

The Polytheistic Tradition of Chu: A Distinct Faith Misunderstood as Shamanism: Based on Qu Yuan's Chu Ci

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Abstract: This paper examines the beliefs of the Chu region during China's Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods as depicted in Qu Yuan's Chu Ci. It challenges the common view that these beliefs are a form of shamanism and argues that the Chu religion centered on "Wu" is a unique polytheistic tradition integrated with political, social, and cultural elements. The paper analyzes the definitions and characteristics of shamanism, the relationship between Chu's "Wu" culture and shamanism, and the features of Chu's polytheistic belief system, including rich mythology, ancestor worship, sacrificial rituals, music and dance, and divination. It concludes that Chu's religion is a sophisticated and multifaceted polytheistic faith that cannot be simply equated with shamanism.

1. Introduction

The beliefs of the Chu region during China's Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, as depicted in Qu Yuan's Chu Ci, have often been categorized as a form of shamanism. However, this view, may oversimplify the complexity of Chu religious practices, which could better be described as a unique faith system. This paper argues that the Chu religion, centered on the concept of "Wu", should not be equated with shamanism but instead recognized as a distinct polytheistic tradition deeply integrated with political, social, and cultural elements.

2. Defining Shamanism

(1) Origins and characteristics of shamanism

The terms "shaman" and "shamanism" are believed to have originated from the Tungus people of Siberia [1]. Over time, "shamanism" has come to be used in English as a generalized term for early beliefs involving the worship of supernatural powers. The current definition of shamanism emphasizes the spiritual dimension, typically referring to practices where a shaman communicates with spirits or gods while in a trance state [1].

To define a faith as shamanistic, it must have a representative, or shaman, who enters an altered or trance state to communicate with spirits or gods and receive the desired guidance or feedback for the community. The essence of shamanism lies in this communication, which often requires a shift in the individual's spiritual or mental state. Mircea Eliade argues that shamanism represents the oldest form of religious practice in human history, marked by evolutionary and primitivist ideas [2].

(2) Debates on whether shamanism is a religion or a cultural phenomenon

Debates continue about whether shamanism should be defined strictly as a religion, or whether it is better understood as a cultural phenomenon with spiritual aspects. Most scholars currently translate the "Wu" culture by drawing parallels to shamanic practices of spiritual communication and transmission. Consequently, they often use the term "Shamanism" to describe "Wu" beliefs.

The study of shamanism and shamanic culture in China primarily relies on field surveys of the nomadic peoples of northern China. There are different categories of shamans: some are responsible only for conducting rituals and performing sacred arts, while others also engage in healing practices for their people [2]. In the Chinese context, religions that can be classified as shamanistic typically align with clan-based rituals practiced by nomadic groups. Additionally, Chinese scholars define shamanism to include animism, which encompasses the belief in the immortality of the soul and the presence of spirits in all elements of nature. Essential features of shamanism in China also involve specific rituals, costumes, magical objects, and a unique social status attributed to the shaman [3]. These elements collectively define shamanism in the Chinese context.

Some Chinese scholars further categorize shamanism based on geographical and cultural distributions. In a narrow sense, it refers to the religious practices of ethnic groups that speak Altaic languages. In a broader sense, it includes the nomadic peoples of northern Eurasia, and in the broadest sense, it is viewed as a primitive religion [4]. The English literature cited in this paper generally interprets shamanism from this broad perspective and treats it as a cultural phenomenon.

(3) Differences in definitions between English-speaking and Chinese scholars

The definitions of shamanism are different. Most English-speaking scholars define shamanism primarily based on its spiritual aspects, emphasizing that the state of spiritual trance or communication with spirits is what characterizes shamanism. In contrast, Chinese scholars argue that shamanism requires several social conditions: a clan-based structure, a central set of beliefs or concepts, and distinct ritual practices. This difference in definitions has led English-speaking scholars to use the term "shamanism" to directly reference ancient Chinese religions, which may not align with the more specific Chinese understanding of the term.

3. Chu's "Wu" Culture and Shamanism

(1) Translation of "Wu" as shamanism in some works

Take the culture of the Chu region in China during the Spring and Autumn Period as an example. In the book *The Shaman and the Heresiarch: A New Interpretation of the Li Sao*, the term "Wu" is translated directly into "shamanism," using the English concept of a shamanic practitioner as a reference point. This translation is based on the belief that "Wu" involves communication with spirits, which is a key characteristic of shamanism in the context [5]. Indeed, there is evidence of communication with ghosts in Chu culture. For example, Qu Yuan wrote the song *Inviting the Spirits*, which includes the line, "Oh spirit, return; mourn for the South of the Yangtze." This is an invocation of the ghost of King Huai of Chu and a lamentation for the state of Chu [6]. This shows that, at least in terms of summoning and communicating with spirits, Chu culture had elements that could be viewed as shamanistic.

(2) The diverse meanings of "Wu" from a Chinese perspective

However, from a Chinese perspective, the meaning of "Wu" is more diverse and not limited to spirit communication. According to the *Shuowen Jiezi*, the character "Wu" is primarily derived from depictions of women dancing during early rituals to summon deities. The term was often combined with "Zhu" to form "Wu Zhu," which referred to individuals responsible for performing rituals in ancient Chinese religious culture [7]. Thus, the Chinese character "Wu" can also be interpreted as originating from acts of sacrifice. Relic suggests that "Wu" reflects the ritualistic loss of physical

control experienced by practitioners during ancient Chinese rituals, which he uses as a basis to classify these beliefs as a form of shamanism [8]. However, this interpretation focuses mainly on one aspect of "Wu" and does not capture its broader cultural and religious significance.

4. Features of Chu's Polytheistic Belief System

(1) Mythology and Gods

First, it is clear that the Chu region placed great importance on "Wu" and that Chu culture itself was characterized by a polytheistic belief system. During the Chu period, there was already a well-developed system of mythology, as reflected in the works of Qu Yuan. For example, in Chu mythology, the deity in charge of the sun is called Dong Jun, and the goddess of the mountains is known as Shan Gui. For instance, in the chapter "Shan Gui," a human male falls in love with the goddess of the mountain, but they are ultimately unable to meet again. Qu Yuan writes: "In the mountains lives a person, ... When my lord thinks of me, his doubts arise." and "The wind whistles through the trees, ... I am filled with sorrow in vain," expressing the goddess's longing and sorrow over unfulfilled love [6]. This depiction shows that gods in Chu culture are conceived with human-like emotions, experiencing love and the sadness of loss, much like the gods in Greek mythology who possess desires and emotions. This humanization of gods further underscores the polytheistic nature of Chu religion.

Chu people worshipped a diverse range of gods, and their conceptions of these deities were heavily influenced by human experiences and emotions. The main deity of the Chu people, "Tai Yi," associated with the sun and creation, is particularly noteworthy. Among the texts unearthed from the Chu region during the Warring States period is a work found in the *Guo Dian Chu Jian* collection, which the compiler has titled "Tai Yi Sheng Shui." This ancient text suggests that Tai Yi created water as the primordial source, which then supports and nourishes all other forms of life [9]. Many Chinese scholars speculate that Tai Yi is related to the "Dao" in Taoism. For example, Guo Moruo, in his work "Progress in the Pre-Qin Dynasty's View of the Way of Heaven," suggests that Tai Yi corresponds to the "Great Oneness" mentioned in Laozi or the concept of "Dao" itself [9]. From this, it can be inferred that the gods in the Chu people's faith were conceived through a combination of indigenous beliefs and external philosophical influences.

(2) Ancestor Worship

Not only were the names of gods recorded in Qu Yuan's *Nine Songs*, but the Chu people also practiced ancestor worship. I am a descendant of the Emperor Gao Yang, and my revered father was called Bo Yong. In this sentence, "Emperor Gao Yang" refers to Zhuan Xu [6]. Additional evidence linking Gao Yang and Zhuan Xu comes from the excavated Xin Cai Ge Ling Chu Jian. Chinese scholar Dong Shan interprets one of the bamboo slips, numbered Jia-3 11, 2, to read "In the past, my ancestors originated from Zhuanxu.," meaning that the Chu people believed they were descendants of Zhuan Xu. The tomb where these bamboo slips were found belonged to a nobleman of the state of Chu, Ping Ye Jun Cheng, who lived between approximately 443 and 398 B.C. [9]. Since Qu Yuan lived from around 343 B.C. to 278 B.C., this indicates that Zhuan Xu was already regarded as an ancestor by the Chu nobility before Qu Yuan's time.

This shows that the early Chu people traced their ancestry to real historical figures or entities, not just mythical beings. Although there is not enough archaeological evidence to prove the existence of the Three Kings and Five Emperors, the Chu people clearly had a concept of human origins, tracing their lineage back to significant ancestors. Over time, this human-centered ancestry, combined with elements from nature (like the sun, rivers, and mountains), evolved and became integrated into the philosophical thinking of ancient China during the pre-Qin period. Thus, the final composition of the Chu belief system included both gods and ghosts.

(3) Sacrificial Rituals

While Chinese scholars agree that the concepts of shamanism and polytheism can coexist, it is important to note that the "Wu" culture practiced by the ancient Chinese, including the Chu people, cannot be fully explained by shamanism alone. Shamanic communication with spirits is only one aspect of "Wu". Gao Guopan divides "Wu" into three main categories: First, Supernatural powers, such as the Chinese doctrine of the five elements; Second, primitive divine sorcery, where gods serve as carriers; and Fairies and ghosts [10]. In the Chinese definition, one key element of shamanism is that the shaman's primary functions are sacrifice and healing. Therefore, Gao categorizes shamanism under the broader category of exorcising ghosts, as practiced by Manchu shamans who exorcise spirits and heal the sick [10]. Based on Gao's conclusion, "Wu" in the Chinese context is not equivalent to shamanism but encompasses it. Gao argues that "Wu" covers a broader range of meanings than the term "shaman" in Chinese semantics.

Furthermore, if consider the English understanding of shamanism, the religious activities of Chu culture were not limited to spiritual communication with gods or ghosts or to receiving messages in a state of trance. In a broader sense, under the Chinese understanding, activities like divination, praying for rain, cursing, blessing, avoiding disasters, and observing taboos all fall under the category of "Wu." A major part of this includes ritual culture and divination practices.

The sacrificial rituals in the Chu region were quite similar to those of the Zhou Dynasty, characterized by strict regulations and choices. For example, common animal sacrifices in the Chu region, as well as prepared dishes offered as sacrifices. Additionally, jade was an important item in ancient Chinese rituals. According to the *Book of Rites*, different types of jade were chosen based on color, texture, shape, and function, depending on the specific ritual. For instance, blue jade was used for sky rituals if it was four kyu and two inches in size [9]. Approximately eleven different types of jade were used as ritual objects. In addition to gods, the ancestors of the Chu people were also included in these sacrifices, underscoring the comprehensive nature of their ritual practices.

While there were specific regulations governing the sacrificial objects used in rituals, there were also rules for conducting the sacrificial rites themselves. It is important to note that the "Wu" culture in the Chu region played a significant role in the social and political life of the people. However, the rituals associated with "Wu" culture were not centralized but instead were carried out by various members of society. In a typical ritual, a Wu Xi (wizard, referred to as "Xi" for men and "Wu" for women) was responsible for invoking the gods, positioning them, and determining the specifications of the ritual. The roles of Zhu and Zong were assigned to those who managed the ceremonial aspects [11]. Historical records also indicate that rulers such as King Huai of Chu and King Ling of Chu personally presided over these rituals. This shows that political leaders in Chu were directly involved in both governance and religious ceremonies, with the outcomes of rituals often influenced by those in power. This intertwining of faith and politics will be discussed further later.

The sacrificial rituals of the Chu state have been briefly categorized based on the Chu artifacts excavated so far. However, the specific details of the rituals and the ritual objects used in each category are not clearly documented in the textual evidence. Among the most common ritual practices was "Ju Dao". The term "Ju" is frequently used in poetry and ritual texts to signify sacrifice, but archaeological findings suggest that sacrifices in Chu were varied. It can therefore be inferred that "Ju" was a type of sacrifice accessible to most social classes, primarily involving animal offerings. Another type of sacrifice "Ba Dao", appears less frequently in historical records. Tomb excavations suggest that it was typically performed by high-ranking officials, such as those of the Shi Dafu level or higher. The focus of these prayers was mainly on the ancestors of the tomb owner and occasionally on a small number of gods. Most records of these prayers come from sites in Xin Cai and Tian Xing Guan, which were at the level of the feudal lord [9]. Additionally, there was "Sai Dao", a ritual performed to express gratitude to the gods [9]. These variations in sacrificial practices reflect the class-based structure of ancient Chinese society, as well as a class hierarchy among the gods

worshipped during the Chu period.

Synthesizing the sacrificial acts, methods, and roles in the Chu rituals listed above, can conclude that, even without fully developed religious doctrines or concepts, the Chu people already had a complete belief system. This system included a clear hierarchy of gods and a structured approach to sacrificial practices. The types of sacrifices were differentiated according to the status of the gods and the specific purpose or intention behind the offering. Therefore, the faith of the Chu people was organized and systematic in its execution of rituals.

(4) Music, Dance, and Prayer

The Chinese word "Wu" is defined in the *Shuowen Jiezi* as a ritual act performed by people through dance. However, Ratka Relic interprets "Wu" as reflecting the body's movements when communicating the names of the gods [8]. Based on a large number of musical instruments excavated in Hubei, it is evident that the people of Chu considered music an important part of their rituals. The use of music in prayer, intended to honor the gods, is extensively recorded in unearthed Chu texts, including the *Rites of Zhou* and the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* [9]. Music was often accompanied by dance. For example, in Qu Yuan's *Nine Songs*, there is a description of using music and dance to entertain the gods during rituals: "With a relaxed rhythm, the peaceful song is sung, Flutes and zithers are arranged, and the grand chant resounds. The spirit ... hall." This passage describes an ensemble performance with various musical instruments, while women dance to please the gods [6]. Therefore, it can be concluded that, during Chu rituals, when people prayed to gods, spirits, or ancestors for blessings, they made offerings and used music and dance to entertain these entities, rather than communicating with them through physical convulsions or trance-like states, as suggested by Relic [8]. Of course, rituals were only one aspect of the "Wu" culture of Chu; divination was another key element closely linked to rituals.

(5) Divination and Belief Practice

The distinction between "Wu" and shamanism in Chu culture can also be seen in their practice of divination. Unlike the shamanic tradition, which relies on direct spiritual communication or trance states, divination in ancient China often involved the use of specific tools or objects, such as tortoise shells or divination sticks made from plants, to seek guidance or insights from the spiritual realm. In Chu, there was even an official position specifically for divination, indicating that the person responsible for divination was dedicated solely to this task and not involved in other ritual practices. Artifacts suggest that divination was widespread in the Chu region, with its use and frequency often determined by social status. In some cases, multiple divinations would be performed to provide people with different options to choose from in order to obtain a desired outcome [11]. This reflects that "Wu" was a belief system that functioned practically.

When comparing the definitions of shamanism provided by different scholars, it becomes evident that some scholars often equate "Wu" with shamanism. This is because "Wu" encompasses various rituals, including trance-like states characteristic of shamanism. However, from the perspective of Chinese scholars, the concept of "Wu" encompasses a broader scope than shamanism and can even include shamanistic practices. Examining the rituals of Chu culture reveals that some scholars' understanding of "Wu" may be biased, possibly due to limited data or language differences. Chu culture is inherently polytheistic, drawing from both the human self-image and ancient Chinese philosophical concepts.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Chu religion, or "Wu," represents a sophisticated and multifaceted polytheistic faith that cannot be simply equated with shamanism. It integrates a wide range of spiritual, social, and political elements unique to the Chu state. Therefore, the Western characterization of "Wu" as

shamanism fails to capture its full scope and significance within Chinese history and culture.

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