

# Interpretation and Analysis of the Witch Culture in Sanxingdui of the Ancient Shu Civilization

Shuyuan Li, Huimin Wang

College of Art, Southwest Minzu University, Chengdu, China

**Abstract:** While the specific cultural context of Sanxingdui relics is deeply analyzed, the witch culture and its symbols created by the wizard group headed by the king of Shu in the ancient Shu Kingdom are sorted out and summarized to explore the reasons for the emergence of Sanxingdui witchcraft culture. And the elements of witch culture are extracted by means of image and concrete analysis, which provides important conditions for elaborating the connotation of Sanxingdui witchcraft culture. Method Firstly, the research background and current situation of witchcraft culture are sorted out and analyzed through literature research and comparison. Secondly, the field investigation method is used to collect and sort the status quo of the bronzes unearthed from Sanxingdui sacrificial pits about the image of witches, and classify them according to their characteristics and images. Then, through case analysis, starting from the specific cultural context and modeling characteristics of the unearthed witch cultural artifacts, the elements and symbols of Sanxingdui witch culture are deeply analyzed. Finally, based on the case analysis of six specific artifacts, three elemental symbols with the significance of Sanxingdui witchcraft are analyzed. While elaborating the profound connotation of Sanxingdui culture, the elemental symbols of Sanxingdui witch culture are discussed. It is conducive to enriching the cultural diversity of the Chinese nation and injecting new vitality into artistic creation. While inheriting Chinese culture, it can also carry the spirit of The Times and promote the exchange and integration of Chinese national culture.

**Keywords:** Ancient Shu civilization; the witch culture; analysis

## 1. Overview and background

### 1.1 An overview of the witch culture

Table 1: Tools and means for witches to communicate with heaven and earth, and to see gods and ghosts

Number	Name	Significance and way
1.	Mountains	The witch can enter the divine world through the high mountains.
2.	Trees	A common tool to communication the heaven for wizards.
3.	Birds	It is regarded as the messenger of the heavenly emperor.
4.	Animals	As a sacrifice, its soul was borrowed as a means of access to god.
5.	Divination	A means of knowing the will of god.
6.	Rituals	Props and symbols for wizards to communicate heaven and earth.
7.	Alcohol and drugs	Offering to ancestors or gods; For the witch to drink to produce excitement and hallucinations, and to achieve the spiritual state of god.
8.	Food, music and dance	' Priests of Sanxingdui use dance as his important skill to perform the descent ritual for the benefit of mankind.'

\*Table 1 is organized by the author according to ZhangGuangzhi' s ' Witch And Witchcraft in the Shang Dynasty', 'Bronze Age in China'

Witch culture was created in ancient times by ten wizards of Ling Mountain headed by Wuxian and centered on Baoyuan Mountain, Ningchang ancient Town of Wuxi ,with astrology and divination as the main forms of expression and salt culture and medicine culture as the main contents<sup>[1]</sup>. In the ' Great Chinese Dictionary', the definition of 'witch' is: ' In ancient times, people who engaged in prayer,

divination, astrology, and the use of medicine to pray for people's blessings, ward off disasters and cure diseases.' ' *Origin of Chinese Characters*' explains ' Witches, people who pray to the Gods, they can serve the invisible mysteries, can communicate with the gods through song and dance, so that the gods will descend'<sup>[2]</sup>. The general name of witchcraft is people with culture. Witch culture also involves various cultural forms such as song, dance, religion, sacrifice, art, literature, etc. It is a kind of magical human civilization. Chinese witch culture originated in the Paleolithic period (about 4 million years ago), developed relatively mature in the fishing and hunting period (about 500,000 years ago), and developed fully and entered an advanced stage in the farming period 14,000 years ago<sup>[3]</sup>. Around 5000 years ago, the primitive religions in various regions of China began to develop continuously, and special groups of witches and priests may have appeared, such as the Sanxingdui culture in the Yangtze River basin, the Liangzhu culture in the Taihu Lake and Qiantang River basins and other sites have been found to have traces of religious sacrifice. It can be seen that the witch culture is closely related to the Chinese national culture.

### 1.2 Historical background of the witch culture in Sanxingdui

According to the records in the ' *Book of Jin*' and the ' *Huayang state Annals*', Duan Yu believed that the worship of witches and ghosts in Bashu had a long history, and traced the Taoist tradition of belief in magic gods and witches back to the Sanxingdui culture<sup>[4]</sup>. Zhang Guangzhi pointed out that the witches communicated with the gods by means of singing, dancing, banquets and other means, and proved it with the record in the annotated version of ' *The Songs of Chu*': 'In the past, in the cities of Nanyang and other cities in the Chu State, along the Yuanjiang River and the Xiangjiang River, the folk superstitious ghosts and gods, and liked to make up words that must be used as song and dance to please the ghosts and gods'<sup>[5]</sup>. In addition, according to the literature and archaeological materials, Zhang Guangzhi summarized 8 tools and means for witches to communicate with heaven and earth, and to see gods and ghosts, as shown in Table 1.

In Sanxingdui civilization, it is found that the corresponding characteristics of the above tools and means can almost be covered, and the corresponding artifacts can be found, which are traces to follow. For example, the bronze mythical tree No. 1, pottery bird- featured spoon handle, ivory, bronze zun and bronze lei, bronze sun-shaped object and gold scepter.

## 2. Witch figures

There are many clergy in Sanxingdui sacrificial activities in ancient Shu civilization, among which priests, as the disseminator of the sacrificial culture and the witch culture of Sanxingdui, played an important role in the sacrificial activities. The authors of the ' *Sacrificial Pits in Sanxingdui*' delineates the priest as mainly the bronze standing figures and the bronze kneeling figures<sup>[6]</sup>, which are studied from these two aspects.



\* Fig. 1 was taken by the author



\* Fig. 2 from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/1GzIyUC-GCeSFHpRnYoLWg>

Figure 1: Bronze grand statue of human figure

Figure 2: Bronze altar

## 2.1 The bronze standing figures

### 2.1.1 The bronze grand statue of human figure

The bronze grand statue of human figure (Figure 1) is 260.8 cm in height and 180 cm in height, making it the tallest and most complete bronze standing figure in existence. It was unearthed in the No. 2 sacrificial pit of the Sanxingdui Site. The figure wears a high-crowned hat, a mask, and a three-layer coat, with intricate and delicate clothing patterns. His hands are clasped in a hollow fist-like shape, the left hand is placed in front of the chest, and the right hand is slightly raised upward, the size is disproportionate to the body. It has ankle bracelets, and stand bare feet on a square pedestal, which some scholars believe is a sacred mountain or altar<sup>[7]</sup>, and originally held a ritual vessels such as 'Jade Cong' to worship heaven and earth. The large standing figure is a wizard who presides over the sacrifice, is the leader of the group of witches of the Shu people, and may also be the image of a certain generation of Shu Kings<sup>[8]</sup>.



\* Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 were taken by the auther

Figure 3 and Figure 4: The jade zhang with worshipping mountains pattern

### 2.1.2 Other bronze standing figures

(1) The small standing figure cast on the altar of the No. 2 pit (Figure 2), the figure has two layers. These small standing people wear high crowns on their heads and hold rattan strips on their chests in a sacrificial posture.

(2) There are also standing figures on the decoration of the jade zhang with worshipping mountains pattern(as shown in Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) . They all wear hats, sleeveless clothes, skirts, hands in front of the abdomen, and sacred mountains under the figure, which is obviously a gesture of worship.

## 2.2 The bronze kneeling figures

### 2.2.1 The kneeling figure holding a hom-like zun



\* Fig. 5 from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/MDrzV8ecxSuOcl0vd3MFSA>

\* Fig. 6 was taken by the auther



Figure 5: The kneeling figure holding a hom-like zun Figure 6: The bronze kneeling figure holding a zhang

The kneeling figure holding a horn-like zun (Figure 5) is divided into two parts: the bronze horn seat and the top kneeling figure. The figure wears a mask, and the hands are raised to make the bronze statue on the head as a sacrifice, showing the scene of the witch's worship to the gods. In addition, the upper body of the figure is naked, has prominent nipples, and wears a skirt with a strap around the waist, and the waist is tied. From the point of view of the shape characteristics, this may be the image of the female Priests' in Sanxingdui of ancient Shu civilization.

### 2.2.2 The bronze kneeling figure holding a zhang

The bronze kneeling figure holding a zhang (Figure 6) is 4.7 cm high and 1.8 cm wide. Its head is missing, its upper body is naked, and the lower body wears a skirt. It holds Zhang with both hands, arms raised flat in front of its chest, and sits on its knees in a sacrificial posture, which is obviously also a typical "Priest" image.

## 3. The core element and symbol of the witch culture in Sanxingdui

### 3.1 Elements of social structure in the witch culture

The participants of the Sanxingdui sacrificial come from different sources. ' It may represent different generations or different identities to accept their sacrifice ancestral image'. However, it is based on the ' great statue of human' as the core, and uses witchcraft to enhance the cohesion of the people of each tribe and their sense of identity in the inner spiritual world. It is enough to show that the ancient Shu kingdom was composed of multinational<sup>[9]</sup>. This is also consistent with the records of materials and documents such as the ' *Huayang state Annals*' and the ' *Records of the Grand Historian*'. Teacher Xu Zhongshu once said, "When the productive forces of primitive society developed to a certain extent, there were inevitably a few public officials who separated from production. Some of them as guardians of the faith of the tribe, taught the people to sincerely follow the ancient rules, regulations and all effective rules by offering sacrifices, so that the tribe could develop from stability"<sup>[10]</sup>. From this point of view, the sacrificial activities in Sanxingdui are the proof of the spread of the witchcraft culture in the ancient Shu civilization. Therefore, it is further believed that while the witch culture was created, it was also a way for wizards to use it to expand their power.



\* Fig. 7 from [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Or0v1kc\\_c536towMIzX-XA](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Or0v1kc_c536towMIzX-XA)

Figure 7: The bronze beast- headed crowned figure

### 3.2 The pictorial elements of the human figure in the witch culture

The image elements reflect the imagination of the ancient Shu ancestors and their spiritual sustenance and spiritual support for a better life. The patterns on the clothes of bronze portraits are more complex, and the clouds and thunder patterns are generally more common. For example, the bronze beast- headed crowned figure (Figure 7), its shape and gesture are similar to the bronze grand statue of human figure. They are dressed in a pair of clothes with exquisite patterns, decorated with cloud and thunder patterns and Kui dragon patterns, and tied around the waist. The statue on the bronze altar (Figure 8) is dressed in short-sleeved clothes, and the front and back of the clothes are decorated with the cloud and thunder patterns similar to the cloud and thunder patterns decorated on the bronze beast- headed crowned figure's clothes. The cloud and thunder pattern is a classic pattern in the bronze pattern, which is in the shape of the word "Hui". In the ancient Xia and Shang societies where agriculture was underdeveloped, natural weather clouds and rain had an important and direct impact on production. The cloud and thunder pattern is an embodiment of the ancient Shu people's worship of nature and gods, and it is also the embodiment of natural phenomena such as clouds, rain, thunder and

clouds.

**3.3 The gesture elements of the human figure in the witch culture**

**3.3.1 Holding zhang with both hands crossed**

This gesture of holding the zhang with crossed hands is the most common ritual gesture, and the small figure on the bronze altar (Figure 8) is the gesture of holding the zhang with both hands crossed. This kind of figure also stands or kneels, and is sacrificed with the jade zhang.



\* Fig. 8 from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/1GzIyUC-GCeSFHpRnYoLWg>

\* Fig. 9 was taken by the auther

Figure 8: Bronze altar




Figure 9: Bronze grand statue of human figure

**3.3.2 Holding both hands in a hollow ring grip**

The shapes of these gestures are exaggerated, do not match the proportion of the portrait, and the hands are large and eye-catching. There are mainly two bronze figures representing this kind of gesture: the first is the bronze grand statue of human figure( as shown in Figure 9), there are many studies and speculations on the objects held in his hands, such as the idea of holding ivory, the idea of holding jade cong, and the idea of holding snakes, but they all end up in the sacrifice. The second is the bronze beast- headed crowned figure( Figure 7), but the little finger of its gesture is slightly tilted outward, which is very similar to the ' nianjue' in Taoist magic. Therefore, this kind of hollow ring grip gesture is a special gesture of worship in the sacrificial activities.

**3.3.3 Like the Zen meditation**

Table 2: Figure gesture

Figure gesture	Posture	Characteristic	Legend	The prototype of the legend
Holding zhang with both hands crossed	Hands crossed, holding something like jade zhang	The most common ritual gesture		The bronze kneeling figure holding a zhang
Holding both hands in a hollow ring grip	Holding both hands in a hollow ring grip	Exaggerated shape, large hands, out of proportion to the portrait		The bronze grand statue of human figure
Like the Zen meditation	Hands crossed on the abdomen	Similar to the Zen meditation in the Buddhist		the jade zhang with worshipping mountains

\*Table 2 is organized by the author, legend is drawn according to The bronze kneeling figure holding a zhang, The bronze grand statue of human figure and the jade zhang with worshipping mountains.

This kind of gesture is the hands crossed on the abdomen, similar to the Zen meditation in the Buddhist. In the decoration of the jade zhang with worshipping mountains pattern, the 11 figures all perform sacrificial mountain activities with this gesture, so this gesture also has its special significance in the witch culture.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through the interpretation and exploration of the Sanxingdui witch culture of the ancient Shu civilization, I have a new understanding and deeper thinking about the elements and symbols of the Sanxingdui witch culture. First of all, starting with the witchcraft culture and the historical background of Sanxingdui witchcraft culture as the starting point, according to its type and posture characteristics, it is sorted out and summarized two categories: the bronze standing figures and the bronze kneeling figures, and the styling characteristics of the Priest image classification in the Sanxingdui witchcraft culture were obtained. Then, through the six unearthed artifacts, three core elements of the Sanxingdui witchcraft culture were summarized: social structure elements, portrait image elements and portrait gesture elements, and the portrait gesture elements were sorted out and summarized (see Table 2). This study provides a basis and direction for follow-up research, which is conducive to a deeper understanding of the Sanxingdui culture of ancient Shu. It provides new ideas for the innovation and creation of Sanxingdui witch culture of ancient Shu, and promotes the spread and development of Sanxingdui culture in different fields.

This study is only a preliminary analysis of the Sanxingdui witch culture in ancient Shu, which is extensive and profound, full of mystery. There will be more in-depth attempts in other fields. In the future study, we will study the Sanxingdui culture of ancient Shu in depth, so as to provide more rigorous theoretical basis and support for future research, and create more works with the ideological connotation of the Sanxingdui witch culture.

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