

## Article

# Shamanic Culture's Reconnection of Earth and Heaven (*Xu Ditian tong*) in the New Era in China: The Dialectical Relationship between Material Civilization and Cultural Intimacy

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**Abstract:** Shamanic culture, which adheres to the worldview of connecting earth and heaven, has been marginalized in the discourse of the modern material world and separated from mainstream society. However, with the increase in personal problems in civil society and the rise of regional cultural identity since the reform and opening up in China, shamanic practitioners have again become active. Adapting to the official ideology, shamanic culture has emerged in China as a new form of folk culture and cultural heritage. Using Michael Herzfeld's theory of "cultural intimacy" to a limited extent, this paper regards the new image of the shamanic tradition that has appeared in the new era as a manifestation of "cultural intimacy", which does not infringe the authority of official discourse, nor damage the interests of government departments, and is in line with the imagination of official discourse about culture. Within the shaman cultural community, the shamanic tradition continues to connect earth and heaven, helping to solve difficult personal problems, alleviating the pressure of the material world, and at the same time making the sacred expression of the members of the shaman cultural community possible. In this way, the shaman tradition, which has emerged in a new image since the new era, has maintained the ecological balance between government and folk practices and formed a more stable pattern of cooperation.



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## 1. Introduction

Shamanism is one of the important cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities in northern China and has been an important part of the collective identity of these groups from ancient times to the present, exemplified especially in the Tungus-Manchu, Mongolian, and Turkic languages. After the founding of the new China, the shamanic beliefs of ethnic minorities along China's border were initially regarded as "cultural dross" and were long prohibited. During the Cultural Revolution, shamanism almost disappeared. After the reform and opening up, with the liberalization of governmental policies, folk shamanic activities were gradually restored. To date, shamanic belief activities have been staged to varying degrees in the folk lives of Manchu, Mongolian, Xibo, Hezhen, Oroqen, Ewenki, Daur, Uygur, Kazak, Kirgiz, Korean, and other northern frontier ethnic groups. At the same time, in the new situation that has emerged in the new era<sup>1</sup>, some changes have taken place in shaman activities. One of the most important changes is that shamanic activities are presented mostly in the form of folk customs and intangible cultural heritage recognized and supported by the government (Se 2015b).

Qu Feng believes that intangible cultural heritage is a worldwide theme recognized by mainstream society and marginal indigenous societies, coming not only from the interior of the frontier national culture but also from the outside that lies in the mainstream society's

imaginative construction of the frontier. Based on the recognition of this theme, presenting shamanic culture as a form of intangible cultural heritage can enable successful cooperation and connection between frontier national culture and mainstream society, which is in line with the Project Identity defined by the American sociologist Manuel Castells (Qu 2020). Using the theory of “cultural intimacy”<sup>2</sup> put forward by Michael Herzfeld, Naran pointed out that the shamanic tradition presented in the image of “cultural heritage” has created a new space of “cultural intimacy” that has neutralized the tension between shamanism characterized by connecting earth and heaven and official ideology in the way of “culture” and has become a social and cultural ecological tie between local practices and official ideology (Naran 2021, pp. 214–25). Based on differences in worldviews between shamanic culture and the material world and the problems each focuses on, this paper further explores the reasons behind the existence and popularity of shamanic culture as a manifestation of cultural intimacy in contemporary society.

## 2. Shamanic Culture in the Material World: Connecting Earth and Heaven—Blocking the Passage between Earth and Heaven

Shamanic culture is a worldwide religious culture that has deep roots in China. Ethnic minorities in northern China have long practiced shamanic rituals. As early as the medieval Chinese documentary book, *Sanchao beimeng huibian* (三朝北盟会编), compiled by Xu Mengxin of the Song Dynasty (1126–1207), there has been a record of the word “shaman”, recorded in the original text as “shanman” (珊蛮), which means wise man and is the term used by Nuzhen, the ancestors of the Manchu people in China, to refer specifically to a “female shaman”. Belief in shamanic culture has never been interrupted and is still active among northern ethnic minorities in China. Therefore, like North America, South America, Africa, Australia, and other places, China is also the center of the shamanistic circle in the world (Zhao 2011, pp. 1–2).

It is generally believed that a shamanic culture is a form of local knowledge, which appeared in the Stone Age and was produced in the national culture. In clans and tribes, shamans perform certain social functions. They often connect heaven and earth in trance, communicating with the gods and negotiating with the supernatural on behalf of their followers or believers. Thus, they are a medium between the sacred and the secular and meet the needs of the group in ways such as petitioning for Heaven’s blessings, telling fortunes, and treating sicknesses. Based on these findings, scholars such as K.C. Chang have speculated that the earliest leader might have been a shaman (Chang 1983, pp. 337–38).

Clans and tribes form a cultural community around shamanism. Members of shamanic cultures believe that all things have spirits and gods that live in the sun, moon, stars, mountains, rivers, and earth. In addition to the visible material world, there is an invisible spiritual world that is omnipresent. The human world and the spiritual world permeate, influence, and connect each other; exchange information and energy with each other; influence the surrounding situation; and form a larger worldview including both the material world and the spiritual world. Human beings can influence the spiritual world. Similarly, the spiritual world can extend deeply into the human world. When human beings lose balance in their interactions with the supernatural due to negligence, disrespect, or other reasons, society and individuals experience failures, misfortunes, disasters, diseases, and other problems. At this time, the shaman communicates with the gods in trance and exerts influence over the invisible spiritual world. Thus, the shaman uses the knowledge of gods to explain, reveal, and cure diseases and disasters to meet real needs and to recreate harmony with the supernatural. The insiders of shamanic culture formed ancestor worship and nature worship under the belief system. They often harbor a mentality of awe and forgiveness, and “would not hurt others or animals”<sup>3</sup>.

Compared with the larger worldviews of shamanic cultures, the worldviews of modern civilization are much narrower as they are limited to the material world that human beings can see and perceive. The material world is based on science and rationality, forming a self-sufficient and independent system, and there is no problem maintaining balance

among the different dimensions of the universe. Although shamans, in a trance state characterized by connecting earth and heaven, once solved problems caused by the destruction of balance, now the government, military, police, churches, hospitals, and other social institutions of modern civilization are entrusted with this function ([Marx 2015](#), pp. 114–15). As a result, in modern society, being sick means seeing the doctor for physical issues, and there are schools, churches, and the police to handle your mistakes. Material society tries to solve everything in life in a “material” way, building effective mechanisms by which to control interconnectedness and balance within the system while losing the sense of awe<sup>4</sup>.

Shamans claim to serve not only the material world but also the spiritual world. In the worldview of connecting earth and heaven, the normal operation of the world depends not only on social institutions of the material world but also on the spiritual world and the shamans who communicate with that world. In social institutions of the material world, the shaman appears to be out of place, disloyal, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. As a result, shamans and the larger worldview of connecting earth and heaven in shamanic culture became alien and a threat to material society. Therefore, they were gradually exiled from the social structure; labeled as feudal superstition and backward symbols; and forced into a scattered, marginal, secret, and unpopular state with lower status and strict limitations.

In historical facts and legends, there are metaphorical traces of the struggle between the social institutions of the material world and shamanic culture. One of the best-known is the story of the blocking of the passage between earth and heaven (Jue Ditiantong) in the Chinese classic *Guoyu-Chuyu II* (国语·楚语下):

... At the time of the decline of Shaohao's regime, Jiuli ethnic group from the south brought moral chaos, the world becomes chaotic and gods intermingle with commoners. All turn themselves into shamans or shamanesses ... The emperor Zhuanxu (顓頊) sends two of his ministers, Chong and Li, to block the passage that connects heaven and earth. Order is restored, and commoners and gods separate again. Gods belong to heaven and commoners to earth. All was put back into order as before, and the mutual interference between gods and commoners was terminated. This is called the blocking of the passage between heaven and earth. ([Chen 2016](#), p. 344)

Among the different interpretations of this document, Chang's viewpoint is representative and has a far-reaching influence. He believes that before the emperor Zhuanxu implemented the plan of blocking the passage between heaven and earth, everyone was a shaman; every family sacrificed; and with the help of witchcraft, power animals, and various magic tools, everyone could connect heaven and earth and communicate with the gods in their way. However, after social development, to a certain extent, witchcraft began to be combined with politics. Chong and Li became full-time clergy, served the ruling class, and became tools and vassals of the imperial family culture. The means of connecting earth and heaven were monopolized by the ruling class, resulting in changes in human relations and the formation of a class society, also known as a civilized society. However, including the harmonious relationship between humankind and nature, many aspects of society have shown important continuity rather than change in the transition from prehistoric shamanism to civilized society. Therefore, “shamanistic civilization” is one of the main characteristics of ancient Chinese civilization. Shamanistic civilization also widely occurred in most ancient civilizations in the world, such as Egypt, the Indus River basin, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and Central and South America. Together, they constituted a worldwide, non-Western, and continuous civilization ([Chang 2010](#), pp. 4–18).

In fact, not only has the relationship between people changed but the experiences and corresponding functions of shamans serving the ruling classes and shamans in clan organizations are also likely to have changed after the blocking of the passage between heaven and earth. According to ([Campbell 1996](#), pp. 63–97), in the clan organizations of the Paleolithic age, religion was a personal mysterious experience that could be directly felt and was also the product of a personal psychological crisis in which people used fasting, hallucinogens, dancing, and other methods to obtain the illusion of divine power in the spiritual world

and serve themselves. While the shaman's words and deeds were subject to the constraints of the king's power, all myths, rituals, and social institutions were concerned mainly with suppressing individualism, rejecting the influence of any mysterious phenomena, and instead identifying with the public sphere in a class society. Obviously, in this context, the shaman's divine experience would also be greatly reduced since the overarching worldview of shamanic culture recognizes personal interests, intuition, and experience and claims that an individual's own spiritual experience is fundamental and dominant. The spiritual experience of a shaman is highly dangerous and unpredictable, and social institutions cannot shake it either, which threatens the power of social institutions.

Therefore, in the narration of legend and history, shamanic culture is often rectified and suppressed by kingship. For example, in the legend of Genghis Khan (成吉思汗) and Shaman Kokchu, when Genghis Khan, who represents social institutions, is not strong enough and needs the shaman's help, he is in great awe of the shaman. At the time, shamans had enormous power, and only shamans could declare candidates to be legitimate rulers. When Genghis Khan created an institution powerful enough to govern everything, the shaman, who was independent of the institution and able to contact the spiritual world, posed a threat because he undermined the credibility of the omnipotent public institution. Therefore, shaman Kokchu was mutilated by the social institution (Marx 2015, pp. 115–16).

The Manchu shaman's dance (*Tiao shen*) in Northeast China originated from ancient shamanic beliefs. Before the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), the shaman's dance could be divided into the shaman's dance to the domestic god (the domestic sacrifice) and the shaman's dance to the wild god (the wild sacrifice), hence making a distinction between *jia saman* 家萨满 (meaning domestic shaman) and *ye saman* 野萨满 (meaning wild shaman). The former is also known as the clan shaman, while the latter is also known as the amba shaman (amba means “big” in Manchu). The difference between the two consists in the fact that domestic shamans were not possessed by gods. The domestic shamans just presided over the ancestral sacrifices of the clan with drumming, singing and dancing, and prayer, while the wild shamans presided over the sacrifices to natural gods, such as animal gods, and had the skill of possession by using drumming, singing, and dancing (Qu 2020). As the rulers of the post-Jin Dynasty (1616–1636), although Nurhaci and Huang Taiji believed in shamanism, they could not allow it to remain unrestrained but controlled, regulated, and utilized it to maintain and consolidate the family regime. After they established the Qing Dynasty, due to the excessive killing of animals, the distinct characteristics of the scattered primitive society, and the abilities of shamans to connect earth and heaven, wild sacrifices were not conducive to nationwide unity and were regarded as witchcraft. Therefore, Huang Taiji stated in the imperial decree, “When people sacrifice to gods, redeem vows, die, go to graves, they are never allowed to slaughter cattle, horses, mules, and donkeys any longer.” He severely suppressed the shamanistic ritual of wild sacrifices and the practice of the shaman's dance to cure diseases: “Whoever does not obey this shall be executed.”

In the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, the document “*The Manchu Ceremony Determined by the Emperor for the Sacrifice to God and Heaven*” (钦定满族祭神祭天典礼), which reformed and standardized family sacrifices to a certain extent, was promulgated, demanding that the reformed family sacrifice be vigorously promoted again and that wild sacrifices be prohibited. In this document, family sacrifices were based on the sacrifices of the Aisin Gioro clan and referred to the traditional sacrifices of the Han people, which changed the simple, rough, and pungent characteristics of the original family sacrifices and increased the seriousness and etiquette of these beliefs. The family sacrifice activities at this time were limited to praising the merits of ancestors and encouraging future generations to be loyal to the Qing court, which made family sacrifices temple-like and courtyard-like and led to court shamans serving court institutions (Wang 2006, p. 109; Qu and Ren 2006, pp. 321–25).

“Blocking the passage between earth and heaven” was a relatively long process. Chen Wenmin believed that the period of “blocking the passage between earth and heaven” began in the era of Emperor Zhuanxu and ended in the Shang (1600 BC–1046 BC) and Zhou

(1046 BC–256 BC) dynasties. Before that period was the age of gods, and after it came the era of humans. The replacement of the Shang Dynasty by the Zhou Dynasty (周革殷命) marked the overall end of the ancient mythological era. Afterward, the Zhou Dynasty perished, and the seven kingdoms (403 BC–221 BC) competed for hegemony, marking the full development of the “era of humans”. With the process of blocking the passage between earth and heaven, the people of the Zhou Dynasty could not understand the mythological life during and before the Shang Dynasty, so they replaced the specific “concept of god” of the Shang Dynasty with the general and vague “concept of people” (Chen 2007, pp. 23–26).

Through the investigation of two ritual systems of communicating with spirituality in the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, ecstasy, and divination, Qu Feng pointed out the successive relationship between the systems and the tendency toward the “historical transition of myths” in the successive relationship. He found that ecstasy was the legacy of the tradition of spiritual rituals characterized by shamanic ecstasy to connect earth and heaven in the Neolithic Age. However, in the middle and late Western Zhou Dynasty, shamanic ecstasy as a spiritual ritual gradually declined in social culture. Divination was a tradition inherited from the Neolithic Age, which was weak in the Neolithic Age and reached its peak in the late Shang Dynasty with the emergence of oracle bone inscriptions, showing a tendency to keep pace with and even surpass the spiritual ritual of ecstasy. Unlike ecstasy, which had a strong sense of mystery because of the connection between earth and heaven, divination was not a direct communication between wizards and gods. Instead, wizards in divination communicated through deceased ancestors as intermediaries to indirectly interact with the gods and obtain news about the fortunes of the future in advance. In this way, the ruling class represented by wizards achieved the goal of seeking advantages and avoiding disadvantages and tried to change the destiny determined by the gods through human efforts. Thus, divination reflected a kind of rationality. The development of the ritual of divination in the direction of documentation, knowledge, and rationalization led to the phenomenon of the “historical transition of myths” in China (Qu 2007).

After the reform of “blocking the passage between earth and heaven”, a class society was formed in which people were deprived of equal god-connecting experiences and lost the possibility of becoming a shaman. The functions and god-connecting experiences of shamans as full-time clergy arranged by the state also gradually weakened. In the so-called age of humans or the age of the historical transition of myths, shamanic culture was expelled from mainstream and official ideology. During the more extreme totalitarian historical eras, shamanic culture was almost entirely in a state of collective silence. Due to differences in their worldviews, there are potential competitive and hostile relationships between the traditional shaman culture that identifies with individuality and spirituality, the ancient civilized society that identifies with the king’s power, and the later modern civilized society that explicitly identifies only with “materiality”. Often, social and cultural organizations can only converge and function smoothly when the collective believes in their worldviews. For social institutions in power, worldviews that are different from and especially opposed to theirs seem to pose a threat. As a result, with the prevalence of modern civilization, shamanic culture has also declined accordingly. However, the shamanic culture did not completely disappear. On the contrary, with the severity of personal problems, shamanic culture became active again in the space of cultural intimacy in the modern form of “intangible cultural heritage”.

### 3. The Current Demand for Reconnecting Earth and Heaven in the New Era

Modern civilization is very good at solving complex social problems with the collective power of organizations and has made great achievements in this regard. However, the absence of social problems does not mean the disappearance of personal problems. In fact, since the beginning of the new era, with the prevalence of technology, bureaucracy, and materialism and driven by economic interests, problems related to nature, the inner world, and the individual are becoming increasingly serious. Anxiety, depression, and poor health have become common states of modern people, while very healthy and happy

people have become rare. Anxiety is particularly prevalent in China. Zhang Li argues that after 40 years of profound structural and cultural transformation and facing a bleak future, “anxiety has emerged as a potent signifier for the general affective condition shared by a great number of Chinese” (L. [Zhang 2020](#), p. 5). However, in the modern civilization typically represented by China in the new era, people are ashamed to admit that they have these psychological problems. This is because in the modern atmosphere where it is rich in “material” and people have the conviction “humans must be able to conquer nature”, people are taught that nightmares are imaginary, misfortune is a reflection of helplessness, psychological problems are due to oversensitivity, and internal contradictions are merely reflections of weakness. In short, personal problems arise because people are not strong enough to find solutions through “material” means. Thus, the situation develops in such a direction that personal problems, psychological problems, and related diseases caused by social problems are often treated by the material world as biological problems.

For example, in China, if an individual suffers from mental illness, it is regarded not only as a shame for the patient himself or herself but also as a shame for his or her whole family. Whenever someone in the family suffers from a psychological disease, the whole family will be excluded from other people’s lists of people whom they can marry and will be criticized by others for the rest of their lives. Psychological problems such as stress are a key factor in most mental illnesses. However, the Chinese euphemistically refer to mental illnesses as “neurasthenia” with distinctive physical disease characteristics and treat them mainly with drugs and chemical therapy to disguise the unacceptable mental illnesses associated with psychological problems. When heart disease occurs, modern medicine treats it with drugs, surgery, and stents. However, ubiquitous tension, the breakdown of close social relationships, the scarcity of leisure, and a sedentary work environment are the root causes of heart disease ([Kleinman 1988](#), pp. 19–22). In China, 250 million people suffer from hair loss. On average, 1 in 6 people lose their hair. A large number of people in the post-1990s generations have also started to lose their hair. Among the current recipients of hair transplants, young people aged 20–30 account for 57.4%<sup>5</sup>. Anxiety, tension, and mental stress are important reasons for hair loss among young people today. However, modern material society chooses to ignore these social reasons. Instead, hair transplant advertisements and related industries are becoming increasingly blatant. The material world deliberately downplays personal psychological problems and related diseases caused by blindly advocating economic, business, and material practices and tries to limit them to the narrow scope of medical technologies. In addition to leading to further economic development (probably not a benign development), nonsymptomatic treatment does not fundamentally solve these problems and may even exacerbate them.

When material society is unable and unwilling to solve personal problems and is not suitable for solving them, people tend to turn to shamanic culture in situations of psychological discomfort and misfortune, in the face of life and death, and at crossroads in life. Shamanic culture has helped to solve the remaining problems that the material society cannot and will not answer or fails to answer well. Robson, the most famous shaman in Buryat, China, said that people used to seek help mainly with health consultations, but now they seek help mainly with family disputes and psychological problems ([Marx 2015](#), p. 109). The *Ominan* ritual is a famous shamanic cultural practice of the Daur people, and one of its functions is that shamans in the state of connecting earth and heaven invite the gods to pray for the clan. However, recently, with the increase in personal questions, the *Ominan* ritual has been interspersed with new content so that shamans can address participants’ concerns such as misfortune, the future, unknown tribulations, and diseases, which mainly relieves the mental stress of the participants ([Wu 2013](#), pp. 183–86). The new shamanic movements that emerged in the West in the 1960s and 1970s mostly used trances to address the psychological and individual problems pervading modern society rather than the major issues of the clan.

In modern society, shamans play the roles of doctors and psychologists. People with personal problems tell the shaman about their misfortune and inner stress. In the trance of

connecting earth and heaven, shamans apply the larger worldview to explain the causes of misfortune and find solutions. Despite the popularity of material society today, shamanic culture has not disappeared. The reason for this is that as long as people feel dissatisfied and lost and cannot find answers to their problems in the material society, they will move toward another worldview—the larger worldview that connects earth and heaven. Regardless of whether the shaman's explanation is correct, in the context of faith, it provides a self-justifying explanation and solution for modern people who are distressed by personal problems—the gods know and answer everything, which relieves people's tensions and psychological pressures to a certain extent. People need shamanic culture, just as they need dreams, music, and movies, seemingly out of some kind of human instinct and nature. In this way, they compensate for impotence in real life and explain matters, such as life and death, to which the material world cannot provide satisfactory answers. Often, when they or their loved ones are facing death, they suddenly begin to favor beliefs such as shamanic culture. As they think about and experience the ultimate problem of death, people are often transformed from atheists to theists to seek some kind of sustenance, often some kind of hope<sup>6</sup>.

Chinese people also turn to Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and other religions for help with personal psychological problems. The reason why the mysterious shaman culture occupies a place in the treatment of personal problems is related to its long history in China. Shamanism existed in China as early as the Stone Age. Even after the Cultural Revolution, the shamanism of ethnic minorities in northern China was not interrupted. Therefore, shamanic culture is not strange to Chinese people, and it has a fixed number of believers in China. Based on this historical reason, patients with mental illness will also choose shamanic culture for treatment. A Mongolian girl said to me, "Some people go to shamans because they can't heal the disease in the hospital; some people who are devout to Shamanism go directly to a shaman instead of a doctor". Mental illness, which can only be experienced by feeling, seems to be more compatible with the divine and gods that can also only connect through inner feeling. In the treatment category, compared with physical diseases, shamans have always been better at treating virtual diseases, such as neurological or mental and psychological diseases ([Se 2015b](#)). In addition to relying on gods, shamans also use herbal remedies, fire, and complementary remedies. It is also true that people turn to shamans for psychotherapy because of the low price of medical treatment compared to the vast sums paid for the psychotherapy.

In the new era, as personal problems have become more serious, shamanic culture has gradually shown an upward trend in modern society. Villagers and town dwellers, ordinary people, and government officials all turn to shamans, hoping that the shamans, who are still in touch with the sacred world, can guide them, help them overcome their troubles, and bless them. However, in general, due to the conflict between the larger worldview of shamanism with the material world and the material world's indifference to and denial of personal problems, shamanic culture is still in a state of secrecy. When seeking help from a shaman, people tend to go secretly and are reluctant to admit afterward that they have done so, even if the shamanic ritual has helped them.

A proprietress surnamed Fu believes in shamanism. When she becomes sick, she likes to ask the shaman in the village to determine whether she is frightened by the gods. "This is a kind of spiritual sustenance." However, externally, believers such as the proprietress continue to repeat the same words: "We just believe in it ourselves and don't harm our country" ([Y. Zhang 2020](#)). Knowing that I study myths and shamanism and often travel for research, my mother sometimes warns me seriously, "Don't get too deep and believe in everything." Shamans are seldom willing to allow people other than clients who trust and need them to know of their existence. Because of my research needs, I tried several times to visit a witch who had a reputation for being good at curing skin diseases, but she refused. Once, I went to investigate another witch who was known to be good at treating mentally depressed children for being frightened or stricken. I felt that she was eager to confide in me as if she had been waiting for someone to listen to her story. However,

whenever we talked about key issues such as dreams and gods, we were held back by her family. Her family was not willing to allow more outsiders to know about this miraculous way of curing diseases, as this knowledge could cause unnecessary troubles. They only hoped that it could help those nearby. Therefore, under the stern scrutiny of her family, I left dejectedly.

Public institutions in the material world regard themselves as powerful and self-sufficient. They believe that they can solve anything and can keep structures and systems in balance; therefore, they refuse to acknowledge any power other than their own. As a result, shamans are driven to the fringes of the social structure, performing few important social functions. However, when people cannot find answers in the material world, they seek ways to obtain help outside social institutions, even if these ways are not recognized by official and mainstream culture. Given the failure of modern society to provide citizens with satisfactory solutions to their problems, an increasing number of people are obliged to seek help from shamans in marginal areas. Shamanic culture seems to be fighting against, threatening, and opposing the material world, but in fact, they are interdependent and complementary, as Marx concluded:

As for shamanism, it can be said that the shaman complements the social structure and adds a certain stability to it. In fact, those who think society is unacceptable when faced with trouble, or such marginalized representatives, can only find a way out of their predicament through shamans. Therefore, the anti-social structure potential of shamans helps the social structure to reduce stress and maintain stability. ([Marx 2015](#), p. 117)

Shamanic culture helps solve problems that the material world currently fails to solve. If used properly, shamanic culture can enable people to obtain what they need in terms of cultural diversity and richness, allow freedom of thought, relieve pressure in the material world, and keep systems and structures in the material world balanced and stable. Based on an extensive examination of the functioning of nation-states, Michael Herzfeld also found that over time, laws and official codes of conduct can become problematic, contradictory, outdated, and difficult to reinvent. As such, the nation-state relies heavily on what it claims is illegal, informal, and indecent in dealing with complex situations and problems. Cultural intimacy is such a space, accepting and tolerating a certain degree of unofficial cultural forms and ideologies in the official discourse to support the long-term stability of the regime. An example is the government's attitude toward gambling. Gambling can be financially futile and even devastating. However, because of its role as a form of social interaction, gambling can hardly be eliminated. Therefore, in practice, the government's attitude toward gambling is often more permissive than the position set out in the law ([Herzfeld 2016](#), pp. 1–19; [Liu 2020](#), pp. 240–48), which is similar to the complex relationship between "emotion" and "reason". "Reason" consists of the laws and regulations of the government, which has absolute rights and authority. In theory, no changes or challenges can be tolerated. However, in reality, "reason" and "feeling" have the possibility of being accommodating because many kinds of situations and corresponding emotions are involved in life. Without changing the general direction, "reason" and the law will sometimes be flexible and allow a way out for specific and special situations, even those that seem to violate the law. Although the law is "fixed" and "cold", those who interpret and apply it have emotions. They can empathize with the actual situation and use the law flexibly.

The space of cultural intimacy is in a harmonious state of flexible handling of "emotion" and "reason", which is the same as "walking the tightrope and playing the edge ball". Under the condition of not violating the basic system, management agencies in the space of cultural intimacy mostly choose to turn a blind eye to small violations. In the space of cultural intimacy, both officials and members of the public have a certain right of expression and flexible space for each other so that they will not be too tense to confront each other. Nations in the material world require a certain degree of flexibility to remain durable and stable. One form of flexibility is a lenient approach to nonexcessive or not-so-obvious vio-

lations to meet people's real needs. Therefore, we can speculate that allowing the existence and even growth of shamanic culture within the scope of control is an undisclosed strategy for China to achieve structural balance and stability within the system.

#### 4. Shamanic Culture in the Space of Cultural Intimacy

The "blocking of the passage between earth and heaven" of modern civilization is incompatible with the cosmology of shamanic culture. However, in the new era, with the increase in personal problems, people currently demand the reconnection of earth and heaven. Therefore, modern material society allows a certain degree of local shamanism to exist. In China, officials relent to a certain extent when shamanic activities appear in the image of folk culture and cultural heritage.

In 2017, the Shamanic Folk Culture Research Society, to which Mr. Teng Ping made great contributions, was established in An Shan city. There are two main reasons for its success. First, Mr. Teng Ping claimed that the society that he requested government permission to establish involved "shamanic culture", not shamanism, and second, his society was an affiliate of the Anshan Culture Industry Association, which was headed by a former government official. Again, on 10 April 2019, the annual shamanic meeting held by the Shamanic Folk Culture Research Society in An Shan city issued such a statement<sup>7</sup>.

Some shamanic cultures presented in the form of "folk customs" are included in the list of intangible cultural heritage. Places such as Jilin, Liaoning, Heilongjiang, and Inner Mongolia have all started to excavate shamanic culture presented in the form of folk customs, turning them into an intangible cultural heritage and using them to develop tourism. Projects related to shamanic sacrifices, such as the Daur "shaman obo sacrifice", Mongolian "Bo dance" and "Bo music" as well as Ewenki costumes and divine paraphernalia, have been included in the district-level intangible cultural heritage list of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Many Manchu shamanic cultures, such as the Manchu Shi family ancestor worship custom and Manchu Guan family ancestor worship custom, have been included in the list of the intangible cultural heritage of Jilin Province. Family sacrifices were included in the list of the intangible cultural heritage of Heilongjiang Province, and a single drum was included in the list of the intangible cultural heritage of Liaoning Province ([Se 2015a](#), pp. 326–28; [Liu 2012](#), p. 399). Under this general trend, shamanic culture in the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, America, Latin America, and Africa has also been selected as a cultural heritage project in the forms of "oral traditions and performances", "performing arts", "social practices, rituals, festivals", "knowledge and practice of nature and the universe" and "traditional handicrafts".

Even if packaged as cultural heritage, not all content of shamanic culture can be selected. Meng Huiying notes that shamanic projects selected as cultural heritage are only certain aspects of shamanic cultures, and they are outward manifestations of customs that emphasize artistry and performance, such as dancing, singing, and ritual performance, while core rituals such as the trances and healing of shamans are still hidden and excluded from cultural heritage because of the strong features of the heaven–earth connection ([Meng 2018](#), pp. 153–57).

Shamanic cultures that are included in intangible cultural heritage projects because of their artistry and performance have been further recognized and supported by the government. The government regards them as a valuable resource for improving cultural soft power and boosting the regional economy and is thus willing to develop and protect them. For example, related governmental departments have spent large sums of money building a Shamanic Culture Museum in Moqi, where the Daurs are located, and are striving to build it into a "hometown of shamanic culture" to boost the tourism economy ([Wu 2013](#), pp. 188–89). The Guo Baoshan shaman of the Daur nationality also received a letter of appointment from the government and a certain amount of government subsidies. For this reason, the villagers call the Guo Baoshan shaman a "licensed Yadgen" ("Yadgen" is a word in the Daur language meaning "shaman") ([Meng 2012](#), pp. 436–37). The shamanic culture and other ethnic tourism projects supported by the government and es-

tablished by the Oroqen people themselves are the most popular tourist projects in the Da and Xiao Xing'an Mountains and have become an important source of income for the local area. Shaman Guan Kouri of the Oroqen nationality has been ranked as the local inheritor of intangible cultural heritage because of the inheritance of shamanic songs and dances (Guan and Wang 2010, pp. 35–37). Healing rituals in a state of heaven–earth connection will also develop within the officially recognized shamanic culture.

For example, because the aspects of shamanic culture presented in the form of intangible cultural heritage have been recognized and supported by the government, there is an endless stream of people visiting shamans to cure diseases in the Daur Autonomous Banner of Morin Dawa of Inner Mongolia. Shaman dances in trances to heal diseases are also carried out under normal circumstances, which are no longer subject to official interference and restrictions (Meng 2012, pp. 436–37). In South Korea, where the situation of shamanic culture is similar to that in China, a shaman surnamed Jin became the inheritor of “national culture” and was officially recognized. However, for her, shamanic performance and shamanic healing “are not the same thing.” On the one hand, Shaman Jin is busy with various official performances and publicity, and on the other hand, she is busy with the increasing number of shamanic healing rituals that are still performed underground. Being officially recognized as a shamanic performer has become a kind of “passport” to protect her shamanic healing activities (Meng 2018, pp. 166–67).

In daily life, the insiders of shamanic culture seem to view and participate in shamanic practices in terms of cultural heritage, but this is only a superficial phenomenon. Privately, they place more value on the sacred ability and corresponding functions of the shaman to connect earth and heaven. For them, participating in external shamanic cultural projects that emphasize artistry and performance is only a tool for expressing sacred beliefs. These external shamanic cultural projects are supported by the government in the name of cultural heritage, which is of great significance to the survival and expression of true shamanism. Even if only some external shamanic content is supported by the government, the core and mystical shamanic rituals make progress more easily with this support. Whether in the performance of cultural heritage or daily life, e.g., getting up in the morning to burn incense or spread milk to heaven and earth, these external ritual actions are still the sacred expression of the shaman cultural community, and they still carry a sense of awe when performing these external rituals. It seems that those external shamanic projects approved by the government limited shamanic culture but expanded the belief expression of the shaman cultural community whose overall belief practice far exceeded the scope specified by the government.

Therefore, regarding the folk culture of their nation defined by others or presented as an expedient measure, some insiders of shamanic culture will choose to participate. However, they know that what others see in the performance of folk culture is different from what they perceive and experience. Some insiders of shamanic culture have directly rejected the title “folk culture”. A participant from the Pacific region declared:

The term “folk customs” is unacceptable to many of our native cultures. Our cultures are not “folk customs” but sacred norm that integrates with our traditional way of life and establishes the logical, moral, and cultural values of our traditional society, which are our cultural identity. (Hoppal 2006, p. 24)

In the field, a Mongolian young man told me about shamanism in his hometown. As he talked, his eyes shone, and he was unconsciously immersed in the sacred atmosphere. He said, “Our feelings about shamanism are different from yours. It is true for us”<sup>8</sup>. At the beginning of August 2020, I participated in the *Ominan* ritual of the Daur people. During the ritual, when the shamans connected with the gods and announced the oracle (Figure 1), the participants in the shaman cultural community were often awed by the divine; their bodies and minds were shocked, and tears streamed down their faces (Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Shaman Siqingguwa in the state of connecting earth and heaven in the *Ominan* ritual. Photograph by Liu Xiaoshuang, 30 September 2020.



**Figure 2.** Women are moved to tears by shaman Siqingguwa in the state of connecting earth and heaven in the *Ominan* ritual. Photograph by Liu Xiaoshuang, 30 September 2020.

Once I talked with a Daur insider about my confusion. I said, "You have a set of your descriptions about shamanism, and outsiders or researchers have another set of descriptions. Sometimes I am afraid to study it. I revere and fear gods, and I am afraid of getting them wrong." He said, "You must already know that some researchers know our set of descriptions about shamanism, but they are still expressing them in terms that you can ac-

cept instead of ours, which is very good. We are also afraid that you will truly express our things and then cause unnecessary trouble. You can express in your way”<sup>9</sup>. For insiders of shamanic culture, the images of folk customs and intangible cultural heritage are only the external packaging for the smooth operation of shamanic rituals, and the sacred experience and sacred expression of the heaven–earth connection and corresponding functions are its core. The heaven–earth connection is even found in the sacred appeal of ordinary people in the official discourse because the irrational–emotional need seems to be innate to everyone, and everyone is equal in terms of personal issues. It is very likely that ordinary people under the official discourse face more personal problems in the fiercely competitive environment of survival of the fittest and have more need for the shamanic culture.

The shamanic culture is in a very delicate situation in the modern context. On the one hand, the increase in personal problems has led to a need for shamanic culture to “come out again”; on the other hand, shamanic culture should not become too exposed so that it will not threaten the dominance of official ideology and attract another wave of attack. This situation requires a strategic, measured, and partial exposure of shamanic culture to create a new space acceptable to both sides between official discourse and shamanic practice to discover overlapping consensus. Shamanic rituals presented in the form of folk culture, traditional culture, cultural soft power, and intangible cultural heritage have neutralized the tension between shamanic religion characterized by connecting earth and heaven and official ideology in a formalized “cultural” way, thus achieving an ecological balance and forming a compatible space between official surface management and non-governmental practice.

According to Michael Herzfeld’s “cultural intimacy” theory, shamanic culture presented in the image of cultural heritage in the new era is a manifestation of cultural intimacy with Chinese characteristics ([Naran 2021](#), pp. 214–25). The shamanic culture in the space of cultural intimacy appears in the new forms of folklore, art, and performance, which satisfies the material society’s conception and imagination of shamanic culture and maintains the dignity and interests of the official discourse, allowing shamanic culture to survive and develop in an aboveboard manner. With the support of the government, the shamans’ sacred experience of connecting heaven and earth and the corresponding function of healing diseases can be carried out relatively smoothly, constituting the sacred experience and sacred expression of the insiders of the shamanic culture in the frontier areas and helping the material society in modern civilization relieve pressures and address the personal psychological problems that it cannot solve well. In general, the Chinese government regards itself as ontologically complete and capable of meeting all social and public needs. However, to comply with the new situation and emerging problems, the Chinese government will choose to flexibly adjust its actions when the discourse remains unchanged. Although the Communist Party of China claims atheism, with the increase in personal problems, they also need religious beliefs such as shamanic culture to help solve social problems. Therefore, shamanic culture appears in the image of cultural heritage with a cultural tone that more easily obtains government recognition. Shamanic culture in the form of cultural heritage constitutes an elastic space of cultural intimacy. In this space, the government locates shamanic culture in the form of cultural heritage and solves the social problem of increasing individual problems without harming the discourse and general direction, while the shaman community can secretly express and expand their beliefs under the title recognized by the state so that national discourse and shamanism achieve a peaceful coexistence in a space of cultural intimacy.

Obviously, the government has very different attitudes toward shamanic rituals on different occasions. For example, when shamanic rituals as religious practices involve spiritual activities and a larger worldview that cannot be controlled by the material world and threaten the authority of the omnipotent government, the government tends to consider shamanic rituals to be dangerous and decadent<sup>10</sup>. In contrast, when shamanic rituals are treated as cultural performances through formal packaging and promote local tourism with the image of regional cultural soft power, they are considered benign and are offi-

cially recognized, which is a problem related to their extent. How can the official discourse and minority cultures make concessions while adhering to their bottom lines, getting what both sides need to achieve a win-win situation. Some insiders of shamanic culture refuse to convert the sacred shamanic experience into folklore and cultural interests, and the government still secretly observes the scope of shamanic culture. However, in general, the shamanic culture presented in a brand new form in the space of cultural intimacy has achieved the goal of satisfying not only most insiders of the shamanic culture but also social institutions to the greatest possible extent between compromise and perseverance.

The shamanic rituals seen by outsiders of the shamanic culture are just lively and exotic folk performances. However, the insiders of the shamanic culture know that what the outsiders see is only what they can see from their cultural perspective. It is not what the insiders of the shamanic culture experience but rather an observable cultural surface in conjunction with the official ideology. Under this surface, the scared experience of connecting earth and heaven and the corresponding functions are truly the collective identities of insiders of the shamanic culture. Therefore, the insiders of the shamanic culture are not willing to reveal too much of the essence of shamanic culture to the “tourists” who are looking around. When tourists ask questions about the performance of shamanic rituals, the insiders of the shamanic culture often reply that this depends on “understanding”. Only when you “understand” can you enter the interior of the shamanic culture circle and get the essential knowledge about shamanic culture. If you can’t “understand”, it is just an artistic performance you see on the surface.

Shamanic culture and official culture sometimes compete and sometimes cooperate, depending on the temporal situation and the context, which is very similar to relationships among people. Just as cooperation is a healthy state for people in getting along with each other, the shamanic culture that appears in the space of cultural intimacy is a sign of a healthy state of cooperation. The shamanic culture presented in the image of folk culture and cultural heritage not only survives in the official discourse with a reasonable and legal title but also expresses the sacred demands of ethnic minorities in northern China to believe in shamanism. It helps to solve increasingly serious personal problems to meet people’s current needs, thus achieving a connection between official discourse and present-day problems as well as compatibility between the official discourse and minority cultures.

## 5. Conclusions

The shamanic experience of connecting earth and heaven has enabled the shamanic culture to form a larger worldview, including views about the material world and the spiritual world. However, modern civilization limits its worldview to the realm of the material world, regards science and rationality as priorities, and does not consider the issue of maintaining balance in different dimensions of the universe. As a result, shamanic culture was long excluded from mainstream discourse and official ideology, resulting in a state of blocking the passage between earth and heaven.

In the new era, with the increase in personal problems, modern society has failed to provide citizens with satisfactory solutions to these problems, resulting in more people seeking the help of shamans in frontier areas. Thus, the cultural phenomenon of reconnecting earth and heaven has emerged. However, in general, due to the conflict between the larger worldview of frontier cultures and that of the material world and the disregard for and denial of personal issues in the material world, shamanic culture is still in a state of secrecy. Therefore, the shamanic culture in the image of folk culture and intangible cultural heritage in the space of cultural intimacy has come into being. In the space of cultural intimacy, externally, shamanic rituals appear in the form of folklore and art, satisfying the expression of official ideology. With the help of this external image, internally, shamanic rituals are more of a sacred experience that connects earth and heaven to solve personal problems for the masses. This creates a new space between disconnecting earth and heaven and reconnecting earth and heaven, which has been recognized by the official discourse and the insiders of shamanic culture. Therefore, the official discourse and the

insiders of shamanic culture have established communication and cooperation based on “project identity” and built a bridge of dialogue to achieve an ecological balance.

Through such interaction and interpenetration in the space of cultural intimacy, there is reason to believe that one day the veil between shamanism and official ideology may be lifted to achieve real understanding, tolerance, mutual consultation, and harmony. In this case, China can avoid making the appearance of shamanic culture in the form of folklore and intangible cultural heritage a mere formality and art due to the needs of the official discourse and instead allow real and comprehensive shamanic cultural practices to meet diverse current needs (Meng 2013, pp. 346–47; Liu 2012, pp. 425–26). Right and wrong and high and low are the only judging criteria in sociology. From an anthropological point of view, there are no right or wrong or superior or inferior cultures; there are only differences in cultures. Different cultures correspond to their various realities with specific practical needs. It is their very differences that have endowed different cultures with unique charm and color. Regardless of the discourse of power, all cultures should be equal. However, in mainstream society, cultural equality is an ideal, and only sporadic “secret pleasures” can be found in the space of cultural intimacy.

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## Notes

- 1 “The New Era” refers to the time since China’s market-oriented reform and opening up since 1978.
- 2 Through the investigation of the operating mechanism of the nation-state, Michael Herzfeld put forward the innovative concept of “cultural intimacy” in 1995, which means that to achieve the long-term stability of the regime, the official discourse will accept and tolerate the existence of some unofficial cultural forms and ideologies. Official existence and unofficial existence test each other, constantly adjusting the boundaries of norms and practice, thus forming an interactive zone of mutual recognition between official and unofficial, providing a living elastic space for the whole society, which is the space where cultural intimacy can be generated (Herzfeld 2016, pp. 1–19; Liu 2020, pp. 240–48).
- 3 Data was collated according to the interview on 28 March 2023. The speaker is a Mongolian girl whose mother is a shaman.
- 4 In one class, a male Mongolian student living in shamanic culture told me that if a ewe did not recognize its new baby, herdsmen would gently sing to the ewe and influence it until it figured out its baby. But now, driven by modern market interests, some herdsmen would take the sheep to the slaughterhouse and brutally kill them.
- 5 <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20201217A03O5900> (accessed on 2 April 2022).
- 6 The following is what Professor Chen Jianxian learned about the ancient belief of shamanic culture when his parents were facing death: When my parents were about to leave this world, I suddenly found that my knowledge of the other world was so deficient that I, a so-called professor of mythology, was completely incapable of building their confidence to go to the other world. All that I could do was silently accompany their desperate hearts in pain until the last moment. I asked myself: for thousands of years, people have created so many myths and beliefs about another world, they have effectively helped many generations overcome their fear of death, allowing them to peacefully go to another world. But why, after the word “science” has occupied the minds of modern people, for many centuries, has knowledge about another world been labeled “superstition” and thrown into the garbage dump of history? Science has become a new “superstition”; is this lucky or unlucky for mankind? Even from the perspective of social functions, human beliefs and practices about another world have irreplaceable value. What’s more, being unverifiable and nonexistent are two different things. There are countless existences in the universe that we cannot prove yet. Why do we have to eliminate ancient myths and beliefs at all? When we pour out the dirty water of the thoughts of old times, are we also throwing out the “babies” of minds at the same time? (Chen 2015, p. 1).

<sup>7</sup> The statement is as follows: On 21 March 2017, the Shamanic Folk Custom Research Society in Anshan has finally been approved by the Anshan Culture Industry Association. The aims of the Society are: Explore, research, and develop shamanic folk culture and fight against feudal superstitious beliefs. Let the essence of ancient shamanic culture be passed down to later generations, and clear the name of our shamanic culture. We will prove through our investigation and research that shamanism originated in the Chinese land. Since its establishment in 2017, society has developed at a fast pace. Now with more than 3000 members, it has 35 offices in seven provinces (regions) and different minority areas ... Under the guidance of the 19th Communist Party of China National Congress, the Society will promote traditional culture, combine old shamanic culture with modern culture, keep pace with the times, and collaborate with universities and research institutions ([Naran 2021](#), p. 225).

<sup>8</sup> Data was collated according to the interview on 9 August 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Data was collated according to the interview on 3 August 2020.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the Northern Dynasty (386–581) was the first climax of the prosperity of Buddhism in China. Because Buddhism was so prosperous that it threatened the imperial power and even the economic lifeline, the Northern Wei and Northern Zhou dynasties launched two large-scale campaigns to destroy Buddhism.

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