Examining Erotic Images and Features of Chinese Shamanism in the *Nine Songs* of the *Songs of the South*

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Original Articles

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Abstract

As a religious phenomenon of humankind, shamanism has a very long history, and its earliest records go back several millennia even to the Stone Age. Although it is not universally present in every society, its global presence has been felt in nearly every corner of the world. Shamanism has also been and continues to be present throughout East Asia, and it has played a definite role in Chinese religions. It has also exerted a decisive influence in certain traditions of early Chinese poetry that continued throughout traditional China. This article discusses certain erotic images and features of a foundational collection of shamanic poetry from the southern state of Chu in early China, called the *Nine Songs*, which were collected into the anthology called the *Songs of the South*. This presentation looks at the logic of eroticism at the heart of these performances that functions in accord with yin-yang ideology, and it examines what the *Nine Songs* can show us about certain features of early Chinese religion and philosophy.

Keywords: the *Nine Songs*; *Songs of the South*; Chinese shamanism; Qu Yuan

Orientations to the Early Chinese Shamanism of the *Nine Songs*

The *Nine Songs* (九歌, *Jiuge*) are a collection of shaman songs found in the anthology called *The Songs of the South* (楚辭, *Chuci*), which provides the primary literary material for this study of early Chinese shamanism. The primary feature of this shamanism is its logic of eroticism between shamans and spirits. Other early Chinese writings also mention and discuss shamans, but their depictions differ from those of the *Nine Songs*. *The Rituals of Zhou* (周禮, *Zhouli*) shows them holding vital positions in the state bureaucracy, while others like *The Zuo Traditions* (左傳, *Zuozhuan*) depict them as pariah figures best left to themselves, whereas others still like *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海經, *Shanhaijing*) portray them as half-human and half-animal figures living on semi-mythical mountains.

As understood in this article, "shamanism" refers to symbolic systems of representation merging myths, beliefs, rituals, traditions, and worldviews in ritualized events involving direct, face to face, and primarily verbal interactions between humans and spirits of the dead or the spirits of nature for the benefit of the community that thereby enjoys the blessings or other boons from the spirits (Michael 2015). I refer to these ritualized events as "shamanic séances." At the same time, "the shaman" is a title for those persons who are socially authorized to perform such events, and they do so by initiating direct, face-to-face communication with the spirits. This takes place in two ways: either through shamanic journeys, whereby the shaman journeys to the realm of the spirits, or shamanic possessions, whereby the spirits come to take possession of the shamans.

Shamanism is not a singular phenomenon that follows a universal history in tandem with the development of human civilization, a relatively popular conception these days (Michael 2017). There are many kinds of shamanism, and they are appropriate to different kinds of economies (Hamayon 1996). Specifically with regard to China, we can locate three different forms of shamanism in ancient and early China. The first is the royal shamanism of ancient economies with its logic of transformation in which the shaman transforms into the ancestral Master of Game to communicate with the spirits of the ancestors. This form is characteristic and pervasive in the shamanism of the Xia (2100–1600 BCE) and Shang (1600–1050 BCE) (Johnson 1988). Worth noting, however, is that it was the root from which subsequent forms of Chinese shamanism evolved and developed.

The second form is the bureaucratic shamanism of traditional mixed economies with its logic of affliction in which the shaman manages the pollutions of death and disease. This form is embedded within the structures of centralized state authority identified with the northern Zhou culture that appears in the Western Zhou (ca. 1046–771 BCE) and the Spring and Autumn (770–475 BCE). In this case, the shamans were appointed to official position in the institutions of the Zhou, but they were subordinated to other religious specialists, primarily the invoker or priest (Lothar von Falkenhausen 1995).

Their practices emphasized shamanic possession to the near total absence of shamanic flight.

The third form is the agricultural shamanism of traditional farming economies with its logic of eroticism in which the shaman seduces the spirits into temporary sexualized liaisons. This predominated in the southern lands of Chu that were characterized by a diversity of ethnic peoples. Not yet entirely subject to the rigid structures of state authority, Chu experienced weaker forms of centralization, and its shamans were often represented as independent actors not subordinated to other religious specialists. This shamanism maintained more direct links with the ancient royal shamanism with its more direct links to animal and natural spirits, and it gave equal emphasis to shamanic possession and shamanic flight, at least as it is demonstrated in the *Nine Songs*. Its legitimacy emerges from the success of the shaman in forming a temporary love affair with nature spirits, but never with the spirits of game or ancestral spirits.

This study focuses on the *Nine Songs* that exemplarily display the agricultural shamanism of the early southern Chu cultural sphere. They portray nine separate shamanic séances that receive their individual titles based on the spirit that the shaman either flies to or is possessed by. In them, the shamans are shown to be at home in the fertile and exuberantly lush world of life and abundance of southern Chu, where they augment the blessings and benefits of life through forging a relationship with a particular nature spirit through the logic of eroticism.

Shamanic eroticism can be approached through the ideas of Georges Bataille, a pioneer in the study of the philosophical nature of eroticism, and he uncovered three forms of it: physical, emotional, and religious; he writes,

> My aim is to show that with all of them the concern is to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity. It is easy to see what is meant by physical or emotional eroticism, but religious eroticism is a less familiar notion. The term is ambiguous anyway in that all eroticism has a sacramental character, but the physical and the emotional are to be met with outside the religious sphere proper, while the quest for the continuity of experience systematically pursued beyond the immediate world signifies an essentially religious intention. (Bataille 1986, 15–16)

Physical and the emotional eroticism are mostly self-announcing, but religious eroticism significantly differs from them as a predominantly mystical phenomenon: profoundly personal, it is exclusively shared between a human being and a spiritual being. However, in addition to the three forms of eroticism recognized by Bataille, I recognize an additional fourth: shamanic eroticism. Although the shared features of both religious and shamanic eroticism are found in "the experience of profound continuity" that are difficult to separate from many forms of mysticism, they are quite different with respect to their separate practical realms, private mysticism for the former and public shamanism for the latter. And while both concern the erotic relationship between a

human and a spirit, their fundamental goals differ: religious eroticism is directed to the personal fulfillment of the individual, but shamanic eroticism is directed to the community benefit that accrues from bringing together the human and the divine in the public performance of the shaman in in the course of the séance event.

Shamanic eroticism is initiated by the shaman in the séance event, and it is activated in the direct encounter of the shaman and the spirit either in the shaman's flight or possession. Within the context of public performance, this eroticism is channeled into the production of a sense of the continuity of being with the divine experienced by and for a public community, in distinction to the religious eroticism normally performed in personal isolation that is channeled into the production of the individual's sense of a continuity of being with the divine. In these ways, the religious eroticism of the mystical experience fundamentally differs from the shamanic eroticism of the séance event.

All four forms of eroticism (physical, emotional, religious, and shamanic) refer to the experience of ravishment, but shamanic eroticism differs from each of the others because of it stems from the primal yearning for the renewal of human life in conjunction, alliance, or consummation with a spiritual being for the benefit of the community. All four forms, however, are typically expressed in the deeply personal feelings that energize love affairs, which proceed between humans in physical and emotional eroticism, but which proceed between humans and spirits in religious and shamanic eroticism. One clear instance of this is found in "The Greater Master of Fate" (大司命, *Da Siming*) when the female shaman anguishes over her separation from the male spirit to whom she directs her love:

> My constant thoughts of him torment my heart,
> What can I do with this torment?
> I wish only that our tryst of this day could last forever.
> Oh! Obstinate destiny, unchangingly fixed,
> Who is able to alter its dictates?
>
> 羌愈思兮愁人/ 愁人兮柰何/ 願若今兮無虧/
> 固人命兮有當/ 孰離合兮可為

Having introduced the logic of eroticism that anchors the *Nine Songs*, in ending this section, it is fitting to quote the words of Gopal Sukhu, who also has recognized its centrality for understanding the world conjured by this southern shamanism:

> The spirits in the *Nine Songs* descend, like most spirits in the Chinese ritual context, to enjoy food. But even more than food, they seek amorous contact with the shamans, who adorn themselves in various ways to make themselves attractive to the spirits. The central event in several of the *Nine Songs* hymns is the love affair between the spirits and the shamans. (Sukhu 2012, 77–78)

On the Southern Chu Cultural Background of the *Nine Songs*

Authorship of the *Nine Songs* is traditionally attributed to Qu Yuan (屈原), a nobleman during the reign of King Huai of Chu (楚懷王, r. 328–299 BC), but this attribution is certainly false. While the *Nine Songs* are literary masterpieces of a self-consciously poetic and romantic writer, the polished products of a sophisticated sensibility, they also express a *joie de vivre* that is presented in the first person voices of shamans and spirits, embodying a religious sensibility that feels more appropriate to a cultural consciousness rather than an individual poet. Sukhu writes, "Only a small fraction of the hymns that accompanied [early Chinese shamanic] rites survives. The *Nine Songs* and possibly some items from the *Shijing* are all that remain from the Warring States period … However, in quality, in the original at least, they rank among the best religious poetry in the world" (Sukhu 2012, 195–196).

Arthur Waley, the famous translator of many ancient Chinese texts who was enamored of the *Nine Songs*, wrote, "As regards the time when these Songs were put into their present form, I should say that the traditional dating (fourth to third century B.C.) seems quite reasonable. But of course the prototypes on which they were founded may in some cases go back to a much earlier period" (Waley 1955, 16–17). Although Waley is correct that *Nine Songs* reveal a performance structure that echoes ancient times past, I agree with him that they should still be taken as literary representations of religious performances carried out already in the 4th century BCE.

Wang Yi (王逸) was an important second century commentator of the *Songs of the South*, and he had much to say about the legend of Qu Yuan. Zhu Xi (朱熹), the famous Neo-Confucian of the Song Dynasty, polished, amended, and retold much of what Wang Yi had to say, and the following is his partial retelling of the origins of the *Nine Songs*:

> The *Nine Songs* are the work of Qu Yuan. Formerly, the custom of the people living between the Yuan and Xiang rivers in the district of Ying in the south of Chu was to believe in spirits and worship them. Their worship required the services of both male and female shamans who would make music and sing and dance to please the spirits. Among the coarse Jingzhou customs [of the shamans] were their crude lyrics. Placing themselves between *yinyang* and humans and spirits, they were confused and unable not to mix in disrespect and lewdness [toward the spirits]. Qu Yuan was banished there, and he witnessed their worship of the spirits and was moved. Thereupon he modified and fixed their lyrics by taking out their excesses, and he accorded with their sentiments in their service to the spirits to express his intention: "I am loyal to my lord, and I love my country. I yearn for them, and I will never forget them." This account provides a context for the genesis of the *Nine Songs*, however, alone among Qu Yuan's other writings, Wang Yi does not interpret them as Qu Yuan's personal creation: the "lyrics" (詞, *ci*) of the shaman songs that Qu Yuan "modified and fixed" (更定, *geng ding*) predated

> him and were originally at home in the shamans' séance events performed in the rustic environs of country folk agricultural life. (Zhu Xi 1987, 29)

The early Chinese shamanism of the *Nine Songs* is made more complex and interesting by the legends associated with their origins, for which two stand out. The content of the first legend is seen in some of the other texts collected in *The Songs of Chu*, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, as well as various other early writings. They agree that that the *Nine Songs* were given to Qi (啓), founder of the semi-mythic Xia dynasty, when he himself went on a shamanic flight to Heaven. While there, he was entertained with a complete performance of the *Nine Songs* by the spirits, after which, modified for performance by shamans and reflective of the Xia religious sensibilities, Qi had them performed after his father's funeral. The *Nine Songs* continued to be performed throughout the Xia and Shang dynasties at ritually auspicious times; the opening of the first song, "The Lord of the East Supreme One" (東皇太一, *Donghuang taiyi*), tellingly situates the ritual period of the *Nine Songs* with the characters *jiri* (吉日), referring to the "auspicious day" that begins the sexagesimal cycle of the Chinese calendar (the first day of the new year), although the traditional commentaries about them claim that they were performed twice a year, in spring and autumn.

When the Zhou defeated the Shang to establish their dynasty in 1050 BCE, the Duke of Zhou spearheaded a process of ritual reform structured around the centralized and authoritative position of the ruler in tandem with the development of their ritual calendar of sacrifice to their royal ancestors. The shamans lost much of their autonomy as their position in the religious bureaucracy was downgraded and made subordinate to all other religious functionaries, including priests, diviners, and astrologists, which was reflective of their position in the Confucian state religion of later times. The ruler no longer relied on the shamans to communicate with the spirits of heaven, the spirits of nature, and the ancestors to announce his works and seek blessing; this duty now fell into the province of the priests (祝, *zhu*). The shamans were primarily charged with purifying the residues of death and other forms of pollutants as well as exorcisms. However, according to the legends, the unreformed shamanism of the Xia was carried to the south by the northern émigrés who began to move there during the Shang and Zhou dynasties.

Now centered in the predominantly non-centralized southern lands of Chu, with its varied forms of religious practice and culture yet still performed with relative independence from the state, this southern shamanism nonetheless remained in tension with the expanding political reach of the northern Zhou, whose rulers were inexorably locating into its relatively virgin domains; soon, the Chu regions would form themselves into a major state player in the period of the Warring States. It was in this environment that the second legend of import surrounding the *Nine Songs* comes into play. It centers on Qu Yuan, the forsaken minister of King Huai who, because of his integrity in the face of the corrupted ministers that filled the court, was slandered to the king by them and was subsequently banished to the Chu hinterlands to spend the rest of his life in exile.

However, after a period living with his heartache, he is said to have thrown himself into the river to end his suffering. Before doing so, he was believed to have "composed" many if not all the separate pieces in *The Songs of Chu*, including the *Nine Songs*.

According to this legend, Qu Yuan personally witnessed the shamanic performances of some of the hinterland peoples, after which he "recorded" them under the title of the *Nine Songs*. This balance between anthropology and artistic creation is a central feature of the *Nine Songs*, since the tradition from earliest times to the present agree that they are not the product of a purely imaginative poetic mind, nor are they the written-up notes of a scholar in the field. The *Nine Songs* present highly stylized literary representations of nine separate séance events that are squarely situated in a performance context. Regardless of whether the historical Qu Yuan is taken as the author in any sense of the word, the *Nine Songs* are strongly reflective of actual performance material filtered through the mind of a literary genius, and the logic of shamanic eroticism shines through in full glory in each of the songs.

Orientations to the Logic of Eroticism in the Shamanism of the *Nine Songs*

A foundational component of most every shamanic worldview throughout the world rests on the nearness and approachability of the spirits, and shamanism claims that there are certain humans empowered or blessed with the ability to initiate direct communication with them. This is due in part to the belief that spirits inhabit liminal locales within this very world to which shamans have access: on mountains, above the clouds, in forests, or under water. In the *Nine Songs*, the spirits of nature are radically humanized in ways that ancestors never can be: they are erotic beings most susceptible to those most human of emotions: passionate joys and lustful delights together with rabid possessiveness and petty jealousies, but they feel such emotions all the way. The world is alive with their presence and shamans tap into it, they bring the spirits home to the community and openly share them with all who are present. Shamanic eroticism, with its succulent offerings of delicacies and liquors, its lush atmospheres of music and incense, its floral decors on head-dress and garments—this marks the celebration of life richly spiced with the flavors of death that inevitably accompany all forms of eroticism.

The ritual structures of the *Nine Songs* are relatively evident as seen through the lens of their literary depictions that are concentrated on the nine shamanic séances, and they altogether give compelling evidence for the complementarity of shamanic possession and shamanic flight, but in different ways. One way is in the intermixing of songs portraying shamanic flight and songs portraying shamanic possession in an otherwise random sequence from one séance to the next. Another way, in a few of the songs centering on female shamans, is in the sequence of shamanic possession immediately followed by shamanic flight within the same séance.

The *Nine Songs* portray the male shamans as only undertaking independent shamanic

flights, where they fly to the domains of the spirits to rendezvous with the female spirits, while the female shamans only undertake shamanic flight in the company of the male spirits. Shamanic possessions appear as the primary province of the female shamans since the male shamans are not once portrayed as ever becoming possessed.

As performed, these séances are understood as first-person narrations sung by the shamans describing their adventures and are enacted through dance and other pantomime forms for the benefit and participation of the congregation. The shaman's songs are accompanied and supported by orchestral performances with a plethora of bells and drums among other instruments that are described in several of the songs. Further, the *Nine Songs* incorporate personal and intimate dialogues between the shamans and the spirits, and some of them also present soliloquies of the spirit seemingly speaking to him/herself either prior to encountering the shaman or immediately upon leaving the shaman.

These literary depictions of the shamanic séance events of the *Nine Songs* that took place over two thousand years ago are at best pale reflections of their lived and experienced performances. Scholars to this day remain puzzled in their attempts to understand exactly what the *Nine Songs* actually are; David Hawkes, the foremost Western scholar of the *Songs of the South*, writes,

> The *Nine Songs* can best be described as religious drama; but though it is obvious that they were written for performance, the absence of stage directions indicating who at any given point was supposed to be singing, or what they were doing while they sang, makes it impossible to be sure how they were performed … It appears that the actors or dancers in these dramas were gorgeously dressed shamans; that musical accompaniment was provided by an orchestra of lithophones, musical bells, drums, and various kinds of wind and string instruments; that—to judge from one or two references to a "hall"—the performance took place indoors. (Hawkes 1985, 95–96)

Lisa Bresner, a contemporary leading French scholar of the *Songs of the South*, puts it nicely: "The ritual was erased in order to privilege the expression of the shaman and the reaction of the deity. Despite this mystery of their origins and position in Chu society, the *Nine Songs* remain the primary (but anything but exclusive) evidence for approaching the early Chinese shamanism of the southern Chu culture" (Bresner 2004, 101). She continues:

> The imagery of the fauna and flora, the musical indications and certain material emblems such as the harnesses or the costumes take the place of occult formulas in the *Nine Songs*. Their incantations were purged in the hands of the poets, the only witnesses who could let us know the unfolding of the seasonal performances. The vegetal elements, textiles, and minerals named throughout should remind us of the *mis en scene* which was prescribed, and it is only through the snatches of

> these scenic indications, reduced to a term which suffices to itself in the chant, that makes us imagine the gestures, the postures, and the orchestras. The chants retained the essentials of the ceremony as much as the process…The reputation of the kingdom of Chu was also constructed from the disposition to cultivate these performances. We can suppose that the inhabitants profoundly knew the meaning of these gestures. (Bresner 2004, 101)

Sukhu also recognizes the difficulties of fully comprehending the sheer vitality of the ritual environment within which the *Nine Songs* had their place in southern shamanism in ways that echo those of Bresner; he writes, "Given the apparent prevalence of the sort of ritual they [e.g., the *Nine Songs*] accompanied…another possible reason for their difficulty is the loss of the performative aspect of the rituals they accompanied" (Sukhu 2012, 196).

Still, Bresner and Sukhu are not alone in lamenting the devilishly abstruse nature of the *Nine Songs*, but more than that, even our efforts to make preliminary sense of them require a series of choices to be made in a sea of uncertainty: while there is much dialogue, it is difficult to know who is speaking, what is their gender, and where the actions take place. For instance, Waley writes, "The main difficulty in interpreting the songs lies in the fact that the subject of the sentence is so often left unexpressed. Add to this the absence of number, gender and tense, and you will readily agree that there is bound to be room for differences of interpretation" (Waley 1955, 15).

Adding to this uncertainty, Hawkes adds writes: "In some cases we cannot even be sure whether what we are reading is monologue or dialogue or dialogue with choric interruptions. Everyone who interprets the songs has to begin by making his own reconstruction; and because the uncertainties are so numerous, there are almost as many reconstructions as there are interpreters" (Hawkes 1985, 96). Finally, and almost comically, Sukhu adds, "The central event in several of the *Nine Songs* hymns is the love affair between the spirit and the shaman. Even the traditional commentators acknowledge that some sort of love affair is hinted at, but the question they have debated for centuries is, who is the male and who is the female?" (Sukhu 2012, 79).

Despite this long line of uncertainties, many of these questions have remained because it has been difficult to gain an appropriate perspective on them, but they can nevertheless be resolved by examining them through the perspective of the logic of eroticism at play in the séances (and Sukhu has come closest to gaining this perspective, but he stopped short of pursuing it to a sufficient degree). Thus, questions of who is speaking and what is their gender are clarified by recognizing that, for each song with its one séance event, either a male shaman appeals to a female spirit, or a female shaman appeals to a male spirit. Questions about where the action takes place are clarified by the functional mechanics of the shamanic séance itself, such that if the shaman is undergoing a shamanic flight, then the action takes place in the natural realm of the spirits, since that is where the shaman goes to meet or search for the spirit, but if the shaman is undergoing spirit possession, then the action takes place in the séance area,

since that is where the spirit comes to take possession of the shaman.

Recognizing that each of the songs is driven by the logic of eroticism further entails that, given the religious and cultural context of early China, it functions in tandem with the gendered ideology of *yin* and *yang*. This combination of the logic of eroticism and the ideology of *yin* and *yang*, which in a shorthand way can be called "the logic of gendered eroticism," decrees that males participate in *yang* by being active and mobile, since male shamans journey to the abodes of female spirits and male spirits descend to the female shamans in the séance arena, while females participate in *yin* by being passive and sedentary, since female shamans receive male spirits in the séance arena and female spirits receive male shamans in their rivers or mountains. My own readings and reconstructions of the *Nine Songs* are primarily based on the application of agricultural shamanism's logic of gendered eroticism, broadly illustrated by Zhang Jun:

> Among the responsibilities of Chu shamans was calling the spirits; this involved the shamanic practice of seeking a love relationship with them, and it had a strongly local and popular quality...Young girls with beautiful voices and beautiful complexions were used to call male spirits, and pubescent boys of outstanding beauty were used to call female spirits. (Zhang 1994, 426)

Shamanic Possession and Shamanic Flight in the *Nine Songs*

"The Lord of the East" (東君, *Dongjun*), titled after a spirit associated with the rising sun, sets the tone of eroticism that seethes through each of the songs. It opens with him beginning his journey through the skies when his curiosity is suddenly piqued by the female shaman who has just caught his attention:

> I see the shaman inspired and ravaging,
> Whirling through the air like a kingfisher in flight…
> The sound of her song and her beautiful face seduces me.
>
> 思靈保兮賢姱/ 翾飛兮翠曾/…羌聲色兮娛

In line with this logic of eroticism, the male shamans featured in three of the *Nine Songs* attempt to seduce female spirits by undertaking independent shamanic flights to the environs where the female spirits reside, as in "The Princess of the Xiang River" (湘君, *Xiangjun*):

> Skimming forth in my osmanthus boat,
> I command the Yuan and Xiang to quiet their waves,
> I order the waters of Jiang to soften their currents.
> Searching for my Goddess, she doesn't appear.
> Playing her bamboo flute, who stays in her thoughts?

I harness the flying dragons (of my boat) and skim to the north,
But I change my course, steering for Dongting Lake.
With my fig-leaf sail, my melilotus rigging,
My iris scull with orchid banderole,
I see the isle of Cenyang and its distant shore.

沛吾乘兮桂舟/ 令沅湘兮無波/ 使江水兮安流/ 望夫君兮未來/ 吹參差兮誰思/ 駕飛龍兮北征/ 邅吾道兮洞庭/ 薜荔柏兮蕙綢/ 蓀橈兮蘭旌/ 望涔陽兮極浦

The female shamans featured in the other six of the *Nine Songs* attempt to seduce male spirits by shamanic possession, but while their possessions are sometimes followed by flights, when they occur, it is only immediately after the male spirit has already taken possession of them, and they are never shown to undertake independent shamanic flight by themselves alone. It should be noted that although the shamanic possessions only involve female shamans, the possibility remains that the male shamans may also be taken possession of by female spirits, although none of the *Nine Songs* show this.

"The Lord of the East Supreme One" portrays the possession of the female shaman, after which the male spirit, in possession of her body, remains present in the séance area:

The spirit with sinuous movements descends into me, wondrously adorned.
Fragrant incenses wafting, their billows filling the hall…
The Lord takes his pleasure, happy and at ease.

靈偃蹇兮姣服/ 芳菲菲兮滿堂/ … 君欣欣兮樂康

In this line, the binomen (靈偃, *yanjian*) refers to either the postures and movements of the spirit's descent, or to the shaman's dance. In their commentaries, neither Wang Yi nor Zhu Xi provides any further details.

In "The Lord Among the Clouds" (雲中君, *Yunzhongjun*), this same mechanism of the possession event is at play where it says:

In a shower of radiance, the deity descends into me.

靈皇皇兮既降[1]

"The Greater Master of Fate" shows an instance of the female shaman being taken possession of by the spirit, which is then followed by their shamanic journey together. It opens from the point of view and in the voice of the male spirit soaring on his own spirit-journey; he sings:

Open wide Heaven's Gate,
In splendor I harness my dark cloud,

I summon the winds to clear the way before me,
And order the rains to wash away the dust.

廣開兮天門/ 紛吾乘兮玄雲/ 命飄風兮先驅/ 使凍雨兮灑塵

But then the spirit sees the erotic dance of the shaman in the séance arena, and it catches his attention, whereupon he swoops down to take possession of her, as she sings out:

Lord, in sweeping circles you descend into me,
I accompany you in crossing Mount Kongsang.

君迴翔兮以下/ 踰空桑兮從女

The consummation of their alliance is represented in images of ecstatic flight that call upon the symbolism of the union of *yin* and *yang*:

Our towering flight, soaring serenely,
Harnessing the pure vapors, steering through *yin* and *yang*,
Together with my Lord in pure velocity.
Leading the Emperor of Heaven through the Nine Mountains,
His sacred robes in billowing folds,
His jade pendants dangle and dazzle.
Now in the *yin*, now in the *yang*,
No one knows what it is that we do.

高飛兮安翔/ 乘清氣兮御陰陽/ 吾與君兮齊速/ 導帝之兮九坑/ 靈衣兮被被
/ 玉佩兮陸離/ 壹陰兮壹陽/ 眾莫知兮余所為

Her erotic ecstasy is depicted in the images of her riding through the skies with him "in pure velocity" (齊速, *zhai su*) while "steering through the *yin* and the *yang*" (御陽陰, *yu yin yang*). This does more than border on the orgasmic; it is in fact the consummation of shamanic eroticism. In the language of the *Nine Songs*, such consummations are never explicitly articulated; they linger, rather, at the hazy center of the mysteries of shamanic eroticism.

"The Earl of the River" (河伯, *Hebo*) provides another striking instance of the female shaman's spirit-journey. Her being taken possession of is not mentioned; rather, it opens in medias res during shamanic flight in the company of the male spirit over the semi-mythical mountains, and note the powerful imagery that announces their own eroticism:

I roam together with you along the Nine Rivers,
As a mighty wind arises, unleashing the waves.
Mounted on a water chariot, with its lotus dais,

Pulled by two dragons and flanked with serpents on all sides.
We ascend Mount Kunlun to survey the four quarters.
My heart is dizzy and flutters, overcome with giddiness.
Enraptured by you under the setting sun, I forget to go back.

與女遊兮九河/ 衝風起兮橫波/ 乘水車兮荷蓋/ 駕兩龍兮驂螭/ 登崑崙兮四望/ 心飛揚兮浩蕩/ 日將暮兮悵忘歸

The language of this passage also makes clear that they have achieved erotic consummation during their spirit-journey. Riding together in the chariot as they fly over mountains and rivers, this image directly recalls the erotically charged "pure velocity" (*zhai su*) of "The Lord Among the Clouds."

The Ritual Features and Ritual Arena of the *Nine Songs*

The three songs that show the shamanic flight of the female shaman after her becoming possessed pay little to no attention to the ritualized séance area. As well, the three songs that are centered on male shamans only portray their shamanic flights *in situ*, after they have already departed the séance area, so in them there is also no attention paid to the séance arena. Although these songs that portray the flight of the male shaman do not mention anything about the séance arena, they go to great lengths to describe the ritual offerings that the male shamans make to their target female spirits, including flowers and belt-buckles, and they also give precise details of the flowery adornments of their clothing and vehicles.

In contrast, the three songs that portray the female shaman becoming possessed without ensuing flight during which the male spirit remains in the séance area, there is much attention paid to the scenes of the performances, and they provide remarkable details concerning the ritual activities surrounding the shamanic events that are housed in the sacred temple dedicated to them, which "The Lord Among the Clouds" names:

In flutters and coilings, the spirit takes me, he lingers.
His brightness unhindered shines forth,
Lo! The spirit is coming to rest in the Temple of Longevity.
His radiance equals that of the sun and the moon.

靈連蜷兮既留/ 爛昭昭兮未央/ 蹇將憺兮壽宮/ 日月兮齊光

Describing this ritual scene, the second century commentator, Wang Yi, writes that:

The Lord Among the Clouds has already arrived at the Temple of Longevity, has happily received the offered wine and food, and is peacefully contented with no thought of departure. (Wang 2002, 58)

雲神既至壽宫,歆饗酒食,憺然安樂,無有去意也

The séance events are surrounded with ritualized activities meant for the purification of the shamans and the séance arena to be made sufficiently cleansed that the spiritual purity of the spirits would not be compromised. For example, "The Lord Among the Clouds" describes the ritualized purifying floral baths requisite for the shamans before the numinous spirits could approach them:

Having bathed in warm orchid water, my hair washed in sweet herbs
I don my robe, richly brocaded with pollia.

浴蘭湯兮沐芳/ 華采衣兮若英

In addition to the physical state of the shamans, their costumes also carried the weight of ritual purity and ritual appropriateness. It is not simply that their costumes were pure, their materials dominated by floral additions, but they also were appropriate to the specific spirit being sought, especially regarding the female shamans who would be possessed by the spirit. In "The Lord of the East Supreme One," a rather martial spirit, the female shaman dons a costume befitting his nature, replete with sword and gemstones associated with him:

Solemnly I please Highest August
Grasping the long swords by their jade hilt
Amidst the tinkling of my *lin-lang* gemstones.

穆將愉兮上皇/ 撫長劍兮玉珥/ 璆鏘鳴兮琳琅

As with many ritualized religious events that intend to invoke the presence of spirits, offerings of food and beverages play a central role, and this also is not lacking in the *Nine Songs*. Appealing to the gustatory and olfactory senses of the spirits, the shaman in "The Lord of the East Supreme One" is seen to display some of these luscious offerings to entice and attract the spirit, and it also mentions the burning of the "jade-branch incense" (瓊芳, *qiongfang*), whose billowing and pleasing smoke served the same purpose:

The steamed meat wrapped in coumarou on a bed of orchids
The libations of osmanthus wine and pepper beer.

蕙餚蒸兮蘭藉/ 奠桂酒兮椒漿

As is also typical of shamanic performances, music plays a central role, and the moment of the arrival of the spirits, especially when it takes possession of the shaman, or when the shaman departs on the shamanic journey, is underscored by frenetic turns

of the orchestra and their instruments as the shaman's dance evokes the intensity of the occurrence. In the *Nine Songs*, the shamanic dance remains *de rigueur* the main source of the female shaman's erotic appeal to the male spirits. In its performance, shamanic dance is the central force for evoking the deepest erotic desires, and it remains the primary vehicle for the expression of shamanic eroticism. This eroticism excites the basic instincts for taking possession of the other, as occurs in shamanic flight, or for being taken possession of by the other totally and completely, as occurs in shamanic possession. Shamanic dance is inevitably transgressive, and in the *Nine Songs*, it demonstrates the fullness of shamanic eroticism unmasked and unleashed. "The Lord of the East Supreme One" presents this scene in stunning detail:

> Raise the mallets to beat the drums.
> The gradual beat softly pulses, a tranquil song.
> Then enter the ranks of reed-organs and flutes loudly sounding.
> The spirit with sinuous movements descends into me, wondrously adorned.
> Fragrant incenses wafting, their billows filling the temple
> The frenzy of the five notes comes to accord, the dazzling array!
> The Lord savors his pleasure in ease.
>
> 揚枹兮拊鼓/ 疏緩節兮安歌/ 陳竽瑟兮浩倡/ 靈偃蹇兮姣服/ 芳菲菲兮滿堂 / 五音紛兮繁會/ 君欣欣兮樂康

"The Lord of the East" presents a similar scene, but this time it is presented through the viewpoint of the male spirit on his own flight, whose attention is caught first by the music and then by the female shaman herself; here we hear the male spirit sing out:

> The sounds of her song and her beautiful face seduce me.
> I, the spectator enchanted, forget to go back.
> Yes! Strum loudly the zither to the beat of the drums!
>
> 羌聲色兮娛人/ 觀者憺兮忘歸/ 緪瑟兮交鼓

In keeping with the shamanic logic of eroticism, so very different from the religious eroticism described by Bataille, the séance events of this early Chinese southern agricultural shamanism were eminently public affairs, performed in the presence of the congregation for their own community benefit, and all that was required of them for pleasing the spirits was their simple presence in joy and celebration. Although this element is not widely seen in the *Nine Songs*, due their performative and pantomimic nature, "The Lesser Master of Fate" (少司命, *Shaosiming*) off-handedly remarks on the presence of the congregation, thereby announcing the public nature of the performances as revealed in a line of the female shaman's song that, due to the ideology of *yin* and *yang* in relation to a male spirit, would only pinpoint females; she sings:

The hall is filled with lovely women
But your eyes suddenly fix on me alone。

滿堂兮美人/ 忽獨與予兮目成

One of the central and defining features of shamanism is the direct face-to-face communication between humans and spirits, which takes place in one of two forms. The first form occurs after the spirit has taken possession of the shaman and has been installed in the temple, thereby enabling him to directly speak to and otherwise interact with the congregation. The congregation can now witness and bask in his presence, share in his dance and songs, and ask for personal blessing or valuable knowledge about the present and future state of concerns that affect them. However, since these sorts of activities are not directly included in any of the songs, we can only indirectly surmise their occurrences.

The second form of direct, face-to-face communication takes place between shamans and spirits in the spirit domains throughout the course of the shamanic flight, and such communication is abundantly present in many of the songs. These dialogues would be narrated in song and enacted by the shaman for the congregation during the séance, thereby underscoring, once again, the public nature of shamanic eroticism. "The Lady of the Xiang River" (湘夫人, *Xiangfuren*) is one of many that portray the direct communication between the shaman and the spirit; it states:

I hear my beloved beckoning to me.
We mount the chariot and race off together
To build a house in the water.

聞佳人兮召予/ 將騰駕兮偕逝/ 築室兮水中

In "The Lesser Master of Fate," the communication is somewhat more personal as the spirit directly questions the female shaman, whom he refers to as the "Fragrant One":

Each person has their own beautiful offspring
Why for this, Fragrant One, are you tormented?

夫人自有兮美子/ 蓀何以兮愁苦

The eroticism at the heart of the dialogue in "The Spirit of the Mountain" (山鬼, *Shangui*) is particularly dense. It opens with the male shaman having already arrived in the natural domain of the spirit, and when he finally finds himself in her presence, the description of her bespeaks her identity with the natural world all around as she directly engages the shaman on a thoroughly erotic level:

Her body covered in fig leaves and girdled with rabbit silk
With a seductive glance and a disarming smile
[She says,] “You desire me, for I am beautiful and gracious.”
She then harnesses her red leopards, and striped lynxes follow astride
Upon her magnolia chariot waves her osmanthus banner
While she dons her wrap of stone-orchids sashed with asarum.

被薜荔兮帶女羅/ 既含睇兮又宜笑/ 子慕予兮善窈窕/ 乘赤豹兮從文狸/ 辛夷兮結桂旗/ 被石蘭兮帶杜衡

The Sensuous Flora of the Shamanic Eroticism of the *Nine Songs*

By itself, the shamanic eroticism of the *Nine Songs* is already evocative of the profusely sensual experience of the natural world. The prolific lushness of the settings, whether in the natural realm or in the séance arena, is highlighted by the richness of the visual and olfactory evocations brought out by the elegant variety of flora and their seductively stimulating fragrances.

However, the shamans still depend on their ability to attract and seduce spirits, and they do so through a variety of strategies. The energy of the séance event comes as a direct product of their displays of shamanic eroticism, and this is far and away the most effective of the several strategies that they employ, all of which serve the same end: to attract and seduce the spirits. Their erotic displays include offerings of flowers, food and alcohol, and music, song, and dance, as we have seen already in several of the songs. These strategies have deep implications for the ways in which the spirits are represented as being with the shamans. Thus, when male shamans go off to be with female spirits, they are at pains to collect only the most sensual flowers to offer as tokens of their desire. In “The Princess of the Xiang,” the male shaman sings:

My osmanthus oars, my orchid paddles,
Chop against the ice and chunks of snow,
To gather fig leaves in the water,
To search for lotus flowers on the treetops.
I pick pollia from the fragrant islet,
To leave as a gift for my Goddess gone under the waters

桂櫂兮蘭枻/ 斲冰兮積雪/ 采薜荔兮水中/ 搴芙蓉兮木末/ 采芳州兮杜若/ 將以遺兮下女

In “The Spirit of the Mountain,” we again see the male shaman gathering natural gifts in his effort to seduce the female spirit; he sings:

I gather sweet scents for the one of my affections,
Cloistered in the thickness of her bamboo forest where the sun is never seen.

折芳馨兮遺所思/ 余處幽篁兮終不見天

Certainly, the most striking and elaborate representation of erotic and amorous flower offerings from a male shaman to a female spirit comes in “The Lady of the Xiang,” as he readies their love nest, the site of his expected tryst:

I build a house in the water,
The walls and roof of lotus,
The court of purple cypress,
The hall of fragrant xanthoxylum,
Beams f osmanthus with orchid rafters,
Shingles of magnolia, bowers of peony,
Lintels of woven fig-leaves,
Bed-curtain screens of plaited coumarou,
White jades driven to hold everything in place,
Stone-orchids spread for their fragrance,
The lotus chamber ceilinged with iris,
Woven together with stalks of asarum,
I place a hundred bouquets to fill the court,
Their aromas wafting through the porch and the walls.

築室兮水中/ 葺之兮荷蓋/ 蓀壁兮紫壇/ 播芳椒兮成堂/ 桂棟兮蘭橑/ 辛夷楣兮葯房/ 罔薜荔兮為帷/ 擗蕙櫋兮既張/ 白玉兮為鎮/ 疏石蘭兮為芳/ 芷葺兮荷屋/ 繚之兮杜衡/ 合百草兮實庭/ 建芳馨兮廡門

These lines particularly demonstrate the natural lush and sensual luxuriance of the shamanic eroticism of the *Nine Songs*. We sense the shaman’s quiet confidence in expectation of his erotic consummation as he concentrates his entire attention on the preparation of the love nest; yet he is in no rush. The eroticism of the setting is highlighted by the richness of the visual and olfactory evocations brought out by the elegant variety of flora and their seductively stimulating fragrances.

One passage in “The Greater Master of Fate” depicts the female shaman with the male spirit as they undertake a spirit-journey; upon its completion, she stoops to pluck flowers for him as she sings:

I pluck the emerald flowers of the divine hemp
That I offer to my departed Lord.

折疏麻兮瑤華/ 將以遺兮離居

This is the only instance of a hemp flower offering in the *Nine Songs*, and it is notable because hemp (in this case a floral variety of the cannabis plant) has long been recognized and administered as an aphrodisiac intended to increase sexual desire; this too is a mark of the shamanic eroticism of the *Nine Songs*.

In every case, the female shaman's attire appeals to the male spirit's sense of erotic attraction, and all its materials come from natural flora; no mention is ever made of any of her articles having been constructed from human manufacture. Furthermore, her costume would have no lasting duration or remaining value: the flowers would have wilted already by the end of the séance, even if they could be imagined having kept their integrity during her erotic fury.

When the female shaman's costume is described, it is with special reference to the floral ornamentations and various other articles that are directly associated with the spirit whom the shaman intends to attract and seduce. Such accoutrements create an identifiable bond between them that the female shaman puts to her special advantage, but the flowers employed for enticing the spirit go even beyond the shaman's costume, as the following passage from "The Lesser Master of Fate" makes clear:

> Autumn orchids and asterid lovages,
> Their blooms carpet the floor at the foot of the hall.
> Verdant leaves with their white flowers
> Their luxuriant fragrance envelops me with their aromas.
>
> 秋蘭兮麋蕪/ 羅生兮堂下/ , 綠葉兮素華/ 芳菲菲兮襲予

In "The Lord Among the Clouds," the description of the shaman comes in the first two lines, where she is shown adorned with polis flowers which could only have been chosen for their particular appeal to the spirit, allowing her to be singled out apart from all other participants in the séance event by her costume first of all:

> My body bathed in warm orchid water, my hair washed in fragrant herbs,
> Here I am, wearing my robe richly brocaded with polis.
>
> 浴蘭湯兮沐芳/ 華采衣兮若英

In "The Lesser Master of Fate," these erotic strategies have their intended effect:

> Autumn orchids bloom luxuriant,
> Verdant leaves and mauve stems,
> The temple is filled with beautiful women
> But his eyes fix on me alone.
>
> 秋蘭兮青青/ 綠葉兮紫莖/ 滿堂兮美人/ 忽獨與余兮目成

The shaman's costume has been designed for maximum sensuality with its lush floral luxuriousness, all with the exclusive intent of appealing to the erotic nature of the spirit's desire, and it is only after the spirit has already come to possess the shaman that we get the description of his costume:

> A lotus robe, a sash of melilotus.
>
> 荷衣兮蕙帶

The dress of the spirits is also noted in several more of the songs, and they are similarly sensual; in "The Lord of the East," for example, the spirit is described as:

> Adorned in his pure cloud coat and a white-rainbow robe.
>
> 青雲衣兮白霓裳

That the shaman's costume primarily consists of floral materials certainly impresses but does not surprise, because the spirits are beings of nature who inhabit domains apart from (yet still next to) the human world. The burden of the shamans is to appeal to the spirits' sense of erotic attraction, and they manage this by relying primarily on their own natural beauty (at least for female shamans; male shamans rely primarily on their virility), enhanced by the pristine floral products of nature.

Conclusion

These are just a small number of the prominent features of the early Chinese southern Chu agricultural shamanism of the *Nine Songs* that display its logic of eroticism, which seethes with a relentless and overt sensuality. In each of the songs, the shamans continuously express either their ecstatic satisfaction or heart-searing disappointment that concludes their erotic trysts with the spirits, and sometimes a shaman will express both in the same song. The sexual congress between the shamans and the spirits can be read as an embodied cypher of the actual love and intimacy between the people in the southern lands of early Chu society and the natural spirits of the lands, waters, and skies who watch over, protect, and bless their lives and their works. The songs represent joyous celebrations of the love and adoration shared between spirits and humans.

By way of the shamanic possessions and shamanic flights represented in the *Nine Songs*, humans were able to gain the blessings of the gods and the good returns resulting from the power of their presence. This tradition of agricultural shamanism would continue to be an important feature of early Chu culture well into Han times, even as it became subject to state institutions. However, with the enthronement of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, the great imperial sponsor of Confucianism, the institutional presence

of shamanism was greatly curtailed and eventually faded from court society. However, it played a decisive role in the development of immortality literature that maintained the strong flavor of early Chu tradition. This immortality literature featured spiritual flights to the lands of the immortals, and it emerged from a remarkable coming-together of the motifs of shamanic flight (to the total exclusion of shamanic possession) with those of Daoist spirit liberation (Kirkova 2016). Nonetheless, agricultural shamanism would remain an important element of popular religions, albeit underneath the political radar screen, in the hands of local communities throughout the duration of traditional China.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Note

[1] This last line uses the highly loaded term 降 *jiang*, whose meaning in relation to the shamanic séance is quite interesting and has caused much debate. The term also plays a crucial role in other early Chinese shamanistic texts, most importantly the *Guoyu* and the *Zhouli*, which have received more scholarly attention that its use here, but the same arguments apply. Many sinologists who deny the presence of shamanism in early China, for example David Keightley (1989), read the term to mean that the spirits "descend" to the ritual arena without taking possession of the shamans, but those who affirm the presence of shamanism, for example Dirk Bodde (1961), read it to mean that the spirits "descend into" and take possession of them. In his examination of the commentarial tradition to all these classical writings, Lin Fushi (2009) writes, "In classical Chinese, spirit possession is usually indicated in sentences where a spirit is the subject of the verb 'to descend' (降, *jiang* or 下, *xia*) and the object is a person… [In these instances,] the state of possession is described with a verb meaning 'to descend upon' and a direct object, 之 *zhi* [as pronoun]. A similar formula is used in the *Guoyu* in the earliest extant, and most frequently cited, account of what happens to people who become shamans. That text tells us that *ming shen jiang zhi* (明神降之, 'the bright spirits descend on them'), which is to say the spirits possess them" (Lin 2012, 76). However, this line from "The Lord Among the Clouds" marks the only use of *jiang* to mean the spirit "descended into" the shaman; more common is the term ling (靈, "spirit") used in a technical shamanic sense referring to the spirit taking possession of the shaman, or the shaman being possessed by the spirit.

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