

IN SEARCH OF TRADITIONAL SHAMANS: DAUR OF INNER MONGOLIA, CHINA, AND THE TSAATAN REINDEER PEOPLE OF MONGOLIA

Susan Grimaldi, M.Ed.

Susan Grimaldi, M.Ed., FSS Field Associate specializing in AV Field Documentation, and John Lawrence, Ph.D. videographer and photographer, recently undertook an expedition seeking Daur Shamans in northern Inner Mongolia, China, and to find the Tsaatan nomadic reindeer herders in the East Taiga of northern Mongolia. In both places, they observed the shamans working and witnessed their ceremonies, interviewed and filmed them. While in Inner Mongolia, they were joined by FSS Field Associate, Kun Shi. Here is Susan's report of their experiences with the shamans they met, including FSS Living Treasure, Daur shaman, Siqingua.

—the Editor

We began our journey in the northern regions of Inner Mongolia, China, in the cities of Morin Dawa and in a hamlet near Hailar. Vast grasslands and herds of sheep, goats, horses, and cattle distinguish this area. Our main objective was to see Daur shaman Siqingua, an FSS Living Treasure of Shamanism, brought to the attention of the Foundation by FSS Field Associate Kun Shi. Meng Huiyin, Professor of Anthropological and Ethnological Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, arranged for us to meet with the Daur shamans and she provided us with graduate students who assisted us. Without her support these meetings would not have been possible.*

We had heard that Siqingua kept written records of her healing sessions and we hoped to see these notebooks and witness her conducting healings during her daily morning clinics. We attended her healing sessions for several mornings. We learned about her healing techniques and practices, and also obtained an understanding of the types of the conditions she treats. We met

with several of her apprentices and filmed three Daur shaman ceremonies.

WO JUFEN

When visiting the first shaman, Wo Jufen, we were driven through alleyways to a beautiful compound that was her home.

Wo Jufen had been an apprentice of Siqingua and had become a full-fledged shaman. She was preparing to conduct a “coming of age” ceremony for a 16-year old male. She put on her costume and the young man sat in a chair.

Several people had been twisting raffia making 100 feet of rope for the ceremony. She tied the rope around the young man's feet and circled the rope up around his

neck and hands, which he had placed together in prayer. This was done in a very particular way. Finally the ends of the rope were twisted into one rope making it actually one big circle. Then five or six overhand, loop knots, were tied down the strand.

Wo Jufen sprayed a fine mist of alcohol from her mouth onto a sheet of paper that had cutouts throughout, and she had placed this paper over his face, then, folding it, she dropped it into a pan of liquid, which was a mix of water, vodka, milk and herbs. She played her drum. She used a small, straw broom to fling liquid onto the young man and sweep his back and front side, slapping it against his body on occa-



First night campfire on the trail in search of a Tsaatan shaman (see p. 25). Photo by Susan Grimaldi.

sion. She played her drum and chanted, then, using scissors, she cut the cord near his face. The rope was placed in the tub and it was taken out into the courtyard.

We were told that this ceremony would prepare him for growing into adulthood. It severed him from his youth, and cleared away obstacles from his past.

SIQINGUA

We (Kun Shi, John, and I) traveled further north in Inner Mongolia where we were invited by Siqingua to visit her clinic, which was located in her home.

Siqingua had a dozen or so jars with herbs, roots and sticks on her desk. She showed which would be good for arthritis, which for high blood pressure and also mentioned one that is helpful for healing broken bones and for bone cancer treatment. There was citron pepper that she recommends for menopause. In her office we saw the framed letter signed by Michael Harner, appointing her as an FSS Living Treasure.

We watched her do divinations with her beads and we heard about the problems people brought to her. She wrapped the beads around her fist holding them taut. They stood straight up in the air for a period of time before falling. We asked Siqingua about how she uses the beads for doing a divination. She demonstrated. She first gathered them up and rubbed them in both hands. She said that she could use her beads in seeing the future. Every time, the falling occurs in a direction (no rules). When the beads fall, the voices tell her. For example, she knows the name, sex, age, and zodiac sign of a person, before she begins. When the beads fall, she remembers what the spirit says to her. She senses the understanding.

One woman had heart troubles. She was told never to eat wild meat and not to argue with her husband anymore. A man had recently lost both parents. She told him that the disturbance he was feeling was because his parents were not buried together and that he needed to move them by July 14, so they are buried together.

The next patient was a 9-year-old boy. He had suffered with a chronic ear infection for five years. At some point, he had spent three months in the hospital receiv-

ing treatment. The parents gave Siqingua the child's name, date of birth, and a brief medical history, which she wrote in her notebook in her native language of Daur. She asked them several questions as she wrote. Then she looked at the boy's ear as she leaned across her desk. She wrote more information in her notebook, then she used her beads to do a divination.

She lit some incense and then approached the boy as he sat in his chair. She used smoke from the incense and cleaned around his head and ears. She had a black wooden stick that she used to press against and around the infected ear as she chanted. She wrapped her string of beads around her fist and stick as she pressed it against his head.

She then began to prepare the alcohol by blowing into the top of the bottle. She mouth-sprayed a fine mist of alcohol over the child's ears and head. Every time she sprayed him he would cringe and draw back. She sprayed him with the vodka and used the stick and continued to press it around his ear as she sang. She then collected several powdered herbs and poured them into a piece of paper, which she folded and blew upon, then she gave it

to his parents with instructions. She gave them the bottle of alcohol that had been made sacred and instructed them how to sprinkle it upon the earth.

In difficult cases, she dreams. She will write down the dream and the time of the dream. She will give this guidance to the client. She added a comment that this work tires her and that if she does too much without resting enough, it messes up her mind. She told two case stories of patients.

A baby of eight months had been to the local hospital, but that didn't help his symptoms. He had epilepsy. The parents were told that they needed to take the baby to Hailar to a hospital there. The parents were worried that the train ride would be hard on the baby and that he might die on the train due to a seizure. They came to ask Siqingua for help. She prayed over the alcohol and sprayed it over the baby. He got to the hospital and was quiet on the whole train ride without incident. Later, they brought the baby back to Siqingua and the baby smiled at her.

A 17-year-old man with a brain tumor was very agitated and couldn't hold still for a brain scan (they didn't know at the



Siqingua performing a divination with her beads (standing vertically from her right hand) at her clinic in Inner Mongolia, China. Photo by John Lawrence.

time that he had a brain tumor). Siqingua prayed over the liquor and he was able to get the scan (but he had delayed it for a year). During the scan, they could see he had a brain tumor. The family didn't have money for treatment, so Siqingua introduced him to a man with lots of money. He had surgery and six rounds of chemotherapy. The surgery left him not very functional. This was not too successful because they should have come earlier.

All of a sudden, Siqingua jumped up from her chair and her husband, Bateer, indicated that she was going to be possessed by spirit. She left the room, and came back dressed in silk, playing her drum and singing her spirit song. Siqingua then went back into her inner room. When she came back, she was in full regalia. Her costume was made of leather, with colorful embroidery, brass mirrors, and bells and cowries shells. There was a riding crop hanging at each side. Her boots were traditional and had a gathering at the toe with a little open place near the toe on top of each boot. She was bolting and jerking and had to be held up. She was bucking like a wild horse. They got her seated on her stool and

her son knelt at her feet. As she played the drum, he ducked his head back and forth, beneath the swinging drum.

There was to be a ceremony for me that was to begin at 3 p.m. that day. In preparation for the afternoon ceremony there was a lot of flurry going on as the cups, fruit, milk, and sweets were gathered for the altar and ritual. Beads were needed for my wrist. There had to be eighteen exactly. When we finally got all these things, Siqingua told Kun Shi that there was enough fruit for my ancestors, but not enough for hers. Kun Shi gave her some chocolate and hoped that would help.

I put on the white dress that Siqingua had given me. Siqingua played her drum and chanted. She soon fell into a trance and she bucked and jerked as her husband and apprentice held her. She was held up, lifted by her thighs and arms, as a stool was placed beneath her. I was instructed to kneel on the floor in front of her. Siqingua began her chants, calling on her ancestors and transmitting her power to me. As she did this our souls joined. I was told to sway beneath the drum as Siqingua waved it from side to side.

I was then instructed to close my eyes as Siqingua mouth-sprayed wine over my head and into my face. She did this many times. I was in an altered state of consciousness and I felt that I was going north to Lake Baikal. At some point, I was helped to stand up.

I felt queasy with too much power. I was taken outside by the apprentice and asked to take the little cups of vodka and milk and toss them between two trees as an offering.

Then, back inside, information was given. Siqingua had transferred the power of the original ancestors to me. I was instructed to collect water from nine springs and use this water and boil it to prepare tea and drink it for 81 days straight. Before drinking the tea, I should present it to the four directions and to the direction of Lake Baikal and then drink it.

There was a transfer of power from the original ancestor spirits to my hands, and I was told, "When you touch patients your powers will be greatly increased and when you touch a patient; you will have the correct diagnosis. Siqingua and you



In deep trance, Siqingua dances with her horses, supported and protected by her husband Bateer, who holds her securely by her girdle-sash. Photo by John Lawrence.

share some common fate, and that's why you have come so far." I was instructed, "When you come into a challenge, you are to consult our ancestors and ask for help." She explained that Siqingua and I have ancestors in common. These ancestors lived near Lake Baikal; 7000 years ago my ancestors migrated to a new land and Siqingua's ancestors stayed in this place.

Kun Shi was brought before Siqingua and he was told that her helping spirits wanted to acknowledge his contribution in bringing shamanic knowledge of the rest of the world.

While I had been making my offerings in the courtyard, John had asked for healing. Siqingua told John: "There is a pain in your knee. You should be careful not to expose the soles of your feet to coldness. Your sleeping area must remain dry (no dampness). You are to avoid the color red and to be careful not to ride in a red vehicle. If you should come upon an accident with blood, you mustn't go and watch it. Do not eat wild animals, especially deer and leopard." She said, "You have a stiff back that may lead to symptoms related to



Daur shaman Siqingua playing her drum during a ceremony. Photo by Susan Grimaldi.

blood circulation. One way to address this is to exercise. Eat food that will soften your blood vessels. Then you will live a much longer life. Also, the 20th day of the ninth month and the 4th day of the eleventh month, do not go in a northwest direction. As long as you pay extra attention, you will live a longer life. You will already live a long life. Within the next year, you should not go to a funeral, but if you must go, then go after the ceremony is over.”

John asked her if she had any advice for his healing practice. She replied, “If a patient is bleeding, it is best not to do anything, because their blood will cause problems for you. For fatal patients, if they are already on their way to another world, it’s better not to do healing because it would transfer your life force into that person.” She added that if he treats a patient who is dying, his life would be shortened by three years. After this year (Year of the Rabbit) is over, he can eat wild meat.

She was preparing to infuse the liquor with her prayers and she asked John if he would be drinking it or offering it (using it to make offerings). He said both. She said words and then blew into it. She told him to make offerings first, then drink it.

THE TSAATAN REINDEER PEOPLE OF THE TAIGA OF MONGOLIA

The second objective of our expedition was to try to find a small band of nomadic, reindeer herders called the Tsaatan, and we hoped we could meet with a shaman among them. We were headed to one of the most remote and hard to reach areas of Mongolia.

We (John and I) would need to travel hundreds of kilometers north, over ungraded terrain, through rivers, and then ride horses for days to elevations over 7,600 feet. This proved to be a very difficult and arduous undertaking.

We did succeed in finding the Tsaatan

in the Eastern Taiga, 20 kilometers from the Siberian border, between 51 and 52 degrees North latitude and 99 and 100 East longitude. The Tsaatan live in teepees called *Ortz*. Reindeer are milked daily and this milk provides the main component of the Tsaatan diet; they are seldom used for meat. The reindeer are also ridden and used as pack animals during nomadic moves.

We were welcomed warmly and we were able to meet their shaman, whose name is Saintsetseg, which means Good Flower. We were able to interview her, talk about her healing work, and experience this work firsthand.

We began by asking her how she became a shaman. She said it was a gift from heaven. She was paralyzed, her legs were paralyzed and she received a message from heaven that she was chosen. At that time she was 37 years old. The next step was that she received beads, which were made for her. She had a teacher named Munkhuu.



Summer encampment of one band of the Tsaatan Reindeer People of Khovsgol Aimag of the East Taiga of northern Mongolia. A raven's eye view of their Ortz (teepees: white in the foreground). Photo by John Lawrence.

“What do you do as a shaman?” we asked. She replied that she tells people’s destiny. We asked her, “Do spirits talk to you?” She said she would demonstrate.

Saintsetseg had a jaw harp strapped to a wooden horse carving. She did a divination for our translator, Puje. She played her jaw harp very softly for about three minutes, then reflected in silence for several minutes before speaking. She told Puje, about her family, especially her husband. She told Puje that her husband is fine, but asked Puje, “How many daughters do you have?”

“Only one,” Puje replied.

She asked if Puje’s daughter has some kind of sickness where she gets easily cold. Puje replied that her daughter does have this problem. The shaman’s sister explained that Puje needed to rely on the shaman to heal her daughter. She said that she would do a ceremony for her after the interview.

Saintsetseg said that there are five skies and she told us that she has a special spirit that takes care of her. “You have to have respect and believe in the highest sky spirits. That will help you to be touched and help you to be healed.”

We asked how she makes contact with the spirits. “I have to be dressed in a special, official dress and I use the drum.”

“Is the drum like a horse?” we ask.

“It’s a circle. The sound is like a horse hoof.”

She sees my drum. She is very interested. This is made of elk. I explain that I made it and that elk have big antlers. She pointed to my drum and reached for it. She played it and said it was a very good sound. She liked it. She took it.

She wanted to show us her drum. It is made of reindeer hide. She had her costume packed inside the drum. The drum is magnificent! It is big with wooden bumps along the edge. It is supposed to be this way. It serves a purpose. Each has a different meaning. We are told, “It’s very good for crossing the mountain. It helps (me) to go to different (other) worlds. When I start the ceremony and I have the drum in my hand, it helps me to leave this earth. It is like passing through the mountain to get there, for my journey.”

The blocks on the rim are wooden and carved. There are metal clangors hanging



Mongolian Tsaatan shaman Saintsetseg “Good Flower” with her drum. Photo by Susan Grimaldi.

in clusters in at least two places inside the rim. There is also a blue silk scarf tied in the back of the drum. She showed us the beater that was made of a goat’s foot. There was a metal hoop holding a cluster of metal that jingled at the bottom of the beater.

“Was your mother a shaman?” we asked. She told us that when she was 23 years old her mother had passed away. Her mother had been a very famous shaman known as Bobo. “My grandfather was also a shaman, as was my uncle, my father’s brother.” She didn’t know much about her grandfather, but more about the uncle. His name was Natsoo. He was a very strong shaman.

We asked, “What happened to you when you were sick?” She said that her knees were very painful and she couldn’t move and she was always feeling dizzy with some headache. She had a heart problem. She was sick when she was about seven years old. I asked if she had had a fever. She told me that she did. Her heart still has problems, but not much.

“How did you get better?” we asked.

“When I was 37 years old I received the message (to become a shaman) and I agreed. I received all that was given to me and I became a shaman. All the sickness and fevers were gone.”

Five years ago Saintsetseg’s sister had a stroke and her side was paralyzed. “Now I can’t ride a horse. I get dizzy,” she told us.

“How did you get better from your stroke?” we asked.

“My shaman sister helped me.”

We asked Saintsetseg if she would do a divination to find out about John’s health and future and to see what she could do to help him in a ceremony.

She played her jaw harp again. She told John, “You have a destiny to be a shaman. Everything is very good.”

We asked her when we should come back that night for the ceremony. She said we should come after sunset when it becomes a little darker. We asked if there was anything we should bring to the ceremony. “Bring candies and alcohol for the altar offering for my five skies and some money.”

We ask about the five skies. “Are they levels?” She answered, “Five Ongat spirit heavens, five gods. That’s where I get all the messages and information.”

That night Saintsetseg began to perform a ceremony. She began by mending her costume. She then prepared her altar and placed the offerings upon it. She had the gifts we had given to her. She took the drum that I had made for her and she began to play it. People were gathering in

the tent. There were several children and three male relatives present. Her older sister was there, too. One of the little girls helped by burning a branch of juniper, making smoke to cleanse the costume and drum. This girl helped the shaman put on her costume, which was blue silk with lots of long strips of white cloth hanging off the shoulders in clusters. The girl tied the robe together in the front. We could hear metal clanking. Her headdress was placed upon her head. It had a face with eyes and a mouth stitched onto the front, across her forehead. The headdress had a fringe across the front edge that covered her eyes. There boots were placed upon her feet.

A patch of reindeer skin with metal medallions was on the back of her blue, silk robe. We could hear clanging as she began to swing her body back and forth. There were colorful cloth strips hanging down in front and back. She bowed forward and chanted. She played the drum rapidly and stood. The drum covered her face as she swung, whipping her fringes. She was chanting in a quiet, muttering way. Her head shook back and forth.

John was asked to hold his jaw harp. She bowed forward and chanted. More colorful cloth strips hung from the patch of reindeer skin that adorned the back of her shaman robe. She was on one knee as she took John's harp and began to play softly. She held it inside the drum, which was up by her nose.

She then took her big reindeer drum. It was cleaned with juniper smoke. Her sister was flicking milk from a bowl onto the shaman. The energy escalated. She was moving faster and the drumming was more intense. Occasionally she would stop and start again. She jumped up three times and continued to drum and swing from side to side while chanting and shaking her head and bowing.

She was performing a healing ritual. She told John, "Now I am going to heal your sickness, the one you have been asking for. This is what this healing is for. Sit down here. Kneel down." John did as asked. She held a braided cluster of colorful, cloth whips that had jangles. She began to whip him gently on his back and waved this bundle around his body and flicked off the energy. She waved her hand over his

lower abdomen, as she seemed to be absorbing something, and then dropping this out of her hand, off to his side. She blew on her hand after releasing the intrusion. She took a bowl and drank some vodka. She told him that she had taken all of the bad things from him.

Everyone was asked to hold out the bottom of their shirts and she gave us a special blessing. She threw the beater into John's shirt and he was instructed to say, "Turig," and give it back. This was repeated for everyone present. Then she bowed at the altar and the girl helped her take off her

costume. The first part was done. She took off her dress, then came to each of us and told us what she had seen. Her costume was carefully put away and she again was wearing her deel and sash.

Then she lit a cigarette, as did her sister and their male relatives. The rest of us unwrapped candies from the bowl on the altar and ate these. She began by telling us that she saw very good things for us saying, "Everything I asked from the spirits has been accepted and received. Things will be good."

She cut a strip of white cotton cloth,



Saintseteg drumming in trance within her orts (teepee). The shaman's elder sister (background) is assisting, holding a bowl of reindeer milk used for blessing in this ceremony. Photo by John Lawrence.

ripping off a two-foot by one-inch piece. She wadded it up and blew on it, into it. She took a second strip and did the same after tying them together with a knot. She asked John to give her his jaw harp. She seemed to put it to her lips, lick it and blow on it, and then she tossed it several times into her lap, onto the white strips of cotton. She appeared to be doing a divination by flipping the jaw harp. She seemed to have a special way of tying these cloth pieces to the harp. She brought the harp, cloth and the knots to her teeth. When finished, she wrapped the ends all around the harp and as she gave it back to John and said, "Now you are my student. Keep it always tied to your jaw harp and keep it always on your body. Now your jaw harp is alive."

John expressed his thanks and said, "I want to thank you so much for all of your gifts and especially for using your shamanic power in such a good way to spread the energy to us. We will take it back with us, with honor and gratitude, to the United States. And we will take the power of your drum. Many, many people will hear the power of your drum."

I told Saintsetseg that it had been so special to witness the power of her ceremony and the beauty of her being, along with these wonderful people who had joined us—her sister, the children, and her male relations.

We were told, "You are welcome to come back." ☞

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 1994 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.

***ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The travelers wish to express their thanks to FSS Field Associate Kun Shi who connected us with Professor Meng Huiying, at the Institute of Anthropological

and Ethnological Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. (Professor Meng's Ph.D. dissertation is the first of its kind on shamanism in China.) Among other things, Dr. Meng made pre-trip planning and arrangements for transportation and lodging; sent one of her students to accompany us to Morin Dawa and Hailar; initiated contact with Wo Jufen, the Daur shamaness in Morin Dawa; and sent one student to Hailar to arrange accommodations and scheduling with Siqingua in Nantun. Professor Meng's relationship ensured that Siqingua was available to us and treated us as special guests. With Dr. Meng's generous help, our expedition in search of shamans in Inner Mongolia met with great success.