

The Existence of Spirit Medium “Chumaxian” of Animals Spirit in Northeast China: A Ritual Performance Approach

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Received: November 19, 2025 Revised: December 25, 2025 Accepted: December 31, 2025

Abstract

Chumaxian is a distinctive form of folk spirit mediumship centered on animal spirits in Northeast China. This belief system integrates elements of shamanism, Taoism, Buddhism, and local folk traditions, and is practiced primarily through possession rituals and everyday moral cultivation. The objectives of this study are: (1) to examine the religious concepts, moral values, symbolic imagery, and ritual practices embedded in Chumaxian belief; and (2) to analyze its social functions within contemporary Northeast Chinese society, particularly in relation to family ethics, community cohesion, psychological support, and cultural continuity.

This research adopts a qualitative approach, combining literature review, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and field investigation conducted in Boli County, Qitaihe City, Heilongjiang Province. The findings indicate that Chumaxian functions as a form of “middle-level belief” situated between institutionalized religion and individual superstition. Through spirit possession rituals, moral exhortation, and personalized guidance, Chumaxian provides believers with emotional healing, ethical orientation, and practical interpretations of life difficulties. Despite pressures from modernization, scientism, and urbanization, Chumaxian belief has not declined. Instead, it has undergone adaptive transformation through ritual simplification, digital dissemination, and cultural reconstruction.

The study argues that the persistence of Chumaxian demonstrates the cultural resilience and adaptability of Chinese folk beliefs. Rather than being a remnant of superstition, Chumaxian represents a dynamic cultural resource that continues to fulfill important psychological, social, and spiritual functions in contemporary society. Respecting the internal dynamics of such folk traditions is essential for their creative transformation and sustainable cultural preservation.

Keywords: Animal Spirit, Folk Beliefs, Spirit Mediumship, Possession

Introduction

In the early years of the People's Republic of China, society underwent a series of reforms, resulting in significant changes to social structure and a severe impact on traditional values.



People's lifestyles and values changed accordingly. During this dramatic transformation, new values, social structures, and social culture were advocated and promoted, while certain aspects of traditional culture were neglected and misunderstood, with folk beliefs being one such example (Xinyu Jia, 2021). Especially compared to religious beliefs, folk beliefs have long lacked official recognition from the Chinese government and were even labeled as "dregs" to be discarded and eliminated. Official discourse and mainstream culture not only suppressed folk beliefs but also viewed them as superstition. Folk belief activities were also relegated to the grassroots level, undermining their fundamental foundation and depriving them of the public space upon which they depended for survival.

With the continuous development of society, some scholars in the humanities and social sciences have begun to delve into the issue of cultural consciousness, reassessing and reflecting on Chinese traditional and folk culture. In this process, activities such as the protection of intangible cultural heritage have gradually been launched and are receiving increasing attention and support.

The attitude of official media and mainstream media towards traditional culture has also changed significantly, shifting from previous neglect or disdain to active promotion and dissemination (Jing Guo, 2013). This support has provided an opportunity for the resurgence of some unique and representative folk religious activities, allowing them to return to the public eye through the promotion of traditional culture and the development of cultural industries.

These changes have not only prompted scholars to conduct more in-depth research on traditional culture but have also encouraged ordinary people to re-examine and cherish their own cultural heritage. The value and significance of traditional culture have been reassessed, and its role and status in modern society are becoming increasingly prominent. This phenomenon of cultural awareness not only helps to inherit and promote China's excellent traditional culture but also enhances national cultural confidence and self-awareness, injecting new vitality into cultural diversity and development.

Study objective

1. To explore the religious concepts, value orientations, moral norms, and other cultural connotations contained in the belief in Chumaxian, as well as the symbolic significance of Chumaxian's image, sacrificial rituals, myths and legends.

2. To analyze the role of the belief in Chumaxian in the social life of Northeast China, including its functions in family ethics, community integration, psychological comfort, and other aspects. At the same time, explore the impact of the belief in Chumaxian on local social order, cultural inheritance, economic development, and other aspects, in order to comprehensively understand its position and role in the social structure.





Review of Literature

1. Background of Population migration

From a historical perspective, after the Qing government's army entered Shanhaiguan in 1644, it implemented a blockade policy in Northeast China, aiming to restrict mining and hunting activities by Han, Korean, and Mongolian ethnic groups in the interior. Until 1787, the population of Northeast China was still less than one million. In the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, due to various reasons, a large number of people began to migrate out of Shanhaiguan. According to *Modern Chinese Agricultural Production and Trade Data (Dafoe Xu, 1983), between 1850 and 1910, the population of Northeast China increased by 18 million, while the national population decreased by 62 million during the same period. In these 60 years, apart from a small amount of natural population growth, the vast majority was due to immigration. It can be said that Northeast China is an "immigrant society."

The population composition and folk culture of Northeast China are deeply influenced by historical immigration. Most of the current residents of Northeast China are descendants of northern immigrants, especially those who migrated during several large-scale waves of migration throughout history (Caile Gao, 2008). The large-scale migration of Han Chinese from the north to Northeast China has had a profound impact on the folk culture of the region.

Specifically, the folk belief systems of northern China, such as the belief in fox spirits, the "Four Great Gates" or "Five Great Immortals," and the worship of animals like foxes, weasels, hedgehogs, snakes, and sometimes even rats, became the main source of chumaxian beliefs in Northeast China. These beliefs were widely prevalent in Northeast China and, combined with the local natural environment, production methods, and lifestyles, formed a folk culture with distinctive Northeast characteristics.

2. The phenomenon of religious and cultural integration

Shamanism is an ancient, primitive religion whose history dates back to the Late Paleolithic period, approximately 30,000 years ago. The word "shaman" originates from the Tungus word "šaman," derived from "ša" (meaning "to know"), emphasizing the special knowledge and abilities possessed by shamans as spiritual mediums. In China, shamanism is primarily prevalent among the Manchu, Mongolian, Oroqen, Evenki, and Hezhe ethnic groups in northern China. They believe that all things possess spirits and communicate with deities through the special role of the shaman, praying for people, exorcising evil spirits, and healing the sick (Xiaomeng Kong & Hang Su, 2025). However, with the establishment of the Qing Dynasty, shamanism was gradually restricted, although its rituals, clothing, and some belief systems were preserved.



Photo No.1 Ms. Li's chumaxian hall. On the right is the Buddhist hall. In the middle is the Taoist Hall. On the left is the spirits hall.

Taoism does have a lot of influence on Chuma culture. First of all, Taoism is a native religion of China. It has a long history and profound cultural heritage. Taoism emphasizes "Tao follows nature (Lao zi, 475-221BCE)" and pursues harmonious coexistence with nature. This philosophy shares similarities with the concept of animal spirits cultivating immortality through cultivation in Chumaxian culture. Influenced by Taoism, Chumaxian practitioners have combined Taoist teachings with their own beliefs to develop a unique practice system. They establish Taoist temples and enshrine Taoist deities, leveraging the power of Taoism to help animal xians cultivate and improve their own spiritual attainments.

Secondly, Taoist thought profoundly influenced Chumaxian's values. Taoism advocates the principle of "accumulating virtue and doing good deeds (Lao Zi, 475-221 BCE)," believing that only by continuously accumulating merit can one achieve immortality. Chumaxian practitioners uphold this value in their practice, actively doing good deeds, helping others, and resolving difficulties, thereby accumulating merit and elevating their own spiritual realm.

The influence of Buddhism on Chuma culture also gradually emerged during this process. For example, Buddhist concepts of karma and reincarnation provide theoretical support for Chuma beliefs in divine retribution and the soul's final resting place. Chuma disciples may also draw on Buddhist practices such as meditation and chanting to enhance their own cultivation (Ziyang An, 2017). During my interviews, I discovered that most Chumaxians recite Buddhist scriptures, such as the Shurangama Mantra and the Diamond Sutra, almost daily. They believe that reciting the scriptures not only helps them to be mindful but also aids the cultivation of animal xians.

On the other hand, Buddhist concepts of compassion and wisdom have also influenced the values of the chum a culture to a certain extent. When chum a disciples pray for the salvation





of others, they may incorporate Buddhist compassion into their hearts, treating others with greater tolerance and kindness.

The formation of Chumaxian culture is the brilliant fruit of the fusion and collision of diverse cultures. It blends the primal mysticism of shamanism, the yin-yang and five elements of Taoism and its cultivation philosophy, and the compassion, wisdom, and causal concepts of Buddhism. In this multicultural blend, Chu Ma Xian culture retains the unique charm of each culture while creating its own unique style and charm. It is more than just a religious belief; it is a deeply rooted cultural phenomenon, carrying the historical memory, life wisdom, and spiritual sustenance of the local people.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

Qualitative research: This study will adopt qualitative research methods and comprehensive approaches. Collect relevant information. On site investigation strategy, interviewing local people. Gain a deeper understanding of the local Chumaxian culture and participate. Learn about the beliefs and customs of local believers during local sacrificial activities. Towards Chumaxian, Exploring the Local Characteristics and Evolutionary Process of Chumaxian.

2. Data collection

Through extensive collection of various documents related to the belief in the Chumaxian, including historical classics, local chronicles, folklore works, academic papers, etc. Classify, summarize, and organize the collected literature. Thoroughly analyze the content of the literature, extract information related to the belief in the Chumaxian, and explore its evolutionary patterns and cultural connotations.

In this matter research use 3 techniques of data collection instruments

- 2.1 In-dept interview
- 2.2 Observation
- 2.3 Participant Observation

3. Data Analysis Method

3.1. Content analysis

This is a popular approach to qualitative data analysis. Other analysis techniques may fit within the broad scope of content analysis. Thematic analysis is a part of the content analysis. Content analysis is used to identify the patterns that emerge from text, by grouping content into words, concepts, and themes. Content analysis is useful to quantify the relationship between all of the grouped content.

3.2. Historical Analysis

Historical analysis in research refers to the examination and interpretation of historical data and sources to gain insights and understanding of past events, trends, and phenomena.





4. Sampling Methods

Purposeful sampling, also known as judgment sampling or selective sampling, is a non-probability sampling method. Researchers select participants or cases based on specific characteristics, qualities, or criteria consistent with the research objective. In this method, participants are carefully selected because they are considered to possess certain traits or experiences relevant to the research question.

This study focuses on the psychological mechanisms of Chumaxian beliefs in Boli County, Qitaihe City, Heilongjiang Province, China, and employs qualitative research methods.

Key information providers interviewed include:

- 1) Four Chumaxian practitioners
- 2) A woman experiencing spiritual torment
- 3) Two Baoji Xian believers

Result

Physical Reactions After Spirit Possession

When a fox spirit or weasel spirit possesses body, will feel warmth. However, when possessed by a weasel spirit, will not only feel warmth but also a sensation as if someone is gripping your heart. When a snake spirit or python spirit possesses body, will feel a chill spreading from feet throughout your body. When possessed by a ghost or deity, will feel a coldness in your back.

Emotional support

During the "consultation" process, the chumaxian typically spends considerable time listening to the believer's confessions. Similar to a psychologist, this process itself holds immense healing value. The believer's distress, secrets, and guilt can be vented in a space deemed sacred and confidential, where they are unconditionally accepted and understood by the chumaxian (representing a spirit). This is crucial for individuals who lack a listening ear in real life.

Many individuals seeking help are at a low point in their lives, experiencing extremely low self-esteem. Chumaxian narratives often reinterpret their suffering. For example, they might interpret a person's sensitivity and sentimentality as spiritual traits brought about by a " "; or explain a person's repeated setbacks as "hardships before achieving great things." This positive reframing process significantly boosts individuals' self-esteem and sense of self-worth, transforming them from "losers" to "chosen ones with a mission."

The impact of social change on the culture of chumaxian

With the rapid development of society, urbanization has swept across urban and rural areas, reshaping people's lifestyles and spiritual worlds. Chuma culture, rooted in folk beliefs, has also undergone drastic changes in this social transformation. Urbanization not only restructures physical space but also brings about dramatic changes in social structure and cultural ecology. The physical compression of religious spaces has directly severed the traditional interaction





between Chuma culture and believers, forcing many Chuma believers, who are the city dwellers also set up a room in their living for chum a altar. The privatization and enclosure of these venues, while preserving traces of ritual activities, has also weakened their public presence and community influence.

A deeper impact stems from the clash of values—the increasingly prominent tension between scientific rationality and cultural beliefs. In an era of universal education and technological dominance, people generally value logical empiricism and verifiable knowledge. However, core elements of chum a culture, such as "possession" and "spiritual communication," due to their transcendental and unfalsifiable nature, are often labeled "superstitious" and "ignorant," subjecting them to mainstream discourse and even criticism. The emphasis on materialism and scientific philosophies in school education further weakens young people's identification with this traditional culture. Media coverage of chumaxians, often focusing on speculative themes, reinforces their mystification and entertainment, rather than respecting and understanding them as cultural relics. In this social climate, chum a culture has been marginalized as a symbol of "non-mainstream" and "backwardness," its cultural value and social function severely undervalued.

According to "Functionalism" of Malinowski (1948), this phenomenon represents Chuma culture has functions to people in community especially for psychological need. In this matter, fulfill and solve the problems in the dimension of mental and emotion. For instance, Chumaxian can help exorcise ghosts, infant spirits, or other spirit that possess someone. Some Chumaxian can heal illnesses, however this is rare. A person's birth date and time to tell destiny about the past and future.

Gender: female and chumaxian

Based on my research and investigation, women overwhelmingly dominate the chumaxian industry, and a significant proportion of them have experienced divorce. This phenomenon is not accidental, but rather the result of a combination of traditional cultural values, social structural pressures, and individual psychological needs.

From a cultural perspective, the traditional concept of yin and yang categorizes women as "yin," believing them to be more susceptible to communicating with supernatural spirits. This cultural assumption legitimizes women as chumaxians, fostering the shared expectation among both believers and practitioners that "women are more suited to spiritual communication." Furthermore, the chumaxian emphasis on intuition, empathy, and emotional expression aligns with societal expectations of femininity, giving women a significant advantage in this profession.

From a social structural perspective, as to why a significant proportion of female chumaxians have experienced divorce, I prefer to explain it as a "breakthrough" within the traditional patriarchal family structure. Many women, within traditional marriages and families, play a repressive role, lacking a voice and a sense of value. Becoming a chumaxian offers them an independent career, a prestigious social role (as a spokesperson for spirits), and a stable social





community (of believers). This stands in stark contrast to their dependent status within the family. However, their husbands often find it difficult to accept their wives engaging in a profession considered "feudal and superstitious" by mainstream society, finding it "shameful." Becoming a chumaxian requires a wife to devote significant time to receiving believers and performing rituals, leaving her unable to fully devote herself to her family and husband. While assisting believers, female chumaxians can openly criticize and direct others (including men), speaking frankly about topics typically considered taboo (such as sex, family conflicts, and wealth). This "oracular" discourse carries supreme authority, suspending or even reversing secular gender power structures. This provides women with a protected platform for expression. This dynamic can ultimately permeate family relationships, where women begin to assert authoritative authority and may even accuse their husbands of mistakes, directly challenging traditional patriarchal authority.

As a result, divorce is often the inevitable outcome of the intensification of these structural contradictions. It's not that being a chumaxian directly leads to divorce; rather, after finding a new lease on life as a chumaxian, women find themselves unable and unwilling to return to the oppressive old family structure. Divorce is the price and consequence of their struggle to break free and pursue a new identity. Chumaxian offers a rare avenue of empowerment for women who are often disadvantaged within traditional marriage structures. Many women face the dual dilemmas of financial pressure and declining social status after a broken marriage. The chumaxian industry not only offers them the possibility of financial independence but also grants them a "sacred" identity. This transformation from "abandoned" to "mentor" significantly enhances their sense of self-worth and social status.

Sociological Value

Chuma culture adherents and practitioners are often individuals experiencing confusion, anxiety, or marginalization amidst rapid social transformation. By studying Chuma culture, we can observe how individuals draw on traditional cultural resources to cope with modern risks such as unemployment, illness, and family breakdown, thereby understanding the underlying logic of social mentality and individual behavior. Chuma culture demonstrates how, outside of official institutions and the mainstream market, civil society has spontaneously developed a set of effective organizational, normative, and transmission systems. Chumaxian beliefs are by no means a "feudal remnant" that can be simply ignored. They represent a creative practice of self-help, mutual assistance, and self-empowerment by some people, under the immense pressure of social change, leveraging local cultural resources. By providing psychological buffers, social support, informal employment, and alternative identities, Chuma culture weaves a safety net outside of formal social structures to sustain individual survival and dignity. This is crucial for understanding the vitality, resilience, and self-organizing capacity of Chinese civil society.





Folklore and the value of intangible cultural heritage

Chuma culture, as a living folk practice, contains extremely rich folk knowledge and oral traditions, including a systematic mythology, complex ritual procedures, intricate daily taboos, and distinctive oral literature (songs sung during rituals). These precious intangible cultural heritages face a severe threat of transmission disruption and rapid extinction under the wave of modernization, making their rescue recording, organization, and research particularly urgent. At the same time, chuma culture itself demonstrates strong adaptability; its dissemination and practice are undergoing structural changes from rural society to urban spaces, and from offline halls to online networks. This process itself is a "living" history of folk change, providing researchers with a highly representative dynamic sample for tracing and understanding the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional folk culture in contemporary society.

Modernization crisis

Modern society is rife with various modern crises. These are the "systemic risks" described in Anthony Giddens's (1984) book, "Giddens' Structuration Theory." These risks are abstract and global, yet their consequences are borne by individuals. Examples include job insecurity, market competition, health crises (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), and the fragility of emotional relationships. Individuals feel a loss of control over their own destinies, succumbing to a deep sense of loss and anxiety.

The core practice of the chumaxian directly explores these uncertainties. It transforms abstract "bad luck" or "difficulties" in modern life into concrete, explainable, and even negotiable supernatural issues. When a person fails in their career or falls seriously ill, modern society might explain this as macroeconomic factors beyond personal control, such as "economic cycles" or "market competition." However, the chumaxian might interpret this as "the test of spiritual destiny," "grudges from past lives," or "the involvement of ancestral issues." While supernatural, this interpretation provides a clear causal narrative for chaotic experiences, transforming abstract, uncontrollable risks into concrete problems that can be resolved through specific rituals.

Discussion

1. Simplification of rituals

Traditional rituals were not only complex but also required specific timeframes. As mentioned in Xinyu Jia's (2021) article, the chuma ritual has nine steps in total, and there are even certain time requirements. Now, however, this may simply involve burning incense and sitting in the hall. Some rituals even require only drumming, burning incense, and chanting mantras. Traditional rituals required a full set of ritual implements, including an incense table, incense burner, offerings, drums, and command flags. Today, however, only the basics (such as a stick of incense and an incense burner) are required, and some even omit traditional props like the five-colored grain and wine cup.





2. Commercialization

Traditional Chumaxian customs involve face-to-face communication with believers to help them resolve problems. The process is similar to: invoking a spirit's descent the spirit's descent asking questions (and resolving problems) sending the spirit away (Xinrui Zhang,2019). With the development of the internet and the growing popularity of livestreaming, many chumaxian practitioners have shifted from traditional face-to-face problem-solving to demonstrating psychic communication and spirit possession through livestreams and short videos. Some even sell "amulets" or "good luck bracelets" online. However, this trend has undoubtedly made the already marginalized chuma culture even more difficult to distinguish between genuine and fake. Many chumaxians offer their services through social media and livestreaming platforms. Short video traffic diversion and WeChat fortune-telling have become the norm. Their services are no longer limited to a single region, but have even formed a multi-regional "spiritual pyramid scheme" network. They no longer focus on improving their abilities to better help the public, but instead focus on managing their short video accounts. A chumaxian's ability is no longer measured by their ability to help others, but by the number of viewers and clicks in their livestreams.

3. The younger generation of Chumaxian

Chumaxian is a profession passed down from generation to generation in a family. When the older generation is unable to continue due to age or health reasons, the spirit will turn to the younger generation in the family to ensure the continuation of the incense line.

In the past, after a spirit selected a young person from a family, the chuma master would tell the chosen one to marry before becoming a chumaxian. Some might even need to have children before becoming a chumaxian. The average age for chumaxian practitioners was between 35 and 45 (Chumaxian Knowledge Summary,2010).

However, in Northeast China today, some college graduates become chumaxians right after graduation. This is partly due to the intense competition and employment difficulties in Chinese society, leading many young people to see chumaxian as a "shortcut" to a successful career. The low barrier to entry, low costs, and relatively good income have attracted many young people facing life's pressures. The rise of the internet has also contributed to the younger generation in the profession. Compared to older chumaxians, young people are more receptive to the industry's shift toward online operations. They also have faster learning abilities and greater energy. They are more receptive to new ideas and more adaptable to changes in the times and industry. Another theory is that spirits tend to favor younger individuals when seeking new chumaxians, as younger chumaxians have a longer service life and can accompany spirits in their spiritual practice and accumulate merit for a longer period of time. In contrast, older chumaxians often have limited service capabilities and are unable to work in this industry for a long time.

4. Filling the research gap of middle-level beliefs

Chumaxian culture is a "middle-level faith" situated between institutionalized religion and individual superstition. It lacks systematic doctrines and a unified church organization like





Buddhism and Taoism. However, it differs from individual superstition in that it possesses a unified core belief, ritual norms, and belief system.

Currently, research on traditional folk beliefs has mostly focused on high-level institutionalized religions or scattered, lower-level superstitions.

High-level beliefs often have grand and abstract doctrines, addressing issues of ultimate concern (such as life and death, reincarnation, and salvation). Their responses to the specific, trivial, and pressing daily dilemmas faced by ordinary people (e.g., "Why can't I make money?" "Why is my marriage going bad?" "When will I recover from this illness?") are often indirect and principled, lacking customized solutions. Their rituals and thresholds may also be too complex or distant for ordinary people.

Lower-level beliefs often lack systematization, a complete explanatory system, and a sustained support system. Furthermore, their authority is easily questioned, making it difficult for people to gain spiritual identification. Chumaxian faith, however, doesn't dwell on abstract doctrines; it directly addresses the concrete concerns of its adherents: career, wealth, health, and marriage. It provides believers with a clear "diagnosis" and a specific "treatment plan." This kind of targeted, precise response is unavailable to higher-level faiths, while its systematicity and complexity far surpass those of lower-level superstitions.

Chumaxian's authority stems not from classic texts but from the "Xianjia (Animal spirits and ghosts)" supernatural beings widely recognized in folk culture. It constructs a logically coherent cosmology, incorporating individual misfortunes into this grand narrative, imbuing suffering with meaning. This belief is persuasive and spiritually comforting.

The reason Chumaxian faith has endured and flourished in Chinese folk society is precisely because it perfectly fulfills the role of a "middle-level faith." It is more relevant to life and addresses concrete issues than higher-level faiths. It is also more systematic, authoritative, and organized than lower-level faiths. At the same time, it provides immediate comfort, reassurance, sustained support, and a sense of profound meaning to those lost and struggling.

Conclusion

This article, through an analysis of the historical origins, ritual practices, and modern transformation of Chumaxian faith in Northeast China, reveals the unique characteristics of this "middle-level faith": it is neither an institutionalized religion nor a scattered superstition, but rather a dynamic belief system centered on "spiritual possession," organized through "tangkou transmission," and guided by practical functions. The study finds that the logic of Chumaxian's survival lies not in the "religious decline" hypothesized by traditional "secularization theory," but rather through religious and cultural integration, functional transformation, and formal innovation. This has led to its gradual adaptation to modern society, forming a new form of folk belief characterized by the "symbiosis of tradition and modernity."



Suggestions

1. Actually, there are many cultural phenomena of animal and god spirit in many societies besides China. Therefore, the research in this issue able to be conducted in other societies.
2. Moreover, for instance in Indian culture, especially for Hinduism. There many animals are worshiped as god or sacred animal such as a Monkey, an Elephant and a cow. Thus, another dimension this issue able to be studied to find the similarities and different between guardian animal spirits in China and other culture.
3. Due to, nowadays many primitive societies have been connected with people outside example mountain people and Melanesian people, thus cultural change has been explicit. Therefore, to study and cultural change in the dimension of animal guard spirit will be interesting.
4. In many societies. There are many spirit mediums possess animal guardian spirit then to do research for this issue except China will be useful to compare the differences and similarities.

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