



The Social Significance of the Ancient Yi Wrestling Sport Within the Context of Fire Culture

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Abstract

The element of "fire" holds significant religious importance for various ethnic groups worldwide, including the Yi ethnic group in China, often called the "people of fire." This designation reflects their challenging environment and ancient beliefs that have shaped a unique fire culture. According to Yi legends, "strongmen" triumphed over "gods" through wrestling, symbolizing the theme of "humans conquering the divine." This narrative inspired the "Torch Festival" and popularized wrestling among the Yi people. In their ancient matriarchal society, the ancestors of the Yi linked "fire worship" and "ancestor worship" through "reproductive worship," with wrestling representing reproductive capacity and ethnic continuity. During the Qin, Han, Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties, the central government employed systems like the "ghost master system" to control local populations, reinforcing the authority of chieftains through religious affiliations in the Yi region. The Yi began to practice wrestling as a tribute to their ancestors, often intentionally losing matches to show respect. This practice was also connected to exorcism, believed to drive away ghosts and avert disasters. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the "Gaitu Guiliu" policy led to the replacement of traditional chieftains with appointed leaders, fostering cultural blending. Wrestling among the Yi people gained sacred significance, serving as a means to resolve disputes and as an important political instrument for promoting mutual understanding between the Yi and Han nationalities during this transformative period.

Keywords: Ancient, Fire culture, Social Significance, Wrestling, Yi people.

1. The Fire Culture of the Yi People Gave Rise to the Wrestling Sport

Fire is revered by many cultures around the world. In ancient India, the god of fire was regarded as the highest deity. In ancient Greece, Hestia, the goddess of the hearth, was so revered that every household maintained a perpetual fire as a sign of devotion. Throughout ancient Persian temples, ever-burning lights symbolized eternal sacredness. Furthermore, fire is admired by the Turks as a life-giving sacred force (Zh.V. Poskonnaya & A.I. Naeva, 2016)^[i], and the Altai people associated fire worship with the concept of the domestic hearth, revered as the mother of humanity (O.V. Pervushina, 2022)^[ii]. Comparable to cultures globally, fire is historically held in high regard throughout China. The cultural significance of fire continues in China through the custom of worshipping and offering sacrifices to fire. When visiting relatives and friends for New Year greetings, the Ewenki and Oroqen people kowtow to the God of Fire before greeting the host. The Wa people practice religious sacrificial activity by holding a new fire ceremony annually. When the Jingpo people burn wasteland, they pray to the God of Fire for a good harvest, and the families of the Gaoshan people require a fire be kept constant throughout the year^[iii]. Despite the cultural significance of fire to many Chinese ethnic groups, the Yi people are referred to as the 'fire' ethnic group. The word 'fire' in the Yi language translates to 'lighting the sky' in Chinese. The Yi people regard fire as the ultimate entity, similar to 'heaven' (Qubi Aguo, 2009)^[iv]. In the lives of the Yi people, factors related to fire are ubiquitous. Just as the Yi proverb says, 'born by the fire pond, die by the fire', every aspect of the Yi people's lives from birth to death are intertwined with fire. In daily life, every Yi household builds a fire pond on the left side of the main room's center. A triangular iron frame is placed on the fire pond to hold a pot for boiling water or cooking (Figure 1). The fire pond is often constructed simultaneously with the house, and following construction, the owner selects an auspicious day to perform the fire ceremony. The ceremony involves lighting a fire in the pit and cooking the first meal, symbolizing the family's official move into the new home. From that point

onward, activities such as offering sacrifices, discussing matters, having meals, and entertaining guests were all conducted by the fire pond.



Figure 1. Fire pond mural in Yi village.

The eternal fire in the fire pond symbolizes the family, clan, and the unending life of the Yi people, becoming the ‘fire god’ they revere (Bai Zhangfu, 1993)^[v]. When someone is ill for an extended period, the family consults a Bimo¹ (also known as Duangong) to cure diseases and expel ghosts (Figure 2). For example, in Yao'an County, the Bimo instructs the owner to ignite the fire pond, heat a piece of cast iron until red-hot, remove it, and then sprinkle water on it, causing bursts of steam. Various ghost exorcism and disease treatment rituals are then performed in the room (Dai Guobin, 2020)^[vi]. In Yi belief, fire is the source and symbol of cleanliness, possessing the ability to purify and transmit its purity to other things (He Xingliang, 1992)^[vii]. Therefore, many Yi people in Yunnan predict good and bad luck by observing changes in the fire pond's flames. When brothers of the Yi ethnic group grow up and separate, an important ritual is to share the fire. The most respected member of the Yi ethnic group lights a torch from the fire pit and solemnly hands it to the person moving to a new home, signifying that ‘family can be divided, but blood cannot separate’.



Figure 2. The author and Bi Mo, Yi priest, Yi village Keyi, Xisan Town.

The Yi people's fire worship stems from their high dependence on fire in a harsh natural environment. The ancestors of the Yi people lived in remote, isolated alpine mountainous areas for generations, characterized by low productivity, primitive production methods, inconvenient transportation, and limited contact with the outside world. This resulted in a strong dependence on fire. Fire allowed them to cook food, keep warm, illuminate, make tools and weapons, defend against wild beasts and enemies, and burn wasteland for land reclamation. ‘Slash and burn’ agriculture characterized the Yi people's production and cultivated farming in alpine mountainous areas. This practice reflects the Yi people's reliance on fire for survival and development under specific historical and geographical conditions and acted as a primitive stage of productivity development. Additionally, the Yi people's fire worship, ‘passed down from generation to generation with few changes’, originates from their historic religious beliefs (Ying Ji, 2006)^[viii]. The fire worship stems from their ancient insufficient understanding of the natural phenomenon of fire. Natural fires consumed forests, burned people and animals to death, and even devoured all living things, instilling visual fear in the Yi people. Conversely, the Yi ancestors used axes to strike stones and

¹Bimo is a priest in the traditional religion of the Yi people. In the Yi language, ‘Bi’ means blessings and chanting sutras during religious activities, and ‘Mo’ means elder or teacher. <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%AF%95%E6%91%A9>

create fire, which ‘engulfed the trees’, burning the green world clean and scorching the ground three feet deep, fostering a sense of awe towards fire. This metaphysical and theological aspect gave birth to the relationship between the Yi people and fire. Fire evolved from being a simple tool for production and living to becoming a spiritual symbol and cultural carrier for the Yi people. In Yi belief, fire, like water that ‘can carry a boat or overturn it’, possesses duality. It can warm and cook, eliminate harm, and ward off enemies, but it can also cause disaster, taking lives and property. Therefore, the Yi people regard fire as a being with emotions—anger, sorrow, and joy—worshiping it as a higher form of life. This belief in the sacred nature of fire gave rise to their original religious belief in fire.

National festivals best reflect the characteristics of national culture, and the ‘Torch Festival’ is the most representative national festival of the Yi people. With a long history, it is frequently documented in ancient texts, fully embodying the characteristics of the Yi people’s ‘fire’ culture. For instance, the ‘Yunnan Chronicles’², completed around 1303 by Li Jingxiu, an official of the Yuan Dynasty, records that ‘on June 24th, torches were tied to high poles to light the fire all night long’. Yang Shen³, a scholar of the Ming Dynasty, marveled at the grand spectacle of the Torch Festival carnival night and composed enduring poems such as: ‘The clouds are covered with red and the sun is just above the mountains, the torches are staggered and go back and forth, thousands of lotus flowers are blooming in the sea, and the sky is full of stars.’ And ‘I am staying in Lushan tonight, and I am shocked that the heavenly gate is not closed at night. Who will smash the sky to pieces, and the stars will fall into the world’ (Bai & Ji, 2014)^[ix].

During the Torch Festival, traditional activities such as wrestling, bullfighting, horse racing, sheep fighting, cock fighting, pole climbing, sheep robbing, shooting, singing competitions, beauty pageants, clothing competitions, and various games are held. At the end of these programs, Yi men, women, and children hold high torches to celebrate the harvest, pray for peace, and wish for good luck. Among the various sports, ‘wrestling’ is the most popular due to its ‘unrestrained and heroic’ characteristics. Wrestling has a close internal connection with the Yi people’s primitive religions of nature, totemism, and ancestor worship (Rao, 1989) ^[x], complementing the Yi people’s revered ‘fire’ culture and holding a significant position in their lives. On a material level, Yi wrestling represents the Yi people’s adaptation to their natural environment and their physical activity needs. On a spiritual and cultural level, it highlights the ethnic identity and values of the Yi people. On a community cultural level, it serves as a harmonious expression of the Yi people’s self-identity and the recognition of their culture by other ethnic groups (Sun, 2011)^[xi].

The ‘wrestling’ sport of the Yi people is closely associated with the ‘fire sacrifice’ culture, but there are distinct differences between the sports social function and cultural significance across various historical periods. Historically, the Yi people have been widely distributed in the southwestern region of China for over 3,000 years⁴. The exact regions varied with the frequent dynastic changes witnessed by the central government in ancient times. The governance of the ancient Yi was relatively stable and can be categorized into three main periods: the ancient period, the ‘Jimi’⁵ ‘chieftain rule’ period, and ‘Gaitu Guiliu’ period, as depicted in the figure 3. The ancient period, predating the third century BC, was characterized by a matriarchal society. ‘Jimi’ and ‘chieftain’⁶ rule refer to the system where, although nominally subordinate to the central government, local autonomy prevails. During the Qin, Han, Tang, and Song Dynasties, it was referred to as ‘Jimi’, while during the Yuan Dynasty, it was termed ‘chieftain’. Despite variations, the governance method spanned multiple central government dynasties and primarily revolves around the autonomy of ‘Yi people governing Yi’. The ‘Gaitu Guiliu’⁷ period occurred during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, wherein the central government directly appointed ethnic minority leaders as government officials, diverging from the autonomy of the Yi ‘chieftains’. Throughout various historical periods, the social significance of the ‘wrestling’ movement varied depending on the policies adopted by the central government regarding the Yi areas (Figure 3).

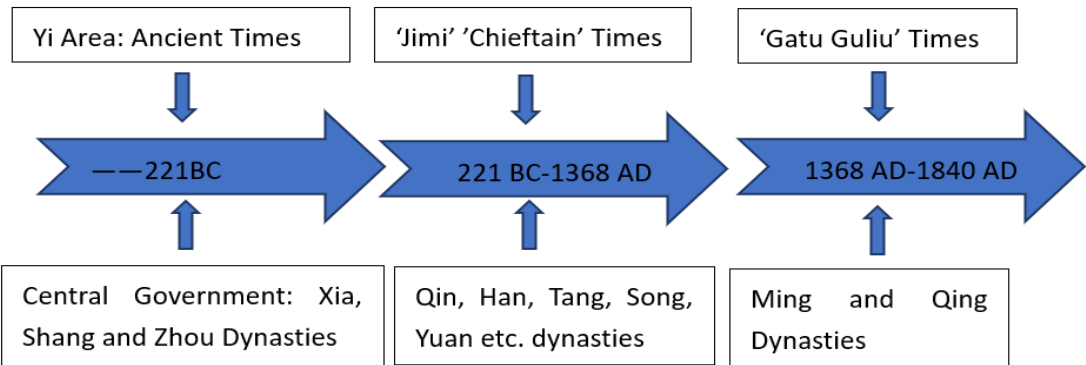


Figure 3. Comparison between Yi areas and central government in different historical periods.

² ‘Yunnan Chronicles’ is a local chronicle written by Li Jingxiu, an official of the Yuan Dynasty, and was completed around 1303.<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%BA%91%E5%8D%97%E5%BF%97%E7%95%A5>

³ Yang Shen (December 8, 1488 - August 8, 1559), also known as Yongxiu, was an official and writer in the Ming Dynasty. From Wikipedia.<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%9D%A8%E6%85%8E>

⁴<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%BD%9D%E6%97%8F>

⁵JiMi: To control. The areas where the restraint policy was implemented were nominally subordinate to the imperial court, but were actually ruled by local indigenous leaders themselves. <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E7%BE%81%E7%B8%BB>

⁶Chieftain: a Chinese frontier official position, first established in the Yuan Dynasty, used to award to the leaders of minority tribes in the northwest and southwest regions. <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%9C%9F%E5%8F%B8>

⁷Gaitu Guiliu :to abolish the rule of local chieftains and replace them with regular direct administration. It began in the Yongle period of the early Ming Dynasty and was implemented on a large scale during the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty. <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%94%B9%E5%9C%9F%E5%BD%92%E6%B5%81>

2. Ancient Times

2.1. The Significance of “Wrestling Between Man and God” In Myths and Legends: “Man Can Conquer Heaven”

In ancient times, natural ‘fire’ appeared to possess mysterious power beyond human control. Nevertheless, as depicted in other Yi legends, the Yi people hold the belief that humans are not entirely passive and helpless when confronted with unknown fire. One legend recounts Mudeng 木邓, an ancestor of the Yi people, brought an end to the primitive and dark existence by creating fire through wood drilling. Mudeng was subsequently venerated as the ‘God of Fire’ by future generations of certain regions. Another tale claims, on the 24th day of the sixth lunar month, the Yi hero Oti Laba 俄体拉巴 rallied the Yi villagers to ignite 99 torches, engaging in a three-day battle, ultimately incinerating all the locusts summoned by the demon king Entiguz 恩梯古兹. Following the villagers’ rescue and the demon’s defeat, torches have been lit annually on June 24th to commemorate this event, giving rise to the distinctive ‘Torch Festival’ of the Yi people (Shao Peng, 2019)^[xii].

Among the legends surrounding the Torch Festival in Butuo County, Liangshan, there exists another compelling narrative. According to this legend, in ancient times, the Emperor of Heaven frequently dispatched troops to invade the human realm. Following the humans’ defeat, celestial giants were dispatched to challenge humanity’s strongest individuals to wrestling matches. The emperor proclaimed if a human could triumph over these giants, the celestial forces would cease their invasions; otherwise, humanity would forever remain under celestial dominion. In this epic ‘wrestle between man and god’, earthly champions, through unwavering determination, emerged victorious over the celestial beings, thereby ushering in an era of peace for the world (SuXia Chise, 2007)^[xiii]. Another legend recounts how the valiant individuals of the world vanquished malevolent angels, laden with ‘all manner of pests and plagues,’ through wrestling contests, bringing about tranquility^[xiv]. To commemorate this triumph, the Yi people ignited torches and rejoiced, giving rise to a traditional festival that endures to this day - the ‘Torch Festival’. Additionally, to honor the earthly champions who prevailed against celestial adversaries, the Yi community congregates annually to host wrestling competitions. Consequently, the spirited and uninhibited sport of wrestling intertwines closely with the festive fervor of the ‘Torch Festival’, emerging as a beloved pastime among the Yi people.

While the story of a wrestling match between man and God may be a distant myth, it’s clear that mortal victories over the divine are impossible. However, the Yi people embrace the legend of “man can conquer heaven” to highlight their indomitable spirit in ancient times. This legend reflects their determination to confront powerful natural forces and their willingness to fight against a harsh environment. Thus, juxtaposed with the prevailing sense of helplessness in the face of nature, the Yi people espouse a spirit of defiance, asserting their capacity to overcome nature’s formidable mysteries; indeed, they uphold the notion that ‘man can conquer nature’. This ethos bears semblance to the biblical tale of ‘Jacob, forefather of the Israelites, wrestling with God and emerging triumphant’⁸.

2.2. The Meaning of “Wrestling” In the “Reproductive Worship” of Matrilineal Society: “Racial Continuity”

The meaning of ‘wrestling’ developed ties in the ‘reproductive worship’ of matrilineal society and began through perceived relationships among nature and life. During the nascent stages of matrilineal clan communes, the social dynamics characterized by the concept of ‘knowing only one’s mother but not one’s father’ intermingled with a profound reverence for natural elements born out of apprehension towards natural phenomena. Within the Yi community, an intimate correlation existed among ‘fire’, ‘deity’, and ‘human’, facilitating the organic integration of nature worship and ancestor reverence. This spontaneous fusion laid the foundation for the ancestral veneration practices observed among the Yi people (Cheng Yaquin, 2009)^[xv]. Offering sacrifices to the totem ancestors stems from a desire for perpetual fertility and vitality bestowed by the maternal essence of life. Within the Yi cultural framework, ‘fire’ embodies the transformative and nurturing qualities essential for all existence. It serves as the primal source of growth and is revered as the deity of regeneration. Primitive beliefs held by the Yi ancestors intricately intertwined fire worship, ancestor veneration, and reproductive worship, emphasizing the interconnectedness of these fundamental aspects of their cultural ethos (Yang Fuwang, 1999)^[xvi].

In ancient times, the Yi people intricately intertwined ‘fire worship’ and ‘ancestor worship’ through the practice of ‘reproductive worship’. The tradition endures in the Torch Festival ‘ancestral worship’ custom of the Yi community in Zhekeshao Village, Shuangbai County, Yunnan. This ceremonial rite comprises two main components. First, Bimo chants the ‘Six Groups of Branches’⁹, a ritual derived from the migration history of the Yi ancestors, who were purportedly divided into six tribes by a single progenitor, Apu Dumu. Secondly, a symbolic figure known as the ‘straw man’ performs the ‘Crying Mother Tune’, a song honoring maternal virtues such as childbirth and commemorating the role of the mother. Accompanied by simulated gestures depicting aspects of childbirth, including sexual intercourse and pregnancy, this ritual reinforces the reverence for maternal lineage within the Yi cultural framework¹⁰.

Following the preceding rituals, the ceremony progresses to the burning of the ‘straw man’, symbolizing the ancestors’ return to the heavens and their ancestral realm. As the effigy, clad in a straw suit, representing the ancestral spirits is consumed by flames, it signifies their transition to the afterlife. Subsequently, a pair of men, symbolizing the ancestors, interlock and descend the hillside in a rolling motion, metaphorically expressing the journey of returning to their ancestral abode (figure 4). In this context, fire assumes a transcendent role beyond its natural properties, serving as a conduit for the deceased to reunite with their forebears. This worship of fire intertwines with ancestor veneration, with the ‘straw man’ embodying the ancestor figure.

⁸ Genesis 32:24-25.

⁹ originating from the migration history of the Yi ancestors who were divided into six tribes (sons) by one ancestor (Apu Dumu). <http://www.yizuren.com/yistudy/xyjxx/20126.html>

¹⁰ <http://m.yizuren.com/tradition/jqymjyl/19141.html>.



Figure 4. Sacrificial dance of the straw man in Shuangbai County.

During the enactment of the 'Crying Mother Tune', the straw man holds aloft a symbolic male genitalia, and the desire for racial continuity is expressed. Post-'return to ancestors', the ritual of 'wrestling' symbolizes the ancestral lineage's reproductive potency, as one man places his head on another's crotch, while the latter tightly clasps the former's neck. They descend the slope in a rolling motion, known as 'kinking and rolling', representing the transmission of ancestral reproductive power, and further signifying the intent for 'racial continuity'^[xvii].

In the ancient matriarchal society of the Yi people, confronted with the harsh natural environment, population size emerged as a pivotal concern. Therefore, the Yi ancestors, strive to ensure the perpetuation of their lineage and the proliferation of offspring, by resorting to the primitive 'wrestling' practice of 'twisting and rolling' as part of sacrificial rites venerating the 'God of Fire' and their forebears. Such sacrificial rites embody prayers and offerings. Moreover, the sport of 'wrestling' serves as a conduit for venerating the 'God of Fire' and bridging connections with ancestral spirits. The ritualistic 'body movements' enacted during sacrifices are imbued with the essence of wrestling, characterized by kinking and rolling, to beseech ancestral spirits for resilience against natural adversities, thereby articulating primal reproductive instincts and the importance of racial perpetuation.

Unlike the ancient Yi people, who prayed for "more children and more happiness" through sacred ceremonies dedicated to the "Fire God" and wrestling-like rituals, most young people in China today, including those in the Yi region, are reluctant to have more children. This trend contributes to the demographic crisis we face due to an aging population. Therefore, preserving traditional religious ceremonies and promoting the values of ethnic reproduction could be beneficial for encouraging population growth in contemporary society.

3. 'Jimi' 'Chieftain' Times (221 BC -- 1368 AD)

Throughout the Han 汉 Dynasty, the central government adopted a relatively lenient 'restraint' policy alongside a chieftain system for governing remote ethnic minority regions. The chieftaincy system, regarding the Yi people, had its roots in the Qin 秦 and Han 汉 Dynasties, developed during the Three Kingdoms period, and further solidified during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties. The Tang Dynasty implemented the 'restraint' policy extensively, signifying the establishment of the chieftain system. Following the Song Dynasty's comparatively conservative approach to ethnic affairs in the southwestern border regions, the chieftain system gained official recognition during the Yuan Dynasty, tracing its origins back to the Sui and Tang Dynasties. From the Sui and Tang Dynasties onward, approximately 800 years had elapsed^[xviii]. Reflecting the belief characteristics of the Yi ancestors, the Han Dynasty and subsequent central governments implemented the 'ghost master system', a policy of 'using barbarians (Yi) to control barbarians (Yi)' (Zhang Zehong, 2012)^[xix]. The so-called 'ghost master system' originates from the 'ghost and god belief' held by the Yi ancestors. 'The investigation of our ancestors began in the Han Dynasty ... the Han Dynasty conferred gods, the Song Dynasty consecrated Buddhas, and these figures were worshiped for thousands of years.' (He Yaohua, 1983)^[xx]. The practice of the 'Han Dynasty conferring Gods' respected the chiefs as deities, which strengthened their authority and control. During the Tang Dynasty, the 'ghost master' system, a primitive religious activity centered on ancestor worship, was established. Fan Chuo's 'Manshu'¹¹ from the Tang Dynasty documents: 'The large tribe of Wuman (Yi) has a big ghost master, and the small tribes of hundreds of families and two hundred families also have small ghost masters.' In this way, the 'ghost lord', who combines political, military, and divine power, can prevent or expel disasters through ritual activities such as 'spelling, exorcising ghosts, reviving souls, summoning spirits, divination, and exorcism' (Duan Wei, 2008)^[xxi]. Therefore, the worship of the fire god by the Yi people was related to the ancestor worship of the tribal chiefs at that time. This eventually formed a new sacrificial method in the village torch festival established by the 'ghost belief' during the Han and Tang Dynasties. 'Fire' became the medium of communication between the villagers and their 'ancestors'. When a plague spreads and disaster strikes, to ensure the health of people and animals, they 'build altars and worship ancestors', 'light fires to pray for ancestors', and hold corresponding 'wrestling' activities. The meaning of cultural belief changed from the 'knotting and rolling' in the 'reproductive

¹¹ Compiled by Fan Chuo of the Tang Dynasty in 863, it is an important classic that records the nationalities, products, customs, politics, and culture of Yunnan and neighboring Southeast Asian countries in the Tang Dynasty. <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%BA%91%E5%8D%97%E5%BF%97>.

worship' of ancient times to the 'knotting' of 'expelling ghosts, supporting animals, and avoiding disasters', represented by the 'wrestling between humans and gods' to pray for the safety of humans and animals.

The unique form of 'wrestling' remains popular among the Sani people of the Yi ethnic group in Shilin, Yunnan (Figure 5). In the wrestling competition at the local Torch Festival, the Yi people utilize 'wrestling' as a 'tribute' offered to their 'ancestors'. 'The more you fall in wrestling, the happier you will be! Only then can all the diseases be thrown away from your body' (Ito Seiji, 1993)^[xxii]. Additionally, it is stipulated that 'there is no wrestling between people in the same village. The winner must be from another village and must leave the venue that night.' This means that only when demons and plagues are defeated or taken away by people from other villages can the villagers and animals be safe.



Figure 5. Sani children wrestling.

Judging from the competition results, this system of 'losing' as 'winning' seems logically difficult to understand. However, the 'wrestling' activity is regarded as a sacrifice to the 'God of Fire and Ancestors' and expresses the Yi people's respect and recognition of their 'ancestors' by actively or passively 'giving up'. This then obtains the peace bestowed by the ancestors' 'ghosts and gods' as a means of 'retreating in order to advance'. It embodies the idea of 'cleverness and cunning' and reflects the simple thought and cultural significance of the 'wrestling' movement of the Yi people during the chieftain reign.

4. 'Gaitu Guiliu' Times (1368—1840)

Unlike the 'restraint' policy during the Qin, Han, and Tang dynasties and the chieftain system of the Yuan Dynasty, the central government during the Ming and Qing dynasties implemented the ethnic policy of '**Gaitu Guiliu**'. This was prevalent in the Yi areas, wherein the chief officials of ethnic minorities were directly appointed by the central government rather than elected from local 'ghost lords' and 'chieftains'. This policy not only differentiated the rights of local governments but also strengthened the direct leadership of the central government over the Yi areas. The governance concept of 'people' led to the phenomenon of 'Han culture transferring to the Yi people' (Liu Yonggang, 2010)^[xxiii], resulting in the village structure of 'large dispersion, small settlements' and 'mixed Han and Yi'. This intertwining of cultures was relatively common among the Yi people in southeastern Yunnan.

4.1. The Significance of "Wrestling" in the Social Context of "Gaitu Guiliu" Times: "Mutualization of Yi and Han"

'Wrestling' had great significance within the social context of 'Gaitu Guiliu' times. Among the Sani Yi people in southeastern Yunnan, legend tells of 'wrestling's' association with the well-being of people and animals. A young Sani man named 'Ruogepa' encountered the exiled Emperor Jianwen¹² of the Ming Dynasty while plowing the fields. They talked, became brothers, and lived together. One day, after healing a sick cow, they jumped up with joy and rolled on the ground, hugging each other. A passing shepherd thought they were fighting and stepped forward to intervene. Upon discovering the reason, he said, 'Such a good thing. You should be happy, so just hold each other and wrestle hard' (Wang Jianzhong, 2006)^[xxiv].

This story about 'the exiled emperor of the Ming Dynasty and the young Yi man wrestling over the healing of a sick cow' reflects the social background of the central government's 'Gaitu Guiliu' policy during the Ming and Qing dynasties and illustrates a new dynamic in the relationship between the Yi and Han peoples. Consequently, the 'wrestling' competitions held during the 'Torch Festival' in southeastern Yunnan incorporated the political significance of promoting ethnic harmony and mutual respect between the Yi and Han. For example, in the wrestling competitions in Shilin and Mile, before the match begins, contestants warmly hug and greet each other. They then take a half step back, raise their hands upward, bend over, and place their hands down to signify mutual respect and learning. After the match, the winner enthusiastically helps the opponent up, dusts off their shoulders and back, and escorts them to the village seat for rest, conversation, and communication (Fan Liling, 2009)^[xxv].

¹²Jianwen Emperor: Zhu Yunwen (December 5, 1377 -?) was the second emperor of the Ming Dynasty, with the reign name 'Jianwen', and the grandson of Ming Taizu Zhu Yuanzhang. Because his uncle Zhu Di, King of Yan, launched the Jingnan Rebellion and attacked Yingtian Mansion in the capital, which was the founder of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yunwen's whereabouts are unknown. <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%BB%BA%E6%96%87%E5%B8%9D>

Thus, the wrestling sport of ‘fighting against the sky and avoiding disasters’ evolved into a cultural practice that emphasizes harmony and etiquette, reflecting the significance of national integration.

4.2. The Sacred Function of “One Wrestling to Determine the Outcome” In Social Conflicts: Promoting Social Stability and Harmony

Within social conflicts, the sacred function of ‘one wrestling to determine the outcome’ promoted social stability and harmony. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Yi population experienced growth, migration expanded, and geographical constraints led to traffic congestion. Consequently, the Yi people's ancestral concepts gradually blurred, and the notion of clan cohesion strengthened. Thus, the ancestral worship observed in ancient times and during the Han and Tang Dynasties transitioned into clan ancestral spirit worship in the Ming and Qing eras. This evolution involved a belief that ancestral spirits of their respective clans exclusively safeguarded their descendants, with all clan matters subject to the control of these ancestral spirits (Xu Ming, 1990)^[xxvi]. According to the records of ‘Puznanz’¹³, one of the Yi classics preserved through generations by Bimo, it states: ‘The ancestors of the family protect the livestock, and the livestock thrive; the ancestors of the family protect the crops, and the houses are filled with food. When the children and grandchildren are in the world, the ancestors of the family protect them’ (Ma Tingzhong, 2000)^[xxvii]. Hence, the original ‘wrestling’ sport of the Yi people, aimed at praying for ‘the continuity of the race’ and ‘eliminating filth and disasters’, has acquired additional functions of ‘praying for a good harvest’ and ‘predicting good or bad harvests’. According to ‘Xundian Fuzhi - Customs’¹⁴, a Yunnan local chronicle written by Wang Shangyong in the 29th year of Jiajing (1550), it records: ‘(Yi people) kill animals to worship their ancestors on June 24th. At night, they tie up torches with high poles, and use light and darkness to gain harvest. Men use their strength to those who fight with each other are said to Sibayao (wrestling).’ In the eyes of the Yi people, the winner, endowed with ‘divine power’ by the ‘ancestral spirit of the family’, is believed to ensure a better harvest in the village the following year (Kunio Yanagida, 2010)^[xxviii]. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Yi people's aspiration shifted from reliance on heroes from other villages for protection to a desire for victory for their own village. The ‘wrestling’ competition at the ‘Torch Festival’ evolved from a symbolic ‘performance program’ to a competitive ‘wrestling event’. Participants engaged in wrestling techniques like ‘grabbing each other's belts’ and holding each other's shoulders. Moreover, they established the refereeing method of ‘one wrestling determines the outcome’. This method, known as ‘landing at the third point, being picked up by the opponent, and spinning three times’, became the criterion for victory or defeat (Zhu Wenxu, 2002)^[xxix].

The ‘wrestling’ competition held at the Torch Festival is typically presided over by Bimo, a highly respected ‘intermediary between humans and gods’, transforming it into a ‘sacred competition’ under divine supervision (Zhang Weidai, 1990)^[xxx]. With a certain degree of ‘divine judgment’, this event serves as a mechanism for resolving disputes, such as mountain forest conflicts or turf battles between different villages, such as in the Yi nationality in Liangshan area. When a clear determination cannot be reached, the involved parties resort to ‘wrestling’ to settle the matter, where ‘one wrestling match determines the outcome’. The principle of ‘the winner is right, the loser is wrong’ stems from divine judgment. Consequently, both parties wholeheartedly accept the outcome of the match as it originates from ‘god’ rather than human decision-making (Figure 6). In an era marked by harsh external conditions and scarce natural resources, the Yi people's method of ‘one wrestling match determines the outcome’ may not have been the fairest or most rational decision-making approach. Nevertheless, within a specific historical context, it effectively curbed conflicts between different villages to some extent. The prevalence of large-scale ‘military fighting’ over survival resources was undoubtedly detrimental to Yi society's stability and harmony. This wrestling-based conflict resolution mechanism positively impacted and held political significance for maintaining societal cohesion.



Figure 6. Wrestling activities in Liangshan Yi area.

¹³ one of the Yi classics, it has been preserved from generation to generation by Bimo.
<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%92%92%E5%B0%BC%E4%BA%BA>

¹⁴ unnan local chronicles written by Wang Shangyong in the 29th year of Jiajing (1550).

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b4/%EF%BC%88%E5%98%89%E9%9D%96%EF%BC%89%E5%B0%8B%E7%94%B8%E5%BA%9C%E5%BF%97_-_E5%98%89%E9%9D%96%E4%BA%8C%E5%8D%81%E4%B9%9D%E5%B9%B4_281550%29.pdf

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b4/%EF%BC%88%E5%98%89%E9%9D%96%EF%BC%89%E5%B0%8B%E7%94%B8%E5%BA%9C%E5%BF%97_-_E5%98%89%E9%9D%96%E4%BA%8C%E5%8D%81%E4%B9%9D%E5%B9%B4_281550%29.pdf

In ancient Chinese villages, where civilization was still developing, civil conflicts were often resolved through sheer numbers and physical strength. Generally, the side with a significantly larger group held the advantage in disputes. However, the ancient Yi people had a different approach to conflict resolution: they believed that "one wrestling match determines the outcome." This method offered unique advantages compared to the traditional reliance on force and numbers.

The first point is to eliminate the advantage of numbers. To ensure fairness in the competition between the two villages, each village should select one player to represent them, regardless of their population size. This way, the village with more residents does not gain an advantage, and the village with fewer residents does not suffer a disadvantage. By having only one player represent each village, the impact of population size is removed, making the match more equitable.

The second point is to ignore weight differences. While weight is certainly important in wrestling matches, it should not overshadow the form of competition established by the wrestlers chosen by each village. The weight classes for each player are determined by their respective villages, according to rules agreed upon by both sides. Thus, the outcome of the match should not be questioned due to any disparities in the wrestlers' weights.

The third point is that the rule of "one wrestling match decides the outcome" reduces the duration of the competition. The primary purpose of the wrestling match is to resolve conflicts between the villages, so a quick resolution is more effective in settling disputes.

Finally, the contest is overseen and judged by the chief of the Yi nationality and the respected sacrificial officiant known as the "Bimo." By having the esteemed Bimo serve as the judge, both parties demonstrate their respect for the competition and their commitment to resolving their differences honestly. Regardless of the outcome, the presence of the Bimo as the presiding authority ensures that, even if one side has objections, both parties must accept and respect the final decision. This reflects their reverence for the "fire God" and their respect for the Bimo, underscoring the fairness of the competition.

Thus, the method of "wrestling" to resolve disputes and contradictions among people reflects the ancient wisdom of the Yi people. The conflict between the two villages is transformed into a one-on-one match between two individuals. This shift minimizes the chaos that arises from large-scale fighting, allowing for better control of village disputes and reducing overall damage to both sides. In their conflict resolutions, the Yi people prefer "wrestling" over "fencing," contrasting with the Western gentlemen who fight with swords. They do not resort to using firearms, despite China being the inventor of gunpowder and some ethnic minorities in southwest China having long been acquainted with firearms. Instead, the Yi approach aims to minimize harm, focusing on safety and avoiding threats to life. This method seeks to reduce damage between the two villages and prevent animosity from arising. The Yi religious leader, known as Bimo, acts as an arbitrator to resolve civil disputes between different villages. He employs a method where two individuals compete in a wrestling match to determine the outcome. This practice reflects the ancient wisdom of the Yi people. Although the rules and methods of this competition can lead to some uncertainty regarding the final result, they help prevent violent confrontations between villages. Rather than escalating conflicts and deepening hatred within the community, this approach fosters peace and promotes social harmony among the villages.

In today's world, resolving conflicts and disputes between countries, regions, and nations through sports rather than war can significantly reduce unnecessary sacrifices and bloodshed. Therefore, the ancient Yi people's practice of solving community issues through "wrestling" holds practical relevance for our society today.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Discussion

Wrestling, an ancient sports event among the Yi people, intertwines with their cultural heritage, particularly intertwined with their 'fire' culture. It holds a significant place in important ceremonies such as 'Fire God Worship', 'Ancestor Sacrifice', and the traditional festival known as the 'Torch Festival', each occasion serving as a platform for its display with distinct social significance. Despite its historical importance, scholarly attention to the role of wrestling in fostering ethnic harmony and shaping the relationship between local and central governments has been limited. By exploring the role of wrestling in Yi culture, the research sheds light on previously overlooked aspects of ethnic harmony and governance. It is worth noting that cultural anthropology, which investigates human cultures primarily through ethnography, plays a vital role in this endeavor. Ethnography serves as both a research method and the resulting scholarly work, often manifesting as monographs or books¹⁵. Given the fragmented nature of historical documentation pertaining to the Yi people and the slower pace of development in Yi society, which has preserved many ancient folk activities in contemporary times, researchers have often turned to Han historical records for relevant information. Juxtaposing historical data with observations from current Yi folk festivals and activities reveals the evolution of wrestling across different historical periods. This evolution highlights various social significances, ranging from the expression of natural instinct in ancient times, to the embodiment of simplicity and pragmatism during the era of 'Jimi' and chieftains, and finally, to the manifestation of sacred politics during the period of 'Gaitu Guiliu'.

5.2. Conclusion

'Fire' holds profound significance in the annals of human civilization, revered and worshipped by cultures across the globe. In the southwestern reaches of China, the Yi people have enshrined 'fire' as a central deity, a testament to their intimate relationship with this element forged through their rugged natural environment and primal religious convictions. Integral to both their daily lives and productive endeavors, fire has evolved into a cultural emblem for the Yi, defining them as a people deeply rooted in the flames of tradition. Throughout Yi history, numerous legends have been woven around the theme of fire, none more prominent than the tale of the 'human strongman' grappling with the divine on the 24th of June. This legend forms the cornerstone of the Torch Festival, the Yi people's paramount traditional celebration, where 'wrestling' stands as the quintessential folk sport,

¹⁵ [<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%BA%BA%E7%B1%BB%E5%AD%A6>]

cherished by generations. Across epochs, the sport of ‘wrestling’ has borne varying social significances, reflecting the evolution of Yi society and culture.

In ancient times, within the framework of the matriarchal society, the Yi people intricately intertwined the practices of ‘fire worship’ and ‘ancestor worship’ through a ritualistic concept known as ‘reproductive worship’. This ritual, characterized by movements such as ‘kinking, rolling, and wrestling’, symbolized the reverence for ancestral lineage and the perpetuation of the Yi race. Through these symbolic actions, the Yi sought to convey their acknowledgment of their forebears’ potent reproductive prowess, thereby embracing the inherent significance of ensuring ‘racial continuity’ as dictated by natural instinct.

During the era of ‘Jimi’ and chieftain rule, marked by the central government’s implementation of a ‘restraint’ policy, a unique governance system known as the ‘ghost master system’ emerged among the Yi people. This system, characterized by a principle of ‘Yi people governing Yi’, afforded local autonomy to remote ethnic minority regions. Within this socio-political landscape, the Yi people intertwined the veneration of the God of Fire with the ancestral reverence directed towards tribal chiefs. This fusion gave rise to a form of ‘wrestling’ imbued with spiritual significance, termed as ‘scuffles between humans and gods’. In this ritualistic practice, which unfolded within the framework of beliefs in ghosts and deities, the Yi people showcased their reverence for both divine entities and ancestral figures. Through the act of willingly ‘losing the game’, they expressed profound respect and sought the protective blessings of these revered beings. This cultural phenomenon reflects the Yi people’s ethos of logical thinking and embodies the simple yet profound notions of ‘retreating to advance’ and ‘sacrificing to gain’.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, as part of their governance strategy, the central authorities implemented a policy of ‘returning native lands to locals’ in ethnic minority regions. Within this context, the traditional sport of ‘wrestling’ among the Yi people acquired political significance, symbolizing the fostering of mutual understanding between the Yi and Han ethnic groups and promoting ethnic harmony. Under the guidance of Bimo, the respected intermediary between humans and gods, a system was established where the outcome of a wrestling match would determine the resolution of civil disputes. Through the principle of ‘one fall would determine victory’, disputes were settled, and the notion of ‘winner is right, loser is wrong’ prevailed. This method of conflict resolution, grounded in the revered tradition of wrestling, served as an invisible force for maintaining stability and harmony within Yi society. It underscored the sacred political significance of wrestling as a sport, embodying the principles of justice, arbitration, and societal cohesion.

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