

Chuonnasuan (Meng Jin Fu) **The Last Shaman of the Oroqen of Northeast China***

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In the 17th Century a Dutch explorer in Siberia witnessed something terrifying that only a handful of Europeans had ever seen before. During a visit to an encampment of nomadic tribal people whom the Russians generally referred to as the *Tungusy*, Nicholas Witsen reported being horrified by the satanic nocturnal dancing, drumming, leaping and screaming of a “Priest of the Devil” adorned in a furry costume that made him seem half-human, half-animal. This devil-priest whom Witsen said the Tungus people called a *Schaman* was performing a healing ritual for a sick member of the tribe. Witsen is given credit today for introducing the word “shaman” into Western culture, though earlier Russian explorers had already encountered and used the Russified version of the term (Znamenski 2003). In his 1692 book, *Noord en Oost Tartaryen*, Witsen also included an illustration of the Tungus Priest of the Devil as a monstrous amalgam of man and beast in an image of evil familiar to 17th-century Europeans: the lycanthrope, or werewolf.¹

This famous image was the very first representation of a Siberian shaman to appear in any European publication, and it has haunted the imagination of the world for three centuries. Indeed, the word “shaman” is itself derived from the Tungus *saman/xaman*, though the origin of this word and its indigenous meanings among the Tungus are still less than clear (Janhunen 1986). But after Witsen’s book appeared, and especially after its second edition in 1785, the feared Siberian people known as the Tungus and their lycanthropic devil-priests became a legend, a source of endless speculation by natural philosophers, explorers, and much later, ethnologists (Hutton 2001). Siberian shamans and in particular those of the Tungus peoples have had an almost magical reputation for being the most authentic and most powerful of all shamans studied around the world.

* This paper is the first publication of data collected among the Tungus (Manchu, Evenki and Oroqen) in Northeast China during three months in the summer of 1994. We deferred publication until confirmation of the deaths of all the shamans we interviewed and photographed. We did not want to make their private lives public, and hence expose them to exploitation. While in the PRC we learned that the Chinese government was pouring considerable money into ersatz “Ethnic Villages for tourists that replicated the architecture, costumes and even the shamanism of China’s 55 ethnic minorities. We became especially concerned when we learned of an elderly Mongol shaman from the Qiqihar region who was forced to relocate to Beijing to perform in one of these tourist traps. Our research was funded by a Wenner-Gren Foundation grant (Grant No. 5676), and we wish to thank that institution for its generosity. Richard Noll first presented our field data on the last Oroqen shaman at the Institute for Religion at Sogang University in Seoul, Korea, in May 2004. He wishes to thank Professors Kim Chae Young and Kim Seong-nae for this stimulating opportunity.

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¹ An excellent reproduction of this 1692 illustration can be found in several volumes, especially in Hoppal (1994: 43). Flaherty (1992: 24) provides an uncropped reproduction of the same image and allows for a view of the conical tents of the Tungus that so closely resemble the teepees of the North American Plains Indians.

In July 1994, almost exactly three hundred years after Nicholas Witsen provided the world with the first image of a power Siberian Tungus shaman, the following scene took place in a land not far from Witsen's "Tartary":

In a small clearing in a Manchurian forest very near the Huma River, close to the border between Russian Siberia and the People Republic of China, a small but muscular man in his late 60s has just been helped into a heavy buckskin ceremonial gown by his "second-spirit," or assistant. Swirling, brightly-colored flower-like patterns are sewn into the heavy animal hide garment. As he struggles into his gown, the long yellow and blue ribbons hanging from his waist sweep across the earth like the drooping wings and tail feathers of a giant eagle perched at the top of the world just before launching into flight. Circular brass mirrors hang from the front and the back upper torso of the costume, adding weight and sounding a continual cymbal-like cacophony. It is only after his second spirit, his wife, assists him with the fringed headdress of ribbon-covered brass antler horns, completing his sacred transformation, that the dance begins.

It is hot, unusually so for the southern Siberian borderlands. The man's high-cheek-boned face is glowing cherry-red as he wildly swoops to and fro, beating his flat-head drum and singing a spirit song, bending low then soaring upwards, then finally stiffening, his head cocked back and his fringed face angled to release the spirits from his body and send them back to the upper world. At that crisis point his second spirit suddenly springs into action, deftly positioning herself behind him and catching him as he falls backward. As we learn from him later, the singing of the spirit song and the rhythmic drumming and dancing summoned the spirits into his body and propelled him directly into a trance, though he did not intend to fall so deep during an artificially arranged demonstration.

An uncanny resemblance to North American Plains Indians makes us forget we are in the People's Republic of China, the last great communist empire, the land of Mao Zhuxi, Chairman Mao. From just beyond the trees where we all stand, enraptured by the ritual we are witnessing, comes the sound of the frequent passing of People's Liberation Army jeeps carrying soldiers with automatic weapons. We know the significance of what we are recording and do not allow ourselves as much as a breath to be taken between photographs. For here, before our eyes, was a gentle man whom we knew was the very last of his kind, a master of spirits who would die without leaving behind colleagues or apprentices of his own. We knew this man was probably the last authentic Siberian Tungus shaman in China and we were documenting for posterity one of the final performances of the most ancient of human rituals. It felt as if Nicholas Witsen was reaching out to us from across the centuries, and in a strange way we felt a kinship with him, as if we were the endpoints marking an era in magical time and in magical space. Nicholas Witsen's 1692 illustration of a Tungus shaman unleashed a stream of Western cultural fantasies that we knew our photographs would close forever.

This man was known to outsiders by his Han Chinese name, Meng Jin Fu, but to his Oroqen relatives and neighbors his was known as Chuonnasuan, an onomatopoeic name given to him by his mother when he was an infant because he cried like a bird that made that sound. At the height of his powers he mastered more than 90 spirits (*bukan*). He was, truly, the last shaman of his tribe.

Beginnings

In October 1993, one of us (Richard Noll) received formal approval for a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation to travel to the People's Republic of China to locate, interview and document the cognitive styles of Tungus shamans in Xinjiang and Manchuria.² Following the hypotheses generated in a

² The Tungus-speaking people in China are mainly found in the country's northeastern region, which used to be called Manchuria. They are further divided into five officially recognized ethnic groups. According to the 1990 census these groups had the following populations: the Evenki or Ewenki (26,315), Hezhen (4,245), Manchu (9,821,180), Oroqen (6,965) and Sibe or Xibe (172,847). The Sibe also live in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in China's far west

theoretical article on shamanism published in *Current Anthropology* (Noll 1985), we sought to examine the use of mental imagery, particularly visual, in healing and divination as well as collect data on the mnemonic strategies that shamans used in their role as transmitters of culturally vital symbols and narratives. Shi Kun, then a doctoral student in anthropology at The Ohio State University in Columbus, had conducted fieldwork among the Manchu and other ethnic minorities in the PRC and had published several scholarly papers on shamanism (Shi 1993). Already a seasoned anthropologist, he agreed to participate as a facilitator and translator. What the Wenner-Gren Foundation did not know was that our quest was based only on rumors of Tungus shamans who may still be alive in Xinjiang (among the Sibe or Xibe people) and along the Russian-Chinese border (among the Evenki and Oroqen). When we arrived in Beijing in June 1994 we learned that we could not travel to the western province of Xinjiang due to civil unrest. Our hopes were dashed. We did not know for sure if we would locate even a single living shaman during the next three months.

We had received permission from the Foreign Affairs Office of the PRC³ in early 1994 to conduct research on the religion of the ethnic Tungus groups. This was an unprecedented gesture. As we were told time and again as we made our way from Beijing to Changchun to Harbin, Jagdaqi, Tahe, and finally, not far from Tahe, the dusty People's Liberation Army garrison village of Shibazhan in northern Heilongjiang province where we found Chuonnasuan, no other outsiders had been allowed unrestricted and unmonitored access to ethnic minorities to specifically study their religious beliefs and practices. International political forces had fortunately cleared our path: the summer of 1994 was marked by a singular warming of relations between the United States and the PRC, a honeymoon that did not last long and which has not returned. We were told by several local Communist Party administrators along our journey that although foreign linguists (such as Juha Janhunen from Finland, whom we were delighted to meet in Changchun, and, later, collaborators Lindsay Whaley of Dartmouth College and Fengxiang Li of the California State University at Chico, who began their fieldwork among the Oroqen in 1995) had been allowed to conduct research on the Tungus languages, we were the first foreigners specifically allowed in Heilongjiang province (northern Manchuria) and Inner Mongolia since the creation of the People's Republic in 1949 for the purposes of studying "superstitions" such as shamanism. And we knew from the existing ethnographic literature in English, German, French, and Chinese that only Ethel J. Lindgren and S.I. Shirokogoroff had documented Tungus shamanism in these regions, and their most recent publications dated only to the mid-1930s.⁴ The Japanese invasion of Manchuria, World War II, and the communist take-over of China in 1949 had effectively ended the scholarly study of shamanism by foreign researchers in Northeast China until we arrived in the summer of 1994.

Some of the folklorists we met knew the work of Ethel John Lindgren, a Swedish-American who conducted fieldwork in Mongolia in the 1920s and northwest Manchuria in 1931-1932, later becoming a lecturer at Cambridge University. Her primary focus of research was on the Evenki (Ewenki) Tungus reindeer-herders living north of Hailar in the Greater Khingan range (Lindgren 1930; 1935a; 1935b).⁵ We learned later that German anthropologists F. George Heyne and Ingo Nentwig had conducted fieldwork in the Reindeer-Evenki community of Aoruguya in the early 1990s, but in 1994 we were unaware of their efforts (Heyne 1999a; 1999b; 2003).

Of paramount importance for our research were the works of S.I. Shirokogoroff, particularly his magnum opus, *The Psychomental Complex of the Tungus* (Shirokogoroff 1935). Although most of

and, when we proposed our fieldwork in 1993, were said to still have several practicing shamans within each clan. The Sibe of Manchuria do not.

³ The permission was made possible by Shi Kun's association with the Jilin Nationalities Research Institute.

⁴ Neither of us reads Russian, but we became aware to the following volume which should be mentioned here for its relevance to the Evenki and Oroqen peoples that we visited during our fieldwork: Mazin, Anatolij Ivanovic. *Byl i khoziaistvo evenkov-orcchonov* [Life and Economy of the Evenki-Oroqens from the End of the 19th to the Beginning of the Twentieth Centuries]. Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1992 (154 pages).

⁵ The last two shamans of the Reindeer-Evenki were female, and as of 1998 both are deceased. See Heyne (2003).

his fieldwork was conducted among the Tungus north of the Amur River, from 1915 to 1917 Shirokogoroff and his wife, Elizabeth, collected data in the regions of northwest Manchuria and Inner Mongolia that we explored almost eighty years later. We were especially pleased to discover that much of the material on shamanism we collected among the Oroqen and Evenki corroborated the masterful observations of Shirokogoroff.

With the denial of our proposal to travel to Xinjiang in northwest China to locate Sibe or Xibe shamans that were rumored to exist we instead decided to try our luck in northwestern Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. Although we again heard rumors of the existence of some of the old Tungus “wild shamans” in the Heilongjiang/Amur river region, we had no firm facts to guide us. From the Beijing central train station we made our way north to try our luck among one of the smallest officially recognized ethnic minorities in China, the Oroqen.

The Oroqen

The Oroqen, also called Orocen or Orochon (or Elunchun in Chinese) traditionally have lived south of the Heilongjiang (Amur) River in the forests and on the rivers of the Lesser and Greater Khingan (Xing’an) and Ilkhur (Yiehuli) Mountains of northern Manchuria. In the past the Oroqen have been known by names associated with their geographical localities, such as the Kumarchen (or Manegir) of the Kumara (Huma River) basin on the Upper Amur, the Birachen (or Birar) of the Xun River and Zhan River basins on the Middle Amur, the Naunchen, Ganchen, and Numinchen. Collectively they have been called the Khingan Tungus or Mergen Tungus. Although the official Chinese system of ethnic taxonomy distinguishes between the Oroqen and Evenki nationalities, ethnically and linguistically the Oroqen are close to the Evenki — so much so that ethnolinguist Juha Janhunen argues that, “The subethnic difference is not big, and by any objective criteria there would be no reason to recognize the Orochen of China as an ethnic group separate from the Ewenki” (Janhunen 1996: 69).

The Oroqen in China are horse-keepers and have no history of reindeer-herding, unlike their Oroqen relatives north of the Amur River in Russian Siberia. Formerly nomadic hunters and gatherers, since the early 1950s they were forced to settle in log cabins and to learn to grow their own food. Many still hunt and are given special permission to maintain firearms, a rare privilege in the PRC. Today the Oroqen live in ten main localities within the province of Heilongjiang and Inner Mongolia. These are: (1) Gankui; (2) Guli; (3) Nuomin; (4) Tuozhamin in the Oroqen Autonomous Banner of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region; (5) Shibazhan in Tahe County; (6) Baiyinna in Huma County; (7) Xinsheng in Heihe City; (8) Xin’e; (9) Xinxing in Xunke County; and (10) Shengli in Jiayin County.

The Oroqen do not have a written language. Some Oroqen could speak and write Manchu because of the historical influence of the Manchu, the most powerful Tungus group. Today, most Oroqens speak their native language and Mandarin Chinese. Traditionally, Oroqen society was comprised of patrilinear *mokun* (clan) organizations. Each *mokun* consisted of several *wulileng* (large families) units. Although a *wulileng* usually had a number of nuclear families, each living in a tepee, the property was communally owned by the *wulileng*. According to legend, seven clans of the Oroqen migrated south of the Heilongjiang (Amur) River. Demonstrating the extent of the assimilation of the small Oroqen population to the dominant Han Chinese culture, Chinese surnames identify the different clans. For example, MENG identifies the Manyagir clan, GUAN the Guragir clan, WU the Uqatkan clan, and so on. Exogamous marriage is the norm, and wind burial in trees is practiced.

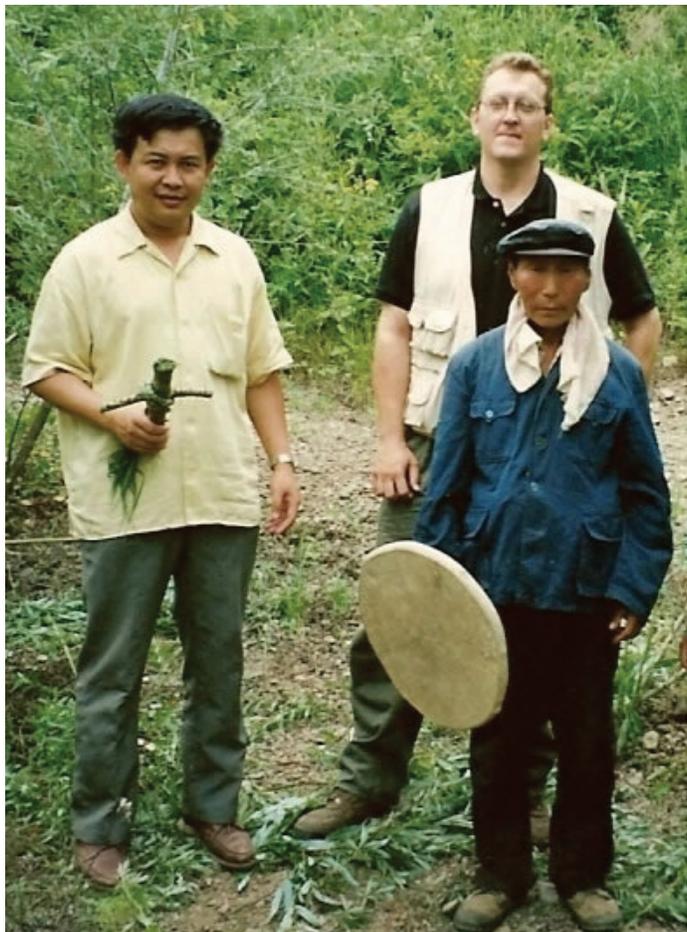
Oroqen Shamanism

Although we knew that the Oroqen were mentioned in two classic volumes on shamanism (Eliade 1964; Shirokogoroff 1935), no literature specific to Oroqen shamans or shamanism existed in any

Western language at the time of our fieldwork in 1994. However, Ma and Cui (1990) indicated there were some Chinese publications relating to Oroqen shamanism before 1994. Indeed, if we relied solely on the literature, there would have been very little reason to believe that Oroqen shamans still existed. In the only fieldwork report on the Oroqen available at the time, that of the first joint Sino-Finnish ethnographical expedition of the Oroqen of Heilongjiang province in August 1988 which focused on the village of Xinsheng in Heihe, the researchers reported that “no active or even formerly active shamans are reported to have lived in the village recently” (Janhunen, Hou and Xu 1989: 17). When we encountered Juha Janhunen in Changchun in June 1994 he also personally testified to the fact that he had not come across any active shamans in his nine fieldwork excursions to Manchuria. Later (1997 to 2000) fieldwork expeditions by linguists Lindsay Whaley and Fengxiang Li among the Oroqen led to the subsequent conclusion that, “It seems the shamans are all dead, many of them reportedly killed during the persecutions of Mao’s Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)” (Whaley 2001: 1).

We proved to be the first ethnographers from outside of China to locate and extensively document the life of the last living Oroqen shaman in the village of Shibazhan in July 1994. We were fortunate to have made the acquaintance of a local amateur folklorist, Guan Xiaoyun, who introduced us to Meng Jin Fu and to a woman who was in training to be a shaman prior to 1952, Guan Kouni, but who never performed a healing and remained at the level of a “second-spirit” or *jardalanin*. Guan Xiaoyun opened her home and her heart to us, and her cooperation was invaluable. Following our visit to Shibazhan, Guan Xiaoyun published a book on Oroqen shamanism (Guan and Wang 1998) which included 9 photographs (numbers 59 to 67) of the last shaman taken at the very same time as we were recording him with video and still photography. Biographical material from our interviews with Meng Jin Fu at which Guan Xiaoyun was present as our Oroqen to Chinese translator also is used in that book. In the spring of 1997 Daniel Kister of Sogang University in Seoul, Korea, traveled to Shibazhan and interviewed Meng Jin Fu (Kister 1999), but no mention is made of our prior fieldwork, which he simply may not have been told about. Kister found the shaman to be “tender-hearted, practical, and endowed with a good sense of humor” (Kister 1999: 88) as did we. This is a very apt characterization of this remarkable man.

We were not the first to photograph Meng Jin Fu in his shaman costume. One of the first things he told us was that he had been filmed by television crews from Japan and China on four prior occasions, and on two of them he also unwillingly fell into a trance while demonstrating the basic choreography of his ritual behavior as he remembered it from his youth. He and others told us that the occasional folklorist would visit him and ask him to remember folk tales or spirit songs, but no one had ever inquired about his initiatory sicknesses or his training and practice as a shaman. “No one has asked me these question in 40 years!” he told us, the emotion in his voice revealing his wonderment and gratitude.



Kun Shi, Richard Noll, and Shaman Meng Jin Fu.

Introductions

It wasn't until the second day after our arrival in the dusty village of Shibazhan that we met Chuonnasuan.⁶ He stood in the middle of an intersection of two dirt roads, a look of amusement on his face. Wearing a blue cotton Mao jacket and matching cap, he looked more like a party cadre than a shaman. After a brief introduction he led us down the road to his orange-brick home. His mother and brother were in the front yard awaiting his return. All three had been busy making birch-bark canoes. There had been an order for 100 such canoes to be made, which would then be shipped to various "Ethnic Villages" where tourists could see reconstructions of the homes and daily artifacts of China's 55 ethnic minorities. They were to be paid 1500 *yuan* per boat, so many in this largest of the 10 Oroqen communities were feverishly at work on the project.⁷

We sat on the ground near a finished canoe and regarded each other with great curiosity. When Richard Noll took off his straw hat, the shaman also quickly removed his cap.

"You've come a long way to be here," he said to Richard Noll. "You're about 30, aren't you?"

Richard told Chuonnasuan he was 34.

"You have had much progress in your life for someone so young," the shaman replied. He then told us he needed to continue to make the canoes, but promised to come to our room in the local guesthouse that evening to talk. That night would be the first of several long evenings during which Chuonnasuan told us the story of his life.

The Life, Initiatory Illnesses and Training of the Last Oroqen Shaman

"It is not that anyone can become a shaman if one wants. It is the intention of the spirits that the person becomes a shaman." Chuonnasuan, July 1994

Chuonnasuan was born in 1927 near the Huma River among the Kumarchen Oroqen. His *mokun* or clan was the Manyagir. As is often the case in Siberian shamanism, Oroqen shamanism is based on hereditary transmission. Chuonnasuan's grandfather and his paternal uncle, the older brother of his father, Minchisuan, were both powerful shamans. We were told that this uncle was so powerful that he cured two cases of TB and that "he could use a spirit to kill a pig." Minchisuan, who died circa 1947, was stricken by sudden death after performing a healing ritual. Chuonnasuan attributed it to the fact that his uncle had conducted the ritual alone, without a *jardalanin* or "second spirit" to assist.

When he was a little boy Chuonnasuan used to attend the community healing rituals of shamans and mimic the activities of the second spirit, sometimes in a manner that would make others laugh. But because he was able to perform the role of a second spirit so convincingly, he was told he might one day be selected by the spirits to become a master shaman. It would take three classic "initiatory illnesses" and three healings by master shamans before Chuonnasuan would join their ranks.

The First Illness. At the age of 16 Chuonnasuan "became sick." According to Guan and Wang (1998: 52), Chuonnasuan lost a younger brother and sister in 1943. That traumatic experience made

⁶ Hereafter we will refer to Meng Jin Fu by his given Oroqen name, Chuonnasuan.

⁷ We were told that Shibazhan had a population of 528 in July 1994. This population may be for the Oroqen village Chuonnasuan belonged to, or the total Oroqen population in Shibazhan. Shibazhan is the name for the Oroqen township, with several villages (not including the government forestry company and a military unit nearby). According to Guan and Wang (1998: 24), Shibazhan Oroqen township had 1,357 households with a total population of 4,458, including 546 Oroqen, 194 Manchu, 21 Mongol, 17 Daur, 13 Korean, 6 Evenki, 6 Hui Muslim, 2 Sibe, and 1 Russian. The majority are Han Chinese. The name of the township meant "the 18 then campment" of the last Chinese empress who was traveling north from Beijing.

him wander around in the forest and often in seclusion and sometimes in trance state. His mother first asked a local shaman to conduct a soul retrieval for him, but the condition got worse. His mother was afraid he might die, so she went with him to Baiyinna in Huma County to ask for the help of Wuliyen, a powerful female Oroqen shaman. At that time their family was in the process of moving down from the mountains into the Huma River area and they were “very poor.” For a major healing ritual they knew that had to provide a horse, and they couldn’t afford it. But Wuliyen agreed to attempt to heal the boy anyway because she said Chuonnasuan was “selected” and “had to become a shaman.”

The ritual took place on the banks of the Huma River from dusk until dawn over a period



Shaman Meng Jin Fu (left) and his wife.

of three nights. Thirty to forty persons sat in a big yurt, men on one side and women on the other.

Offerings of moose, wild duck, goose, fish and antelope were prepared for the spirits. As the shaman Wuliyen danced and beat her drum and sang spirit songs, over the course of three days Chuonnasuan was introduced to over 50 spirits. One by one, as the shaman sang a spirit song specific to only one spirit, the spirits came to know Chuonnasuan and taught him to dance. This was the first step to becoming a shaman.

“Wuliyen asked the spirits to come teach me. She invited the spirits and made me possessed by the spirits, and they made me follow her in the dance. I couldn’t do anything else but follow her in dancing. I couldn’t speak or hear anything. I followed Wuliyen and the others joined the dancing.” When we asked him if he had any physical sensations when the spirits “descended” into his body, Chuonnasuan replied, “Not a great sensation from my heart, but a feeling like the earth was a soft quilt, like walking on a very soft mattress. I couldn’t hear or understand what I was singing or chanting. Others would repeat the songs or the chants back to me. I could hear her as she sang the names of the spirits, and at once I could hear them as they came into me.”

Since our intention was to examine the role of mental imagery in the subjective experiences of the shaman, we were intrigued by the emphasis on auditory imagery, particularly the hearing of spirit songs that would signal the arrival of a particular spirit. We asked him if during this ritual experience or later if he ever had visions while dancing during rituals. “For three nights I was learning to dance, and Wuliyen introduced spirits into me. But visions, or experiences I would have of going out of this world, I would have during healing.” Contrary to our expectations, time and again during our interviews with the shaman we noticed the primacy placed on auditory mental imagery rather than visual mental imagery. Perhaps this pointed to a particular cognitive style that may differ from other shamans, or it may point to differing cultural demands leading to different modules of information processing in select individual shamans within those cultures. For him, enhanced visual mental imagery — visions came years later in his training.

“My becoming a shaman is due to the power of the spirits of the universe. I was taught by those spirits, and taught by them to learn other spirits, and in healing I relied on spirits for their power. With Wuliyen, the spirits did not teach me how to heal, but they taught me how to dance. Through dancing, all the spirits descended into me.”

Chuonnasuan told us that spirits were invited into a person’s body usually only during healing rituals, and that a shaman would not do this casually. We asked him if it was possible to introduce

spirits into another person without first doing a healing ritual, and his one word answer was emphatic: “No.”

We additionally questioned him about why the spirits “descend” into him. He told us that most of them come down from the upperworld (*b’wa*).⁸ “More than half of my spirits came from there. The shaman does not go there. Some spirits come from above, some wander around on earth (the middle world, or *berye*), like fox spirits.” When we asked him which class of spirits was more powerful, he said it depended on the situation. “But usually those from above are more powerful.” However, on certain rare occasions demanded by a serious illness, the shaman did travel to the lowerworld (*buni*) to seek the cause of disease and bring about a cure. These three levels of reality form the basis of Oroqen cosmology and are shared under different names by most Tungus groups (see Shirokogoroff 1935: 125-126).

After being cured of his illness by Wuliyen after a three-day ritual, Chuonnasuan occasionally served as a second spirit to other shamans. It was not known if he served Wuliyen as her *jardalanin*, but it is probable, at least for a time. What we do know was that for most of the next three years Chuonnasuan was not working under Wuliyen as her apprentice, for he was with his family in Tahe and she was in Shibazhan. We know he had a shaman’s gown and complete paraphernalia because he told us that, after Wuliyen healed him, “nine persons worked to make a shaman’s clothes for me.” When we asked him how he trained to be a shaman without the presence of a master shaman, he again reminded us that his teachers were the 50 spirits that he had been introduced to during his three days with Wuliyen. “After I was healed by Wuliyen, I just consulted with my spirits.”

The Critical Role of the Jardalanin (Second Spirit). “To be a shaman, one must first be a *jardalanin*, and then healed.” One of the most remarkable things we learned from Chuonnasuan is the critical role of the powerful figure of the shaman’s assistant or “second spirit.” Other than Shirokogoroff’s (1935: 239-330) insightful section on “the assistant of the shaman” in *The Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*, this is a fact that also has gone rather under appreciated in the anthropological literature on shamanism, which accentuates the role of the shaman above all others.

Chuonnasuan revealed that he was not a skilled second spirit. He said he was almost “just acting like a second spirit. I was not a formal second spirit. I would just interpret a little then stop. I was not as experienced as the others.” Perhaps this was because of Chuonnasuan’s natural talent for entering trances or ecstasies, and the requirement of a second spirit is to not allow himself to fall into a trance during shamanistic rituals, but instead, as Shirokogoroff (1935: 330) remarks, “(he) must carefully follow the shaman, to observe and, when needed, to come to his assistance. There is a special selection of persons who are not susceptible to ecstasy, but who understand the essentials of the performance.” Shirokogoroff further remarks, “As a special characteristic of the assistants it should be noted that, almost as a rule, they are not inclined to become themselves shamans.” Chuonnasuan also hints at individual psychological differences as perhaps distinguishing who is destined to remain a second spirit and who will one day become a shaman:

“A *jardalanin* is smart from childhood and can read the shaman, but doesn’t have to go through illnesses. A shaman can select someone smart to be his second spirit. There is a rule that the second spirit is selected by the shaman, not the other way around. They must have a very good relationship and be able to read each other’s minds. Even during ordinary (non-ritual) times this was true too.” We asked Chuonnasuan if a male shaman would be more likely to have a male second spirit, and vice versa, and he replied, “No, there’s no difference if the second spirit is male or female. But if the second spirit is female, she must be older and more experienced and not a girl. Also, during healing rituals, no woman who is menstruating can be present.”

⁸ This is probably related to the Tungus term *buga* for ‘heaven-sky.’ See Shirokogoroff (1935: 1) for a discussion of this core Tungus concept.

“The *jardalanin* is like an interpreter,” Chuonnasuan noted, observing the two interpreters in the room one Oroqen, one Han Chinese repeating back what he said in two foreign languages (Mandarin Chinese and English) as the video camera recorded the exchange. “When the shaman sings or chants, he is the person who best understands the shaman’s sounds. Yes, the *jardalanin* is quite powerful. Sometimes when a shaman invited a spirit and the spirit cannot help, then the *jardalanin* could tell from the shaman’s chant that the shaman did not get the spirit’s help, and then the *jardalanin* can suggest to the shaman another spirit who could help. When the *jardalanin* sees another spirit coming who would help, he stands up and announces it to the shaman and the audience. The *jardalanin* can read the movements of the shaman, the sound of the drum, the metal bells, and then he stands up and notifies the shaman and the audience of the coming of the new spirit.”

Chuonnasuan explained further: “When I danced I didn’t know what was going on. But the *jardalanin*, who was in communication with the spirits would know. The *jardalanin* would then communicate to the family (of the patient), what images to use, what prayers to offer, what meats to prepare as offering.” Chuonnasuan’s personal assistant or *jardalanin* was named Meng Changguo.

Chuonnasuan would later tell us that it was the *jardalanin* of the master shaman who healed him who told Chuonnasuan that he should become a shaman.

The Second Illness. At age 19, Chuonnasuan once again became ill. “After I knew the spirits introduced by Wuliyen, some new spirits wanted to enter me. But Wuliyen’s spirits couldn’t accept them, and they had a fight. The fighting of the spirits made me ill.⁹ I couldn’t eat well, I couldn’t sleep well, and I wanted to be alone all the time. So, I would sit silently alone by myself under a tree or somewhere. When I was alone outside I could hear voices talking in the far distance, and enchanting songs from the spirits. This lasted 5 months or half a year.”

We asked Chuonnasuan about his subjective experience of the new spirits trying to enter him. Did he hear, see, or feel them trying to enter his body? “I didn’t see them coming, but I could hear the new spirits coming. They were spirits from my grandfather’s father.” In other words, he was possessed by ancestral spirits, and this made him ill.

A grave personal crisis may have precipitated this second illness. According to Guan and Wang (1998: 52-3), Meng Jin Fu got married in 1944 when he was seventeen, but a year later his beautiful wife died due to an illness. (He married his second wife, Ding Xiuqin, in 1963.) One day, when he was walking near the Huma River, he heard a thunderous noise and saw brightness and lost consciousness. Still an adolescent, Chuonnasuan’s parents became involved. “Since new spirits were involved, Wuliyen could not help. They had to find a new shaman. So my parents consulted directly with their ancestral spirits, and the advice they got was for a different shaman to help.” His parents hired the services of his uncle, Meng Minchisuan, a highly respected master shaman during the 1940s and 50s in Tahe (Guan and Wang 1998: 38). The healing ritual took the following form: Minchisuan, the master shaman, danced alone for more than an hour. Then the second spirit, a very good speaker, informed the spirit why the spirit was wanted for this purpose. Then it was time they all went to sleep. The next morning, the master shaman Minchisuan said he had dreams. He saw many, many spirits gathered and demanding offerings of antelope, moose, duck, and so on. “Then I followed Michisuan in dancing for three nights.” But this did not cure Chuonnosuan. “So Michisuan stayed 3 more days and offered deer to the spirits. After this I was well and no longer heard the enchanted singing of the spirits.” Michisuan introduced 10 new spirits into Chuonnasuan, and he was restored to health when “the old and new spirits became friends within me.”

The master shaman Minchisuan introduced him to the most powerful two-headed Eagle Spirit *sheki*. After that, Chuonnasuan’s power greatly increased and he was often invited to perform healing rituals.

⁹ On the fighting of spirits and souls, see Shirokogoroff (1935: 320-322).

The Third Illness. Following the death of his uncle in 1947, the powerful shaman Minchisuan, Chuonnasuan once again became ill at the age of 20. Chuonnasuan told us that he had lost consciousness for three days, and for almost two months he felt “blurred” in his mind, almost as if being in a trance. “I felt other spirits coming into me. I just felt lost. I didn’t want to eat. I didn’t want to be with anyone else. I just wanted to be alone.” His family sought out the most powerful shaman in practice at the time, Zhao Li Ben. What is interesting about this fact is that Zhao Li Ben is the only shaman that Chuonnasuan ever initiated into shamanhood during his brief career, and this event occurred only a year prior to Chuonnasuan’s illness. In that one year Zhao Li Ben had become a very powerful shaman indeed and in many respects, Zhao Li Ben was a remarkable man in the history of the Oroqen people for a variety of reasons.

We interviewed Zhao Li Ben’s brother, Zhao Ben Chang, who told us that Zhao Li Ben would have been 68 years-old in 1994 if he had not died in 1978 from cancer. Their father was Han Chinese from Shandong province and their mother was Oroqen. The fact that Zhao Li Ben was half-Han Chinese would open doors for him after the People’s Republic was founded in 1949. Their father owned a trading company in Tahe, the Yimin Company, that sold animal skins, deer antlers and other products. Zhao Li Ben was born in Tahe circa 1928, making him close in age to Chuonnasuan. During the Japanese occupation, some Oroqen men were forced into military service by the Japanese, but Zhao Li Ben convinced these Oroqen conscripts to rebel and they killed a Japanese officer. Not long after the war Zhao Li Ben became ill. As his brother tells it, he was “crazy, running around, mumbling nonsense and climbing trees.” Zhao family sought out Chuonnasuan to cure their son. The healing ritual took place in a large yurt and lasted three nights. During that ritual, according to the brother of Zhao, Chuonnasuan’s spirits “educated” Zhao Li Ben’s spirits, and he was called to become a shaman. After Chuonnasuan healed him and initiated him, Zhao was considered perhaps the most powerful shaman in the Oroqen community until the summer of 1952 when, as his brother put it, he “took up the work” and became an ardent Chinese Communist Party cadre and convinced the Oroqens to give up the “superstitions” of shamanism and convince the spirits to go away (see below). Zhao Li Ben became perhaps the most powerful person in the Oroqen community from that time until his death, serving as township director of Shibazhan, and later the Director of Nationality Affairs for Huma County. But his early career as a shaman came back to haunt him during the Cultural Revolution: Zhao Li Ben was “criticized” and put into a labor camp for more than a year. Perhaps his conversion to atheistic communism was less than perfect and others suspected it. For example, even long after he had become a strong Communist Party cadre, sometimes at night he would jump up out of bed and be startled by the spirits, and his wife had to jump on him (“ride him”) to keep others from finding out.¹⁰

Chuonnasuan was emphatic when he told us more than once that, “The first time I healed someone was after my third sickness.” Unfortunately, we were left with a contradiction that was never fully resolved: If he healed Zhao Li Ben, initiated him to be a shaman, and then was healed by his former apprentice a year later when he became ill for the third time, how could he make this statement? We could not get a direct answer from him about this logical contradiction, and so we have decided that the confusion in detail may be due to our lack of understanding the typical career of an Oroqen shaman as well as the 67 year-old shaman’s difficulties in remembering an occupation he had not practiced since 1952.

We believe, based on the account of Chuonnasuan’s life found in Guan and Wang (1998: 53), that he probably began conducting healing rituals after being healed from his second illness and that the version he told us was incorrect.

¹⁰ This is according to Guan Kouni (born 1935), whom we interviewed in Shibazhan on July 14, 1994. According to Kister (1999: 89), she is “the last female shaman” of the Oroqen, but she herself insisted in our presence that she was “only a *jardalanin*” and never a practicing shaman. She was, however, in training to become a shaman after Zhao Li Ben cured her of serious chest pains in 1950 or 1951 when her mother-in-law, the shaman Wuliyen, failed to do so. When the new communist regime convinced the Oroqen to renounce their “superstitions” in the summer of 1952 her career as a shaman-in-training was over.

When we asked him how he knew that he was to start practicing after his third healing, and what form this realization took, he said the following:

“I had a direct call from the spirits to become a shaman,” Chuonnasuan told us. “It is not that anyone can become a shaman if one wants. It is the intention of the spirits that a person becomes a shaman. First I had a direct call from the spirits to become a shaman (his first initiatory illness) and then I learned I could become a shaman when I was in a trance. Then later I was asked to become a shaman when Zhao Li Ben healed me and Zhao’s spirits told me I could become a shaman. I was then told of the different roles or powers of the spirits of Zhao, which spirits could cause disease and which could heal.”

We were curious about the form the communication took between Zhao’s spirits and Chuonnasuan, and he replied: “It was Zhao’s *jardalanin* who introduced the different spirits to me, and what disease each spirit participated in. During the third healing Zhao’s *jardalanin* told me I should be a shaman.” (Again, this is confusing because Chuonnasuan was already a shaman after the first illness and a fairly powerful one after the second illness. How can he be called to become a shaman after the third illness and with the help of his own apprentice?!) He interpreted this as the *jardalanin* reading the mind of the shaman, Zhao Li Ben. This story not only supports the extraordinary power of the shaman’s assistant or “second spirit,” but also the classic model of shamanic initiation through initiatory illnesses as found in Shirokogoroff (1935) and Eliade (1951/1964).

Healing Rituals. Shamanism is a hereditary vocation among the Oroqen not only in terms of members of succeeding family generations taking up the career of a shaman, but certain spirits are inherited as well, and without the mastery of spirits no healing is possible. Since the spirits are already comfortable with one family member, they tend to introduce themselves to other shamans in the bloodline. Often this happens after the death of a shaman. In the case of Chuonnasuan, when his paternal uncle died, his uncle’s spirit songs were passed on to him. “My uncle sang this song, and my cousin who was a shaman sang this song, and I did too. We all used it in healing rituals. Usually shamans didn’t use this song until this particular spirit had descended, and then they used the song. Each spirit has its own song.”

This was clearly a very powerful spirit, so we asked Chuonnasuan the identity of the spirit. He didn’t want to answer us. “I’m not clear about this,” he said. This was a typical response whenever we asked the specific identities of spirits. He was clearly uncomfortable talking about them. We asked him when he did his first healing ritual as a shaman.

“The first time I healed a person was after my third sickness. (More likely this occurred after his second illness, as argued above.) He suffered from seizures. After this went on for many months, his family asked me for help. I danced twice for two hours and asked each spirit one-by-one for help, but they demanded many offerings. These were communicated to the family by the *jardalanin*. Presumably the healing ritual was successful.

On another occasion Chuonnasuan said he successfully treated two persons from the Guo family who suffered from skin infections, and he healed them without herbs or ointments. Our data is again corroborated by Guan and Wang (1998: 53), who write that one of the first patient Chuonnasuan healed (presumably between 1946 and 1947) was a young woman named Manniyan, or Guo Xiuzhen in Han Chinese. She was so grateful to him that she kept sending gifts to Chuonnasuan during festival time until the late 1990s.

However, there was one healing ritual in particular that he would never forget.

The Trip to Buni (The Underworld). During our discussion of healing rituals we asked Chuonnasuan if he ever went to the underworld during a healing ritual.

“One trip,” he said. “It was a special ritual. I went to *buni* to save an old woman. Her husband, who had died years before, was trying to get her to come to *buni* and was making her sick. Her

husband was trying to steal her soul. She died three years later. It was not me who saved her soul, but my spirits.”

Chuonnasuan then told us that the healing ritual had taken place over three nights. On the first night there was no dancing. He consulted with his spirits but they could not discover the cause of her illness. On the second night he held a ritual dance, but the spirits still couldn't figure out the cause of the illness. On the third night he invited new spirits to the ritual dance and these new spirits told him that the woman's soul had been stolen by the soul of her husband in *buni*. He said the spirit that told him this was a powerful ancestor spirit named a *shurkie*. While inside a dark yurt, he then laid face-down on an animal skin and attempted to enter the lower world or land of the dead, *buni*, on a visionary journey.

“At first I couldn't see anything. It was dark. Then I closed my eyes and it was bright. I saw my spirit going ahead, leading two dogs by the hand.” This spirit was the *seki*, the two-headed Eagle Spirit, and it had taken human form. “It was dressed in a shaman's mask. This spirit was one of the spirits of my paternal uncle. This spirit simply entered me. During the healing ritual, this spirit had been called for help by my *jardalanin*.” This was the spirit that was so powerful that his uncle could use it to kill a pig.

We then asked him to tell us what was in the lower world.

“I saw the spirit in the shaman's mask going ahead into a passage that became narrower and narrower, then there was a barrier, then I saw first a tiger, then a black bear, and other human forms, and they were all eating each other. It was very frightening.” Chuonnasuan became quite nervous at this point and refused to say more about *buni*.

We asked him if the lower world was always a frightening place, and he replied: “I don't know if other people think so, but it was frightening for me. But after passing through those frightening things, it is a nice place. Or so I heard.” He later said he followed the spirit into the passage, and it led him back out, but he doesn't remember anything in between. This was the only time that Chuonnasuan specifically revealed the use of visual mental imagery in shamanism. All other reports emphasized auditory mental imagery.

Summer 1952: Twilight of the Spirits. One reminiscence that everyone shared was the tragic summer (June or July) of 1952 when Zhao Li Ben, a newly converted communist, and the Chinese authorities coerced the Oroqen people to give up their superstitions and abandon any religious practices. This *Goetterdaemmerung* was a reluctant capitulation on the part of the Oroqen. Chuonnasuan and Zhao Li Ben were two of the most powerful and respected shamans among the Oroqen, and so the Chinese communists took them for a free trip to eight major cities by train and airplane to try to convince them that resistance was futile and that the future was with Mao and the Communist Party. Most likely, an alternative interpretation from the communist official viewpoint would have been that the purpose of the trips was to reinforce the message that shamanism was “primitive” and a permanent settlement of “modern” life should be their future. Since neither man had ever been out of rural Oroqen regions, they were clearly affected by the propaganda exercise and organized and participated in a three-night ritual in which the Oroqen people asked the spirits to “go away.”

According to Guan Kouni, who was a 17 year-old shamaness in training in 1952, the final sending away of the spirits took place over three nights in Baiyinna (where she was living) and in Shibazhan. She estimated that about 200 people participated the ritual in her home village, but “they were very reluctant to do that. This was especially true of those Oroqen living south of the Huma River who did not want to give up the spirits. The public communal rituals in those two settlements asked the spirits to go away and to not return, and each shaman did his or her own ritual at home to send away the spirits. Guan Kouni told us she could not remember any of the chants or songs from that fateful ritual, just that everyone “begged the spirits not to come back.”

Guan Kouni said that her husband snatched the birch bark box containing her ritual items and threw it in the fire. Her shaman's gown, which was made of cloth ("that was not as good as a leather gown," she told us), was taken by her grandfather and hidden in the mountains, but she never learned where he hid it. After the summer 1952 ritual, neither she nor Chuonnasuan openly practice any shamanistic ritual. No communal healing rituals were ever held again. Guan Kouni told us that she had wanted to continue to practice shamanism, and dreamed of it often. After the ritual to send away the spirits she told us she felt "pressure on her chest" and often cried because she was no longer allowed to learn shamanism.

Conclusion

The stories told to us by Chuonnasuan (Meng Jin Fu) during multiple formal and informal interviews in mid-July 1994, presented above, are some of the most detailed descriptions of the life, calling, training and career of a Tungus shaman to ever appear in print. Although we set out on our journey to Manchuria and Inner Mongolia to gather evidence for or against certain psychological hypotheses we had entertained, our inquiries proved to be of a much wider scope.

At the beginning of our second interview with Chuonnasuan, as we met him along the road, he said to Richard Noll, "You are the uncle of my child." This was a high compliment, indicating he regarded Richard as one of his generation. His trust in us allowed him to freely share some of the most intimate details of his life, knowing that his brief career as a master Oroqen shaman was being recorded and would be preserved for others. There are no more shamans among the Oroqen.

Chuonnasuan died on October 9, 2000.

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