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**Xian Belief from Animal Worship towards Urban Shamanism:
The Transformation of a Folk Belief in
Contemporary Northeast China**

Master's Thesis

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis concentrates on Xian belief, a set of shamanic beliefs and practices based on animal spirits performed by particular spiritual mediums in modern northeast China. Here the word Xian (仙) refers to both animal spirits and the spirit mediums who claim to have connection with animal spirits. As a modern folk belief rooted in long tradition, it has developed and changed in various social and cultural environments over the last centuries, demonstrating the dynamics and vitality of folk cultural forms.

My interest in the theme derives from personal experience. Born and raised in an urban family originally from northeast China, I heard frequently about animal spirits and Xian shamans from my childhood onwards. “Perhaps we should call the *Xian'er*”, “What did the *Xian'er* say about it” and similar sentences were often heard in my family, as seeking the help of Xian-shamans is an acceptable or even necessary option when faced with problems relating to health, career, wealth, etc. Several of my family members developed close personal relationship with Xian-shamans, which helped me to find informants for my research.

The *Xian'er* or Xian-shaman is a spiritual medium, the key role in this folk belief. They function as shamanic actors, mediating between normal human and animal spirits, and heal or predict the future using the power of the spirits. This widely spread and long maintained tradition serves as an alternative medical option or solution to other problems in contemporary society.

This phenomenon demonstrates how in contemporary China, although the dominant zeitgeist is of high materialism, rationalism and atheism, traditions concerning the old folk beliefs are still preserved and in a constant process of transmission, innovation and adaptation in relation to the quickly changing social, cultural and economic conditions. I would like to figure out in this research how Xian beliefs have survived and developed throughout time in different social environments.

Thus, this thesis focuses on Xian belief in contemporary Chinese society, mainly analysing vernacular knowledge and belief narratives collected from different adherents to Xian belief, in order to answer the following questions: What are the main features of Xian belief as a traditional and modern shamanic practice? What has changed, and remained unchanged, in Xian belief today compared to the past? Why did these changes take place and what factors motivated or prevented

the changes? Establishing these questions as the main directions of research, ultimately, I would like to discover the mechanism of transformation of this folk belief in changing sociocultural environments by observing the dynamics of the elements that compose it.

1. METHODS AND RESOURCES

1.1. Resources

1.1.1. Fieldwork resources

When collecting materials, I followed Lauri Honko's thick corpus principle, according to which study should focus on one performer, one village or one thematic field in a community or region. The fluency of the folklore expressions studied should be high, so that variation is visible (Honko 2000: 16). The high density of information acquired from intensive interviews with the same person on the same theme, it should be easier to reveal the characters present in the narratives of Xian belief.

Due to China's travel restriction against the Covid-19 pandemic, I didn't get a proper chance to do my fieldwork on spot in northeast China, and therefore all my fieldwork interviews were carried out online. I used the video call function within WeChat, the most popular instant messaging social media in China, to interview all my informants, and recorded the interviews with their permission.

In total 10 interviews with 4 informants were conducted in this way. For the sake of a thick corpus, I concentrate on one thematic field, which is the discourse and narrative of Xian belief. All the informants are from the same region, Jilin province in northeast China, living in either urban or rural areas. Coming from different generations my informants are surrounded by different social environments and have various styles. In the following discussion I have anonymised all the informants.

Informant Z, female, aged 71. A Xian-shaman who worships animal spirits. Born, bought up, living and acting in a rural area (Changyi district, Jilin City, Jilin province). Interviewed once, in total about 1 hour.

Informant F, female, aged 41. A Xian-shaman dealing with animal spirits. Born and bought up in a rural area (Nong-an county, Changchun, Jilin province), now living and acting as medium in an urban area (same region). Interviewed twice, in total about 1.5 hours.

Informant W, female, aged 41. A Xian-shaman using animal spirits. Born, bought up, living and acting in an urban area (Nong-an county, Changchun, Jilin province). Interviewed five times, in

total about 3 hours. Although she has never argued about being presented anonymously in the research, she will simply be referred as informant W.

Informant S, female, aged 40. A client of informant W, with whom she has developed a respectful friendship. She is in regular touch with W not only for answers to questions but also as an important part of her daily social life. She was interviewed twice, in total about 1 hour.

1.1.2. Written resources

This thesis mainly relies on fieldwork resources. However, since comparative methods are essential in analytical research for the sake of a comprehensive observation of the dynamics of folk belief, data about Xian belief from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries are also worthy of attention. These materials are predominantly written.

In the late 17th century and the 18th century, information about Xian belief appeared in the literary works of the Zhi-guai genre, written by several intellectuals. Zhi-guai translated as records of anomalies and is a special literary genre mainly listed as non-serious. Predominantly presented as brief stories written in classical Chinese prose, this genre focuses on events that are considered unusual, anomalous or supernatural. The literati authors of Zhi-guai may have believed that these events were factual (Campany 1996: 163). Some Zhi-guai stories about Xian belief that the authors heard or personally experienced can be found from the late imperial period of China, stories that might reveal some of the early characters from Xian belief.

Ethnographic research and records of Xian belief came to light from the late 19th century as foreign ethnographers studied local folk beliefs in China, and native scholars started to be trained as collectors and researchers of ethnographic materials (Kang 2006: 40). Initially, information on Xian belief was fragmentarily, distributed in those generalised ethnographic works. The first ethnographic research that specifically focused on Xian belief was written in the 1940s (Li & Zhou 2011). From the 1980s until recently a few Chinese researchers published articles on Xian belief based on their fieldwork, which can also be regarded as ethnographic material (Zhu, Yue 2007; Liu, Zheng-ai 2009; Zhou, Peng et al. 2015; Hai 2019).

Apart from this material, there are other fragmentary written sources that are worth noting. Many short stories, mainly regarded as folktales (民间故事, Mǐn-jīān Gù-shì), about Xian belief or

animal spirits (Xian'er) are collected in the *Grand Collection of Folktales*, which is part of the Three Grand Collections of Folk Literature (*Santao Jicheng*) Project initiated by the Chinese Ministry of Culture (Yang; An 2005: 14; Zhang 2022: 22). Each volume of the *Grand Collection* contains folktales collected from a particular region, and it includes much formerly unpublished archival material.

1.2. Methods

In order to analyse Xian belief, oral materials collected in the fieldwork and relevant written materials from former research and records are discussed in two categories. I would call these theoretical discourses and experience narratives.

The first category contains Xian shamans' theoretical discourse. In this research, more concretely, theoretical discourse includes Xian shamans' worldview, the cosmology of Xian belief, definitions of animal spirits and other supernatural beings, etc. These discourses are presented by informants in a reflexive way and function as theoretical cores to their narrative. To some extent, these discourses can also be understood as the folk theology of Xian belief. As direct and general statements, these discourses might be classified by some folklorists as folk belief (Honko 1964), which is defined as the religious ideas about magic, omens and supernatural beings (Blehr 1971). However, in this thesis, when handling these categories of discourse, I follow the framework in which vernacular theory can be considered part of vernacular knowledge. The concept of vernacular theory refers to the vernacular understanding of cultural forms. By democratising the notion of theory, the concept of theory is no longer limited to the privileged cosmopolitan and intellectual cultural achievements but includes creations of the broader community (Briggs 2008). This framework enables us to give the right of reply to our informants by entrusting the definition and formation of theories to them. As a less systematic form than scientific theory, vernacular knowledge is not a systematic and consistent doctrine but rather an expressive strategy, and its never-finalised product, that appears in manifold forms. Vernacular knowledge is in perpetual fluctuation, remaking and variation, constantly taking new forms (Valk 2022: 21). So, we can observe the dynamics of vernacular theories in particular sociocultural context from the emic perspective of the participants in this belief.

The second category is experience narrative. In most, if not all, of my interviews, narratives of personal experience play the dominant role. In contrast to parallel theoretical discourses, which are not necessarily derived from personal or collective experience, experience narratives do not attempt to define any phenomenon within this folk belief, but rather as more actualised, localised and personalised story telling forms, they describe, explain and validate vernacular theories using examples from personal experiences. From the respect of genre, these narratives are mainly memorates (Honko 1964). Experience narratives are discussed in the framework of belief narrative, which refers to the narrative concerning belief behaviour and understanding based on personal and collective experience. Belief narrative is a synthetic genre category that includes stories and storytelling, which shapes one's perception of reality by evoking belief and disbelief, trust and mistrust, and fear and confidence and by making us act or abstain from action in our daily lives (Valk 2021). Within this framework, it is possible to consider the dynamic relationship between the narrated experiences and former narrating patterns, particular social consensus, cultural factors, etc. (Valk 2012a; 2014). As Ülo Valk points out, supernatural narratives are derived from particular experiences that are verbalised and intertextually linked to interpretative frameworks of previous conversations and storytelling (Valk 2018: 109).

According to Lauri Honko, memorates enable us to form a picture of the social context of belief (1964). Ülo Valk also points out that if belief narratives such as legends are studied in their social context, then we are not only dealing with the single narrative but also a vast generic field, ranging from everyday communication and storytelling to the printed pages of the mass media (Valk 2012b: 249). Based on these points of view, in order to investigate comprehensively an oral narrative, it is necessary to discuss the narrative in its own original cultural and social context (Siikala 1989: 190). Each of my informants lives in slightly different social environments, and the cultural backgrounds that have affected them are not completely the same, this would be also taken into accounts.

The purpose of the thesis is not simply to classify informants' narratives into different categories and discuss their social and cultural contexts separately, but also to discover the mechanism of transformation of Xian belief in the changing social environment. Therefore, I compare narratives from different informants who are from various generations and living environments. Previous records and research on Xian belief are also compared so that a broader

overview can be achieved. In the process of the comparative work, I introduce the theoretical framework of the cultural self-healing mechanisms developed by Chinese American folklorist Juwen Zhang (2017; 2022). According to Zhang, this mechanism enables traditions or cultures to survive internal and external upheavals and continue in a new environment (2022: 39). In order to explain the process of this mechanism, Zhang introduced concepts such as vitality and validity of tradition. Traditions that are deeply rooted in the beliefs and values of a culture have vitality, which helps to keep tradition stable in its transmission (ibid.: 41). While the validity of a tradition shows in its practical usefulness, practical validity vacillates in its adaptation of a tradition. Zhang also differentiated two kinds of element in a cultural form. The first is elements that are rooted in the fundamental beliefs and values of the cultural form, thus showing their durability and sustainability. These are core identity markers and correspond to the vitality of culture. The second category is the arbitrary identity marker, i.e. elements that often change strategically in order to adapt to a new environment. This kind of element reveals the vitality of a particular cultural form (ibid.: 42). Both kinds of identity marker are necessary in reconstructing and maintaining identities at all levels, and in developing new cultures. (ibid.: 43)

In this research, I will find the unchanged elements, the so-called core identity markers, of Xian belief, that show its vitality, as well as the arbitrary identity markers, those elements that change whether through innovation or borrowing, in which the validity of Xian belief lies. By investigating the factors causing change or promoting stability of a particular element in specific historical period and social context, the mechanism of transformation and transmission of Xian belief can be built. Thus, finally, I apply another theoretical tool, the narrative register, to analyse the adaptation and arrangement of elements of Xian belief in different social contexts. Based on linguistic discussion about contextual variation, essentially developed by M. A. K. Halliday, Kaarina Koski introduced the concept of register in the folkloristic study of legends. While linguistic registers represent contextual variations in language and marks the various uses of language expression in different situations (Halliday 1973: 22), narrative register marks recontextualisations of the legend in different contexts and represents the decisions to include or exclude certain details, as well as the choices of how to set the narrative world. (Koski 2016: 130-131) The transformation and transmission of Xian belief narratives is also a process of adapting different social environment by recontextualising its content in the changing social context. Register

may be viewed as the cultural systems that provides models for expressive behaviour (verbal and otherwise) in contexts of social practice and interaction (Frog 2015: 90). In this research, each social context is discussed as a register, using Asif Agha's three-dimensional register model, which includes criterial behaviour (its repertoires), stereotypic indexical values (its social range) and the recognising or performing such signs in practices (its social domain) (Agha 2015: 28). Combining this with Zhang's cultural self-healing mechanism, mentioned above, I attempt to view Xian belief as a dynamically developing tradition that interacts with social contexts.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Historiography

From the late 17th century, literati authors of late imperial China started to record Xian belief events in their Zhi-guai genre short works, for example, in *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (translated as Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio), the most famous work of its kind, a recorded of Pu Song-ling's personal visit to a Xian belief shamanic medium (Kang 2006: 121-123). Ji Yun, an imperial official and literatus, also wrote his personal experience dealing with shamanic medium in his home town (ibid.: 2).

In the late 19th century and 20th century, ethnographic research focused on Xian belief in north and northeast China, such as Doré (1920), Fei (1939), Takizawa (1940), Uchida (1970), though none of them was completely devoted to this theme. Li Wei-tsu's ethnography carried out in the areas of Beijing in 1940s was the first academic work to concentrate on the cult of animal spirits and the shamanic practice of Xian belief. With systematic and comprehensive records of different participants' narratives and experiences, it provides a worthy and detailed overview of 20th century's Xian belief in north China (Li 1948; Li & Zhou 2011). Zhou Xing enriched Li's ethnography with theoretical analysis from a modern folkloristic perspective (Li & Zhou 2011).

Thomas D. Dubois devoted one chapter to Xian belief and related shamanic practice in Cang County in north China in his book *The Sacred Village: Social Change and Religious Life in Rural North China* (2005). Xiaofei Kang's monograph *The Cult of the Fox, Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China* concentrated on the fox cult and made a detailed analysis of Xian belief, mainly belief in fox spirits (Huxian) from the perspective of the researcher (Kang 2006).

In recent years, some academic dissertations from Chinese institutions (Li, Xiao-lin 2013; Pang, Zhe 2018; Zhang, Ning 2019; Liu, Chang 2020) and journal articles (Zhu 2007; Liu, Zheng-ai 2009; Zhou, Peng et al. 2015; Wang 2018; Hai 2019) have discussed this theme from the perspectives of folklore studies, religion studies, material culture studies, sociology and anthropology, etc.

2.2. Region

This thesis concentrates on Jilin province northeastern China. Northeast China is composed of three provinces: Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning, as well as the eastern part of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The majority of the population of northeast China are Han Chinese, many of them descended from 19th and 20th century immigrants from north China. People in this area speak mandarin Chinese with a unique and distinct accent; they share a strong regional identity.

Jilin province, located in the geographical centre of northeast China, borders Liaoning to the south, Heilongjiang to the north, Inner Mongolia to the west and North Korea and Russia to the east. Apart from Han Chinese there are also many other ethnic groups, such as Manchu and other Tungus peoples as well as Koreans and Mongolians. For historical reasons, northeast China was the one of the earliest industrialised and urbanised regions in China, so the proportion of the population that grew up and live in urban areas is high.

My informants live in two regions in Jilin province: Changchun city and Jilin city¹, two neighbouring cities that form the core region of Jilin province. Jilin city was the historical centre of this province, while Changchun was the political, economic and cultural centre for most of the 20th century, maintaining this position today. The same region (Changchun and Jilin) is also a cultural centre of the Manchu people, one of the minority ethnic groups of China. Manchu inhabitants in Jilin city maintain much Manchu shamanist heritage, and there is an institution for research into Manchu shamanism in Changchun (Siikala, Hoppál 1992: 194-195; Hoppál 2015: 77-95). So, influence from Manchu shamanism can also be detected in Xian belief, which was carried into this region from north China by waves of immigration.

2.3. Background Knowledge of Xian Belief

2.3.1. Xian belief as a vernacular religion

The folk belief of Xian worshipping different animal spirits was spread widely and long among the regions of northern China. In 1940s, Chinese sociologist Li Wei-tsu wrote about the belief in four

¹ In China, city is an administrative division lower than province and higher than county, it does not refer to urban area exclusively, but contains both urban and rural areas.

kinds of spirit (四大门) based on fieldwork material collected from rural regions near Peping (today's Beijing). According to Li's research, the four most notable spiritual animals worshiped by peasants in these regions were fox, weasel (Siberian weasel), hedgehog and snake (Li & Zhou 2011: 5; Li 1948). They were believed to be able to develop from normal animals into spirits or deities (*Xian*) and possess supernatural powers that could provide welfare or cause doom to human beings related to them. Animals that are worshiped and believed to be able to possess supernatural power vary in different regions. In other rural regions near Beijing, rat and hare are listed among the spirits (Li, Jinhua 2012). While in northeastern China, the most common animal spirits derive from fox, weasel, snake and python (Liu, Zheng-ai 2009). Folklorist Zhou Xing points out that although components and details may vary greatly in different regions, the underlying logic of *Xian* belief in northern China is similar, that is, common wild animals acquire spiritual and cultural properties through the process of personalisation and deification (Li & Zhou 2011: 167).

Several Chinese folklorists define *Xian* belief as a folk religion of northern China (Li & Zhou 2011) (Li, Jinhua 2012). One of the most important researchers of Chinese religion, sociologist C. K. Yang, divides religions in Chinese society into two types: institutional religion and diffused religion. Institutional religions in China are universal religions such as Buddhism and Taoism, which operate as independent systems of religious life with independent theology, forms of worship and organisation of clergy. Diffused religions operate and are functionalised as part of mundane society, with theological theories, worship objects and believers, diffused closely in one or several mundane systems and forming part of mundane society's worldview, ritual and structure (Yang 1961: 294-295). According to this dichotomy, *Xian* belief obviously belongs to the category of diffused religion, as it integrates closely with the everyday life of the mundane world, and unlike the institutional religions, the theologies and worship objects of which are relatively steady and systematic, elements of *Xian* belief, just like other diffused religions, can vary drastically in particular social and cultural environments, hence many regional and temporal variants of this religion are extant in a similar way to the concept of ecotype in legend studies, to some extent (Hasan-Rokem 2016).

Diffused religions, as defined by Yang, also fit into the concept of vernacular religion from the perspective of folklore studies. Vernacular religion is a religion as it lived and as human beings encounter, understand, interpret and practice it (Primiano 1995). Compared with institutional

religions, there are fewer normative and fixed elements in vernacular religion. The paradigm rather highlights verbal, behavioural and material expressions of the religious life of the individual (ibid.). In the following parts of this thesis, we can clearly see that the individual creativity of Xian shamans is the deciding factor in the development of Xian belief. In order to define Xian belief, these two terms, diffused religion and vernacular religion, are used here, as they carry different meanings. While diffused religion is a dichotomous opposite to institutional religion at social and organisational levels, vernacular religion is a concept that highlights the people as the focus of religious study (Primiano 2014).

Diffused religions are dependent on institutional religions that may offer mythological or theological concepts, worship objects such as deities or spirits, and ritual means (Yang 1961: 215). We can find reasons for this phenomenon according to the theory of vernacular religion, which regards individual creativity as the main power in shaping religious life (Primiano 2014). In the case of Chinese vernacular religions, as represented by Xian belief, elements from institutional religions are important sources of inspiration and authority for their creativity in religious life. In Xian belief, for example, the great influence of Buddhism is especially notable in its variants in northeastern china, where Buddhist deities are often regarded as the sources of the supernatural power of animal spirits and shamans (Wang 2018). I shall discuss the phenomenon of Buddhist influence more deeply in this thesis as well.

2.3.2. The public and private domain of Xian belief

In northeastern China, the folk religion of Xian belief exists in parallel both in the public domain as a community belief and in the private domain as worship of family protectors. In the public domain, spirits of Xian belief own sacred places on various scales. Temples, in which animal spirits are worshiped, are in the central position of public religious life connected to this belief. According to previous fieldwork records, more than half of the temples located in the western, southern and eastern regions of Liaoning province (the southern part of northeastern China) are dedicated to animal spirits, mainly foxes, weasels, snakes and pythons (Liu, Zheng-ai 2009).

Of the animal spirits, foxes have the most representative position, due to which the sacred places of animal spirits are also generally called the Hall of the Fox Spirit, or Spirits (狐仙堂 or 胡

仙堂, Huxian-tang). Some temples act as the centre of religious life for a whole community. A good example of this is Tian-bao village, where rituals attended by the whole village are held regularly in the temple, which enshrines the most important local fox spirit accompanied by less important fox spirits (Zhu 2007). Such religious centres also exist in urban areas, for example the old town of Hulan, a district in Heilongjiang's provincial capital, Harbin, where a temple enshrining more than 50 spirits (predominantly foxes and weasels) is run by professional clergy and worshiped regularly by believers (Zhou, Peng et al. 2015). In the public domain, the animal spirits are often functionalised as the patron god(s) of social groups such as a community or village.

In the private domain, the function of animal spirits is quite similar to their roles in the public domain, although they have smaller coverage. One of the most important private domains is the private residence. In rural regions of northeastern china, mini sacred places can be found for the animal deities in private residences, in which case they are called Bao-jia Xian (保家仙, House Protective Deity). One family would enshrine at most one animal spirit, most commonly Hu-xian (fox) or Huang-xian (weasel). Some believers even treat their house protective spirit as a family member, for example a small amount of their daily meals would be presented to the spirit as tribute, etc. More substantial food, alcohol and incense are offered to the spirit on specific dates such as the first and 15th days of every month of the Chinese lunar calendar (Liu, Chang 2020), or when the family makes a specific request to the spirit (Hai 2019).

In contrast to the spirits enshrined in the public temples, house protective spirits usually don't have icons, their symbols are often simply pieces of red or yellow cloth stuck to the wall with spirits' names written on them (Hai 2019). Although the house protective spirit can be regarded as part of the family, their mini sacred places are still somehow traditionally separated from the daily living areas of family homes. In rural regions, their niches are placed in warehouses or courtyards, or nooks in the living house (ibid.). Some families build a small temple (in some cases constructed of a few bricks) for their protective spirit in courtyards or even wild areas (Liu, Zheng-ai 2009). Believers living in urban areas enshrine their house protective spirit at home (Liu, Chang 2020).

2.3.3. Xian belief as a shamanic practice

The connections between Xian belief and shamanism have been noticed by several scholars since

the 1940s (Li, Jinhua 2012). The shaman is a communally recognised professional who cultivates personal relationships through assistance in order to achieve particular ends for the community: generally healing, divination, and/or control of the future (Dubois, Thomas A. 2009: 6). In Xian belief, there are people who fit this definition perfectly, spirit media channelling between normal believers and animal spirits are usually the key figures among practitioners of Xian belief. In northern and southern China, the Xian belief shaman is called Xiang-tou (香头, leader of the believers) (Li & Zhou 2011: 54), while in northeastern China, the shaman is called Xian (仙, the deity) or Xian'er (the -er suffix often marks diminutive and oral use). In northeastern China, the term Xian can refer to both the animal spirits and the shamans, its concrete reference relying on context. Two terms, *Bao-jia Xian* and *Chu-ma Xian*, are often used in parallel in northeastern China in order to differentiate animal spirits of different functions. While *Bao-jia Xian* refers to the patron deity of the family, as mentioned above, *Chu-ma Xian* (出马仙, the acting deity) refers to the source of the shaman's supernatural power, i.e. spirits who help shamans heal and divine (Hai 2019). It is unique that among *Chu-ma Xians*, the souls of human beings who were persecuted to death can also function as animal spirits.

In many cultures of the world, shamans often point to a period of disease in their personal lives as a pivotal event that led one or more spirits to make themselves available as a source of healing and survival (Dubois, Thomas A. 2009: 57). The process is the same for Xian belief shamans. Typically, a Xian shaman's career begins with a sudden and pre-destined disease caused by a spirit. The novice can recover and survive by making a connection with this particular spirit with the help of an experienced Xian shaman (Liu, Chang 2020). A unique double or even triple mentoring relationship will then be built between the experienced shaman, the novice shaman, and their spirits: theoretically, the novice shaman becomes a disciple of the spirit after connection between them is made, while at the same time the experienced shaman acts as a vocational and mental mentor of the novice shaman. In some cases, the establishment of the mentoring relationship between two shamans also means that the novice's spirit becomes a disciple of the experienced shaman (Li & Zhou 2011). Xian shamans have particular sacred places to worship spirits that provide supernatural power to them, although one shaman is spiritually mentored by the particular spirit who caused the disease at the beginning of his career, it is quite common that shamans worship, and use the power of, more than one spirit.

Traditionally, it seems that Xian shamans have more passive roles in relationships with the spirits who choose shamans as a medium to connect with common people in order to cultivate themselves. In the rituals of channelling, the Xian shamans function as vehicles for the spirits who carry out the task of divining and diagnosing, during which Xian shamans are directly possessed by the spirits (Dubois, Thomas D. 2005: 84). The degree of trance of the Xian shaman when possessed can vary greatly, but generally it is the spirit who takes control of the ritual.

2.3.4. Personified animal spirits

Animal spirits in Xian belief are highly anthropomorphised and personified. This is expressed in several ways, including their appearance, character and social relation. In both previous records and my interviews, animal spirits are described as living and acting in a parallel society that corresponds to human society in the ordinary world.

First, according to the narratives and traditions of Xian belief, animal spirits always appear in anthropomorphised form. The representative figure of the fox spirits in north and northeast China is a white-bearded old man, sometimes accompanied by his spouse, a similarly elder female figure. They are often addressed as Hu San-tai-ye (Grandpa/master Hu the third) and Hu San-tai-nai (Grandma/mistress Hu the third) (Kang 2006: 92). In Xian belief temples, private altars for house patron spirits, or shamans' altars with anthropomorphised forms of animal spirit idol are worshiped. Apart from these, animal spirits are described as having different characters, like human beings. Fox spirits are believed to have a mild disposition, and are sometimes careless, weasel spirits can be naughty and tricky (Shan 1995: 36), and snake spirits are vindictive and hard to deal with (Liu, Zheng-ai 2009).

Animal spirits also have names. The spirits of one particular animal share a common surname, so all fox spirits have the surname Hu (胡), which is homophonic to fox (狐, Hu) in Chinese. Weasel spirits have the surname Huang (黄), which is also the first Chinese character in the name of the Siberian weasel (黄鼠狼, Huang-shu-lang). Animal spirits are also believed to live in a society resembling human society, and the spirits of a particular animal form a social network-like family consisting of several generations, built on both kinship and the mentoring relationship (Liu, Zheng-ai 2009). Spirits from the same generation share a common Chinese character as the first part

of their given name, which is the traditional Chinese naming regulation in families.

3. THEORETICAL DISCOURSES

3.1. Cosmology and the Self-cultivation of Xian Belief

A cosmology is believed to be necessary in Shamanism, as shamans need a notion of a cosmos that contains multiple levels, as well as temporal dimensions or locales in which they are able to travel spiritually and interact with their interlocutors (Dubois, Thomas A. 2005: 41). Mircea Eliade, famous scholar of religion, suggested a cosmology could represent a conceptual foundation upon which shamans draw to describe and detail their experiences (1964: 259). Cosmology as intellectual story coined by shaman describing the universe (Riches 1994) is definitely a dominating part in shamans' theoretical discourses. In this section, Xian shamans' discourses about their cosmology in different registers are discussed.

Traditional cosmology in Xian belief is based on the concept of self-cultivation in Chinese culture and religion. In contrast to typical shamanic cosmologies in Eurasia or America, which can contain multiple worlds among which shamans journey and interact with interlocutors (Dubois, Thomas A. 2005: 41), in Xian belief, spiritual interlocutors, specifically animal spirits (*Xian* in Chinese), are from and exist on the same level of the world as human beings. According to the vernacular understanding of Xian-shamans and adherents to Xian belief, all animal spirits developed from normal wild animals after self-cultivation of several hundreds of years, and then obtained spiritual abilities and anthropomorphised forms (Li & Zhou 2011: 19). Self-cultivation is thus a process of accumulating and absorbing energy within a long period of time in order to obtain achievements such as supernatural lifespan and power. Those successfully self-cultivated animal spirits stay and act in the human world and are sometimes visible to normal people.

The concept of self-cultivation (修炼, *Xiu-lian* in Chinese) rooted deeply in Chinese folk beliefs and institutional religions. Early in the pre-Imperial period (before the 2nd century BC), many figures that are believed to have human origin and supernatural lifespans and abilities gained through self-cultivation were mentioned in various textual documentation. Later, animals were believed to be able to carry out self-cultivation as well, their first objective always being to gain

human form. Such descriptions are seen in a 4th century text:

When a fox reaches fifty years old, it can transform into a woman; when it reaches one hundred years old, it becomes a beautiful female, or gains the ability of a spiritual medium or a man who has sexual intercourse with women. Such beings are able to know what happened at a distance of more than thousand Lis ... and when a fox reaches a thousand years old, it ascends to heaven and becomes a celestial fox.

The author of this passage, Guo Pu, was a famous intellectual and diviner in the 4th century. This discourse demonstrates that the fox has been regarded as a shamanic animal in China since the ancient time, and that, on the other hand, it corresponds to one of the basic concepts of traditional Chinese cosmology, that is, by self-cultivation any normal being can obtain a long lifespan, supernatural ability, and finally ascend to heaven.

Li Wei-tsu recorded some theoretical discourses from rural regions in north China in the 1940s:

Foxes, weasels, hedgehogs and snakes are spiritual animals... When they reach 500 years old, they can transform into human form. All spiritual animals can become *Xians* by self-cultivation... Each of four spiritual animals has its own unique way to cultivate... Foxes cultivate themselves by spitting fire... Weasels cultivate themselves by talking with human beings...or worshiping the moon. (Li & Zhou 2011: 20)

Similar discourse still exists, as shown in one of my fieldwork interviews. As informant Z, the 71 years old Xian-shaman from a rural region, claimed:

Among all the *Xians* [spirits] that I worship, the most powerful is *Hu San-tai-ye* (Master Hu the third), he appears as a white-bearded old man, he is the leader of the others. He is a fox spirit and has self-cultivated for more than eight thousand years, longer than the others. (FW6)

Although the details of the self-cultivation of animal spirits were omitted, what informant Z described corresponded perfectly to the traditional concept of self-cultivation. We can summarise the traditional version of the cosmology of Xian belief briefly: spiritual animals, typically foxes and weasels, gain supernatural abilities through self-cultivation after reaching a particular age, and then become animal spirits (*Xian*), who are sometimes visible to ordinary humans, but mainly communicate with human beings via a medium, the Xian-shaman. The multi-level world also exists in this cosmology, although unlike typical Eurasian shamanism, the other worlds are not destinations of shamanic spiritual travel, but rather the target of the animal spirits' self-cultivation, for example heaven or the celestial world.

Some similarities can be observed between the cosmology of Xian belief and Taoism, the first local institutional religion in China. The concept of self-cultivation is also an important part of Taoist religious practice. It is either regarded as a process by which to arrive at immortality by uniting with the eternal Tao and sharing its eternity, or as a way of achieving a long or even eternal life and finally ascending to heaven (Maspero 1981: 31-32). It is possible that these Taoist idea of self-cultivation inspire folk beliefs of spiritual animal self-cultivation and ascending to heaven. However, this judgement can never be absolute, for Taoism itself, as a religion, is a combination of components from different eras, including Taoist philosophical teaching, and practices derived some pre-historical folk religions such as sorcery, divining, ecstasy, alchemy, etc. (Robinet & Brooks 1997: 36; Maspero 1981: 32) Therefore, we cannot exclude the possibility that the concept of self-cultivation already existed in folk religion in the pre-historical era and found its way into both Taoism and Xian belief at different times. The two could even be interrelated to some extent.

Another similarity lay in the term for animal spirits in Chinese, *Xian* (仙). In the Chinese dictionary, *Xian* is explained as “the figures in myth who live eternal lives and have extraordinary abilities.” *Xian* often parallels another term, *Shen* (神), which means god. In comparison to *Shen*, *Xian* spirits can travel freely and have no close attachment to any specific location, temple or grave site (Kang 2006: 51). The pursuit of Xian-hood is the final target of Taoist self-cultivation as the status of *Xian* is regarded as equivalent to eternal life. There is a Chinese idiom describing the achievement of this status, *De-dao-cheng-xian* (得道成仙), literally meaning achieving *Tao* and becoming *Xian*. The term *Xian* is often translated into English as *immortal*, while Robert Campany defined it as *transcendent* as it not only assures timelessness but also means overcoming the

temporal and spatial matrix in which one is located (Campany 2002: 4).

In case of the animal spirits that are called *Xian*, scholars such as Li Wei-tsu (1948) and Xiaofei Kang (2006: 51-61) noticed that interpretations of *Xian* in Taoism and folk belief are different. In the vernacular understanding of adherents to *Xian* belief, *Xian*'s meaning as divine transcendent is minimal and superficial, as well as emphasising the magical, spiritual, and ambiguous side of the animal spirit (Kang 2006: 56).

Despite some similarity in terminology, which could be the effect of Taoism, the traditional cosmology of *Xian* belief was still quite a unique one based on vernacular knowledge of its participants and because it differs essentially from the cosmology of any institutional religion.

I defined the unique cosmology based on animal self-cultivation as the traditional cosmology of *Xian* belief because some comprehensive changes are noticeable in my fieldwork interviews with those *Xian*-shamans from the younger generation who are based in urban regions. When asked to define the identities of the animal spirits, informant W answered:

They (animal spirits aka *Xian*) are *Di-xian* (地仙, terrestrial transcendent) according to Taoist teaching. And relationship among them are like one among Taoists in different schools. Each school has its master and disciples of different generations and branches. Each group of *Xian* (such as foxes or weasels) is like a Taoist school. (FW3)

Differing obviously from the traditional cosmology of *Xian* belief, informant W first arranged the animal spirits into the cosmology of institutional religions. While previously the vernacular understanding of *Xian* had nuances compared with Taoism, here informant W equated vernacular and Taoist understandings. Terrestrial transcendence is an intermediate level of the hierarchy of the divine transcendence in Taoism. According to Ge Hong, a 4th century Taoist philosopher, terrestrial transcendence (*Di-xian* 地仙) is the *Xian*-hood achieved by the middle level self-cultivators, who wander among famous mountains as *Xian* spirits. They are inferior to the superior self-cultivators who rise up with their body and ascend to the void and are celestial transcendents (*Tian-xian* 天仙), and superior to lesser self-cultivators who first die and then leave their bodies and are called transcendents free of the corpse (*Shi-jie-xian* 尸解仙). (Campany 2002: 70)

In addition to the definition of *Xian*, informant W also introduced the institution of Taoist

schools or sects to describe the organisation of animal spirits, although Taoism is not the only institutional religion whose cosmology is mentioned in informant W's theoretical discourse. Actually, her version of Xian belief cosmology is a mixture of elements from Taoism and Buddhism, and her inclination to Buddhism is even stronger, as presented in the following sections. In relation to the theme of cosmology, she also said:

Animal spirits belong to *Chu-sheng-dao* (the realm of animal, 畜生道) according to *ṣaḍ-gati*. They can attain a higher level or even become a Buddha only with the help of human beings... Spirits that we Xian shamans use also include human ghosts who belong to the path of *E-gui-dao* (the realm of restless ghosts, 饿鬼道), especially the ghosts of ancestors... (FW4)

Ṣaḍ-gati is a Sanskrit term literally meaning 'six manners of going', it is a very basic concept of the cosmology of Mahayana sutra Buddhist and divides all creatures into six basic realms: inhabitants of heaven (*deva*), human beings (*manussa*), demi-gods (*asura*), animals (*tiryagyoni*), restless ghosts (*preta*) and inhabitants of hell (*niraya*). (Buswell 2004: 711) Informant W uses Taoist and Buddhist cosmologies at the same time, and believes that they are not at all controversial. For example, one fox, which belongs to *tiryagyoni* (Buddhist term), can attain the status of a terrestrial transcendent (Taoist term) through self-cultivation (both Taoist and traditional Xian belief), and then ascend to heaven or even reach the status of Buddha (Buddhist term). Similar discourses are also noticeable in the interviews with informant F, although not in so much detail.

It is worth noting that although she introduced many terms from institutional religions, informant W preserves her vernacular understanding to some extent when using these terms. According to her discourse, some human beings enter the realm of *preta* (restless ghosts) after death and act as spirits who help Xian shamans. Here the ghost is understood as the continuation of the human being, while according to the understanding in institutional Buddhism, after the death of a creature it enters its next life in one of the realms as a consequence of its actions in the previous life (Braarvig 2009). This makes entering another realm of life a kind of reincarnation or rebirth, not a continuation of the previous life as informant W understands it. Another vernacular understanding of hers is that she believes the target of animal spirit self-cultivation is to become *Shang-fang-xian*

(上方仙 superior deity), although both are called Xian, the superior deity is not equal to the Taoist celestial transcendent (Tian-xian) mentioned above, but rather is a synonym for god. This term is also used by other northeast Chinese Xian-shamans with the list of superior deity including several important Taoist and Buddhist deities (Liu, Chang 2020).

Compared with the traditional cosmology of Xian belief, its modern and urban version, represented by informants W and F, have been more obviously influenced by the institutional religions of Buddhism and Taoism. Many terms and concepts from these two religions were deliberately introduced, and together with the vernacular understandings left behind they form the cosmology of a vernacular religion in modern society.

3.2. The Role of Animal Spirits in Xian Belief

The interaction between animal spirits and Xian-shamans constitutes a crucial part in the narratives of Xian shaman, including both experience narratives that are discussed in the next section and the theoretical discourses analysed in this section. Some essential changes in the role of animal spirits and the relationship between animal spirits and Xian-shamans have taken place in the theoretical discourses of urban Xian-shamans, as compared with traditional discourses. In Xian belief, animal spirits (sometimes including particular human being spirits) are always regarded as the sole origin of the power of Xian-shamans; what may vary is why and in what conditions spirits empower shamans, and this subject forms the focus of this section.

Traditionally, the role of animal spirits is active and dominant; they are the object and worship and act as the shamans' mentors and masters. In northeast China, the beginning of a Xian-shaman's career is marked by a rite called 'setting the altar' (立堂子, *li-tang-zi*). In this rite, by writing the names of animal spirits onto a red cloth, the novice Xian-shaman confirms a worship-based relationship with those animal spirits, and in many cases she or he also confirms the leading figure of those spirits, for example Hu-san-tai-ye (Master Hu the third) as the shaman's own mentor. Historically, recordings of this rite can be found in various ethnographic works. (Li & Zhou 2011; Li, Xiao-lin 2013; Liu, Chang 2020) Thus the role of animal spirits in traditional Xian belief can be discussed in two aspects: firstly as worshiped deities, secondly as mentoring masters.

Worshipping the enshrined animal spirits on the altar is a routine rite for most of the Xian-

shamans. In the 1940s in north China, *Xiang-tous* (a local term for Xian-shaman) would burn incense before the altar three times a day, each time a different kind of incense. Some more devout *Xiang-tous* even kneel every night before the altar (Li & Zhou 2011: 87). In northeast China, on every third day of the third month and ninth day of the ninth month according to Chinese traditional lunisolar calendar, more ceremonious offerings to the spirits must be made (Hai 2019). According to rural-based informant Z, dates for ceremonial offerings are the first five days of the new year, the fifteenth day of the seventh month and the ninth day of the ninth month (all are traditional calendar dates). It is worth noting here that the fifteenth day of the seventh month is also the traditional date for worshipping the dead ancestors and communicating with the world of death (Peng 2015).

As mentioned above, many shamans build mentor–disciple relationships with animal spirits. Interestingly, the main function of animal spirits in their role of mentoring master is not teaching any skills to Xian-shamans, but rather tempering their daily behaviour with a strong moral tendency. Xian-shamans often describe the moral norms which they obey as their animal spirits’ teaching. In Li Wei-tsu’s depiction, *Xiang-tous* in the 1940s had to comply with moralities such as generosity, charity and cleanliness in the name of the orders and preferences of the animal spirits (Li & Zhou 2011: 108). In the case of northeast China, rural-based informant Z also said:

The master (Master Hu the third, the leading fox spirit) always told me to be benevolent, because heaven is watching what people do, and never lie to others... The master never let me be faithful to any religion such as Buddhism, because what Buddhism teaches us is to be a good person, and what the master teaches is the same, so there’s no need to believe in Buddhism... Our animal spirits are upright, they never ask for too many rewards from others... (FW6)

The value orientations that Xian-shamans show in the name of the spirits’ teaching are discussed later. However, for the moment we can observe that animal spirits are described as the dominant figures with a high level of control over Xian shamans’ lives and behaviour.

In the case of the theoretical discourses of Xian-shamans from younger generation, for example informants W and F in this thesis, both aspects of the animal spirits’ roles have essentially changed, the overall tendency being that their roles have already been minimised compared to their

traditional as role analysed above.

As for the worshiped deities of informants W and F, their position has been replaced by Buddhist deities. Informant W thinks ritual worship is no more than a courtesy for those who don't fully understand the animal spirits. According to informant W:

I don't worship them anymore, I prepare neither offerings nor incense nor alcoholic drinks. During these years, I don't use the red cloth or the censer any more, my heart is the censer... Everyday can be the third day of the third month or the ninth day of the ninth month in my heart. Those who worship them don't understand so much and just fear animal spirits' punishment. They actually imagine the spirits' behaviour from their way of thinking. The connection with spirits in the heart is more important.
(FW5)

Similarly, claiming to be a devout Buddhist, informant F also showed a relatively negative attitude towards the worship of animal spirits:

I threw out all the equipment for worshipping animal spirits, including the red paper, censers and candles. It is totally enough to worship the Buddha devoutly. I also prayed to animal spirits before Buddha. They know this is also good for them. (FW10)

Both informants regard spirit worship as useless and outdated formalities, even as a symbol of unenlightened cognition and understanding.

In the aspect of the mentoring master, informant W, as an urban Xian shaman from the younger generation, coined her own theories to explain why the traditional mentor–disciple relationship between animal spirits and Xian shaman is replaced (at least in her case) by a co-operational relationship in which both parties have nearly equal positions. She said:

When animal spirits, who are only terrestrial transcendentals now (*Di-xian*), want to develop into higher positions, primarily superior deities (*Shang-fang-xian*), they must carry out self-cultivation with the help of human beings because the *human being is*

the paragon of animals, and is greater than heaven and earth... (FW3)

According to this theory, Xian shamans are those who are able to help animal spirits cultivate themselves (cooperating with shamans is a way for animal spirits to reach a higher position). The phrase given in italics was quoted by informant W to prove the correctness of her theory. The origin of this sentence is interesting: in Chinese it is 人是万物的灵长, literally “*man is the primacy of all creatures*”; its classical Chinese version 惟人万物之灵 originated from an apocrypha from the *Shang-shu (Book of Documents)*, one of the most important Confucian classics. In the early 20th century, a translator of William Shakespeare’s works made use of this sentence to translate “(*Man is the paragon of animals*)” from *Hamlet*. For some reason, this sentence is commonly used in the Chinese mass media and thus became a very familiar claim, even for those who are unfamiliar with either the *Shang-shu* or *Hamlet*. Informant W quoted this sentence at least three times in different interviews (FW1; FW4; FW8) to emphasise her equal position with animal spirits. This interesting phenomenon reflects the intertextuality between so called high cultures and the discourses of folk belief.

3.3. The Role of Institutional Religion in Xian Belief

Some elements in Xian belief from institutional religions, in the Chinese context mainly Taoism and Buddhism, have already been mentioned in the section on cosmology. In this part, I attempt to give a more comprehensive overview of the role of institutional religions in Xian belief in both rural and urban environments.

3.3.1. Taoism in Xian belief

As mentioned in the sections above, Xian belief shares some key concepts, such as self-cultivation and *Xian*-hood, with Taoism. Younger generation Xian-shamans such as informant W use the structure of Taoist institutions to describe the organisation of animal spirits in Xian belief. Some dates for ceremonial worship, especially the fifteenth day of the seventh month, are also of Taoist origin (Peng 2015).

Apart from these influences, other Taoist elements also formed a notable part of Xian belief,

though the overall tendency according to my observation is that Taoist influence in modern and urban Xian belief is continuously weakening. Superior Xian belief deities mainly belong to the Taoist pantheon. According to Xian shamans in northeast China, the status of the superior deity (*Shang-fang-xian*) is the target of animal spirit self-cultivation, while the existing superior deities include several figures from Taoist mythology. Theoretically, animal spirits submit to the authority of superior deities and cultivate themselves to enhance their status in this hierarchy, finally reaching the position of superior deity.

Some superior deities are worshiped together with animal spirits on the altars of Xian-shamans. In north Chinese rural regions in the 1940s, *Xiang-tous* put idols of superior deities on their altars (Li & Zhou 2011: 73), while in northeast China, a typical Xian shaman alter enshrines two pieces of cloth: a red piece onto which the names of animal spirits are written, and a yellow piece onto which the names or titles of the superior deities are written (Hai 2019). Taoist gods worshiped as superior deities can vary depending on the Xian shaman, for example, some enshrine the three pure ones (*San-qing*), the supreme gods in Taoism, or the Jade Emperor (*Yu-huang Da-di*), the acting ruler of the heavenly kingdom and whole cosmos in Taoism (Maspero 1985: 88).

In addition to worship, some instruments used in rites of Xian shamans in rural northeast China, for example, fanions and sword (Liu, Chang 2020), also correspond to commonly used instruments in classical or vernacular Taoist rites (Schipper 1985).

While the tradition of worshipping animal spirits is vanishing in modern Xian belief, the Taoist gods who are worshiped as superior deities together with the spirits are also losing their position on the Xian-shaman's altar. Similarly, Taoist influences represented in the usage of instruments in rites are also vanishing as all kinds of shamanic rite in Xian belief are in a process of being simplified and minimised; these phenomena are discussed in the section on belief narratives. To summarise: based on my own fieldwork and the ethnographic research of others in northeast China, the Taoist elements that solidly remain in modern Xian belief are mainly conceptual and metaphorical, such as those listed at the beginning of this section, while the influence of the ritual and material aspects of Taoism is weakening.

3.3.2. Buddhism in Xian belief

Another main institutional religion in China, Buddhism, also has played an important role in Xian belief for a long time, for example early in the 17th century Xian shamans worshiped idols of Bodhisattva that were kept on their altars (Kang 2006: 121-122). Researches in this century, as well as my own fieldwork, confirm that, unlike Taoism, the influence of Buddhism in Xian-belief is still getting stronger, especially in Xian shamans' theoretical discourses and daily behaviour.

Li Wei-tsu wrote in 1940s that when a *Xiangtou* died, she or he would be dressed in a Buddhist monk's costume and be mourned by the chanting of Buddhist mantras. Some *Xiangtous* also worshiped important Buddhist deities such as Buddha, or Bodhisattva *Guan-yin* (Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara), who enjoyed great popularity as the goddess of mercy and compassion (Irwin 1990), apart from the animal spirits and Taoist gods mentioned above (Li & Zhou 2011: 69).

In northeast China, Buddhism and Xian belief have combined quite thoroughly. Many Xian shamans in northeast China claim to be devout Buddhists, and according to their discourse the animal spirits whom they worship have close relations with the Buddhist faith (Wang 2018). Buddhist deities were also included in the worship of superior deities, as the tradition of worshiping is reducing and the Taoist gods are vanishing from Xian shaman's altar; Buddha and Bodhisattva *Guan-yin* are instead taking more dominant positions. Some Xian shamans' have idols of Buddha and Bodhisattva *Guan-yin* on their altars instead of simply writing their names on yellow paper, claiming that Buddhist deities can help animal spirits be cultivated in the direction of Buddhism, enabling them to reach the status of superior deity sooner (Liu, Chang 2020). Scholars like Wang Wei even think the intense combination of Buddhism and Xian belief in northeast China has already developed into a new stage and should be renamed Xian Buddha Belief (Wang 2018). However, Wang also noticed that the Buddhism in Xian shaman's discourse is of a vernacular understanding and differs from Buddhist doctrine (ibid.). The core of Xian belief is still shamanic practice, while the introduction of Buddhism is to some extent an expressive strategy.

In relation to my fieldwork, informant Z, as the eldest, and rural-based, Xian-shaman of the three northeast Chinese shamans, showed resentment towards Buddhism (FW6), while the other two both demonstrated to what extent have Buddhism influenced Xian belief in contemporary northeast China. This can be observed in their clear personal identity as devout Buddhists and in the

theoretical discourses where Buddhism became one origin of their authority.

Informant W once explained her doomed destiny as a Xian shaman by connecting herself with Buddhist deities:

Q: So when animal spirits need human being's help (to cultivate themselves), why did they choose you? Are you particularly talented in some aspects?

A: Do you know something about Buddhism or karma?

Q: Yes, a little bit.

A: According to Buddhist classics... Buddha and Bodhisattva incarnate in all kinds of shape in order to save the creatures of the world. One Bodhisattva can come to human beings in the shape of a human being, she or he may have some experiences, and she or he can save others who have similar experiences. Just like what is written in the 25th chapter of *The Lotus Sutra*, "*The Universal Door of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva*", the Bodhisattva incarnates as all kinds of people: if you were a bhikkhu, the Bodhisattva would present herself to you as a bhikkhu, if you were a king, the Bodhisattva would present herself to you as a king. You could be a dustman or the president of a country, the Bodhisattva would present herself to you as whatever, what is closest to you, in order to save you. (FW1)

In this interview extract, informant W didn't answer my question directly, but made a long speech about how and why Bodhisattva, a high ranking Buddhist deity, incarnates in this world. She strongly hinted that she is an incarnation of the Bodhisattva, having incarnated as a Xian-shaman, who are close to animal spirits and is thus able to help them. The phenomenon of a Xian-shaman claiming to be an incarnation of Bodhisattva was also noticed and described by other scholars (Wang 2018).

Another urban Xian-shaman, informant F, said that instead of worshiping any animal spirits or other deities, she just recites "*The Universal Door of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva*", the 25th chapter of *Lotus Sutra* every day before her Buddhist shrine, and that she believes this benefits the spirits, her clients and herself (FW9). Both informants mentioned that the *Lotus Sutra*, *Saddharma Pundarika* in Sanskrit, is perhaps the most popular Buddhist classic with the longest influence in

eastern Asian Buddhism. Because of its most popular chapter, the 25th chapter, *Avalokitesvala* (Guan-yin in Chinese) has traditionally been regarded as a benevolent and merciful deity and saviour of men in China (Murase 1971).

Informant W not only quoted this Buddhist classic to validate her theoretical discourse, she also claimed the best way to solve a client's problem, caused by the malevolent behaviour of spirits or ghosts (this kind of disease or problem is discussed in next section), is to have both parties (client and ghost) converted to Buddhism (FW3).

In short, we can see that Buddhism's role in modern Xian belief of northeast China is dominant and has replaced the original direct worship and enshrinement of animal spirits in many aspects. Buddhism has become the origin of theories and authority, as well as the identity of Xian-shamans.

3.4. Disease and Ability

3.4.1. Causes and types of disease

Shamanic traditions, such as Sámi shamanism, often conceptualise disease as either a either a loss of soul or an invasion of the soul (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 44). Disease can also be ascribed to the punishment of misdeeds, or to ancestor deities or other supernatural beings (Dudois, Thomas A. 2009: 137). In Chinese folk belief, disease is often divided into two types with different causes. As Thomas D. Dubois notes in a rural regions of north China, people distinguish between ordinary diseases of physical origin (*Shi-bing*), and those of supernatural origin (*Xu-bing*), the latter attributed to a number of supernatural causes, in addition to which a continuous state of *Xu* can cause physical disease (Dubois, Thomas D. 2005: 66).

In Chinese, *Shi-bing* (实病) means real disease or hypostatic disease, while *Xu-bing* (虚病), also called *Jia-bing* (假病) in some regions, means false disease. In her book devoted to the phenomenon of *Jia-bing*, She Yan identifies three kinds of disease often given supernatural origin and regarded as *Jia-bing* or *Xu-bing*: sudden disease that the patient has never had before; slight disease, which cannot be cured over a long period; and an unclear state of body discomfort (Shen 2022: 77). In rural regions from northeast and northwest China to south of the Yangtze river, it seems to be common sense that these kinds of *Xu-bing* with supernatural origin are under the

control of spirit mediums such as Xian-shamans, while patients with *Shi-bing* of physical origin should seek help from trained doctors in modern hospitals (ibid.: 16). The border between the two types of diseases may be vague in the context of real life (ibid.: 180). In rural regions of contemporary northeast China, typical *Xu-bing* that often demand help from a Xian shaman includes long-term mental problem, or young children suddenly and ceaselessly crying (Liu, Chang 2020), although problems can also include headache, diarrhoea or eye trouble, according to some elder generation Xian shamans (Li, Xiao-lin 2013).

In modern northeast China, the definitions of disease in the theoretical discourse of Xian-shamans are various, obscure or even contradictory. For example, informant Z once claimed, “*You must go to hospital and ask help from doctors when getting particular diseases*” (FW6). And when I asked how to distinguish between *Shi-bing* and *Xu-bing*, she answered: “*90 percent of diseases nowadays are real diseases (Shi-bing), false diseases are very few now*” (ibid.). However, this doesn’t mean to her that today, when diseases of supernatural origin are fewer, her range of responsibility, and her ability, have remained narrow. In the same interview, she also claimed her animal spirits can interface with any process of healing (FW6), including the curing of physical disease, which, as she suggested, must take place in hospitals. In her understanding, although disease caused by invasion or punishment by souls or spirits is reduced today, the range of responsibility and ability of Xian-shamans and animal spirits are wider because they are able to cure physical diseases as well, in contrast to the traditional understanding.

The opinion of informant W, younger and urban-based, on the definition of disease is completely different:

The reasons for disease or problems are often animal spirits who had conflicts with their (clients’) ancestors and took revenge on these clients. Or these could be signals from clients’ ancestors who now belong in the realm of *Preta* and need the help of human beings. Or these diseases could be caused by ancestors who want to warn clients of potential problems, but then are misunderstood and hurt... Actually, *Shi-bing* and *Xu-bing* cannot be discussed separately. Every symptom seen on the body has its reason, every symptom corresponds with one of the creatures, every symptom is led by karma, which may be rooted in our previous lives. (FW5)

In informant W's discourse, the diseases have supernatural origins; more precisely, they stem from entanglements between human and spirits or ghosts, which can last for a period of several reincarnations. Although informant W didn't deny the existence of disease with physical causes (*Shi-bing*), she clearly enlarged the range of supernatural disease, explicitly contradicting the discourse of informant Z. But from my point of view, both informants' underlying logic is similar. By breaking the traditional dichotomy of *Shi-bing* and *Xu-bing*, both Xian-shamans extended their range of responsibility and ability and defended the necessary existence of Xian-shamans in the present era, when modern medical treatment is available to almost all the inhabitants in both urban and rural regions.

3.4.2. The abilities and specialities of Xian shamans

Generally, Xian-shaman in northeast China have abilities in two fields: healing, which is called 'view of the disease' (*Kan-bing*) in daily language, and the so-called view of the issue (*Kan-shi*), which include un-therapeutic services such as divination, solving daily problems, etc.

Xian shamans offer service in both fields corresponding to the appeals of their clients, although some Xian shamans would claim they are especially skilled in particular aspects and that their speciality is often healing particular diseases. Li Xiao-lin recorded a 75-year-old shaman in a rural region who is especially skilled in healing female physiological and generational diseases (2013). All of my informants also claimed to specialise in particular fields, for example rural informant Z is proud of her great ability in healing tumours and cerebro-cardiovascular disease (FW6). In the case of two urban Xian-shamans, informant W believes her speciality is healing mental diseases, depression and other mental problems (FW5).

3.5. Innovations in Modern Xian Belief

3.5.1. The introduction of scientific terms into Xian belief

While the theoretical discourse from rural-based informant Z accord with the traditional discourses of Xian belief, in the interviews with urban-based informant W, a lot of innovation can be found,

the most noticeable being the introduction of modern scientific terms into Xian belief.

When answering the question which animal spirit does she contact and how, informant W said:

At the beginning, I just thought I had the destiny [to be able to contact animal spirits]. Now I believe I have the destiny or power to contact higher dimensions. Let's talk about it in a modern or scientific context: I can link with beings who exist in higher dimensions or frequencies, and download some information from them. (FW 1)

Here informant W defined animal spirits and ghosts as beings in other dimensions. Sometimes she simply called them supernatural *beings of higher dimensions* (FW1). In other interviews, she also mentioned other scientific and philosophical concepts such as *infinite greatness*, *higher frequency*, etc., but the most frequently used term was dimension, with which she explained why normal people in three dimensions cannot view animal spirits and highlighted her own supernatural ability to contact other dimensions.

However, concerning the scientific terms she applied, her own theoretical discourse was sometimes self-contradictory. While in the first interview, all the animal spirits and ghosts were listed as *beings of higher dimensions* then in another interview one year later, this classification was overturned when my questions concentrated on the concept of dimension.

Beings of higher dimensions are generally heavenly beings such as gods, superior deities and so on. The view of them is like a hallucination, for example when I dreamed that I meet Buddha... We human beings are in three dimensions, but the dimensions in which animal spirits exist are fewer, maybe two dimensions. These beings may be animal spirits that have not reached the status of superior deity through self-cultivation, or some invisible ghosts who caused disease for clients. (FW3)

In the new classification, animal spirits, except those who became superior deities, are no longer among the *beings of higher dimensions*, on the contrary, they are now beings in two dimensions. In a sense, the process of self-cultivation is an attempt to enhance the dimensions in which the cultivator can set foot, although informant W didn't directly express this.

It is also worthy of note that when using scientific terms, informant W expressed her vernacular understanding of these words rather than pay attention to the original meaning of these words. For example, although she classified animal spirits as beings of two dimensions, actually she didn't mean that animal spirits are planar creatures like images on paper, or at least she never expressed this idea. What she wanted to say here is that human beings are actually more advanced and at a higher level compared with ghosts and animal spirits, for after giving this classification of beings of different dimensions, she repeated her quotation of the sentence of *Man is the paragon of animals*.

Informant W also mentioned the criteria and medium of connecting with beings of other dimensions:

It is easiest to contact the souls of your ancestors, everyone with some training of meditation can contact with their ancestors' souls. But only Xian [shamans] are able to contact other beings: animal spirits, superior deities and so on. The organ through which connection is made is the heart, not the brain. (FW4)

Informant W's theoretical discourse, which is armed with scientific terms, is an innovated phenomenon in Xian belief. These terms can be found neither in previous ethnographic material, nor in the discourses of other informants in my fieldwork. But using 'scientific language' to refer to beliefs and practices that are "far from scientific" and describing certain approaches as scientific on the basis of analogies and metaphors drawn from scientific methods, scientific theories and technology are not rare in modern occultist activities (Lewis, James R 2007: 208). Because science is an attractive legitimator for religious activity because of its high social status and because of the popular view of science as an objective arbiter of "truth" (Hammer & Lewis 2011: 6-8). The reasons for this phenomenon in modern Xian belief in northeast China will be discussed in the following sections of this thesis, taking various social aspects into account.

3.5.2. The self-definition of Xian shamans

The term *Xian-shaman* in this thesis is actually my personal invention, it didn't exist before in

either English or Chinese. It consists of two parts. The meaning of Xian has already been discussed, in Xian belief it refers to both animal spirits and the spirit mediums who claim to have connection with animal spirits. They are called Shamans in this thesis, for they correspond with the basic definition of Shaman as a professional who cultivates personal relations with helping spirits (Dubois, Thomas A. 2009: 6). The word Shaman also exists in Chinese, as 萨满 (sà-mǎn), which is a transcription of the pronunciation of the international term. The usage of this word in Chinese largely remains in the field of academic and cultural knowledge rather than everyday life.

However, informant W made an innovation on the definition and classification of Xian shaman, according to which Xian shamans are divided into several levels and types:

A: Now the so-called Xian is just the lowest level of all spirituality, the highest level with this kind of function is *Wu*, also known as *Shaman*, have you heard about it? They are really spirit mediums who connect with the high dimension of the wisdom of the universe. In the pre-historical age of our Chinese people, every clan had a *Wu* healer of their own, they were the shamans, you can see shamans in historical teleplays about the *Qing* dynasty.

Q: Can a normal Xian research the status of Shaman through self-cultivation?

A: I've researched, there are many kinds of Xian. There is *Chu-ma-xian* and *Chu-dao-xian*. *Chu-ma-xian* is the lowest status, they just worship animal spirits and heal some diseases or make some divinations. *Chu-dao-xian* is stronger. The highest level is shaman. I believe I've already reached the level of shaman, I'm a shaman. At the beginning I thought that it was probably my hallucination or I got mental disorder, but I felt that all who worship animal spirits in northeast or the whole of China are in my charge, that was what I thought. (FW1)

As we can observe in this part of informant W's theoretical discourse, the term of shaman has become part of her own identity. In her case, this word in Chinese is no longer a term that only exist in documentary film or ethnographic or historical texts, it is the subjective identity of the spirit medium. In another interview roughly one year later, she repeated her classification and self-definition as shaman, though omitted the intermediate level of *Chu-dao-xian* (FW4). It's also

notable that she made a connection between shaman, an international term, and *Wu* (巫), the religious title referring to the supposed shamanic role in ancient Chinese religions (Michael 2015). The equating of these two terms is actually quite an academic trope, for instance it can be seen in academic, or at least popular science, articles. This reflects the intertextuality between expressions of vernacular knowledge and so-called high culture.

3.6. The Value Orientation of Xian-Shamans

Many Xian-shamans tend to show notable value orientations in their theoretical discourse that can be presented as moral norms which regulate their daily behaviour while at the same time the violation of particular value orientation is regarded as taboo, which may lead to various consequences. Apart from theoretical discourse, Xian-shamans sometimes justify the correctness or necessity of what they do from their own experience, which will be discussed in the next section.

The leading and dominant value orientation is anti-pecuniary, in other words the control of avarice. Throughout time Xian shamans have tended to deny the economic interest they obtain in their careers as shamans. For instance, Li Wei-tsu wrote about *Xiangtou* in the 1940s:

Clients need to pay some money every time, the sum was not sure, totally depends on clients' own will, the *Xiang-tou* should never take the initiative and ask for remuneration... According to some *Xiang-tous*, all the money paid was kept and used to buy offering for the spirits... Similarly, *Xiang-tou* shouldn't ask for material objects as payment. They believed if they violated this norm, they would be punished after death. (Li & Zhou 2011: 107)

As we can see, Xian-shamans (known as *Xiang-tou* in the quoted text) avoided any suspicion of avarice and thus kept their distance from actively striving for pecuniary benefit. In my fieldwork interviews, informant Z also expressed a similar value orientation: "I'm different from *them*, who ask for so much in the way of reward and burn so many offerings [to animal spirits], these are all useless, I just heal others." Informant W had a similar but more detailed discourse:

I don't do this [shamanic practice] for money. I have my own business, we deal with interior finishing, so I know very well how to do advertisements for myself [as a Xian-shaman], but I never did. I never did anything like marketing, all the new clients know me through their acquaintances. (FW8)

Another notable value orientation is to benefit others and use their ability properly. In some rural regions, Xian-shamans believe that the only purpose of their shamanic practice is *benefiting others*, *xíng-hǎo* (行好) in Chinese (Li, Xiao-lin 2013). According to informant W, the purpose of using the power of a shaman must be morally positive, otherwise misuse of shamanic ability will lead to damaging consequences. In informant W's opinion, self-interest must be avoided: "The biggest taboo is being selfish when using the power", "What is self-interest, what is selfish, is bad. Only altruism is good." (FW1; FW3) To summarise the theoretical discourses on the value orientation of Xian-shamans, the ideal and proper Xian-shaman must ignore her or his own personal interest, pursue morally purity and avoid the misuse of this supernatural power.

4. EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES

4.1. The Beginning of a Shamanic Career

4.1.1. Disorders in life

In my fieldwork interviews with Xian-shamans, the experience narrative of how their careers began is one of the most discussed themes. Many similarities can be found in the experience narratives of the beginning of my three informants' shamanic careers, as well as of other Xian-shamans in previous researcher's records. The beginning of the shamanic career, i.e. establishing a connection with the spirits, is often marked by a kind of disorder in life that which can be mental, physical or social. However, as we can see in the following section, the roles that animal spirits played in these disorders are different in each case.

As Thomas A. Dubois pointed out, Shamans often point to a period of disease in their personal lives as a pivotal event that led to one or more spirits making themselves available as a resource for healing or survival (2009: 57). In the cases of northeast Chinese Xian-shamans, this disease mentioned by Dubois is also a very common embodiment of the disorder at the beginning of their career. However, these disorders don't present exclusively as diseases, and the functions of spirits in relation to these disorders can be highly heterogeneous.

Rural-based elder generation Xian-shaman informant Z's experience of a life disorder was typically a disease, in the process of which spirits played a crucial healing role. As informant Z described:

My family was so poor, when I got married, my only dowry was a borrowed sewing machine. Three months later I visited my parents' home, when I came back to my own home, the borrowed sewing machine had been taken back by its owner. I was so annoyed and I got mad. I lost consciousness. Then I dreamed of a white-bearded old man who fed me special medicine for three days. After that I recovered and started [as

a Xian-shaman]. This white-bearded old man is the fox spirit Hu-san-tai-ye (Master Hu the third). (FW6)

In informant Z's case, the period of disorder in her life was presented as mental illness caused by the pressure of poverty. Hu-san-tai-ye, the white-bearded spirit, who has since become the leading spirit in her shamanic career, was her saviour and functioned as the restorer of order in her life. Answering the question why the spirit would save her, informant Z thought it was because of the benevolence and compassion of the spirit.

However, for other Xian-shamans, an animal spirit could be both the cause and solution of life disorder. And restoration of order in life is a process of negotiating with the spirits and finally entering into cooperation with them. This can be seen in the case of informant W:

I was young at that time, 23 years old. It was my personal experience, I suddenly couldn't not walk anymore, my legs were out of my control. And I couldn't express anything orally clearly, I couldn't control my mouth either. It was like disease... When I got the disease, I was terrified when it was serious. I felt I saw a lot of people whenever I opened my eyes, like a hallucination. (FW1)

Informant W described her state of disease and hallucination in the period of disorder in her life. In order to resolve the issue, informant W had to carry out the rite of 'setting the altar' (立堂子) with the help of an experienced Xian shaman. All the symptoms vanished after she enshrined animal spirits on her altar. In this case, the disorder in her life was caused by animal spirits who wanted the future Xian-shaman to be subject to their will and become their vehicle or disciple, or to cooperate with them. In cooperation with human being, spirits are able to cultivate themselves more efficiently, as mentioned in last chapter. The only way to restore the order of life is to reach an agreement with spirits and start a shamanic career. In informant W's own words, the disorder in life is something that the spirits with whom the future Xian-shaman is destined to tangle, use to stimulate the future Xian-shaman, in order to be noticed and gain importance for the individual involved (FW3). According to informant W, there was no single spirit who caused her disease, rather all the spirits that were enshrined later contributed to it together.

In next case, informant F depicted in detail how a few spirits caused disorder to not only her life, but also the lives of her whole family. The description of the disordered state before her shamanic career featured prominently in the first interview with informant F. However, it was not herself but her son who suffered the disordered state, which was reflected as mental disorder (FW9). Informant F believes the spirits could not disturb her owing to her extraordinary mental power and her routine of reciting Buddhist mantras. So her son, a junior high school pupil, was targeted to coerce her to offer her services as a Xian shaman to them (ibid.).

Informant F also elaborated the spirits' identities and their motivations for causing her son's mental disorder. The first spirit mentioned was a weasel spirit (*Huang-xian*), whose corporeal body was killed by her husband's grandfather and thus wanted revenge, or at least to demand her services as compensation (FW10). In a sense, the weasel spirit and informant F were destined to tangle and to seek a resolution to this destiny in the process of negotiation cooperation in order to end the disordered state. The second spirit was a ghost of human who claimed to be informant F's artificially aborted daughter. This spirit's motivation was jealousy at her born and well brought up brother and resentment against informant F. The female ghost of a human is called *Qing-feng* in Xian belief, although ghosts of humans who were persecuted to death are also enshrined by Xian shamans and recognised as spirits that function as sources of Xian-shamans' power. It is actually quite unique that a human ghost takes so essential a role in a Xian-shaman's narrative.

The resolution to her son's disordered state was narrated separately. As compensation to the weasel spirit, informant F carried out a 'setting the altar' (*Li-tang-zi*) ritual with the help of an experienced Xian-shaman, exactly as informant W did, and then started to act as a Xian-shaman (FW10). Like other Xian-shamans, informant F's altar enshrines not only this particular weasel spirit who has resentment against her family, but also a whole group of other spirits. As an extra consolation, informant F and her husband's family built a small temple to the weasel spirit in countryside (ibid.). Informant F promised to make regular offerings as consolation to the little girl's ghost. In her own words "what I buy for your brother, I'll buy the same thing for you" (ibid.).

As these cases from my informants demonstrate, disordered states often described as disease are quite normal phenomena for novice Xian-shamans before the beginning of their careers. Other researchers also recorded similar cases, for example, Li Xiao-lin wrote about two Xian-shamans in rural regions of northeast China who suffered from physical pain and torment caused by animal

spirits before being subject to spirits' will and becoming Xian-shamans (2013). One informant in Liu Chang's dissertation said directly, "there aren't normal people who do this, only those who are tormented by disease nearly to death would enshrine animal spirits [i.e. become Xian-shamans]." (Liu, Chang 2020)

There are some exceptions among Xian-shamans, who successfully avoid suffering from a disordered state. One example is from informant W's narrative about her mother's grandmother, who once saved the life of a fox's that later turned to be a spirit. In return, the fox spirit empowered her and made her a Xian-shaman, who was extremely efficient and powerful within a period of three years (FW4). The plot is similar to other Xian shamans' narratives, for example one rural Xian shaman narrated a legend-like story explaining the origin of the local fox spirit (Li, Xiao-lin 2013). In these cases, shamanic power is a kind of reward for humans. Interestingly, collectors of folktales found many short stories in northeast China in which the main plot is that a human saves a fox and is then rewarded in different ways (Tang 2019). Rewards in these stories can be fortune or the anthropomorphised fox itself as a wife, although these stories are usually not connected with the shamanic tradition, although we can certainly find some similarities in motifs and narrative structure.

4.1.2. Obstacles to becoming a Xian-shaman

In Xian-shamans' narratives, the most obvious obstacle to their shamanic career is their own resistance. And we can see in last section, most of them claimed that they had had no choice but to obey the will of animal spirits in order to improve the disordered state in their lives. In most cases, Xian-shamans start their careers unwillingly, and they emphasise their helplessness in the face of pressure from the spirits. However, this is not the only obstacle, as in both informant W and F's narratives resistance from the spouse is a factor.

In informant W's case, her husband's resistance toward her shamanic career was resolved relatively easily. Her husband was worried because he was a firm atheist and did not agree with her plan to become a shaman. However, his mind was changed the night before the 'setting an altar' ritual, as he saw an old white-bearded man on the balcony of their apartment (FW4). It is notable that this white-bearded man is a widely spread motif in Xian shamans' narratives. Informant Z also

mentioned this character, *Hu-sa-tai-ye* (Master Hu the third), as her saviour and the leading animal spirit for her shrine (FW6). In a book devoted to Chinese fox spirit belief, religion researcher Xiaofei Kang described her mother's narrative, in which she saw an old white-bearded man curing her brother at night after *Xiang-tou* conducted a ritual (Kang 2006: 1). In Kang's book this happens in the mid-20th century and is evidence that Xian shamans use this motif stably and repeatably at different times and in different places. I shall discuss this phenomenon in the following section.

In informant F's case, her husband as well as his parents together formed a large obstacle to her shamanic career. Just like informant W's husband, informant F's husband and his whole family are firm atheists and regarded her behaviour and narratives related to Xian belief as nonsense. Informant F elaborated two experiences of conflicts between her on behalf of animal spirits and her husband and his parents. Initially when faced with her husband's criticism, informant F, possessed by the weasel spirit, threaten to bring death to him (FW 10). The second time she gathered the whole family including her husband's parents. Then, with informant F's mouth, the weasel spirit talked about many things that had happened to his family over several generations, beginning from his grandfather, who hurt the spirit's corporeal body, finally saying "without my disciple [informant F], your family would had fallen into a miserable situation long ago" (ibid.).

The context of these conflicts may be the relatively strong patriarchal feature in traditional Chinese families, especially in rural regions, where informant F herself also came from. On behalf and with the help of animal spirit, informant F reversed the power position of a traditional family to some extent and enhanced her authority. Xian-shamans are predominantly female, so naturally the gender aspect is worthy of attention. Female shamans using technique of spiritual possession to resist male dominance is a common phenomenon (Lewis, I. M. 2003). This aspect of Xian belief has also been noted by other researchers, for example, Liu Chang believes that a shamanic career can improve the social status of women or the poor in traditional society (2020), while Kang Xiao-fei described this process as a confrontation between the power of animal spirits and the power of male authority over the family, while the female Xian shaman battled her traditional family role and challenged the male authority, gaining new social authority (2006: 100).

4.2. Spiritual Interactions, Shamanic Rituals and Techniques

4.2.1. Possession as a ritual

In Xian belief, possession is the typical and traditional way of communication between spirits and humans, including Xian-shamans or somebody related to her/him, as the case of informant F showed in the last section. Possession is called as *shang-shen* (上身 getting on the body) or *kun-qiao* (捆壳 tying the body) by Xian-shamans with both terms referring to the loss of control to the body. In this process, the spirit utilises the medium's body to fulfil its own aims. The most common function in possession is expressive, as the spirit express their will, suggestion or teaching through the Xian shaman.

Pu Song-ling, the 17th century Chinese literatus famous for his *Zhi-guai* literature, recorded his visit to a local medium who served the fox spirit, during which the woman was possessed by a male fox spirit and had conversation with the visitors (Kang 2006: 121-122). In a record from the late 19th century, a female shamanic medium in Tian-jin, north China, was able to be possessed by various female fox, weasel and rat spirits (Luan 2009: 151). Li Wei-tsu's work in the 1940s describes possession as a shamanic ritual through which spirits communicate with mediums' clients or other humans (Li & Zhou 2011: 78). The above possessions began with a particular symbolic action, it may be beating the gong while reciting something, as in Pu Song-ling's case, or burning incense, as in the last two cases.

Traditional possession in Xian belief begins with the relatively simple action of summoning the spirit, usually through the burning of incense. Then the Xian-shaman enters a state of possession very quickly. The beginning of the possession could be marked by an unusual sound (Kang 2006: 122), yawns, coughs or stretching the body (Li & Zhou 2011: 78), or the shaman might just starting talking in a different tone or voice. After that the possessed Xian shaman talks and acts as the possessing spirit to carry out diagnostic, healing or divining processes. The ritual is then highly verbal, as in most recorded narratives the spirits simply tell clients the origin and resolution of their problem through the mouth of the Xian-shamans. Li Wei-tsu depicted three kinds of verbalisation used by Xian-shaman after being possessed: chant, dialogue and narration (ibid.: 78), and actually the chant that Li recorded was no more than a narration with a repeating melody and unusual tones.

In the process of expression during possession, there is almost no evidence for the existence of any auxiliary instrument, technique or action, such as medicines or music.

In northeast China, some interesting variations of the possession ritual can be found. Liu Chang recorded such a ritual at which the Xian-shaman burnt incense, then her shamanic assistant started to beat the drum and chant. After about 20 minutes of chanting, in which a few trivial ritual actions were interspersed, the Xian shaman was finally possessed and started to communicate with the shamanic assistant, who talked on behalf of the clients (2020). In this ritual, summoning the spirit was notably longer and more complex than in the traditional possession ritual. In addition to some consistent elements from traditional Xian belief, such as incense burning, there were some special elements such as chanting and drum beating, which are reminiscent of typical Eurasian and Tungus shamanic traditions. A drum being used in the ritual, which is not found in Xian belief elsewhere, is an essential instrument for Tungus, such as Manchu, shamanism, as it is widely believed to be the way that shamans communicate with other worlds (Li, Lisha 1992). Researcher of shamanism Mihály Hoppál made several fieldwork trips in the northeast China, during which he concentrated on Manchu shamanism. According to his observation of Manchu shamanic rituals, instruments, especially drums but also chants devoted to the ancestors, gods and spirits accompanying the drums, are typical elements (Hoppál 2015: 77-95). These typical Manchu elements in Xian-shaman's ritual may indicate cultural fusion in this region.

Possession has been a basic element of Xian belief rituals for a long time. However, as my fieldwork materials show in following sections, its importance in rituals is probably declining, although it still functions as a channel of interaction between Xian-shamans and spirits.

4.2.2. Possession as a channel of interaction

This section concentrates on possession as a communication channel between spirits and Xian shamans per se. This function is relatively ignored by other researchers, so discussion in this part depends completely on my fieldwork material. Although possession in Xian belief mainly functions as the expressive method in rituals, in practice it can also show the visible interaction between Xian-shamans and spirits, for example, informant Z shared one of her experiences of possession in the interview:

I never consume alcohol nor tobacco, but the spirits do. On particular dates, sometimes when they came, I had to drink several bottles of liquor and smoke without stopping.

(FW6)

Informant W also mentioned, years ago, that one of her leading fox spirits would possess her and give her slaps on the face when she didn't want to cooperate with the spirits. These cases demonstrate that possession in Xian belief not only has ritual and expressive functions but also works as a channel of physical interaction. Informant F's mention of the spirits possessing her son in order to negotiate her cooperation also shows the two-way nature of their communication, as the will and requirements of both parties to consider and accepted the other in negotiation. For instance, while the spirit's requirement was to have a temple devoted to it, informant F's requirement was the liberation of her son from the repeated possessions; both requirements were finally fulfilled (FW9).

Here we can discuss briefly possession in Xian belief. According to Ruth-Inge Heinze's definition of "classic shamanic possession", the medium should experience an extreme loss of control of the body with a dissociative mental state (Heinze 1988: 90), although in Xian-shamans' narratives variations of possession can be noted. According to most of the records about possession in Xian belief, including my fieldwork, Xian-shamans don't fall into a state of mental dissociation as they claim that they remember clearly what happened while possessed. They do loss control of their bodies, although the degree can also vary. Sometimes the spirits control them completely, while there are also cases in which they are partly controlled and even try to fight against the possession.

4.2.3. Non-possession rituals

As my informants are giving up possession as their main shamanic ritual, which they describe as a communication channel with the spirits, they have developed a series of alternative solutions to carry out shamanic rituals to fulfil clients' needs. The way they perform these rituals depends on their client group as well as the environments in which they live and act.

Informant Z is a representative example. As a rural elder Xian-shaman, the most common way

that she carries out curing or divining rituals is not through traditional possession as described above, on the contrary, she has a unique solution to deal with her clients' pleas that we can call 'remote shamanism'. Most of informant Z's regular clients don't visit her in person for daily requirements (for example, curing a sudden illness or divining), but would rather make a phone call to her to express their needs and pleas. Then, in most cases, when the Xian-shaman is asked to cure a disease, she "sent the spirit(s) to make a treatment" for the clients. The Xian-shaman is quite proud of the efficiency of remote shamanism, as she said in her narrative: "I have clients in Beijing, I have clients in foreign lands, and their problems were solved smoothly when I sent spirits to help them" (FW6). In essence, there is no ritual carried out in the process of remote shamanism, all that the Xian shaman need do is to say "I've sent the spirit to help you".

A similar phenomenon appears in Xian belief in other regions in northeast China as well were, apart from phone calls, social media such as WeChat is also used as channel of remote shamanism (Li, Xiao-lin 2013). Carrying out rituals through modern communication devices and technologies is not unique, it can be seen in other modern societies, where traditional beliefs and rituals still play roles, and the application of these tools seems particularly necessary today (Solovyeva & Kollmar-Paulenz 2023). Obviously, this 'ritual' is strongly grounded in clients' trust of the shaman's personal authority, so that her oral promise through a phone call has same weight as a real ritual. Generally it is the familiar clients who ask for informant Z's help in this way. An interesting paradox about the status of the spirits can be seen in her wording of the narrative. When talking about summoning a spirit for a possession, the verb used is 请, invite, while in the case of remote shamanism, the informant Z said a spirit would be sent to help. In the first situation, spirits enjoy a higher and more respected status, while in remote shamanism, they became assistants who obey the Xian shaman's orders.

Informant W has also given up possession as a shamanic ritual; more precisely, the role of spirits in her daily shamanic work is now minimal.

4.3. Other Non-ritual Supernatural Experiences

Although most Xian-shaman experience narratives are related to their rituals or their interactions with animal spirits or clients, there are still narratives about some supernatural experiences that are

grounded in other themes in the interviews with my informants, mainly with informant W.

Some of these narratives are said to be informant W's personal experiences, which usually strongly hints at her fatal link with religious signs. She described her experience on Mount Wutai, the scared Buddhist site in north China, for instance:

On the car driving to Mount Wutai I couldn't raise my head, I thought it was altitude sickness. When we visited the temple on the top of the mountain, I walked faster than the others, so I waited for them for a long time. Then I stepped randomly into a chapel, without acknowledging what Buddha or Bodhisattva it was dedicated to. There was an icon which I don't know. Then I felt great stress, I couldn't raise my head, the icon was like alive and said something to me. I don't remember what the icon said, but suddenly I got lots of knowledge. The icon gave me kind of, let's say, implements with supernatural power. I had this kind experience three times, each time I got an implement, and my ability was enhanced. I never learned the *I Ching*, but after that time on Mount Wutai, I have been able to foresee future using the *I Ching*. (FW1)

Similar narratives were also mentioned when informant W tried to describe an example of connecting with higher dimensions:

I regularly hold online lectures and sharing sessions with clients. Once I had to share a book about spiritual treatment. I was so nervous because I had never talked about that and I had no idea how to put it. Just a few minutes before the sharing session, I closed my eyes. When I opened them, suddenly old gentlemen Wang Feng-yin, a social activist and religious organization leader in early 20th century, was standing before me. He said "My child, be at ease, just talk about it. And whatever you say will be right. But don't use the term spiritual treatment, change the name." Then he suddenly vanished, and at that moment I understood how to share it. I called it 'emotion and disease' and talked for 48 minutes without a break. (FW4)

Informant F has a similar narrative, although not as detailed. In her case, after the ritual of

Li-tang-zi, she suddenly mastered the skill of pulse diagnose from traditional Chinese medicine, although she had never learned it before (FW10). The precipitant acquisition of particular knowledge or skills after a supernatural encounter seems to be the general plot of these narratives. The slight difference between two informants' narrative is that F's encounter was with animal spirits while informant W seems to prefer talking about encounters with higher dimensions.

Another common story from informant W relates to reincarnation and previous lives. As mentioned in the last section, informant W sometimes hinted that she was as an incarnation of Bodhisattva and her detailed narratives about seeing her previous lives are also highly religiously oriented:

Once in on Changbai Mountain, I somehow couldn't move before a waterfall and I had to kneel before it. Then I saw, behind the waterfall a very young Buddhist monk was sitting in light yellow Kasaya. At first I just felt the monk was very handsome. Then I suddenly realised this monk was my previous life, he was me. When I understood this, the monk started to change. His face changed five times, each time it was a handsome male monk's face. I understood, all of them were me, which means I had been a monk many times in previous lives. (FW1)

As a Xian-shaman with firm Buddhist faith, who emphasises the importance of Buddhist teaching in Xian belief through both her theoretical discourse and experience narratives, informant W tightened her connection with the authority of this institutional religion by sharing supernatural experiences that reinforce her validity as a Xian-shaman empowered by Buddhism rather than animal spirits. Informant W prefer to highlight her supernatural experience as a Buddhist rather than talk about her personal encounters and interaction with animal spirits, a preference that corresponds to the inclination of the expanding influence of elements of Buddhism in Xian belief, as discussed in the last section.

4.4. The Xian-Shaman's Social Roles and Functions

Li Wei-tsu concluded that *Xiangtous* in north China had five main functions of in the 1940s: 1)

offering treatments to believers who suffered disease; 2) solving physical or mental problems caused by spirits; 3) solving believers' daily troubles, such as losing something; 4) intercession in community or family conflict; 5) carrying out other spiritual rituals, such as gaining extra life for believers dying action by spirits, deities, etc. (Li & Zhou 2011: 93-97).

With the exception of the fourth one, these functions are forms of personal interaction between the Xian-shaman (called *Xiangtou* in Li's case) and the believer or client. However, when exercising the fourth function, the Xian shaman obviously operated on the level of the community, acting as a social figure with the authority to force people's behaviour to her or his will. Li illustrated this function with two experience narratives of *Xiangtous*. In the first case, the *Xiangtou* pressed a laborer to admit his behaviour of burglary to his co-workers; while in second case, another *Xiangtou* convinced a man in poverty to not abandon his new-born child (ibid.: 96). In both cases, community members respected the *Xiangtou's* authority and were willing to make concessions to his requirements or suggestions. In this sense, the Xian shaman's status in traditional Chinese rural societies can correspond to their counterpart shamans in other cultures of the world, an esteemed prime mover in securing the needs of clients and ensuring the wellbeing of the wider community (Bubois, Tomas A. 2005: 82).

However, in the late 20th century, as modernised administration has systematically taken hold in both urban and rural regions in China after the founding of the PRC and the overhauling of traditional communities, the Xian-shaman as a social authority in the community, along with other traditional authorities (such as clan force), has significantly declined, if not vanished. In Chinese researchers' works from the 1990s to recent years, the Xian-shaman's role as community authority can hardly be noticed.

However, as Xian belief has moved in the direction of becoming urban shamanism in modern Chinese society, Xian-shamans somehow regained their authority within the community, as we can see in informant W's case. In her own estimation, about 30% of her clients keep in touch with her after their first meetings. And she is respected by these clients as a mentor who boosts their spiritual cultivating and increasing of other kind of knowledge (FW8). This claim can be partly proven by W's client informant S, according to whom informant W is a worthy friend and mentoring figure (FW2; FW7). Informant S frequently attends collective activities organised by W (FW2), although the activities may have nothing to do with their personal problems or requirements, which are

generally the theme of the traditional relationship between Xian shaman and client.

According to Mihály Hoppál's observations of urban shamanism, in a big city environment shamanism has a therapeutic function, which he identifies as having two aspects: the first is that participants believe that they can learn the technique of discovering psychic disorders and reinforce the awareness of the self. And secondly, it is the togetherness, the psychic experience of collective action (1992: 201); the second is the way in which informant W strengthened the bond between her followers through regular collective activities. For instance, every month, informant W holds lectures both online and offline to her stable clients (her so-to-say followers), the themes of these lectures being Buddhism, traditional Chinese culture, morality and social norms, etc. (FW8). Apart from lectures informant W also introduced some western therapeutic methods that enriched the collective events. Informant S mentioned that one of the method often used in their collective events is Family Constellations founded by Bert Hellinger (FW7). Followers represent rolls of family members under informant W's instruction in order to solve followers' mental or behavioural problems. With these methods the bond between informant W's followers is strong, with the core of this togetherness definitely being informant W's authority as mentor and leader.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1. Register in Xian Belief

In this part, I shall define the registers of Xian shaman's discourses and narratives. Register was originally a socio-linguistic concept that marks variations in the use of language in different situations (Halliday 1973: 22). In cultural studies, this model can be applied to analyse variation in elements of particular cultural forms in different contexts, for instance, in Kaarina Koski's research, register can represent the context in which legends include or exclude certain details and elements (Koski 2016: 113). In my research, register is viewed as a cultural model that represents sociocultural context, in which Xian-shamans' expressive behaviours, including both theoretical discourses and experience narratives, change or remain unchanged by transforming, adapting, omitting or keeping particular elements.

Xian belief can be presented in various sociocultural contexts, as it has lived through different historical eras and spread widely to various geographical areas. However, in order to analyse Xian belief briefly in this thesis, here I would simplify these various sociocultural contexts into two different registers: the traditional register and the urban register. The dichotomy between tradition and modernity seems to be arbitrary, but as we can see in the last chapters, the transformation of Xian shamans' discourse and narrative in modern and urban environments can be significant compared with the traditional ones, which are relatively stable through time. This is partly because modern Chinese cities experienced rapid and thorough development that makes them an essentially different sociocultural context from traditional, more rural, contexts. Thus, it is possible to analyse the dynamics of Xian belief by comparing the homogeneous and heterogeneous elements presented in traditional and urban registers.

The traditional register in this section is the sociocultural context of relatively traditional rural

Chinese society, where the discourses and narratives of Xian shamans tend to be more homogeneous and stable. Among the materials I used in last two chapters, those fragmentary records about Xian belief from historical texts (17th to early 20th century) and the discourses and narratives from earlier researchers' ethnographic works generally belong to this register. Some of these works date back to the early 20th century, such as Li Wei-tsu's ethnographic dissertation, while some of them are quite contemporary, even after the 2010s. These are discussed as the traditional register as well, for fieldwork for this research was carried out in rural regions where the comprehensive sociocultural change caused by massive urbanisation and economic development in the last decades has not yet been felt. In my own fieldwork material, the single but informative interview with informant Z, the 71-year-old rural Xian-shaman, can also be discussed mainly in the traditional register, although her experience narrative also included some modern elements.

The urban register than represents the sociocultural context of modern Chinese big cities. As one can imagine, it is a sociocultural context filled with various information spread with the popularization of mass media and modern intelligent devices, and the lifestyle, education level and cognitive competence of people experienced comprehensive changes in the process of urbanisation and economic development in the last decades. In my fieldwork material, those interviews with informants W, F and S, as well as and some of the narrative from informant Z (for example "remote shamanism"), belong to this register.

Characters from the two registers will be discussed in the following sections, in which I combine the model of register with Juwen Zhang's theory on core and arbitrary identity markers.

5.2. Core Identity Markers

According to Juwen Zhang, elements that are rooted in the fundamental beliefs and values, and thus show their durability and sustainability, are the core identity markers (Zhang 2022: 42). In this thesis, core identity markers refer to those elements of Xian belief that remain more or less unchanged in both traditional and urban registers.

The first core identity marker we notice is that some concepts rooted in the theoretical discourses are grounded in both registers. It is easy to see how the concept of self-cultivation has been stably rooted in Xian shaman's theoretical discourse for a long time. From the first detailed

ethnographic works on Xian belief to my recent fieldwork, almost without exception, self-cultivation is described as the source of animal spirits' cooperation with Xian shaman. The logic of self-cultivation remains unchanged through different registers: animals become spirits because of self-cultivation, and are then elevated the level of self-cultivation in order to benefit human beings with the help of Xian shamans. This is the *raison d'être* of Xian belief and Xian-shamans in the theoretical discourses. In this sense, self-cultivation is the irreplaceable 'creating myth' of Xian belief.

Elements from institutional religions have also appeared in Xian shaman's theoretical discourses in both traditional and urban registers. The role of Taoism and Buddhism can vary in different registers, as can interpretation of the teaching of these two institutional religions in theoretical discourses, but almost none of the Xian shamans were able to explain their theoretical discourses independently from the elements of Taoism and Buddhism. Even informant Z, who clearly resisted the faith of Buddhism, mentioned the Buddhist concept of Sad-gati in her discourse (FW6). According to C. K. Yang, it is natural and crucial for diffused religions in China to absorb theological teachings and other elements from institutional religions (1961: 294), thus the dependence on Buddhist and Taoist elements is a core identity marker of Xian belief.

In both traditional and urban registers, Xian-shamans have preserved the concept of the division of diseases into physical disease (shi-bing, 'real disease') and disease caused by spirits (xu-bing, 'false disease'). Again Xian-shamans presented various interpretations of the division of disease, which I shall discuss further in the next section. However, the division between real disease and false disease can be viewed as a core identity marker in Xian belief because of its stability in both registers.

The major value orientations expressed by Xian-shamans are also core identity markers, as in both registers Xian shamans tend to highlight their anti-pecuniary and altruistic value orientation and avoid the suspicions of avarice and selfishness.

In Xian shamans' experience narratives, there are a few elements that can be viewed as core identity markers. Firstly, in both traditional and urban registers, the career of the Xian-shaman always begins with a period of disorder, which forces or at least motivates the novice shaman to cooperate with the spirits. Although this disordered period of life is presented differently in different Xian-shaman's narratives, the core element remains quite stable. In addition, some motifs

also appear repeatedly in the experience narratives, for instance the white bearded old man who is mentioned many times in different sources. However, most experience narratives, as we will see in the next section, can be divided using arbitrary identity markers.

The vitality of Xian belief can be found in its core identity markers, with the following elements forming the underlying logic of Xian belief: the benevolent medium (Xian-shaman), who often started her or his career involuntarily, acts under an altruistic premise to help his or her clients to solve problems caused by natural and supernatural factors, aided by the power of supernatural beings (mainly animal spirits, but also perhaps superior deities), with the whole process supervised by higher beings from institutional religions. This is the common feature for both traditional and urban forms of Xian belief. Regardless of how the situations are, this is what Xian-shamans try to describe and want other people to believe.

5.3. Arbitrary Identity Markers

Arbitrary identity markers are elements that often change strategically in order to adapt to a new environment (Zhang 2022: 42), thus in this thesis the arbitrary identity markers of Xian belief include those elements that are heterogeneous in traditional and urban registers.

In the category of theoretical discourses, as we see in last section, many concepts are stable and are preserved in urban registers. However, in fact Xian shamans' interpretations of these concepts are very flexible and their understandings of some concepts may have discrepancies. For example, in the traditional register, interpretation of Xian belief's cosmology and self-cultivation was based on vernacular understandings of traditional Chinese mythology, while in the urban register, younger generation Xian-shaman such as informant W introduced teachings from institutional religions to explain these concepts so that interpretations seem far more reflexive than those of the traditional register. In the case of the influence of institutional religions on Xian belief's theoretical discourse, the situation is quite similar. Although elements from Buddhism and Taoism already existed in the traditional register, they are essentially highlighted in urban registers. Urban Xian shamans claim to be devout Buddhist, quote Buddhist texts, worship Buddha and Bodhisattva and give Buddhism a central role in Xian belief. Xian shamans' interpretation of the relationship

between real and false disease vary even within the same register. Therefore, the Xian shamans' personal interpretation of those stable concepts that appear in theoretical discourse should be viewed as arbitrary identity markers.

One exception in the theoretical discourse is the role of animal spirits. In the traditional register, animal spirits had absolute dominance, while in the urban register both informants W and F tend to put themselves in a more equal – sometimes even higher – position with animal spirits. Such significant change demonstrates that the role of animal spirits is an arbitrary identity marker in Xian belief. And informant W's theoretical discourse contains many innovations, including the introduction of scientific concepts and definitions unique to the Xian shaman. In the urban register these new elements are also arbitrary identity markers.

In the category of experience narrative, all kinds of ritual are seen to be arbitrary identity markers. The possession ritual, which has remained stable in the central position of Xian belief in the traditional register, can change randomly and profoundly in particular situations such as communication with other ethnic groups, and has already been notably marginalised in the urban register. Xian-shamans in the urban register either omit the rituals as a matter of form, or introduce new types of ritual (for example Family Constellation) to strengthen the bond between followers. Similarly, other supernatural experiences in Xian shamans' narratives have strong personal character and depend on Xian-shamans' personal understanding of the current socio-cultural context.

5.4. Dynamics of Xian Belief

I will expound on the dynamics of Xian belief through a comparison of the two registers. According to Agha Asif (2015: 28), a register model is minimally a three-dimensional object of study. It is expressed or made manifest through criterial behaviours (i.e. repertoires) that have stereotypical indexical values (i.e. social range) for people who recognise or perform such signs in their practices (i.e. social domains). Using this model, we can analyse the dynamics of the changing or transformation of the identity markers of Xian belief in different registers.

In the traditional register, the repertoire of Xian belief consists of the core identity markers (concepts relating to self-cultivation, cosmology, elements from institutional religions, types of

disease, value orientation and a disordered period as the beginning of the shamanic career), with arbitrary identity markers appearing exclusively in the traditional register (the dominant role of animal spirits and possession rituals). The social domain of the traditional register is those people who performed the repertoire (i.e. traditional Xian shamans) and those who recognised it (i.e. the clients). Their profile coincides with the non-elite members of traditional Chinese society: relatively low literacy (Peterson 1997), thus apart from written culture, they are immersed in local cults and vernacular religions (Yang 1961), mainly living in rural areas and thus acting in a limited range (Fei 1939). This profile is of course too generalised and stereotypical and ignores geographical variation and difference of era. However, to some extent it reflects some general characteristics of rural Chinese society and could contribute to analysis of the social range of Xian belief in the traditional register, which is itself a simplified model. Therefore, for this social domain, the repertoire of the traditional register has particular stereotypical indexical values. For example, the concept of self-cultivation shows the reliability of the animal spirits as the source of the Xian shamans' power, while the anti-pecuniary value orientation shows the moral purity of Xian shaman, etc. But generally, theoretical discourse in the traditional register was simple and brief, while visual and behavioural aspects carried more indexical value. Rituals performed before the altar and possession rituals that express the will of the spirits take a relatively dominant part in the traditional register. Both Xian-shamans and clients relied more on visual and behavioural forms than verbal teachings, perhaps because the indexical values presented with rituals and forms of worship were more recognisable for traditional and rural Chinese society as they could recognize the reliability and professionalism of Xian-shamans.

In the urban register, the repertoire of Xian belief consists of those core identity markers and the arbitrary identity markers that appeared exclusively in the urban register (the personal interpretations of theoretical discourse, the equal position of Xian-shamans and spirits, innovations such as the introduction of scientific concepts, simplified rituals and Western therapy methods). In the urban register of Xian-shamans (in this thesis informants W and F) and their clients are predominantly modern city inhabitants in northeast China. It is worth noting here that many people in this social domain are actually first generation urban inhabitants born in rural areas. Xian shaman informant F and client informant S both belong to this group. These city inhabitants have a far better education level, having been immersed in information from the mass media for a long time.

Naturally, this, together with their being part of the modern education system, means they have developed a complex corpus of cognition that consists of versatile strands. Despite this their rural backgrounds still tie them to folk systems such as Xian belief. As Ari Kiev noted, some psychic symptoms and conflicts are bounded to specific social and cultural factors, and shamans can provide their clients with a whole set of ethnopsychologically suitable, congenial and culturally recognisable defences against the client's idiosyncratic conflicts (Kiev 1964: 27). This dual character definitely leads to the change in constitution of this belief and its carriers.

The change of indexical values in the urban register can be observed in the arbitrary identity markers. While in the traditional register, the indexical values are mainly carried by rituals and formal behaviour, then in the urban register, the rituals and worship are simplified and often omitted. As a result, urban shamans have almost developed a kind of minimalistic shamanism: the only necessary material element in this urban shamanism is the shaman herself/himself. On the other hand, Xian shamans' theoretical discourse has been far more enriched and innovated through an increase in personal interpretations. A large number of new elements are introduced from so-called high culture: doctrines of institutional Taoism and Buddhism, scientific concepts, sentences from literary creations etc., which have made these discourses more reflexive and sophisticated. In short, for urban inhabitants, the indexical value of reliability and professionalism is no longer grounded in visual and behavioural forms, but is based on the more rational and knowledgeable verbal discourse.

One exception is informant W's collective activities, which seem to be alternatives for old rituals to some extent. The indexical value it presents to city inhabitants could be togetherness, which can fill the gaps in the social distance between people in a modern urban environment. In this sense, these activities create an ethnopsychologically suitable, congenial and culturally recognised environment for those who are struggling between rural background and urban life.

Another distinguishing feature of the urban register of Xian belief is that the position of animal spirits is gradually declining and their roles becoming marginalised in both theoretical discourse and experience narratives, while Xian-shamans are taking the central position. Especially in informant W's case, animal spirits are no longer the source of her power, instead they are becoming her assistants. The beginning of her shamanic career was still motivated or even enforced by animal spirits in her narratives, but this seems to be the only essential function left to them. Informant W

believes that her power is not a gift from the animal spirits, but originated from her pre-determined destiny, thus she doesn't rely on spirits; on the contrary, the spirits must rely on cooperation for the sake of self-cultivation. The reason for this can still lie in the social domain as for better educated urban people it may be that the Xian-shamans gaining their abilities from some unfamiliar animals might not be plausible enough. In the urban register, animal spirits are losing their indexical value as the source of the Xian shaman's authority and reliability, while Xian shamans are pursuing their own internally consistent and independent authority via more complex and reflexive theoretical discourse.

CONCLUSIONS

The object of study in this thesis, Xian belief, is a folk belief that originated from traditional animal worship and shamanic practice and is developing in the direction of urban shamanism. The aim of this study is to discover the mechanism of on-going development by analysing the dynamics of the elements that appear in the theoretical discourse and experience narratives of participants in Xian belief. Combining materials from various sources and comparing them systematically in a properly simplified model, using the theoretical tools of register (Halliday 1973; Koski 2016; Agha 2015) and identity markers (Zhang 2022), this thesis has reached following conclusions:

Traditional and urban Xian belief share several common features, including cosmology, moral requirements for shamans and some stable motifs in the experience narratives. This folk belief persists and continues to develop in modern urban environments because of its flexibility and ability to adapt to changing sociocultural contexts. In the cases examined in this thesis, adherents to Xian belief in urban environment shares a more complex corpus of cognition as a consequence of their education background and easy access to various information channels, and thus some old elements of Xian belief have lost indexical value for them. Therefore Xian-shamans renew their repertoire by omitting particular old elements and increasing the weight of reflexivity and knowledgeable theoretical discourse by means of the intense appropriation of elements from contemporary media channels, literary tradition and theological religion to create new expressive behaviours that are tied to the indexical value of their authority and reliability. Xian shamans also reinforce their own central position by connecting themselves thoroughly with Buddhism, because, to the same group of believers, this institutional and theological religion seems more convincing than merely having animal spirits as the source of power.

Therefore, the dynamics of the consistently developing and adapting Xian belief can be briefly summarised in this way: the active participants of Xian belief, mainly Xian-shamans, adjust their repertoire by adding, highlighting or omitting particular elements as the indexical values of these elements change because of the changing social domain, i.e. believers in new sociocultural environments. This is the mechanism that has ensured the persistence of Xian belief across

hundreds of years and various areas, especially in modern Chinese cities, which comprehensively differ from traditional societies.

RESÜMEE

Loomade austamisest linnašamanismi: Xian-uskumuste muutumine tänapäeva Kirde-Hiinas

Käesoleva magistritöö teemaks on Hiina traditsiooniline rahvausund ja selle muutused kaasaegse Kirde-Hiina linnakeskkonnas. Süvendatud vaatluse all on uskumused šamaane abistavatest loomavaimudest (*Xian*). Töö aine on kogutud kiirsuhtlusrakenduse „WeChat“ videokõnedes peetud intervjuude kaudu. Intervjueeritud olid Kirde-Hiina Jilini provintsis elavad ja tegutsevad Xian-usundi aktiivsed osalised ehk Xian-šamaanid ja üks šamaani klient.

Xian-usundi järgi saavad teatud loomad nagu rebased ja siberi nirkid muutuda vaimudeks (*Xian*) enesearendamise kaudu. Xian-šamaanid on vahendajad nende vaimolendite ja tavaliste inimeste vahel, kes oskavad lahendada inimeste tervislikke ja vaimseid probleeme ja ennustada nende saatust. Uskumuste järgi on šamaanid saanud sellised võimed loomavaimudelt.

Kogutud materjal on jagatud vernakulaarse teadmise teooria ja usundilise narratiivi teooria järgi kahte kategooriasse: teoretiseeritud diskursus ja kogemusjutt. Neist esimene tähendab arutlusi, mis ühtlasi väljendavad narratiivide olulisi mõtteid. Kogemusjutt on narratiivi vormis esitatud isikliku läbielamise refleksioon, mille keskmes antud töös on Xian-uskumused.

Võrdlen linnas tegutsevate Xian-šamaanide arutlusi ja kogemusjutte traditsiooniliste šamaanide pärimusega, et selgitada kaasaegses linna-keskkonnas arenenud moodsa Xian-usundi ja traditsioonilises maa-keskkonnas kujunenud Xian-usundi erinevusi ja ühisjooni. Töö lõppjärel on, et Xian-usundil on sisemised uuendamismehhanismid, mis tagavad selle dünaamilise arengu muutavas keskkonnas. Et linnaruumis kaugenevad inimesed metsloomadest ja loomavaimude positsioon usundis pole enam endine, leiavad šamaanid uusi vahendeid, kuidas oma autoriteeti tugevdada. Nii suureneb järjest teoreetiliste arutluste osa šamaanide eneseväljenduses, kus tuge leitakse ka institutsionaalsete religioonide õpetusest nagu näiteks budism. Sedalaadi kohanemine kindlustab ka Xian-usundi järjepidevust Kirde-Hiinas.

FIELDWORK MATERIALS

FW1 = Interview with informant W on WeChat, 27/09/2021.

FW2 = Interview with informant S on WeChat, 08/11/2021.

FW3 = Interview with informant W on WeChat, 12/08/2022.

FW4 = Interview with informant W on WeChat, 18/08/2022.

FW5 = Interview with informant W on Wechat, 2/09/2022.

FW6 = Interview with informant Z on Wechat, 19/09/2022.

FW7 = Interview with informant S on WeChat, 26/09/2022.

FW8 = Interview with informant W on WeChat, 30/09/2022.

FW9 = Interview with informant F on WeChat, 04/10/2022.

FW10 = Interview with informant F on WeChat, 11/10/2022.

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