

Shamanistic Studies in China: A Preliminary Survey of the Last Decade

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Serious study of shamanism is a young discipline in China, but documentary evidence of it dates back probably farther than in any other place in the world. Shamanic rituals in southern and northern China alike were recorded by poets and historians well over 2,000 years ago (Fu 1988, 1990; Qiu 1985, Song 1989; Waley 1955; Wu 1989; Zhang 1990), and were inscribed on oracle bones as early as the Shang dynasty before the eleventh century B.C. (Cai 1988a; Qiu 1985). With the emergence of



Fig. 1. Kun Shi with the Yao *shigong* or shamans (Master shaman Su Yulong, left) in Jinxiu, Guangxi, 1989.

Confucianism and the introduction of Buddhism, the ancient *wu* tradition (shamanism) of the Han people gradually became taboo. Despite historical assimilation and persecutions, the shamanic traditions of the minority peoples—the Daur, Ewenki, Hezhen, Jingpo, Manchu, Mongol, Oroqen, Uygur, Xibe, Yao and Yugur—have endured till today. But with a few exceptions (Ling 1934; Shirokogoroff 1935), little was published on shamanism in China before the Communists came to power (Thompson 1985). From 1949 to the late 1970s, shamanic studies were virtually prohibited, shamanism being regarded as a superstition that had to be eradicated, although some work was done within the framework of the national ethnic identification project in the 1950s. From the early 1980s, China's "open-door" policy paved the way for the study of shamanism. Since then, numerous articles, books and documentary films/videos have been produced. Some have caught the attention of such internationally known scholars as Michael Harner, Lauri Honko, Mihály Hoppál and Tae-gon Kim. But nearly all these publications are in Chinese, and are little known outside of China. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview and an assessment of the recent Chinese literature on shamanism, in the attempt to bridge the rift between the Chinese and the "others" in the field of shamanistic studies.

Progress in Shamanistic Studies

Along with the revival of shamanic practices among ethnic minorities all across China, the last decade has witnessed a veritable revival of shamanistic studies: hundreds of publications, numerous audio-visual tapes, dozens of dedicated researchers, organizations, and ongoing programs focus on shamanism. Although many of the publications and research projects implement theories and approaches no longer current in either Russian or Western scholarship, the very volume of the publications and of the ethnographic research work of the past few years is ample demonstration of the devotion of Chinese researchers to the study of shamanism, and there have indeed been some real breakthroughs (e.g. Fu 1990; Fu and Meng 1991). This progress, made after years of academic suppression, deserves to be celebrated.

Publications

Academic journals have carried about 200 articles on shamanism among the Altaic peoples in China. Including the shamanic traditions of some minority peoples in southern China will at least double this figure. Some of these journals, such as *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu* (Studies of World Religions), *Beifang Minzu* (Northern Nationalities), *Minjian Wenxue Luntan* (Tribune of Folklore), and *Shehui Kexue Zhanxian* (Social Science Front) are available in major university libraries outside of China. After the first book on shamanism was published (Qiu 1985), ten more books of this nature appeared within a period of four years (Cai 1988a; Fu 1988, 1990, Fu and Meng 1991; Liu and Ding 1990; Meng 1990; Song 1989; Sun 1990; Wu 1989; Zhang 1990), and several collections of shamanic scriptures, myths and ritual songs have been printed (Aisin-Gioro 1987; Jalungga 1990; Wang and Chen 1988). A promising sign is that more books are ready to go to press, including a book of photos on Tunguz shamanism, several book-length studies by Fu Yuguang and his colleagues (personal communication), and seven volumes of monographs on



Fig. 2. Oroqen shaman Meng Jinfu (Chuonnasuan) drumming and chanting with his wife as an assistant. Photo: Kun Shi, 1994.

the Daur, Ewenki, Hezhen, Manchu, Mongol, Oroqen and Xibe (Mandu 1992: 118). While some of the articles and books published offer valuable new ethnographic materials within a solid theoretical framework, most of them are written from a historical materialist perspective (which is assessed in the following section).

Worth mentioning here is the major contribution made by Fu Yuguang and his colleagues (Fu 1990; Fu and Meng 1991; Wang 1991; Xu 1987). They argue that shamanism is not the same as witchcraft and is more than just a form of religion. It was the foundation for the emergence of civilization, and traces of it can be found in our present cultural traditions. It is an important body of knowledge accumulated through history. This is the first interpretation that recognizes the shaman as the “teacher and spirit” of the people, and discovers traces of shamanic influence in philosophy, literature, art, folklore, belief systems and social laws. Shamanism, it is argued, should be preserved and cherished; shamanic knowledge should be explored and used to make our lives better. Unfortunately, this position is not yet supported by the majority of researchers, though the study of all shamanic phenomena is encouraged (Mandu 1992).

Audio-Visual Collection

Although three ethnographic films related to shamanism were made before the mid-1960s (Du and Yang 1989), it was not until the mid-1980s that numerous video films and sound tapes focusing on shamanism began to appear. In the past few years at least a dozen documentary video films were made on the surviving shamanic traditions of the Daur, Ewenki, Manchu, Mongol, Oroqen, Uygur, and Xibe. The most notable work was done by Fu Yuguang and Wang Honggang and their colleagues at the Jilin Institute for Ethnic Studies and the Jilin Folklore Society. Their pioneering work in making a video recording of the Tunguz shamanic rituals has proved to be, in Hoppál’s words, a “classic” and “standard reference” (Siikala and Hoppál 1992: 196) for future



Fig. 3. Kun Shi with the Manchu scholar Fu Yuguang (left) in Changchun, 2005.

studies of shamanism.¹ Fu Yuguang and his colleagues have conducted comprehensive surveys of Manchu shamans, have made hundreds of hours of audio recordings, and have collected shamans' costumes, drums, scriptures, idols and other artifacts.

¹ The representative videos are "The Manchu Shamanic Ritual of the Guar'jia Clan," "The Wild Spirits Offering Ritual of the Manchu's Nimacha Clan," "The Shamanism of the Oroqen Wild Spirit Ritual of the Manchu Nimacha Clan," and "Idols and Genealogy." (These and other videos can be ordered from the Jilin Institute for Ethnic Studies at non-profit bargain prices.) Some of the elder master shamans who were pictured in these videos have passed away, making the record more valuable yet. For an English description of parts of the video scenes, refer to Shi (1991).

Researchers and Organizations

Fifteen years ago and earlier, shamanism was considered a superstition in China and no one would take the risk of owning to be a researcher of shamanism. Today, shamanism has become a hot topic, and many ethnologists and folklorists (particularly those in northern China²) are proud of being part of the contingent for shamanistic studies. More and more researchers and government workers have begun to realize the cultural and social significance of shamanism. At present, there are nearly 100 researchers directly or indirectly involved in the study of shamanism. There are two centers: one at the Institute for Ethnic Studies of the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing (headed by research fellows Qiu Pu and Mandu Ertu), and the other at the Jilin Institute for Ethnic Studies in Changchun (headed by research fellow Fu Yuguang). There is also a small group at Liaoning University in Shenyang (headed by Wu Bing-an). So far, Fu Yuguang's team has done the most solid ethnographic work, has had the most publications, and is the best known both in China and among foreign researchers. The joint effort to publish a series of ethnographic monographs on shamanism has become one of the key projects in government-funded programs of social science research. In June of 1988, the Jilin Institute for Ethnic Studies sponsored the first conference on shamanic culture ever held in China, in the course of which the China Society for Shamanic Studies was founded (with Qiu Pu as its first president). In August of 1991, the Jilin Institute organized a second conference, and plans to host an international conference on shamanism in 1994.

² Most Chinese researchers hold that shamanism in China exists only among the Tunguz and some Turkic peoples in northern China; phenomena of a similar or identical nature among some peoples in southern China are associated with the *wu* tradition, a so-called "primitive religion." This traditional idea is being challenged by some Chinese (Cai 1988b; Li 1976; Ling 1934; Mandu 1992; Shi 1988) and Western researchers (Atkinson 1992; Harner 1988, 1990; Hoppál in Siikala and Hoppál 1992; Waley 1955).

Theoretical Implications and Problems

The assessment of the Chinese literature on shamanism is not meant to slight the informative ethnographic materials collected, but intends to offer Chinese researchers some thoughts on shamanistic studies that contrast with their traditional positions. I understand that some Chinese researchers (Fu 1990; Fu and Meng 1991; Mandu 1992) are aware that some of the problems I shall be pointing out deserve to be taken more seriously.

The gravest problem, to my mind, is the feverish pursuit of “theoretical arguments” within set frames of reference (Marxist or unilinear evolutionary), and their substantiation with information selected from fragmentary historical records or from incomplete field data. Past records are certainly an important source for shamanistic studies, but they should be treated cautiously, keeping in mind that they were recorded in the style of travelogues, in a society dominated by Confucianism, which despised shamanism. Except for the work of Fu Yuguang and a few others, little systematic ethnographic work on shamanism has been carried out; thus, there is a fundamental lack of reliable field data for theory building. (In the light of the forthcoming seven-volume series on shamanism, it is to be hoped that focus will shift to present ethnographic data.) As a result, there appears to be a misunderstanding of shamanic practices³ (Cai 1988a; 1988b; Fu 1988; Mandu 1992; Qiu 1985; Song 1989), which has led to biased interpretations. Of course, this problem is not unique to China, being no less prominent in the former Soviet Union (Michael 1963), and a similar situation existed only a few decades ago in the West (Atkinson 1992: 307; Flaherty 1992: 208).

One of the major concerns of most Chinese researchers is to discover the origin and fall of shamanism (Cai 1988a; Fu 1988; Liu and Ding 1990; Mandu 1992; Qiu 1985; Song 1989; Wu 1989; Zhang 1990). Mainly based on textual clues and the Morganian model, they argue that shamanism emerged in the late matriarchal period, reached its prime after the shift to the patriarchal period, and began to fade during feudalism. Many of them have predicted that shamanism is bound

³ While judging the work of Chinese researchers, we should bear in mind that China still officially advocates atheism, and the researchers are conditioned by things beyond their control. Some may have become used to prejudiced models and are reluctant to accept or initiate new ideas, even when politics is not a big problem.

to disappear in the new “socialist state” or in post-industrial societies, and are puzzled by its vitality today. The problem here is that they have generalized the diverse shamanic traditions (diverse even among the different Tunguz groups) and have lumped all of them in the same evolutionary basket. They fail to realize that shamanism, like other components of tradition, undergoes constant change and adaptation in order to survive in an ever hostile environment. The Chinese researchers have failed to answer the following questions: What facts support the assumption that shamanism emerged in matriarchal societies? When exactly was this matriarchal period and what is the supporting evidence? How much of what we know about shamanism allows us to predetermine its demise? And why is there a revival of shamanic practices and studies all over the world as modern science advances? The effort of Chinese researchers to trace the origin and decline of shamanism is highly arbitrary. It can be traced back half a million years, to *Homo sapiens*, who may have started to worship nature—a key feature of shamanism. As for the fate of shamanic traditions, they have survived not only among native “primitive” peoples, but have also developed in the most industrialized societies, such as the United States (Atkinson 1992; Harner 1990; Siikala and Hoppál 1992).

Related to the interest in the origin of shamanism is the question of the geographical distribution of shamanic practices. Except for a few people (Li 1976; Ling 1934; Shi 1988), most Chinese scholars hold the traditional view that shamanism existed only among the Tunguz and some Turkic peoples in northern China, and those spreading from Scandinavia through Siberia to Alaska. Others acknowledge the existence of similar traditions in South America and Australia (Cai 1988a, 1988b; Mandu 1992). This view is shared by many European scholars (Siikala 1978) but is challenged by others (Eliade 1964; Harner 1988, 1990, Hoppál in Siikala and Hoppál 1992; Waley 1955). While we should be careful to regard shamanic traditions as universal, we should not restrict “classical” shamanism to Central Asia, Siberia and the Arctic regions, nor regard it as unique and homogeneous. The socio-economic conditions of these peoples are drastically diverse. For example, the Manchu people are farmers and urbanites, and their social organization is highly developed (similarly to the Han Chinese); the other Tunguz peoples are largely herders and hunters, and some of them (such as the Ewenki, Hezhen and Oroqen) still enjoy a “tribal” way of life. Also, most of the Tunguz peoples in northeastern China inhabit

a cold environment with deep forests, in contrast to many peoples (including some Tunguz such as the Xibe) in Central Asia, who often occupy open grasslands or deserts. Yet, all researchers agree that all the above peoples practice shamanism. According to some scholars (Li 1976; Ling 1934; Shi 1988; Thompson 1985; Waley 1955), traditions identical to shamanism exist among some peoples in southern China. Our criteria of “shamanic” practices, thus, cannot be their occurrence in certain geographical locations, but are, rather, the “role-taking” of the shamanic figure (Siikala 1978), whether ecstasy is involved or not (Eliade 1964), and whether s/he is a “knower” (Fu 1990; Fu and Meng 1991). If we also recognize as shamanism the “neo-shamanism” or “urban shamanism” of contemporary North America and Europe (Atkinson 1992; Harner 1988, 1990; Siikala and Hoppál 1992: 179–209), we can hardly deny that shamanism also *exists* in other parts of the world and is a worldwide phenomenon. All this, however, calls for our differentiating between shamans, and mediums and sorcerers.

A major controversy of Chinese scholarship is whether shamanism is “a later form of primitive religion” and “a transitional form of religion between polytheism and monotheism” (Cai 1988a, 1988b; Liu and Ding 1990; Mandu 1992; Qiu 1985; Song 1989; Wu 1989; Zhang 1990), or a form of the Chinese belief systems and a part of its cultural heritage (Fu 1990; Fu and Meng 1991; Wang 1991; Xu 1987). Is the shaman a purely religious figure, or a figure of many functions? Ethnographic data indicate that the shaman is not only a healer and a leader of rituals, but also a transmitter of culture. This latter interpretation gives us a whole new perspective on shamanism. The shaman is no longer an “abnormal” person as most Chinese researchers suggest (although some shamans are called and initiated after serious sickness); s/he becomes a community protector and keeper of cultural traditions; s/he is believed to be able to “communicate” with nature and bring harmony to the people. Such a position is supported by Michael Harner (1990) and Mihály Hoppál (Siikala and Hoppál 1992), and is shared by Fu Yuguang (1990). This is probably why shamanism has persisted to this day, and is undergoing a renaissance.

Most Chinese researchers admit the importance of shamanism in historical terms, but are highly skeptical of it today. Some of them (Fu 1990; Fu and Meng 1991; Wang 1991; Xu 1987) have recognized shamanic traditions as a form of knowledge, and the shaman as a mediator of cultural traditions. On the other hand, even as many researchers (Qiu



Fig. 4. Kun Shi with Mongol *bö* Serenchin (left) at his home in Inner Mongolia, 2005.

1985, Song 1989; Wu 1989; Zhang 1990) are beginning to appreciate the role of shamanism in history and argue that it was not a superstition or “opium of the people,” they conclude that shamanism is no longer functional in today’s society, and is doomed to be outdated by the process of development. The former focus on the living tradition of shamanism in the context of the present, while the latter can see historical shamanism only with modern eyes.

Some of the above problems are due to a lack of information from the outside world. Before the early 1980s, almost nothing of shamanistic studies was allowed to enter China. Then came the only informative article on the study of shamanism abroad (Zheng 1983). But it was based on a limited number of sources and was restricted in its distribution, for the journal that carried the article was not for sale to the public. Recently, a 350-page collection of translated articles has been published (Sun 1990). It is a good sign for the introduction of works on shamanistic studies from outside China, but the book relies heavily on the Russian sources (eleven of the total of eighteen articles), with not enough attention given to the Western theories (there are no articles from Europe and only two from the United States by Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade). As a result, most book-length studies in Chinese

are handicapped when presenting “grand arguments” of the kind previously mentioned, and none has touched on the therapeutic value of shamanic healing, as practiced, for instance, in the United States today (Atkinson 1992).

Prospects

Despite the existing problems, Chinese researchers have made tremendous strides in shamanistic studies as compared to where they stood ten years ago. Given the present revival of shamanic traditions and a fair degree of academic freedom in China, researchers there can make significant contributions to the international study of shamanism if they modify their approach enough to consider Western theories, and base their own conclusions on solid ethnographic work.

The traditional prejudice against shamanism needs to be discarded, and shamanism recognized as an inseparable component of the Chinese cultural tradition and of the corpus of human knowledge. It will then become possible to take a multidisciplinary approach to shamanistic studies, and explore the value of shamanism to the social sciences as well as to medicine. The puzzling vitality of shamanism will then become understandable. Shamanistic studies thus having proven its usefulness, more funding and support will probably be forthcoming from the authorities.

Secondly, shamanism needs to be viewed in the socio-historical context in which it grows, is assimilated, endures and revives (or, in some cases, declines). Due attention must be given to the changes and diversities of shamanism, bearing in mind that the cultural tradition of any ethnic group (unless it is completely isolated) is always changing, and is always a combination of the old and new. It is a mistake to conclude that there is no place for shamanism in urban life; examples are the neoshamans across North America and the Hmong shamans in downtown Chicago. Generalization should be avoided unless specifically supported by reliable ethnographic data.

Finally, value-free ethnographic work should be done on every aspect of the shamanic tradition, including rituals, social control, healing methods, and altered states of consciousness. Sufficient field data must be obtained before attempting theory building and comparative studies. Once the facts about shamanism have been separated from fiction, the

value of shamanism will become evident, as will the extensive influence of shamanic traditions in our lives. As Flaherty (1992: 215) has noted, it is time for researchers of shamanistic studies to recognize the discipline of shamanology.

Update by the Author in November 2006

Since this survey article was published in 1993, tremendous changes have taken place in China in the field of shamanistic studies. Many of the problems discussed in this article have either disappeared or become less apparent. For example, greater attention is paid to fieldwork and theories based on ethnographic data, and some researchers (e.g., Fu Yuguang, Meng Huiying and Guo Shuyun) have ventured into the areas of psychoanalysis and healing practices of the shaman. At least two Ph.D. dissertations on shamanism have been published by Meng Huiying (2000) and Guo Shuyun (2006), and hundreds of books and documentary videos on shamanism in China have been published/produced. With continuous revival of the shamanic tradition and increasing official tolerance and support, significant achievements have been made by various organizations in China. For example, Changchun University established the first Museum of Shamanic Culture in May 2006, and Changchun Teachers College is starting an M.A. program focused on shamanic studies, another first of its kind, to enroll students in the autumn of 2007. (The present author has been associated with both institutions in Changchun, China. More details of the development on shamanistic studies in China can be found in the author's forthcoming article in the 2006 Fall/Winter issue of *Shamanism*.)

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