

# CONTEMPORARY SHAMANISM IN CHINA

## UPDATE OCTOBER 1, 2010

*Kun Shi and Susan Grimaldi, M.Ed.*

*Fifteen years ago, the Kun Shi and Susan Grimaldi joined the FSS expedition to study the Manchu and Mongol shamans in Jilin and Inner Mongolia. They both contributed to the FSS journal Shamanism the following year (Grimaldi 1996; Shi 1996). Ten years later, the authors participated in the opening of the Museum of Shamanic Culture at Changchun University and published in Shamanism about the exciting new developments in China (Grimaldi and Shi 2006). Kun Shi has also published other papers on Tungus shamanism.<sup>1</sup>*

*This is further update about the continuing revival of shamanism in China, with a focus on Daur shaman Siqingua, who is an FSS Living Treasure of Shamanism. (See box below.)*

*—the Editor*

Shamanism, as a field of study and practice, has witnessed tremendous development in China in the last few decades. Some thirty years ago, the topic of shamanism was a taboo—one of the poisonous weeds that had to be eradicated. As late as 1995, when a group of Americans went to study Manchu and Mongol shamans, they encountered challenges of being shadowed or having limited access to a shaman's village. Nowadays, Tungus-speaking shamans are regarded as heroes or cultural treasures in their homeland of northeast China. Some healing shamans not only attract local patients, but also clients from

Russia. One of them, a Daur shaman Siqingua, is described below.

In addition to the numerous publications and audio-visual materials on shamanism in Chinese (Shi 2007), there have been an increasing number of publications of on the Tungus-speaking shamans in the last two decades, particularly by this journal, *Shamanism*, and by *Shaman: Journal of the International Society for Shamanistic Research*.

We are grateful to Ping Lü for agreeing to the use of passages of information from her book about Siqingua, and to Huiying Meng for information and photos of Siqingua.

### DAUR SHAMAN RECOGNIZED AS FSS LIVING TREASURE

On February 7, 2008, based on recommendations from FSS Field Associate Kun Shi and renowned scholar Fu Yuguang, the Foundation for Shamanic Studies issued a Certificate to Siqingua (aka Siqingua), from Inner Mongolia, China, recognizing her as a Living Treasure of Shamanism.

*On behalf of the Board of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, it is my honor to name you as a Living Treasure of Shamanism. This designation is in recognition of the work you have done for your people and for shamanism.*

*Your outstanding work as a shaman is important for the planet and for maintaining the link between the spiritual world and the ordinary world.*

*Please receive our congratulations and best wishes so that you may continue with great success in your admirable work.*

*With my deepest respect and best wishes,  
Michael Harner, President*

### LIVING TREASURES OF SHAMANISM

The Foundation for Shamanic Studies "Living Treasures" designation provides an annual lifetime stipend to exceptionally distinguished indigenous shamans in less-developed countries where their age-old knowledge of shamanism and shamanic healing is in danger of extinction. Special care is given to providing the economic assistance necessary to allow these Living Treasures to pass on their knowledge to their people.

Examples of Living Treasures honored by the FSS are:

- ♦ A Daur shaman, Siqingua, of Inner Mongolia, China;
- ♦ The two of the last known Tibetan shamans in a refugee camp in Nepal, *Pau Pasang Rkichoe* and *Pau Nyima Dhondup*;
- ♦ One of the last known snuff-Jaguar shamans, *Mandu Manuel da Silva*, of the Baniwa people, *Aiary River*, in the Northwest Amazon.



### SIQINGUA'S BACKGROUND

Siqingua was born in 1950 in Inner Mongolia. Both of Siqingua's parents were Daur. Her first language was Daur. Later when she went to school she learned Mandarin. She taught herself Mongolian and *Ewenki*, so she now speaks four languages.

She married a Mongolian, named Bater, in 1970. Together they had a son and a daughter. Siqingua's husband is now a shaman assistant. Siqingua became a math teacher in 1978. Two years later, she became sick and couldn't teach. She went to work in a county government office working in accounting for programs for the retirees. Due to poor health, she retired early at the age of forty-eight.

### SIQINGUA BECOMES A SHAMAN

Starting at the age of fourteen, Siqingua was frequently sick having a fever quite often. It was so severe that sometimes she couldn't sleep for days and nights, and even had seizures. In the beginning she was sent to the hospital and diagnosed with epilepsy. She was treated with medication and injections. These treatments were not helping and the hospital had nothing further to offer.

In 1995, she had a heart attack. Her condition grew more serious when she began having several heart attacks each year. Several times the hospital notified her family letting them know she was nearing death. She would shout out and sing in her dreams. Since the onset of her illness, she would have all sorts of dreams, but as her sickness grew more serious her dreams became clearer. The most significant figure in her dreams was an old man with a white beard who told her, that if she believed in what he was doing, she would be healed. After the old man came in her dreams she would chant and sing. Each time this happened the family feared that she had lost her mind and become psychotic, but she looked different from the mentally ill.

As she was chanting and singing in the dream, she demanded alcohol and while drinking it she said, "Now I'm going," and she woke up. When people asked her what had happened she said

she didn't know. This happened more and more frequently and the hospital couldn't do anything.

The family believed in a form of Buddhism. They believed that Siqingua or a family member had offended a Lama so they made rituals and offerings at their home, but still that didn't help.

Then her husband's younger sister came for a visit. She had an unusual ability to see through people. She performed a ritual and said, "My sister-in-law must become a shaman by the age of forty-seven, otherwise she will be forever tormented." Her family had to agree to let her become a shaman. They waited for more than a year, when she was forty-eight, before they could find someone to conduct the ritual to help her become a shaman.

Her grandfather had been a shaman; in fact she was the seventh shaman in her lineage.

After she became a shaman, she conducted many different kinds of rituals. She has treated many hundreds of clients including *Daur*, *Han*, *Ewenki*, Mongolian and Russian. Sometimes she sees more than a dozen patients in a day. She writes records of her diagnosis and treatments and had amassed over 300 notebooks. Regular patients come to her home for treatment, but for seriously ill patients she will go to their homes. She even went to Russia several times, by invitation, to treat patients.

She has more than ten apprentices. Four of them are *Daur*, two females, *Wo Jufen* and *Meng Xiaorui*, and two males, *Meng Lizhou* and *Ao Xiaoliu*. They all live in the *Morin Dawa* Autonomous Banner. Among these four apprentices, *Wo Jufen* has become a shaman. She has a six-point set of antlers on her headdress, designating her status. In addition to her apprentices, Siqingua has three assistants.

### AOMINAN CEREMONY

Most of the *Daur* shamanic rituals involve making offerings to the heavens and to the deity called *Abaki Enduri*. Offerings to the ancestors are made to *Bainacha*, the mountain spirit who protects the hunters.

The *Aominan* Ceremony is a ritual for upgrading the status of a shaman. The shamans perform the ritual for themselves. The ceremony lasts for three days and three nights. Of the dozen rituals Siqingua performs, this is the longest and most complicated. The date, timing and place for the ritual are always determined by spiritual means, through a dream. Siqingua received such a dream, and as a result she underwent her fourth *Aominan* Ceremony on August 12, 2010, raising her to the highest status possible. She now dons a headdress with 12-point antlers made of copper.<sup>2</sup>

The initial ritual can be conducted only after the shaman has been working for three years. A new shaman starts without antler points. Each time a shaman successfully completes this ritual he or she will raise one level and three antler points will be added to their headdress. Six years after becoming a shaman, they can rise to six point antlers, and



Siqingua. Photo by Meng Huiying.



after nine years of working, they can go through another *Aominan* Ceremony and obtain the nine point antlers.

The first day of the ceremony is for preparation. A yurt, especially for this ritual, is setup in the wild or in a courtyard. They prepare the sheep, goat, ox, chicken, liquor, milk, cake, candy, fruit, bow and arrow, rope, colored flags and strips of colored cloth. Two trees are lowered through the hole in the roof and are planted inside the yurt and more trees are planted together in a grove up to a hundred yards away from the yurt. The number of trees in this outside grouping will depend on the number of ancestors that had been shamans before her. Sicingua is the seventh shaman in her family lineage; so there are seven trees outside smeared with red paint.

Ropes link the trees on the inside with the trees in the grove outside. This will become the sacred path for the spirits to descend. These ropes are painted red and have colored flags and strips of cloth in yellow, green, red and white hanging from them.

Oil wick candles are prepared. The number required is determined by the number of guardian spirits helping. If there are twenty guardian spirits helping, then twenty lights must be prepared. Sicingua's main spirit helper is her grandfather, who was a Lama shaman. She also has two-dozen guardian spirits.

The offerings include a white male sheep, a black goat, and a three-year old ox. Also needed for the occasion are nine young people (men and women), not more than 20 years old, who can dance and sing.

They tie cloths of different colors onto the ropes. They place offerings of food and wine on the altar, then the shaman summons each participant and gives them the prediction of what will happen to them according to the spirits.

On the afternoon of the first day, after beating the drum and chanting, the spirits descend into the shaman(s). The shaman reports information about the participants to the ancestor spirits, requesting blessings for all.

At the end of the first day they make offerings to the sky. There is singing as

Sicingua puts on her costume and the spirit enters into her body. She receives instruction on how and when to conduct the ritual. There is no written rule. If the spirit advises something different from what was prepared, then they have to rearrange the preparations.

On the second day, they start with inviting spirits to the ceremony and the shaman puts on his or her costume. The shaman sings and chants while beating the drum, then puts on the mask. Sicingua's mask is made from copper and is in the shape of a human face. It



Sicingua in front of altar. Photo by Meng Huiying.

helps her to heal the patient. She places a piece of sheep fat into the mouth of the mask to make a tongue. The fat comes from the tail area and is used for treatment. This fat doesn't attract flies or maggots, nor does it smell badly, making it good for treating skin symptoms. While chanting she uses this tail fat to smear over an area to prevent infection.

It was thought that these masks no longer existed, until in 1994 when Kun Shi and Richard Noll discovered an old female shaman who had such a mask. Her mask was made of pounded copper and hair; eyebrows, and beard were made of bear fur (Noll and Shi 2007). The mask represented a spirit known as *Abagalili*, the spirit of a black bear (Humphrey and Onon 1996). (See photo p. 5.)

At the *Aominan* Ceremony, after donning the mask, they beat the drums, chant and conduct a ritual to expel evil spirits.

Next, they invite the main spirit, which is the shaman of the last generation—for Sicingua that would be her grandfather. This spirit comes and instructs them on how things will be done for the ceremony, so each time it can be different.

The spirit will descend to merge with the shaman and each time when she is possessed of the spirit, she becomes more tormented, clenching her teeth, shivering, falling on the ground and rolling around. Six generations of shamans enter her and continuously raise demands, as a way of testing the shaman. If the main spirit is satisfied, then the shaman can put more points on her headdress. Otherwise the promotion is denied.

At night on the second day, the final step is to expel the evils. A black goat is sent to the west, and evil spirits are sent away.

On the third day, the ox is butchered as an offering. This is the most important part of the *Aominan* ceremony. The ritual is for making offerings to *Huaimade* Spirit, which is the most powerful spirit. It is a combination of more than ten wooden carved idols tied together. The emperors of the Qing Dynasty worshiped these spirits. Great attention must be paid to the ritual. That is why the ritual requires the sacrifice of a three-year old ox and the dancing of nine young men and women.

After the ox is butchered, the head is put on a small altar outside. Other parts of the ox are put on the inside altar. The shamans dance in accordance to the



wishes of the spirits. If the spirits are not satisfied, the entranced shaman screams showing the dissatisfaction.

According to Siqingua's husband, during the *Aominan* ritual conducted in 2004, when the dancing and singing didn't satisfy the spirits, the possessed shaman screamed and jumped around, until an old man who knew the ritual, led the young people in the singing and dancing, and only then were the spirits satisfied, and the possessed shaman began to calm down.

At the end of the third day of the ritual, participants divide the offerings to eat. On the evening of the third day, the ritual to offer blood occurs. The ox's blood, milk and alcohol are prepared. The lights are extinguished and two shamans beat drums and jump in the dark, mimicking birds singing. All of the participants follow and mimic. As the bird singing reaches the climax, lights are re-lit and they smear the ox blood over the mouths of the idols, then carry the trees to the outside, ending the *Aominan* ritual.

#### TREATMENTS

The fact that shamans are again practicing healing in China is an important development.

Patients come to Siqingua's house for treatment. She has a large room that is used for this purpose. For some seriously sick patients, Siqingua will go to them. She has traveled to Russia several times to treat patients. There are many people who come to her for help. Her methods reduce anxiety for the patients and their families.

During her diagnosis and treatment she doesn't wear her costume. If a ritual becomes necessary, she puts on her costume and sings songs. She begins by seeking help from the spirits to determine if the symptoms are caused by a psychological illness or a spiritual illness. She mainly treats spiritual illnesses. These are considered to be caused by external forces and are referred to as "unreal."

She also uses herbs to treat injuries and skin diseases. Her other approaches include acupuncture, mouth spraying

alcohol, and massage.

One of her most important spiritual instruments for healing is called *jurige tori*, which is a brass mirror that is worn in front of her heart. She also wears a brass mirror on her back, which is called *arken tori*. She often uses this on the body of the patient (not unlike a stethoscope). When necessary to prepare medicine, consisting of healing ritual water, she will put the *jurige tori* into the water to enhance the healing effect.

She wears a string of beads that are used for diagnosis. There are 108 beads representing 108 wishes. These beads play a role in providing protection. They are also used for diagnosis. The necklace is formed of three sections, each one separated by a special agate rock. The necklace is tied with five pieces of colorful cloth: red, yellow, green, white and black, representing gold, wood, water, fire and earth. There are two copper bells and two silver spiritual objects on the necklace. According to Siqingua, this tool is used along with a heavenly sword and even serious symptoms can be cured.

The heavenly sword is represented as a pointed silver object. The beads circle the sword and when she is making a diagnosis she holds the beads up and lets them fall, seeing the direction they go. A diagnosis is made according to the direction they fall. This is repeated with various questions asked until the diagnosis is determined.

She uses the copper pointed object to treat external symptoms. This painted copper object is the tool of the Thunder Spirit. It is the most powerful spiritual tool for dealing with evil forces. It is effective for treating psychological symptoms. No matter how violent the patient may become, pointing this copper instrument calms them down and they will answer questions and cooperate.

She also uses *Ashalibe* for treatment. She prepares a pot of boiled water into which she has added milk, butter, alcohol and sage. Nine rocks are added from nine different springs. Then the *jurige tori*, which is her front brass mirror, is put into the water. She beats the drum



Ewenki shaman, Dula'r wearing a copper mask. Photo by Kun Shi.

and sings the shaman songs. Using a big brush she throws the hot water over the infectious areas of the patients. For the average patient three such treatments work, but for patients with more serious symptoms seven to nine treatments may be needed.

She uses a spiritual whip to expel evils. It is believed that in the open grassland there are many spirits wandering. Small children and the weak are easy targets of the evil forces. Whenever she treats patients afflicted by evil forces, she uses the spiritual whip. The whip is made of two parts: the handle, and the braided portion of colored threads consisting of eight different colors. At the top of the whip are three copper bells to scare away the evil forces.



Siqingua performs a ritual for getting the soul back to the patient. This ritual must be done at night. Before the treatment, seven small holes must be dug into the dirt floor in the room where the patient stays. A pot of water is prepared and a small bowl of millet is wrapped in cloth and hung by a thread from a ceiling beam as an offering to the spirits in the underworld.

When the ritual begins, all of the lamps are put out. The shaman beats the drum and dances until they are possessed. With the help of the assistants, the shaman lies down on the ground beside the seven small holes. The assistant sings three shaman songs telling the spirits in the upper world what happened, and whose soul the shaman has come to retrieve.

While lying there on the ground the shaman's hands and feet become cold and her body becomes unconscious. After several hours the copper bells on the shaman costume ring indicating that the soul for the patient has been retrieved. At this moment the assistant quickly shouts out as the shaman gradually wakes up. The shaman then conducts a ritual to thank the spirits, thus ending the soul retrieval.



Shamanic Theme Park. Kun Shi with a shaman, whose headdress is adorned with a flying eagle spirit. Photo by Kun Shi.

There is a ritual for making offerings at an *obo*, which is a sacred place, comprised of a circular shaped pile of rocks. On top of the rock pile are planted willow branches. Among the branches they tie colorful strips of cloth in red, yellow and blue. A master shaman usually conducts this ritual. It is not used for treating specific symptoms. This ritual is often done during the change of seasons. Offerings are made while asking for protection. This ceremony lasts for a day and includes a sheep sacrifice.

#### SHAMANIC THEME PARK

About an hour's drive from Changchun, a Shamanic Theme Park has opened, with its focus on public education and awareness. There are performances by an urban dancer who was taught by a true shaman. There is an authentic village shaman conducting healing ceremonies in a clinic provided.

Visitors have the opportunity to pass through tests similar to shamanic initiations, creating experiences of transformation by climbing specific ladders and crawling through a narrow cave.

There is a divination area near the entrance with pieces of rock holding certain signs.

Near the entrance is a totem pole based on Manchu mythology, with the eagle head-human body spirit nurturing a baby.

Fertility worship is an important part of Manchu culture. This has proven to be the most controversial aspect of the park. A nine-meter tall phallus sculpture, made of frame and rope, projects from the hilltop. This has attracted media attention and much discussion about whether this should be forbidden. Since the park is on private land and away from the city, it was ruled that it would be allowed to remain.<sup>7</sup> In the meantime the park gained mass notoriety all across China. ☛

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*(2006-2010); program evaluator of the Ohio Legislative Office of Education Oversight (2000-2005); and development director of the Asian American Community Services in central Ohio (1996-1999). He has taught in universities in Ohio and China, conducted field research in East Asia and Scandinavia, and published in Chinese and English in the areas of cultural anthropology and Chinese language education.*

*Susan Grimaldi, M.Ed., is a Field Associate for the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, specializing in audio/video documentation. She produced *Drums of the Ancestors, Manchu and Mongol Shamanism*, which was filmed during the 1995 FSS expedition. She returned to China in 2006 by invitation of Changchun University to make a presentation on reintegrating shamanism back into contemporary Chinese society. She is in private practice in Montpelier, Vermont. [www.susangrimaldi.com](http://www.susangrimaldi.com)*

#### NOTES

1. Papers on Tungus shamanism published in 2008; 2006; 2005; 1996a & b; 1991; 1990. Kun Shi has also presented on Tungus shamanism at universities in China and the United States, including the most recent at the University of South Florida. (The presentation slides are available online at [http://global.usf.edu/confucius/download/USF\\_CL\\_Lecture09162010%20-Shamanism%20in%20China.pdf](http://global.usf.edu/confucius/download/USF_CL_Lecture09162010%20-Shamanism%20in%20China.pdf).)

2. On September 4, 2010, there was a forum on Shamanism held in Changchun. During this event, a video presentation produced by Ifeng Television Network was presented showing segments of Siqingua performing the *Aominan* ritual. The production can be viewed by accessing the following link: <http://v.ifeng.com/culture/01009/0688add2-9bb2-4c7e-b0a6-9626950c3099.shtml>. The commentary has not been translated into English, but the visual component is quite compelling.

3. Despite the marketing strategy of the park owner, Kun was impressed by shamanic symbols everywhere in the park and the positive impact of shamanism on visitors old and young.

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*Spirit Messenger*. Mixed media on drum by Christine Holden. cholden741@verizon.net