



## Mangye sets off in search of grain

*Bouyei People – China and Vietnam*

A long, long time ago, the Bouyei People had no cereals with which to sustain themselves, so they just fed on the meat of the animals they hunted and on the bark of certain trees.

However, a woman who had just given birth in a village had a very unusual dream. In the dream, which she recounted to everyone in the village, an old man with a long beard told her that, in the far west, there was a sacred cave in which mountains of rice, millet and wheat seeds were hidden. The trouble was, the old man said, that getting hold of some of the seeds would not be easy. Whoever dared to go in search of them would have to face massive risks and dangers that could lead to death.

The day came when game began to be scarce, and the idea that perhaps someone would have to set out in search of the mysterious cave with its wondrous treasure of grain began to spread through the village. The villagers tossed around the names of those they thought might have a chance of success in this endeavour, but nobody seemed willing to risk their life for the sake of their village and future generations.

It was then that a slender, handsome-looking young man, called Mangye, remarked to a group of villagers that he was willing to go in search of the grain. At first, they did not listen to him.

‘You’re too young,’ they told him, ‘and you don’t have the strength and powerful build of a warrior. You couldn’t even overcome the dangers of such a long journey.’

But Mangye was not put off by their arguments. He might not have the size and strength of a warrior, but he had other resources and skills that, he was sure, could compensate for mere physical strength.

‘Let me go,’ he said, ‘I can do it!’

And so he insisted, day after day, week after week. In the end the villagers, gathered in assembly, said:

‘All right, let him try.’

Not waiting a day longer, Mangye began preparations for the journey, while everyone in the village helped him. In order to carry the seeds of grain, his mother wove him a sturdy sack made of mulberry bark fibre, while the families prepared a good supply of preserved wild boar meat so that he could have enough food for the journey. The younger men went in search of the best possible horse for such a hazardous undertaking, and found an excellent amber-handled, sharp-edged dagger for him, while the girls presented him with coloured ribbons and silk sachets. Some of them even sang a popular song for him so that he would not forget his people and his land.

Finally, the day of departure arrived. All his neighbours in the village accompanied him along the road for a long way, offering him their advice and whispering their best wishes. And, with the sun behind him, Mangye finally climbed onto his horse and bade farewell to everyone, slowly riding off into the distance towards the west.

For the first seven days and seven nights, Mangye traveled ninety-nine mountainsides and ninety-nine peaks, traversing a myriad of dark and uncertain forests, populated by snakes, tigers, wolves and leopards. But he made it through these terrains and forests safely. However, after fourteen days and fourteen nights, he had finished his supply of wild boar meat, and his horse was beginning to show signs of serious fatigue.

Still, Mangye was not disheartened. When hunger was pressing, he foraged for wild fruits in the forest, and when the horse seemed to falter under his weight, he dismounted and walked the trail on foot, at his side.

The weeks went by, with no clue as to the whereabouts of the marvellous grain cave, until one day hungry and exhausted, he came upon a peach tree. Not thinking twice, he climbed up into the branches

of the tree, shook it and caused five huge golden peaches to drop at its feet. He then satisfied his voracious appetite. He ate so much that, in the end and almost without realising it, he fell asleep at the foot of the generous tree.

In his dream, he suddenly saw – and who could have guessed it – the old man with the long beard who had once appeared in dreams to the young mother of his village. From afar he saw him walking, leading a beautiful white horse by the reins, and accompanied by a dog. When he reached the peach tree, the old man said to Mangye:

‘Bold young man, you look exhausted. May I ask where you are going?’

‘Sir,’ replied Mangye, ‘I’m going in search of a sacred cave in the far west, where, they say, there are mountains of rice, millet and wheat. My people do not yet know how to grow grain, and we are sometimes hungry when game is scarce.’

And, lowering his head in exhaustion he added, almost in a whisper:

‘All I’m seeking, sir, is to give a better life to my people and to the generations that will come after us.’

The old man seemed to commiserate with him.

‘I see that you’re bold, and that love for your people moves your soul and your legs,’ said the old man. ‘The journey you’ve undertaken is a dangerous one. Do you really think you can come out of it safely?’

‘No matter how many dangers I may face on my path,’ Mangye replied, ‘as long as I have breath left, I’ll seek and find the cave and return with the grain to my village.’

‘Well,’ the old man muttered, seeing the boy’s determination, ‘since you’re determined to help your people, and there’s nothing that seems to divert you from your purpose, I’ll help you.’

The old man turned in the direction from which he had come and, pointing to the horizon, said to Mangye:

‘Follow this path for thirty days, until you come to a large tree, a ginkgo tree. Here you’ll see a turtle dove nest and, in the nest, you’ll find an egg. Crack open the egg and you’ll find a key inside it, which you must take with you to the cave. Then, at the foot of the ginkgo, you’ll find a hole. You must reach into it, fearlessly, until you come across the hilt of a sword. Pull it out and take it with you, for with it you can defend yourself against all kinds of monsters, beasts and demons.’

‘With the key and the sword in safe keeping, you must continue your journey for another thirty days, until you reach the banks of the Red River. In that river there lives a dragon that raises great waves to prevent anyone from crossing its waters. But you’ll see that, not far from the shore, there is a stone ox. Take a bunch of snake jasmine<sup>1</sup> and hold it in front of his mouth. When you see the stone ox open his mouth to eat the jasmine, put your hand inside his belly and you’ll find a bow and a quiver of arrows. Pull it out and shoot an arrow into the river. The dragon will have no choice but to fall asleep and calm the waters.’

‘Once you have crossed the river with your key, your sword, your bow and your arrows,’ continued the old man, ‘you’ll have to travel another thirty days until you meet the Mountain of Fire. But do not be afraid. In front of the mountain rises a red rock. You’ll see a large crack running through it. Reach into the crack and you’ll find a fan. Then head towards the mountain and wave the fan in front of you. You’ll see a path open up through the middle of the mountain, which you’ll be able to cross safely. Once you’ve reached the other side of Fire Mountain, you’ll come across the sacred grain cave.’

The old man was silent for a few moments then, looking compassionately at the young man, added:

‘Come on! Let’s go! Let us exchange our horses, since mine can go five hundred miles in a day. And you’ll take my dog with you,’ he added, ‘she’ll be very useful to you in due time.’

And with no further word, the old man vanished into Mangye’s dream. When Mangye opened his eyes, he was amazed to see that his horse was gone and, in its place, was the old man's white horse and his dog.

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<sup>1</sup> *Rhinacanthus nasutus*.



Closing his eyes for a moment, so as not to forget any of the instructions given to him by the old man with the long beard, Mangye felt his strength returning and got up, ready to continue the search.

Thirty days later he came across a huge ginkgo tree with its branches swaying over a cliff. Following the old man's instructions, he climbed the tree until he found the turtle dove nest and, in it, an egg. He cracked the egg and, within it, he found the key he had been told he would find.

'I already have the key to the cave,' he said to himself.

Pocketing it in one of the silk pouches that the village girls had woven for him, he climbed down from the tree and, without a moment's hesitation, reached into a hollow at the foot of the ginkgo tree. He soon caressed the leather handle of a sword and, pulling it out of the hollow, slipped it into his belt and continued on his journey.

For the next thirty days, Mangye had to pass through dense, dark forests populated by all kinds of wild beasts. He had to defend himself against them with his prodigious sword until, finally, he reached the banks of a river of reddish waters. As he was about to put his foot in its waters, a gigantic wave almost snatched him from the shore and, almost swept him to the bottom of the river.

'This must be the Red River which the old man spoke of,' he said to himself.

Remembering the old man's directions, he searched the bank for the stone ox that would enable him to overcome the new obstacle. It did not take him long to find it and, plucking a clump of snake jasmine, he set off resolutely towards the ox.

When shown the bunch of jasmine the stone ox suddenly came to life and opened its mouth to gulp down the tasty morsel. At that moment, with the speed of a snake, Mangye reached in and pulled out the bow and quiver of arrows from his belly. Giving the ox the bunch of jasmine as a reward, Mangye headed towards the river again and shot an arrow from his bow. As soon as the arrow hit the waters, they calmed down as if by enchantment, so he climbed back on his horse and, with the dog in his arms, crossed the Red River safely.

For the next thirty days, Mangye felt the heat becoming more and more oppressive. Then he found the cause of the strange rise in temperature as he stepped out of a humid, sweltering jungle, suddenly encountering the Mountain of Fire.

Realising that he was very near the goal of his journey, he located the red rock in front of the mountain which the old man had spoken about in his dream. He approached it and, thrusting his hand into the huge crevice that dissected it from one end to the other, he found a white-coloured fan. Mounting his horse again, and with the dog in his arms, he rode towards the mountain, waving the fan in front of him. Then, to his surprise, a long, winding, fire-free path opened before them!

Reaching the end of the path, on the other side of the mountain, Mangye finally found the sacred cave of the far west. He had reached his longed-for destination. But, after alighting from his horse and, as he approached the entrance of the cave reaching for the key in the silk pouch, two great cave gods approached him from either side. One was red-faced and carried two huge axes in his hands. The other, with a black face, wielded a gigantic sword.

‘Where do you think you’re going, you wretched mortal?’ The black-faced god challenged him.

Mangye did not shy away from the two huge gods, but neither did he intend to challenge them. Calmly, with all the courtesy he could muster in such a tense situation, he replied to both gods:

‘I come on behalf of my people in search of grain, of rice, millet and wheat, in order to satisfy the hunger of my people when game is scarce in our region. I beg you, sirs, to allow me to take a few handfuls of these grains, and I’ll not trouble you again with my presence.’

‘Our cereals are not for mortals,’ the red-faced god said scornfully. ‘You’re leaving now, or else we’ll kill you.’

Mangye humbly insisted that he be allowed to take a few handfuls of grain for his people, but the two gods seemed not to listen to any reason, becoming increasingly annoyed and beginning to brandish their weapons menacingly.

Finally, when Mangye insisted for the third time that he be allowed to take some grain, the black-faced god brutally lunged at him with his huge, sharp blade. Mangye only had time to draw his sword from his belt and parry the fatal blow that was aimed at his head. The ginkgo sword saved his life, but it shattered under the god's crushing blow. Throwing down the shattered weapon, Mangye decided to defend himself with his bow and arrows, but he had left them on his horse, which the red-faced god was blocking with his axes.

Wielding the amber-hilted dagger that his neighbours in the village had procured for him, Mangye tried his best to defend himself against the two huge gods. Dodging their slashes and lunges, he had to resort to his great agility and speed of movement, slipping between them and sometimes even between their legs. In the end he felt lost, with a god on either side of him about to launch their final blows at him.

Mangye, not giving up, waited for the two gods to launch their attack which was precisely aimed at severing his head from his shoulders. And when both gods brandished their weapons with a triumphant smile, Mangye dropped to his knees as the long-bearded old man's dog lunged at the back of the red-faced god's neck, sending him toppling forward.

And so, as the blade of the sword of one and the axe of the other passed over Mangye, the two gods slashed and tore each other's bellies. A second later, Mangye, huddled on the ground watched, out of the corner of his eyes, as the two gods fell dead on either side of him.

Relieved to find himself still alive, Mangye did not stop to celebrate his good fortune, but hurried into the cave. Suddenly he came upon a second door, and before he could put his hand on the knob, a tiger pounced on him from a high rock, knocking him to the ground. But, fortunately, before he realised what had happened, the old man's dog came to his aid again. She clamped her strong jaws around the feline's throat and, no matter how hard it tried to escape, the dog's fatal bite, it soon lay limp on the ground.

After passing the second door and venturing further into the cave, Mangye and the dog encountered a third portal. This time, a huge stone door was guarded by a giant divine bird who, seeing the dog baring her teeth and growling ferociously, did not dare to descend from his perch.

Mangye pushed the stone door in his search for the grain, but it did not swing open. He then remembered the key and, finding it among the silk sachets, took it out and inserted it in the keyhole ...

The door opened ... and a spectacular scene unfolded before them! Mountains and mountains of grain, of rice, millet and wheat was piled up everywhere in the immense grotto. The grain itself seemed to illuminate the cavern with a soft golden glow. Without pausing to think about this wonder, Mangye took out the bag of mulberry bark fibres that his mother had woven for him and went into the hall followed by the dog, ready to fill the bag with as much grain as he could fit into it. But just as he had filled it, and was about to leave the cave, the sound of flapping behind the door made him fear that something terrible might happen. Sure enough, a second later, the huge stone door slammed shut in front of him and the dog, making them prisoners in the grain cave.

In vain Mangye tried to open the door. Not even with the key could he open it from the inside. Then, suddenly, a fleeting intuition flashed through his mind: 'What if I turn the key the other way?'

Mangye finally managed to open the door and escape and was able to open the other two doors in the same way until he was out in the open again with his precious treasure and accompanied by the old man's valuable and beloved dog. Riding the white horse again, Mangye started on his way back home.

But the setbacks were not over for them.

The Mountain of Fire seemed to be raging, spewing flames and massive boulders from its slopes, and causing the fan's magic to falter greatly. It took them a whole day and night to cross that fiery mountain. And something similar happened when they reached the Red River, since the dragon seemed equally enraged and the river was even more tumultuous than before. Mangye shot the arrow, but it failed to affect the dragon. He shot a second arrow but it had no effect either. Only when he shot the third arrow did the dragon fall asleep and the waters subside, but unfortunately the bow broke.

Still, he managed to reach the towering ginkgo tree, and then the peach tree where he had met the old man in his dreams, and for weeks



he managed to evade the dangers of the dark woods with their wild beasts and mishaps.

However, with only nine days and nine nights left to reach his village, Mangye felt that his strength, and that of his horse, were coming to an end.

With a final effort, he hung the bag of seeds around the dog's neck, seeing that she still had the strength to continue on her way. He also hung the silk ribbons and sachets of silk that the girls of the village had given him around her neck and, giving her a light pat on the back, instructed her to deliver the grain on his behalf.

As soon as the dog had vanished over the horizon in an easterly direction, Mangye collapsed on the ground next to his horse. The bold young man would not make it back home to his mother and his neighbours, to the girls who had sung him their songs.

After nine days and nine nights of dodging dangers, evading snakes and wild beasts, finding her way in the darkness of the woods, the dog finally arrived at the village with her precious treasure. At first, the villagers were happy but, when they saw the silk ribbons and sachets around the dog's neck, they began to worry.

They sent out a party of men in search of Mangye, but when they found him, both he and his horse were dead. They carried his body back to the village and, at his funeral, performed the ceremony of 'opening the road', accompanying his body to the grave with drum and horn music.

Mangye had given his life for the welfare and happiness of his people and their future generations, and this is why, to this day, he is remembered for his extraordinary sacrifice. And the old man's courageous dog is also remembered for, when the Bouyei people harvest rice in July and August, they offer the first fruits of the harvest to their dogs as a sign of gratitude. □

Adapted by Grian Cutanda and Xueping Luo (2022).

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## Comments

Numbering less than three million, the Bouyei people are found, mainly, in the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau in China and appear to be the original inhabitants of these regions. There is evidence of their presence there dating back more than two thousand years.

Studies suggest that the Zhuang and Bouyei Peoples have a common origin in the ancient Louyue People. Already, during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) the Zhuang and Bouyei were considered to be a unique people, being labelled as the "alien barbarians". It would be after this date that what we now know as the Zhuang People would settle in a different region and the two cultures would take separate paths, although they both belonged, linguistically and culturally, to the Tai Peoples, of which the Bouyei are the northernmost group.

The Bouyei culture is an eminently oral culture. In fact, since their literacy came quite late, their oral tradition has great richness and depth. It is notable not only for its traditional stories, fairy tales and fables, but also for its proverbs and songs, which use analogies, metaphors, rhymes, images and alliterations (Snyder, 1998). From the traditional wisdom of its hundreds of proverbs, we could perhaps single out three that are certainly striking, such as «Eating well is not as good as living well» (ibid., p. 66), which conveys the wise idea that happiness and hedonism need not go hand in hand; «You don't eat pork, but you see a pig walking» (ibid., p. 67), or, in other words, just because you haven't done something before that doesn't mean you can't see what needs to be done and do it; and «Only when the river has water will the fish stay and make their home, only when the forest has trees will the birds stay and make their home» (ibid., p. 79), a proverb of ecological wisdom conveying the idea, from generation to generation, that survival can only take place within a support system.

The Bouyei are renowned for their traditional songs which they use on the occasion of celebrations or social situations, so we can find songs of welcome to guests, songs of mourning, work, marriage, as well as songs of farewell, such as the ones offered by the girls to Mangye in the story. For example, at weddings young men and women are invited to sing peculiar antiphons while, in the mountains of Biandan, old women are invited to sing songs of blessing by the fire. These are songs that can go

on for days and nights and up to a week, without repeating their lyrics. (China Internet Information Center, 2006).

## Sources

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## Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble: Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

## Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- P4c. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

The Way Forward: Every individual, family, organization, and community has a vital role to play.