



The Pattern and Function of Manchu Shamans' Guardian Spirits

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Abstract: The Manchus use *Amba Weceku* to refer to the guardian spirits of the *Amba Samans*. The guardian spirits are arranged in rows, with each row consisting of one leading spirit and several helping spirits. Mastering the guardian spirits is an important criterion for examining and certifying the status of an *Amba Saman*. The formation of the concept of guardian spirits in shamanism not only reflects the needs at the unconscious level but also incorporates conscious construction under specific historical conditions. The fantastical construction of the guardian spirits in Manchu shamanism has a solid real social foundation. Compared with the shamanism of other Tungusic tribes, its structure places greater emphasis on “hierarchy” and “seniority”, and its content highlights “heroes and war gods”. As a symbolic system of emotional form, these guardian spirits represent different states of psychological imbalance. Shamans use their guardian spirits to dispel harmful spirits or regulate imbalances in the soul.

Keywords: *Amba Saman*, guardian spirits, pattern, function

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Introduction

The Manchu ethnicity took shape in the middle of the 17th century, primarily derived from various Jurchen tribal groups. Constrained by blood lineage and geographical factors, Manchu shamanism inherited the traditional beliefs of the Jurchen people dating back to the Jin Dynasty, as well as the religious traditions prevalent in northern China.

After the Qing troops entered the Shanhaiguan Pass, Manchu shamanism underwent a highly complex process of evolution and institutionalization under the influence of imperial authority. To curb extravagance and waste in shamanic rituals and prevent shamans from deluding the public with fallacies and ecstatic rituals, Qing rulers issued decrees banning all excessive religious practices and wasteful ceremonies. The *Draft Veritable Records of Emperor Taizong of Qing* stipulates: no one shall collude in wicked deeds, fabricate tales to foretell fortune and misfortune, or mislead the populace; violators shall be sentenced to death. Among the Jurchen people at that time, there was no formal medical treatment for illnesses. Instead, shamans and priests would perform rituals to pray for recovery, slaughter pigs, and burn paper offerings to invoke spirits—hence the enormous consumption of paper and pigs among the tribal communities (History Department of Liaoning University 1978, p. 13).

Nevertheless, to preserve ancestral traditions, the Qing authorities allowed the continued existence of the priestly class. Successive emperors from Nurhaci and Hong Taiji to Kangxi and Qianlong made continuous efforts to regulate shamanic practices. The Manchu Ritual of Heaven and Spirit Worship, finalized during the Qianlong reign, later became the standard sacrificial code followed by all Manchu clans. A core outcome of the transformation of Manchu shamanism was the shift of religious authority from folk shamans to official court priests. The ultimate consequence was that the original sacrificial system and ecstatic ritual practices were banned. The sacrificial norms and rituals formulated by the imperial household were established as the standard for all Manchu clans. A unified new sacrificial tradition was thus established across Manchu society. Over time, most Manchu people gradually lost the inheritance of ancient shamanic traditions and came to regard the standardized clan ancestral worship as an age-old indigenous custom.

However, both in the notes compiled by scholars of the Qing dynasty and in the ethnographic studies conducted by modern scholars, it can be found that shamanism centered on ecstatic rituals was still practiced in some clans in Manchu folk society. For instance, *Liubian Jilue* 柳边纪略, compiled in the early years of the Kangxi reign, records: when the Manchu people suffered from illnesses, they would invite a shaman to preside over a seance. Shamans were selected from among female witches or clan members' wives. The shaman would tie bells around her waist, making sounds as she shook the bells, while

simultaneously beating a drum with her hand. The shaman's drum was covered with cowhide and reinforced with iron; its handle was adorned with several metal rings. The shaman struck and shook the drum at the same time, producing a soft drumming sound. During the seance, the shaman's chants were indistinct. When the prayer ritual came to an end, the shaman would jump and spin continuously (Yang, Fang and Wu 1985, p. 109). The *Longsha Jilue* 龙沙纪略 records: "The witches who channel spirits into their bodies are called "sama". They perform horse offerings and use copper mirrors to dispel evil spirits." (Yang, Fang and Wu 1985, p. 212).

In the 1980s, Song Heping and Meng Huiying conducted an ethnographic investigation into Manchu shamanism. They identified two ritual forms—namely clan domestic sacrifice (家祭) and wild spirit sacrifice (野祭)—and drew distinctions between them according to their respective characteristics. The clan domestic sacrifice mainly involves the practitioners of *Boigon Saman* (家萨满), and the wild spirit sacrifice mainly involves the practitioners of *Amba Saman* (大萨满) (Song and Meng 1998, p. 318). According to Manchu belief, one of the most important distinctions is that an *Amba Saman* masters a group of spirits, is able to receive spirit possession at will, and can assist people afflicted with misfortunes caused by wandering souls or malevolent spirits (Shirokogoroff [1935] 2025, p. 559). To date, research on the Manchu *Amba Saman* has focused on the selection process and ecstatic states of the *Amba Saman* (Yuan Jie 2012, p. 89; Guo Shuyun 2007, p. 32), but has relatively neglected the exploration of the spirit group mastered by the *Amba Saman*—namely, the guardian spirits of the *Amba Saman*. Regarding the issue of the guardian spirits, Russian ethnologist Sternberg conducted an investigation of the Hezhe 赫哲 ethnic group's shamanism. He explored the relationship between the shaman and his (or her) guardian spirits: male and female shamans who are primarily elected by a mere whim of the spirits, graduate into professional priests, their functions then being to amuse their deities, not only with music, dance, glorification etc., but in the first place by gratifying them with sexual intercourse, either directly in dreams, or indirectly through earthly men or women, in whom the gods and goddesses incarnate themselves (Sternberg [1925] 2004, p. 127).

Sternberg highlighted the sexual relationship between shamans and guardian spirits, and inspired us to explore the pattern of guardian spirits, the process by which shamans and guardian spirits establish and maintain relationships, and the function of guardian spirits in shamanic practice. On this account, this paper makes use of the literature, physical objects and field investigation materials to explore the structure of guardian spirits, the relationship between *Amba Saman* and guardian spirits, and the function of guardian spirits in the practice of *Amba Saman*. This paper aims to propose

ideas and methods to analyze the guardian spirits of *Amba Saman*, and enrich the academic understanding of Manchu shamanism.

The Pattern of Guardian Spirits

In Manchu folk society, the guardian spirits are symbolized by pictures and idols. In clans with a tradition of *Amba Saman*, the guardian spirits of *Amba Saman* are a component of clan spirits. Although the guardian spirits vary among different clans, there are some shared features of these groups of spirits. These commonalities are directly expressed through spirit pictures and spirit idols, especially the internal structure of guardian spirits. The following four cases are from different Manchu clans. We can analyze the characteristics of the guardian spirits through their pictures and idols.

Case 1.

From 1915 to 1918, Russian ethnologist Shirokogoroff conducted an ethnographic investigation of Manchu shamanism. He described a picture of guardian spirits but did not indicate the clan to which it belonged. The entire system of guardian spirits is divided into eleven rows and consists of four pictures. The contents are as follows.

The first painting depicts four rows of spirit deities. Each row of spirits dwells in a pagoda-like tower. In the middle of the first row, Grandfather Shaman and Grandmother Shaman are seated at the very center of the pagoda. Beside the pagoda stand two spirits beneath a tree; they are deities adopted from the Northern Tungus. The spirits of the second row are partly inside the pagoda and partly outside it. The leading spirit of the second row is the Mute Spirit, surrounded by warrior spirits referred to as *manni* in the Manchu vernacular. These spirits are endowed with extraordinary supernatural powers: for instance, casting coins from molten metal, walking barefoot over burning charcoal, twisting red-hot iron bars around their waists, treading barefoot on scorched iron plowshares, and climbing knife ladders with bare feet. The third row consists of a dragon spirit, a snake spirit, and a python spirit with human-like forms. The fourth row features a tree painted with five cuckoo spirits perched on its branches, with two bird spirits standing underneath the tree.

The second painting shows the following content: in the fifth row, a Grandmother Shaman sits in the centre. The sixth row consists of several female spirits. The presiding spirit of the seventh row is a heroic spirit adept at archery. He is clad in official robes and mounted on horseback, surrounded by eight Tungus spirits.

The third painting shows the following content: the leading spirit of the eighth row is the Army Leader Spirit (*čooḥa janggin* in the Manchu vernacular),

though the subordinate spirits under its command cannot be identified. Shirokogoroff was unable to recognize the spirits depicted in the ninth and tenth rows.

The fourth painting shows the following content: the eleventh row mainly portrays "wild spirits", including several Tungus spirits, as well as tiger spirits, raptor spirits, and leopard spirits. The chief spirit in this painting is the "Blue Tiger Shaman" (Shirokogoroff [1935] 2025, p. 350).

Case 2.

This system of guardian spirits belongs to the Kerga Clan of the Aihun area and was investigated and recorded by Shirokogoroff. The entire painting is set against a vast, pristine mountain landscape. Among the massive mountain rocks lies a small settlement. At the centre of eight pairs of trees stands a multi-storey pagoda, with twelve rows of spirit deities arranged within it. Each row of guardian spirits is headed by a leading spirit (*Dalaha Weceku* in the Manchu vernacular). The supreme deity governing all these spirits is *Agjuran Saman*, the primordial founding shaman of the Kerga Clan. The details are as follows.

The first row of guardian spirits is described as follows: the leading spirit of this row is *Agjuran Saman*, holding a ritual drum. He is attended by eight helping spirits: *Erinbuku Saman*, skilled in wrestling and wielding a throwing spear; *Agjana Age*, who rides a chestnut horse and carries a halberd; *Cagjana Manni*, mounted on a sorrel horse and holding a pair of arrows; *Arsulan Age*, who rides a colourful horse and bears a pair of ritual staffs and is tasked with gathering intelligence and handling all manner of affairs; *Ajilan Age*, holding a harpoon; and the sister spirits *Salinju* and *Selinju*, each carrying a square silk kerchief.

The second row of guardian spirits is described as follows: the leading spirit is a fearless heroic spirit seated in the pagoda amid jagged rocky cliffs, who descends holding a drum. His helping spirits include: *Ajan Beise*, descending with a javelin; *Agulai Age*, armed with twin swords and a toothed spear; *Juru Mergen*, descending with a spear; *Doholon Age*, descending with a drum; *Durjire Dutu*, descending with a javelin; *Sesereku Age*, riding a dark horse and wielding a halberd; the sister spirits *Erinju* and *Weriju*, each descending with a pair of copper mirrors; the sister spirit *Yingwu*, holding a silk ribbon; and the sister spirits *Jinji* and *Yinji*, each bearing a drum.

In the third row of guardian spirits, these guardian spirits dwell in walled settlements nestled among mountains and rivers. Their leading spirit is *Seimeju Saman*. The helping spirits include *Daifu Mama*, the two Green Snake Sister spirits (each holding a pair of silk kerchiefs), as well as golden and silver carp spirits.

In the fourth row of guardian spirits, this group of spirits is situated in the mountain pine forest. *Amba Daimin* serves as the leading spirit, assisted by *Narhun Daimin*, *Kuri Daimin*, *Kekesere Gasha*, *Fulgiyan Daimin*, *Gjohun*, and *Jilhu*.

The fifth row of guardian spirits is described as follows: at the heart of the high mountain lies a settlement, where is an ornate colourful pagoda. This row of spirits is enshrined within the pagoda. The leading spirit is *Jatungga Saman*. His attendants include: *Seletu Age*, riding a horse and wielding an iron bar; *Seletai Age*, holding a long halberd; and *Jergule Age*, bearing twin swords.

The sixth row of guardian spirits is described as follows: at the mountain's centre stand two pairs of trees, with a radiant pagoda erected between them. The leading spirit *Balan Baturu* sits inside the pagoda holding a javelin. The helper spirits are: *Agjan Beise*, carrying a battle axe; *Sergudai Age*, wielding a narrow spear; *Aisuldai Age*, holding a toothed spear; *Beisuldai Age*, bearing a drum; and *Salhudai Age*.

In the seventh row of guardian spirits, these guardian spirits are distributed among jagged rock formations. The central leading spirit is *Sebehun Saman*, clad in an iron helmet and holding a toothed spear. His leading spirits include: *Sele Sècè* with a toothed spear; *Sele* with twin staffs; *Sele Mergen* with a javelin; *Sele Setu* with an iron bar; *Sele Serinju* holding silk ribbons; the sister spirit *Sele Wukunju*; and *Sele Erinju*.

In the eighth row of guardian spirits, the leading spirit *Ingeljl Saman* dwells in the settlement at the centre of the high mountains, holding a ritual drum. His helping spirits include: *Durgide Dutu* with a drum; *Belinbe Tece* with a spear; *Holhodai Age* — a spirit that steals worldly goods upon descending into a shaman's body; *Doholon Age*, holding a drum; *Imjin Mama* with a drum; and two *Guniang Sefu* spirits, each bearing a drum.

The ninth row of guardian spirits is described as follows: in the mountain's centre, enclosed by high walls, lies a settlement situated between two lines of pine trees. The leading spirit is *Wukunju Mama*, who holds a drum and is accompanied by two servants. The helping spirits include: *Temtule Age*, riding a chestnut horse and carrying a javelin; *Temtule Baturu*, mounted on a black horse and holding a drum; *Sarhudai Age*, riding a grey-chestnut horse and wielding a sword; and *Narhusan Age* with a drum.

In the tenth row of guardian spirits, these guardian spirits reside among birch trees. The leading spirit is *Bilen Buku Tasha*. The helping spirits consist of *Tarin Tasha*, *Muhan Fisu*, *Alha Fisu*, *Lebsere Sefu*, *Sayan Sulen*, and *Sayan Tasha*.

In the eleventh row of guardian spirits, this set of spirits is located among towering crags. The leading spirit is *Karangga Saman*, holding a drum. His helping spirits are: *K'ilergi Age*, carrying two spears; *K'ilin*, a mighty hero mounted on a white horse and wielding a spear; and *K'ilerčan Age*, riding a black horse with a spear.

In the twelfth row of guardian spirits, the presiding spirit is *Naijulan Saman*, who descends holding a drum. The helper spirits include: *Algudai Age* with a spear; *Alire Manni* with a toothed spear; *Sukara Manni* with an iron bar; *Fangkara Manni* with twin swords; *Sele Sece* with a spear; the nine-foot-long spirit *Muduri*; the eight-foot-long spirit *Jabjan*; as well as *Cecerku Meihe* and *Aisin Menggun Ingali* (Shirokogoroff [1935] 2025, pp. 351–361).

Case 3.

In the 1990s, Chinese scholar Yin Yushan discovered painted scrolls and statues of guardian spirits belonging to the Manchu Wusu Guan Clan. During the Qing dynasty, the Wusu Guan Clan was classified as part of the *Fe Manju* and affiliated with the Zheng Blue Banner.

The ancestral homeland of the Wusu Guan Clan was a village west of Wuzala along the Ussuri River. After the mid-Qing dynasty, the clan migrated extensively and finally settled in present-day Jilin Province. The clan preserves two guardian spirit painted scrolls. Both are crafted on plain coarse white linen and are rectangular in shape. The edges of the scrolls are framed with decorative cloud and thunder patterns, and painted predominantly in black, white, blue and green. According to Yin Yushan the guardian spirits of the Wusu Guan Clan are arranged in four rows, with each row separated by floating cloud motifs.



(Picture 1. Guardian spirits of Wusu guan clan, provided by Yin Yushan)



(Picture 2. Guardian spirits of Wusu Guan clan, provided by Yin Yushan)

In the first row of guardian spirits, the leading spirit is Grandmother Shaman, seated in a golden pagoda. Two female spirits stand sideways with their hands folded before their chests in a reverent bow toward her. On the left and right sides stand male ancestral spirits facing one another. Also present is a female spirit holding a copper mirror, alongside a young shaman standing upon a knife ladder. Additional spirits include a human-faced weasel spirit with sharp claws, two heroic spirits wielding steel knives in both hands, four eagle spirits, and three sculptor spirits.

In the second row of guardian spirits, the leading spirit is the Shaman Spirit. To her left stand seven female spirits, some playing bamboo flutes, some holding torches, some carrying spears, and others bearing three-pronged harpoons. On the right side are helping spirits: a middle-aged female shaman in a bowed posture, an elderly female shaman, two bear spirits holding steel knives, a male shaman with a ritual drum, another elderly female shaman seated sideways in a reverent bow, and a human-bodied, beast-faced spirit holding a toothed staff.

In the third row of guardian spirits, the leading spirit is an elderly male shaman, sitting on a chair with his hands clasped before his chest. On the left side are: a hunting heroic spirit holding a bow in his left hand and a sword in his right; another heroic spirit wielding steel knives in both hands; a shaman holding a copper mirror in each hand; and a shaman assistant standing with his hands bound. On the right side are: an elderly male shaman, a middle-aged shaman, a heroic spirit holding a spear, the fire spirit, and two additional heroic spirits.

In the fourth row of guardian spirits, the row of guardian spirits consists of the green snake spirit, flying tiger spirit, leopard spirit, jackal spirit, and bear spirit. (Yin Yushan 1992, pp. 96–97)

Case 4.

In the Manchu language, the Shi Clan is referred to as *Sikteri Hala*. During the Qing dynasty, it belonged to the *Fe Manju* group and was affiliated with the Zheng Yellow Banner. According to clan genealogical records (jiapu 家谱) and ancestral oral tradition, the Shi Clan originally descended from the Huifa Tribe of the Haixi Jurchens during the Ming Dynasty. In the early Shunzhi reign period, the clan migrated to the Wula area of Jilin Province and came under the jurisdiction of the Wula Sacrificial Supervisor's Office. The Shi Clan lineage has continued to the present day. Since 2012, the author has conducted several field investigations into the clan's shamanic traditions and collected relatively complete documentation of its guardian spirits.

The clan's guardian spirit scroll measures approximately two metres in length and one metre in width, commonly known as *Shenlouza* (神楼). Unlike the previously mentioned spirit paintings, the Shi Clan's scroll is relatively simple in composition. It features the Army Commander Spirit (*Coochai Janggin* in the Manchu vernacular), alongside six shamanic ancestral spirits arranged in generational order. These are: the first-generation patriarch Chongjide, the second-generation patriarch Dakabu, the third-generation patriarch Wulinba, the fourth-generation patriarch Donghai, the fifth-generation patriarch Duominga, and the sixth-generation patriarch Guihai. All are depicted sitting upright inside pagoda pavilions.

The background of the scroll portrays mountains and rivers, the sun and the moon, as well as green pines and cypresses. On either side of the altar top, two tiger spirits are illustrated among the mountain landscapes, one of which is a flying tiger spirit. At the bottom left of the painting, a shaman holds a spear, ready to perform the ritual of "drilling ice eyes". At the bottom right, another shaman is shown walking barefoot across burning charcoal while holding a spear.

It is worth noting that these rituals are performed during the official inauguration ceremony of the *Amba Saman*. After invoking a designated spirit from the *Amba Weceku* pantheon to descend and possess their body, shamans carry out either "drilling ice eyes" or "running through the fire pool". These performances serve to demonstrate that the shaman has mastered the cold and hot spiritual powers endowed by the corresponding deity. At the bottom of the scroll lies a cluster of animal spirits, including the wolf spirit, the jackal spirit, and the wild boar spirit.



(Picture 3. Guardian spirits of Shi Clan, photographed by the author)

Unlike the previously mentioned spirit paintings, the Shi Clan's *Amba Weceku* (guardian spirits) painting mainly depicts the leading spirit of each row. The helping spirits are represented by woodblock statues. Through the Shi Clan's shamanic documents, we can identify the relationship between the helping spirits and the shamanic ancestral spirits: *Amba Manni*, who holds a pair of copper mirrors, and *Huyaci Manni*, who holds a spear are the helping spirits of the first-generation patriarch Chongjide. *Seletai Manni*, who wields an iron bar, and *Bakta Manni*, who holds a spear, are the helping spirits of the second-generation patriarch Dakabu. *Jakta Manni*, who carries a pair of knives, and *Huyan Manni*, who holds a three-pronged spear, are the helping spirits of the third-generation patriarch Wulinba. *Chahan Buku Manni*, who holds an iron hammer, is the helping spirit of the fourth-generation patriarch Donghai. *Silageci Manni* is the helping spirit of the fifth-generation patriarch Duominga. *Sala Buku Manni*, who holds a spear, is the helping spirit of the sixth-generation patriarch Guihai.

“Master and Servants”:

the Relationship between Shamans and Guardian Spirits

According to the Manchu people, the *Amba Weceku* are the spiritual beings under the command of the *Amba Saman* (great shaman). Shamans can invoke these spirits to possess their bodies at will and utilize the spiritual powers of the *Amba Weceku* to expel or subdue the spirits that cause misfortune. The *Amba Saman* holds regular sacrificial rituals to the guardian spirits. During these ceremonies, spirit possession is demonstrated to prove the shaman's ability to control the spirits (Yu Yang 2013, p. 74).

The shamanic documents of the Wusu Guan Clan record the details of a shaman inviting a guardian spirit to possess him (or her): “Offer sacrifices to the ancient spirits of the Guan Clan, offer sacrifices to the *Amba Weceku*, and let the shaman born in the Year of the Horse pray... Please gather around the head of the shaman master, descend and dwell in his (or her) waist, and penetrate his (or her) body”¹. The aforementioned “shaman master” indicates that the shaman is the ruler of the *Amba Weceku*, while the phrases “descend to the waist” and “penetrate the body” signify that the shaman can be possessed by the *Amba Weceku*.

Then, how did the shaman establish a connection with the *Amba Weceku*? Since the concept of spiritual harm was deeply rooted in the people's minds, after the death of an *Amba Saman* (great shaman), members of the clan would demand the emergence of a new shaman. Shirokogoroff once described the severe situation that occurred in Manchu clans after the death of a shaman: After a shaman's passing, the spirits under his (or her) command became unruly. Severe and unexplained “illnesses” broke out within the clan; adults fell into a state of mental tension, committing unexplained violent acts or even crimes. Widespread excitement prevailed, accompanied by a hysterical tendency to attack. These pathological behaviors led to an increase in misfortunes and deaths, bringing the normal order of people's lives to a halt. Sometimes, the entire clan faced the danger of destruction (Shirokogoroff 1935 [2025], p. 548).

In his 1915 investigation, Shirokogoroff provided cases that help understand the manifestations of Manchu shamans when they experienced “spirit calling”. The first case detailed the process of a woman becoming a shaman: both her grandfather and father had been shamans. After the soul of a deceased shaman possessed her, she rushed into the mountains and forests, quickly climbed a tree, and sat on the treetop. A few days later, she returned home (Shirokogoroff 1935 [2025], p. 526). According to the oral tradition of the Shi Clan, the fifth-generation shaman “Duo Minga” returned to life after his

1 Sacrificial Documents of Wusu Clan, 1834, provided by Song Heping.

death and rushed into the Changbai Mountains. Three years later, he came back home and became an *Amba Saman*. According to the oral tradition of the Shi Clan, the fifth-generation shaman *Duo Minga* came back to life after his death and ran into the Changbai Mountains. Three years later, he returned home and became a shaman (Yuan Jie 2008, p. 90).

According to the author's investigation, the Shi Clan's *Amba Saman* Shi Qingshan, at the age of nineteen, overturned his carriage while driving. He fell into a trance, during which he kept reciting the names of the six generations of deceased shaman ancestors. In the end, he became a shaman. The current *Amba Saman* Shi Zongduo has also described his shamanic dream to the author: in his dream, the sixth-generation deceased shaman ancestor helped him master the python spirit and the eagle spirit. In conclusion, among the disorders experienced by shaman candidates, if a candidate is possessed by a certain spirit, "mastering spirits" will be one of the important ways to achieve healing.

Among the Manchu people, after a shaman candidate shows signs of becoming a shaman, he (or she) needs to be taught knowledge about spirits and rituals by elders in the clan who have shamanic experience. After a series of special training and a "public recognition" ceremony, he (or she) will be regarded as a formal shaman. This process usually lasts for three years or even longer. The underlying idea is that if the *Amba Saman* can command the *Amba Weceku*, then these spirits will not harm other members of the clan.

The most important element of a shaman's "public recognition" ceremony is the verification of the candidate, whose ability to command spirits must be confirmed through a successful performance. During the shaman's examination process, the spirits in the *Amba Weceku* will possess the candidate one by one. While the spirits are possessing the candidate, experienced elders will ask for the names of the spirits. The shaman candidate needs to answer the names and histories of all the spirits—for instance, who the spirit once was, where it lived (which mountain or river), and which shaman once commanded it. At the same time, the candidate also has to answer many other questions to convince the audience that the spirit is indeed within his (or her) body.

Among the *Amba Weceku* commanded by Manchu shaman candidates, some spirits possess the abilities of "cold" and "hot" manipulation, some can dive, and others can wield weapons such as arrows, halberds, and harpoons. If a shaman claims to command the presiding spirit of a certain row, he (or she) must master all the manifestations of that row of spirits. Among these, the tests for "cold" and "hot" abilities are relatively common. According to the author's investigation, in the Manchu Shi Clan, shamans must demonstrate "running through a fire pool" or "drilling ice eyes" to prove their spiritual powers.

In 1953, during a public recognition ceremony, Shaman Shi Dianfeng performed "drilling ice eyes." The details are as follows: on the surface of the

Songhua River, several members of the Shi Clan chiseled several holes at a certain distance from each other. After Shi Dianfeng invoked the fifth-generation patriarch "Duominga" to possess him, he entered one ice hole, emerged from another adjacent ice hole, and then entered a third one. In total, he went through nine ice holes in sequence. In 2014, during another public recognition ceremony, after Shaman Shi Zongduo invoked the first-generation patriarch "Chongjide" to possess him, he ran through a burning charcoal pool that was 10 metres long and 2 metres wide. Only by passing these tests can a shaman candidate be regarded as having mastered the spirits and become a real shaman.

Shirokogoroff's investigation provided a case of failure. Among the Manchus in the Aihun area, a man claimed to have mastered the spirits. Although clan members opposed him becoming a shaman, he persisted. An experienced shaman decided to test his ability: he asked some people to set a pile of wood on fire. When the wood turned into burning charcoal, the elder shaman rolled up his trouser legs and pulled the candidate into the fire pool. The underlying assumption was that if the candidate had truly mastered the spirits, he would not be burned by the fire; if he refused to enter the fire pool, it would indicate that he had not mastered the spirits. In the end, the candidate abandoned his idea of becoming a shaman (Shirokogoroff [1935] 2025, p. 733).

Mastering the spirits is an important symbol of the identity of a Manchu *Amba Saman*, and this concept runs through the entire process of judging, training, and examining shaman candidates.

The Types and Functions of Guardian Spirits

Once a shaman candidate becomes an *Amba Saman*, he (or she) begins to assume the role of the spirits' master. In the Manchu vernacular, the shaman is called *Saman Ejen*, which means "master," and the relationship between the shaman and the guardian spirits is called *Ejen Be Kicemlembi*, which means "the spirits work for the master." These spirits have different origins and mainly include the following types: (1) ancient male and female shamans (usually regarded as the founders of shamanism) and shaman assistants; (2) groups of female spirits; (3) groups of *Buku*, *Baturu*, and *Manni*; (4) groups of animal-related spirits; (5) spirits borrowed from other ethnic groups; (6) other spirits.

In the process of shamanic practice, the shaman needs the assistance of spirits in different forms of manifestation. For instance, when a shaman guides the soul of the deceased to the underworld, he (or she) will encounter obstacles such as rivers and mountains along the way. Therefore, he (or she) must be possessed by spirits whose manifestations can help cross rivers, traverse mountains, and so on. When a shaman confronts other spirits, he (or she) sometimes needs to take the forms of birds, insects, and various animals to

catch up with the spirits. The following section specifically discusses the different types of spirits.

The first type consists of the spirits of shaman ancestors. Among the aforementioned cases, the shaman ancestor spirits of the Shi Clan are special: the guardian spirit painting depicts the founder of shamanism, namely *Coo hai Janggin* (Army Commander Spirit). This is the spirit that governs all the souls of shamans. In the minds of Shi Clan members, the souls of deceased *Amba Saman* will return to *Coo hai Janggin* in the Changbai Mountains. A few years later, these souls return to their own clans to select shaman candidates.

According to Shirokogoroff's investigation, *Coo hai Janggin* is the first shaman of the Manchus. After his death, he became a spirit. During the Jin Dynasty, a war broke out between the Jurchen ancestors of the Manchus and the Han Chinese. The Han Chinese emperor captured *Coo hai Janggin* and ordered his beheading. However, after being beheaded, the shaman did not fall. The Han Chinese emperor then regarded his soul as a divine spirit (Shirokogoroff [1935] 2025, p. 573). Unlike the Shi Clan, the shaman ancestor spirits among the *Amba Weceku* of the other three clans are all "grandmother shamans" and "grandfather shamans." According to the Manchus, these were shamans who commanded spirits.

The second type consists of female spirits. Female spirits are sometimes classified as a special group, forming a unique row of spirits. They are called "woman" (in the Manchu vernacular, *Hehe*, *Gehe*), "girl" (in the Manchu vernacular, *Gege*), or "aunt" (in the Manchu vernacular, *Dede*). These female spirits are generally the souls of female shamans. The shamanic documents of the Wusu Guan Clan mention the functions of some female spirits. For example: *Arhuci Mama*, who cures eight types of diseases; *Suyuli Gehe*, who governs fifty households; and *Dersulan Gege*, who covers the sun's face with a flowered handkerchief.

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The third type consists of hero spirits. Among the guardian spirits of the *Amba Saman*, this group of spirits is called *Buku* (wrestlers), *Baturu* (hero), or *Manni* (hero), with diverse names. These spirits originate from the souls of shamans or souls similar to those of shamans. They are skilled in using various weapons, such as javelins, spears, swords, and sabers, and serve as the shaman's attendants.

The fourth type consists of animal spirits. It should be emphasized that these spirits originated from the souls of animals. After a shaman commands them, he (or she) can take on the corresponding animal manifestations. When an animal spirit possesses a shaman, the shaman can imitate the animal's sounds and actions but cannot speak. According to Shirokogoroff's

2 Sacrificial Documents of Wusu Clan, 1834, provided by Song Heping.

investigation, when a Manchu shaman is possessed by a carp spirit, he can move under the ice like a fish (Shirokogoroff [1935] 2025, p. 771). In the shamanic documents of the Wusu Guan Clan, the eagle spirit can go to the underworld to retrieve souls.³

Conclusion

A compelling ideal type of Siberian shamanism, defined by the idea of ecstasy experiences to a celestial supreme being, was popularized by Eliade and has been used by countless other authors as a point of comparison for their own regions. In recent years, scholars have begun to recognize the limitations of this perspective. Among cultural anthropologists, there is widespread distrust of general theories about shamanism, which run aground in their efforts to generalize. By contrast, recent ethnographic research has explored the connection of shamanic practices to broader social processes (Atkinson 1992, p. 308). Based on this shift, this paper explores the important constituent element of Manchu shamanism—the shaman's guardian spirits. The paper points out the basic methods for analyzing the guardian spirits.

The first method focuses on analyzing the pattern characteristics of the guardian spirits. Compared with the shaman's guardian spirits of other Tungusic ethnic groups, the Manchus have a unique classification of guardian spirits, which are distributed in different rows. Each row is headed by a principal spirit. Most of the principal spirits are shaman ancestors, while the attendant spirits include hero spirits, female spirits, and animal spirits. The pattern of guardian spirits highlights "seniority" and "hierarchy," with hero spirits occupying the central position among the guardian spirits.

The second method examines the relationship between shamans and guardian spirits. The Manchus regard the shaman as the master of guardian spirits. Mastering spirits is the most important sign of becoming a shaman. Shamans can freely invoke guardian spirits to possess them and must master several spirits with different abilities. The number of guardian spirits is constantly changing. When first assuming the role of a shaman, the new shaman masters at least one guardian spirit. With the help of this spirit, the new shaman gradually masters other spirits.

Thirdly, the function of guardian spirits. Shamans use guardian spirits to symbolize and categorize the psychological imbalances of groups and individuals. The guardian spirits symbolize various types of harmful psychological states that arise when a group or individual adapts to its living environment. These spirits can be commanded by shamans and obey their will. The troubles caused by harmful psychological states can be solved through the

³ Sacrificial Documents of Wusu Clan, 1834, provided by Song Heping.

shaman's mastery of the spirits. Therefore, the shaman is the "safety valve" of the spiritual life of the Manchu clans.

Fourthly, the guardian spirits are a cumulative construction based on a specific social and cultural context. The guardian spirits of Manchu shamanism are not immutable. Although the guardian spirits are a habitual force in Manchu culture, they have also undergone a process of continuous revision, negotiation, and variation in the course of historical evolution. The latest transformation of the guardian spirits of Manchu shamanism was very likely influenced by the Eight Banners system and the slavery system during the Qing dynasty.

In the past, scholars tended to explain the objects of belief in shamanism based on totemism, animal worship, or ancestor worship. To some extent, these viewpoints overlooked indigenous interpretations of shamanism. The guardian spirits pattern of Manchu shamanism proposed in this article aims to emphasize the variation of "animism" in Manchu shamanism and its corresponding local interpretations. Of course, these efforts are still at a preliminary stage, and there are still more issues that need to be explored in depth.

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