we want to accomplish the goal of understanding local ideas about them.

Secondly, when discussing the meaning of some concrete spaces in this article, psychological analysis will be applied. The concept of the “archetype” (“Great Mother”) that Jung presented, as well as related arguments in Neumann’s research, are used to help explain the expression of images that appear repeatedly in some myths, although we do not entirely agree with the transcendentalism or heredity involved in this concept. After all, the repeated appearance of maternal images occurs across the expanse of time and culture, and this article accepts this universal fact.

Thirdly, Eliade’s way of understanding the myth, especially sacred space, will also be adopted in this article. Regarding the topic of “how the sacred space is constructed and experienced” that this article attempts to consider, “the dialectic of the sacred”, as the core concept of Eliade’s religious ideological system, is more enlightening. His research on myths and religion is considered to be influenced by phenomenology, which also implies that this article agrees with the relevant ideas of Husserl, Heidegger, and others in this regard.

In the process of analyzing the cosmology or space view in mythologies, several scholars’ similar arguments about Chinese or East Asian cosmology inspired the writing of this article, such as: “The continuity of Being” (Tu 1985) and “correlative cosmology” (Schwartz 1985). Furthermore, the term “relational being” will be the basic concept throughout this article: “The vision of relational being will invite us, then, to set aside the freedom/determinism opposition, and to consider the world in terms of relational confluence” (Gergen 2009, p. xvi, Prologue).

1.3. The Mountain Land Covered in This Article

This article’s objective is to understand how the sacredness of the natural landscape is shaped by folk narratives in the Eastern Himalayas region of China. What follows is a brief introduction to some places involved in folk literature and rituals.

As a keyword in this article, “mountain land” in some folk narratives is a realistic and testable place, mainly involving the following mountains in the Hengduan Mountains: the Gaoligong Mountains 高黎贡山, which are west of the Hengduan Mountains; the Nu Mountains 怒山, which are also a branch of the Hengduan Mountains, facing the Gaoligong Mountains across the Nujiang River 怒江 (Salween); and Wuliang Mountain 无量山, which is located in the west branch of the Yun Ling Range of the Hengduan Mountains. The mythological texts used in this article mainly come from the Lisu 傈僳, the Nu (Nung) 怒, the Drung (Dulong) 独龙, the Achang 阿昌, the Deang 德昂, and the Pumi 普米 people. It

should be noted that the distribution of the Lisu people in Yunnan is not limited to the area mentioned in this article, and the texts used in this article are mainly narrated by the Lisu living in the Gaoligong mountain range.

It should be noted that some of the texts from different ethnic groups discussed in this article are quite similar. The reasons for this phenomenon are diverse and complex, but living in large mixed communities is one of the reasons. For example, the mythical texts of the Nu and Drung have many similarities. Part of this comes from the fact that their living spaces are shared. Fugong county 福贡 and Gongshan county 贡山, on the east side of Gaoligong mountain range, are where the Nu live, and the rest are distributed in areas such as Lushui 泸水 and Weixi 维西. The Drung people mainly gather along the Drung River on the west side of the Gaoligong mountain range. As one of the starting points for crossing the Gaoligong mountain range and entering the Drung River, Gongshan is the main shared area between the Drung and the Nu peoples' living areas, making cultural exchanges and integration possible.

As far as sacred places are concerned, there are 11 sites in the local expression, as can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Eleven sacred mountains in the Nujiang River and Drung river.³

① Kvwagarpu Mountain 嘎哇嘎普神山.
② Mukemudang Mountain 木克木当山.
③ Gongdang Mountain 贡当神山.
④ The Snow Mountain, located on the west side of the first bay of the Nujiang River.
⑤ Xinjiongnai fairy cave 信灵乃仙人洞, located on the west side of the first bay of the Nujiang River.
⑥ Pamunai fairy cave 帕姆乃仙人洞, located north of Nayiduo Village 那衣朵村.
⑦ The cliff behind Qiukedang 秋科当.
⑧ The Snow Mountain, located south of Dala village 打拉村.
⑨ Dengquenai fairy cave 登雀乃仙女洞, located on the east bank of Shimenguan 石门关.
⑩ The cliff behind Nayiduo Village 那衣朵村.
⑪ Rizong Mountain 日宗山 at the junction of Gongshan and Deqin 德钦; the mountain is regarded as the goddess of livestock and keys.

The 11 sacred grounds here are mainly located in the Gaoligong mountain range. In the telling of the myth of the mountain god, the myth of the hunting god, and the legend of the Flower Festival, these spaces and places are endowed with a sense of sacredness. Pilgrimage to these spaces is important to the continuity and operation of local people's lives. This article covers several of them, such as Kvwagarpu, Mukemudang Mountain, and several fairy caves.

2. Mythical Nature as the Existential Essence of Mountain Space

As far as the theme of "the shaping of sacred space" is concerned, the creation myth shapes the basic structure and essence of the universe and natural space. This article makes arguments for this by analyzing the myth about the separation of sky and earth and the myth describing creation through bodily dismemberment.

2.1. Beyond the Veil of Separation

The myth of the separation of sky and earth describes the basic mode of natural space. The relationship between sky and earth shaped by such myths is dynamic, and "separation" is described as one of the changing facts of the relationship between them (Table 2).

Table 2. The myths of the separation of sky and earth.

Text	The Drung	The Nu		The Lisu
	Ants Ate the Sky Ladder and Ants Evacuated the Sky Ladder ⁴	Ants Ate the Ladder to the Sky	Origin of Sky and Earth	The Separation of Sky and Earth
Characters	A man (named Mupu/Gemeng/Gamu).	A brother and sister.	A woman.	A human and the trees.
The way that sky and earth connected	Nine steps on the top of Mukemudang Mountain (Figure 1).	Wooden ladder.	Sky and earth were the same height and grew together.	Sky and earth almost overlapped.
The reason for the separation of sky and earth	① Gamu went to the sky to make gold; ② Gamu laughed at the ants; ③ The angered ants gnawed the ladder; ④ Sky and earth were separated.	① The brother and sister produced iron for people who lived in the sky; ② The brother and sister laughed at the ants; ③ The angered ants ate the ladder; ④ Sky and earth were separated.	① A woman threw a shuttle upward; ② Sky and earth were separated.	① A human and the trees were friends; ② The human cut down the trees as firewood; ③ A branch of firewood stung the sky; ④ The human blamed the sky for being so close to the earth; ⑤ The sky moved farther and farther away from people.
Separators	Ants.	Ants.	A woman.	The sky.
After the separation	Gamu asked plants on the earth for help/scattered seeds on the earth, trying to go back—but he failed.			When the sky left, the mountains also rose.

Based on the above texts, several conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, “separation” is not the essential relationship between sky and earth. Using “separation” as the keyword, the main plot can be divided into three parts: before separation—separation—after separation. According to two texts of the Drung and the Nu, the sky and the earth, before separation, were distant but contactable. According to *How the Sky and Earth Are Divided*, the sky and earth were originally connected by a nine-step ladder. Gamu needed to go to the sky to make iron tools and travelled using the ladder to the sky. This plot aptly points out the fact that the sky and earth were interconnected in the initial stage; that is, the activity of crossing the border between them was normal. In the description of *The Separation of Sky and Earth*, the distance between the sky and earth was “only as high as a person, and a person could reach out and touch the sky” (Zuo 1999, p. 93) before the separation. In the narrative of *The Origin of Sky and Earth*, there is no distance between the sky and earth, as they “grew together” (School of Chinese Language and Literature Yunnan University 2023, p. 134). Oneness is the original characteristic of the relationship between the sky and earth. Thus, the separations these myths speak of refer to the interruption of the channels of contact.

Does separation mean that “opposition” is the dominant or only principle in the construction of grand space? Although the separators are ants, tree branches, and the sky itself, the cause of the separation is the bad temper or immoral behavior of a human. In the Drung people’s story, the occurrence of separation is closely related to the interaction between humans and other species. Gamu’s sneer and the ants’ anger caused the separa-

tion of sky and earth. There are similar plots in the Nu people's text. In the Lisu's text, the human's excessive deforestation caused the separation of sky and earth. If "separation" is a way to resolve conflicts or disputes in stories, the separation of concern in these texts has a keen sense of loss.

As it is not only a way to resolve conflicts, "separation" should be understood as another pattern in the relationship between the sky and earth, which is based on oneness. The re-establishment of the connection between the sky and earth is an important demand raised by such myths. According to *How the Sky and Earth Are Divided*, when Gamu was trying to get back to the ground, he asked for help from the plants on the earth, hoping to re-establish the connection between the sky and earth through the growth of plants. In another version⁵, this attempt is directly expressed as Gamu's scattering of the seeds of *Caryota urens* from the sky to the earth, hoping to return to the earth through their growth. It can be seen that "separation" does not mean a complete replacement of the integration of sky and earth. It is only the visible aspect of the relationship between sky and earth, while the original integration means that the connection between them is intrinsic and possible.

In addition to the pattern of "from connection to separation", the Achang's *Zhepama and Zhemima*⁶ contains a difference, as opposed to the pattern described in the above text. The encounter between sky and earth is an important plot in this text:

On a sunny morning, the earth was quiet, without any sound, and the river stopped flowing. The trees also dropped their branches and leaves, and everything was quietly waiting for the arrival of Father Sky and Mother Earth. In the center of the earth, Zhepama and Zhemima met on the Wuliang Mountain (Figure 2). They met like the sun and the moon meeting for the first time. Their meeting like stars staring at the earth, never satisfied.....Zhepama and Zhemima were married, and they settled in the center of the earth. Nine years later, Zhemima gave birth to a gourd seed, and Zhepama buried the gourd seed in the soil. (Yang et al. forthcoming, l. p. 4)

In this section, the sky and earth are quiet and sublime. It can be argued that the narrator holds high regard for joy, because all of nature exhaled candor, caress, and dawn. Although this can be interpreted as a symbolic meaning, the direct meaning of "the encounter between sky and earth" is the overlapping of space and the flow of life energy.

In addition, no matter what kinds of patterns or dynamic relationships are shown, the nature of the relationship between sky and earth is primarily about oneness in such myths. In the shaping of the literary discourse, the close proximity between sky and earth is visible, and it determines the possibility of specific forms of relationships, such as superposition, separation, encounter, and mutual stare.

Secondly, the shaping of the relationship between sky and earth shapes the basic characteristics of the earth in the myth about the separation of sky and earth. This kind of shaping has the meaning of "land-making movement".

"Separation" is the first step. It is the creation of the distance between the sky and earth that made the appearance of natural space possible, which contains mountains, canyons, rivers, flatlands, and so on. According to the description in *The Separation of Sky and Earth*, the earth before the separation was flat, but the "raising" of the sky not only created the distance between sky and earth but also created different spatial dimensions: sky, mountains, land, and ravines. It is particularly worth noting that, for people living in the mountains, the undulating ground is the background to the landscape in their living space. Additionally, the emergence of ravines was also specifically described: "the distance between sky and earth was getting farther and farther, and the mountains were getting longer and higher, leaving people in deep ravines" (Yang et al. forthcoming, l. pp. 384–85). In the narrative of *The Origin of Sky and Earth*, after the separation of the sky and the earth, the woman's "land-making" behavior focused on creating grass in the ground: "At that time, there was no grass in the fields. The woman said: 'People are idle and have nothing to do. The grass grows much more, and people have to pull it out, and there is more work'" (School of Chinese Language and Literature Yunnan University 2023, p. 134). Undoubt-

edly, the creation of the land is the origin of life on the earth, the beginning of human labor, and the initial construction of the relationship between people and plants (grass) on the earth.

In addition to the shaping of the characteristics of the land's surface, a specific mountain is endowed with the meaning of sacred ground, which is related to the reconstruction of the cosmic order. As the only channel between the sky and earth, the ladder had a specific location that actually corresponded to a location on a map. For example, in the Drung's myth, the ladder connecting the sky and the earth was located on Mukemudang Mountain, which is located in the lower reaches of the Drung River and is part of the Gaoligong mountain range. Coincidentally, the site where sky and earth meet in *Zhepama* and *Zhemima* also exists in reality; it is Wuliang Mountain, which was formed after the plateau was uplifted and deeply divided by the Lancang River, the Yuanjiang River, and their tributaries.

It must be admitted that the realistic placement of mythical space demonstrates at least two points. On the one hand, as a mythical belief, the unity between sky and earth can undoubtedly be regarded as the ultimate truth, and its implementation in realistic time and space undoubtedly means the manifestation of this ultimate truth as a phenomenal being. On the other hand, with the confirmation of the location of the connection or encounter between sky and earth, the mythical place and the realistic space are superimposed. This once again shows that the sacredness and secularity of the spatial being are not completely separated.

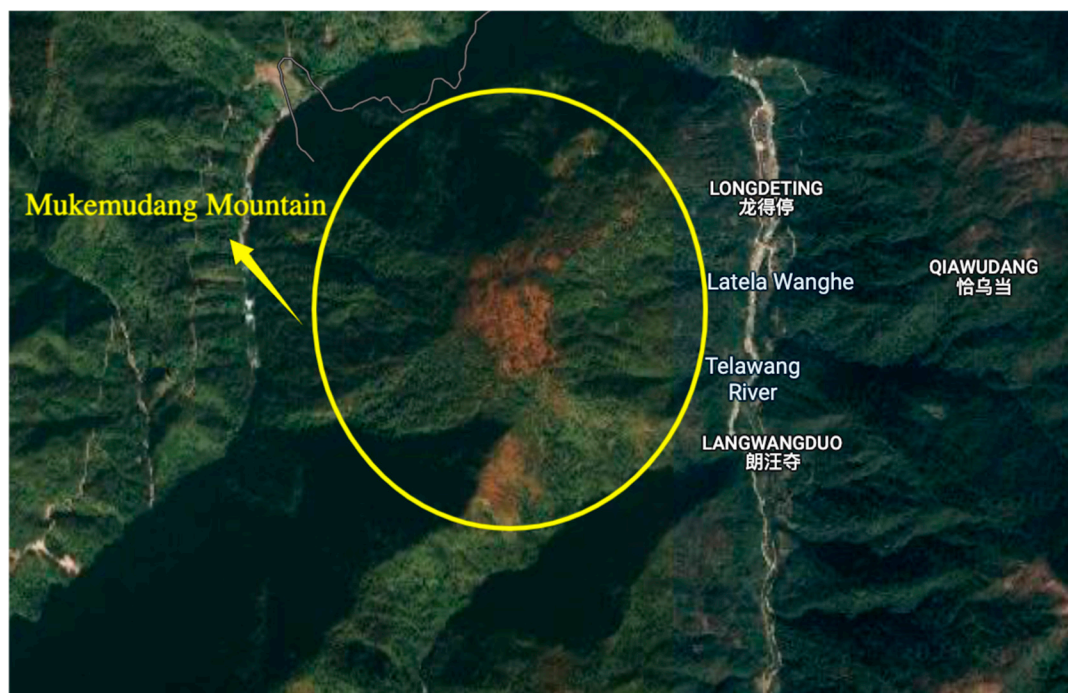


Figure 1. Cont.



Figure 1. Topographic map of Mukemudang Mountain (Google Maps)⁷. Diagram by the authors. Photograph by the authors, taken on 23 January 2023.



Figure 2. Topographic map of Wuliang Mountain (Google Maps). Diagram by the authors.

Thirdly, this type of myth is based on the belief in a “Sky Father and Earth Mother (or vice versa)”. Although it is generally spread around the world, the Drung, Nu, Lisu, Achang, and other ethnic minority groups live in the original core of this cultural idea, according to K. Numazawa:

Though I cannot specifically identify the cradle of those myths, I have been able to show that elements of matriarchal cultural spheres are found in nearly every one of them as a basic component. The cradle of such spheres is to be found on the eastern slopes of Himalayas, drained by the Ganges, the Bramaputras, the Irrawaddy, and other rivers. The district in which our myths are most densely distributed in their most typical forms approximately corresponds to the cradle of the matriarchal cultural spheres. These myths may most probably be connected with the southern Indo-Chinese Language Sphere, which has been influenced by the Austronesian Language. (Küichi 1984, p. 192)

Regarding the spread of such myths in the Eastern Himalayan region of China, it is necessary to consider the spatial attributes of the area, which are mainly characterized by “mountain valleys”. On the one hand, the mountains are high enough to trigger the imagination and the belief that they enable communication between the sky and the earth. On the other hand, regarding “matriarchy”, it may be more inclusive to replace this with the sense of life. Behind the relationship, which is both separated and connected, between the sky and the earth, there are probably mythical thoughts about the life mechanisms of all things rather than just mechanical reflections of a certain social system. The natural life-creating ability endowed by both separating and connecting the sky and the earth is obvious. This is also a perspective that needs to be expanded on when interpreting this kind of creation myth.

2.2. *Breeding Ever Anew*

As an important type of creation myth, the core content of the myth describing creation through bodily dismemberment is that natural space is transformed from the bodies (parts) of gods, humans, animals, or plants. The characteristic of the natural space in this type of myth is that of mutual adaptability among everything in nature, which is innate and is based on their sharing of the same root. Specific to the theme of the shaping of natural space, the diverse texts are mainly divided into three types.

Firstly, the natural landscape is shaped by the dead body of a divinity, giant, or animal. This type of myth can be summarized as follows: “the general narrative is that a primordial being is killed and dismembered, and that from that being’s body the cosmos or some important aspects of it are created” (Lincoln 1986, p. 2). The shaping of natural space by such myths has the following characteristics: the creation of various aspects of nature comes from different parts of the dead body, and these two parties form a corresponding relationship. The correspondence between the natural landscape and the dead body is created by a third party. The primordial being is completely unconscious of this creation, as their participation is totally passive. Also, this shaping is carried out in one step. In this regard, the most typical mythological text of this type is “*Jinjinzu*”, a text of the Pumi people:

The red deer was dead...what to do if the stars didn’t light up? Took out the deer’s eyes to make stars. What to do if the moon was not clear? Took a deer ear and made it into a moon. What to do if the sun didn’t rise? Cut off the deer’s head to summon the sun... Jinjinzu swung his long falchion and chopped at the deer’s body. Jinjinzu dug out the deer’s eyes, and the stars blinked. Jinjinzu cut off the deer’s ears, and the moon showed a white smile. Jinjinzu cut off the deer’s head, and the sun jumped out of the mountain. Jinjinzu used the skin of a red deer to mend the broken sky corners, and Jinjinzu used the legs of a red deer to hold up the sloping earth. Jinjinzu sprinkled deer blood on all things, and the vegetation and forests became alive. Jinjinzu dug out the intestines of the red deer, and

there was gurgling water in ravines and ditches. Jinjinzu scattered deer hair on the fields, and the grains produced gold. Jinjinzu threw the deer intestines to the mountainside, and a beautiful rainbow appeared in the sky. Jinjinzu distributed the venison to the people, and the people regained their strength. From then on, there was light on the earth, and colorful clouds appeared in the sky. From then on, people rebuilt their homes, and the world was filled with happiness and laughter. (Pu et al. 2009, p. 392)

This is a mythical narrative about rebuilding natural space. In the process of reorganizing nature, the performer of the creative act was the hero, Jinjinzu, and the dead body of the red deer was used as a creative material to participate in the construction of the spatial landscape. As the material that the natural space was made from, the functions of the red deer are multi-faceted; it is a raw material for making celestial landscapes, a material for patching the sky, and a source of nourishment for the resurrection of natural life. Undoubtedly, this myth established a corresponding relationship between natural space and various parts of the red deer's body. All kinds of natural scenes also constitute a homologous relationship based on the sharing of the red deer's body and the moment of creation that would last till the end. It is worth noting that, in participating in the shaping of the natural space, the inanimate body of the red deer achieves the birth of a new form of life.

Secondly, the natural space is still shaped by the bodies of gods, giants, plants, or animals, but this creation took place while they were in an animated state, which implies that the participation of the primordial being is motivated. As promoters and practitioners, they fully understood that it is a rational choice. Furthermore, there is more than one primordial being, and the shaping of natural space is a continuum rather than a one-time act. It is worth noting that, in the creation of various natural scenes, the creation of adaptability or matching between them is emphasized. In such texts, primordial beings not only created the universe with their living bodies but continued to exist after the creation ended.

A typical text of this type of myth is *Zhepama and Zhemima*. When Zhemima weaved the earth, the tools she used were different parts of her body. She used her throat as a shuttle and her own hair as threads to weave the earth. Later, when the earth and the sky were connected, she pulled out three threads that had been used to weave the earth before, thus creating mountains and dams. The hair on different parts of her face corresponded to the earth in different directions, and the blood that flowed out after plucking the hair became mountains and rivers. Her flesh and blood held up the land and separated the earth from the sea. Then, Zhepama praised the earth woven by Zhemima, while Zhemima expressed her confusion: "the mountains were high and no one cut firewood, the forests were wide and no one hunted, the fields were fertile and no one cultivated, and the oceans were deep and no one fished" (Yang et al. forthcoming, l. p. 4). Clearly, these discourses are the vivid expression of the concept of a life community. According to one variation, Zhemima gave birth to a gourd seed after their union. Zhepama buried it in the earth woven by Zhemima's hair, and it was watered by Zhepama. His sweat turned to rain, and his breath turned to wind. The sun and the moon, which shone on the growth of the gourd seeds, were placed between two mountains, which were formed by Zhepama's own breasts. The sun and moon appeared alternately around the Thoreau tree, which was also planted by Zhepama.

In the Nu people's text *LaShan and CiShan*, this connected creation of living life is also expressed very vividly. The surviving brother and sister were married after a fierce flood, then the ants, hacking knife, cloth, and so on dropped by the sister became the ancestors of different creatures. The ants became the ancestors of ghosts, were assigned to live on the Crag, and took charge of mountain animals and vegetation. The ants in this story have the same function as the hunting god (which will be described and discussed later).

Thirdly, creation through bodily dismemberment is not undertaken by a single devotee but by a community of devotees. As far as the shaping of natural space in such myths is concerned, the true meaning of "a primordial being" is the chain of life, as the logical point of the origins of the universe, although it is possible to trace creation back to this

being on the timeline. The sacredness of grand spaces mainly comes from the continuous interactions between everything in nature. Although the creator or sacrifice remains alive, they are not external or superior to natural space in such myths. This kind of interactive link can be clearly felt in the Deang's text *DaGuDaLengGeLaiBiao*, which follows:

Tea trees were from a part of the god (Padaran). The first generation of humans were transformed from tea leaves, and tea's flowers became the moon and stars, and its fruits became the sun. The rivers, lakes and seas on the earth were from man's tears. When the rivers, lakes and seas became floods, and when people had nowhere to stay, it was their brothers and sisters of the tea leaves who had the same roots and provided the assistance. After the flood, the land was thickly covered in tea leaves and finally transformed into mountains and dams. The earth was covered with flowers, plants and trees after the first generation of humans gave up parts of their skin and flesh. The second generation, who lost parts of their body, became thinner and shorter. They used the soil formed by the tea leaves, mixing with their own saliva to create birds, animals, insects, and fish.

In short, the Deang people established diverse relationships between species and the environment, as well as among multiple species, in *DaGuDaLengGeLaiBiao*. A sense of connectivity is in full flow in this myth, as Yi-Fu Tuan said: "The universe is not alien; it influences or determines the fate of human beings and is yet responsive to their needs and initiatives" (Tuan 2001, pp. 88–89). The important concept is not so much the creation of specific natural scenes but the creation of relationships among natural scenes in such myths. The mechanism that ties these relationships together is living and oriented toward the sacredness of the life of everything in nature.

Based on the texts quoted above, the shaping of natural spaces can be summarized as follows.

Such myths focus on shaping the spatial system of nature. They not only answer "what should natural space accommodate" but also provide the basic view that "natural space should have creativity and vitality". Regarding important ways in which to live, these myths regard "the construction of ecological community" as key. As for the nature of the space and the relationship among all things shaped by these narratives, Bruce Lincoln's analysis is reasonable:

Within that system, anthropogony and cosmogony were both described, the two being complementary halves of one cyclical process, a process whereby matter was recurrently transubstantiated from a microcosmic form to a macrocosmic form and thence back again, bones becoming stones becoming bones becoming stones ... world without end. The body and the universe are all forms of each other, their respective component parts subtly interrelated along the lines of the homologies I have detailed in this chapter. (Lincoln 1986, p. 4)

Regarding this theme, in addition to the correspondence, a more profound relationship is the mutual integration. The space is not empty and majestic but filled with the growth and flow of all things in the natural space, and what is revealed of the transformational chain of life is the spatial awareness of "being-in". In other words, with regard to everything in the natural space, the appropriate interrelationship among them is open and integrated in these myths, and it should be understood as "being-in": "being-in designates a constitution of being of Dasein, and is an *existential*." (Heidegger 1996, p. 50).

Secondly, for the natural space shaped by these myths, its sense of sacredness lies in the establishment of an inexhaustible experience of life. The shaping of spatial characteristic in such myths is described as "creating the time-space continuum out of a sacred body and marking and consecrating an actual space/landscape by the body parts of a divine being" (Yanchevskaya 2022). It is instructive to think of the natural space shaped by such myths as "the continuum of time-space". Judging from the myths listed above, "the continuum of time-space" undoubtedly means the growth and development of life, and natural space derives its vitality from the creation and breakthrough of a "bounded being" (Gergen 2009, p. 20). In other words, it not only creates bounded existences but also establishes connections between bounded existences as its ultimate pursuit.

3. The Mythical Mountain as the Original Home of Mountain Creatures

If it is believed that the creation myths of this region shape “relational nature” as the existential essence of mountain lands, then the narrative of the mountain god shapes the “sacred mountain” as the source of existence of mountain communities. As Gros noted, “mountain deities are of particular significance regarding people’s livelihood. They are considered to be in charge of the community’s territory and its resources and consequently can guarantee people’s prosperity in terms of an abundance of game and grain. Mountain deities therefore play a crucial role in community life” (Gros 2017). This kind of shaping is mainly seen in flood myths, which tell of the origin of the mountain gods, and folk legends, which tell of the relationship between the mountain gods and the local world.

3.1. The Cradle of Living Creatures

The mountains are recurrent themes in the flood myths found in Western Yunnan, and specific mountains are shaped as the birthplace of human beings and mountain communities. The meaning of “the original home” points to two aspects of flood myths: the survival and the development of mountain communities.

The following sections will take the Drung people’s, the Nu people’s and the Pumi people’s myths (Table 3) as examples to illustrate.

Table 3. The Flood myths of the Nu, Drung and Pumi.

Text	The Nu	The Drung	The Pumi
	Flood Myth ⁸	Flood ⁹	Pamichali
Reason	The gods sent floods to punish/eliminate evil spirits and bad people.	People and ghosts lived together. Ghosts began to harm the humans. The gods sent floods as punishment to distinguish humans from ghosts.	On the earth, demons destroyed the fruits of human labor. God sent a flood as punishment.
Characters	Siblings (a brother and a sister).	Siblings (a brother and a sister).	Three brothers.
Behavior	Collected mushrooms at the top of a mountain.	Collected mushrooms from the top of a mountain.	Received help from a white-haired old man.
Shelter during the flood	A cave on the top of the mountain.	A cave on the top of the mountain.	The three brothers were tied to the base, waist, and top of the sacred tree “BaZhaJiaChuBeng”.
After the flood	① Survived and left the cave; ② Gave birth to nine pairs of siblings.	① Survived and left the cave; ② Gave birth to nine pairs of siblings.	① The third child survived on the top of the tree. ② After the flood, the mountains arose from the ground and the canyons fell from the ground. ③ The third child married the fairy who lived in the mountains.
Mountain’s name	Neyamensilong Mountain 讷雅门四龙山	Kvwakarpu ¹⁰	Unknown
Cave’s name	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown

As can be seen from the table above, mythological motif-sharing is characteristic of the regional literature. This sharing of geographical and cultural space also has something in common with the identifiable sacred mountains. Neyamensilong Mountain and Kvwakarpu, in the above-mentioned myths, are real in the minds of local people. Kvwakarpu is the main peak of the Gaoligong mountain range, with an altitude of 5128 m; its full name is “Gyangmu Kvwakarpu” 仰目嘎哇嘎普 or “Gyangmuglung” 仰目谷陇. As for the Neyamensilong Mountain mentioned in the Nu people’s flood myth, although it is difficult to determine its location, some investigators have pointed out that “in some creation myths of the Nu and Drung, Kvwakarpu is regarded as the main refuge for human beings to survive during the prehistoric period” (Yang and Yang 2024). In addition, as far as the investigation of “Mus” (mountain god, namely Mis) in Lisu is concerned, there is a record from the introduction of the Lisu people’s “Nima” (local shaman in the Lisu language) in Gongshan: “there are many Mus here. The first one is Kvwakarpu which is called ‘Kvwakarpu jiwa’ (Kvwakarpu Snow Mountain Figure 3) in Lisu language” (Yang and Yang 2024). Based on these records, it can be inferred that it is a common local concept to regard Kvwakarpu as the “first sacred mountain” in the context of the beliefs regarding mythical mountains of the Nu, Drung, and Lisu peoples in Gongshan.

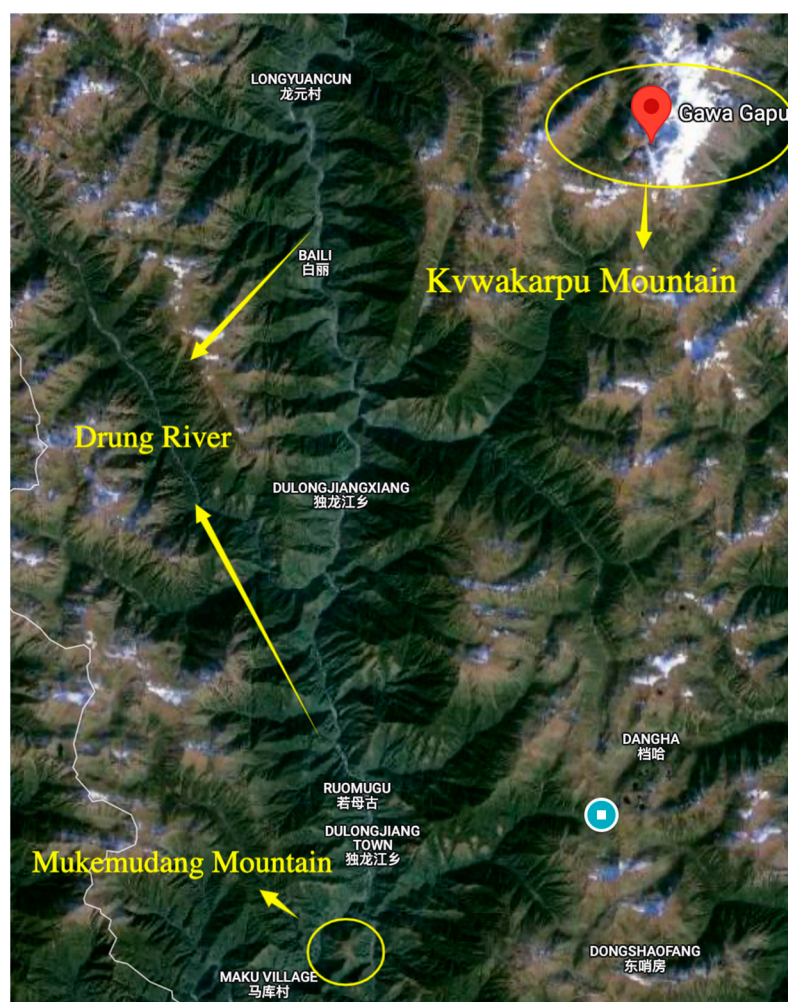


Figure 3. Topographic map of Kvwakarpu Snow Mountain (Google Maps). Diagram by the authors.

Three myths share the topics of “human’s spread”, “the beginning of local history” and the “emergence of new heaven and earth” (Witzel 2010, p. 238). In terms of the reconstruction of natural space, “this is positioned after the creation of the world and the preparation of the world for (human) habitation. It functions as an interlude in the continuing

creation of humans and of culture" (Witzel 2010, p. 238). In view of the irreconcilable contradictions between humans and ghosts, creating floods in their living space is a method of spatial segregation. The natural spaces that contributed to the survival of human beings during these floods are given significance as the birthplace of human beings and of mountain communities.

The destiny of humankind following a disaster has two turning points: survival during the flood and development after the flood. Although two transitions occur through the characters' connection with the "mountain", the plots in the above-mentioned three texts are different. In the myths of the Nu and the Drung, the sacredness of the "mountain" appears in the first turning point of the plot. The siblings' daily behavior of "climbing the highest mountain to collect mushrooms" helped the brother and sister survive the flood. Mountains have always existed as refuges for ordinary humans in the flood myths of the Nu and the Drung; therefore, the sacredness of the mountains comes from their protection of all life. The "mountain" is constructed as the only place to avoid disasters; that is, the only space to preserve the roots of mankind. In the spatial setting of a disastrous event, the mountain is a preceding existence, because the specific origin of the mountain is not mentioned in the two stories in question.

The sacredness of the mountain emerges in the second turning point. The mountain enables the restoration of order after the disaster in the Pumi people's myth. The distinctive features of mountains and canyons are very clear; concerning the canyon, it is said that "that's where monsters live" (Pu et al. 2009, ll. p. 380). Contrastingly, the mountain is given sacredness: "the gods lived in the smoking mountains...That was the gods' dwelling" (Pu et al. 2009, ll. p. 380). The only survivor after the flood went to the "mist-shrouded mountains" to ask the gods to help the humans boost their population. The "mountain" is constructed as the only space where human beings can be given an opportunity to develop.

According to the Nu's and the Drung's texts, the second turning point of the plot shapes the sanctity of the cave. In other words, the writing of spatial duality deserves attention. By climbing up the mountain, the brother and sister were able to avoid being swallowed by the flood. When they entered and then left the cave in the mountain, human beings' development officially began. Entering and leaving the cave signifies that it is sacred, not for the survival of life but for the breeding of future generations. As the ancestors of the Drung, the brother and sister became gods of Kvwakarpu Mountain. In the Nu's texts, when the flood receded and man left the cave, species in the cave began to diverge. While it signifies the initial establishment of human socialization, the cave in Neyamensilong Mountain also serves an important function in recreating relationships among species. In a word, the spatial combination of mountains and caves was crucial for the regeneration of species. Compared with the "realness" of the sacred mountain in the flood myth, the cave appears a generic or abstract sacred space.

It is worth noting that there is another Drung text about Kvwakarpu: *The god of snow mountains washed all things*. It also provides sanctity to the same mountain in the natural space, as follows:

The sun and the moon united and gave birth to all things, but all things were round blocks without corners, which were washed with snow water by the god of Kvwakarpu. When all things were separated, a man and a woman appeared in the snow water. (Li 2004, p. 73)

The relationship between *The god of snow mountains washed all things* and *Flood* still cannot be clarified in the current fieldwork, but there are several doubts worth noting. Firstly, are the gods of the snow mountains here the siblings in *Flood*? Secondly, is the water from the snow mountain another expression of a flood? If so, as an atypical flood myth, this story undoubtedly tells how the snowy mountains fully participated in the process of human rebirth. The events of creation in this myth describe the different stages of human origin. The emphasis on the defects of the life that was born from the sun and the moon shows that the first birth was ambiguous. The god of the snow mountain corrected

the defects of life. When using the water of the mountain, which combined naturalness and sacredness, the god of the mountain definitely participated in the construction of the “correctness” of human origins. According to *Flood*, there is the closest identity in the snow mountain and siblings, who produced offspring of their own. In sum, there is an “intimate link with the notion of fertility” (Gros 2017) between the mountain gods and the mountain communities, which we will discuss later. We should note that not only have cosmological thinking and reality been reconciled, but social order has been structurally reshaped through myth-telling.

3.2. The Earthly Life of the Mountain God

As a mountain god, what is interesting is that Kvwakarpu is not only mentioned in flood myths but also in legends about the surrounding scenery.

“There was a story about the origin of Shimenguan (Figure 4). There used to be a brother and sister, who were the mountain gods in the past. The mountain on the east side of the Nujiang river in Shimenguan was the brother, Kvwakarpu, and the one on the west side of the river was the sister. Their parents were out of town, and Kvwakarpu later married his sister. Originally, the brother and sister planned to block the Nujiang River, but their old mother fell ill, so the younger sister went to visit her. Kvwakarpu is the ‘Emperor’, so Baraosengeng’s (male) daughter married Kvwakarpu when she returned home. Later, when the wife who was Kvwakarpu’s younger sister came back, she went to Kvwakarpu’s side to create a disturbance, so Kvwakarpu scattered a handful of stones, which turned into two umbrellas at Shimenguan. The two umbrellas are still there, on the stone wall. The brother and sister’s idea of blocking the Nujiang River could not be achieved”. (Yang and Yang 2024)

Shimenguan is a famous natural scenic spot in Gongshan county. This legend about the origin of Shimenguan further clarifies several local opinions. Firstly, the brother and sister who were human ancestors in the aforementioned flood myth did become mountain gods, but Kvwakarpu refers to the older brother, and the mountain of the younger sister lies opposite. Secondly, Kvwakarpu, in this text, is given a more local identity than the mountain god, as the creator or the ancestor of human beings. As far as the storyline is concerned, this sense of place is reflected in the construction of the secular relationship between Kvwakarpu and the ordinary local mountains. The shaping of the three-dimensional relationship among people, mountain gods, and natural space is clear and deep-rooted in the local spatial consciousness, which is based on the establishment of Kvwakarpu as an intimate and perceptible image.



Figure 4. Topographic map of Shimenguan (Google Maps). Diagram by the authors. Photograph by the authors, taken on 26 September 2022.

In addition to the legend about the local scenery, the origin narratives of local rivers are also related to Kvwakarpu.

In very ancient times, there was a pool on Kvwakarpu Mountain ... In a magical cave beside the pool, there lived the Snake King and Snake Mother who could change their forms... Kvwakarpu Mountain towered into the clouds, with towering ancient trees on the mountainside and white snow on the top. After a while, the Snake King and Snake Mother played all over the mountain, then they felt a little tired... One night with good weather, the Snake King discussed with the Snake Mother: "We have stayed here for a long time and it is really deserted. It is better to go out and find a wider place." After leaving the cave, the Snake King said goodbye to the Snake Mother and went southwestward alone. The Snake Mother shook its head and tail and ran southward... One day, they finally came to the vast and boundless sea. They looked for each other. Finally, they met in the middle of the sea. From then on, they lived happily together forever. The road that the Snake King walked turned into a river. The Drung people called it "Aguwang" (King), and later it was also called Nujiang River. The road that the Snake Mother walked also turned into another river. This river was called "Amaiwang" (Mother Queen) by the Drung people, and later it was also called Drung River. The children of them who followed the Snake King and Snake Mother later became small rivers flowing into these two rivers. (Liu et al. 1995, pp. 614–16)

This is a legend about the origin of important rivers in this area. When the story was published, it was noted that Kvwakarpu is located at the head of the Drung River, although this has been denied by actual geography. In terms of spatial location, Kvwakarpu is not located at the head of the Drung River. Judging from the content of this legend, it does not construct the spatial relationship between Kvwakarpu and these rivers but indicates that Kvwakarpu is the source of existence of all rivers in this area.

3.3. Back to the Original Home

The sacredness of mountains is not only shaped in the story worlds of these local myths but is also repeatedly emphasized in the traditional rituals of the area. The Drung's flood myth is narrated during Kaquewa, the Drung's sacrificial ceremony during the New Year celebrations. Kaquewa is held every year by different families scattered across the mountains, and it begins with the narration of the flood myth. As a family's shaman, the Namsa spends nearly an hour at the beginning of Kaquewa telling the story about their ancestral origins, which tells how people left Kvwakarpu Snow Mountain and scattered to various places. Afterwards, the Namsa starts offering sacrifices from the mountains where their family lives. Then, the Namsa chants the names of the mountains in sequence and prays for protection from the god of each mountain. The Namsa's chants start with the name of the mountain where the family in question lives. The last mountain chanted is the Kvwakarpu Snow Mountain. When they sing the praises of this mountain, the entire ceremony comes to an end. It is worth mentioning that the word "loq" (meaning "return" in the Drung language) is used to refer to the final arrival at Kvwagarpu in the narrations of the Namsa. This sacred mountain is both the starting point and the ending point, whether from the perspective of the story or of the entire ritual process.

In addition to the relationship between Kvwagarpu and the mountain community as a whole, every individual life is connected to this mountain. The traditional life-saving rite—"Soracho"—for Drung males also includes the reciting of mantras about the mountains. As a rite of passage, "Soracho" is generally held twice throughout the life of a Drung male, once when he is two years old. The ritual's purpose is to pray for protection from the mountains and to be able to grow up safely and healthily. When they experience distress during adulthood, they will hold the rite again, hoping to send the bad things away and gain the protection of the mountains again. The ritual process of "Soracho" is also the same as that of Kaquewa. Just as Gros said, "mountain deities—such as Gyangmu Kvwakarpu—are also protective divinities and may be asked to look after people and defend them against other beings that may cause all kinds of calamities" (Gros 2017). Furthermore, when an

individual re-establishes their connection with the mountains and re-travels the route of the beginning of life and the origin of the group, they will regain their connection with the mountains and return to their previous happiness. In short, the mountains in the flood myths and folk legends of this area are closely connected to adoring life. In the lives of local people, such connections are intrinsic and a matter of common practice.

4. Sacred Caves as the Source of Life for Mountain Community

As an indispensable component of “the shaping of the mountain” in sacred narratives, the life cycle of everything in natural space is a common theme, seen mainly in the myths of the hunting god and the legends of the “Flower Festival”. Both types of narratives shape concrete caves and cliffs into sacred spaces, which are related to the awareness and maintenance of the consciousness of life. As sensible physical spaces, their sacredness comes from the construction of the discourse of the origin narrative and the constant emphasis on their authority by periodic rituals.

4.1. Chasing the Endlessness of Life through Drowned Mountain Forests

According to the texts of the Nu and the Drung peoples, specific cliffs and caves are the spaces where mythical events took place. The theme of such myths is how ordinary people became gods or goddesses who are responsible for the fertility of animals, plants, and humans; that is, the guardians of life and the sources of vitality.

The description of spatial transformation reveals a functional view of the cave according to *The hunter and the goddess of hunting* and *Golden Girl*. See Table 4 below for details.

Table 4. The Myths of The Hunting god.

Text	The Nu	The Drung
	The Hunter and the Goddess of Hunting	Golden Girl
Main Character	Male hunter; a girl who lived in a tree hole.	Male hunter; a girl who lived in a cave.
Object that Disappeared	Prey.	Corn.
Male’s Behavior	Chased.	Chased.
Relationship	Married.	Married.
The Girl’s Function	Good at hunting and weaving.	Not mentioned.
Ending of Story	The wife went back to the mountain.	① The couple went back to the cave. ② Springs came out from the cave and turned into the Drung River.

After comparing the two texts, it can be clearly seen that, by focusing on the unusual experiences of the male hunter, especially through weaving a potent tale of his encounters with a girl living in a tree hole or rock cave, the point of the two stories is to believe in the existence of the goddess of hunting in the mountain forests. According to *The Hunter and the Goddess of Hunting*, the tree hole, whose width was difficult to measure, was located at the root of an ancient tree on the top of a remote mountain, and all the things in it were related to textiles (textile utensils, raw materials, and textiles) and animals. The direct manifestation of the marriage between the hunter and the owner of the tree hole was a magical way to obtain prey. According to *Golden Girl*, the magical effect of the marriage was that the springs continuously gushed out from the cave, benefiting the local people’s productive practices. Undoubtedly, the simultaneous possession of the identities of cave master and hunting god points to two stages and aspects of vitality: gestation and growth.

Concerning the dual or multiple attributes of godhood, there is another type of narrative focusing on changes in identities. During transformational events, mountains, cliffs, and especially caves are by no means just “the site of event”. This is shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5. The Narratives of The Cliff God, Rock God and Cave God.

Text	The Nu	The Nu	The Drung	The Drung	The Drung	The Drung
	The Cliff God Marrying His Wife (He and He 1988)	Women’s Rock (You 2003)	Cliff Ghosts (Li 2004)	Renmuda (Li 2004)	Hunting God Akati (Ba and Ba 2010)	Duna’s Cave (Ba and Ba 2010)
Before	Two sisters.	A mother and a daughter.	Five people.	Two brothers.	An abandoned infant.	A human girl.
Turning Event	Climbed the mountain to chop wood.	Climbed the mountain to chop wood.	Climbed the mountain to go hunting.	Climbed the mountain to go hunting.	Abandoned in a cave.	Moved to a cave.
Disappearance/Death/In Hiding	The cliff god was hidden at the back of a big rock.	The daughter disappeared.	One of them disappeared on the cliff.	One of them disappeared on the cliff.	Died on the night of a red moon.	Left the cave (disappeared).
Magic Plot	They encountered the cliff god, and one of the sisters married the cliff god.	The daughter married the cliff god.	The disappeared person became a cliff ghost (“Jiublang”).	The disappeared person became a hunting god (“Renmuda”).	Hunting on a red moon night will be fruitful.	She was taken by the hunting god and lived in the hunting god’s palace.
Ritual			Offering sacrifices to cliff ghosts every year.	Offering sacrifices to Renmuda every year.	Hunting on a red moon night or on a moonless night.	Sacrificing Duna before hunting on the mountain.

The six texts mentioned above focus on the process of transformation from human to non-human and from mortal to immortal, even if the backgrounds to the stories and characters are far from ordinary life and are not all the same. In local people’s beliefs, the immortal deity is transformed from an ordinary person. Accepting this view that the main theme of these stories is the importance of disappearance or death as the catalyst of the transformation of life forms, there are more details worthy of scrutiny:

1. Although the behavioral motivations were different, all the transformations started with climbing a cliff or entering a cave. No matter what kind of combination of gods they are, their integration with the belief in vitality was based on the specific spatial support of the cave or cliff. Without this spatial entity, the transformation toward the symbol of productivity was difficult to achieve.
2. The key point to achieve transformation is “death or hiding”. The disappearance or appearance of the chief character was related to the prosperity and decline of all things. Before becoming gods, the characters in these stories all experienced the crisis of death. The cliff or cave was where death occurred and where transformation was successful. As mentioned before, cliffs are often “pronounced” at the edge; the steepness of the cliff was maybe the main cause of death. In contrast, caves were often described as spaces where the transformation or the regeneration of life took place. If there was no death on the escarpment or while hiding in the cave, it was impossible for these ordinary people to gain the special ability of being immortal. Therefore, the cave and cliff are integrated spaces in such myths; this oneness is also the main feature of the construction of sacred space in these stories.
3. In addition to death, transformations of life-forms brought about by marriage or a change of residence are also told. There are several stories related to the motif of “the cliff god marrying his wife” that are widely circulated in the mountain communities. In *Duna’s Cave*, an ordinary girl acquired the identity of the goddess of hunting through entering into the cave of the god of hunting. She was taken to live in the palace of the god of hunting. As for the echo between the cycle of life and the form

of the moon, *The Hunting God Akati* explicitly mentions that the infant abandoned by human parents grew into a magical hunter in the cave, and that the cycle of his life was closely tied to the waxing and waning of the moon.

- 4. It is worth noting the character named “Cliff Ghost”, who controls the lives of living creatures, in some stories. Naming the characters who live in cliffs or caves gods or ghosts expresses the local people’s concept of bounded space, as Eliade pointed out: “one of the outstanding characteristics of traditional societies is the opposition that they assume between their inhabited territory and the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it.” (Eliade 1987, p. 29). On the one hand, based on the description of these stories, the cliffs and caves in the mountain forests are indeed “a sort of ‘other world’” (Eliade 1987, p. 29), but, on the other hand, these spaces and human settlements are mutually supportive rather than isolated and antagonistic, and not entirely “a foreign, chaotic space” (Eliade 1987, p. 29).
- 5. The plot focusing on the transformation of life-forms directly leads to the legitimacy of hunting rituals, and as the designated place for the ceremony, the sacred attributes of a specific cliff or cave are established. The “cliff ghost” is sacrificed in the Drung’s “Kaquewa” and “Soracho”. In the folk beliefs of the Nu, the cliff god is not only regarded as the “mountain god” but also as the “grain god”, “rain god”, “marriage god”, and “hunting god”.

4.2. The Place of Fresh Flowers

In addition to the myth of the hunting god, legends of the “Flower Festival” also focus on specific caves as sacred spaces. Local people show their ambivalent feelings and modify their content to express their own feelings and evaluations by telling stories and engaging in folk practice.

A “Fairy Cave” is a sacred space where the Nu people practice their belief in vitality. The sacrificial space is not limited to a single location, but all of them are named “fairy caves” and can be identified and recognized. There are different names for the folk festival dedicated to the sacrifice of the cave: Fairy Festival, the Festival of Pilgrimage to the Mountain, Flower Festival, and so on. Although different, these names all clarify the activities and cultural significance of this festival. In the traditional expression of the Nu, this festival is called “Nerewa” 乃热瓦. The festival is still a core part of the experiences of native inhabitants in the multidimensional and composite space of mountainous areas. There are multiple versions of the legends related to the sacredness of these caves. Table 6 records some basic information about these legends.

Table 6. The Legends of The Flower Festival.

Text		Character	Plot	Festival	Sacred Space	Sacred Things in the Cave
The legend of Fairy Cave	Variation I	Arong, related to spider silk.	① She escaped from marriage and hid in a cave. ② She died of burning or starvation. ③ She became the goddess of the cave.	Flower Festival.	Fairy cave located in Shandang.	

Table 6. Cont.

Text	Character	Plot	Festival	Sacred Space	Sacred Things in the Cave
The legend of Fairy Cave	Variation II	Gejuemu, an outsider with a local lover. ① He was kidnapped by a python and brought into a cave. ② He became the owner of the cave and the cliff god.	Flower Festival.	Fairy cave located in Jimudeng, opposite the snow mountain pass on the other side of the Nujiang River.	
	Variation III	① A young man, an outsider from Dimaluo 迪麻洛. ② A local girl, Jimudeng. ① They got married. ② They became the masters of the cave and the Gods of the cliff.			
	Variation IV	Arong; she is industrious, capable, and beautiful because she drinks the spring water from the river. ① The little river loved to be clean and hated dirt the most. ② A bride washed her clothes in the little river, which angered it, causing a drought. ③ Young men failed to search for water. ④ Arong dug a hole halfway up a cliff of the Gaoligong mountain range, and water came out of the hole. ⑤ The chieftain was jealous and hunted Arong. ⑥ Arong hid in a cave and turned into a stone statue, from which spring water gushes out.		Fairy cave located in Jimudeng at the east foot of the Gaoligong mountain range and on the west bank of the Nujiang river.	Spring water dripping from stalactites is commonly known as “fairy milk”.
	Variation V	Arong ① She helped people to dig the mountain and draw springs from the cave to irrigate the land. ② She was hunted down by the Dragon King. ③ Arong hid in the cave and became a stone statue, gurgling out mountain spring water.			

Table 6. *Cont.*

Text	Character	Plot	Festival	Sacred Space	Sacred Things in the Cave
Unknown ¹¹			Flower Festival	Double stone birds' cave, located in Shimenguan.	① A pair of bird-shaped stalactites. ② Spring water dripping from the stalactites in the cave.
Unknown ¹² (Lv et al. 2000)	① A beautiful and vicious woman. ② Bizhendamabo, the hero.	① Bizhendamabo was seduced and killed by a beautiful but vicious woman. ② After the woman died, she became the cave master and rock god.	There is no festival; no one worships this legend.	Xiamudayanwa cave.	

Regarding the legend of the Fairy Cave and “Nerewa”, although there are many versions, the stories with Arong as the main character account for the majority. There are three points that need to be explained.

Firstly, there is no doubt that spring and Arong are consubstantial. The Nu hold “Nerewa” to celebrate the coming of spring and honor Arong on the 15th day of the third lunar month, which is said to be the date of her death. Based on the legend of the origin of the “Flower Festival”, centered on Arong, the first thing shaped by this legend is the sacredness of the cave, which became a sanctuary. It is in the shaping of the sacredness of the fairy cave that the circle of life in the mountain is told as a fact.

According to the story or echoing the story, the relationship between Arong and the life of the mountain forests is continuously constructed in folk festivals and landscape reconstruction. The picture below (Figure 5) is an artificial landscape, based on the story of Arong, in the first bay of the Nu River. This landscape narrates several key points from the legend of Arong: her weaving skills are shown (Arong was good at weaving, and she was the inventor of the zipper), and the statue of Arong holding flowers attempts to show the goodness of life.



Figure 5. Image of Arong in the first bay of the Nu River. Photograph by the authors, taken on 25 September 2022.

Looking at this landscape, one has a strong feeling that Arong is a “presence” (Heidegger 2002, p. 20) in the natural space. The literary images and natural scenery are not discrete things, and sacred landscape appears in their interweaving. In this spa-

tial landscape, “this presence of the god is, in itself, the extension and delimitation of the precinct as something holy” (Heidegger 2002, p. 20). When the legend of Arong is carved into the earth, the natural space becomes the narrator of its own sacredness, which means that the sacred narrative and the earth mutually construct and inter-embed. As Heidegger said, “This setting forth of the earth is what the work achieves by setting itself back into the earth” (Heidegger 2002, p. 25).

Secondly, this idea that the existence of the caves could provide factual information about how local people should live their life is not only described in story but also manifested in ritualistic practice. If these stories tell how and why relationships between nature, gods, and local people were woven, the festival practices solidify the authenticity of this sense of connection. By the definitions of local scholars, “Nerewa” is “a typical activity of worshipping mountain gods”; “as the main activity of ‘Nerewa’, pilgrimage to the mountain is to worship the ‘Fairy Cave’”. In other words, worshipping the cave of the mountain god is an indispensable part of the most lively activities. According to the local custom, before worshipping the ‘Fairy Cave’, a ritual to worship the mountain god must be held first... the formation of ‘Nerewa’ and the culture of pilgrimage to the mountain is in order to build a security system through this unique way, which is the reason for pilgrimage to the mountain and the expectation of pilgrimage to the mountain. When kowtowing to the mountain god, they feel that they have gained some kind of communication with the god” (Peng 2007, pp. 139–41). Among the various activities undertaken during “Narewa”, “fetching fairy milk” is the most important:

The god of the cave of the Nu in Gongshan county is also the god of grains, and controls the growth and abundance of crops. One of the most important activities when worshipping the god during the Festival of pilgrimage to the mountain is to “fetch fairy milk” (spring water dripping from the stalactites in the cave) to soak grain seeds. It is believed that if the grain seeds are soaked in “fairy milk” and planted, there will be a bumper harvest in the coming year; otherwise, the crops will not prosper... The “fairy milk” of the god in the cave is not only believed to have the effect of curing diseases, but also believed to make women to produce breast milk. The “fairy milk” has the ability to make babies grow up healthily. Therefore, the “fairy milk” in the cave should be taken home, sharing it with family members, or giving it as a precious gift to friends and relatives. (He 1988)

As for the preciousness of “fairy milk”, the description in *Changputong Annals*¹³ reads: “such water is not available at all times. It only flows out a little during ceremony. Anyone who can drink it feels lucky to be able to.” (Chen et al. 1998, pp. 136–37). Local scholars further explained, “there is usually no water in the Fairy Cave, but only after the ritual of worshipping the mountain god” (Peng 2007, p. 146). In other words, the preciousness of “fairy milk” lies in the fact that it is a gift resulting from sincere communication between the people, the mountain gods, and the natural space. Obviously, it would indicate that, in the construction of sacred caves, the shapes of natural entities are given symbolic meanings. This refers to not only the shape of the cave but also the stalactites inside the cave; they all have an isomorphic, echoing, and even inductive relationship with the human body. “Fetching fairy milk” is a ritualistic act centered on the interaction between gods, humans, and natural matters. The cave and the objects in the cave are regarded as not only “hierophany” (Eliade 1987, p. 20) but also as specific participation in the production of life. The drinking of “fairy milk” directly realizes the connection between the sacred place and the secular world. It means that those people who consume this sacred drink are united with the god of the cave and the natural world.

Thirdly, it is worth noting that, in addition to sacred caves and memorable people, there are also corresponding descriptions of the evil woman and the forbidden cave as negative aspects that point to the end of life, whether good or evil, with regard to the metaphor of life, as Erich Neumann said:

When analytical psychology speaks of the primordial image or archetype of the Great Mother, it is referring, not to any concrete image existing in space and time, but to an inward image at work in the human psyche. The symbolic expression of this psychic phenomenon is to be found in the figures of the Great Goddess represented in the myths and artistic creations of mankind. The effect of this archetype may be followed through the whole of history, for we can demonstrate its workings in the rites, myths, symbols of early man and also in the dreams, fantasies, and creative works of the sound as well as the sick man of our own day. (Neumann 1974, p. 3)

In other words, in the shaping of sacred space, the beginning and end of life, the beauty and ugliness of life, and the diverse forms of the two are all regarded as indispensable aspects of the life system to obtain an overall construction. In this way, the legends of caves in this area can be described as narratives of life.

4.3. Mysterious Nayi

The Drung people have a sacred cave named Nayi 乃依. The “Nayi” Cave, located in the Mudang area (Figure 6), in the upper reaches of the Drung River, is currently managed by the family who used to live there.

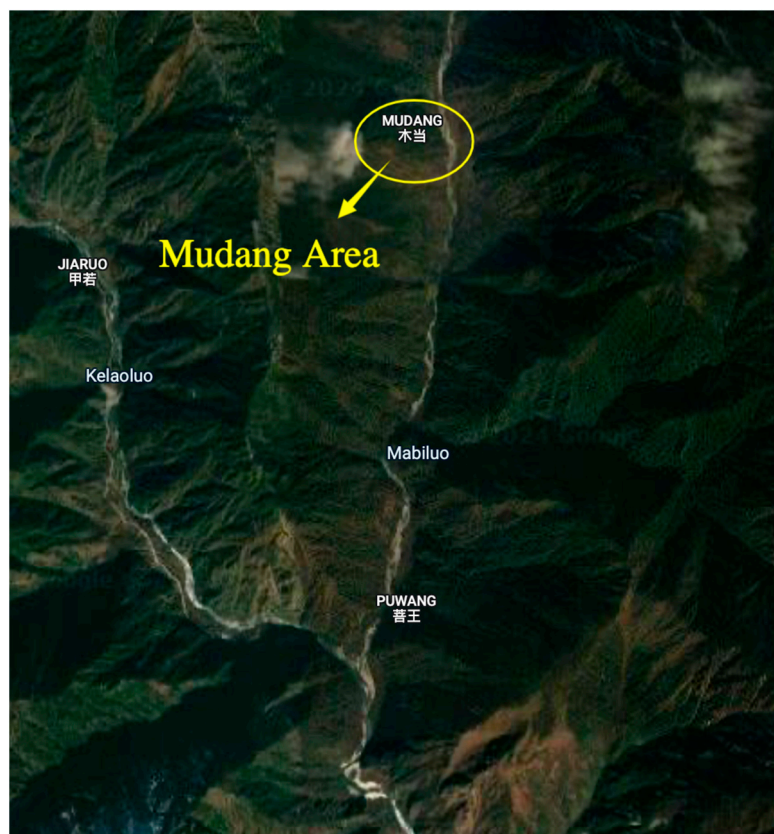


Figure 6. Topographic map of the Mudang area (Google Maps). Diagram by the authors.

Nayi Cave is managed by inspecting it every year.¹⁴ According to local residents¹⁵ accounts, this mysterious cave has a prophetic function. Nayi is a ghost living in the cave of “Jinmen” 斤门, a mountain by the Drung River. If no sacrifice is received, Nayi will bring disaster to the world. Nayi also has the ability to bless women with children. The cave was once partially destroyed; there was a stalactite that represented the Drung River. There were stone pillars and stone troughs, corresponding to male and female genitals, in the cave, which could be used to ask for children or to be blessed with a safe birth. The most sacred place in the cave was the room where “Nayi” lived. There were three

stone pillars lined up next to it, which had the functions of observing the rain, observing whether it would snow on the Drung River, and observing the snow on the top of the mountain (Figure 7). According to the records of Li Jinming¹⁶, every year, a grand ritual for “Nayi” is held, and he said it is as important to the Drung people as “Kaquewa” (Li 2004, pp. 45–49).

According to the brief narrative about Nayi, the spatial structure of the cave shown in Figure 7 above also emphasizes some objects of great significance to the life of the mountain forests in the overall spatial arrangement, such as the symbolic references to the Drung River and the Snow Mountain. This indicates that these caves are symbolic of the meaning of the miniature landscapes of the local geography, while the division of gender and the establishment of grain-farming areas undoubtedly emphasize the reproduction and fertility of life.

In summary, regarding the fairy cave and the Nayi cave in sacred narratives, if we take into account the theory of Mircea Eliade, the understanding of “the expression of the sacredness of natural space” will obtain a deeper dimension:

The sacred reveals absolute reality and at the same time makes orientation possible, hence it founds the world in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world. (Eliade 1987, pp. 29–30)

Establishment in a particular place, organizing it, inhabiting it, are acts that presuppose an existential choice of the universe that one is prepared to assume by “creating” it. Now, this universe is always the replica of the paradigmatic universe created and inhabited by the gods, hence it shares in the sanctity of the gods’ work. (Eliade 1987, p. 34)

Undoubtedly, for the mountain dwellers of Western Yunnan, the acquisition of sacredness and stability lies in their mutual integration with natural space. As Max Müller said, “yet evermore tending, under a divine control, towards the fulfillment of that inscrutable purpose for which the world was created, and man placed in it, bearing the image of God” (Müller 1856, pp. 6–7). In these localized stories, common people’s existence exhibits a unity of biological and cultural characteristics. They use themselves as tools to practice their own integrity. Within this interweaving of interactions, the sacredness of the world continues to grow through the imagination of folk literature and the practices of folk life.

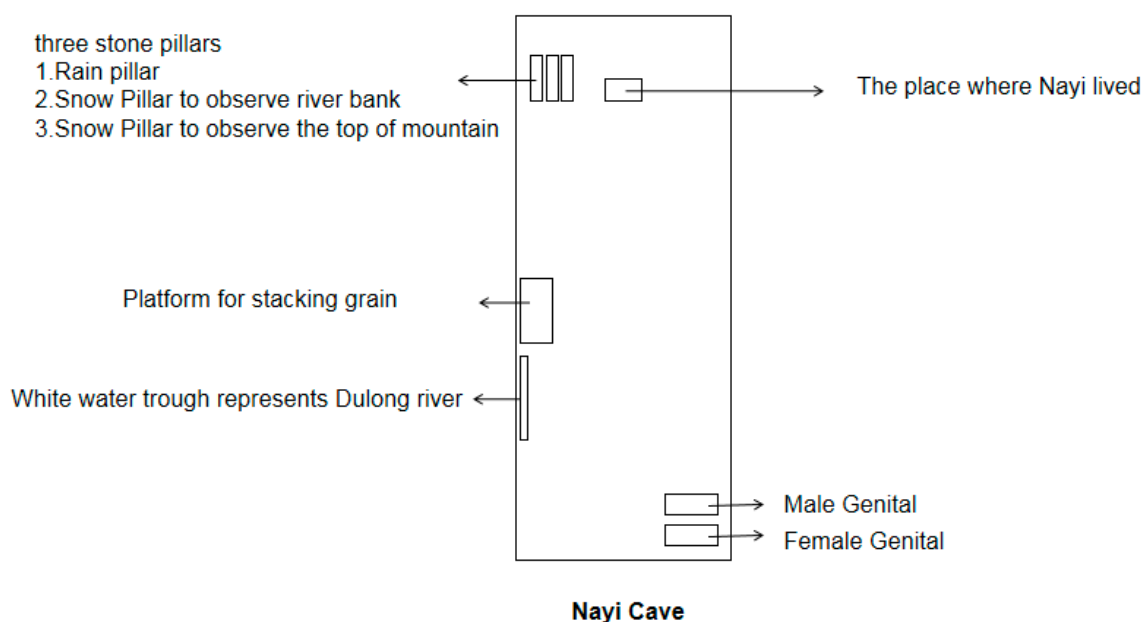


Figure 7. Flat graphic of Nayi Cave. Diagram by authors.¹⁷

5. Conclusions

Sacred narratives that take “the shaping of the mountain” as their core describe the beginning and growth of natural space in the Eastern Himalayan region of China, which is full of cosmological significance. The entanglements between the towering cliffs, green forests, blue sky, rolling hills, secluded caves, torrential rivers, and deep valleys make this mountainous area a mythical place in the imagination of folk literature. It is summarized as follows.

Firstly, different types of mythical narratives have different emphases on the shaping of natural space. When the four types of myths are juxtaposed, the shaping of natural space reveals a continuum of macro and micro, universality and locality, wholeness and details, past, present, and future, familiar and unfamiliar, sublime and tender, and great and ordinary.

The narrative focus of myths on the separation of sky and earth reveals the basic structure of the universe or the natural space by establishing the relationship between the sky and the earth. Unity and continuity are the characteristics of the original and authentic relationship between them. The vast space constructed by “separation” actually provides the possibility for the interdependence of all natural scenes. The myths describing creation through bodily dismemberment focus on the overall shaping of natural spaces. By describing the origins and essences of various scenes, such myths reveal the systematic operation of natural space. It is worth noting that this systematization takes the suitability for the survival of species, including humans, as the main criterion. Obviously, the spatial forms and spatial characteristics constructed by these two types of myths are wholeness and universal. Although some texts have localized characteristics to a certain extent, they do not affect the all-encompassing characteristic of the natural spaces constructed by myths and the sublime feeling evoked by this immensity.

In the sacred narrative of the mountain god, the overall shaping of the natural space has been completed, and the narrative focuses instead on how the mountain forests are the source of life and stability for nearly all of the species in the area. What is particularly impressive in such texts and rituals is that the construction of the sacredness of the mountain is integrated with the responsibility of life that it carries. This responsibility refers not only to humankind in general but also to specific community groups and to ordinary individuals. Therefore, as far as the texts mentioned in this article are concerned, the sense of space created by the flood myth and the legend of the mountain god is both abstract and concrete.

Compared with the above sacred narratives, the myth of the hunting god and the legend of the Flower Festival have a remarkable endemicity. The narrative perspective shifts from the grand cosmos to the familiar mountain forests, exploring the mystery of everlasting life in breaking through spatial boundaries. The sense of place, which is both intimate and alienated, helps mountain residents to establish distinctions and connections between themselves and others, and to practice friendly interactions between humans and nature with a sense of community in the mountains. The consciousness of life in the community, which is fundamentally constructed in the creation myth, creates visible and sensible pictures in the discourse and ritual behavior stemming from these two types of narrative.

Secondly, in the literary imagination of these sacred narratives, natural space not only nourishes the life of all things but is also a member of this system. These discursive texts focus on establishing and breaking through the spatial boundary based on the interactive practice among subjects in mountain communities—mountains and rivers, lakes and seas, woods and trees, animals and insects, sun and moon, sky and earth, humans and gods, humans and nature, and “us”. This kind of community contains the possibility of commensurability between different existences.

As Kenneth J. Gergen said, “from a relational standpoint we may leap this chasm of separation between the sacred and social life. We realize the artificial character of bonded and separated beings, and stand in awe of the relational process from which these very concepts draw significance. We recognize that it is out of ongoing relationship that we

have created the conception of a remote God—an identifiable and sometimes gendered being, possessed with agency, love, anger, forgiveness, omnipotence, wisdom, and other diverse attributes assigned by the various cultures of the world. We are invited, then, to view the divine as *a process* within which we exist and from which we cannot be separated. The sacred is not distinct and distant, but immanent in all human affairs” (Gergen 2009, pp. 392–93).

The enlightenment of these sacred narratives is not lost in our practices. In the form of mythological practices, we continue to build links between everything in nature, and this construction continues to appear in stories that will continue being told in the future. Only when we truly realize this connection can we truly feel, realize, and own our own wholeness.

Thirdly, in the intertwining of imaginative narratives and realistic existence, the sacredness of natural spaces is established and able to be experienced. Although the artificial construction on the physical level is not obvious, the expressions in the stories and rituals have “a determinate intention” (Husserl 2001, II. p. 120); the meaning of “constitutive performance” (Zahavi 2003, p. 42) is also clear. Literary imagination means that the spatial community it presents is an ideal of natural space. Our entire knowledge system about the natural world was designed to facilitate the achievement of this ideal. The natural knowledge set by the sacred narrative becomes the inner guidance for the local community’s practices. When understanding this kind of knowledge through reading stories, we feel as though natural life itself seems offered to us.

The answer to what is sacred points directly to the ongoing evocation and shaping of a sense of connectedness with nature and others in folk life. Through storytelling, which shapes the morphological characteristics and life essences of natural spaces, and through narrating the “relational beings” of various things in mountain communities, mountain communities imbue their practices with gracefulness and nobleness in the dimensions of emotion and morality. The shaping of beautiful places and sublime realms in these stories is a vivid expression of cosmology.

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Notes

- ¹ Part of this article was written for the 15th Annual International Conference on Comparative Mythology: Sacred Ground: Place and Space in Mythology and Religion, Belgrade, Serbia, 7–11 June 2022.
- ² Gros’s views show the research characteristics of the ontological turn in anthropology. In his article, he also mentioned the research of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola, Tim Ingold, etc.
- ³ According to Peng Zhaoqing, a Nu scholar, the 11 sacred mountains described here are mainly located in the Gaoligong mountain range.
- ⁴ This story is clearly stated to have taken place on Mukemudang Mountain, which is a part of the Hengduan Mountains and is located in the lower reaches of the Drung River.
- ⁵ According to Jiang Liang, the inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage of Nujiang Prefecture, this version was recorded on 23 January 2023 in Maku Village, Drung Township, Gongshan County.
- ⁶ In the myths of the Achang, Zhepama and Zhemima are a pair of creation gods; that is, the God of the Sky and the Mother of the Earth.
- ⁷ The location of Mukemudang Mountain on Google Maps was confirmed by Jiang Yun, a resident of Maku Village in Gongshan.

- 8 According to the compilation in *A Brief history of the literature of the Nu*; the recording location is Gongshan and the narrator is Peng Zhaoqing (You 2003, pp. 17–20).
- 9 According to the compilation in *A Brief history of the literature of the Drung* (Li 2004, pp. 73–79); this myth was named *Flood* by the compiler. The location and narrator are not specified in the book.
- 10 There is no conclusion yet on the relationship between Kvwagarpu and Kawargarbo, but the two mountains are connected in terms of pronunciation and semantics, as well as via the correspondence between belief circles. This is another example of the sharing phenomenon between regional natural space and cultural space.
- 11 Further corresponding stories still need to be collected. The texts used here come from *The Nu's worship of the rock god in Gongshan* (He 1988).
- 12 See note 10 above.
- 13 Changputong is the old name for Gongshan.
- 14 According to local residents in the upper reaches of the Drung River, the chieftain of Tsavalong once arranged for subordinates to inspect this cave at fixed times every year during the Qing Dynasty. He later assigned a family from the Mudang area to manage it on his behalf, because of the great distance between his residence and the cave. To this day, managers, descended from the family that lived there, still inspect the cave at fixed times every year.
- 15 Li Fuying and Long Jianlin live in Dizhengdang Village, Drung Township, Gongshan County. Jiang Liang, Jiang Yun, Jiang Wen, and Jiang Hong live in Maku Village, Drung Township, Gongshan County.
- 16 Li Jinming is a scholar from the Siri family in Dizhengdang Village in Gonashan. His books include: *A Brief history of the literature of the Drung*, *The original customs and culture of the Drung*, and *The Drung alongside the Drung River*, among others.
- 17 This flat graphic is based on descriptions in *A Brief history of the literature of the Drung* (Li 2004, p. 45) and *The original customs and culture of the Drung* (Li 2016, p. 77).

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