

The development of the heroic myth“Zhige Alu in the Yi ethnic group, China

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical development of the Yi ethnic heroic myth Zhige Alu, focusing on its narrative formation, transmission, and transformation within the cultural context of southwest China. The Yi people possess a rich oral literary tradition shaped by complex geographical environments and long-term intercultural exchange, in which heroic myths play a central role in articulating collective memory and cultural identity. As the most representative epic widely shared across Yi regions, Zhige Alu provides a valuable case for understanding the mechanisms through which heroic myths are preserved and reshaped over time.

Adopting a qualitative and text-based research approach, the study analyzes multiple versions of the Zhige Alu myth from oral and written sources, examining changes in narrative structure, heroic imagery, and symbolic meaning. The research situates these transformations within broader historical, social, and religious contexts, including the influence of Yi oral tradition, Bimo religious practices, and regional cultural interaction. The findings demonstrate that the development of the Zhige Alu myth reflects a dynamic process of cultural adaptation, in which core heroic motifs remain stable while narrative details and symbolic emphases evolve in response to shifting historical conditions. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Yi mythology and highlights the role of heroic narratives as living cultural texts shaped by continuity and change..

INTRODUCTION:

The Yi ethnic group has a population of more than 8 million, mainly living in Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangxi in southwest China. The culture there is influenced by geography and history. Geographically, the area has diverse landforms, including mountains, forests, and rivers. These landscapes have shaped the culture of the people in the region. The Yi people living in the mountains have developed beliefs and rituals adapted to the harsh mountain environment. In terms of historical impact, the region has been a crossroads of trade and culture for centuries. This has formed a diverse cultural landscape, influenced by many different cultures, including Chinese culture, Tibetan culture, and Indian culture. At the same time, they have a rich and diverse cultural heritage with unique traditions, beliefs, and customs. The Yi people have their own unique language family and rich oral literary tradition, including folk tales, epics, and poems, which are often passed down from generation to generation. Among them, the myths have become typical representatives that have had a profound impact on the national identity and economic and cultural development of the Yi people.

The definition of myth has different contents. Generally speaking, myths are divided into narrow myths and broad myths. A myth in a narrow sense refers to a single event or story that occurred in the primitive period of mankind, that is, in the early stages of human evolution. In a broad sense, myths refer to stories with supernatural creatures as the main characters that have been collectively created

and inherited by human groups, including clans, tribes, nations, and countries, since ancient times, based on primitive thinking and unconscious anthropomorphism. Symbolizes natural phenomena and human life. According to Merriam-Webster, the meaning of myth includes traditional stories, especially stories about the early history of a people or that explain some natural or social phenomenon, often involving supernatural beings or events. In Encyclopedia Britannica, myth is a collective noun used to refer to symbolic narratives. It refers specifically to basic forms of religious symbolism, as distinct from symbolic acts (worship, rituals) and symbolic places or objects (temples, idols). According to 《The Function of Myth》, “A complex of stories that are deeply meaningful to a particular culture and help explain the nature of reality, the origins of the world and humanity, and the correct way to live. (Joseph Campbell, 1949). From a different definition, it can be seen that myths are different from legends, fables, and religions. It mainly expresses ancient people's understanding of natural phenomena and the relationship between man and nature through supernatural images and fantasy forms, which carry a nation's sense of identity and values towards life and community.

There are five main types of stories in the Yi myths, including hero myths, creation myths, life myths, flood myths, and nature myths. Among them, heroic myths tell the stories of legendary figures who embarked on extraordinary journeys and accomplished seemingly impossible feats. In different cultures around the world, they describe the pursuits and beliefs of strong men and

leaders, which have an important impact on national identity and cultural cognition. Use mythological storytelling to convey cultural values and norms to the younger generation. Help individuals understand their place in the group, society, and their potential to achieve greatness. It also provides comfort and hope when people encounter difficulties and uncertainty. Joseph Campbell theorized that all heroic myths have a common underlying structure and that the hero's journey is a metaphor for the human experience. The Yi ethnic group is widely distributed and has numerous branches, but there are not many folk literature works that are spread across regions and branches. The epic of “Zhige Alu” is the main representative (Yuanpin Xiao, 2015).

"Zhige Alu" is a heroic myth of the Yi people. He is the son of a dragon and an eagle. He has supernatural powers, anti-magic and anti-ghost abilities, and rides a nine-winged flying horse. Like the archer Houyi in Chinese mythology, Zhige Alu shot down the sun to save the people. In the Bimo religion of the Yi ethnic group, "Zhige Alu" helps Bimo priests treat leprosy and exorcise ghosts (Li Hui, Yang, An, D. 2011). The development of the "Zhige Alu" myth involves the inheritance of oral tradition, cultural customs, and historical experience. The mythical story tells about his victory over opponents, encounters with gods, and contributions to the well-being of the Yi people. It is of cultural significance to the Yi people and is a treasure trove of their history and values. Through the heroic deeds of "Zhige Alu", the myth preserves and conveys important events in the history of the Yi people. The myth embodies and promotes the core values and virtues cherished by the Yi people. As a heroic figure, "Zhige Alu" became a symbol of these virtues and provided a moral compass for society.

Based on the above influence and value, the mythical story of "Zhige Alu" has attracted much attention in the Yi area, and its contemporary development has undergone many changes with the transformation of the times and society. Studying the changing factors in development has become a basic link in analyzing the heroic myth of "Zhige Alu". The development of the “Zhige Alu” heroic myth from the image symbols and the character traits focuses on the propagation mode and the inheritance status. The heroic myth of “Zhige Alu” became one of the important factors and had a significant role in the economic and social development of the Yi ethnic areas.

Based on the understanding of the current situation from development, this study will continue to explore the "Role" analysis in the heroic myth of "Zhige Alu" in the Yi area. Research on the social function and influence of myth. In this study, role refers to the value of the heroic myth of "Zhige Alu" in the economic, social, and cultural fields. Economics is focused on the use and effect of the heroic myth of "Zhige Alu" symbols in the tourism economy. Social is focused on the shaping and influence of the heroic myth of "Zhige Alu" on the values of the Yi people through common culture and traditional customs. Cultural is focused on educational institutions, investigating the importance and application of the heroic myth of "Zhige Alu" in education. Through the above analysis from both economic and social perspectives, the

"Role" situation of the heroic myth of "Zhige Alu" is obtained.

## 2. Objective

2.1 To study the development of the heroic myth“Zhige Alu” in the Yi ethnic group .

## 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine the development and contemporary roles of the Yi heroic myth *Zhige Alu*. Drawing on mythological texts, oral literature records, and relevant secondary scholarship, the research analyzes the narrative structure, symbolic imagery, and heroic character traits of *Zhige Alu*. The study situates the myth within the broader cultural, historical, and geographical context of the Yi ethnic group, emphasizing how oral tradition and regional diversity have shaped its evolution and transmission.

Analytical methods include textual and narrative analysis informed by hero myth theory, as well as a role-based analytical framework that interprets the social functions of the myth across economic, social, and cultural domains. Specifically, the research examines the application of *Zhige Alu* symbolism in cultural tourism and local economic development, its influence on social values and collective identity through rituals and customs, and its role in cultural education and heritage transmission. Through contextual and comparative analysis, the study reveals how the *Zhige Alu* myth continues to function as a dynamic cultural resource within contemporary Yi society.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 the development of the heroic myth“Zhige Alu” in the Yi ethnic group .

In the Yi region of China, there are always sculptures or murals of “Zhige Alu”, depicting a heroic man riding on the back of a horse, bending his bow, and shooting the sun. This man is the most revered ancestor of the Yi people - “Zhige Alu”.

“Zhige Alu” is a creation hero in Yi mythology and legends, his story is detailed in the Yi long classical poem *Le Otey* and the Yi epic poem *Chigaru*. “Zhige Alu” is the creation hero of the "Combination of man and God", and also a wise man who combines the wisdom of an astronomer and Bimo (Yi priest). He is characterized by wisdom, courage, kindness, and civilization, and he is the image of a monarch and a leader who advocates freedom and peace and opposes aggression and humiliation.

The mythical story of "Zhige Alu" is roughly as follows, and the source of image symbols can be found in the story:

*In ancient times, the daughter of the dragon clan named Pumolei did not marry within her community. Renowned for her wisdom and beauty, Pumolei is credited with inventing the art of weaving cloth. One day, while setting*

up her loom on Tur Hill, she observed four pairs of eagles soaring and playing in the sky. Suddenly, one of the eagles dropped three drops of blood onto Pumolei's dress, causing her to become pregnant. She subsequently gave birth to Zhige Alu on the day of the dragon.

After giving birth, Zhige Alu cried incessantly, and her cries alarmed the heavens. The ancient deity sent the cannibal king "Tang Bo Amo" to capture Alu and her mother. When they were captured at the Smuwai mountain cliff, the mother sacrificed herself to save her son by quietly placing Alu on the edge of the cliff. However, due to his crying and rolling, Alu fell into a dragon's nest. Nurtured by the dragon, he grew into a powerful hero. Upon reaching adulthood, Zhige Alu ventured to the celestial prison to rescue his mother. However, six suns and seven moons scorched the earth, threatening all life. To prevent extinction, Alu shot down five suns and six moons, leaving only one sun and one moon, before continuing his quest to find his mother.

During his journey to shoot down the suns and moons, Alu also subdued the thunder, protecting the public from lightning disasters. With extraordinary wisdom and courage, he slew the human-devouring python demon, benefiting the people. Additionally, he performed numerous other heroic deeds to eliminate demons and benefit the people, earning the love and admiration of the Yi people. (Yuanping Xiao, 2014)

Through literature review and field research, we found the image symbols primarily consist of young men, arrows, sun and moon discs, bow and arrow, flames, and winged horses. In different regions, different craftsmen created different sculptural effects, but the figure posture and image symbols are all the above.



Mural of "Zhige Alu" in Yi area, in Weining County, Bijie City, Guizhou Province, Source: Xiao Ning (2025)



A statue of "Zhige Alu" in the Yi area, in Weining County, Bijie City, Guizhou Province, Source: Xiao Ning (2025)



Zhige Alu stage play, in Weining County, Bijie City, Guizhou Province, Source: Xiao Ning (2025)

**Young men:** The young male character, shirtless and draped in a traditional Yi cloak, draws a bow and arrow and points at the sun in the sky, it symbolizes the heroic image of "Zhige Alu" in the mind of the Yi people.

**Sun and moon disc:** The sun appears in the form of a disc around the "Zhige Alu" and Winged horses, symbolizing the sun he shot to save humanity.

**Bow and arrow :** The bow and arrow in the hands of "Zhige Alu" shows one of his most famous stories, that is, the famous legend of shooting down the five suns and six moons in the sky to save mankind.

**Flames:** As a description of the environment at that time, the flame showed the hot ecological environment of the people under the influence of the six suns at that time.

**Winged horses :** Winged horses is depicted as the steed ridden by "Zhige Alu", whose ability to combat demons

in the sky underscores the fusion of human and divine attributes embodied by this heroic figure. The wings of horses symbolize this amalgamation of mortal and celestial qualities.

Jingwen Zhong pointed out: "Epic is a kind of large-scale ancient works in folk narrative poems. It uses the language of poetry to describe the formation of heaven and earth, the origin of mankind, as well as the migration of nations, national wars, and the glorious achievements of national heroes and other major events, so it is accompanied by the history of nations. In a sense, a national epic is often a visual history of the nation at a specific time." (Jingwen Zhong.1990)

The“Zhige Alu”image reflects the life form and ideology of the Yi people's ancient society. “Zhige Alu” describes the social style from ancient times to the matrilineal clan period in the form of deepening narrative poetry. From the birth and growth of“Zhige Alu” and shooting the sun and moon, subduing demons and ghosts, saving human beings and all living things, eliminating disasters for the people, unifying Yi departments to the death of “Zhige Alu” and other great and tragic life.

The image symbols create a heroic image of power, kindness, wisdom, inimitable strength, courage, and decisive victory. The archetypes of the aforementioned image symbols, along with the underlying reasons for their formation, will be explored in the narrative analysis presented in the subsequent section.

At present, "Zhige Alu" has permeated the daily lives and production activities of people as a collective consciousness, exerting significant influence within Yi society. The name Zhige Alu has echoed across the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau and surrounding Yi regions since ancient times. As a legendary figure who vanquished demons and brought benefits to the Yi people, Zhige Alu's spirit has been eternally enshrined in their hearts. His pursuit of goodness for the people has become a model for the Yi community, leading many to claim descent from him.

In the new era, science and technology continue to progress, which makes people's living standards continue to improve, but also makes people's lifestyle has undergone a great change. At the same time, the natural and human environment of people's lives is getting worse and worse. The same is true in the ethnic areas of southwest China. With the progress of science and technology and the convenience of transportation, some things that fully embody the essence of the folk and folk culture of ethnic minorities are gradually disappearing from people's sight. The gradual loss of Yi's oral epics is a typical example. Therefore, how to protect and utilize the folk customs of the Yi people, give play to its folklore, education, tradition, and regionalism, and make its characteristics better inherited and developed is very worthy of our consideration.

In China, cultural centers are mass cultural institutions at the county and city, and some places call them cultural centers and cultural activity centers. The role is to carry out cultural activities, provide places for mass cultural and

entertainment activities, disseminate and carry forward excellent traditional culture and national culture, and help improve people's spiritual and cultural levels. The information about propagation mode and Inheritance status was obtained through the interview.

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*Tao Yong, deputy director of Weining County Cultural Center,*

*Bijie City, Guizhou Province, Source: Xiao Ning (2025)*



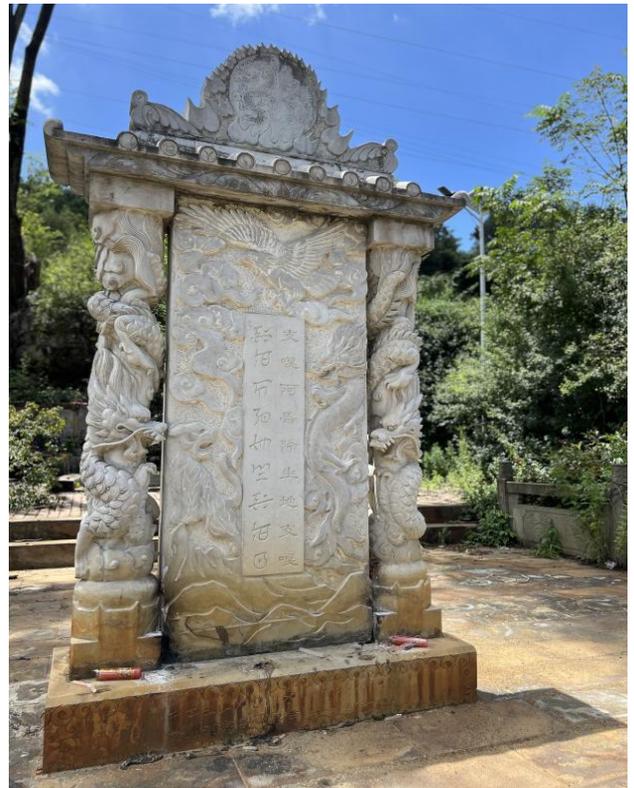
*Interview with Yi literature research experts and Cultural Center experts*

*in Weining County, Bijie City, Guizhou Province (2025)*



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*Research on the birthplace of Zhige Alu, and the stele proving Zhige Alu's birth, in Weining County, Bijie City, Guizhou Province, Source: Xiao Ning (2025)*



*Research on the birthplace of Zhige Alu in mythology, in Weining County, Bijie City, Guizhou Province, Source: Xiao Ning (2025)*

**Through the interview with the Weining County Cultural Center in Bijie City, Guizhou Province, it is known that the following communication methods are used to spread the myth of Zhige Alu:**

### **5. Conclusion and Discussion**

In summary, research and analysis of the development of the Zhige Alu heroic myth reveal that its current dissemination relies primarily on three main channels: government support, interpersonal communication among inheritors, and educational dissemination. Each of these channels has its own unique characteristics, but also significant limitations.

First, government guidance, through policy support and the organization of cultural projects and festivals, provides policy support and resource resources for the dissemination of the Zhige Alu myth. For example, the regular promotion and holding of Torch Festivals, as well as the implementation of intangible cultural heritage protection efforts, have effectively increased the myth's public visibility and recognition. Second, inheritor dissemination relies on cultural protectors such as Bimos and folk artists, who, through word of mouth and ritual performances, maintain the myth's authenticity and cultural context, and promote its dissemination and transmission. This method of dissemination remains a core channel for cultural transmission, particularly in Yi-populated areas. Third, educational dissemination, through school curriculum, academic research, and textbook development, has integrated the Zhige Alu myth

into the formal education system, ensuring the systematic transmission and intergenerational continuation of cultural knowledge. These three dissemination channels together constitute the fundamental framework for the dissemination of the Zhige Alu myth, providing multi-layered guarantees for the continuation of ethnic culture. However, current communication methods also have significant limitations. While government guidance is effective, it sometimes overemphasizes policy objectives, potentially leading to the bureaucratization and superficiality of cultural dissemination. For example, some localities have overly focused on the economic benefits of tourism in promoting the Torch Festival, neglecting the spiritual essence of the myth. Transmission through inheritors faces the risk of a generational gap, with younger generations showing a waning interest in traditional storytelling. With the aging of ethnic cultural inheritors, the sustainability of this channel is challenged. While highly systematic, educational dissemination often focuses on imparting knowledge and lacks a deep appreciation for cultural sentiment and values.

Furthermore, its audience is primarily limited to students, hindering its ability to reach a wider public.

Furthermore, these three communication methods generally lack interactivity and participation, often following a one-way delivery model that fails to fully leverage the communication characteristics of the digital age and the audience's creative potential. Therefore, there is an urgent need for innovative dissemination methods for the Zhige Alu myth.

In contemporary development, we should focus on modern translations of mythological narratives, aligning the spiritual essence of Zhige Alu myth with contemporary values. This will enhance its contemporary appeal and influence while preserving its cultural authenticity. Only by finding a balance between tradition and modernity, government and the people, education and entertainment, can the Zhige Alu mythology truly achieve creative transformation and innovative development in the new era.

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