

Article

Contemporary Northeast Chinese Shamanism in the Interaction Between Public Heritage and Private Belief

Xiaoshuang Liu

School of Ethnology and Anthropology, Inner Mongolia Normal University, Hohhot 010000, China;
20220031@imnu.edu.cn

Abstract: Since China's accession to the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2004, private shamanism, centered around the sacred belief of "connecting heaven and earth", has for the first time been incorporated into the national heritage management system with legal legitimacy, becoming regulated public heritage on the condition of avoiding religious attributes. Through fieldwork and historical analysis, this paper examines the interaction between public heritage and private belief in contemporary Northeast Chinese shamanism. The research reveals the mutual influence between the public and private domains of shamanic ritual practices, with a new synthesis or symbiotic relationship emerging across these domains, which is manifested in two main aspects: first, the "generation of the public from the private", exemplified by the emergence of the public heritage associated with shamanism, and second, the "promotion of the private by the public", where the sacred private belief expands its existential space with the assistance of newly recognized public heritage. This bidirectional interaction model challenges the conventional notion that "heritagization leads to the decline of faith", offering a novel interpretive framework for understanding the contemporary transformation of ritual systems.

Keywords: contemporary Northeast Chinese shamanism; intangible cultural heritage (ICH); private belief; public heritage; interaction



Academic Editors: Andre P. Audette,
Christopher Weaver and
Mark Brockway

Received: 6 March 2025

Revised: 29 May 2025

Accepted: 29 May 2025

Published: 30 May 2025

Citation: Liu, Xiaoshuang. 2025. Contemporary Northeast Chinese Shamanism in the Interaction Between Public Heritage and Private Belief. *Religions* 16: 706. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16060706>

Copyright: © 2025 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Since China became a signatory to the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2004, folk cultures have begun to receive China's state-level protection under the designation of ICH. In just over two decades, ICH protection has sparked a remarkable wave of cultural preservation and dissemination across the country. Academic circles often hold two contrasting views on this phenomenon. One perspective argues that ICH helps to showcase and protect the profound depth and uniqueness of Chinese culture, thereby more effectively promoting it as an essential component of global cultural diversity (Kurin 2004; Blake 2008, pp. 59–87). The other perspective suggests that the heritagization of culture may lead to the reconstruction of ethnic and folk cultures in ways that align with national or local government cultural policies, potentially causing them to lose their original local characteristics and cultural essence (Zhu 2015), which is reflected in the varying standards for ICH.

In 2003, UNESCO adopted the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, which specifically includes five aspects: (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the ICH; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals, and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and (e) traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO 2003). Among these, "knowledge and practices

concerning nature and the universe” highlights the spiritual colors of traditional cultures worldwide. However, the Chinese version of the ICH standards has expanded these five categories into ten, namely, folk literature; traditional music; traditional dance; traditional drama; folk arts; traditional sports; traditional crafts; traditional medicine; and folklore (Ma 2022, pp. 3–12). It is evident that in the Chinese version of the ICH convention, the spiritual dimension related to belief has nearly disappeared.

This largely stems from the distinctive cultural-cognitive paradigm shaped by China’s atheistic ideological framework, which profoundly influences the official interpretation of religions and related cultural practices. Western academia often views shamanism as a universal archetype of the earliest religion rather than a localized “folk” variant (Francfort et al. 2001). Influenced by atheistic ideology, the Chinese government categorizes shamanism as part of folk beliefs, even subsuming it directly under broader folk cultural classifications during ICH processes (Sa 2021, p. 483). This state-led categorization, however, contrasts with the self-perception of many indigenous shamanic practitioners and communities, who often regard their traditions as an autonomous spiritual and religious system transcending the folk belief framework. This tension highlights the interplay between ideological governance and lived religious practice in China’s cultural policy landscape. In China, shamanism often occupies an ambiguous space between folk belief (folk culture) and religious identity. Consequently, the ambivalent attitudes toward ICH are particularly evident in the heritagization of ritual practices such as shamanism in Northeast China.

Scholars recognize that the word *shaman*, now used worldwide, is derived from a word in the Tungusic languages of Siberia in N.E. Asia. In Northeast China and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region located in N.E. Asia, shamanism is practiced by different Mongol and Tungus “ethnic minorities” whose various languages belong to the Altaic family. Although the basic connotations of shamanic beliefs and healing practices among groups in Northeast China are largely similar, in reality, their internal differences far outweigh their superficial commonalities. Ritual ceremonies often differ markedly due to the domestic economy of the ethnic groups (such as fishing–hunting, nomadic pastoralism, etc.). The pantheons of spirits and the use of ritual implements among shamanism practitioners from different ethnic groups may also differ drastically. Among them, Northeast Chinese ethnic groups such as the Daur, Manchu, Evenki, Oroqen, and Mongolian—who have long-standing practices of shamanism—have seen numerous ethnic-specific projects related to shamanism inscribed on China’s National List of ICH. Their living cultural practices have played a significant role in the safeguarding process of China’s ICH.

Through an investigation of the shamanic religious system among the Tujia ethnic group in Qinghai Province, in Northwestern China, Xing and Murray (2018) found that the frequency of privately conducted shamanic healing rituals involving trance in the region has declined due to their exclusion from the officially protected cultural heritage list. They argue that in addition to material changes, socio-political and ideological variables are equally significant in shaping the trajectory of religion in China. Xuan (2014) even posits that the practice of ICH discourse in China can be understood as a confrontation between administrative discourse and cultural discourse, with administrative discourse dominating the ICH protection framework, while cultural discourse reflects the marginalized voices of heritage inheritors. For a long time, shamanism in Northeast China existed outside official discourse, practiced and transmitted privately within families and local communities, embodying spirituality, sacredness, religiosity, and a faith-based nature, and serving as a vital spiritual belief for local people (X. Liu 2023). However, when the Chinese state grants authorized recognition to shamanism under the designation of ICH, does private shamanism inevitably fall into a state of silence and concealment? Or rather, what strategies underlie this so-called “concealment”, and against whom is it directed? What

is the relationship between the different contemporary groups' understanding of shamanism and the visualized space outlined as a result? This paper will attempt to answer these questions from the perspective of the ownership of shamanism in Northeast China.

To thoroughly explore the aforementioned questions, I consulted the classic historical analysis works related to Chinese shamanism (Chang 1983, 2010; Z. Li 2005; S. Li 2022). Moreover, I conducted a series of phased fieldwork from September 2024 to February 2025 in the shamanism-rich regions of Northeast China. Specifically, I conducted a seven-day fieldwork study in Hulunbuir municipality in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (7–14 September 2024) and a six-day investigation in Jilin province (10–16 December 2024). The field research in Hohhot demonstrates greater flexibility—I initiate relevant investigations immediately whenever opportunities arise to engage with shamanic practices. As of February 2025, the study cumulatively completed interviews with 12 individuals, distributed as follows: four shamans, (three of whom, including the stout shaman, are ICH inheritors), three ICH administrative officials, one ICH researcher, and four ordinary local people (notably the Daur gentleman, who not only imparted systematic shamanic knowledge but also proactively facilitated critical connections with relevant stakeholders). Due to the highly contingent nature of shamanic public performances in ICH contexts, this study successfully documented only one instance from the Changchun city-based ICH project—“the Single Drum Dance (*dan gu wu* 单鼓舞)”. However, this observation carries significant implications: First, as one of the few shamanic ICH items inscribed on the “National Representative List,” it completely preserves core shamanic cultural symbols in its performance system. Second, a core practitioner within the inheritance community (field pseudonym “the stout shaman”) served as a key informant in this research. During the writing process, when encountering complex interpretive challenges, I consulted trusted fieldwork informants via telephone. Perhaps motivated by my dedication to independent research, these informants occasionally proactively shared newly acquired information through the WeChat application or phone communications. Due to the widespread use of Mandarin, all field communications were conducted in Mandarin language in these areas, except for some shamans using their own ethnic languages during solemn ritual occasions. These historical materials and fieldwork experiences provided substantial empirical material and profound conceptual foundations for the development of this article.

2. The Historical Transformation of Northeast Chinese Shamanism

The UNESCO (2003) *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, adopted in 2003, aims to protect, transmit, and revitalize ICH worldwide. The convention defines ICH as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated there with—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage”. China’s ICH list includes not only folk beliefs like shamanism but also traditional foods such as Peking duck and stir-fried pork. In this nationwide wave of ICH, businesses have eagerly tapped into the cultural meanings behind their products, as if failing to do so would result in a loss of competitiveness in the fierce market. Since then, the social identity and cultural status of ordinary Chinese people have significantly improved. In the past, the social identity and status of ordinary people were frequently perceived as “lacking modernity” and out of sync with urban and elite cultures (Gao 2007). But now, as some “ordinary people” became ICH inheritors, they receive government funding to conduct transmission activities, train successors, and ultimately emerge as creators and guardians of China’s cultural history. Simultaneously, ethnic and folk traditions once dismissed as “feudal superstitions” (*fengjian mixin* 封建迷信), have been transformed into integral components of Chinese traditional culture, and even regarded as valuable cultural resources and essential for

maintaining China's cultural identity and sovereignty. Public attention has shifted from focusing solely on the "material" aspects of culture to emphasizing the intangible cultural dimensions, such as the creative processes behind objects, as well as the wisdom, craftsmanship, emotions, and spirit they embody. Temporally, the "historicity" represented by ICH extends into the present and future (K. Liu 2020; K. Liu 2023, pp. 299–312). All of this has reshaped the polyphonic value system of contemporary Chinese society, one aspect of which is the construction of cultural and national identity through ICH.

The *Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage*, enacted in 2011, explicitly states: "The protection of intangible cultural heritage is conducive to enhancing the cultural identity of the Chinese nation, safeguarding national unity and ethnic solidarity, and promoting social harmony and sustainable development" (Gov.cn 2011). However, a paradox arises: how can traditional cultures of a private nature, such as shamanism in Northeast China, which belong to individuals, groups, or localities, become shared cultural symbols of the Chinese nation and thereby serve the goal of national unity? What transformations have shamanism in Northeast China undergone during the process of heritagization? Discussions on the nature of ownership in "heritage" have become a critical entry point for understanding this issue. Some scholars have noted that the original meaning of "heritage" referred to an individual's inheritance from deceased ancestors, whereas the contemporary concept of heritage reflects a "collectivization" of its original meaning (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). Peng (2013, p. 347) points out that this shift clearly involves the construction of "public heritage" from "private heritage".

Gao (2022, pp. 414–16) further concludes that when ICH is officially designated in China, its attributes manifest dual characteristics: on one hand, it develops a public dimension (encompassing public interest, public recognition, and shared access mechanisms), while on the other hand, since ICH remains inherently dependent on specific inheritors and specific communities, its private attributes persist. The essence of ICH safeguarding does not negate the original ownership of individuals or groups but extends public value upon this foundation—thereby establishing a novel ownership framework of "your thing remains yours but also becomes ours." (Gao 2022, p. 415) Another implication of the public dimension is that public heritage is managed centrally by the "state" or "government". People can identify with each other through participation in and sharing of the public heritage created by the state. From this perspective, we can understand how the ICH of originally private individuals, specific groups, or particular regions can become shared cultural symbols of the Chinese nation. This "both public and private" cultural form provides an important lens for understanding the artistic survival of folk beliefs like shamanism in the context of ICH. However, before exploring this issue, we must first examine the historical survival and corresponding ownership of shamanism in China.

2.1. Prehistoric Period (Before the Xia, Shang, and Zhou Dynasties, 2070 BC–256 BC): Unity of Religion and Politics (Connecting Heaven and Earth)

Chang (1983, pp. 313–32) noted that in Chinese texts from the ancient civilization period (circa 1600–256 BCE), such as *Zuo Zhuan* (左传), *Guo Yu* (国语), and *Shan Hai Jing* (山海经), as well as in archaeological findings, there are frequent records documenting a stratified cosmology and accounts of shamans freely traversing between these layers. He argued that shamanic practices and the associated worldview of a stratified universe emerged in China as early as the Neolithic period (7000–2000 BCE). In other words, in the prehistoric era (before the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties), shamanism was already present in China. During this time, individuals could communicate with the sacred heavens and spirits using tools for connecting with the divine. This characteristic of traditional shamanism is sometimes referred to as "spiritual individualism" (Moondance 1994, p. 7). Among them, shamans were often regarded as having a distinct advantage in communicat-

ing with the sacred (Christian 2004, p. 189). Shamans performed a wide range of functions, including healing the sick, divining auspicious or inauspicious events, conducting rituals for bountiful harvests, and averting disasters (Wu 2014, pp. 224–38). Historical records often describe this period as “Every household had its own shamans” (*jia wei wu shi* 家为巫史) and “connecting heaven and earth” (*Di tian tong* 地天通) (Guoyu 2016, p. 344). Shamanism became the dominant ideology of prehistoric Chinese society, and its relationship with society is sometimes summarized as “the unity of religion and politics” (Z. Li 2005, p. 28).

2.2. Ancient Civilizations (Xia, Shang, and Zhou Dynasties to 1949): Religion Subordinate to Politics (Blocking the Passage Between Heaven and Earth)

As the social formation gradually evolved toward the early state stage, shamanism began to intertwine with politics. Shamans served the ruling class, becoming tools and appendages of imperial family culture (Humphrey 1994, pp. 191–228). The event of “blocking the passage between heaven and earth” (*juedi tiantong* 绝地天通), recorded in ancient texts, is often cited to illustrate this¹. Chang (2010, pp. 4–18; 1983, pp. 313–30), in multiple writings, highlighted the role of the event of “blocking the passage between heaven and earth” in promoting the formation of civilized or class-based societies. He argued that before “blocking the passage between heaven and earth”, everyone could potentially be a shaman. After “blocking the passage between heaven and earth”, only professional religious officials like Chong and Li remained, serving the ruling class exclusively. People in the early state stage believed that “Heaven” and “spirits” were the sources of knowledge, and controlling the means of communication with “Heaven” and “spirits” equated to holding political power over others. The methods of connecting heaven and earth were monopolized by the ruling class, who began accumulating political power and wealth on this basis, leading to hierarchical changes in human relationships. Thus, civilized or class-based societies, or the initial concept of a “state,” gradually emerged.

Z. Li (2005, p. 28) categorized the trajectory of shamanic activities after “blocking the passage between heaven and earth”. He pointed out that, on one hand, and primarily, the rituals derived from prehistoric shamanic practices of connecting heaven and earth were elevated by Confucian rites and music, evolving into state ideology and serving the political activities of the monarch, becoming a spiritual bond supporting China’s patriarchal relationships and communal consciousness. On the other hand, shamans who preserved the prehistoric ecstatic rituals of heaven–earth communication gradually moved into the folk sphere, focusing on healing and ultimately developing into non-institutional cultural modalities. These non-institutional cultural modalities, accompanied by myths, doctrines, and mystical experiences, were eventually integrated into folk beliefs, becoming an essential part of local religious activities. In summary, shamanism, which was widespread in prehistoric society and centered around communicating with spirits, was marginalized in ancient civilizations, relegated to private folk beliefs, with its survival space often dictated by the shifting tides of political discourse. For example, unorganized folk beliefs were often tolerated by local officials as “private worship” (*si si* 私祀). However, the state ideology represented by Confucian ethics and rituals set clear boundaries for tolerating ghost and spirit worship and shamanic practices, strictly prohibiting the use of such beliefs to deceive the public. Due to their conflict with official orthodoxy, folk shamanism as a non-institutional cultural modality was often suppressed as “heterodox worship” (*yin si* 淫祀) or “evil cults” (*xie jiao*, 邪教) during periods of strict political control, such as the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) (S. Li 2022, pp. 74–75). The relationship between shamanism and society during this period is often summarized as “religion subordinate to politics” (S. Li 2022, p. 123).

2.3. Communist Period (1949–1978): Religion in Opposition to Politics

In the early years after the foundation of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party presented itself more as a revolutionary party rather than a firmly established ruling party. X. Li (2010, pp. 513–16) pointed out that the hallmark of the communist period in the PRC was the replacement of religious practices with revolutionary ideas, constructing a national state-building movement centered around revolutionary faith. As the Communist Party conducted land reforms and the People's Commune movement in rural areas, the penetration of this revolutionary faith extended into the folk sphere. Thus, the Communist Party tried to transform the faith in rites esteemed by the official ideology of ancient civilization and the popular folk belief in shamanism into a channel of faith in the Party and Chairman Mao Zedong. Furthermore, the Communist Party's thorough promotion of materialist atheism led to a further repression of the private existence of shamanism, which was viewed as a feudal superstition. Shamanism officially disappeared, but in some cases, people secretly continued to perform rituals. Xiao (2010, p. 61) indicates: "The time of strong administrative interference in folk beliefs often coincides with the founding period of a dynasty, clearly aimed at implementing the spiritual beliefs advocated by the rulers. Yet, curiously, these folk beliefs, no matter how harshly criticized or suppressed, have continued to be transmitted within traditional community". For instance, especially during times when revolutionary ideology weakened, the farmers residing in villages still maintained traditional customs, indicating that the spiritual concepts from shamanism persisted (Zhang 2012, pp. 84–86). During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976, *wenhua da geming* 文化大革命), Chinese shamans secretly hid their Shamanic objects and quietly brought them out for sacrificial activities during festivals (S. Meng 2019, p. 155). Such religious resilience under state suppression is not an isolated case. During the Soviet collectivization period (1920s–1930s), while Siberian herders publicly professed atheism, many families secretly continued traditional shamanic rituals (see Vitebsky 2006; Sadomskaya and Dragadze 1990; Lane 1981). This reflects, to some extent, a shared logic of ritual transformation in socialist contexts: excising their religious core and remolding them into content that serves the state ideology. The dual survival strategy adopted by traditional ritual practitioners—superficial compromise coupled with private adherence to faith—demonstrates the flexible survival tactics of religious practices under socialist frameworks. The relationship between shamanism and society during this period can be characterized as "Religion in Opposition to Politics."

Throughout the historical changes of shamanism, its relationship with the political landscape and corresponding ownership nature can be summarized as follows: in the prehistoric period, "Unity of Religion and Politics" ("public-private unity" ownership); in ancient civilization, "Religion Subordinate to Politics" ("private" ownership); and during the communist period, "Religion in Opposition to Politics" ("private" ownership). In prehistoric times, the concept of the state had not yet emerged, and with every household having its own shamans, the ownership of shamanism in Northeast China was neither distinctly public nor private—it could be considered entirely public or entirely private. Traditional core shamanism emphasizes personal spirituality. Therefore, when collective notions of the state emerged (i.e., from ancient civilizations through communist periods), traditional core shamanism clashed with mainstream political systems, remaining marginalized. Its ownership and identity attributes have consistently maintained a private nature, subjected to state-level regulation and suppression. This ownership situation did not change until China embraced the preservation of ICH in the 21st century.

3. The Publicness of Contemporary Northeast Shamanism in China Within the Context of ICH

Since China's 1978 reform and opening-up, the Chinese Communist Party has shifted from revolutionary struggle to economic modernization governance, consolidating social forces for national development. This transition prompted a diversification of belief systems (X. Li 2010), enabling the coexistence of atheists and theists in socialist construction, with shamanism reemerging as practitioners metaphorically declared "the sky has cleared" (Fu and Zhao 2010). Although the state has shown increased tolerance towards religious practices since the reform and opening-up, "folk beliefs" such as shamanism are still regarded as "socially marginal beings" within Chinese society (Kister 1999). According to *The Beijing News*, shortly after the turn of the 21st century, the local government in Zhejiang Province, in Eastern China, demolished over ten thousand local shrines in its campaign against "feudal superstition" (Chen 2010, pp. 158–59). Zhou (2013) notes that despite the gradual public emergence of folk beliefs in contemporary society, their identity remains constrained by issues of legitimacy. A key resolution to this issue began in 2004 when China signed the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Since then, shamanism—previously seen as a local folk belief in ancient civilizations, and denigrated as "backward superstition" during the Cultural Revolution—is now gradually moving towards legitimacy as an ICH and a valuable cultural resource, and is tolerated by the government to a certain extent. Northeast shamanism in China has also experienced a degree of revival as a result. Xiao (2010, p. 62) points out that "once folk beliefs become cultural heritage in the new era, they naturally have the opportunity to stand tall; we have finally acknowledged the legitimacy of folk beliefs (although the public has always considered them rightful). This is a circumstance that folk beliefs have never encountered in the thousands of years of historical society."

Under the designation of ICH, shamanism has begun to occupy a place in the national public discourse. Simultaneously, or as a prerequisite, in regions where shamanism is practiced, believers have relinquished certain ownership rights over shamanism, allowing it to become a public heritage managed collectively by the state, embodying the concept of the "generation of the public from the private". Within this newly added "publicness", a "contractual" relationship has been established between the applicants for shamanic ICH and the government. The applicants commit to viewing the protection and transmission of this heritage as their obligation, rather than merely regarding the knowledge, skills, and talents they possess as private property (K. Liu 2016). As an inheritor of the Manchu shamanism ICH project, Shi Guanghua has even been given a formal position, working at the Manchu Museum in Jilin province and employed by the state, becoming an official member of the system (He 2017, p. 87). Various levels of government serve as the guiding and leading forces in the protection of ICH, responsible for reviewing, approving, and publishing lists, while also recognizing and accepting the commitments of applicants and supporting them in their protective efforts².

Undoubtedly, the Chinese government has become the dominant force in the discourse surrounding ICH within this contractual relationship. Since the establishment of the state, politics has occupied a significant position in Chinese society. Even after the reform and opening-up of the 1980s, politics continues to hold absolute discourse in China. The core criterion for evaluating a Party member or even an ordinary citizen remains whether their political direction is correct. The transformation of shamanism in Northeast China into a public cultural heritage, partially owned and protected by the state, is also driven by current political considerations through the establishment of public heritage, creating a shared cultural identity, constructing political and national recognition, and promoting local economic development as a cultural resource. Supported by the gov-

ernment, established by the Oroqen people themselves, ethnic tourism such as “shamanic culture” (*saman wenhua* 萨满文化) is the most tourist-popular travel project in the Greater and Lesser Khingan Mountains of Heilongjiang Province, and has become an important income for the locality (Guan and Wang 2010, pp. 35–37). At the same time, the content of shamanism, in applying for ICH, must also undergo strategic adaptations to meet the state’s criteria for such heritage. In fact, any folk belief system intended for inclusion in the heritage list and seeking legitimacy in the public sphere is compelled to implement certain modifications to some extent.

The “Dragon Tablet” belief revitalization project in Fanzhuang 范庄 Village, Hebei Province, serves as a representative case study. Centered on the spiritually potent “Dragon” spirit, villagers organized temple fairs for centuries through the Dragon Tablet Temple Fair to pray for blessings and avert disasters. However, this tradition was suppressed and disrupted during the 20th century due to sociopolitical transformations. In 2003, villagers innovatively adopted a dual-naming strategy—externally registering as the “Dragon Culture Museum” for ICH recognition, emphasizing cultural-educational functions, while internally preserving its ritual role as the “Dragon Ancestral Temple” (*long zu miao* 龙祖庙), thereby establishing a “museum-Temple duality” framework. This dual-naming framework allowed the community to circumvent religious sensitivities while leveraging state-sanctioned heritage recognition to legitimize faith-based practices, ultimately achieving the localized revival of the “Dragon Tablet” belief (Gao 2014). Shamanism also employs similar strategic adaptations when applying for ICH status.

As Qu and Meng have noted, all shamanic projects included in China’s ICH list are emphasized as cultural and artistic elements rather than religious or spiritual elements such as “shamanic trance healing” or *chuma* (出马, initiation ritual that marks someone becoming a full-fledged shaman) (Qu 2024; H. Meng 2018, pp. 153–57). The listed shamanic ICH items are divided into three categories: Musical Art: Mongolian Boo dance (Inner Mongolia), Ning’an Manchu sacrificial music (Heilongjiang), etc.; Material Culture: Evenki shamanic costumes and tools (Inner Mongolia) and shamanic bone idol-making skills (Jilin), etc.; and Sacrificial Customs: Daur shamanic oboe sacrifice (Inner Mongolia), the Yang clan’s shamanic eagle sacrifice (Heilongjiang), and the Shi clan’s ancestor worship rite (Jilin), etc. (Qu 2020).

Naran (2021, pp. 214–25) points out that the current attitude of the Chinese government toward contemporary shamanism exhibits duality. On one hand, when shamanism presents itself in a folklorized and heritagized form that emphasizes cultural significance—aimed at enhancing cultural soft power and boosting regional economies—it often receives government recognition and support. On the other hand, when shamanism appears as a religious belief, it is viewed by the authorities as a potential threat. Although there is yet to be a national formal document regulating folk beliefs like shamanism, projects related to belief have generally failed to gain approval when applying for ICH (Sa 2021, p. 489). The application of folk beliefs such as shamanism for ICH remains a highly sensitive issue, forcing applicants to strategically adjust their representations of shamanism during the application process. The tendencies toward heritagization and folklorization that accentuate cultural hues have become novel hallmarks of contemporary North Chinese shamanism (Se 2015).

In addition to being packaged with cultural hues, Northeast Chinese shamanism actively seeks and emphasizes aspects that align with official mainstream discourse when applying for and showcasing its ICH project. On 12 December 2024, I was invited to the home of a Zhang family shaman, which serves as a shamanic cultural exhibition hall, to watch the performance of the *Single Drum Dance* from the Chen Han Military Banner in Ula Town, Jilin province, a national-level ICH project. The *Single Drum Dance* is an

important component of shamanic ritual belief in Jilin Province, passed down through generations by the Zhang family as inheritors of ICH. Before the performance began, one of the lean shaman inheritors proactively explained its meaning: “We, the descendants, must never forget our ancestors, because every family has its forebears. The *burning incense*³ (*shao xiang* 烧香) in the ritual performance is simply an expression of piety toward our ancestors”⁴ (Figure 1). In other words, from the outset, the shaman legitimized the inherited shamanic ICH project, emphasizing that their ritual acts are a form of ancestor worship accepted and recognized by the public or the state, rather than the worship of spirits. In fact, the entrance of the Zhang shaman’s home displayed typical elements of ancestor worship. The couplets on either side of the gate read, “*In inheriting the land, we always cherish reverence; in the ritual hall, we never forget the aspirations of our ancestors*” (*chuanchengdi shenzhong changcun yipianxin, yanyitang zhuiyuan buwang xianrenzhi* 传承地慎终常存一片心, 演仪堂追远不忘先人志), accompanied by the character “德” (virtue), symbolizing their commemoration of ancestors and reverence for the past (Figure 2).

Inside the house, elements unique to shamanic rituals were evident, such as the altar in the center dedicated to various spirits. Later, when I inquired further about the altar of spirits with the shaman inheritors of the Zhang family, another inheritor, who was relatively stout, explained: “Among the spirits worshipped, the central tablet is dedicated to ancestors, while others are for Guan Gong (关公) and Erlang Shen (二郎神)⁵. Both Erlang Shen and Guan Gong are spirits from traditional Chinese culture, representing filial piety (*xiao* 孝) and loyalty (*zhong* 忠), respectively—values highly promoted by the state.”⁶ I noticed that the altar also included spirits like the “Eagle Spirit”, invoked during shamanic possession, but the shaman inheritors deliberately avoided mentioning them (Figure 3).



Figure 1. The shaman, an ICH inheritor, was burning incense to invite the spirits. Photograph by Liu Xiaoshuang, 12 December 2024.



Figure 2. The couplets of the gate: “In inheriting the land, we always cherish reverence; in the ritual hall, we never forget the aspirations of our ancestors” (*chuanchengdi shenzhong changcun yipianxin, yanyitang zhuiyuan buwang xianrenzhi* 传承地慎终常存一片心, 演仪堂追远不忘先人志), and the couplets of the gate and the character *De* “德” (virtue). Photograph by Liu Xiaoshuang, 12 December 2024.



Figure 3. At the very top hangs the sacred tablet of the spirit worshipped by the shaman. Photograph by Liu Xiaoshuang, 12 December 2024.

Furthermore, the stout shaman added: “In the past, when we conducted rituals, they were primarily to pray for the well-being of our family and clan members. However, in today’s shamanic ICH performances, we have incorporated prayers for the stability and prosperity of the nation, as well as the flourishing of all families”⁷. For example, on the fifth day of the Lunar New Year in 2025, the Year of the Snake, Shi Zhongduo, a Manchu shaman and inheritor of ICH, performed a shamanic blessing ceremony at the Manchu Museum. The narration stated:

In this prosperous era of China, we celebrate a joyful and harmonious New Year. On 2 February 2025, the fifth day of the Lunar New Year, the Jilin City Manchu Museum has prepared a special program—a shamanic blessing. This is not an ordinary performance or game but a solemn ancient ritual of faith, allowing visitors to experience the solemnity and mystery of traditional culture. The Manchu people believe in shamanic culture and hold shamanic blessing ceremonies during major festivals and important life events, both to express gratitude for all they have received and to seek blessings for future life. Citizens take the Manchu character for *Fu* “福” (fortune) home, which brings happiness to their entire family. Concurrently, the shaman extends his blessings for our nation’s prosperity, the people’s well-being, and the early realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation—the Chinese Dream.⁸

It is evident that even though folk beliefs such as shamanism enter the state-recognized legal domain through the “intangible cultural heritage (ICH)” designation, this recognition entails conditional tolerance—a point that becomes clearer when contrasted with the state’s attitude toward the five major institutionalized religions. According to official Chinese policy, the government explicitly recognizes and financially supports the five major religions—Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism—permitting them to publicly conduct traditional ceremonies that invoke Buddha, Jesus, Allah, angels, and spirits of different types. In contrast, the official ICH program grants shamans limited legal status only when they relinquish their core religious function of public spirit intermediaries, at least in public. This policy duality reveals a deeper governance logic: the functional incorporation of institutional religions (allowing the retention of religious essence within regulatory frameworks) versus the systematic decoupling of belief essence from folk practices (permitting only sanitized cultural forms into public spheres).

Nevertheless, despite Northeast Chinese shamanism adapting to official mainstream discourse in various ways during its (ICH) designation process, it remains at the lower end of the ICH funding hierarchy. China’s ICH projects are distinguished between “protection” (*bao hu* 保护) and “preservation” (*bao cun* 保存). Article 3 of the *Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People’s Republic of China* states: “The state shall adopt measures such as identification, documentation, and archiving to preserve ICH, and for those that embody the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation and possess historical, literary, artistic, or scientific value, measures such as transmission and dissemination shall be taken to protect them.” (Gov.cn 2011). Ma and Zhu (2018, pp. 76–77) argue that although the difference between “protection” and “preservation” is just one character, it reflects the Chinese government’s “value orientation” in ICH practices—only those ICH items that embody the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation are given protection, promotion, and development. Naturally, for practices like northeast shamanism, which have long existed on the margins and in private spheres with religious connotations, the approach is preservation rather than active promotion or development. A Daur gentleman from Hulunbuir, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, who lives in an environment of shamanic belief and has participated in the ICH application process for shamanic culture, once expressed his frustration to me: “The international ICH convention refers to all ICH as ‘protection,’ but

only China distinguishes between ‘protection’ and ‘preservation’. Why can the indigenous religions that have existed on Northeast lands within China since ancient times only be classified as folk beliefs? Why can they only be ‘preserved’ and not ‘protected’?”⁹

How do believers, with the shaman as the core representative, perceive shamanic projects as public heritage? I once asked this question to three shamans who are inheritors of ICH, and they all expressed their delight at being recognized as ICH inheritors. However, I was uncertain whether this sentiment originated from their contractual relationship with the government as ICH inheritors. An in-depth conversation with the stout shaman, however, dispelled my doubts on this matter. The stout shaman said: “Shamanism teaches people to revere heaven, earth, ancestors, spirits, and all things. Therefore, I strive to do good deeds and promote positive energy throughout my life. In fact, shamanism shares the same goal as the state—to promote positive energy. We are very grateful that the state is now legitimizing shamanism. Only when the country is strong can the people live in peace. Although we sometimes perform in the context of ICH, every action we take is carried out with reverence and follows ancient methods. It’s just that you don’t understand it.”¹⁰ This shows that even within the packaged framework of public heritage, shamans still convey the sacredness derived from prehistoric practices of connecting heaven and earth.

4. Public–Private Interactions in Contemporary Northeast Chinese Shamanism Within the Framework of ICH

Of course, becoming an ICH with “publicness” does not necessarily mean that the privateness of shamanism is entirely lost. The core practices of shamanic beliefs, such as connecting heaven and earth, still belong to the shaman inheritors and the local shamanic believers. In fact, the new identity of shamanism as public heritage is crucial to its private identity, and the two have developed a more nuanced interaction. In this process of interaction, different people perceive expressions of shamanism’s diverse qualities, outlining its multifaceted image. This interaction is mainly reflected in two aspects: one is the “generation of the public from the private”, represented by the emergence of public heritage associated with shamanism; the other is the “promotion of the private by the public”, manifested in the fact that after certain shamanic practices gain recognition and support from the government in the form of ICH, they can, to some extent, protect the private practices of shamanic believers, preventing them from being labeled as “superstition”. Among the contemporary Daur people in China, there is a shaman named Guo Baoshan. As an inheritor of ICH of shamanic culture, he is also referred to as a “licensed *Yadgan* (the daur term for “shaman”)” due to his government-issued certificate as a cultural inheritor. Many individuals from other regions seek his assistance for medical treatment (S. Meng 2019, p. 180). In Daur Molidawa banner, in Hulun Buir, China, people seeking shamanic healing come in a steady stream, and shamanic rituals for healing are conducted normally without official interference or restrictions (S. Meng 2012, pp. 436–37). Nowadays, Daur people sometimes joke: the ancestral spirit “*xodʒor*” (霍卓日 *huozhuori*) knows it’s a good day, and they are all coming out to *chuma* (Sa 2021, p. 493).

There is an old Chinese proverb saying, “It’s easier to get things done when one has connections in the court (*chaozhong youren hao banshi* 朝中有人好办事).” The dual characteristics of contemporary Chinese shamanism vividly illustrate this point. The newly heritagized shamanism, emerging from the “private” sphere of shamanism, has become an officially privileged “courtly matter”. With such a “courtly” connection, it provides some support for shamanism, which has existed on the margins of private life since ancient times. From this perspective, the publicness of Northeast Chinese shamanism does not necessarily replace or eradicate its privateness but can appropriately assist it. Thus, China’s ICH policy can be seen as an artistic practice of Chinese politics. In this artistic practice, the

public and private aspects of Northeast Chinese shamanism mutually support each other to some extent, finding suitable spaces for expression, which not only meets the discursive needs of the authorities but also responds to the spiritual demands of private believers. Gao (2022, pp. 412–13) argues that ICH can only acknowledge the cultural and artistic dimensions of shamanism, as this is “a result of the inherent characteristics of the existing system, not merely a strategic approach but also the proper role of cultural work rather than religious work. However, understanding must be comprehensive...” In other words, ICH is only a strategic manifestation of the current system, but a complete understanding of shamanism must also include its private belief aspects. During one of my visits to the ICH-related departments in Hulunbuir, China, an administrative staff member told me, “We only handle the part of shamanism that applies for ICH status; the private part is not our concern.”¹¹ He looked at me, his expression seemingly jesting about the political artistry of the state in its handling of shamanic ICH issues, hinting that the harmonious coexistence of the public and private dimensions of shamanism is an open secret and anticipating that I, too, would come to understand it.

Private shamanism, rooted in the tradition of connecting heaven and earth, represents the core embodiment of shamanic sacred beliefs. If shamans express sacredness in a “hidden” form during public heritage performances, they convey it more thoroughly in private settings. The inheritor, the stout shaman said: “We worship the spirits privately. During those times, the spirits return, and we perform rituals to invite and send them off. These things are incomprehensible; sometimes even we can’t explain them—they just happen. That is the true setting for worship, and sometimes those watching our performances are moved to tears”.¹² Given the sensitivity of private shamanism in China, it is almost never open to the public, except to specific groups such as insiders of the shamanic belief circle, patients, and certain scholars. For devout shamanic believers, the spirits have always existed, from prehistoric times to the present. Thus, whenever I asked the believers how they viewed shamanism as ICH, they often told me: “You must understand shamanism from its roots and beliefs.” When I asked about the impact of being an ICH inheritor on the status of shamans, shamans replied: “For me, being a shaman means doing more good deeds.” When I asked further questions about what spirits are, where they reside, and how they heal, even though the shamans might think some scholars are writing nonsense, they still refuse to disclose ultimate secrets, not even to their families. They often say, “Revealing too much is harmful for me and even worse for you, unless you are my disciple. Some things are divine secrets. Although we cannot fully explain them, they are effective nonetheless”.¹³

However, there is a certain degree of contradiction within the public–private interaction. As a sacred belief system since ancient times, shamanism possesses its own unique characteristics. Firstly, shamans are often compelled to assume this role due to a divine calling. Once they become shamans, as sacred intermediaries between heaven and earth, they must undertake a sacred mission, such as praying for blessings and averting disasters for individuals and clans. If they do not become shamans or fail to fulfill these duties, they and their families often face spiritual punishment. Therefore, not just anyone can become a shaman, and shamans cannot perform rituals arbitrarily. Sa (2021, p. 476) points out: “(When shamans perform) rituals, there must be a reason for the rituals. Shamanic attire and drums are not things to be used casually; they are sacred objects that connect with the spirits”. When embedded in the ICH context, an irreconcilable contradiction arises between private shamanism as a sacred representation and public shamanism as a heritage performance.

During fieldwork, the Daur gentleman told me about someone who, although not a shaman, became an inheritor of the ICH project for shamanic attire due to his ability to

make shamanic costumes. However, this inheritor passed away not long after. Locals widely believed it was spiritual punishment for his inappropriate performances wearing shamanic attire despite not being a shaman.¹⁴ A renowned elderly Daur shaman also became a local ICH inheritor of shamanic culture. Once, while performing a spirit possession ritual in a park for an organization, her ancestral spirits refused to descend, citing that it was not for the community's benefit. After that, she never performed spirit possession in a decontextualized setting (Qu 2024). In contrast, consider the following example.

Once, the Ulan Muqir (a cultural performance troupe) of Morin Dawa Banner in Inner Mongolia staged a large-scale performance titled *The Sun God*, which drew its themes and movements from shamanic rituals. As the actors began to perform, they started beating shamanic drums. Following the rhythmic drumming, the actors danced gracefully. When the drumbeats intensified and the performance reached its climax, one actor exhibited unusual symptoms, entering a state of spirit possession. Eventually, the actor collapsed on stage. After this incident, the actor never performed in the program again. This event became widely known throughout Morin Dawa Banner, and locals explained that the actor had “Hojoor” (the daur term for “root of ancestral spirits”, in Chinese: *zu gen* 祖根). They believed that the spirits of his ancestors had sought him out, possessing his body, which led to his trance and subsequent collapse (S. Meng 2012, p. 75).

That is to say, the sacred possesses absolute authority, and the shaman, who is connected to spirituality and ancestral roots, serves as a representative of the sacred and cannot perform arbitrarily. An expert deeply involved in ICH work even expressed the following view: “Folk religious beliefs such as shamanism might not be suitable for inclusion in ICH. When you truly immerse yourself in the local communities, you will find that those who are not eager to be listed in heritage inventories are genuine shamans. It is there that true faith resides.”¹⁵

Through an analysis of public–private interactions in the contemporary shamanism of Northeast China, it can be observed that there exists an intricate and intertwined symbiotic relationship network between the two. Within the framework of the “generation of the public from the private”, shamanism acquires a state-tolerated public heritage identity by sacrificing its core spiritual beliefs. Nevertheless, real shamans strive to find hidden or state-compatible sacred expressions within public discourse. Within the framework of the “promotion of the private by the public”, leveraging the legitimacy of public heritage status allows private sacred beliefs to be partially practiced and developed. It must be emphasized that the “connecting heaven and earth”, as a core sacred belief of shamanism that has persisted from prehistoric times to the present day, continues to occupy a pivotal role in public–private interactions. If shamanic ICH performances in public discourse arbitrarily trample on sacred standards—such as casually performing the core shamanic practice of spirit possession in a decontextualized public setting, or non-shamans inheriting shamanic attire—they will face backlash from the prehistoric sacred essence of the “connecting heaven and earth”. In contemporary shamanic practice, publicness and privateness manifest as mutually permeating, mutually constitutive symbiotic forms. This dialectical relationship not only reveals the inherent tension between the sacredness (privately) and performative nature (publicly) of shamanism as an ICH, but also reflects the mutual adaptive wisdom in the integration of shamanism with modern Chinese national governance. It is not a simple process of the “publicness” eliminating the “ privateness”. So why do some scholars believe that the sacredness of shamanism is weakened under the influence of ICH policies (Xing and Murray 2018; Xuan 2014). This requires an understanding of how different contemporary ethnic groups perceive shamanism and the spaces they delineate for it.

Through investigative research, I have discovered that different groups hold varying attitudes toward contemporary shamanism, which can be categorized into the following three types. Core shamanic believers: Represented by shamans themselves, these individuals steadfastly acknowledge the sacredness of shamanism. For instance, among the Manchu shamans of the Shi clan and their ritual assistants (*zaili* 裁力), shamanism remains fundamentally faith-centric. As explained by Shi Zongxiang, a shaman of the Shi clan: “Our Shi clan has spirits, but it’s different from those who perform exorcisms and healings—those are the tricks of miscellaneous clans pretending to be spirits” (Yuan 2014, p. 213). General public: The general populace holds a skeptical yet partially believing attitude towards contemporary shamanism, including those who have lived within shamanic-believing communities. For example, with the passage of time, some members of the Manchu ethnic group in China have become less active in local shamanic rituals (Yu et al. 2019, P.166). Similarly, some Daur people now hold the view that Shamanism is “not entirely believable, but not entirely dismissible either”. They believe that some phenomena are hard to explain, and the beliefs passed down by their ancestors should not be easily dismissed (S. Meng 2019, p. 156). The critics: Individuals such as government officials and intellectuals, who maintain a distance from shamanism, often hold a critical stance. They view shamanism as having transformed under new social conditions into a cultural symbol for national identity construction, a resource for economic development, or even a form of entertainment while avoiding discussions on its religious aspects. As mentioned earlier, officials from Hulunbuir exemplify this stance.

Through her research on shamanism among the Northeast ethnic groups of China, H. Meng (2018, pp. 164–65) also observed such phenomena and conducted statistical analyses on the numbers of people holding different attitudes. She pointed out that nowadays, a minority fully affirm shamanism; many hold a skeptical yet partially believing attitude, and a significant number hold critical or opposing views. It is evident that for the first category of core believers, whether in public ICH performances or private rituals, they are practicing and experiencing the sacred. For the third category, who maintain a psychological distance from shamanism, they are more inclined to recognize and promote a publicly presented shamanism packaged as an artistic and cultural form, while dismissing any aspects that carry religious connotations. The attitudes of the second category represent a transition between the first and third categories; they might perceive the public in private shamanism and the private in public shamanism, leading to them holding a skeptical yet partially believing attitude. Given that the second and third categories constitute the majority, and shamans remain reticent towards those who are distrustful or lack a connection, they avoid discussing the sacred meanings in public performances or prevent outsiders from participating in private rituals. This leads to the perception that, influenced by ICH policies, shamanism has been reduced to a culturally packaged public heritage image. However, the sacredness of shamanism in the private domain has not disappeared; it even influences shamanism as a public heritage—shamans practice sacredness in implicit or state-compatible ways in public, and non-orthodox performances in public may incur sacred punishments for the inheritors of shamanic culture. The diverse perspectives on shamanism arise because individuals with different attitudes automatically select different aspects of shamanism.

5. Conclusions

The ownership status of shamanism in Northeast China has undergone a historical evolution: from “public–private unity” (prehistoric times), to predominantly “private–ness” (during ancient civilizations and communist periods), and then to a “coexistence of both public and private” (in the contemporary context of IHC). In contemporary society,

shamanism in Northeast China has developed a bidirectional interactive model between its dual identities as public heritage and private belief, characterized by the “generation of the public from the private” and the “promotion of the private by the public”. This interactive model not only fulfills the needs of national identity and economic development (publicly) but also addresses the spiritual demands of the believing community (privately), demonstrating shamanism’s adaptability and vitality in contemporary society, as well as the political artistry of China’s ICH policies in dealing with religious issues. Although Chinese administrative discourse has taken the initiative in the ICH movement, within the public–private interaction of shamanism, the private sacredness inherited from the pre-historic belief of “connecting heaven and earth” has remained unchanged. This private sacredness even exerts a sacred influence on shamanism as a public heritage. This finding revises the previous view that ICH policies merely undermine the sacredness of shamanism, thereby providing a richer case perspective for a deeper understanding of the essence of shamanism, its transformations and constants, and its complex interactive relationship with contemporary society.

6. Limitations

Due to the significant unpredictability of shamanic ICH performances, this study’s field observations successfully documented only a single case of the *Single Drum Dance* (a rare national-level ICH project) in Jilin Province. While the *Single Drum Dance* holds notable cultural value, the singularity of this sample may limit the interpretive depth regarding the public–private interaction mechanisms within shamanic cultural fields, potentially failing to fully unveil its multidimensional symbiotic relationships.

7. Suggestions for Future Research

1. Continue longitudinal observations of the Jilin Shamanic *Single Drum Dance*, focusing not only on officially recognized ICH exhibitions but also extending to ritual practices in private, folk contexts. Long-term ethnographic fieldwork could holistically map the interplay between publicness and privateness in shamanism.
2. Develop a comprehensive research framework across administrative hierarchies by systematically cataloging the four-tiered inventory system (national/provincial/prefectural/county-level) of shamanic ICH in Northeast China.
3. Through multi-level, multi-typological and long-term sampling, explore the establishment of a systematic public–private interaction mechanism for shamanic ICH preservation, while investigating the dynamic negotiation space between shamanic belief systems and contemporary Chinese governance.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Verbal informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The blocking of the passage between earth and heaven is discussed in the Chinese classic *Guoyu Chuyu II* (国语·楚语下): At the time of the decline of Shao hao’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 (颛琐) 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. (Guoyu 2016, p. 344)

- 2 The specific requirements are as follows: Applicants (typically individuals who fully master the core skills of a specific ICH project and hold recognized authoritative status within its designated cultural space) may apply through three channels: individual application, institutional recommendation, or expert nomination. The government conducts a multi-tiered review process to evaluate applications. Once officially designated as an ICH inheritor, they assume the following legal obligations: Conduct inheritance activities and train successors; Safeguard related physical artifacts and documentation; Collaborate with cultural authorities and relevant departments in ICH surveys; Participate in public-interest promotion of ICH. ICH inheritors are entitled to the following statutory rights: Provision of designated venues for inheritance activities; Financial subsidies to support apprenticeships, skill transmission, and cultural exchanges; Assistance in engaging in public welfare initiatives; Additional state-supported measures for inheritance and dissemination efforts (Gov.cn 2011).
- 3 *burning incense* is a significant part of Jilin shamanism, used to show respect and make prayers to spirits, carrying profound religious significance.
- 4 The data were from the lean shaman inheritors on 12 December 2024, in Ula Town, Changchun, China.
- 5 Guan Gong (Guan Yu 关羽)—The Exemplar of Loyalty and Righteousness. A renowned general of the Shu Han state during the Three Kingdoms period (220–280), Guan Yu was celebrated for his unwavering loyalty, bravery, and integrity. The Records of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo Zhi 三国志) documents his devotion to Liu Bei (Guan Yu’s sworn brother, who later became emperor), stating that he “shared a bed with Liu Bei as brothers, bound by profound camaraderie.” Erlang Shen (Yang Jian 杨戩)—A Case Study in Filial Piety. Yang Jian, the deity Erlang Shen, is a product of literary imagination. His legend of “Splitting the Mountain to Rescue His Mother” (from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) text 《erlang baojuan 二郎宝卷》) illustrates filial devotion.
- 6 The data were from the stout shaman on 17 February 2025, during a phone interview.
- 7 See note 6.
- 8 This document was published on the WeChat Video Channel: *Yangshu Yingxiang*.
- 9 The data were from the Daur gentleman on 19 September 2024, during a phone interview.
- 10 The data were from the stout shaman on 21 February 2025, during a phone interview.
- 11 The data were from the administrative staff on 10 September 2024, in Hulunbuir China.
- 12 See note 6.
- 13 The data were all from my personal fieldwork in China’s Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Jilin Province during the period from 2024 to 2025.
- 14 The data were from the Daur gentleman on 9 September 2024, in Hulunbuir China.
- 15 The data were from the expert of ICH on 12 December 2024, in Changchun, China.

References

- Blake, Janet. 2008. UNESCO’s 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage: The implications of community involvement in ‘safeguarding’. In *Intangible Heritage*. Edited by Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Chang, Kwang Chih 张光直. 1983. *Zhongguo qingtong shidai* 中国青铜时代 [*The Bronze Age of China*]. Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian.
- Chang, Kwang Chih 张光直. 2010. *Kaoguxue zhuanli liujiang* 考古学专题六讲讲 [*The Six Lectures on Archaeology*]. Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian.
- Chen, Jinguo 陈进国. 2010. Chuantong fuxing yu xinyang zijue-zhongguo minjian xinyang de xinshiji guancha 传统复兴与信仰自觉—中国民间信仰的新世纪观察 [Traditional Revival and Self-Awareness of Faith: An Observation of Chinese Folk Beliefs in the New Century]. In *Zhongguo zongjiao baogao (2010)* 中国宗教报告 (2010) [*China Religion Report (2010)*]. Edited by Jin Ze 金泽 and Yonghui Qiu 邱永辉. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe.
- Christian, David. 2004. *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Francfort, Henri-Paul, Roberte N. Hamayon, and Paul G. Bahn, eds. 2001. *The concept of shamanism: Uses and abuses*. Vol. 10. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- Fu, Yuguang 富育光, and Zhizhong Zhao 赵志忠. 2010. *Manzu wenhua yicun diaocha* 满族萨满文化遗存调查 [*Investigation of Manchu Shamanic Cultural Relics*]. Beijing: Minzu chubanshe.
- Gao, Bingzhong 高丙中. 2007. Zuowei feiwuzhi wenhua yicha yanjiu keti de minjian xinyang 作为非物质文化遗产研究课题的民间信仰 [Folk beliefs as a research topic of intangible cultural heritage]. *Jiangxi shehui kexue* 江西社会科学 3: 146–54.
- Gao, Bingzhong 高丙中. 2014. How Does Superstition Become Intangible Cultural Heritage in Postsocialist China? *Positions* 22: 551–72.

- Gao, Bingzhong 高丙中. 2022. Baohu feiwuzhi wenhua yichan gongyue de jingshen goucheng yu zhongguo shijian 《保护非物质文化遗产公约》的精神构成与中国实践 [The Spiritual Framework of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Its Chinese Implementation]. In *Feiwuzhi wenhua yichan xueshu jingcui* 非物质文化遗产学术精粹 [The academic essence of intangible cultural heritage]. Edited by Kang Li 康丽. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe.
- Gov.cn. 2011. Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage. Available online: https://www.gov.cn/flfg/2011-02/25/content_1857449.htm (accessed on 12 February 2025).
- Guan, Xiaoyun 关小云, and Honggang Wang 王宏刚. 2010. *Elunchunzu saman wenhua yicun diaocha* 鄂伦春族萨满文化遗存调查 [Survey of the Remains of the Oroqen Shaman Culture]. Beijing: Minzu chubanshe.
- Guoyu 国语 [The Book of State]. 2016. Chen, Tongsheng, trans. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- He, Xinsheng 何新生. 2017. Lun jilin wula manzu saman yiyue de chuancheng yu chuanbo 论吉林乌拉满族萨满音乐的传承与传播 [On the Inheritance and Dissemination of the Wula Manchu Shaman Music in Jilin]. In *Saman Wenhua Yanjiu 5* 萨满文化研究 5 [Research on Shamanic Culture 5]. Edited by Gang Xue 薛刚. Beijing: Minzu chubanshe.
- Humphrey, Caroline. 1994. Shamanic Practices and the State in Northern Asia: Views from the Center and Periphery. In *Shamanism, History, and the State*. Edited by Nicholas Thomas and Caroline Humphrey. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Kister, Daniel. 1999. Present Day Shamanism in Northern China and Amur Region. *Shaman* 7: 77–95.
- Kurin, Richard. 2004. Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in the 2003 UNESCO Convention: A critical appraisal. *Museum International* 56: 66–77. [CrossRef]
- Lane, Christel. 1981. *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society-The Soviet Case*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Li, Silong 李四龙. 2022. *Renwen zongjiao yinlun: Zhongguo xinyang chuantong yu richang shenghuo* 人文宗教引论: 中国信仰传统与日常生活 [Introduction to Humanities and Religions: Chinese Belief Traditions and Daily Life]. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe.
- Li, Xiangping 李向平. 2010. *Xinyang dan bu rentong: Dangdai zhongguo xinyang de shehuixue quanshi* 信仰但不认同: 当代中国信仰的社会学诠释 [Faith but not identification: A Sociological Interpretation of Faith in Contemporary China]. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe.
- Li, Zehou 李泽厚. 2005. *Youwudaoli shiliguiren* 由巫到礼 释礼归仁 [From Ritualistic Practices to Ethical Propriety: Interpreting Rites through the Lens of Humaneness]. Beijing: Sanlian shudian.
- Liu, Kuili 刘魁立. 2016. “Gongchan yishi” he “qiyue jingshen” “公产意识” 和 “契约精神” [“Public property awareness” and “contractual spirit”]. *Zhongwai wenhua jiaoliu* 中外文化交流 7: 94–95.
- Liu, Kuili 刘魁立. 2020. Feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu de huiwang yu sikao 非物质文化遗产保护的回望与思考 [A Review and Reflection on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage]. *Zhongguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 中国非物质文化遗产 1: 32–40.
- Liu, Kuili 刘魁立. 2023. *Liukuili feiyi baohu lunwenji* 刘魁立非遗保护论文集 [Liu Kuili's Collection of Papers on Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection]. Haerbin: Heilongjiang jiaoyu chubanshe.
- Liu, Xiaoshuang. 2023. Shamanic Culture's Reconnection of Earth and Heaven (Xu Ditiantong) in the New Era in China: The Dialectical Relationship between Material Civilization and Cultural Intimacy. *Religions* 14: 500. [CrossRef]
- Ma, Shengde 马盛德. 2022. Zhongguo feiyi baohu 20 Nian 中国非遗保护20年 [China's intangible cultural heritage protection has lasted for 20 years]. In *Guoji feiyi wendian* 国际非遗大典 [International Intangible Cultural Heritage Canon]. Edited by Hu Muqing 胡木清 and Tang Tingqiang 唐廷强. Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe.
- Ma, Guoqing 麻国庆, and Wei Zhu 朱伟. 2018. *Wenhua Renleixue yu feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 文化人类学与非物质文化遗产 [Cultural Anthropology and Intangible Cultural Heritage]. Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian chubanshe.
- Meng, Huiying 孟慧英. 2018. Guanyu saman wenhua yichan de sikao 关于萨满文化遗产的思考 [Thoughts on Shamanic Cultural Heritage]. In *Zongjiao xinyang yu minzu wenhua (10)* 宗教信仰与民族文化 (第十辑) [Religious Belief and National Culture (Volume 10)]. Edited by Xingliang He 何星亮. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe.
- Meng, Shengbin 孟盛彬. 2012. Dawoerzu saman jiao de shuailuo yu wenhua chonggou 达斡尔族萨满教的衰落与文化重构 [The Decline and Cultural Reconstruction of the Daur Shamanism]. In *Zongjiao xinyang yu minzu wenhua (4)* 宗教信仰与民族文化 (第四辑) [Religious Belief and National Culture (4)]. Edited by Yang Liao 廖旻. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe.
- Meng, Shengbin 孟盛彬. 2019. *Dawoerzu saman jiao yanjiu* 达斡尔族萨满教研究 [Research on Shamanism of the Daur Ethnic Group]. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe.
- Moondance, Wolf. 1994. *Rainbow Medicine: A Visionary Guide to Native American Shamanism*. New York: Sterling.
- Naran, Bilik. 2021. Unblocking the Blockage Between Earth and Heaven: Shamanic Space for Cultural Intimacy in China. In *Dealing with Disasters Perspectives from Eco Cosmologies*. Edited by Diana Riboli, Pamela J. Stewart, Andrew J. Strathern and Davide Torri. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peng, Zhaorong 彭兆荣. 2013. Yichan 遗产 [Heritage]. In *Wenhua yichan guanjianci* 文化遗产关键词 [Key Words of Cultural Heritage]. Edited by Zhaorong Peng 彭兆荣. Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe.
- Qu, Feng. 2024. The Double Identities of the Shaman and the Dualistic Attitudes of the State: An Exploration of Contemporary Organizational Shamanism in Northeast China. *Religions* 15: 415. [CrossRef]

- Qu, Feng 曲枫. 2020. Samanjiao yu bianjiang: Bianjiang wenhua shuxing de zairenshi 萨满教与边疆: 边疆文化属性的再认识 [Shamanism and the Frontier: A Re-understanding of the Cultural Attributes of the Frontier]. *Yunnan shehui kexue* 云南社会科学 5: 121–30.
- Sa, Minna 萨敏娜. 2021. *Dawoerzu saman yishi diaocha yanjiu* 达斡尔族萨满仪式调查研究 [Investigation and Research on the Shaman Rituals of the Daur Ethnic Group]. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe.
- Sadomskaya, Natalya, and Tamara Dragadze. 1990. *Soviet anthropology and contemporary rituals [with discussion]*. Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique: 245–55.
- Se, Yin 色音. 2015. Zhongguo saman jiao xianzhuang yu fazhan Taishi 中国萨满教现状与发展态势 [The Current Situation and Development Trend of Shamanism in China]. *Xibei minzu yanjiu* 西北民族研究 1: 63–78.
- Tunbridge, John E., and Gregory J. Ashworth. 1996. Dissonant heritage. *The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* 40: 547–60.
- UNESCO. 2003. Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Available online: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000132540> (accessed on 26 April 2025).
- Vitebsky, Piers. 2006. *The Reindeer People: Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Wu, Bingan 乌丙安. 2014. *Saman xinyang yanjiu* 萨满信仰研究 [Research on Shamanic Beliefs]. Changchun: Changchun chubanshe.
- Xiao, Fang 萧放. 2010. Wenhua yichan shiyexia de minjian xinyang chongjian 文化遗产视野下的民间信仰重建 [The Reconstruction of Folk Beliefs from the Perspective of Cultural Heritage]. *Tansuo yu zhengming* 探索与争鸣 5: 61–63.
- Xing, Haiyan, and Gerald Murray. 2018. The evolution of Chinese shamanism: A case study from Northwest China. *Religions* 9: 397. [CrossRef]
- Xuan, Bingshan 宣炳善. 2014. Feiyi huayu zhishi shengchan de zhongguo yujing 非遗话语知识生产的中国语境 [The Chinese Context of Knowledge Production of Intangible Cultural Heritage Discourse]. *Zhongyuan wenhua yanjiu* 中原文化研究 3: 9–14.
- Yuan, Jie 苑杰. 2014. *Chuantong saman jiao de fuxing: Dui xiboliya、dongbeiya、he beimeidi qu saman jiao de kaocha* 传统萨满教的复兴: 对西伯利亚、东北亚和北美地区萨满教的考察 [The Revival of Traditional Shamanism: An Investigation into Shamanism in Siberia, North-east Asia and North America]. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe.
- Yu, Yang 于洋, Huiying Meng 孟慧英, Shengbin Meng 孟盛彬, Hui Zeng 曾慧, and Luoguanjiaozu 罗关家族. 2019. *Manzu luoguan mukun xupu yu jizu kaocha* 满族罗关穆昆续谱与祭祖考察 [Genealogical Continuation and Ancestral Worship: An Ethnographic Study of the Luoguan Mukūn Clan in Manchu Culture]. Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe.
- Zhang, Letian 张乐天. 2012. *Gaobie lixiang: Renmin gongshe zhidu yanjiu* 告别理想: 人民公社制度研究 [Saying Goodbye to Ideals: Research on the People's Commune System]. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe.
- Zhou, Xing 周星. 2013. Minjian xinyang yu wenhua yichan 民间信仰与文化遗产 [Folk beliefs and cultural heritage]. *Wenhua yichan* 文化遗产 2: 1–10.
- Zhu, Yujie. 2015. Cultural effects of authenticity: Contested heritage practices in China. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21: 594–608. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.