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A Study of Early Contacts
between Indo-Iranians and Chinese

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Is *Shuma* the Chinese Analog of *Soma*/*Haoma*?
A Study of Early Contacts between Indo-Iranians and Chinese¹

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This study is an investigation of the Chinese term *shuma* 疏麻, as used in a poem by Qu Yuan 屈原 (342–278 BCE), and its relationship to the Indo-Iranian term *soma* or *haoma*. It also considers the possibility that as early as the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE) and at least by the time of Qu Yuan (fourth–third century BCE), the Indo-Iranian rituals and beliefs associated with the term *soma/haoma* already had spread to northwest, central, and even southern China. Although there is no known written evidence for the term *shuma* in the early Zhou period, archaeological discoveries show evidence of the knowledge and use of special plants by people in the north and northwest of China, and much literature of the late Zhou dynasty (771–221 BCE) includes descriptions of active interactions between this people and the Chinese of the Central Plain. And finally, it is noteworthy that Qu Yuan’s poem uses this term to suggest a connection between the southern Chinese Chu culture and northwestern non-Chinese cultures.

Soma or *haoma* derives from a common proto-Indo-Iranian language that existed before 1000 BCE. *Soma* appears in the Hindu sacred book *Rig Veda*, and *Haoma* is used in the Iranian Zoroastrian sacred text called *Avesta*. As described in both books, *Soma*/*Haoma* is a plant, a drink, a God, and an offering to gods. As a plant, its juice is pressed out by a god also named *Soma* or *Haoma* to make a drink, which is then offered ritually to all the other gods. The drink is

¹ I would like to thank William Paterson University, which granted me released time for this research study, and my friend Foster Foreman, who edited my first manuscript, offering her knowledge of Central Asian history, as well as her editing expertise. I also appreciate very much Dr. Victor Mair’s enthusiasm in reading the draft of this paper and his detailed comments with useful sources. Thanks also go to SPP’s two associate editors, Mr. Mark Swofford, who helped with the *Fnyin*, and Ms. Paula Roberts, who edited the final text.

consumed by the gods and, in real life, by practitioners, for strength, healing, long life, and immortality; it is also used, mixed with milk, as a ritual libation. The leaves and twigs of the plant are offered on a fire altar to the Fire of the Zoroastrians, as the "plant of immortality." *Soma/Haoma* is said both to drive death away and to grant offspring to women.² Although the botanical identity of the *soma/haoma* plant remains in debate among scholars, its mythical and ritual nature gives us a pretty good idea that it is a complex entity that consists of a plant, a drink, a deity, and a ritual, with associations of health, strength, offspring, and immortality.

Shuma, or, in southern pronunciation, *suma* 疏麻, appears in Qu Yuan's famous poem *Jiu Ge* 《九歌》 (The Nine Songs), written around 300 BCE and later compiled into the *Chu Ci* 《楚辞》 (Poetry of the Chu State). The Nine Songs is considered to be based on typical *wu* 巫 or shaman songs popularly sung in the ancient Chu State. It consists of eleven subtitled sections, two of which are *Da Siming* (Senior Lord of Life), and *Shao Siming* (Junior Lord of Life).³ The writer speaks in three different characters in the poem: a male god or shaman, a female goddess or shaman, with a third shaman who is an occasional commentator. As the character is traditionally interpreted, *Da Siming* is a male deity who has charge of life and death, and *Shao Siming* is a female deity who is in charge of fertility and offspring.⁴ The lines in the poem mostly take the form of a dialog between the two deities, but they are sometimes expressed as part of a single person's speech.

Shuma appears in *Da Siming* as the twig of a plant picked and offered to *Da Siming* by *Shao Siming* at the eternal farewell. A few lines are quoted here:

² Consult: *The Rig Veda*, translated by Ralph T. H. Griffith, 1896; *Avesta Sacred Books of the East*, trans. by James Darmesteter and L. H. Mills (American edition, 1898); Dieter Taillieu and Mary Boyce, "Haoma," *Encyclopedia Iranica* (New York: Mazda Pub. 2002); Mary Boyce: *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2007); J. E. M. Houben, ed., *Soma Workshop* (Leiden, July 1999/2003).

³ Consult: Owen 1996. Owen's translations of the respective titles are as follows: Senior Master of Lifespans and Junior Master of Lifespans; or Lord Iris.

⁴ 闻一多 Wén Yīduō: 《楚辞校补》 1942; 《Chǔ Cí jiàobǔ》 1942

Pluck the *shuma* and the *yaohua*;
Present them to the one who departs:
We are getting older, toward the end of our lives,
But we are no nearer each other.⁵

The lines express the hopeless sadness of being separated from the beloved, while one offers a twig of the *shuma* and some *yaohua* flowers as an eternal farewell.

In this section of *Shao Siming*, the term *Sun* 蓀 is used to represent also a *Siming*, very likely a Junior *Siming*, a deity who is staying behind, to express feelings of separation and love.⁶ Since this *sun*-like *shuma* represents a *Siming*, and at the same time is a kind of fragrant grass (plant) as defined by Wang Yi and others,⁷ it can be considered a different term for *shuma*.

Interestingly, like the meaning of *soma/haoma*, the botanical identity of *shuma* is also vague. The very first commentary on the Nine Songs, by Wang Yi of the second century CE, annotates the term to the effect that is a "mythical hemp"⁸; and later commentators either copy Wang's interpretation or interpret it literally as "sparse hemp," as if to express the feeling of

⁵ 屈原 Qu Yuan 《九歌·大司命》：“折疏麻兮瑶华，将以遗兮离居。老冉冉兮既极，不寢近兮愈疏。”Readers may wish to consult the two other translations quoted here. Steven Owens, 1996, p.158: “I snapped off a hemp bud and blossoms of yao-grass / to give as a gift to Him Who Dwells Apart;/ old age steals upon me and now has arrived;/ His affection withdraws,/ He grows more remote.” See also Arthur Waley, 1973 (1955): “I pluck the sparse-hemp’s lovely flower, meaning to send it to him from whom I am separated; age creeps on apace, all will soon be over; not to draw nearer is to drift further apart.”

⁶ For example: an additional third persona, a *wu*, or shaman, sings: “The deity already has a beautiful lover, what’s the point of you (*Sun*) being so sad and worried?” and suggests: “Why don’t you (*Sun*) alone take charge of Life for people?” Cf. 纪庸 1948; Ji Yōng (1948) “Chǔ Cí 《Jiǔ Gē》 zhī wǔqǔ de jiégòu” 《Guówén yuèkǎn》 dì 72 qī.

⁷ 王逸 Wáng Yí 《楚辞章句》注：“蓀谓司命也。”又《五臣注》：“蓀，香草，喻司命。”《Chǔ Cí zhāngjù》 zhù: “sūn wèi Sīmìng yě.” (Trans: *Sun* means *Siming*.); 《Wǔchén zhù》: “sūn, xiāngcǎo, yù Sīmìng.” (Trans: *Sun* is fragrant grass, a symbol for *Siming*.)

⁸ 王逸 Wáng Yí 《楚辞章句》注：“疏麻，神麻也。”《Chǔ Cí zhāngjù》 zhù: “Shūmá, shénmá yě.” Trans: “*Shuma* is mythic (or magic) *ma*.”

people separated by a distance.⁹ Wang Yi also interpreted *sun* as a fragrant grass and a metaphor for Siming, Lord of Life,¹⁰ but again without a true botanical identity. The *yaohua* that is offered together with *shuma* is also an unidentified plant, interpreted by Wang Yi as a mythical "jade flower."¹¹ Later, *yaohua* is explained by Hong Xingzu (1090–1155) as "the hemp flower, white in color, ... [that] makes one a long life if one takes it."¹²

To be clear: *shuma* and *sun* are the same plant, unidentified in modern terms, and both words represent a Siming, the Lord of Life; the *yaohua* is the flower *shuma*, which is offered together with *shuma* in wishing for a long life. So we can envision *shuma* as follows: it is a plant that is offered to the beloved Lord of Life at the eternal departure; the Sun, a Lord of Life, is the sender of the plant, who wishes the loved one a long life. *Soma/haoma* shares with *shuma* the complex identity of being a plant, a deity, and an object used for ritual to ask for long life and immortality.

Further investigations of *shuma* lead to other linguistic and historical phenomena that appear to demonstrate more parallels between *shuma* and *soma/haoma*. First, like many other words and expressions used in *Chu Ci*, neither *shuma* nor *sun* can be found in any earlier Chinese sources other than those copying the *Chu Ci*, which suggests the possibility that they are borrowed words. Second, according to several major history annals, the ruler of the Chu state originally came from the northwest and was given the state to rule, which implies that the Chu

⁹ 闻一多 Wén Yīduō 《九歌解诂》：“盖疏麻是隐语，借花草中的疏字以暗示行将分散之意。”《Jiǔ Gē jiěgǔ》：“*Shuma* is a metaphor; it takes on the meaning of being scattered in space for flowers and plants to imply the distance and separation.”

¹⁰ 王逸 Wáng Yí 《楚辞章句》注：“菘谓司命也。”又《五臣注》：“菘，香草，喻司命。”《Chǔ Cí zhāngjù》zhù: “sūn wèi Sīmìng yě.” (Trans: *Sun* means Siming.); 《Wǔchén zhù》：“sūn, xiāngcǎo, yù Sīmìng.” Trans: “*Sun* is fragrant grass, it symbolizes Siming”.

¹¹ 王逸 Wáng Yí 《楚辞章句》注：“瑶华，玉华也。”《Chǔ Cí zhāngjù》zhù: “yáohuá, yùhuá yě.” Trans: “*Yaohua* is a jade flower or jade beauty.”

¹² 洪兴祖 Hóng Xīngzǔ 《楚辞补注》：“瑶华，麻花也，其色白，故比于瑶。此花香，服食可致长寿。”《Chǔ Cí bǔzhù》：“*Yaohua*, hemp flower; its color is white, so it is compared to *yao*. This flower is fragrant; it makes one's life longer if one takes it by mouth.”

ruling class might not be a local people from the south but were from the west. Third, on the north and northwest borders of the Central Plain, as early as 2000 BCE, many archaeological discoveries demonstrate a popular use of hemp and ephedra, which are the best candidates for the ingredients for *soma/haoma*. This suggests knowledge of the plant in parts of China outside of the center. And fourth, the Chu state is uniquely known for its *wu* or shamanic belief and practices associated with a fire ritual, which demonstrates an interest in common with many Central Asian tribes. The following is the elaboration of the investigation.

I. Mystery of the Term

The mystery concerning the term has its source in the fact that not only is the plant impossible to identify botanically, but the term for the plant also cannot be found in contemporary and earlier writings. In fact, there are many more problematic words and expressions in *Chu Ci* that cannot be traced to their origins. While some scholars consider these as being from dead local dialects, a few suggest that they originate elsewhere, such as in Turkic, Indo-Iranian, and Indo-European languages.

Cen Zhongmian, in his study "Ancient Turkic Language in *Chu Ci*,"¹³ listed twenty-three items from *Chu Ci* for a comparison to the Turkic language. The word "sun" 荪 in question happens to be on his list. According to him, the word "sun" matches the second person pronoun "san" or "sin" in Turkic language,¹⁴ and it also matches the traditional Chinese interpretations of the word as (you) Lord, implying Siming, "Lord of Life."¹⁵ Inspired by his interpretation, I further found that in modern Uygur and Kazak languages, both of the Turkic family, the respectful form of the second person pronoun is "su." *Sun* and *su* seem to be interchangeable in

¹³ Cén Zhòngmiǎn, "Ancient Turkic language in *Chu Ci*" in *Cen Zhongmian Historical Essays Collection* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2004) (岑仲勉：“《楚辞》中的古突厥语，”《岑仲勉史学论文续集》，中华书局，北京 2004)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 王逸 Wáng Yí 《楚辞章句》注：“荪谓司命也。”又《五臣注》：“荪，香草，喻司命。”《Chǔ Cí zhāngjù》zhù: “sūn wèi Sīmìng yě.” (Trans: *Sun* means Siming.); 《Wǔchén zhù》: “sūn, xiāngcǎo, yù Sīmìng.” Trans: “*Sun* is fragrant grass, it symbolizes Siming.”

the Turkic language group. This *su* happens to be the sound of the first word of *su-ma*. Additionally, both *sun* and *shuma* are clearly shown as plants and associated with Siming in the Nine Songs. So this interpretation, that the word's origin is Turkic, seems a reasonable option.

However, examining Cen's theory reveals some serious confusion. He claims at the very beginning that the ruling class of Chu is an Aryan group from the Medes, and the group that came to east with the Zhou people must be Tujue or Turkic people. He also argues that one of the major last names of Chu people, Mi 𠂔, comes directly from "Medes." Additionally, he draws comparative words without differentiation from both Turkic and Iranian languages. It is apparent that he has mixed Turkic people with Iranian people and their languages. We know that the Medes were Indo-Iranian language speakers and the Tujue were Turkic language speakers. Despite this confusion, however, in his earlier study titled "Comments on Chu as Eastern People,"¹⁶ he uses three examples of the royal name "Xiong" 熊, an official title "Mo Ao" 莫敖, and the popular Chu last name "Mi" 𠂔, to demonstrate that Chu people are not from the East, but from the West, and that all three words appear to be linked with Indo-Iranian languages. In this study, Cen argues that the royal name *Xiong* 熊 of Chu is derived from the Avestan word "Ahura" with only a simplified *hung* left, but with the same meaning as "Great Leader" or "King." He thinks that *Mo Ao* 莫敖, a title for a high priest in the Chu language, comes from the Iranian *moju*, *magus*, *moj* or the Greek *magos*, for "priest." And *Mi* 𠂔, for "him," simply comes directly from "Medes."

If Cen is right in tracing these words to Indo-Iranian rather than Turkic words, we may consider "*shuma*" and "*sun*" as coming from an Iranian language as well.

Inspired by Rao Zong-yi (Jao Tzong-I 1991), who proposed a connection between the Chinese word *wu* 巫 and similar marks found in West Asia, Victor Mair, in several publications (1990, 2000, Mallory and Mair 2000), argues that the Chinese word *wu*, "in earlier Chinese would have been pronounced something close to *m(y)ag or *mag," and "may have been borrowed from Old Persian *maguš*" (Mallory and Mair 2000, 326). It was not clear how both *mo-*

¹⁶岑仲勉 Cén Zhòngmǎn : "楚为东方民族辨"《两周文史论丛》(外一种)西周社会制度问题。中华书局, 北京 2004 pp. 60-61; "chǔ wéi dōngfāng mínzú biàn".《Liǎng Zhōu wénshǐ lùncóng》(wài yī zhǒng) Xī Zhōu shèhuì zhìdù wèntí. Zhōnghuá shūjú, Běijīng, pp. 60-61

ao and *wu* could be transcribed to the same word, "magus," but examining the meaning of the two words seems to shed some light. A clue emerges in Jiang Liangfu's explanation that "*Mo Ao* is an officer who is in charge of astronomy and rituals."¹⁷ The word *Wu* 巫 has been known since Shang and Zhou oracle bone inscriptions and also in *Chu Ci* as a shaman, who often has both a high official position and the best knowledge of astronomy and astrology, and who is in charge of important rituals. So, both *Mo Ao* and *Wu* seem to share the same profession and official position as shamans or magicians. The two may be interchangeable if they can be traced back to "myag" or "mag." But until then, we have at least one account (Cen's)¹⁸ that links a Chu word to an Indo-Iranian language.

It may be worth mentioning that as early as the eleventh century CE, the famous Chinese scientist and encyclopedist Shen Kuo (1031–1095), in his book *Mengxi Bitan*,¹⁹ commented on the specific word *xie* 些 (or *sa*, *sai* in Chu dialect) that appeared constantly in *Chu Ci*, especially in Qu Yuan's *Zhao Hun* 《招魂》 (Calling Back the Soul). Shen Kuo writes that the word *xie* used at the end of each sentence was a closing auxiliary word that was commonly used among many minority peoples in South China, for they followed an old Chu tradition; he also added that it came from the Sanskrit words *sa po he* 萨婆诃 (?) as found in some Buddhist mantras. Some writers of later generations seem to agree with him in this additional interpretation, including

¹⁷姜亮夫 Jiāng Liàngfū 《楚辞的源流、系统》：“莫敖是管天文、郊祀的官，懂得许多历史。屈原也是管天文的。” 电大在线网；diàndà online <http://www.guoxue.com/master/jiangliangfu/jlf03.htm>; “Mo-ao is an officer in charge of astronomy and rituals, who also knows a lot of history. Qu Yuan used to be in charge of astronomy.”

¹⁸ Victor Mair's connection of "magus" with "wu" may be applied to the usage of "wu" in Shang and Zhou times, but not specifically to the Chu dialect.

¹⁹沈括 Shěn Kuò 《梦溪笔谈》卷三·辩证一：《楚词·招魂》尾句皆曰“些”，苏个反。今夔、峡、湖、湘及南、北江獠人，凡禁咒句尾皆称“些”。此乃楚人旧俗，即梵语“萨婆诃”也。萨音桑葛反，取无可反，诃从去声。三字合言之，即“些”字也。《Mèngxī bītán》 juàn sān - biànzhèng yī: (trans.) “In 《Chǔ Cí zhāohún》, many sentences end with ‘xiē’, the word should be pronounced as ‘sè.’ Today, native peoples in Kui, Xia, Hu, Xiang (names of places), and south and north of Jiang (Yangtze River) still use ‘se’ at the end of each mantra/spell. This is an old tradition of the Chu; it came from Sanskrit ‘sà-jù-hē’ (?). Take s from *sa*, e from *ge*, nothing from *ju*, and the fourth tone from *he*, and put them together, we get ‘sè.’”

Zhu Xi.²⁰ In the studies of *Zhuang Zi* 《庄子》, Ma Xulun, a modern scholar, compared the ideas of Zhuang Zi and Buddha with a suggestion that there was a Buddhist influence in late Zhou dynasties,²¹ which supports Shen Kuo's idea. However, there are also writers who think that *Chu Ci* of the late Zhou dynasty is too early to have any Buddhist influence in China. In my opinion, Sanskrit, an Indo-Iranian language, does not have to spread to China through Buddhism alone. Its early settlement in Central Asia such as in Bactria, Gandhara, and northern India may have provided the chance to travel to the north and northwest of Xinjiang long before Buddhism.

Jin Kemu, a scholar in Indian languages and literature and the Chinese Classics, compared the pre-Buddhist Indian text *Rig Veda* and *Chu Ci*, finding that *Rig Veda* Book 10, Hymn 58, and *Chao Hun*, Calling Back the Souls, parallel each other so closely that it raises the question whether there were connections between India and Chu State through southern China.²² Jin observes that, not only does the content of each repeatedly ask the spirits to come back from the above, below, and four directions, as well as from parts of the natural world such as the mountains and the seas, etc., but also the fact that only in *Chu Ci*, not so much in its contemporary Classics in the north, such as *Shi Jing* 诗经, *Shu Jing* 书经 etc., do we find such a belief and ritual as "calling back the spirits." Jin has also pointed out that *Rig Veda* Book 10,

²⁰朱熹 Zhū Xī 《楚辞集注》《Chǔ Cí jízhù》

²¹ 马叙伦 Mǎ Xùlún: 《庄子天下篇述义》序言之二：“庄子学说，似受印度哲学之影响颇深；... 是在我国商代，印度已与今新疆之于阗、莎车有交通，而新疆之东与甘肃接壤，则佛法在周末自有传入删丹张掖之可能。而觐者盖达摩之俦，其声远着，故庄、荀皆援而说之。庄书记及此事，而其书述义大抵与佛法相同，其为受印度思想之影响可知。”上海龙门联合书局 1958 年《Zhuāngzǐ tiānxià piān shù yì》. Shànghǎi lóngmén liánhé shūjú, Second Preface: (trans.) “Zhuang Zi's theories seem to be influenced by Indian philosophies to some extent; ... it was during the time of the Shang dynasty, India and Khotan and Shache (or *suo ju*) had already had contacts; and eastern Xinjiang is connected with Gansu geographically; therefore it is possible that in late Zhou Buddhism came to Shandan and Zhangye. Well-known people such as Dharma (scholar), their reputation must have spread it very far, so both Zhuang(Zi) Xun(Zi) borrowed such ideas and talked about them. Zhuang's writing mentions it(?), and his ideas are about the same with those of Buddhism; so it can be known that he (Zhuang Zi) was influenced by Indian thought.”

²²金克木 Jīn Kè mù: “《梨俱吠陀》的招魂诗及有关问题”，《比较文化论集》，三联书店，1984；“《Lǐjù fèituó (Rigveda)》de zhāohún shī jí yǒuguān wèntí”，《Bǐjiào wénhuà lùnjí》，Sānlíán shūdiàn

Hymn 119, reminds us of *Jiu Ge*, the Nine Songs, in its mood.²³ Jin does not go further to compare the two, but, inspired by his work, I looked at other points. What is startling in comparing the formats of the hymns of *Rig Veda* and *Jiu Ge* is that in both, there are found one-person narrations (such as the one quoted by Jin, above), a dialog between two people, and an interaction of three people representing different characters. As an example of the last, in *Rig Veda* Book 10, Hymns 135 and 183, one can find dialogs between father and son, husband and wife, and a comment, or question, or conclusion by a third person who is either a deity or a priest; in *Jiu Ge*, we also see all these methods of expression.

Victor Mair (2000, 192–208) has made a similar and convincing comparison concerning another poem by Qu Yuan, *Tian Wen* 《天问》 (Heavenly Questions.) What he noted is that the very form of the poem recalls Indian styles, and some questions it addresses closely parallel questions in both the Indian Vedas and the Iranian *Avestan*, and even Germanic riddles. He also observes that some aspects of these mythical stories imply a typical nomadic life, including as cattle and sheep herding, a largely non-Chinese practice (certainly a non-southern Chinese practice).

In addition to Mair's observations regarding non-Chinese practices observed in the poem, I found a perhaps even more telling poem titled "Driving the Chariot" 《御赋》 by Tang Le 唐勒, a contemporary and follower of Qu Yuan. The 1972 discovery of a Han tomb in Linyi, Shandong,²⁴ revealed some fragments written on bamboo slips of this long-lost poem by Tang Le. It has taken great scholarly efforts to reassemble the scattered pieces of the poem, of which about 202 words are legible. It is written in the style of *Chu Ci* and praises some good charioteers on earth and in the sky, commenting on contemporary charioteers that they are not as good as the ones in the olden times.²⁵ Although driving chariots had been practiced for some centuries in

²³金克木 Jīn Kè mù : “《梨俱吠陀》的独白诗和对话诗三首解析”, 《比较文化论集》, 三联书店, 1984b; “《Lǐjù fèituó (Rigveda)》 de dúbái shī hé duìhuà shī sānshǒu jièxī,” 《Bǐjiào wénhuà lùnjí》, Sānlíán shūdiàn

²⁴Consult ; 汤漳平 Tāng Zhāngpíng : 1990 “论唐勒赋残简”, 《文物》1990年第4期 “lùn Táng Lè fù cán jiǎn,” 《Wénwù》1990 nián dì 4 qī

²⁵汤漳平 Tāng Zhāngpíng: 《论唐勒赋残简》, 《文物》1990年第4期, 第48—52页; “lùn Táng Lè fù cán jiǎn,” 《Wénwù》1990 nián dì 4 qī, pp48–52; 陈桐生“二十世纪考古文献与楚辞研究”, 中国社会科学院文学研究所

China by the time of the poet, it would still have been very unusual for a southerner to observe chariots, since horses were rare in the south. Using it as metaphor, especially its terms of technical skills that were almost exclusively mastered by the nomads in the north and northwest, seems to indicate actual information about the peoples to those regions.

Other evidence is presented by Hoong Teik Toh, in a very recent article titled "Notes on the Earliest Sanskrit Word Known in Chinese" (2010), has traced a particular word for a mythical horse that appears on a list of items offered in ransom for Wen Wang (before 1046 BCE) recorded in *Huai-nan-zi*, to a Sanskrit word related to the horse. Zhu Qingzhi (1995) also has done a study demonstrating that some Chinese words are related to Vedic languages before Buddhist times.

In brief, the problematic words and expressions in *Chu Ci*, including *shuma* and *sun*, may have been borrowed from such western languages as those in the Indo-Iranian group. In addition to the implications of the term *shuma* mentioned above, the sound of the term also matches well with either *soma* or *haoma*. We cannot simplistically treat the similarity as merely a coincidence.

II. The Chu People

In the northwest of China at the beginning of the rising of the Zhou tribe who later founded the Zhou dynasty, its leaders Wen Wang and Wu Wang secretly allied with hundreds of dukes and tribes to overthrow the last king of the Shang dynasty. The tribes and individuals who helped establish the Zhou dynasty were later made rulers of these states by Cheng Wang (r. 1042–1020 BCE), charged to govern and further expand Zhou territory. One of these rulers, Yu Xiong 鬻熊, who was once a teacher and advisor to Wen Wang, had already died by that time, so his great grandson Xiong Yi 熊绎 was awarded the title of ruler over the southern state Chu.²⁶ The closeness of the relationship between the northwest of China and the Chu area is spelled out in the official histories.

中国文学网; Chén Tóngshēng "20th Century Archaeological Documents and Studies of *Chu Ci*," Chinese Academy of Social Science, Institute of Literature website: <http://www.literature.org.cn/Article.aspx?ID=11092>

²⁶ 司马迁 SimaQian 《史记·楚世家》《Shǐjì – Chǔ shìjiā》

According to the "History of Chu" in *Shiji*²⁷ (second–first centuries BCE) and *Dadaili-Dixi*²⁸ (first century BCE), the legendary origin of the Chu rulers goes back to Emperor Zhuan Xu 颛顼, named Gao Yang 高阳, who was the grandson of Huang Di (Yellow Emperor). Zhuan Xu's own two grandsons Zhongli and Wuhui become, one after the other, the Officer of Fire, with the title Zhurong 祝融, to Emperor Ku 瞽. One of the two sons, Wuhui, himself had a son called Luzhong 陆终, who married a woman from Guifang 鬼方, who bore him six sons. The eldest son is named Kunwu 昆吾 and the youngest Jilian 季连. Jilian has the surname Mi 芈 and is the direct ancestor of the Chu people. One of Jilian's descendants, Yuxiong 鬻熊, became a teacher and advisor to King Wen Wang. During King Cheng Wang's reign, Yuxiong's great grandson Xiongyi 熊绎, who also carries the surname Mi 芈, was given the position of Governor of the Chu.

These and other sources point to the origin of the Chu people from places in the west. First, the ancestor, Emperor Zhuan Xu Gao Yang himself, is from the west, as is indicated in *Shan-hai-jing* 《山海经》²⁹ and Qu Yuan's own poems. In his best-known long poem, *Li Sa* 《离骚》, Qu Yuan says twice that he travels spiritually to Kunlun Mountains looking for the origins of his ancestors. Second, a female ancestor of the Chu people is from Guifang 鬼方, which is likely a nomadic tribe from the west as well. While most sources give us only mythical and legendary accounts, the Guifang story seems to offer some clues based in history.

The Guifang 鬼方 appear as troublemakers for the Shang kings in the oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, i.e., as early as c.1200 BCE.³⁰ It is one of the earliest "barbarian" tribes recorded in writing. This group is identified by both ancient and modern scholars as one of many different names for the nomadic tribe later called the Xiongnu

²⁷ 《史记·楚世家》：“楚之先祖出自帝颛顼高阳。高阳者，黄帝之孙。”《Shǐjì – Chǔ shìjiā (Lineage of Chu)》：“Chu's early ancestor descended from Emperor Zhuanxu Gaoyang. Gaoyang is grandson of Yellow Emperor.”屈原《离骚》：“帝高阳之苗裔兮” Qu Yuan 《Li Sao》：“(I am a) descendent of Emperor Gaoyang.”

²⁸ 《大戴礼·帝系》《Dà dài li - dìxì》

²⁹ 《山海经·大荒西经》《Shānhǎi jīng – dàhuāng xī jīng》

³⁰ About Guifang, consult Yu Taishan 2000, pp.106–122.

匈奴. The *Han Shu* states: "in the time of Yao, (they are) called Hunyu 荤粥; in the time of Zhou, (they are) called Xianyun 狫狁; and in the time of Qin, (they are) called Xiongnu 匈奴."³¹ Wang Guo Wei, a well-known scholar of the Chinese Classics, in his "Study of Guifang, Hunyi, and Xianyun,"³² has made the case that Guifang 鬼方, Hunyi 混夷, Xunyu 獯鬻, Xianyun 狫狁, Rong (Quanrong 犬戎), Di 狄, and Hu 胡, were all names for the Xiongnu 匈奴, later so-named. In one of his publications, Yu Taishan 余太山 also exhibits extensive research on the same issue to conclude that Hun 混, Kun 昆, Gun 緄, Quan 犬, Hunyu (or Yunyu) 荤粥, Xunyu 獯鬻/ 獯鬻, Xianyun 獯鬻/ 狫狁, and finally Xiongnu 匈奴 are, indeed, all different transcriptions of the same name.³³

During the Zhou dynasty, identified as Hunyi, 混夷, Xianyun 獯鬻, etc., these same people again become a major problem for the Zhou kings. The best known such incident may be found in the bronze inscription at the time of Xuan Wang (827–781 BCE), which mentions that the Zhou general Zibo led an attack on the Xianyun 獯鬻, decapitating five hundred and capturing fifty of them.³⁴

The Xiongnu issue, i.e., its ethnic identity and the origin of its language, has long been controversial. Some theories trace it to Turkic,³⁵ Mongolian,³⁶ Iranian/Saka,³⁷ or Yeniseian³⁸ groups. Xiongnu of the Han period, however, called themselves "Hu." Some scholars have said that its original meaning of *hu* is "beard," and so, when used to mean a group of people, it likely

³¹ 《汉书》晋灼注：“尧时曰荤粥，周曰狫狁，秦曰匈奴。”《*Han Shu*》Jin Dynasty Zhuo's commentary.

³² 王国维 Wáng Guówéi: 《观堂集林·鬼方昆夷狫狁考》《*Guān táng jí lín-Guǐ fāng kūn yí xiǎn yǔn kǎo*》

³³ 余太山 Yu Taishan: 《塞种史研究》。中国社会科学出版社1992; "A Hypothesis about the Source of the Sai Tribes," *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 106 (Sept. 2000).

³⁴ 中国国家博物馆：虢季子白盘铭文 National Museum of China: Guo Jizi White Plate Inscription

³⁵ E.g., Omeljan Pritsak 1959. XUN Der Volksname der Hsiung-nu. *Central Asiatic Journal*, 5: 27–34; Otto J. Meanchen-Helfen, 1973; 林幹 Lin Gan 2008/2007

³⁶ E.g., Paul Pelliot and Byambyn Richen

³⁷ E.g., H. W. Bailey (1985) and Janos Harmatta (1999)

³⁸ E.g., Edward Pulleyblank (1984, 1989); Alexander Vovin (2000)

means people who have apparent facial hair. This led some people to think that the Xiongnu are either Turkic or Iranian, since they have this characteristic. Today most scholars agree, however, that the Xiongnu cannot be just one people. Xiongnu should be considered a term referring to a variety of different ethnic groups and politically a confederacy of combined peoples. It is because of this idea of confederation that I see a possibility that two or more of the groups within the Xiongnu may be related to Iranian-speaking peoples.

In tracing the origin for the word "Hu" 胡, a general term by which Chinese called all nomadic tribes from the north and northwest, especially the Xiongnu in later times, Rao Zong-yi, in his article "*Some Issues about the Ancient History of the Sakas*,"³⁹ has suggested an "Indo-European" word "Hur" or "Hurri" for Hu, and found that the Hunyi 混夷, a group of nomads described in *Shi Jing*⁴⁰ 《诗经》 c. sixth–fifth century BCE) were the closest and earliest tribe to be called both "Hurri" and "Hu." While his suggestion has certain problems, such as treating Hurrians and Hurrian language as "Indo-European," although these are commonly identified by scholars as non-Indo-European, his view that Hunyi 混夷, Hun 混, 昆, Gunrong 緄戎, Xianyun 玁狁/ 猃狁, and Yun 允 are the same people, is relevant here. On his list, the name Yun 允 is particularly important in that it will lead us to a connection with an Iranian-speaking people, the Sakas.

From the "History of Chu" in *Shiji*, we already know that the ancestor of the Chu people, Jilian 季连, with the surname Mi 芊, is one of the six sons born to the Guifang 鬼方 mother. What Rao Zongyi⁴¹ has contributed is that Xianyun 猃狁, another name for Guifang 鬼方, is sometimes noted by the shortened term Yun 允 in some early documents. And this Yun 允 is closely connected with the Sakas. The name first appears as "Rong 戎 of the surname of Yun 允,

³⁹ 饶宗颐 *Ráo Zōngyí*: 上古塞种史若干问题 - 于阗史丛考序; *Some Issues about Ancient History of the Sakas* ; 《于阗史丛考》张广达、荣新江 *Zhāng Guǎngdá, Róng Xīnjiāng* 《Yútián shǐ cóng kǎo》 1993

⁴⁰ 《诗经·小雅·采芣序》：“文王之时，西有昆夷之患，北有玁狁之难。” 《*Shījīng – xiǎoyǎ – cǎiwēi xù*》 : “During Wen Wang’s time there was trouble with the Kunyi from the west and problems of the Xianyun from the north.”

⁴¹ 饶宗颐 *Ráo Zōngyí*: 上古塞种史若干问题-于阗史丛考序; *Some Issues about Ancient History of the Sakas* ; 《于阗史丛考》, 张广达、荣新江 *Zhāng Guǎngdá, Róng Xīnjiāng* 《Yútián shǐ cóng kǎo》 1993

who live in Guazhou⁴² (瓜州)"⁴³ in some fourth-century BCE documents, and then, in the Han documents, it is identified with "Sai," or Saka.

Here is a paragraph from *Han Shu—Story of West Regions* quoted in a sixth-century document.⁴⁴ The quotation makes the point directly that the Yun 允 people are Sakas 塞人.

The Sai tribes were originally the Rong 戎 of the surname of Yun 允 who dwelt in Dunhuang for generations, and then moved to the south of Congling (the Pamir Regions) because of being forced and driven off by the Yuezhi.⁴⁵

Yu Taishan, however, does not think Yun 允 is Xianyun 獯豸, as Rao does, but he also compares Yun 允 to one of the four Saka groups, the Asii.⁴⁶ In addition, Yu Taishan has made a connection between the name of Kunwu 昆吾, the eldest of the six sons born to the Guifang mother, and the Indo-European language family.⁴⁷ Since I do not see a strong reason for Yu Taishan to single out Yun 允 or Rong of the surname of Yun 允姓之戎 from other Rongs 戎 (e.g., Quan-rong 犬戎, Yin-rong 阴戎, Qiang-rong 羌戎, Luhun-rong 陆浑之戎, etc., which Yu Taishan treats all as different names of the Xianyun or Xiongnu, except for Yun-rong), I will accept Rao's interpretation of Yun 允 as Xianyun 獯豸 and as Sakas 塞种.

Thus, we seem to have the case that the tribe Guifang 鬼方 or Xianyun 獯豸, who had close contacts with the Shang and Zhou kings, are Iranian-speaking people, so there stands a

⁴² Guazhou is located at the west end of Hexi Corridor in Gansu Province. It is northeast of Dunhuang. In ancient times, Dunhuang was part of Guazhou.

⁴³ 《左氏春秋》《Zuǒshì chūnqiū》：“允姓之戎，居于瓜州。”《礼记》：“西方曰戎”《Liji》：“Those in the west are called Rong.”

⁴⁴ 荀济 Xún Jì 《论佛教表》引《汉书·西域传》：“塞种本允姓之戎，世居敦煌，为月氏追逐，遂往葱岭南奔”。
《Lùn fójiào biào》 quoted from 《Hànshū – xīyù zhuàn》

⁴⁵ Translation from Yu Taishan 2000

⁴⁶ Yu Taishan, "A Hypothesis about the Source of the Sai Tribes," *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 106 (Sept. 2000), pp. 84, 156

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 173–185, "On the Kunwu 昆吾"

strong chance that at least the ruling class of Chu is related to the Sakas or Scythians through a female ancestor from Guifang 鬼方, who was an Indo-Iranian language speaker and who may have been a *haoma* ritual practitioner. From this branch of its ancestry, the Chu people may have learned *shuma/haoma* ritual.

III. Archaeological Discoveries and Myths

Archaeological discoveries seem also to support the suggestion above. The Sakas, or Scythians in general, are nomadic peoples who were active all the way from Siberia in the east to the Black Sea in the west around 900–300 BCE. Those in the eastern part of their territory once lived in Siberia and the Altai region, including Xinjiang, by 900 BCE, and they made the Ili valley their home around the eighth century BCE. Their tomb burials are found in Russia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang. From Achaemenid Persian inscriptions and Greek travelers' accounts like Herodotus's *History* we learn that there were two prominent Scythian-Saka groups in the time of the sixth–fourth centuries BCE: a *Haoma*-worshipping Saka and the Pointed-hat Saka. Both are unmistakably found in the northwest of China and to the north of China.

In the east and south of the Tarim Basin, where the historic Sakas were recorded in Khotan-Saka inscriptions, there are numerous findings of burials indicating the presence of the proto(?)–Scythian-Sakas as early as 2000 BCE and definitely Scythian-Sakas around the eighth century BCE. Xiaohe小河 and Gumugou古墓沟 sites dated 1800–1450 BCE demonstrate the earliest evidence of both the wearing of pointed hats and the use of ephedra and other plants. Although the hats here are not typically high, they do give the impression of a pointed shape. The plants, though, render a very good idea of their meaningful relationship with the dead or death in a typical ritual. According to the archaeological reports,⁴⁸ in almost all tombs in Gumugou and

⁴⁸ 新疆文物考古研究所 Xīnjiāng wénwù kǎogǔ yánjiūsuǒ : “新疆罗布泊小河墓地 2003 年度发掘简报”《文物》2007 ; 《Xīnjiāng luóbùbó xiǎohé mùdì 2003 niándù fājué jiǎnbào 》, 《Wénwù》2007 (10); also 王炳华 Wang Binghua 2009, pp. 135–153 《Sīchóuzhìlù-kǎogǔ yánjiū 》. Xīnjiāng rénmin chūbǎnshè; 刘学堂 Liú Xuétáng 2009, pp. 48–49

many in Xiaohe are found small bags of ephedra pieces and wheat grains, or small bundles of ephedra, tamarisk, sparsifolia, licorice, and reeds, etc. In most cases the bags are put on the chest of the dead, in some in the hands of the dead; in one case, twelve branches of tamarisk and one reed were found on the top of a wooden coffin.

In a little later site at Yanghai in Shanshan dated between 1000 and 200 BCE, there was found a shaman with a stick and ax held in his hands and with copper bells bound on his legs. In some 500 BCE tombs were found leather bags and wooden bowls filled with hemp seeds and leaves. Also at Yanghai in Shanshan were found silk textiles in the style of Chu silk woven in the Warring States period (475–221 BCE).⁴⁹

The most typical pointed hats were discovered in an eighth-century BCE tomb at Zhagunluke, Qiemo, and in some 500–300 BCE tombs in Subeixi near Turfan, where the mummies wear high pointed hats⁵⁰ that are reminiscent of those found in Arzhan-2, Russian Siberia, seventh-century BCE,⁵¹ and in Issyk kurgen, Kazakhstan, fourth–third century BCE.⁵² At Subeixi, a body was found accompanied by a bag of herbs that possibly are ephedra.⁵³ In Shanpula, Khotan, in burial 5 (M05), dated about fifth–third century BCE, the mummies wear necklaces made of herb seeds and have a bundle of mint leaves.⁵⁴

The famous frozen tombs of Pazyryk of sixth century BCE in the Altai region in Russia testify to a hemp-smoking ritual with the tri-sticks and bronze pot for burning hemp seeds and leaves, as described by Herodotus. Besides the exact apparatus, pouches of hemp seeds were also found at this site.

⁴⁹新疆文物考古研究所等 Xīnjiāng wénwù kǎogǔ yánjiūsuǒ dǒng : “鄯善县洋海一号墓地发掘简报”《新疆文物》2004 (1); 《Shànshànxiàn yánghǎi yīhào mùdì fājué jiǎnbào》, 《Xīnjiāng Wénwù》2004 (1); 祁小山、王博 Qí Xiǎoshān, Wáng Bó 2008; 刘学堂 Liú Xuétáng 2009

⁵⁰祁小山、王博 Qí Xiǎoshān, Wáng Bó 2008

⁵¹ Mike Edwards and Sisse Brimburg 2003; G. I. Zaitseva et al. 2004

⁵² Hall 1997

⁵³ Mallory and Mair 2000

⁵⁴李吟屏 Li Yinping 1991, p. 21

With so many instances, it becomes obvious that among the tribes of Central Asia and the Steppes, including Xinjiang, the belief and practice related to the "Tree of Life" are common, and the ritualistic presence of the plants in the burials is surely more than merely a coincidental resemblance to the *haoma* or *soma* rituals described in *Avesta* and *Rig Veda*.

Although no similar archaeological discoveries of plants have yet been found in the burials in the ancient Chu State, i.e., today's provinces of Hubei, Hunan, Henan, Anhui, and Sichuan, etc., there exist interesting mythical stories written about a particular plant of immortality in which the Chu people believed. This indicates people's great knowledge of such a plant. In an early Han book *Huai-nan-zi* 《淮南子》 (second–first century BCE), four kinds of trees are described as growing in the Kunlun Mountains 昆仑山: Tree of Pearls, Tree of Jade, Tree of Xuan (?), and Tree of Immortality 不死树.⁵⁵ The *Huai-nan-zi* also tells the story of a man named Yi who once got the Medicine of Immortality from Xi Wangmu, Queen Mother of the West. His wife Heng-E happened to taste it and therefore flew to the moon⁵⁶ and stayed there forever. In *Shan-hai-jing* 《山海经》, a 475–200 BCE book written most likely by Chu authors,⁵⁷ it also states that in the Kunlun Mountains, to the north of Kaiming (the guardian animal of the Kunlun) there is a Tree of Immortality, and to its east, there are *wu* shamans, named Wu Peng, Wu Di, Wu Yang, Wu Lü, Wu Fan, and Wu Xiang, who once surrounded Niyu 窳窳 (a mythical animal) that had been killed, trying to revive the divine animal, with the Medicine of Immortality in their hands.⁵⁸ Again in *Huai-nan-zi*, it says that in the south, there is also the "Grass of Immortality."⁵⁹ In another Han book, *Shizhouji* 《十洲记》, or Book of Ten

⁵⁵ 《淮南子·墜形訓》《Huáinánzǐ – zhùixíng xùn》: (昆 仑) 上有木禾，其修五尋。珠樹、玉樹、璇樹、不死樹在其西。

⁵⁶ 《淮南子·覽冥訓》《Huáinánzǐ – lǎnmí xùn》: 羿 請不死之藥于西王母，姮娥竊以奔月。

⁵⁷ 袁珂 Yuán Kē: "山海經"《中國神話傳說詞典》1985 "Shānhǎi jīng" in 《Zhōngguó shénhuà chuánshuō cídiǎn》Shànghǎi cǐshū chūbǎnshè

⁵⁸ 《山海經·海內西經》《Shānhǎi jīng – hǎinèi xī jīng》: 昆 仑開明北有"不死樹"；開明東有巫彭、巫抵、巫陽、巫履、巫凡、巫相，夾窳窳之尸，皆操不死之藥以距之。

⁵⁹ 《淮南子·墜形訓》《Huáinánzǐ – zhùixíng xùn》: 南方有"不死之草"。

Continents, it states that in Zuzhou (in the South Seas), there is the Grass of Immortality, and if one put this grass on a dead body, the body could come back to life even three days after the person died.⁶⁰

All this is to say that, in the Kunlun Mountains in the northwest of China, there existed the Tree of Immortality and that the Queen Mother of the West was in charge of it. Shamans used the medicine (made of the Tree) to restore lives, and a similar plant, the Grass of Immortality, is also found in the south. Additionally, many of these accounts are "conveniently" recorded by the Chu writers who themselves may be *wu*/shamans. When we now go back to Qu Yuan, we see clearly that Qu Yuan and his contemporary Chu shamans knew exactly not only the Plant of Immortality but also the shamans who had used the plant. In Qu Yuan's work there are at least three poems, *Li Sao* 《离骚》, *Tian Wen* 《天问》 and *Zhao Hun* 《招魂》, in which two names of *wu*/shamans appear several times: Wu Xian 巫咸 and Wu Yang 巫阳. The latter name, Wu Yang, is exactly the same as that of one of the Wu shamans mentioned in *Shan-hai-jing* who used Medicine of Immortality to recover the dead.

But it is still necessary to ask: did the Chu people practice rituals with plants? And could the plant be *haoma* or *soma* or *shuma*? The answers here seem positive.

To support the answers, it may be pointed out that there were busy interactions between the Scythian-Saka groups to the north and northwest of China and the Chu state, demonstrated by artifacts that illustrate the possibility of exchange of ideas and religious practices. For example, the Chu-style silk and bronze mirrors from around the time of Qu Yuan, 500–220 BCE, are found in Alagou and Shanpula in Xinjiang, Pazyryk in Siberian Russia, and even Palmyra in Syria.⁶¹ At Pazyryk, with the discovery of a four-horse carriage and precious silk pieces in exactly the Chu style of weaving, there is even a possibility that a Chinese (Chu?) princess was married to a

⁶⁰ 《十洲记》《shí zhōu jì》：“祖洲，…… 上有不死之草，…… 人已死三日者，以草覆之，皆当时活也。服之令人长生。”转引自袁珂 Yuán Kē《山海经》《中国神话传说词典》1985 p. 54 《Zhōngguó shénhuà chuánshuō cídiǎn》

⁶¹ 荣新江 Róng Xīnjiāng：“丝绸之路与古代新疆”，《丝绸之路·新疆古代文化》“Silk Road and Ancient Xinjiang” in *Silk Road: Ancient Culture of Xinjiang* ed. Qi Xiaoshan and Wang Bo (2008)

nomad prince for a peace alliance.⁶² The people in Pazyryk were definitely hemp/*haoma* practitioners; it is unlikely that the Chu people did not know the practice. What is more, people and imaginary animals in both Siberian and Chu tombs are shown as having antlers. The bronzes and many wood carvings discovered in Chu tombs exhibit prominent antlers (e.g. on the long-tongued *Zhenshou*, the guardian beasts), and there are similar sculptural antler headdresses on horse heads and on a painted human figure found in Pazyryk tombs. These antlered animals and people seem to provide clear evidence of connections between Chu religion and Shamanism in the Steppes.⁶³

Further evidence is that a kind of stone tool for copper mining was found at Alagou, which is identical to stone tools found in a contemporary copper mine in Hubei,⁶⁴ the home of the Chu state. Again, even in an earlier time like the third and second millennium BCE, there is a strong indication of bronze technology spreading directly from the Steppes to Southeast Asia (Thailand) via Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan, as has been proposed by White and Hamilton (2009). Although the Chu state is not mentioned in their study, from ancient Chinese records, we learn that from the mid-fourth century BCE, Chu kings had actual control of Ba Shu (Sichuan) and Dian (Yunnan).⁶⁵ It is very possible that in much earlier times the Chu people had a relationship with the southwest and northwest.

There is also a connection to be made between the Chu royal name Xiong (meaning "bear") and actual bears in the north.⁶⁶ As discussed earlier in this paper, the Chu's ancestry goes back to Yu Xiong 鬻熊 and his great grandson Xiong Yi 熊绎; after Xiong Yi, all the Chu kings used Xiong as the royal family name. Xiong literally means "bear," which is an animal not native to the Chu region or to southern China, but it is a common animal in the north and northeast.

⁶² Rudenko 1970, p. 224

⁶³ John Major 1978, pp. 226–243

⁶⁴ 王炳华 Wáng Bǐnghuá 2009, p. 162

⁶⁵ 《史记·西南夷传》；《汉书·西南夷传》《Shǐjì – xīnán yí zhuàn》；《Hànshū – xīnán yí zhuàn》；also consult Cén Zhòngmián 2004b.

⁶⁶ Major 1978 and Mair 2000

This connection of Xiong to the bear can be related to yet another clan name under Huang Di (Yellow Emperor), "You Xiong" (meaning "having bears"). According to *Shiji*,⁶⁷ Huang Di belongs to the You Xiong clan, which might have had a bear as its ancestral totem. In *Tian Wen*, Heavenly Questions, Qu Yuan also mentions Huang Xiong (Yellow Bear) who was transformed from Kun, one of Huang Di's grandsons, who had worked for Yao (the legendary emperor) in dealing with a great flood.⁶⁸ If one takes into account the connections between Xiong of Chu and You Xiong of Huang Di and Huang Xiong of Yao, the Chu royal name Xiong could go back all the way to Huang Di, whose original home is in the northwest of China. So, again and again, we see the actual contacts and close relationships between Chu State and the north and northwest.

An additional piece of evidence comes from a sixth-century book titled *Annual Rituals of Jing Chu* 《荆楚岁时记》⁶⁹ that mentions a ritual held on the fifth of May (Chinese calendar), the day Qu Yuan drowned himself. On this day the people go out to walk on the grasslands and pick *ai-ye* 艾叶 (*Artemisia argyi*), of which they make dolls out to hang on doors. The grass was already mentioned in *Shijing* 《诗经》 (Poetry) of the fifth–fourth centuries BCE as an important medical plant, and the ritual of hanging it on doors is still practiced today in many parts of the country. Together with *Artemisia argyi*, people also put on their doors *chang-pu* 菖蒲 (*Acorus calamus*) leaves, believed to be a plant of immortality once used by Han Wu Di 汉武帝.⁷⁰

IV. *Wu* or Shamanism with Fire Ritual

Chu culture has long been known for its unique *wu* 巫 practices as recorded in many pre-Qin documents of the fifth–third centuries BCE, which all mention that the Chu people particularly

⁶⁷ 《史记·五帝本纪》：“黄帝者，少典之子，姓公孙，名轩辕”；“故黄帝为有熊”。《Shǐjì – wǔdì běn jì》：“Huang Di, is the son of Shao Dian, who has the surname of Gong Sun, and a name Xuan Yuan”; “so, Huang Di is of the You Xiong clan.”

⁶⁸ Consult Mair 2000, pp. 192–195

⁶⁹ 宗懔 Zōng Lǐn (501–565) 《荆楚岁时记》：“五月五日，四民并踏百草，采艾以为人，悬门上，以禳毒气。”

⁷⁰ 晋·葛洪 Jin Dynasty Gě Hóng 《神仙传》《Shénxiān zhuàn》

believe in *wu* and practice spirit worship with *wu* rituals.⁷¹ According to these accounts, not only commoners but also the kings took the belief and practice seriously. For instance, Ling Wang 灵王 (r. 540–529 BCE) himself was probably a *wu* shaman, who, when attacked in a siege by enemies, continually sang and danced in front of an altar, saying "I am worshipping and pleasing the heavenly deity and spirits who will protect us, how can I stop and leave?" Huai Wang 怀王 (r. 328–299 BCE), to whom Qu Yuan had been loyal, when in danger of falling the state into the hands of Qin state, did nothing but hold a large *wu* ritual, hoping that the spirits invoked would fight back the Qin armies' invasion.⁷²

Wu shamans had high official positions in the Chu court. Qu Yuan himself might have been a *wu* officer to Huai Wang. According to his biography in *Shiji*,⁷³ he was once "Zuotu" 左

⁷¹ To name a few: Zuo Zhuan 《左传》, Lie Zi 《列子》, Lü Shi Chun Qiu 《吕氏春秋》, Han Shu 《汉书》, Huai Nan Zi 《淮南子》, Chu Ci Zhang Ju 《楚辞章句》, etc. Also: 班固: "楚人信巫鬼, 重淫祀"。Ban Gu: "Chu people believe in *wu* (magic arts) and ghosts, they take the rituals seriously." 朱熹《楚辞集注》: "楚俗祠祭之歌, 今不可得而闻矣, 然计其间, 或以阴巫下阳神, 或以阳主接阴鬼。" Zhu Xi: 《Chu Ci jizhu》: "Chu's traditional ritual songs cannot be obtained today, but (I have) heard of them; among those, some are about *yin wu* asking for *yang* deities, or some are about *yang* masters receiving *yin* ghosts." 王夫之《楚辞通释》: "巫咸, 神巫之通称。楚俗尚鬼, 巫咸降神, 神附于巫而传语焉。" Wang Fuzhi: 《Chu Ci tongyi》: "Wu Xian, is a general term for all magical *wu* shamans. It is the Chu custom to worship ghosts, so Wu Xian asks for deities to come down; the deities would attach themselves into the *wu* shamans, and the *wu* shamans would speak for them."

⁷² 桓谭 Huán Tán (东汉)《新论·言体》: "楚灵王骄逸轻下, 简贤务鬼, 信巫祝之道, 斋戒洁鲜, 以祀上帝, 礼群神, 躬执羽绂, 起舞坛前。吴人来攻, 其国人告急, 而灵王鼓舞自若, 顾应之曰: '寡人方祭上帝, 乐明神, 当蒙福佑焉, 不敢赴救。'" 《汉书·郊祀志》: "楚怀王隆祭祀, 事鬼神, 欲以获福助却秦师, 而兵挫地削, 身辱国危。" "Chu Ling Wang is bragging and looking down upon his subjects. He likes conducting ritual ceremonies concerning ghosts, and he believes in Wu Zhu practices, such as fasting and cleansing, in order to worship the High God, and show respect to all other deities. He would wear dresses with feathers and have bows and arrows, dancing in front of an altar. Once, the army of Wu Kingdom came to attack, people reported the emergency to Ling Wang, who still kept dancing, only responding casually that: 'I am worshipping the Higher God and pleasing the deities, who would bless us, so I dare not to stop to go help.'" "Chu Huai Wang once had a large ritual ceremony to serve spirits and deities, hoping to get help and blessings from them to fight off the Qin army; but instead, he lost both his soldiers and some territory, leaving himself shameful and the state insecure."

⁷³ 《史记·屈原列传》《Shǐjì – Qū Yuán lièzhuàn》

徒, official advisor to the king and in charge of state affairs and legislation. "Zuotu" has also been identified by modern scholars as "Mo Ao" 莫敖, an official title for a person responsible for astronomy and astrology⁷⁴ used during the Spring-Autumn (770–476 BCE) period of the Zhou period. At least six ancestors of Qu Yuan since the eighth century BCE who used the title of *Mo Ao* have been found.⁷⁵ It seems that Qu Yuan had inherited a family profession as shaman priest. Qu Yuan's poems may be the best examples of his incomparable knowledge of *wu*. *Jiu Ge*, the Nine Songs, and *Zhao Hun*, Calling Back the Souls, are typical in many ways of *wu* shaman songs sung at *wu* rituals, but in these poems are used only to express Qu Yuan's own political ideals and personal feelings. Most authorities who study Qu Yuan and *Chu Ci* agree that the two long series of poems were based on local *wu* songs. Qu Yuan gives the names of famous *wu* priests such as Wu Xian 巫咸 and Wu Yang 巫阳, and he writes in his poetry of hundreds of different plants for rituals that cannot be found elsewhere.

Together with citing *wu* practices, Qu Yuan in his *Li Sao* 《离骚》 gives us a clue concerning fire worship by identifying himself as the descendant of Gao Yang 高阳, the legendary King whose name by itself suggests an association with the Sun and a Great Brightness; Qu Yuan describes himself traveling spiritually to the place of Gao Yang, the Kunlun Mountains. As already mentioned, the Chu people trace their ancestry back to King Zhuan Xu 颛顼, whose personal name was Gao Yang 高阳 and whose great grandsons Zhong Li and Wu Hui were Officers of Fire with the title Zhu Rong 祝融.⁷⁶ It does not seem a coincidence that Gao

⁷⁴姜亮夫 Jiāng Liàngfū: "楚辞的源流、系统": "莫敖是管天文、郊祀的官, 懂得许多历史。屈原也是管天文的。" 《Chǔ Cí de yuánliú xitǒng》 diàndà online <http://www.guoxue.com/master/jiangliangfu/jlf03.htm> "Mo-ao is an officer in charge of astronomy and rituals, who also knows a lot of history. Qu Yuan used to be in charge of astronomy."

⁷⁵ 《史记·楚世家》《Shǐjì – Chǔ shìjiā (Lineage of Chu)》 and 《史记·屈原列传》《Shǐjì – Qū Yuán lièzhuàn》; "屈原" "Qū Yuán" 《中国大百科全书·中国文学卷》, 中国大百科全书出版社 1998 年版 Zhōngguó dàbǎikēquánshū-Zhōngguó wénxuéjuàn》, Zhōngguó dàbǎikēquánshū chūbǎnshè 1998 nián bǎn

⁷⁶ 《史记·楚世家》: 楚之先祖出自帝颛顼高阳。高阳者, 黄帝之孙, 昌意之子也。高阳生称, 称生卷章, 卷章生重黎。重黎为帝喾高辛居火正, 甚有功, 能光融天下, 帝喾命曰 祝融。共工氏作乱, 帝喾使重黎诛之而不尽。帝乃以庚寅日诛重黎, 而以其弟吴回为重黎后, 复居火正, 为祝融。《Shǐjì – Chǔ shìjiā (Lineage of Chu)》: "Chu's early ancestor descended from Emperor Zhuanxu Gaoyang. Gaoyang is the grandson of the Yellow

Yang's great grandsons became Zhu Rong 祝融, in charge of fire rites. "Zhu Rong" is until the present still the name of the Chinese fire deity, and in almost all sources, he has something to do with the south and fire. That the Chu people's ancestors had many Officers of Fire demonstrates that the Chu *wu*/shaman practices were involved heavily with fire worship.

According to *Zhou Li* 《周礼》,⁷⁷ (Rituals of Zhou) (sixth–fifth centuries BCE), Officer of Fire Si Quan has the responsibilities of issuing orders for fire rituals, of igniting the new fire at the beginning of each of the four seasons, of conducting fire worship ceremonies, and of keeping the "fire seed" or original fire for the state. The tradition can still be found among Miao people 苗族 who were and still are the people who live in the old Chu territory. In especially their funeral rituals, a priest called "Ao Biao" 敖表 or "Ao Tao" 敖梲 conducts rituals of burning offerings such as paper money and keeping a torch fire going throughout the entire period between a person's death and burial. Interestingly, these Ao Biao and Ao Tao are seen as being connected with the earlier Chu shaman officer "Mo Ao" 莫敖 by some scholars. Jiang Liangfu for instance, stated that the "Chu's *Mo Ao* 莫敖 is equivalent to today's Ao Biao 敖表 who is in charge of fire worship among Miao folks in Xiang Xi (western Hunan province, the old Chu territory)."⁷⁸

Emperor, son of Changyi. Gaoyang gave birth to Cheng, Cheng gave birth to Juanzhang, Juanzhang gave birth to Zhongli. Zhongli became Fire Officer for Emperor Ku Gaoxin?, who was capable of sending light all over the world; therefore he was given the title of Zhurong. When the Gonggong tribe rebelled, Emperor Ku sent Zhongli to wipe out the tribe, but he failed to extinguish the whole tribe. So, Emperor Ku killed Zhongli on the day of *gengyin*, and named Zhongli's brother Wuhui to be the successor, who revived position of Fire Officer titled Zhurong."

⁷⁷ 《周礼·夏官·司燿》：“司燿，掌行火之政令，四时变国火，以救时疾。季春出火，民咸从之，季秋内火，民亦如之。时则施火令，祭祀则祭燿。凡国失火，野焚菜，则有刑罚焉。” “The Sihuan is in charge of giving orders for the fire rituals, such as changing the national fire for the four seasons to protect against seasonal problems. In the spring, fire going out, people follow; in the fall, fire going in, people also follow the order. He gives orders of fire on time, and conducts fire rituals during ritual ceremonies. There are punishments if fire and wild fire happen in the country.”

⁷⁸ 石宗仁 Shí Zōngrén：“楚国时代的‘莫敖’相当于今天湘西苗族民间掌管丧葬火教崇拜的‘敖表’祭司。‘莫’者即蛮之异译；‘莫敖’即‘蛮敖’、‘苗(mao)敖’，即苗族火教祭司。”《荆楚与之那》民族出版社 2008 “The ‘*mo-ao*’ of Chu times is about the same with today’s ‘*ao-biao*’ priest who is in charge of the fire ritual during a funeral among native Miao people in western Hunan. ‘*Mo*’ is a different translation of ‘*man*’

We may be reminded now that the Iranian Zoroastrians who practiced and still practice the *haoma* rituals are Haoma and Fire worshippers at the same time. The Chu culture's unique *wu* practices combined with their fire-worship suggest a shared knowledge of both sets of the rituals among both Zoroastrians and the Chu people.

"*Mo Ao*" 莫敖, the term mentioned so many times through this discussion, is, first, a high officer in charge of astronomy and rituals as a *wu* 巫 priest, and, second, a priest in charge of fire ritual, and, third, probably a term of a foreign origin. Already suggested linguistically as *magus* in Cen's study, *mo-ao* has been found in a different way to be related to *magus*. As discussed earlier, Victor Mair found a connection between *wu* and *magus*.⁷⁹ *Magus* is originally an Iranian term found in the *Avesta* and in inscriptions of Darius I to mean a religious class of the Medes, those who study astronomy and astrology and who train priests of both the Medes and the Persians. Zoroaster, founder of Zoroastrianism, himself was a *magus* from the Medes.⁸⁰ All three words—*Mo-Ao*, *Wu*, and *Magus*—must be grouped together.

The 1980 discovery of two shell carvings dated to the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE), provides another link between *wu* and a Westerner, in an example more visual than linguistic. The discovery, unearthed in Fufeng near Xi'an, Shanxi Province, shows two carved human heads, both appearing to have a high nose and large deep-set eyes, the image of an Iranian or Caucasian. One piece also has on its headdress a mark like a cross, which has been identified as the ancient Chinese graphic sign for *wu* 巫. This piece was central to the study made by Victor Mair connecting Iranian *magus* and Chinese *wu*.⁸¹ The combination of the Western face and the Chinese word for *wu* shaman/magician⁸² apparently suggests that a *wu* shaman/magician was considered a Westerner or *magus*, or a Westerner thought to be a *wu* priest, by the Chinese people

(barbarian); '*mo-ao*' is '*man-ao*' or '*mao-ao*', who is the fire priest for the Miao people." 《Jīng Chǔ yǔ Zhīnà》, Míngzú chūbǎnshè

⁷⁹ Victor H. Mair 1990

⁸⁰ Consult Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Routledge 2007).

⁸¹ Mair 1990, 2000; Mallory and Mair 2000

⁸² Mair prefers to use "magician" instead of "shaman." Ibid.

in the Central Plain. This combination agrees with the idea that the Chinese knew some religious ideas and practices related to the people from the west. They may have known so much that they adopted some ideas and practices and/or integrated these with their own *wu*/shamanic practices.

The discovery of this early contact between religious ideas may be added to some legendary accounts of the travels by Chinese to the West. We know that in early Western Zhou days, Mu Wang 穆王, or King Mu (c. 1000 BCE), once traveled to the Kunlun Mountains and met the Queen Mother of the West.⁸³ There one would find the Tree of Immortality. And there too, as indicated by recent archaeological discoveries, lived the Scythian-Sakas who already practiced the *soma/haoma* ritual. Qu Yuan, in his poem *Li Sao* 《离骚》 twice describes his own spiritual travels to the Kunlun Mountains, where he believed he would find the home of his ancestor Gao Yang 高阳. We also learn from some documents that shamans (from the west?) constantly offered to the Chu kings the Medicine of Immortality that normally comes from the Kunlun Mountains.

To summarize: the Chu *Wu* practices may have been influenced by the proto-Indo-Iranian, or Indo-Iranian, or Scythian-Saka peoples from the west and northwest, i.e., Central Asia and Iran. Not only were the *wu* practices of the Chu people unique within China and related to the fire-worship performed by the Zoroastrians, but the use of the names *mo ao* and *wu* to designate a shaman are related to the Iranian word *magus*, for priest, as shown through linguistic analysis and appearance.

V. Hemp, *Ma*, *Hu-Ma*, *Han-Ma*, *Huo-Ma*, *Huang-Ma*, and *Shu-Ma*

Before drawing conclusions, I would like to examine a little further the term *shuma* and other “*ma*”s. *Shuma* in the Chinese *shu ma* 疏麻, is a compound word. The first part, *shu* 疏, used alone, means “sparse,” “distant,” and “empty.” The second part *ma* 麻, simply means “hemp” and “of hemp.” From the regular meaning of each word, some scholars, such as Wen Yiduo,⁸⁴

⁸³ 《穆天子传》《Mù tiānzǐ zhuàn》

⁸⁴ 闻一多 Wén Yīduō 《九歌解诂》：“盖疏麻是隐语，借花草中的疏字以暗示行将分散之意。”1993 《Jiǔ Gē jiěgǔ》：“*Shuma* is a metaphor; it takes on the meaning of being scattered in space for flowers and plants to imply

interpreted *shu ma* as "sparse or distant hemp." But many scholars choose to follow Wang Yi's earlier interpretation, which defines *shu ma* as "mythical hemp."

Ma, or hemp, is a native plant of China.⁸⁵ It has been a major agricultural crop for its fiber and seed oil since ancient times. Not only have textiles woven of hemp fiber been discovered in Neolithic tombs of around 2000 BCE in Gansu and in the Shang tombs of 1700–1046 BCE, but *ma* also appears in inscriptions and literature from ancient times forward. *Ma* 麻 is written in the bronze inscriptions of early Zhou (1046–771 BCE), and it appears in classics of history and literature such as *Liji* and *Shijing* from the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 century BCE) and *Erya* from the late Zhou to early Han period (c. fifth–second century BCE), as well as in many other agricultural and medical books since the Han dynasty. With such familiarity, such rich knowledge, and much practical experience of *ma*/hemp in Chinese culture, Wang Yi must have known quite clearly that the *shuma* described by Qu Yuan is not an ordinary hemp, but something that had magical properties.

Also, during the Han dynasty, i.e. during Wang Yi's lifetime, various kinds of hemp were known and named. For instance, "Zhang Qian brought back from Da Yuan (Ferghana) some seeds of *oil ma* (sesame) that was also called *ma* 麻. In order to differentiate the foreign *ma* (sesame) from Chinese *ma* (hemp), people started to call the foreign one *hu ma* 胡麻 (ma of the foreigners) and the Chinese one *han ma* 汉麻 (ma of the Han people) or *da ma* 大麻 (big ma).⁸⁶ The same source also says: "... *da ma* is what we called today *huo ma* 火麻 (fire ma); it is also called *huang ma* 黄麻 (yellow ma)."⁸⁷ Of these names, *huo ma* suggests a burning process with hemp, and *huang ma* indicates the color (of the seed oil or juice?) of hemp. Both terms, fire and yellow hemp, appear mostly in medical prescriptions. With his contemporary knowledge of these many names of *ma*, Wang Yi must have a reason for not picking any one of these.

the distance and separation."

⁸⁵ See Barber 1991.

⁸⁶ 《汉书·西域传》《Hànshū – xīyù zhuàn》：“张骞使大宛得油麻之种，亦谓之麻，故以‘胡麻’别之，谓汉麻为大麻也。”

⁸⁷ 《汉书·西域传》《Hànshū – xīyù zhuàn》：“大麻即今火麻，亦曰黄麻。”

Therefore, Wang Yi's interpretation provides the possibility that *shuma* is either a word for an imagined plant or is a borrowed term.

It should be pointed out that, although "fire hemp" seems to suggest a parallel to the hemp burning practice found in the Pazyryk tombs and the hemp-burning cleansing after burying the dead as witnessed by Herodotus by the Scythian-Sakas, the term usually refers to an actual medical use rather than a ritual one. In China, the only ritual use of hemp is found in association with funeral attire as recorded in *Liji*: when a person dies the family members must wear clothes or strips made of hemp fiber, so-called *pi ma dai xiao* 披麻带孝, still commonly practiced in China today. Only in this case do Chinese seem to treat hemp as an article associated with life and death.

It should also be noted that one of the candidates for *soma/haoma*, ephedra, is called in Chinese *ma huang*, which means "hemp (in) yellow (color)." *Ma huang* has been used as an important herbal medicine since at least Han times.

Finally, there must be added the Khotan-Saka word for hemp: *kamha*.⁸⁸ No linguist myself, I nevertheless wonder if *kamha* can be transcribed to "cama" or "sama" or even *soma*. If it can, *kamha*/hemp would become *soma/haoma*. Khazak and Uyghur people today still call their shaman "kam." Could a *kam* be the user of *kamha*/hemp?

It seems likely that *shuma* is a borrowed term understood to mean a mythical or magical Plant of Immortality grown in the land of the Queen Mother of the West. Botanically, the plant might be ephedra, hemp, tamarisk, or many more.

VI. Summary and conclusion

Shuma, the mythical plant mentioned in Qu Yuan's fourth-century BCE poem "Jiuge," the Nine Songs, exhibits so many parallels with the Indo-Iranian word *soma/haoma* that an investigation of the relationship between the two is indicated.

The parallels include:

1. Both sound similar;

⁸⁸ Witzel 2006, p. 171

2. Both are mythical plants without a real botanical identification;
3. Both are personified deities;
4. Both are associated with health, life and death, offspring, and immortality, etc.;
5. Both are ritual offerings.

Further investigation indicates:

1. The Chu language may have indeed contained some foreign words from the west, likely those of Indo-Iranian origin;
2. The Chu ruling class did have a female ancestor from the Guifang, a possible Scythian-Saka tribe who spoke an Iranian language and practiced some *soma/haoma* rituals;
3. Archaeological discoveries demonstrate some close contacts between the Chu state and tribes from the northwest, especially those of Pointed-hat and Haoma-worshipping Sakas in Chinese Central Asia and the Great Steppes, and ancient literature also supports the contacts;
4. The Chu's unique *Wu* or shaman practices of the Chu culture include some fire ritual, which resembles Iranian Zoroastrian practices; the discovery of a combination of a westerner's face and Chinese word *wu* further verifies the early exchange of religious ideas between the west and east;
5. The term *shuma* itself does not seem that of two separate two words suggesting any specific plant like hemp; it is likely a single word borrowed whole.

With all these correspondences, I would therefore like to propose that *shuma* be considered to be a term borrowed along with its concept and its rituals through either foreign ancestry or direct contact with the tribes in the west. The origin of the word and the use of the plant should be found in the proto-Indo-Iranian and Indo-Iranian languages spoken by Scythian-Sakas, *Rig Veda* Indians, and *Avestan* Iranians, who are very well-known for their belief in and practice of *soma/haoma* rituals.

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