



Shamanic Symbolism in the Robe Patterns of the Chu State: A Semiotic and Archaeological Study

Liangying Zeng, Zongyu Xie, Yuyan Wang, Siyuan Zhang, Lifen Gao[#]

School of Foreign Languages, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, Hubei, P.R. China (434023).

[#]Corresponding author

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Lifen Gao / [0009-0005-5784-0929](https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5784-0929)

ABSTRACT

The robes unearthed from Tomb No. 1 at Mashan, Jingzhou, serve as typical representative artifacts of the ancient Chu state. Existing academic research has predominantly focused on the textile technology and stylistic evolution of these robes, yet the shamanic symbolism implied in their decorative patterns has long been insufficiently explored. To fill this research gap, this study adopts a semiotic approach, integrating textual exegesis of the Chu Ci with evidence from excavated bamboo slips. Through a systematic analysis of three core motif categories—divine symbols, cosmic imagery, and botanical patterns—the research reveals a hierarchical symbolic system that encodes the Chu state’s cosmology, ritual practices, and aspirations for longevity. These findings not only bridge the gap between textual religious records and material cultural relics but also lay a solid foundation for further research on the cross-cultural transmission of Chu heritage.

Keywords: Shamanic Symbolism; Chu State Robe Patterns; Semiotic Study; Archaeological Study.

1. Introduction

The ancient Chu state (c. 1030–223 BCE), distinguished by its pronounced shamanistic traditions, occupies a pivotal position in early Chinese civilization. Unlike the Central Plains cultures that emphasized ritual orthodoxy and patriarchal order, Chu developed a unique spiritual system centered on shamanism (Wu), which permeated all dimensions of Chu social life, from state-level sacrificial rituals honoring celestial deities to daily artistic production that reflected popular religious beliefs. The Chu Ci (Songs of the South), particularly the Jiu Ge (Nine Songs) and Zhao Hun (Summons of the Soul), constitutes the principal literary source documenting shamanic practices through which ritual specialists mediated between human and divine realms (Hawkes, 1985).

Among Chu material remains, the Warring States-period robes excavated from the Mashan tomb in Jingzhou, Hubei Province, offer exceptionally preserved visual evidence of this shamanistic worldview. Dating back to the mid-4th century BCE, these robes feature intricate weaving techniques and elaborate decorative patterns that cover nearly the entire surface of the fabric. However, scholarly discourse has predominantly emphasized technical restoration and stylistic classification while overlooking the symbolic dimensions of their decorative programs. Although Hawkes (1985) and Owen (1996) have provided seminal interpretations of shamanistic elements in the Chu Ci, and Chinese scholars including Li Ling (2004) have illuminated Chu religious practices through excavated texts, few studies have systematically correlated these textual traditions with the specific visual symbols adorning textile artifacts.

This study addresses this lacuna by conducting a semiotic analysis of the principal motifs adorning Chu robes. The primary objective is to decode the shamanic beliefs embodied in these patterns. By establishing correspondences between textual records and material evidence, this research aims to offer new perspectives for understanding the Chu spiritual world and the role of material culture in shamanic ritual practice.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Chu Shamanism

The theoretical framework of this study synthesizes textual exegesis with archaeological anthropology, two complementary approaches that together enable a holistic understanding of Chu shamanism. The *Chu Ci*, as translated and annotated by Hawkes (1985), provides the foundational textual corpus for understanding Chu shamanism. Hawkes demonstrated that the *Jiu Ge* comprises liturgical poems for shamanic rituals, in which the phoenix and loong (long) function as sacred vehicles enabling shamans to ascend to the celestial realm.

Complementing this textual evidence, archaeological discoveries from the Warring States period furnish empirical grounding for understanding Chu shamanic practice. Cook (1999) argued that Chu shamans constituted core intermediaries connecting human, divine, and natural worlds, playing a crucial role in maintaining cosmic balance. Harper (1999), through analysis of divinatory texts, confirmed that Chu shamanic culture was intricately connected to cosmological cognition and ritual practice. Chinese archaeological scholarship has systematically published materials from Chu tombs, including the Baoshan and Mashan excavations, which provide rich contextual data for interpreting ritual iconography (Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, 1991).

This study adopts a semiotic approach inspired by Health' (1977) concept of the "signifier-signified" dyad, extended to material culture. In this framework, the visual motifs on Chu robes are treated as signifiers—tangible, visible symbols—whose meanings (signifieds) are decoded through correlation with textual records, archaeological contexts, and shamanic ritual practices. This method allows for a reconstruction of the Chu spiritual worldview as embedded in material form.

2.2 Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Chu robe patterns may be categorized into technical and stylistic studies. Technical investigations have focused on weaving techniques and material composition (Peng, 1996), shedding light on the advanced textile technology of the Chu state. Stylistic studies, meanwhile, have examined the aesthetic evolution of motifs, tracing changes in design patterns across different periods of Chu history (Shi, 2019). However, research adopting a shamanic cultural perspective to systematically decode symbolic connotations remains conspicuously absent.

Although Allan (1993) elaborated on the ancient Chinese concept of the "cosmic axis" (*axis mundi*) connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld, this framework has not been systematically applied to robe pattern analysis. Similarly, while Loewe (1994) documented the role of shamans in early Chinese religion, the specific visual manifestation of these roles in textile art remains underexplored. International scholarship, including the works of Constance A. Cook and Donald Harper, has illuminated Chu religious practices through textual and ritual analysis, yet the symbolic systems embedded in textile art remain largely unexamined. Domestic researchers such as Peng Hao and Wang Yilei have contributed significantly to the technical and stylistic understanding of Chu textiles, but their approaches do not engage with semiotic or symbolic interpretation.

Furthermore, cross-cultural comparative studies are notably absent. No research to date has systematically compared Chu textile symbolism with contemporaneous shamanic traditions in Scythian, Persian, or Siberian cultures—a direction that future scholarship might fruitfully pursue. The present study addresses this scholarly niche by integrating semiotic theory (Heath, 1977) with textual and archaeological foundations, offering a systematic analysis of the shamanic symbolism in Chu robe patterns.

3. Analysis of Core Patterns and Their Shamanic Symbolism

Building upon the theoretical framework, this section analyzes the principal motifs adorning Chu robes, classified into three interconnected categories: divine symbols, cosmic imagery, and botanical patterns. These motifs are not isolated decorative elements but interrelated components of a cohesive symbolic system, each carrying specific shamanic meanings that reflect the Chu people's understanding of the universe, divine beings, and the human spirit.

3.1 Divine Symbols: Phoenix and Loong

The phoenix (feng) and loong (long) motifs represent the most sacred symbolic elements on Chu robes, embodying the core shamanic function of mediating between the human and divine realms. As central signifiers in Chu shamanic symbolism, they serve as visual anchors for the shaman's ritual role, enabling the wearer to transcend the mortal world and communicate with celestial deities and ancestral spirits.

(1) The Phoenix as Soul-Vehicle and Solar Emblem

The phoenix occupies a preeminent position in Chu shamanism. As Hawkes (1985) observed, the phoenix is repeatedly depicted in the Chu Ci as a divine mount enabling shamans to transcend mortal boundaries and communicate with supreme deities such as Taiyi (the Great One). This interpretation finds corroboration in Cook's (1999) analysis of Chu ritual iconography, which identifies the phoenix as a primary symbol of spiritual ascension.

The phoenix motif on Mashan robes is not merely decorative but dynamic in composition, often depicted with wings spread and tail feathers flowing, suggesting movement through celestial space. This visual dynamism parallels the shaman's ecstatic journey described in the Jiu Ge, where the shaman rides celestial beings to traverse the heavens. Additionally, the phoenix is closely associated with solar worship in Chu culture. Its association with dawn, light, and regeneration reflects the Chu people's veneration of life cycles and cosmic renewal—themes central to shamanic ritual.

(2) The Loong as Chthonic Mediator

The loong requires careful terminological consideration. Unlike the malevolent "dragon" of Western mythology, the Chu loong is a benevolent, chthonic creature intimately associated with shamanic practice. In Chu cosmology, the loong facilitates communication between earthly and celestial realms rather than representing chaos or destruction. Owen (1996) emphasized that in the Chu Ci, the loong is closely associated with the shaman's "spirit journey" (shenyou), serving as a bridge between human and spirit worlds.

Unlike the fire-breathing dragons of Western mythology, the Chu loong is a chthonic being associated with water, rain, and the underworld. In Chu cosmology, the loong serves as a mediator between the human world and the realm of ancestral spirits. Archaeological evidence from Chu bamboo slips indicates that loong motifs were frequently employed in sacrificial rituals to invoke divine protection (Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, 1991).

(3) The Phoenix-Loong Dyad: Cosmic Harmony

The coexistence of phoenix and loong motifs on Chu robes reflects the synthesis of solar worship and chthonic veneration within Chu shamanic practice. Their frequent pairing embodies a dualistic worldview in which heaven and earth, yang and yin, sun and water are in constant interaction. This complementary relationship visually articulates the Chu understanding of cosmic balance—a fundamental principle underlying shamanic ritual and cosmological thought.

3.2 Cosmic Imagery: Cloud and Mountain

Cloud (yun) and mountain (shan) patterns materialize the cosmological framework of the Chu people, giving visual form to their conception of the universe as a vertically structured realm with heaven, earth, and the underworld.

(1) Cloud Patterns as Celestial Cartography

Allan (1991) argued that the ancient Chinese worldview was structured around a "vertical axis" (axis mundi) connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld. The undulating cloud patterns on Chu robes directly embody this cosmic axis. The swirling clouds symbolize the celestial realm, while the ground fabric represents the mortal world. The continuous flow of clouds visually suggests the circulation of qi (vital energy) and the shaman's trajectory through the cosmos. Excavated textiles from Mashan tomb M1 exhibit particularly elaborate cloud patterns identified as visual representations of celestial journeys (Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, 1991).

The cloud patterns on Chu robes are not random decorative flourishes but highly stylized representations of the celestial realm. Their undulating forms evoke the movement of qi, the vital energy that animates the cosmos. In shamanic rituals, clouds were believed to carry the shaman's spirit upward, a concept vividly rendered in the flowing cloud motifs of Mashan textiles. Harper's (1999) analysis of divination records reveals that celestial cartography occupied a central position in Chu ritual practice, with cloud patterns serving as a key visual element.

(2) Mountain Motifs as Sacred Geography

Mountain motifs, meanwhile, symbolize sacred peaks in Chu mythology, particularly Kunlun, the legendary abode of immortals. Loewe (1994) noted that mountain motifs in material culture were associated with ascending to the divine realm. In Chu cosmology, mountains were not only geographical features but also ritual sites where shamans communed with deities. The presence of mountain patterns on garments may thus signify the wearer's participation in sacred geography. The combination of cloud and mountain patterns thus constitutes a comprehensive cosmic map, visually articulating Chu shamanic cosmology—a universe structured vertically, traversable by ritual specialists, and animated by spiritual forces.

3.3 Botanical Motifs: Medicinal Herbs and Floral Patterns

Medicinal herb (yaocao) and floral (huahui) motifs reflect Chu aspirations for longevity and spiritual vitality—central themes in Chu shamanic culture, linking the physical body to the spiritual realm.

(1) Medicinal Herbs: Purification and Immortality

The Chu Ci abounds with references to fragrant herbs and magical plants, including mugwort and angelica. Hawkes (1985) identified these plants as sacred symbols employed in shamanic rituals for purification and communion with spirits. Owen (1996) further emphasized that these botanical motifs were intrinsically linked to shamanic healing practices and the pursuit of immortality.

The inclusion of medicinal herbs such as mugwort and angelica in Chu textile design reflects the shamanic belief in plants as agents of purification and longevity. In the Chu Ci, fragrant herbs are often associated with divine presence and ritual purity. Their depiction on robes may thus serve as a visual invocation of health and spiritual protection. The naturalistic depiction of these herbs on Chu robes embodies the shamanic belief in plants as mediators between humans and the spiritual realm, capable of cleansing ritual spaces, warding off malevolent forces, and extending human life.

(2) Floral Patterns: Symmetry and Life Continuity

Floral patterns, characterized by symmetrical compositions, additionally symbolize cosmic balance and the continuity of life. Excavated bamboo slips from the Baoshan tomb indicate that the Chu people frequently employed plant imagery to express wishes for descendants and health (Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, 1991). These motifs consequently transcend mere decoration, functioning as visual prayers for harmonious existence. The symmetry of floral patterns reflects a cosmological order based on balance, while blooming flowers suggest a visual prayer for vitality, continuity, and the regeneration of life beyond death.

4. Discussion

4.1 A Unified Four-Tiered Symbolic System

Synthesizing the preceding analysis, this study proposes a four-tiered symbolic system embedded within Chu robe patterns, integrating divine mediation, cosmological cognition, vital aspirations, and ritual integration—each tier interconnected to support the shaman's ritual role and reflect the Chu understanding of the cosmos.

Divine mediation means phoenix and loong motifs representing the shamanic function of connecting humans and gods. These symbols activate the ritual function of the garment, transforming the wearer into a mediator between worlds. Cosmological cognition indicates cloud and mountain motifs visualizing Chu conceptions of cosmic structure. These patterns map the universe onto the body of the wearer, situating the individual within a sacred geography. Vital aspirations denote herb and floral motifs reflecting the pursuit of longevity and spiritual vitality. These symbols anchor the ritual in the physical body, linking health, healing, and immortality. Ritual integration refers to the combination of diverse motifs integrating sacrifice, divination, and

daily life. The robe becomes a composite ritual object, its visual program encoding the full spectrum of shamanic practice.

These four tiers are not isolated but function synergistically in ritual practice. The shaman, adorned with phoenix and loong motifs, would invoke divine presence while standing amidst cloud-and-mountain imagery, symbolically entering the cosmos. Botanical motifs, meanwhile, anchored the ritual in the body, linking physical health to spiritual transcendence. Thus, the robe becomes a ritual map—a wearable cosmology that enables the shaman to navigate the spiritual universe. This system provides a holistic interpretation of the spiritual connotations of Chu robes, verifying the accuracy of shamanic traditions recorded in the *Chu Ci* and documented in archaeological materials.

4.2 Implications for Contemporary Cultural Transmission

The symbolic system identified in Chu robe patterns holds significant potential for contemporary cultural transmission. In museum interpretation and heritage presentation, these ancient motifs can be transformed into accessible visual narratives, enabling global audiences to apprehend the spiritual dimensions of Chu shamanism and appreciate the richness of Chu cultural heritage.

Recent exhibitions such as "The Spirit of Chu" at the Hunan Museum have demonstrated the potential of using symbolic motifs to engage global audiences. By translating ancient patterns into immersive visual experiences—through digital reconstructions, interactive displays, and narrative-driven curation—museums can convey the spiritual depth of Chu culture beyond mere artifact display. This study provides a theoretical foundation for such interpretive strategies, offering a framework for translating complex symbolic systems into accessible cultural narratives.

From an academic perspective, this study establishes a methodological framework for cross-cultural research. By correlating Chinese textual traditions with Western semiotic theory and international archaeological standards, it provides a scholarly foundation for the international dissemination of Chu cultural heritage. Future research might extend this comparative approach to examine parallels with shamanic traditions in other ancient cultures, contributing to a broader understanding of early religious expression across civilizations.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the shamanic symbolism embedded within Chu state robe patterns through synthesis of textual exegesis and archaeological evidence. The analysis reveals that phoenix, loong, cloud, mountain, and botanical motifs constitute not merely decorative elements but a sophisticated visual language encoding Chu cosmology, ritual practice, and aspirations for transcendence. The proposed four-tiered symbolic system offers a comprehensive interpretation of the spiritual dimensions of Chu material culture, demonstrating how these ancient garments functioned as ritual objects mediating between human and divine realms.

This research addresses the existing gap in symbolic analysis of Chu textiles while providing a cultural foundation for the creative transformation of Chinese traditional culture within global contexts. Future investigations might extend this analytical framework to other categories of Chu

material culture, including lacquerware and bronze vessels, as well as pursue comparative studies with contemporaneous shamanic traditions in other ancient civilizations.

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