

Mibu Shamanism and the Early Chinese Wu: Cross-Cultural Parallels in Ritual Expertise and Spirit Mediation

Dr. Shiva Prasad Mili^{1*}, Dr. Mridul Bordoloi², Dr. Meena Sharma³, Dr. Arup Sarma⁴, Dr. Kritanjali Konwar⁵, Dr. Priyanka Kakoti⁶

¹ Associate Professor, Department of English, Sibsagar Girls' College, Sivasagar, Assam, India. Email: shibamili24@gmail.com | ORCID: 0009-0007-7193-1821

² Professor, Department of English, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India. Email: mridul.du@gmail.com | ORCID: 0009-0006-9618-5768

³ Associate Professor, Department of English, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India. Email: meena_sharma@dibru.ac.in | ORCID: 0009-0002-9688-4420

⁴ Associate Professor, Chilarai College, Golokganj, Dhubri, Assam, India. Email: arupsarma.sarma7@gmail.com | ORCID: 0009-0007-6288-8016

⁵ Associate Professor, Department of English, Sibsagar Girls' College, Sivasagar, Assam, India. Email: kritanjali34@gmail.com | ORCID: 0000-0003-4702-3835

⁶ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India. Email: priyanka.dib@gmail.com | ORCID: 0000-0001-8212-8275

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Shiva Prasad Mili^{1*}

Department of English, Sibsagar Girls' College, Sivasagar, Assam, India – 785640

Email: shibamili24@gmail.com

Abstract: This article examines shared ritual features between the Mibu shamanism of the Mising tribe of Assam, Northeast India, and the early Chinese wu tradition, particularly in its pre-Han and proto-Daoist expressions. The comparison does not assume historical contact between the two traditions. It instead asks what can be learned when two unrelated bodies of evidence are read side by side, with full attention to their different archives, settings, and limits. Both the Mising Mibu and the early Chinese wu function as specialist intermediaries between human communities and spirit worlds, deploy oral performative traditions as primary therapeutic instruments, use plant and material substances with dual ritual-medicinal efficacy, and are characterized by cosmological systems in which illness represents a disruption of relational order. The article argues more cautiously that these shared patterns can help Daoist studies by clarifying the ritual grammar that early Daoist sources inherited, transformed, and sometimes theorized against. The Mising case is useful here because it keeps the comparison grounded in lived practice rather than in later reconstruction alone. The Mising case, drawn from ethnographic and ethnobotanical scholarship, provides a productive comparative lens for revisiting questions about the place of the wu in early Chinese religious history and the ongoing significance of shamanic logic in Daoist healing traditions...

Keywords: Mising Mibu, Chinese wu, shamanism, Daoism.

Introduction

Comparative religion has always carried the risk of resemblance-hunting-the premature identification of structural parallels that dissolves under scrutiny into superficiality or, worse, into the kind of decontextualized universalism that flattens the very particularities that make traditions worth studying. Jonathan Z. Smith famously cautioned against what he called “parallelomania,” the tendency to accumulate resemblances as if quantity of comparison were itself a form of argument (Smith, 1990). That caution remains necessary. Yet comparison, practised carefully and with explicit methodological accountability, remains one of the most powerful tools available to scholars of religion. The challenge is not to avoid comparison but to make it answerable to evidence.

This article proceeds from that commitment. It sets two traditions in systematic dialogue-the *Mibu* shamanism of the Mising, a Tibeto-Burman tribal community of Assam in Northeast India, and the early Chinese *wu*, the ritual specialists whose activities pervade the textual record of pre-Han China-not to argue for historical diffusion or genetic relationship, but to examine what functional and phenomenological convergences between the two can tell us about the logic of shamanic practice across the East and Southeast Asian world. The argument is comparative in the strict disciplinary sense: it uses one tradition to sharpen our analytical vocabulary for reading the other.

The choice of the Mising *Mibu* as a comparative lens for Daoist studies is not arbitrary. The Misings are a Tibeto-Burman people who migrated to the plains of Assam, likely from the northeastern Himalayan foothills, arriving in the Brahmaputra valley from approximately the twelfth century onward (Pegu & Devi, 2025). Their traditional religion is animistic, organized around a layered cosmology that distinguishes three cosmic realms-*Taléng Among* (heaven), *Dong Among* (earth), and *Uyu Among* (underworld)-and assigns distinct categories of spirit to each (Pegu & Devi, 2025). Illness, in the Mising worldview, results from the aggression or neglect of any of these spirit categories. The *Mibu*-an exclusively male ritual specialist, called into the role by supernatural selection-serves as the community’s expert diagnostician of spirit-caused disorder and its primary therapeutic agent (Pegu, 2026). He works through oral performative tradition-the *a:bang* chant-and through the directed use of plant and animal materials in structured ritual sequences (Sharma & Pegu, 2011).

The early Chinese *wu* presents a structurally similar profile. A religious specialist whose activities are documented from the Shang oracle bone inscriptions through the Han literary record, the *wu* performed healing, divination, exorcism, rain-making, and ecstatic communication with spirits (Michael, 2015). Whether the *wu* should be described as a “shaman” in the technical sense developed by Mircea Eliade and elaborated by later scholars has been vigorously debated in Sinological literature over the past five decades (Michael, 2015). What is not disputed is that the *wu* occupied a structurally central role in the religious life of early China and that their activities left a traceable deposit in the emerging textual traditions that would eventually crystallize as Daoism.

The article is organized as follows. The second section reviews the relevant scholarly literature and establishes the historical context for both traditions. The third and fourth sections present detailed analyses of Mising *Mibu* practice and early Chinese *wu* tradition respectively. The fifth section, the analytical core of the paper, undertakes a thematic comparative analysis across five dimensions: spirit mediation and cosmology, ritual expertise and technique, the therapeutic use of plants and material substances, oral performative tradition, and social function. The sixth section discusses the implications of these parallels for Daoist studies. The conclusion reflects on the methodological stakes of the comparison and suggests directions for future research.

Literature Review and Historical Context

Mising Scholarship

Academic scholarship on the Mising is unevenly distributed. Ethnobotanical and sociological studies have produced the most empirically grounded work, while literary and religious studies remain

relatively underdeveloped compared with the richness of the tradition itself. Sharma and Pegu's (2011) study of the ethnobotany of Mising religious and supernatural beliefs-focused specifically on the *Dobur Ui* purification-healing ceremony-remains the most comprehensive and rigorous empirical treatment of *Mibu*-directed plant use. By documenting thirty plant species belonging to twenty-three families used in the *Dobur Ui* ritual across eight Assamese districts, Sharma and Pegu (2011) established both the botanical depth of Mising healing knowledge and its inseparability from animistic belief. Their study makes explicit what Mising practitioners have long maintained: the plants used in *Dobur Ui* operate simultaneously as material medicines and as spirit-active agents. There is no emic distinction between these two functions.

On Mising religious cosmology and the *Mibu* institution more broadly, recent work by Pegu and Devi (2025) and Pegu (2026) provides the most current account. Pegu and Devi (2025) document the three-tiered Mising cosmos in detail, map the spirit categories assigned to each tier, and describe the specific rites associated with each category. Pegu (2026) examines the institutional decline of the *Mibu* under pressure from Neo-Vaishnavism, Do:nyi-Po:loism, and Christianity, noting that the *Mibu* now performs most publicly during the *Po:rag* festival, a post-harvest community ceremony held every two to three years. The institutional loss of the *Mibu* is connected, in Pegu's analysis, to the deforestation and ecological degradation of Mising-inhabited river lands, since the *épom* spirit-the supernatural force believed to ordain the *Mibu*-is understood to inhabit forest trees, and its displacement through deforestation has made new *Mibu* ordinations increasingly rare (Pegu & Devi, 2025).

Earlier work includes the series of Mising-language publications by Doley and Doley (2002), whose *Glimpses of Mibu and Mibu A:bang* documents the origin of the *Mibu* institution and preserves transcriptions of *a:bang* chants. Padun's (2022) collection of *Mibu a:bang* texts provides primary source material for the oral tradition, though, as Pegu and Devi (2025) note, the challenges facing *a:bang* preservation are acute: without active *Mibu* practitioners, the chant tradition has no living vehicle.

Wu Scholarship and Daoism

The scholarly debate over the *wu* is almost as old as Sinology itself. For much of the twentieth century, the dominant interpretation-associated with Henri Maspero and later with Edward Schafer-held that the *wu* were unambiguously shamans in the Eliadian sense: ecstatic specialists who entered altered states of consciousness to communicate with spirits and perform healing and divination (Schafer, 1951, as cited in Michael, 2015). This reading was challenged in the 1980s and 1990s by scholars who argued that the Eliadian model was too narrowly Siberian to accommodate Chinese evidence and that the *wu*'s activities were too institutionally embedded in the Chinese state apparatus to fit the "free spirit" model of classic shamanism (ter Haar, as cited in Michael, 2015).

Michael's (2015) landmark article in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* substantially reframes this debate. Drawing on modern shaman studies-particularly Michael Winkelman's neurological-evolutionary model and Weston La Barre's work on the shamanic origins of religion-Michael (2015) argues that the *wu* are best understood not through the Eliadian archetype but through a functional definition that emphasizes altered consciousness, spirit contact, and community healing as the defining characteristics of shamanic practice. This functional approach is more accommodating of the institutional diversity of *wu* activity and more compatible with comparative analysis across traditions. It is the approach adopted in this article.

Livia Kohn's contribution to the recent Purple Cloud Institute volume on the Chinese *wu* (2025) situates the *wu* within the broader trajectory of Chinese religious history, tracing their influence from the Shang period through to Daoist institutionalization. Kohn (2025) argues that the Daoist internalization of shamanic technique-the displacement of outward spirit-flight by inward visualization practice-represents one of the defining transformations in early Chinese religious history, but that the underlying logic of spirit mediation was never fully abandoned by Daoist practitioners, persisting in exorcism, healing, and talisman traditions. Winkelman's chapter in the same volume applies his neurological model to the *wu*, arguing that the trance states associated with *wu* performance

are produced by neurobiological mechanisms universal across the species, which partly accounts for the structural resemblances between *wu* practice and shamanic traditions elsewhere in Asia (Winkelman, 2025).

The relationship between the *wu* and early Daoism is addressed directly in Max Dashu's (2011) study of female *wu* in ancient China, which documents the role of ecstatic dance, spirit possession, and healing in proto-Daoist communities of the Warring States period. The *Chuci* (Songs of Chu)-whose "Nine Songs" are among the earliest surviving texts of *wu* performance-are now generally read as representing a transitional moment in which the ecstatic-shamanic tradition of south Chinese religion begins to acquire the literary and cosmological elaboration that would feed into both Daoism and early Chinese poetry.

Methodological Framing

The comparative method employed here follows Wendy Doniger's (1998) "tool-kit" approach to cross-cultural comparison in religious studies: rather than arguing for underlying unity or common origin, it uses resemblance as a heuristic for generating sharper descriptions of both traditions. Where the Mising *Mibu* and the Chinese *wu* resemble each other, we should ask why; where they differ, we should ask what those differences illuminate about the specific cosmological and social contexts of each tradition. The risk of anachronism-reading Mising practice back into early Chinese evidence, or vice versa-is mitigated by keeping the two analyses separate before bringing them into comparative dialogue. The risk of ethnocentrism-treating either tradition as merely an instance of a universal type-is mitigated by attending to the specific ontological frameworks within which each tradition operates.

Mising *Mibu* Shamanism

The *Mibu* Institution

The *Mibu* is the pivotal religious and medical figure in traditional Mising society. He is exclusively male, and his entry into the role is understood as a matter of supernatural compulsion rather than human choice or ambition. According to Mising belief, the *Mibu* is ordained by the *épom*-a spirit associated with the forest, dwelling in large trees, whose presence in the landscape is both a precondition for new *Mibu* emergence and an indicator of the ecological health of Mising territory (Pegu & Devi, 2025). The ordination experience typically involves involuntary episodes of altered consciousness, illness, or dream encounters with spirit figures-a profile that maps closely onto what Eliade (1964) identified as the "initiatory illness" characteristic of shamanic calling across cultures, and what Michael Winkelman's neurological model describes as spontaneous alterations in neural integration that sensitize the individual to spirit-communication (Winkelman, 2025).

The *Mibu*'s technical apparatus centers on the *a:bang*-sacred oral chants whose composition is attributed to ancestral authority and which function as the primary medium of communication between the *Mibu* and the spirit world (Pegu & Devi, 2025). The *a:bang* is not simply incantation; it is narrative literature of considerable sophistication, encoding cosmological knowledge, ancestral history, and ritual protocol in a performed oral form (Doley & Doley, 2002). The *a:bang* opens with an invocation of the primordial period *Kéyum*-described as the darkness before creation, "the un-manifest, the formless, the eternal, the infinite, the great emptiness"-and situates the healing or ritual act within the total cosmological order (Pegu & Devi, 2025). This cosmological grounding of therapeutic action in primordial creative force has direct parallels in early Chinese *wu* performance, as will be examined below.

The *Mibu*'s role is explicitly diagnostic: he identifies which category of spirit is responsible for a patient's illness and prescribes the appropriate ritual response. The Mising spirit taxonomy is organized by cosmic domain. *Taléng Among* (heaven) is populated by benevolent spirits and deities, including the supreme pair *Do:nyi-Po:lo* (Sun-Moon), the creator couple *Se:di-Me:lo*, and protective celestial beings (Pegu & Devi, 2025). *Dong Among* (earth) is the domain of malevolent spirits-including *Bíri Bíag* (spirit of water), *Lé:mug Boté* (storm deity), and *Banji-banmang* (a blood-hungry destroyer)-who actively inflict sickness and misfortune on the living (Pegu & Devi, 2025). *Uyu Among* (underworld) contains ancestral

souls (*urom*) who, if neglected or improperly honored through death rites, may also turn malevolent and cause illness in their living descendants (Pegu & Devi, 2025). The *Mibu*'s diagnostic work is therefore a form of spirit triangulation: determining which of these three domains is the source of disruption and which specific entity within that domain requires addressing.

Ritual Practice: *Dobur Ui*

The *Dobur Ui* ceremony is the most extensively documented of the *Mibu*-directed healing rituals. Performed annually in May, it is directed at the *Dobur Ui* spirit category-celestial forces held responsible for floods, epidemics, fire, and community-level misfortune (Sharma & Pegu, 2011). The ceremony is organized by village youths under *Mibu* direction and involves the entire Mising community.

The ritual sequence begins before dawn with the erection of *Phragmites karka* barriers at village entry points to seal the community from outside contamination during the ceremony. A house-to-house procession collects *ajenge* dues-rice, *apong* (fermented rice beer), wild vegetables, chicken, and pork from each household, while participants beat walls and platforms with sticks to drive malevolent spirits from domestic space. The collected materials are carried to the riverbank, where the *Mibu* constructs a temporary altar using bamboo and sacred plants. The *Mibu* opens the altar ceremony with prayer to *Do:nyi-Po:lo*, then recites the *a:bang* chants that frame the cosmological context of the expulsion. Two symbolic figures made from *Thelypteris angustifolia* (wild fern) and *Imperata cylindrica* (sharp grass) are placed facing the rising sun as representations of the expelled forces. Animal sacrifice-fowls and pigs-follows, with heads and feathers mounted on altar poles. *Apong* is sprinkled over the altar and participants as a purifying and appeasing substance (Sharma & Pegu, 2011).

Sharma and Pegu (2011) identified thirty plant species belonging to twenty-three families in the *Dobur Ui* corpus. The plants serve dual functions without emic distinction between their ritual and pharmacological efficacy. *Acorus calamus* (sweet flag), placed at the four corners of the altar, is believed to repel malevolent spirits through its odor; it is also employed medicinally for bronchitis, rheumatism, and digestive complaints. *Asparagus racemosus* guards the ritual perimeter against spirit intrusion while serving as a tonic and fertility medicine. *Centella asiatica* (*manimuni*), consumed by participants on the day of the ceremony as a protective act against spirit aggression, is simultaneously a recognized treatment for liver complaints and dysentery (Sharma & Pegu, 2011). The *apong* itself, prepared from ten to fifteen plant species in contemporary practice (historically up to fifty), functions as the primary offering substance to all spirit categories-a medium of appeasement and communication whose preparation is governed by precise botanical knowledge (Sharma & Pegu, 2011).

The *Po:rag* Festival and *Mibu* Decline

The *Po:rag* is the post-harvest festival of the Mising and currently the most prominent occasion for *Mibu* public ritual performance (Pegu, 2026). It requires nine female pigs, nine *pi:ro* (*Phragmites karka*) plants, nine *kagori* plants, and the presence of a *Mibu*-without whom the ceremony is considered invalid (Pegu & Devi, 2025). The persistence of the *Po:rag* as an occasion of *Mibu* necessity reflects the general pattern of *Mibu* contraction: from an institution once present in every Mising village to a specialist retained primarily for the largest community events.

The decline of the *Mibu* institution is directly connected to ecological change. Deforestation of Mising river lands has displaced or destroyed the forest habitats of the *épom* spirit, and since new *Mibu* ordination requires *épom* contact, the destruction of forest habitat has functionally severed the reproductive channel of the institution (Pegu & Devi, 2025). This ecological dimension of shamanic decline has no direct parallel in the Chinese *wu* tradition, where urban and court contexts replaced natural settings early in the historical record, but it does illuminate something important about the Mising *Mibu*'s ecological embeddedness-a feature that distinguishes his cosmological orientation from the courtly and bureaucratic contexts of many Chinese *wu*.

Early Chinese Wu Traditions

The Wu in Historical Context

The *wu* (巫) appears in the earliest stratum of Chinese textual evidence. Oracle bone inscriptions from the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BCE) use the character *wu* in contexts that suggest ritual dance, spirit communication, and rain-making-activities that would remain associated with the *wu* through the subsequent Zhou period (Michael, 2015). The graphic form of the character—two persons facing each other in dance, or alternatively a person with outstretched arms holding ritual implements—reflects the performative, bodily character of *wu* activity. By the Zhou period, texts including the *Zhouli* (Rites of Zhou) record *wu* as members of the official religious bureaucracy, responsible for exorcism (*xiang*), rain-making, mourning rites, and healing (Michael, 2015).

The gender of the *wu* has been a significant issue in scholarly debate. Classical sources frequently distinguish between female *wu* (巫) and male *xi* (覡), suggesting a gender division of ritual labor, though the distinction is not consistently maintained across texts (Kohn, 2025). Dashu's (2011) study demonstrates that female *wu* were associated with ecstatic dance, spirit possession, and healing in the pre-Han period, and that their practices were particularly prominent in the cultures of the south-Chu and related states—where the *wu* tradition intersected most directly with the cosmological speculations that would feed into Daoism. The contrast with the Mising *Mibu*—exclusively male—is significant and is taken up in the Comparative Analysis below.

Techniques of the Wu

The core technology of the *wu* was the ability to alter consciousness in order to communicate with spirit entities. The mechanisms documented in early Chinese texts include ecstatic dance (sometimes to the point of exhaustion or trance), the wearing of animal costumes and feather regalia, the use of aromatic plants—particularly artemisia (mugwort) and orchid—as both ritual offerings and consciousness-altering substances, and the recitation of oral formulas and invocatory poetry (Kohn, 2025; Michael, 2015).

Winkelman's (2025) neurological analysis situates these techniques within a broader model of shamanic consciousness: the rhythmic stimulation of the motor system through dance and drumming produces synchronized neural activity across brain regions—particularly between the limbic system and the frontal cortex—that generates the subjective experience of spirit contact, enhanced pattern recognition, and altered temporal perception. This model does not reduce shamanic practice to neurochemistry; rather, it explains why similar techniques—rhythmic movement, aromatic substances, vocal performance—appear cross-culturally as inducing agents for the states in which spirit communication is experienced as possible.

The *wu*'s healing function was inseparable from spirit diagnosis. Illness in the early Chinese framework was attributed to the intrusion of malevolent spirits, the anger of neglected ancestors, or the depletion of vital force (*jing*, later theorized as *qi*). The *wu* diagnosed the spirit cause through divination and direct spirit consultation in altered states, then performed the corrective ritual—appeasement of the offended entity, expulsion of the intruding spirit, or restoration of the patient's depleted vitality (Michael, 2015). The formal parallel with *Mibu* diagnostic procedure is exact: both begin with spirit identification, both use altered states as the medium of diagnosis, and both produce a therapeutic intervention calibrated to the specific diagnosed cause.

The Wu and Early Daoism

The relationship between *wu* practice and the emergence of Daoism is one of the most debated questions in the study of Chinese religion. The maximalist position—associated with scholars such as Anna Seidel and Michel Strickmann—holds that Daoism incorporated *wu* practice wholesale, repackaging it in the philosophical language of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* (Seidel, 1990, as cited in Kohn, 2025). The minimalist position—associated with ter Haar and others in the revisionist school—argues that Daoism explicitly differentiated itself from *wu* practice, defining its sophisticated religious identity partly in contrast to what it characterized as *wu*-style superstition (ter Haar, 2014).

The recent scholarship tends toward a more nuanced intermediate position. Kohn (2025) argues that the Daoist internalization of spirit-flight—the replacement of ecstatic outward journey with inward

visualization and qi cultivation-represents a genuine transformation of shamanic technique rather than its simple rejection. The Zhengyi tradition's talisman-based healing, its spirit-diagnosis procedures, and its ritual sequence of appeasement and expulsion retain the functional grammar of *wu* practice even as they embed it in a new doctrinal framework of qi cosmology and celestial bureaucracy. Michael (2015) makes the related argument that the *Zhuangzi's* famous figures of the cook who follows the Dao and the butterfly who transcends ordinary consciousness are themselves literary transformations of *wu* experiential paradigms, now expressed in a philosophical register. This reading situates the Daoist philosophical tradition as a sophisticated commentary on, rather than a repudiation of, the shamanic substratum it inherited.

The *Chuci*-the "Songs of Chu" attributed partly to the poet Qu Yuan-constitutes the most direct surviving literary evidence of *wu* performance. The "Nine Songs" cycle involves spirit invocation through poetic address, descriptions of celestial journeys, and ritual communications between human performers and divine beings that are closely analogous to *wu* trance performance (Hawkes, 1985, as cited in Kohn, 2025). The imagery of ascent-the shaman-poet rising through the three cosmic tiers to reach the spirit world-recurs in both the *Chuci* corpus and in later Daoist inner alchemy, suggesting a persistent cosmological architecture that survived the philosophical and institutional transformations of the tradition.

Comparative Analysis

Spirit Mediation and Cosmological Architecture

The most structurally fundamental convergence between Mising *Mibu* practice and early Chinese *wu* tradition lies in their shared cosmological premises. Both traditions organise the spirit world into layered cosmic domains that the specialist must navigate in order to diagnose and treat illness. The Mising three-tier cosmos-*Taléng Among* (heaven), *Dong Among* (earth), and *Uyu Among* (underworld)-maps onto the vertical structure of early Chinese cosmology with sufficient precision to warrant scrutiny (Pegu & Devi, 2025). In both systems, benevolent forces inhabit the upper register; malevolent forces, including dangerous spirits of the dead, occupy lower or intermediate zones; and the specialist's expertise consists precisely in the ability to move between registers and negotiate with their respective inhabitants.

This vertical cosmological architecture is not, of course, unique to Mising and Chinese religion. It appears across Siberian, Central Asian, and circumpolar shamanic traditions and has been theorized by Eliade (1964) as a structural feature of shamanism as such. What is analytically interesting here is not the mere presence of the pattern but its specific elaboration in each tradition. In the Mising case, the three-tier cosmos is organized around the fundamental animistic premise that each level is populated by spirits (*Ui*) whose demands on the living are concrete, relational, and negotiable through appropriate ritual action. The *Mibu's* authority rests on direct spirit contact-on being recognized by the spirit world as a legitimate interlocutor-and his therapeutic power is therefore inherently personal and non-transferable in the same way as institutional rank.

In the early Chinese *wu* tradition, a comparable structure is present but inflected differently. The *wu's* ecstatic flight through the cosmic tiers-documented in the *Chuci* and in Shang bronze imagery-reflects the same navigational model: the specialist crosses cosmological boundaries in order to reach the spirits responsible for human welfare and negotiate with them (Kohn, 2025). The critical difference is that the Chinese cosmological model, even in its pre-bureaucratic form, tends toward a more hierarchical organization of spirit entities than the Mising system. Where the *Mibu* encounters spirits that are local, relational, and ecologically embedded, the *wu* increasingly encounters a spirit world organized by celestial rank-a tendency that becomes fully explicit in the bureaucratic Daoist model of the Zhengyi tradition but is already visible in Shang-period conceptions of *di* (the high deity) and the ancestral spirits arranged beneath him (Michael, 2015). This is not a trivial difference: it reflects a divergence in social organization, with the Mising living in relatively egalitarian, community-based

structures and early Chinese society developing pronounced hierarchical ordering. Cosmological architecture, in both cases, reflects social structure.

Ritual Technique and Altered States

Both the *Mibu* and the *wu* employ oral performance-chant, song, and ritual poetry-as the primary medium of spirit communication. For the *Mibu*, the *a:bang* is the technical instrument through which the spirit world is addressed, the diagnosis made, and the therapeutic act framed within cosmological authority (Doley & Doley, 2002). The *a:bang* is not improvised; it is a learned oral text whose preservation requires extensive training and whose performance demands both vocal and mnemonic expertise. The *Mibu* who performs the *a:bang* during *Dobur Ui* or *Po:rag* is simultaneously a performer, a priest, a physician, and a cosmological narrator-all functions integrated in a single ritual act.

The *wu*'s oral tradition-preserved most fully in the *Chuci*-displays a structurally analogous integration. The "Nine Songs" are at once invocatory poetry, cosmological narrative, spirit communication, and therapeutic performance (Kohn, 2025). The spirit invited in the "Nine Songs" cycles is addressed in terms that parallel the *a:bang*'s invocatory form: the performer positions himself or herself at the threshold between human and spirit worlds, names the spirit, describes its dwelling, and requests its presence or intervention. This formal resemblance-address to a named spirit, cosmological framing, request for intervention-is not coincidental. It reflects a cross-cultural logic of ritual speech: to name the spirit is to establish communicative contact; to frame the naming within cosmological narrative is to legitimize the contact through appeal to origin and order.

Where the traditions diverge is in the specific mechanisms of altered consciousness employed. Mising *a:bang* performance does not, in the available literature, involve the kind of drumming-induced trance that characterizes classic Siberian shamanism, nor does it appear to involve the ecstatic dance associated with female *wu* performance (Doley & Doley, 2002). The *Mibu*'s altered state is produced through the chant itself-through the prolonged vocal performance of the *a:bang* in a ritual context-and may be closer to what some scholars describe as "controlled trance" than to the full ecstatic flight of the Eliadian model. The early Chinese *wu*, by contrast, are consistently described in sources as performing vigorous ecstatic dances that sometimes continued until the performer collapsed (Dashu, 2011). This difference may reflect genuine divergence in technique, or it may reflect the limitations of the source material-the *a:bang* tradition is documented primarily through its textual content rather than through ethnographic observation of performance.

Plants and Material Substances

The dual-function use of plants as simultaneously ritual agents and pharmacological substances is one of the most compelling structural convergences between the two traditions. In Mising *Mibu* practice, this integration is documented in systematic detail by Sharma and Pegu (2011), who demonstrate that every plant used in *Dobur Ui* serves both a spirit-directed function (repulsion of malevolent spirits, invitation of benevolent ones, purification of space) and a recognized medicinal function (treatment of specific physical complaints). The integration is not incidental; it reflects a Mising ontology in which physical and spiritual wellbeing are not separable domains and in which a substance that acts on spirit forces thereby also acts on the body.

Early Chinese *wu* practice displays an analogous pattern. The aromatic plants most consistently associated with *wu* ceremony-artemisia (mugwort), *chang* (sweet flag, *Acorus calamus*), and orchid-served simultaneously as ritual offerings to spirits, as fumigation agents for purifying spaces of malevolent influence, and as recognized medicines in the emerging Chinese pharmacopoeia (Kohn, 2025). The appearance of *Acorus calamus* (sweet flag) in both traditions is striking and worth pausing on. In *Dobur Ui*, *Acorus calamus* is placed at altar corners specifically to repel evil spirits through its odor and is used medicinally for respiratory and digestive complaints (Sharma & Pegu, 2011). In early Chinese *wu* practice and in the *Chuci*, *chang* (sweet flag) appears as a plant of spiritual potency, carried or used in ritual fumigation (Kohn, 2025). The appearance of the same plant species in functionally analogous roles in two geographically distant and historically unconnected traditions is consistent with

the “dual-agent” hypothesis—that plants effective against offensive odors (malevolent spirits are consistently associated with foul smells in both traditions) are independently recruited across cultures for spirit-repulsion functions that happen to overlap with their pharmacological properties.

It would be premature to make too much of this specific botanical overlap without systematic ethnobotanical comparison. The point is structural rather than botanical: the logic of the dual agent-plant as medicine and spirit-repellent simultaneously—is a cross-cultural feature of animistic healing systems that the two traditions independently instantiate. This pattern challenges the persistent tendency in medical anthropology to treat ritual action as the symbolic packaging of otherwise effective herbal medicine. In both the Mising and early Chinese cases, practitioners do not experience the ritual and pharmacological dimensions of plant use as separable. The ritual act does not merely accompany the medicine; it constitutes part of its therapeutic action.

Social Function and Community Orientation

One of the most consistently noted features of Mising *Mibu* practice is its orientation toward community healing rather than individual treatment. The *Dobur Ui* is a village-wide ceremony; the *Po:rag* involves the entire Mising community; even the *Mibu*’s household healing rites are, in principle, a form of community service performed by a specialist whose authority is vested in him by the community’s spirit world rather than by individual talent (Sharma & Pegu, 2011; Pegu, 2026). The *Mibu* does not charge fees for healing; he is sustained by the community’s ritual dues (*ajenge*) collected during ceremonies. His healing work is inseparable from his community maintenance work.

Early Chinese *wu* present a more varied social profile. Court *wu*-documented in Zhou state records—were institutional functionaries performing state ceremonies, rain dances, and royal healing rituals (Michael, 2015). Village-level *wu* operated in contexts more analogous to the Mising *Mibu*, providing healing, divination, and community exorcism for local populations (Michael, 2015). The court *wu*’s embeddedness in state apparatus marks a significant divergence from the Mising model: the *Mibu* operates entirely within community structures and has no institutional relationship with state authority, while the court *wu*’s authority was in part derived from royal patronage and state recognition. This divergence reflects the structural difference between a relatively small, community-based tribal society and an early state with centralized ritual administration.

However, when comparison is restricted to the village-level *wu*-a figure less prominent in the literary record but more directly analogous to the *Mibu*-the social function convergence becomes closer. Both serve their communities as the primary specialist for spirit-caused disorder, both operate through personal relationships with specific spirit entities, and both derive their authority from a combination of supernatural recognition and practical competence. The key structural point holds: in both traditions, the specialist’s healing function is inseparable from his or her community maintenance function. To heal an individual is to restore community order; to restore community order is, by extension, to heal the individual.

Cosmological Difference: Ecological vs. Celestial Orientation

The most significant systematic divergence between the two traditions lies in the fundamental orientation of their cosmological frameworks. Mising cosmology is ecologically grounded: the spirits that govern human welfare are embedded in specific natural features—forests, rivers, mountains, the sky—and their power is contingent on the health of those natural systems. The decline of the *Mibu* institution is directly connected to the decline of the forest ecosystems that sustain the *épom* spirit (Pegu & Devi, 2025). Healing in the Mising system is therefore ultimately ecological: to heal the sick is to restore the human community’s proper relationship with the natural forces in which it is embedded.

Early Chinese *wu* cosmology, even in its pre-Daoist form, trends toward a more celestial and cosmological orientation. The spirits that early Chinese *wu* address are not primarily embedded in local ecosystems but in the heavenly bodies, the cardinal directions, and the ancestral lineages of the social order. The early Chinese concept of cosmic order—*tian* (heaven), *de* (virtue), and later *qi* (vital force)—is

organized around principles of hierarchical correspondence rather than ecological embeddedness. This is not to say that early Chinese religion lacked ecological sensibility; the rain-making and agricultural ceremonies associated with the *wu* demonstrate a clear concern with natural-human relationships. But the ontological framework within which these concerns are articulated is fundamentally different from the Mising animist framework of locally embedded spirits.

This difference has direct implications for the trajectory of each tradition. The ecological orientation of Mising cosmology makes the *Mibu* institution directly vulnerable to environmental degradation-the destruction of the forest is, in an ontologically literal sense, the destruction of the spirit world that sustains the *Mibu*. The celestial orientation of early Chinese *wu* cosmology made the *wu* tradition relatively adaptable to institutional change: as the *wu*'s ecstatic techniques were internalized and rationalized within Daoist practice, the underlying cosmological structure was preserved and elaborated rather than abandoned.

Discussion: Implications for Daoist Studies

The comparative analysis undertaken in this article has a specific contribution to make to Daoist studies, distinct from its general contribution to comparative religion. The central claim is this: the Mising *Mibu* provides a living analogue for the kind of shamanic tradition that contributed to the shamanic substratum of early Daoism, and the comparison helps clarify what that substratum actually consisted of-what specific functional features, cosmological assumptions, and therapeutic logics it provided-in a way that purely textual analysis of the early Chinese record cannot.

The first implication concerns the nature of spirit mediation in early Daoism. The debate over whether the *wu* should be described as shamans has sometimes generated more heat than light because it has centered on definitional questions-does the *wu* fit the Eliadian archetype?-rather than on substantive questions about function and cosmology. The Mising case suggests a more productive frame. The *Mibu* is not a shaman in the Eliadian sense-his technique is not primarily ecstatic flight but oral-performative spirit engagement through *a:bang* chant. Yet he clearly practices spirit mediation in the functional sense: he communicates with spirit entities, diagnoses spirit-caused disorder, and restores community relationships with the spirit world through ritual action. If we describe the *Mibu* as a "spirit mediator" rather than a "shaman" in the strict Eliadian sense, and then apply this more capacious description to the *wu*, several features of the *wu*'s documented activity become clearer. The *wu*'s healing function was less about ecstatic soul-retrieval (the Eliadian paradigm) and more about relational repair-restoring the specific relationships between the living, their ancestors, and the spirit world that had been disrupted to produce illness. This is precisely what Michael (2015) argues, and the Mising evidence independently supports it.

The second implication concerns the role of plants in Daoist healing. The Zhengyi tradition's use of "blessed medicine" (*fu yao*)-herbal preparations consecrated through ritual acts-has been treated in the secondary literature primarily as a feature of popular religion or folk medicine rather than as a doctrinally significant healing practice. The Mising case suggests that this treatment may underestimate the ontological depth of the practice. In the Mising system, the dual-function plant is not a folk pharmacological remedy to which ritual gestures have been added as cultural embellishment. It is a substance that operates simultaneously in the material and spiritual registers because those registers are not ontologically distinct. If the Daoist tradition inherited a comparable dual-function logic from the *wu* tradition-as the appearance of *Acorus calamus* and artemisia in both *wu* ceremony and classical Chinese medicine would suggest-then the "blessed medicine" of Zhengyi healing represents not the folk contamination of a doctrinally pure pharmacology but the continuation of a coherent pre-Daoist therapeutic ontology.

The third implication concerns the ecological dimensions of Daoist practice. The Mising *Mibu*'s cosmological embeddedness in local ecosystems-and the direct consequences of ecological degradation for the institution's survival-raises questions about the early Daoist tradition's own ecological

commitments. The *wu*'s rain-making ceremonies, agricultural protective rites, and mountain spirit mediation all presuppose an immediate relationship between human communities and natural forces. As Daoism developed its philosophical and institutional apparatus, this ecological orientation was partly sublimated into cosmological principle-the *Laozi*'s naturalism, the *Zhuangzi*'s celebration of organic process-but the underlying concern with human-nature relationship was never abandoned. The Mising case suggests that this concern may have deeper roots in the shamanic substrate of Chinese religion than has been fully acknowledged, and that contemporary Daoist ecology movements have more historical warrant than they are sometimes credited with.

Methodological Reflection

Two methodological cautions are necessary before conclusions can be drawn with confidence. First, the comparison presented here rests on an asymmetric evidentiary base. The Mising material is drawn from contemporary ethnography and ethnobotany, supplemented by oral tradition; the Chinese *wu* material is drawn primarily from literary and historical texts produced by literate elites who were not themselves *wu* practitioners and who often had ideological reasons to distance themselves from *wu* activity. The distortions introduced by this asymmetry cannot be fully eliminated, only acknowledged and compensated for by reading the Chinese evidence with appropriate skepticism and by treating the Mising material as a check on the textual record rather than a key to decoding it.

Second, the temporal gap between the early Chinese *wu* tradition (Shang through early Han) and the contemporary Mising *Mibu* is enormous-some three thousand years, across which both traditions have changed in ways that cannot be fully reconstructed. Comparing a living tradition with a historical one always carries the risk of using the living tradition to fill gaps in the historical record in ways that are methodologically unjustified. The present article has attempted to avoid this error by keeping the two analyses formally separate and using the comparison only to generate hypotheses about each tradition, not to supply missing data about either.

Conclusion

This article has examined phenomenological and functional parallels between Mising *Mibu* shamanism and early Chinese *wu* tradition across five dimensions: cosmological architecture, spirit mediation technique, the dual-function use of plants, oral performative tradition, and social function. The comparison reveals genuine structural convergences that cannot be accounted for by historical contact or diffusion and must instead be attributed to independent instantiation of shared cross-cultural patterns in the organization of spirit-mediation practice.

The parallels are real, but so are the differences. The Mising *Mibu* operates within an ecologically grounded, community-oriented, egalitarian ritual system whose survival is directly contingent on the health of the natural environment. The early Chinese *wu* operated across a range of social contexts-from village healer to court functionary-within a cosmological framework that trended toward celestial hierarchy rather than ecological embeddedness. These differences are not incidental; they reflect deep structural divergences in the social organizations and environmental contexts of the two traditions.

For Daoist studies, the comparison suggests three productive directions. First, the functional category of "spirit mediator"-broader and more precise than "shaman" in the Eliadian sense-provides a more useful analytical tool for describing the *wu*'s role in early Chinese religion and its relationship to Daoist healing practice. Second, the dual-function plant logic documented in both traditions suggests that Daoist healing's integration of ritual and pharmacological action has deeper roots in the pre-Daoist shamanic substratum than is commonly acknowledged. Third, the ecological vulnerability of the Mising *Mibu* institution-whose decline is directly connected to environmental degradation-raises productive questions about the ecological commitments embedded in the early Chinese shamanic tradition that fed into Daoism, and about what resources that tradition may offer for thinking about the human-nature relationship today.

The *Mibu* is disappearing. Active practitioners now perform primarily during *Po:rag*, and the ecological conditions for new ordinations are contracting with the forests (Pegu & Devi, 2025). The urgency this generates for documentation and preservation is obvious. Less obvious, but no less important, is the analytical resource the *Mibu* tradition represents for scholars working in adjacent fields. To read the early Chinese *wu* through the Mising lens-and vice versa-is not to collapse the distance between them but to use that distance productively, as a measure of what is structurally shared and what is historically particular in the human practice of spirit mediation

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Dashu, M. (2011). Wu: Female shamans of ancient China. Suppressed Histories Archives. Retrieved from <https://www.suppressedhistories.net>
- Doley, G. K., & Doley, A. K. (2002). Glimpses of Mibu and Mibu A:bang. National Printers.
- Doley, G. K. (2022). Mising: Myths, legends and folklores. Rahul Offset Printers.
- Doniger, W. (1998). The implied spider: Politics and theology in myth. Columbia University Press.
- Eliade, M. (1964). Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy (W. R. Trask, Trans.). Princeton University Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1937). Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande. Clarendon Press.
- Harner, M. (1972). The Jívaro: People of the sacred waterfalls. Doubleday.
- Kohn, L. (2025). The Chinese wu in historical perspective. In L. Kohn (Ed.), *The legacy of Chinese shamanism: The wu and their successors* (pp. 1–34). Purple Cloud Institute Press.
- Kuli, J. J. (2014). Mising folklore. Kaustaubh Prakashan.
- Michael, T. (2015). Shamanism theory and the early Chinese wu. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 83(3), 649–696. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfv034>
- Padun, N. (2021). Abotani upakyan. Kaustov Prakashan..
- Padun, N. (2022). Mising ni:tom mising lokogeet Mibu-Miri A:bang. [Publisher details to be verified].
- Pegu, D., & Devi, B. (2025). Age old traditional beliefs of the Mising and its challenges. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 7(3), 1–9.
- Pegu, I. (2026). Continuity and change in Mishing religious beliefs. *TIJER – International Research Journal*, 13(1), a151–a154.
- Schipper, K., & Verellen, F. (Eds.). (2004). *The Taoist canon: A historical companion to the Daozang*. University of Chicago Press.
- Sharma, U. K., & Pegu, S. (2011). Ethnobotany of religious and supernatural beliefs of the Mising tribes of Assam with special reference to the ‘Dobur Ui.’ *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, 7, Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1746-4269-7-16>
- Smith, J. Z. (1990). *Drudgery divine: On the comparison of early Christianities and the religions of late antiquity*. University of Chicago Press.
- ter Haar, B. (2014). Shamanism in Chinese culture. Retrieved from <https://bjterhaa.home.xs4all.nl/shamanismtext.htm>
- Winkelman, M. (2025). Neurological models and the Chinese wu. In L. Kohn (Ed.), *The legacy of Chinese shamanism: The wu and their successors* (pp. 57–89). Purple Cloud Institute Press.
- Winkelman, M. (2010). *Shamanism: A biopsychosocial paradigm of consciousness and healing* (2nd ed.). Praeger.
- Xiong, Z. (2020). *Chinese exorcistic traditions: A historical and ethnographic study*. Brill. (Verify publication details before submission)
- Xiuling, L. (2017). Daoist ritual manuals in Vietnam: Self-cultivation, cosmic governance, and healing. *Journal of Daoist Studies*, 10, 45–72.

Mibu Shamanism and the Early Chinese Wu: Cross-
Cultural Parallels in Ritual Expertise and Spirit
Mediation

Zhang, G. (2022). Ghosts in early Daoist culture. In P. Espeset (Ed.), *Ghosts and religious life in early China* (pp. 120–145). Cambridge University Press.

Zhang, J. (2018). Shamanism in Chinese medicine: The association with the supernatural. *Journal of the American Society of Acupuncturists*. Retrieved from Academia.edu