CHAPTER TEN

CHARACTERISTICS OF SHAMANISM OF THE TUNGUSIC SPEAKING PEOPLE

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Abstract

China’s Tungusic speaking people include the Manchu (滿族), Oroqen (鄂倫春), Ewenki (鄂溫克), Hezhen (赫哲), and Xibe (錫伯). These groups share traditional forms of shamanism. Not only has shamanism served as the foundation for the Tungusic peoples, but also continues to shape their cultures. The shamanism of China’s Tungus people has provided a unique vantage point from which to view the entirety of shamanistic phenomena.

In order to demonstrate the ancient nature of shamanism among China’s Tungusic speaking peoples, this article looks at the hunter-gatherer way of life and its relationship to shamanism and the clan structure. By examining the concepts of shamanism in its various manifestations and social functions, such as shaman illness, medical treatment, and shaman paraphernalia, this essay demonstrates the nature of shamanism among China’s Tungusic peoples. This essay also discusses the shamanistic tradition as it existed within the patriarchal structure of religion among the Tungus, the demise of the clan system which has followed the institutionalization of the position of shaman, and changes in shamanism following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Thus, this discussion elucidates the richness of shamanism among China’s Tungusic peoples.

The author puts forth the idea that the shamanism of the Tungusic peoples became a means of self-cultivation in terms of specific behavioral conventions and cultural ways of thinking. It has interacted with other experiential experiences in China’s Tungusic peoples.

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practices and adapted to ever-changing cultural conditions in history, thus maintaining its usefulness in social life.

Throughout its development, shamanism has been subject to continuous internal adjustment. Over different historical periods, its original function and scope, arrangement, and style have changed according to larger societal changes.

The Tungus peoples originated and continue to live in the Baikal (贝加尔) Mountains, the Greater Hinggan (Khingan) Mountains (大兴安岭), the 黑龙江 Heilongjiang River Basin, the Hulun Buir (呼伦贝尔) grasslands, and the 滨海 Binhai Mountains. Shamanistic culture has spread throughout this vast region. The Tungusic speaking ethnic groups of China include the Manchu, Oroqen, Ewenki, Hezhen, and Xibe. In Russia live the 乌耳奇 Ulchis, 奥罗克 Oroks, 奥罗奇 Orochis, 乌德盖 Udegeians, 埃文尼 Evenis, and 涅基达尔 Niejida’er peoples. The ethnic groups which make up China’s Tungusic speaking peoples live today at different stages of social development. However, the ancestors of all these ethnic groups share the same basic cultural elements. Shamanism not only laid the cultural foundation for the Tungusic speaking peoples, but also provided resources to further develop the cultures of these groups.

Years of research conducted by Chinese scholars has revealed that the spiritual beliefs and religious activities of the Tungus people still preserve some pan-language group characteristics. At the same time, each ethnic group has a unique tradition. In researching the shamanism of China’s Tungusic peoples, whether looking at it as a whole or in terms of specific features, one is provided with a unique vantage point from which to view the entirety of shamanistic phenomena.

I. The Ancient Nature of China’s Tungusic Peoples’ Shamanism

A. Hunter-Gatherer Economic Life and Shamanism

As social history has developed and changed, the original form of shamanism in hunter-gatherer societies has all but vanished. However, the Tungusic people of China have preserved their hunter-gatherer culture. Until the Ming-Qing period (1398–1911), most Tungusic people still lived in and to the north of the Greater and Lesser Hinggan ranges. The uniqueness of this geographical environment and its climatic conditions ensured that farming would prove sustainable in only a handful of areas, and thus hunting, fishing, and gathering still made up major sources of the population’s economic livelihood.

Before the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Tungusic peoples of China’s northeastern region (the Oroqen, Ewenki, and Hezhen, among others) were still at a hunter-gatherer stage of social development. These peoples did not, however, share a