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*QU Yongxian*

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

THE NARRATIVE OF RICE ORIGIN IN THE CREATION EPICS: EVOLUTION OF RICE ORIGIN NARRATIVES UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THERAVADA BUDDHISM

Abstract. The introduction of Theravada Buddhism has influenced the original narratives of rice origins among ethnic groups such as the Dai, De'ang, and Bulang. There are rich rice origin narratives in the creation epics from the three ethnic groups. This article aims to explore how the incoming Buddhism has enabled three distinct ethnic groups with different languages, cultures, and historical backgrounds to share some similar narratives of rice origin.

Taking the ethnographic fieldwork methods, involving participant observation and individual interviews with villagers, to collect and compare both oral and written narratives for analysis, the findings reveal that they share some familiar primarily manifested in three aspects: firstly, these ethnic groups share commonalities in their rice origin narratives, incorporating numerous elements of Buddhism. Buddhism has adapted these narratives by substituting vocabulary and transforming concepts to infuse them with strong Buddhist elements. Secondly, a new type of narrative appeared, where the rice god contends with Buddha and ultimately departs to the Dark World and then be brought back by Buddha. The theme of rice god versus Buddha mirrors the historical struggle between two faiths. Meanwhile, the theme of rice god's departure to the Dark World and return fundamentally serves as a metaphor for seed germination and growth in the soil, representing a concession made by Buddhism to the worship of the indigenous beliefs. Thirdly, Buddhism actively participates in and promotes rice cultivation, such as monks reciting the *Bu Huanghao* to request blessings for crop growth, and performing rituals like washing Buddha pagodas to pray for rain. In conclusion, the introduction of Buddhism has significantly influenced local rice narratives, reflecting the conflicts and eventual reconciliation between the rice god and Buddha, as well as the struggle and compromise between traditional beliefs and incoming Buddhism.

Keywords: Rice origin narratives; Rice soul worship; Creation Epics; Oral tradition; Theravada Buddhism; Rice god; Rice myth; Rituals; Ya Huanhao; Chinese ethnic groups

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ЦЮЙ ЮНЦЯНЬ – доктор права, младший научный сотрудник, Институт этнической литературы Китайской Академии социальных наук, Пекин, Китай. ORCID: 0009-0003-5578-7912. E-mail: quyongxian@126.com

QU Yongxian – Doctor of Law, Associate Researcher in the Institute of Ethnic Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China. ORCID: 0009-0003-5578-7912. E-mail: quyongxian@126.com

Юньсян Цюй

Китайская академия общественных наук

Повествование о происхождении риса в эпосе о сотворении мира: эволюция повествований о происхождении риса под влиянием буддизма

Аннотация. Появление буддизма Тхеравады повлияло на оригинальные повествования о происхождении риса среди этнических групп, таких как Дай, Деанг и Буланг. В эпосах о сотворении трех этнических групп есть богатые повествования о происхождении риса. Целью этой статьи является изучение того, как зарождающийся буддизм позволил трем различным этническим группам с разными языками, культурами и историческим прошлым поделиться некоторыми схожими повествованиями о происхождении риса.

Используя такие методы этнографических полевых исследований, как включенное наблюдение и индивидуальные интервью с сельскими жителями, сбор информации и сравнение устных и письменных рассказов для анализа, мы пришли к результатам о том, что у них есть некоторые общие черты, проявляющиеся в основном в трех аспектах: во-первых, эти этнические группы имеют общие черты в своих повествованиях о происхождении риса, включающие многочисленные элементы буддизма. Буддизм адаптировал эти повествования, заменив словарный запас и трансформировал концепции, наполнив их сильными буддийскими элементами. Во-вторых, появился новый тип повествования, в котором бог риса борется с Буддой и в конечном итоге уходит в Темный мир, а затем Будда возвращает его обратно. Тема бога риса против Будды отражает историческую борьбу между двумя религиями. Между тем, тема ухода бога риса в Темный мир и его возвращения по сути служит метафорой прорастания и роста семян в почве, представляя собой уступку, сделанную буддизмом поклонению местным верованиям. В-третьих, буддизм активно участвует и пропагандирует выращивание риса, например, монахи читают Бу Хуанхао, чтобы попросить благословения на урожай, и совершают такие ритуалы, как мытье пагод Будды, чтобы помолиться о дожде. В заключении отметим, что появление буддизма существенно повлияло на местные повествования о рисе, отражая конфликты и возможное примирение между богом риса и Буддой, а также борьбу и компромисс между традиционными верованиями и новым буддизмом.

Ключевые слова: повествования о происхождении риса; поклонение душе риса; эпосы о сотворении мира; устная традиция; Тхеравада буддизм; бог риса; миф о рисе; ритуалы; Я Хуанхао; этнические группы Китая

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Introduction

The rice narratives and the rice soul worship are widely present cultural worldwide. Most ethnic groups in China have rice origin narratives and act rice soul-summoning rituals, including the Dai (Tai), De'ang (Palaung), Bulang (Blang), people who mainly reside in southwest China, and are also cross-border ethnic groups.

In the 2020 census, the Dai ethnic group has an official population of 1.32 million, De'ang has 22 354, and Bulang has 127 345. Compared to the Han people, these ethnic groups have small populations, but they are the main communities in China influenced by Theravada Buddhism from Southeast Asian. The rice narratives from these groups thus not only share some similarities, but also possess uniqueness relative to other ethnic groups.

Since 2009, the author has been researching ethnic epics, particularly focusing on the origins of humanity and all beings. In the creation epics of these ethnic groups, the origins of rice are vividly described, highlighting its importance. Based on long-term data accumulation, such as field surveys

conducted in 2009 in Xinping County of Yuxi, 2015 in Xishuangbanna Prefecture, and 2016 in Dehong Prefecture, where I collected many folk myths and stories. Among these narratives, the rice deity's struggle against the Buddha are widely known. Therefore, I found the creation epics texts from these three ethnic groups, carefully understand the content about the rice origin, and conducted some comparisons, then it is not hard to find that they share similarities.

As one of the researchers at the Southern Ethnicity Research department of the Institute of Ethnic Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the author has long been focused on the epics studies and cultural integration among southern ethnic groups. In early 2024, the CASS launched the second phase of "Dengfeng Zhanlue" (Pinnacle Strategy) funding program. Project Title: "Chinese Epic Studies" Project No.: DF2023YS07, and this article represents one of its outcomes.

This article mainly combines the ethnographic method and textual study. It covers creation epics of the Dai, Bulang, and De'ang ethnic groups, demonstrating a high representativeness. As influenced by western research methodologies, especially the Morphology of Folktale, the author tried to use these motif methods to analyze the narratives.

Unfortunately, due to words constraints, only a comparative analysis among these three groups could be conducted this time. The author will continue to gather materials in future research, will further compare the narratives of rice origins among these three ethnic groups and their cognate ethnic groups in Southeast Asia.

1. Buddhist elements in the rice origins narratives

From a geographical perspective, the areas in China most influenced by Theravada Buddhism are mainly in the southwest of Yunnan Province, ranging from Dehong, to Menglian, and further to Xishuangbanna, thus form a Theravada Buddhist cultural zone, that extends from northwest region to southeast region along the border of China, Burma and Laos.

The Dai, De'ang, Bulang, living in this area have developed different degrees of Buddhism. These ethnic groups hold rich rice narratives, some of which are oral traditions in prose form, while some have been recorded in manuscripts in poetic verse. The following sections will respectively introduce the narratives of rice origin from these three ethnic groups.

1.1. The Dai epic *Gampi Gampa*

Gampi Gampa: The Creation Epic of the Dai Ethnic Group (*Ganpi Ganpa: Daizu Chuangshi Shishi*) was published lately in 2020, and the original Dai version is mainly circulated in Dehong Dai area. *Gampi Gampa* is in Dai language, and means an ancient era.

This published version is divided into six chapters. The first chapter narrates the creation of heavenly gods and the birth of all beings, while the last chapter primarily preaches Buddhist thought. Meanwhile, the second, third, fourth, and fifth chapters all describe the process of humans being searching the Bodhi Fruit (rice). Thus more precisely, *Gampi Gampa* is an epic that involves the origin of the world but most of the content focus on the rice origin narrative.

In *Gampi Gampa* there are two human warriors seeking the Bodhi Fruit (rice), it says:

After the creation by the heavenly gods and the birth of all beings, it is foretold that five Buddhas will be born on earth successively. However, there is no Bodhi Fruit suitable for offering to the five Buddhas, which is said to grow in the primeval forest and is difficult to obtain. Two human warriors seek advice from the tree deity and the shrine deity about how to find the Bodhi Fruit. The deities inform them that the primeval forest is the realm of the giant rat and can be there after a seven-month journey.

With the assistance of the tree deity, the two warriors embark on their journey to the primeval forest. Along the way, they encounter threats from ferocious beasts but eventually reach the palace of the Golden Rat King. They request the Bodhi Fruit from king, who initially refuses, stating that the Bodhi Fruit serves as food for many animals and deities, cannot be given to human.

When the two warriors explain that they seek the Bodhi Fruit to offer to the upcoming five Buddhas on earth, then the Rat King finally agrees. He provides them with two Bodhi Fruits, each larger than a pumpkin and shining golden.

After obtaining the Bodhi Fruit, the two warriors are escorted out of the forest, on their way back to human realm, there were 12 kinds of animals guided and guarded them, including rats, water buffalo, tigers, rabbits, dragons, snakes, horses, sheep, monkeys, roosters, dogs, and pigs, the Bodhi Fruit finally arrives on human realm.

People sang and danced for celebrating the return of the two warriors with Bodhi Fruit. As these 12 animals assisted them along the way, therefore they were later invited to live on human realm and were honored as the 12 zodiac animals [1, p. 28–43].

This rice narrative above from *Gampi Gampa* has already imbued with strong Buddhist elements. Firstly, the motivation for seeking the rice is to offer them to the upcoming five Buddhas. The epic states:

There will be five Buddhas born in human world, and they will enlighten all beings. The first Buddha is named Guokasan, who will enlighten countless beings and bring peace and prosperity. The second Buddha is named Golagong, who will also enlighten the people of the world. The third Buddha is named Gapsaba, who will also enlighten beings in the mortal world. The fourth Buddha is named Gautama (Shakyamuni Buddha), who will also be born in human world. The fifth is named Alimidieya (Maitreya Buddha), who is the future Buddha to be born [1, p. 16].

These five Buddhas are destined to be born to benefit the world, but there is no perfect food to offer them, hence the need to find so called Bodhi Fruit. The epic also mentions that four kinds of Bie Jie (necessities) must be obtained to welcome the Buddhas' births. The first is Kasaya, the robe of a monk. The second is Bandadan, various offerings. The third is Sananan (temple), their dwelling place. "The fourth is the Bodhi Fruit, which grows in the mountains, tastes delicious, and is the most exquisite food of all" [1, p. 19].

Secondly, in the epic, the rice is referred to as Bodhi Fruit, which is a term with Buddhist connotations. Bodhi Fruit actually refers to rice, stemming from a phonetic mistake in Dai language. The epic states:

When the warriors brought the Bodhi Fruit to the human realm, people came to the city gate to welcome them. Someone said "Ao Hao Jie Ma Yao", which means "it has been brought into the city." The pronunciation "Hao" in Dai language means "rice", and means "come in" as well. People discussed and decided to simply call the Bodhi Fruit as "Hao", which in Dai language is a general term for rice. Therefore, from then until now, the original Bodhi Fruit in the Dai ethnic area has been referred to as "Hao", and this name has remained unchanged [1, p. 39].

This explanation appears reasonable logically but is actually a concept-switching tactic, likely compiled by Buddhists. As known well that the Dai ancestors were among the earliest rice-growing peoples, with a longstanding rice culture predating the introduction of Buddhism. Undoubtedly, the Dai people had rice "Hao" long before the Buddhist term "Bodhi Fruit" was introduced. This inverted interpretation of origins reflects the influence of Buddhism on local narratives.

Thirdly, the transformation of the giant rice grains into smaller ones is related to the succession of the five Buddhas, with the rice grains gradually becoming smaller from the first to the fifth Buddha. According to the epic:

With each Buddha's arrival on human world, the circumference of the rice grain would shrink slightly, as prophesized in the scriptures. During the time of Buddha Guokasa, each rice grain had a circumference of three spans; when Buddha Guora Gong was born, the rice grain reduced to a circumference of only two spans. The length shortened by four fingers, and human lifespans decreased accordingly. By the time of Buddha Gasaba's birth, the rice grain further diminished in size. When Buddha Shakyamuni was born, the rice grain reduced to a size smaller than the tip of chopsticks, and all rice grain in the world became oval-shaped [1, p. 78–79].

This narrative clearly represents a Buddhist interpretation of "giant rices becoming smaller" motif, only found in Buddhist scriptures. While the widely circulated folk explanation often involves a lazy widow smashing the rices with a pole or pounding them, resulting in the rices becoming as small as they are today.

During the warriors' quest for the rices, the tree deity and shrine deity, representing indigenous folk beliefs, played roles as guardians and messengers for humans. Initially, when the two warriors were unaware of where the giant rices grew, it was the tree deity who led them to the primeval forest. Later, when humans wanted to invite the 12 animals to celebrate together, it was also the tree deity who conveyed this invitation message to the animals. According to the epic:

The tree deity delivered the human message to the Rat King and then flew into the high blue sky, he loudly proclaimed, "listen carefully, rat, buffalo, tigers, rabbits, dragons, snakes, horses, and sheep, as well as monkeys, roosters, dogs, and pigs! Humans have sent me to invite you. You have all done great deeds in managing this forest under the command of the Heavenly God. The two human warriors propose the Rat King as your leader, inviting you to join the celebration in the human world, commemorating the acquisition of the Bodhi Fruit as food for the Buddhas. Humans invite you all to celebrate this event in the royal city with great joy [1, p. 41]!

The animals ultimately were invited to live among human's realm, and the realm outside the city became the residence of the animals, where they lived in harmony with humans. Tree deity worship is also an important aspect of the Dai people traditional belief, most of the large banyan trees surrounding Dai villages are considered sacred trees, and the tree deity naturally became the intermediary for communication between humans and animals.

In the end part of *Gampi Gampa*, there are many teachings of Buddhist doctrines, but there is also a narrative of monks offering different types of wild rices. The Buddha was reborn as A-Luang (Buddha's incarnations) named Gongla Yegale, preaching the Buddhist doctrine of karma and morality to the people. Once, he encountered 11 Yaxi (ascetic monks) in the forest. The epic mentions that:

They sustained themselves with various fruits, with one consuming only a single piece of wild rice Hau Luodu each day, one eating one piece of wild rice, one eating a wild rice crushed into pieces, and one consuming golden rice, one consuming only a wild rice Hau Hangzhang in the forest..... When these 11 Yaxi monks heard that the Bodhi Fruit had been obtained in the human world and was being cultivated in fields, they also decided to contribute the wild rice seeds which they consumed. They left the forest and arrived at the fields where people were working. Seeing this, they asked the people to plant the wild rice they had brought [1, p. 64–65].

These narratives supplement the origin of rice cultivation. The Dai people cultivate various types of rice, including glutinous rice, indica rice, purple rice, red rice, black rice, etc. Associating the origin of wild rice with Buddhist monks, attributing the credit for obtaining giant rices and cultivating various types of rice almost entirely to the Buddha and his followers, illustrates how monks have significantly adapted the content of folk narratives into Buddhist scriptures during the process of transcription for long time.

In summary, *Gampi Gampa* is an epic focused on the rice origin narratives. It tells the story of humans discovering rice seeds from the rat realm in the forest, then with the assistance of 12 animals relayed in escort, and guidance from tree deity. Initially, the rice was as large as pumpkins, but over time, they diminished in size with the changing eras of the Buddhas.

Despite being cloaked in a Buddhist context, we can easily relate this historical phenomenon to early humans gathering and hunting in forested valleys, inadvertently discovering wild rice and then transplanting them to human settlements. The narrative of rice origin depicted in the epic *Gampi Gampa* reveals traces of Buddhism absorbing and ingeniously adapting folk narratives to align with Buddhist ideals.

1.2. The De'ang epic *Dagudaleng Gelaibiao*

The De'ang ethnic group in China mainly resides in Dehong Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province. They belong to the Mon-Khmer language family included in the Austroasiatic stock. Due to the relatively small population of the De'ang and their long-term proximity to the Dai ethnic group, there has been frequent interaction in religion, culture, and economy, leading to the influence of Dai culture on the De'ang.

The creation epic of the De'ang people, *Dagudaleng Gelaibiao*, shares many similarities with *Gampi Gampa* and *Dang Gampa* passed down in Dehong Dai area, especially the content of rice origin.

Dagudaleng Gelaibiao is a creation epic compiled from oral narratives of the De'ang elders along with some scattered textual materials. In De'ang language *Dagudaleng Gelaibiao* means "the ancient song passed down by grandparents". This epic also tells the origin of rice, mainly include two parts, the first part depicts 7 human heroes venturing into the forest in search of a Miraculous Food (rice), while the second part narrates the conflict between the rice deity and Buddha, leading to the rice deity's exile into the Dark World.

In the first part, the 7 human heroes embark on a quest to find rice seeds because Buddha is about to be born into the world, and there is a lack of exceptional food to offer him. The heavenly god Khun Xijia sent 7 heroes into the animal world to seek out the legendary Miraculous Food. The 7 heroes visit various realms of buffalo, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and rat, inquiring about the whereabouts of this special food. The animals cooperate and guide them until they finally reach the domain of the rat king where they found the Miraculous Food. The narrative describes:

The pig king guided them to find the rat king. They saw the rat king, who was huge with red lips and a round belly covered in long fur. The rat king's front teeth were as large as bamboo shoots, frightening to behold. The pig king introduced the 7 heroes to the rat king. The rat king was delighted to hear about their mission and expressed willingness to provide the Miraculous Food for Buddha. It revealed that the Miraculous Food was right there, no need to search elsewhere. The rat king presented the Miraculous Food to the 7 heroes [2, p. 95–97].

The Miraculous Food referred to is rice, considered the king of foods, grown in the land of giant rats. To transport the rice to humanity, the rat king ordered its descendants to escort the heroes back to the human realm. To celebrate the arrival of rice in the human world, a seven-day celebration was held, inviting the 12 animals that assisted humans to join in the festivities. Ultimately, these animals stayed in the human world, becoming neighbors with humans and living harmoniously. Later, these 12 animals were designated as the zodiac animals, with the rat being placed first due to its significant contribution of rice.

In summary, the De'ang epic *Dagudaleng Gelaibiao* shares a similar narrative on the origin of rice with the Dai epic *Gampi Gampa*. The De'ang people also practice Theravada Buddhism, but their acceptance of Buddhist scriptures occurred relatively later. They reside in high mountain areas, distinct from the Dai people who usually live in basin.

Buddhism entered De'ang villages from the Dai areas around the 14th century. Additionally, they did not develop their own writing system and instead used existing Dai La script for Buddhist scriptures. Therefore, these two ethnics have long collaborated, shared, and transmitted many similar narratives, particularly the narratives of rice origin in both groups are influenced by Buddhism, with the purpose of finding rice to offer to the unborn Buddha. However, despite the similarities, there are some differences. For instance, the Dai's narrative mentions that after 2 warriors find the giant rice, 12 animals take turns escorting them, whereas the De'ang's version states that 12 animals guide 7 human warriors to find the rice, presenting different expressions of the same theme by the two ethnic groups.

1.3. The Bulang rice origin narrative *White Rat King and the Rice Seed*

The Bulang ethnic group mainly living in Xishuangbanna Prefecture, Yunnan Province, does not have their own writing system and currently has no published creation epics.

However, some folk songs have been collected in the *Chinese Folk Songs Collection*, including one related to the rice origin called *The Rice Goddess Ya Banhao*. The story goes that:

Originally, rice grain was as huge as a pumpkin and would automatically return to the granary when ripe. Later, as a widow had not repaired her granary because she has no husband to help, seeing the rice grain continuously flowed into, she was angry and hit them away with a stick. Consequently,

the rice grain, feeling sad, escaped to the sea and transformed into fish, diving into the deep water.

Many years later, someone fishing in the sea caught a golden fish, which transformed into an old woman, who became the rice goddess Ya Banhao [3, p. 174].

The Rice Seed Come into the Human World, is another story widely circulated in Bulang communities, it tells about the rice origin:

The rice growing on a divine mountain managed by the rice goddess Ya Gusuo. At that time rice grain still had little wings and would fly back to the granary automatically.

One year when rice grains matured, they flew back home as usual, all trying to fly into the granary, but the granary had not been built yet, Ya Gusuo was so angry that she hit them with a stick. Some rice cried out, unable to escape, some shattered, some fell into the granary, and some ran fast away, hiding in caves where no one could call them out.

Later, rat entered the caves to eat the broken rice, then returned to the human world, they left large rat droppings in open spaces. Rice resembled radishes but were now large as rat droppings, regardless of their size, when humans discovered them, they gathered and pounded into food [3, p. 175–176].

Thus, humans thanked the rat, and even if they found rat stealing rice in the granary, they would not kill them. This narrative is not only passed down orally but is also recorded in manuscript. The note accompanying this story mentions that: “*The Rice Seed Come into the Human World* is part of a creation narratives from the Bulang ethnic group, collected in 1984 by Lin Zhang, who was a government worker in Manxi Village, Daluo Town, Menghai County” [3, p. 176].

The third narrative of rice origin is *The White Rat King and Rice*, which is different from the two above, it tells that:

Long time ago in a place called Meng Mulumulao located in the deep forest, beyond the sea, it was the white rat world, where a plant called Hoke grows. At that time, there was no rice in the human world and the white rat prince sympathized with the hardships of humans for food, he asked the rat king to give humans the rice variety Hoke. The rat king agreed to pack Hoke into melons for the white rat prince to deliver to humans.

Along the way, passing through the realms of the buffalo, tiger, rabbit, dragon, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and pig, these animals all came to escort the white rat prince. Finally, they arrived at the human settlement and handed over Hoke to the humans. The white rat prince taught humans how to plant rice, with pigs teaching them how to plow the land; snakes lying on the ground demonstrating how to make ridges in the field; dragons lying in the water and using their forelimbs to create channels to irrigate the fields; buffalo pulling the plow, only the dog slept lazily under the tree. After learning how to plant rice, people no longer went hungry [4, p. 473].

In terms of content, *The White Rat King and Rice* shares many similarities with the Dai epic *Gampi Gampa* and the De’ang epic *Dagudaleng Gelaibiao* on the narratives of rice origin, however it has fewer Buddhist influences.

The Bulang people mostly live in mountainous areas, and their Buddhism was also introduced from the Dai region in the basin area. They neither did not develop their own writing system but used Dai script to transcribe Buddhist scriptures. Historically, the Bulang people in Xishuangbanna often purchased Buddhist scriptures and songbooks from their Dai neighbour. During ceremonies such as housewarming ceremony, weddings, and ordination ceremony (for the young monk), they would invite Dai folk singers, Zhangkhap, to celebrate the new house for a whole night.

This inter-ethnic cultural exchange facilitated literary integration. On one hand, Dai singers incorporated Bulang narratives to enrich their songs, and then Bulang stories began to circulate in Dai areas. On the other hand, the Bulang indirectly accepted Dai culture through Dai-scripted Buddhist scriptures and zhangkhap songbooks.

Meanwhile, the Bulang literati (monks) gradually recorded the orally transmitted traditions into written form. For example, *Majia* is one of the outcomes, which records the narrative of *Rat King Offering Rice*. The story tells,

Paya Mengla went to the heavens to ask Hong for rice seed but was unsuccessful. He then asked the crocodile, elephant, and rooster on earth but still failed. Finally, a rat gave him a rice seed, which he brought back to earth and planted. Three years later, he harvested more rice. Additionally, Ancient Chronicles of the Bulang in Man'E Vallage) also mentions narrative about rice origin, stating that "rice originated from large chestnuts in ancient times" [5, p. 425].

As following the table compares the rice origin narratives of the Dai, De'ang, and Bulang, which reveals some similarities and differences:

main motifs of rice narratives	Dai <i>Gampi Gampa</i>	De'ang <i>Dagudaleng Gelaibiao</i>	Bulang <i>The White Rat King and the Rice Seed</i>
Reason for seeking rice	The 5 Buddhas were about to be born, but there was no good offerings in the human world	The food to be offered to the Buddha was too meager	There was no rice in the human world, and the white rat sympathized with humans
Location where rice grain grows	Rat realm in forest	Rat and other animals realm	Depth place of the forest
Name of rice	Bodhi Fruit	Miraculous Food	Hoke
Owner of rice	Golden giant rat	Giant rat	White rat king
Seeker of rice	2 human warriors	7 human Heroes	White Rat Prince
Helpers 1	The 12 zodiac animals relayed guarding the warriors and rice to human world	The 12 zodiac animals relayed guiding human to search for the rice	The 12 zodiac animals escorted the rice
Helpers 2	Tree deity guide and communicate as a medium between human and animals	Khun Xijia act as as-signor	Rat, pig, snake, dragon, and buffalo taught human how to plant rice
O r i g i n a l appearance of rice	As large as a pumpkin, radiant	As the king of foods	Stuffed into melon
Reason for rice becoming smaller	As the five Buddhas were born and succeeded, the size of the rice grain became smaller and smaller	To escape from the pursuit of the Buddha, the rice grain transformed into flying insects	Rat entered the cave and nibbled on the rices, causing the giant rice to break into small pieces

Through the comparison above, we find several common elements in the rice origin narratives of these three ethnic groups:

The searching for rice was motivated by the need to make offerings to Buddha (or his incarnations); rice was originally not owned by humans but owned by the rat and other animals; rat contributed the rice with significant credit, often assisted by the 12 zodiac animals; initially, rice had various extraordinary features such as being gigantic, able to return to the granary by itself, or having wings to fly; over time, rice gradually became smaller and assumed its present form.

In summary, these narratives reflect certain historical realities, indicating that rice originated from nature, such as forest, cave, muddy land, etc., and rodents and other animals played a mediating role in humans obtaining rice. The narratives underwent adaptations to varying degrees after the introduction of Theravada Buddhism to these ethnic groups regions.

2. The evolution of rice deities' images

There are two main categories of rice deities image, one type portrays an elf-like figure with magical qualities but appears little fragile; she (he) can fly, walk, shrink, or transform into insects, fish, or other animals. This type of rice deity image is likely more ancient, reflecting humanity's primal understanding of nature and the animistic view of all things having their spirits.

The other type of rice deity is characterized by daring to challenge Buddha, with specific names in local languages. In Dai language, they are called Ya Huanhao, literally means grandmother rice soul, or in some places, Bu Huanhao, meaning grandfather rice soul. Transitioning from primitive soul worship to grandparent-like idolized deities, this anthropomorphism serves to counterbalance the idolatry of Buddha.

The narratives of rice goddess Ya Huanhao or rice god Bu Huanhao in conflict with Buddha reflect to some extent the conflicts between local indigenous beliefs and imported Buddhism.

2.1. The brave rice god

The narrative about the conflict between the rice goddess (god) and the Buddha is widely circulated among the Dai, De'ang, and Bulang areas, who adhere to Theravada Buddhism. This narrative is not only orally transmitted but also recorded in scriptures, which is a surprising phenomenon because it is an essentially anti-Buddhist narrative. Not only documented in Buddhist texts, but in some temple, this story is depicted as murals on the walls or textiles hang inside the hall.

In the Xishuangbanna prefecture, both the Dai and Bulang ethnic groups pass down the story of *Ya Huanhao*, the story roughly goes like this:

Beings in the three realms, deities, humans, and animals, all came to pay homage to the Buddha, but Ya Huanhao refused to kneel. She stood tall among the beings, claiming herself as the supreme existence in the world, not needing to bow to the Buddha.

The Buddha sit high above, surrounded by all the beings. Ya Huanhao argued with the Buddha about who deserves greater worship. She surprised and garnered criticism from others due to her arrogance towards the Buddha, and in a fit of anger, she left the mortal world and hid in the deepest Dark World.

After Ya Huanhao left, rice grains failed to grow, and all living beings suffered from famine. People came to the Buddha to complain, and the Buddha reluctantly acknowledged Ya Huanhao's supreme status, deciding to personally go to the Dark World to persuade her back. When Ya Huanhao returned, rice started to grow abundantly again, and both humans and animals were no longer hungry [6, p. 345–347].

While in Dehong prefecture, the text passed down is called *Bu Huanhao*, with a storyline almost similar to *Ya Huanhao*, but the gender of the rice deity changed to male. This change may be due to the strong Hanification in the Dehong Dai area, as historically deeply influenced by central plains culture and having developed a similar clan concept early on, which is a social system based on patrilineal descent. Compared to Xishuangbanna Dai regions, paternal lineage holds a higher status than maternal lineage among the Dehong Dais.

In the De'ang epic *Dagudaleng Gelaibiao*, there is also a description of the conflict between Bu Huanhao and the Buddha, and subsequent Bu Huanhao departure to the Dark World. When rice gain grows in the human world, Para (the Buddha) finally incarnated and became the mentor, all beings from the three realms all worshiped and paid homage to him, except for Bu Huanhao, who refused and wanted to challenge the Buddha's supremacy. The epic describes as:

At that time, when the rice god Bu Huanhao saw this situation, he was very dissatisfied. He transformed into an ugly elderly man resembling beggar and wanted to compete with the Buddha. He rushed up to the Buddha, and everyone burst into laughter, mocking him for being arrogant and overestimating himself.

Among all beings in the three realms, everyone considered the Buddha the most revered, and they all bowed down to him. How could a humble man dare to compare himself with the Buddha?! The Buddha advised him to step aside, saying that there was no need to compare status. Seeing this, Bu Huanhao became even angrier. He replied and reminded them: "Since you think you are more honorable than me, then I will leave, and from now on, you do not come looking for me". He turned and disappeared quietly like dissipating smoke

Ultimately, the rice god Bu Huanhao left the human world. After he departed, rice lost its soul, humans and animals eat the food but fell flavorless and hungry, they then came to the Buddha with

complaints. Eventually, the Buddha had to personally go to the Dark World to search for Bu Huanhao and bring him back. [2, p. 99–101].

It is obviously that the Dai, De'ang, and Bulang people still hold a profound worship of the rice goddess (god), which is an important theme in their traditional beliefs. The essence of the rice soul represents the vitality of the crops, affecting not only individual food security but also the prosperity and continuity of an entire ethnic group. Therefore, if Buddhism is to consider the well-being of all sentient beings, when she spread around, she had to compromise and acknowledge the superior status of the rice god. This is likely why in Buddhist scriptures to portray the rice goddess (god) who dare to conflict with the Buddha.

In these narratives, we see a vivid image of the rice goddess (god). For example, the Ya Huanhao in Dai epic, she wears traditional Dai attire with a long tube skirt. She stands steadfastly, neither bowing nor kneeling to the Buddha, much to the astonishment of the heavenly deities, earth deities, dragon king, and other ones present.

They question her: "Who are you? Why do you not kneel before the Buddha?"

She smiles contemptuously and replies: "My name is Ya Huanhao, and all beings on earth, including deities, cannot survive without me. I am greater than all beings. I cannot bow down; when I stoop, you will starve".

The Buddha asks her: "Where are you from?"

She answers: "I am not from afar; I reside right here all the time. From heaven to earth, I am the one who does not seek favor from any deities, but I make indispensable contributions to humans and animals. Reciting Buddhist scriptures like you all do won't fill stomachs. I worship no gods and no scriptures" [7, p. 254–255].

For another example, the Bu Huanhao in De'ang epic, the grandfather rice soul was portrayed as elderly man wearing ragged clothes, like a destitute beggar. Yet, he insisted on comparing with Parah (the Buddha) who was greater. When he saw that people did not acknowledge his importance status, he turned and walked away, disappeared left smoke behind.

In these narratives, there are multiple contrasting images between characters and storyline:

In terms of imagery, on one side, there is the Buddha seated high in a splendid golden temple, surrounded by his followers, paying reverence, showcasing the grandeur of Buddhism. On the other side is the shadowy figure of the rice goddess Ya Huanhao or rice god Bu Huanhao, standing alone and criticized by others, ultimately retreating to the Dark World.

In terms of attitude, initially, both the Buddha and the beings display extreme arrogance towards the Ya Huanhao or Bu Huanhao. However, later on, the Buddha has to personally visit the Dark World, earnestly pleading for her (his) return, even going as far as carrying her(his) back on his back. This stark contrast in attitude highlights the defiant image of the rice goddess (god) willing to challenge the Buddha. The Dai expert Hu Yuefang once pointed out that: "there is a significant turning point in Dai's religious history, shifting from the original primitive spirit worship to a dualistic belief we see today" [8, p. 212]. Although Buddhism seem to hold all the advantages, it ultimately cannot completely eliminate the deep-rooted rice soul worship.

2.2. The rice god retreated to the Dark World

There is a distinct motif in these rice narratives, that is the rice goddess or rice god retreat to a Dark World. The so-called Dark World includes distant and unknown places such as cave, seabed, or underground, where space and time become blurred. The departure and return of rice deities metaphorically reflect the journey of a seed buried in the soil, experiencing germination, breaking through the earth, and growth up.

In these narratives, it is often said that the rice goddess or rice god hide in an extremely distant and boundlessly dark place. Some say the dark place is called Jahawan, which is a darkest underworld. It can be find the explanation of the term Jahawan in the creation epic *Batamaga Pangshanglo*,

means “the cosmic edge formed by the continuously elongating nail of the creator god Yingba, which separates the heavens from the earth” [9, p. 47].

In *Ya Huanhao*, it says, “when Buddha went to the Dark World to search for the Ya Huanhao, he pursued until reaching Avici (hell), and then pursued further to the outer dark depths of Jahawan, where he found Ya Huanhao hiding there” [10, p. 102].

Another story tells, as Ya Huanhao left the Zongbu continent and went to the very distant and boundless dark layers below. When Buddha asked her to return, he said to her: “Please go back to the sunny place where you enjoy!” [11, p. 346–347]. The sunny place naturally refers to the surface of the earth, and the sprouting of seeds is the process of bidding farewell to darkness and seeking light. The departure of the rice deities to a distant, lightless dark area is interpreted as the reasonable process of grain seed returning to the soil.

In Bulang narrative *The Rice Goddess Ya Banhao*, the giant rice was smashed by a widow with a stick, so sad she was that she escaped to the sea, transforming into a goldfish. This description evokes the practice of cultivating fish in rice paddies during the process of growing rice. The Dai and Bulang peoples have the tradition of stocking grass carp in their rice fields.

The giant rice being struck and fleeing to the depths of the water can also be understood as the seed returning to the muddy field to sprout and grow. The rice soul is immortal; it can fly, escape, and transform into animals.

In De’ang epic *Dagudaleng Gelaibiao*, it is said that the rice soul Grandfather Bu Huanhao hid in a Dark World and was later personally captured back by the Buddha. It describes:

When the Buddha saw Bu Huanhao, who was hiding in the Dark World, he went there to personally capture him back. Seeing the situation, Bu Huanhao hastily hid towards the eastern horizon. The Buddha chased towards the east, then Bu Huanhao hid towards the southern skies. In this way, with pursuit from all directions, both of them became exhausted. Bu Huanhao transformed into rice worm crawling among the grass and bushes. Crawling from one plant to another, through grass tufts and tufts... [2, p. 102].

The description of the Bu Huanhao transforming into rice worm inevitably brings to mind these scenes from daily life: when you open an old rice sack, you find rice worms and weevils; when you open the granary door, rice moths dancing and flying in the air; when you walk into the field, locusts and grasshoppers leaping around. These insects accompany the entire process of rice growth, leaving a lively impression and naturally becoming the informativeness forms of the rice deities.

2.3. Rice soul warship

The transformation from the initial rice soul to the recognized figure of the rice goddess (god) represents a progression from a spirit-like essence to a revered deity symbolizing life force. The vulnerability yet resilient nature of the rice spirit or rice deity underscores the need for protection and the courageous struggle against adversity, standing undefeated.

With the development of the concept of the soul among humans, the belief in the animism of all things gradually emerged. The idea that rice possess a soul is a significant expression of this traditional belief, referred to in the Dai language as Minghau, which can be interpreted as the essence, soul, life, or spirit of rice. It is an intangible and invisible being, yet people firmly believe in its existence.

Dai people believe that rice must possess its Minghau to sprout, grow, and bear fruit; the Minghau could temporarily depart from the rice, just as humans undergo soul-summoning ceremonies when frightened and losing their soul, rice similarly require soul-summoning rituals during important seasons such as planting, harvesting, and warehousing.

One person lacking his soul should become weak, sickly, and devoid of vitality; the same was true of rice, without Minghau, rice would lose its essence and flavor. Furthermore, there is an extended belief that consuming rice lacking this Minghau can lead to a lack of vitality in humans and other animals.

During the process of rice cultivation, from sowing and nurturing seedlings to transplanting them into the fields, and ultimately harvesting and storing them in the granary, people should meticulously protect and settle the rice Minghau.

According to Dai folklore, the rice deity likes to conceal itself in the fields, often in large green trees or sometimes among nightshade trees or calabash vines, enabling them to safeguard the healthy growth of crops. “Therefore, the Dai people prefer to plant large green trees around the villages, and grow calabash vines in the vegetable garden. People would cut a green branch from the forest and planted it in the field during the rice transplanting season, allowing rice god to rest in the shade” [11, p. 581].

Some people place a couple of wine cups along the field ridges or in the grass, alongside a machete. The wine is a bribe to deter various spirits from disturbing the rice crop’s growth and machete to intimidate any mischievous ghosts, warning them against causing trouble and being cut by the machete.

Compared to the highly organized and systematic Theravada Buddhism, traditional indigenous beliefs appear somehow disorganized and fragile. The rice soul worship rooted in the animistic view, all beings possessing their spirits, it is obviously hard to compete with the formidable Buddhist system.

As history progressed, the abstract rice soul gradually became personified. The Dai people have their Ya Huanhao depicted as wearing a long tube skirt, the De’ang people have their Bu Huanhao resembling a beggar, and the Bulang people have their Ya Gusuo portrayed as pregnant woman with a large belly. These images represent figures from daily life – resembling the respected grandparents, the village chief responsible for worshiping deities, or the priestess Yamo, who usually act the soul-summon ritual.

The elevation of the rice soul into the idolized rice goddess (god) combines elements of ancestor worship and local deity worship, enabling it to contend with Buddha worship and ultimately creating a balanced and competitive dynamic.

In the face of all challenges, survival is paramount. The worship of the rice god is closely linked to the survival and propagation of the ethnic group. For Buddhism to stay these areas, it had to compromise with the existing traditional worship.

Even those who had already converted to Buddhism continued to worship the rice goddess (god). The text *Ya Huanhao* is enshrined in Buddhist temples alongside other scriptures that propagate Buddhist teachings, which makes people feel the compromise of Buddhism and ultimate accommodation of the indigenous worship of the rice god.

Recognizing the supreme status of rice deity obviously challenges the authority of Buddha. The conflict between the rice deity and Buddha reflect the conflict between traditional indigenous beliefs and incoming Buddhism.

Although Buddhism has such majestic structures like temples and pagodas, a vast array of scriptures to propagate her teachings, and numerous followers, however, all sentient beings in the three realms would suffer famine without everything rice deity bestow. “The appearance of the rice deity as a victorious figure demonstrates the mindset that regards food as essential, fully embodying the Dai people’s cultural phenomenon of sanctifying and worshipping rice” [12, p. 214].

3. Active engagement of Buddhism in rice production

In Dai, Bulang, and De’ang regions, there are traditional narratives of the rice origin, and the new narratives depicting the conflict between the rice deities and Buddha. These narratives have a symbiotic relationship with customs and rituals in daily life, reflecting the historical and current transformations of religious beliefs.

These ethnic groups have embraced Theravada Buddhism while still adhering to their traditional beliefs. Today, these minorities regions continue to practice rice cultivation customs, but these rituals now incorporate some elements from Buddhism.

3.1. Rice narratives and traditional rituals

There is a reflective relationship between folk narratives and the practical activities of rice cultivation in reality. Many ethnic groups hold ceremonies to honor the rice deity during sowing season and harvest season.

For example, the Dai people conduct rituals to worship the local deities, Ling Sheman Shemeng in Dai language, means worship of village deities and state deities, who essentially represent the ancestral deities.

When you visit the Dai villages, there usually is a grove of trees on the outskirts where dense large trees stand, often with a miniature wooden house beneath them, representing the dwelling place of the local deities. Each year, villagers gather here to conduct ceremonies, led by the village chief, who are descendants of the original settlers and founders of this village, revered as local deities after their passing.

Therefore, the core theme of these annual ceremonies is to seek blessings from the local deities for healthy crop growth and abundant harvest, as well as the well-being of the village's people and livestock. As such, these rituals represent a comprehensive folk phenomenon, honoring various deities including the rice god, tree deity, village deity, and ancestral deity.

During the spring planting season, the Dai people often insert a branch with lush leaves in the edge of their fields, placing offerings of wine and food underneath the branch as offerings to the rice god. People believe that this branch represents a tree, symbolizing the forest where tree deity and the rice deity reside, providing protection for the whole rice growing.

In the Dai epic *Gampi Gampa*, it is mentioned that the Bodhi Fruit grows in the primeval forest. How can the two human warriors reach there? Only the tree deity has been there before and knew where the Bodhi Fruit grows. The epic describes: "The rat friends led the two warriors into a deep cave, where the rat king Molaxiga resides" [1, p. 26]. As we know, rat is a kind of burrowing animals, often making their nests under field ridges, making them the closest animals to rice crops.

The tree deity resides on the green branches planted on the ridges, they definitely are familiar with the location of the rat caves. As the two human warriors said: "We offer various foods and livestock to worship the tree deity and the rice goddess, explaining our demand for seeking the Bodhi Fruit. Then tree deity transported us here immediately, and we arrived in the forest" [1, p. 30]. The tree deity and the rice goddess (god) are protectors of community; having received offerings from humans, they must work for the welfare of human world.

In 2016, during my one-month field study in Lianghe County, Dehong Prefecture, I interviewed a male villager, I called him uncle Li. I noticed a basket in the hall, and upon inquiry, learned that he had just conducted a rice soul-summoning ritual. Inside the basket were 3 bundles of tender grass, 3 stones, and 3 clumps of fresh soil. Uncle Li explained that while he summoning the rice soul, he walked from his house to the riverbank in the field, and then returned, kept calling the name Bu Huanhao all along the way, until he entered the gate, signifying that the rice soul has been safely brought back home. Finally, uncle Li placed the basket in the sacred corner of the hall and kept it there for at least 3 days, during which time lending out any rice is prohibited.

When I asked him why he needed these stuffs, 3 bundles of tender grass, 3 stones, and 3 clumps of fresh soil, he explained by narrating *Bu Huanhao*:

The Buddha ventured into a distant, Dark World in search of Bu Huanhao, and eventually found him there. Despite Buddha's repeated requests, Bu Huanhao refused to return, only gave him 3 handfuls of rice grain to take back.

The Buddha walked out of the dark cave and heard some sound of flowing stream. As he became so thirsty and placed the 3 handfuls of rice grain in his kesaya robe while he went to find water. However, upon his return, he found that rice grain had been gone-----some burrowed into the grass, some flown into the forest, and some dived into the river.

Therefore, in today's rice soul-summoning ritual, people must prepare these stuffs: *"the 3 bundles of tender grass are to call back the rice soul that burrowed into the grass, the 3 stones are to guide the rice soul that dived into the river back onto the steps, and the 3 clumps of fresh soil are to call back the rice soul that went into the soil"* [13, p. 15].

Furthermore, we can further extend this interpretation: the description of rice grains flying into the grass, forest, and river, all mirror the damage caused during the planting, harvesting, and cooking of rice. For example, during the growth period, rice seeding is often mixed with weeds, people inevitably pull out rice seeding when removing those weeds; during rice harvesting, many grain ears fallen on the field; during cooking, some rices always spill into the water basin, etc.

I took another week field work in Yingjiang County. While people hold the similar rice soul-summoning ritual, the ritual stuffs are slightly different, there are some ginger sticks, little stones, and new rice ears in the executor's basket. Aunt Lahuan who lives in Zhongzhai village explained that stuff:

Because Bu Huanhao had once escaped, on the way back to being sought, he flew into the forest and dived into the water, resulting in the incomplete return of the rice soul.

Therefore, when people cook rice, we must soak the rice in water; use wood from the forest to cook the rice over a fire. Only in this way rice has its all Minghao, its vitality, thus people who eat the rice with Minghao would feel strong and fulfilled [14, p. 9].

Folk narratives interpret traditional rituals, and traditional rituals embody folk narratives in practice. Together, they form a holistic understanding that can mutually validate each other. By linking rice narratives with related rituals during the rice production, we can get a better understanding of the meaning behind this tradition.

4. Buddhism plays a role in rice cultivation activities

After Buddhism was introduced around these minority communities, in order to establish a firm foothold, it was necessary to adapt to local traditions and actively participate in rice production activities. This approach could attract more followers and play more important role in local society.

Today, it is easy to find that some Buddhist elements have appeared in the rice cultivation activities in the Dai, Bulang, and De'ang areas.

Firstly, during the rainy retreat season, Hau Vasa in local say, occurs annually for 3 months, from mid-day of the 9th month to the mid-day of the 12th month in the Dai calendar (Approximately From mid-July to mid-October in the Gregorian calendar), during which all monks gather in temples to chant Buddhist canons. Some explanations suggest that this period coincides with the time when insects are most active, and to avoid unintentionally harming insects when going out, all monks have to stay within the temple grounds. However, from another perspective, the villagers are busy with farming, so they have no time to visit temples and listen to Buddhist teachings. Therefore, this summer retreat can be seen as a deliberate withdrawal of Buddhism in response to rice cultivation, adapting to local circumstances.

Furthermore, Buddhist monks also actively participate in some agricultural rituals. For example, during the sowing rice in De'ang village, men plow the fields in front while women prepare the soil at the rear, and monks are invited to chant scriptures. During this activity, everyone villager, young and old, dresses in ceremonial attire, plays gongs and drums, and go to each field to scatter rice seeds. Women call out loudly the name of the rice goddess, asking her to watch over the fields and ensure healthy crop growth.

The Dai villager have the similar ritual, usually conducted annually after planting rice seedlings. Each family prepares a basket and constructs a tripod with bamboo poles, adorning it with green grass and flowers. The basket contains raw rice, cooked rice, cooked meat, fruits and vegetables, and some paper money. These offerings are taken to Buddhist temples to be blessed by monks reciting Buddhist canons. After blessing, the green grass and flowers would be bring back and inserted into the rice

fields. The content of the scriptures recited by the monks involves praying to the rice deities to bless the rice to grow vigorously like green grass and flowers.

In the *Catalog of Ancient Dai Manuscripts in Yunnan Dehong China*, there is a record of such a ritual prayer:

I lift my bamboo tray with two hands, bow my head and lift the tray high, offering them to the great rice god on whom humanity depends.

The rice goddess created the seeds of happiness, the contribution to humanity surpassing the one of the pillars of the world. I offer these gifts to show my sincerity and accumulate merits.

Our wish is for the goddess to accept the offerings, bless healthy crop growth, ensure the safety of our people and livestock, protect the whole village from epidemics, and keep people away from suffering [15, p. 65].

Rice cultivation requires sufficient rainfall, and rain-praying ritual have been closely associated with indigenous religions, however the Theravada Buddhism gradually became involved in the ritual as well.

In Xishuangbanna, if it does not rain by the time of planting rice seedlings, Dai people would consider it is due to the neglect of heavenly deity. Therefore, they would hold a rain-praying ritual by washing the Buddha pagoda.

During this ritual, every household prepares umbrellas and straw hats for raining, then people carry water to wash the pagoda located back mountain. The pagoda will convey people's rain-praying wish to the heavenly deity, and rain will come soon [15, p. 17].

Traditionally, the Dai people in Xishuangbanna use Gaosheng, a homemade cannon made of bamboo pipes that are lit and sent flying into the air, to convey their wish to the heavenly deities for raining. Meanwhile, the Dehong Dai people go to the sacred mountain to make a Dun Nam Shangjian, means water song-khan tree, adorned with wildflowers and moss. People believe that they would welcome the rain deity Langfun Langlom (Goodness of Wind and Goodness of Rain). In Yuxi Dai areas, rain prayers traditionally gather nearby a river, kill chickens to sacrifice deities, eat the meat together, then play water-splash game, resembling a form of sympathetic magic simulating rainfall.

By conveying people's wish for rain-praying through washing the Buddha pagoda, it is evident that the pagoda is treated as a signal tower, representing a practical form where Buddhism participates in folk rice cultivation activities.

Many southern ethnic groups hold the New Rice Tasting festival. When rice is almost ripe, every family will harvest some newly rice grains, which remain intact. The rice grains are then husked, cooked, or made into a snack, people even sell them in market, those without rice fields can buy it to eat.

The person who have priority to taste this new rice represents enjoying the highest honor. Some minorities offer the new rice to dogs first, Dehong Dai people follow this way, for example, and they use the story *Maba Minghao*, means the dog brought the rices, to explain the origin of rice:

Long time ago, rice grew in a distant place separated from humans by an impassable river. One day, human sent a yellow dog across the river, which rolled in the rice field and got covered in rice grains.

When the dog swam back, most of the rice grains were washed away by water, but a few rice grains stuck to its raised tail. People picked these rice grains and sowed into the soil, then people get a continuous harvest of rice. Therefore, nowadays, people always feed the dogs first before eating new rice.

As Buddhism play more and more importance role nowadays, the Dai, Bulang, and De'ang people prioritize offering new rice to Buddha and monks in temples. In Dai in Xishuangbanna conduct annually a ceremony called Dan Haomai, which involves offering new rice to Buddha. After harvesting the new rice grains and storing it into granaries, each household prepares a small bamboo table with cooked meat, fruits, and newly harvested sticky rice.

Then, one person carries a bamboo table, and another one carries a basket of new rices to offer in the temple. The bamboo table is placed in front of the Buddha statue firstly, and then all new rices would be poured into the granary of temple. If the granary is fill full, it would symbolize good fortune [16, p. 19].

Furthermore, the Dai, Bulang, and De'ang all keep the custom making sand pagoda. In Xishuangbanna, before the Water-Splashing Festival, the Dai people will bring clean sand from the river and build a one-meter-high sand pagoda in the temple, then give offerings surround the temple.

During the activity, men and women, from the whole village gather around the sand pagoda, bowing in worship, listening to monks' chanting, praying for good harvests, and the prosperity for humans and livestock. The sand for the pagoda must be carefully collected from the riverbank, choosing clean, untouched fine sand [4, p. 247].

In Dehong, Dai people practice sand pagoda more frequently. If one family experiences a disaster or someone get ill for longtime, they should make a sand pagoda, mostly for blessings. After the ritual, the blessed sand maybe scattered into the rice fields, objectively improving the growth environment of the rice seedlings and benefiting the irrigation systems.

As described above, not only do monks directly participate in agricultural activities by chanting and blessing for rice production, but Buddhism as a whole has gradually formed a series of agricultural customs and ceremonies, allowing Buddhism to better integrate into the local cultural system. In simple conclusion, facing the long historic rice culture and its associated sacrificial customs, Buddhism has made its appropriate adjustments. Many scholars have noticed that Theravada Buddhism has been influenced by indigenous religious beliefs.

5. The authority of interpretation

As Buddhism spread and won obvious dominance, Buddhists also gained the authority, and find another way to narrate and interpret the origin rice.

Firstly, Buddhism altered some aspects by replacing certain terms with Buddhist vocabulary. For example, rice was referred to as Buddhi Fruits, Miraculous Food, Hoke; the helper of rice seeker, the tree deities had been replaced by Khun Xika, which is one transformation of Shakyamuni; while the Dark World was transformed into Avici hells and the Jiahawan, the meeting area between heaven and earth. All of these words are incoming Pali terminology carried by Buddhist scriptures.

Secondly, in the narratives about the conflict between rice deities and the Buddha, the rice soul goddess Ya Huanhao was described as an arrogant old woman, and the rice god Bu Huanhao as a ragged beggar. Meanwhile, the Buddha was depicted as a noble and humble figure, always concern the welfare of all beings and self-sacrificially venture into the Dark World himself to retrieve the rice goddess (god). The noble yet humble Buddha and the lowly yet rude rice deity, they are totally two contradictory images.

Thirdly, some orally transmitted narratives about the rice origin gradually have been record as scripture and even treated like other Buddhist cannon.

During Buddhist activities each year in temple, Dai villagers would retrieve the scripture Bu Huanhao, and the chant leader (Huolu/Bozhan) would recite it to the public. Everyone should remember, only rices are truly essential for our lives [17, p. 25].

Although these texts do not directly propagate Buddhist doctrines, once written down, these texts are typically stored within Buddhist temples, lending them a sense of sacredness. Through the dissemination of these texts, Buddhism also underscores the idea that food is a fundamental issue for survival, making it easier to gain the recognition and support of local followers.

Lastly, those who chant scriptures are mostly faithful Buddhist followers, and emotionally, they often align themselves with the Buddha. I observed a very interesting phenomenon during the fieldwork, there were subtle variations in emotional and expressions among narrators in different places. For instance, in Yingjiang and Lianghe, where Buddhist influence and traditional beliefs are evenly matched, when narrator said that the Buddha went to the Dark World to retrieve the rice god,

they emphasized that the Buddha repeatedly request and respectfully brought back Bu Huanhao. Meanwhile, when I visited Ruili and Longchuan, where Buddhism is more flourishing and the local belief decline somehow, narrator has different attitude, said that because the rice Bu Huanhao was unwilling to return, the Buddha forcibly brought him back carried under his armpit.

Besides, when I asked the narrators where they heard these stories from, these narrators from Yingjiang and Lianghe often mention that they heard these stories from their elders by the transmission orally; on the other hand, narrators from Ruili and Longchuan often emphasize that stories have been recorded in scriptures, or they heard this story from some respected monk. The variations in expression among narrators reflect the fluctuating authority of Buddhism over the narratives of rice origin.

Conclusion

Based on the information from fieldwork in southwest Yunnan Province, as well as some collected published texts, detailed analysis leads to the following conclusions:

Firstly, influenced by Theravada Buddhism, the Dai, De'ang, and Bulang ethnic groups exhibit the following common characteristics in their narratives of rice origin, and they have absorbed some Buddhism elements, not only replacing traditional terms with Buddhist vocabulary, but also closely linking the origin of rice cultivation with Buddhism. It is narrated that humans sought rice to provide the best food for the Buddha; monks also contributed their wild rice, enriching the variety of rices available to human; and the reduction in rice size is associated with the succession of five Buddhas. These changes have resulted in alterations to the content, giving them a distinct Buddhist character.

Secondly, a new type of rice narrative has emerged, depicting the conflict between rice deity and the Buddha, which somehow reflects past struggles between indigenous religions and incoming Buddhism. The theme of the rice deity fleeing to and being brought back from the Dark World carries complex symbolism. On one hand, it can be understood as the process of seeds germinating and growing in the soil; on the other hand, it can be seen as Buddhism's compromise with practical agriculture, acknowledging that food is the first source to survive.

Thirdly, Buddhism monks actively participate in rice cultivation activities. Monks record oral narratives of rice origin into texts and affirm the noble status of the rice deity and its contribution to sentient beings through recitations of Bu Huanhao (or Ya Huanhao). During the planting process, monks stay in temples during rainy retreat season, from an objective standpoint, they silently support people's agricultural activities. Some are even invited to chant for blessing the crops healthy growth and abundant harvests. People convey their wish of rain-praying to heaven deities through washing pagodas. Constructing sand pagodas would result in a by-product, improving the irrigation systems; During the New Rice Tasting festival, people offer newly harvested rice to Buddhist temples. All of these activities demonstrate the close interaction between Buddhism and rice cultivation.

Nowadays, during rice cultivation ritual plots, both primitive religion priest and monks are present; offerings are made to local deities such as the rice goddess (god), tree deity, Sheman (village deity), Shemeng (State deity), while prayers also make to seek the blessing from the Buddha for bountiful harvests.

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