

## In the Words of the Shamans

By Susan Grimaldi

In the following paragraphs, Susan Grimaldi has chosen to let the shamans we visited speak for themselves, each telling his own story of his shamanic calling. The result is like being there again.

*-the editor*

### Shi Zongxiang

*Shi Zongxiang is the only "selected" shaman for the Shikteli clan. We observed his work in Manka Village near the Songhua River. He functioned as shaman for this and one other nearby village. He was born in 1939.*

I was quite sick when I was four years old. I felt suddenly sick. I did things others perceived as abnormal. I was running around, speaking things that made no sense to others. I couldn't remember. It was really nothing physical. I could eat, drink, and sleep. The doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong. I was sick for more than a year.

After lengthy treatment by an elderly shaman, he determined I would become a shaman. He met the spirit of a selected shaman that had passed away and now resides in the Changbai Mountains. He went to the altar to ask the shaman spirit if I could become a shaman. Permission was given. My parents gave their approval and I was promised [when 6 years old]. When I promised to become a shaman, my sickness disappeared gradually. There was no healing ritual performed at that time. My teacher taught me to memorize chants and to learn ritual through written material. This way I learned the Manchu language. His teaching was like classroom work. He taught me how to chant and how to use equipment, like knives and hammers. He didn't teach one how to possess a spirit. After inviting spirits, it will happen naturally. When I was nineteen years old the clan leaders organized all members of the community together and let me invite spirits. The members then made comments. The community agreed I did well, and then I became a shaman.

The wild animal spirits originally resided in the Changbai Mountains. After many years they cultivate themselves into spirits and come down to the clan to give shamans help. These wild spirits are almost like double shapes. They reside in the Changbai Mountains and also reside with the Shikteli clan. The shaman spirit



put these wild spirits around the offering area of the Shikteli clan. The shamans play the animal spirits in their form to make the community people happy. Those who specialize with wild spirits rely on forwarding the message.

The flying tiger, king of all animals, can climb trees. The tiger would fly to the spiritual tree and fly around it. There used to be a huge larch tree that stood in the middle of many villages. People would go there if they needed to make offerings. The offerings included food, steamed bread, and incense sticks. And for good luck a red thread is tied to the tree trunk. Anyone in the village can use the tree. The shaman uses it for displaying the tiger's special skills. By climbing the tree they imitate the flying tiger, while the whole clan watches.

Willow wood is used to make the shaman drum. It is easy to bend. They used to utilize a chestnut tree to make the drum in the old days. The drum acts like wings when doing the Hawk Dance.

On my headdress there is a bronze mirror. When a shaman dances he can see everything. He sees with the mirror. This mirror is also a protective item. It reflects evil forces; when they [evil forces] see themselves in the mirror they run away. On my helmet are three birds. The one in the middle is an eagle. It flies high. Eagle is the highest among animal spirits. They communicate with the Upper World. The two birds on the sides are hawks. They are the second highest among animal spirits. They communicate and connect through the shaman. This happens when the shaman doesn't feel any consciousness. Then the bird can come in.

## **Zhang Yuhai**

*Zhang Yuhai's ancestors came from the south of China 300 years ago. They were brought here to be warriors. They became classified as Manchu although they are ethnically different. Zhang Yuhai was chosen to serve by the souls of his ancestors because they couldn't return home.*



My village is Gongtong. It used to be that the whole village was Zhang family. I am 74 years old, born November 27, 1921. I was sick between the ages of 7 and 8. The herbalist couldn't give an explanation. I was occupied, used by spirits. When I was sick I almost died. I was told later that I was saving a lot of things others couldn't understand. I had a high fever. Sometimes I would jump up and sit on top of a high chest-just sit there. I had a dream or vision that two tiny people, or dwarfs, came into my house through a cat hole. One was wearing a white hat and one a black hat. They

put a chain around my neck and tried to drag me away. My father jumped up and scared them off. Just moments later then heard a cry a ways off and someone had died. The people felt those little people had been angered and took the life of another.

The shaman said. "You are chosen, you must serve the spirits: then you will be well." After my promise to become a shaman and the approval of the elders, I became an assistant. First, there was a ceremony for me to regard the master shaman as my teacher. Then I had to read and memorize 24 scriptures. This was required because at major rituals these are necessary. I continued to farm and do chores. I did the study in the rest of the time.

I was constantly aware that I would be a shaman and do a shaman's work. Shaman means someone who does all the work for the deceased spirits. It is not really for those in the living world, except for healing rituals, or circumstances like disasters. Mainly, the healing is effective for those diseases caused by external supernatural forces.. Shamans do this work by communicating with the spirits. Usually, the shaman would invite the tiger spirit to do the healing, to be joined by Tiger. Shamans would dance and jump like a tiger around the patient, scratch and touch. The healing has to be done while the drum is beating, so the shaman can see the patient.

The purpose of the piercing [of the shaman's cheek with silver needles) is to invite spirits and drive away evil forces. The silver needles are used to represent the wild boar. The piercing of the silver needles is a kind of sacrifice. It shows a willingness to bear pain on behalf of others. This is done to invite the wild boar spirit, so he takes the pain in this way. Onlookers cry when they see me do this.

There are three parts of the headdress. The feathers decorate: they are attractive and beautiful. The bells create an atmosphere to attract spirits. The mirrors warn those spirits that are not invited to leave. When an unfriendly spirit looks in the mirror, it sees its reflection and is simply scared and runs away. The mirrors are a source of power.

My costume is new. My old costume I shared with another shaman. It was over 200 years old. The old shaman died last year. He wanted me to have the costume. I went to pick it up and found it had been burned by the shaman's wife, along with the drum.

I am worried there will be no one to take up my work. I hope my knowledge will be spread out. The most important thing for me to do is to pass on knowledge so when my eyes are closed I will feel at peace. This is an important part of Manchu culture, and if it vanishes the culture is incomplete.

**Serenchin**

*Serenchin is the most senior shaman in the Tongliao area. Inner Mongolia. He is 70 years old.*



Before becoming a bo (shaman) I was seriously ill and could not be cured by doctors. I was selected by the ancestors. I was told by my bo teacher that I was selected.

My methods of healing include wine or spirit spraying, bone setting, and I specialize in treating mental disorders. I was told by the spirits what would be my specialty. I sometimes can see spirits, especially when I am treating a seriously ill patient. Just about the time I was becoming a shaman, I was called by some spirits and I experienced a

journey into the world below. When I returned, I felt reborn. I felt I could fly.

In my chant I invite a spirit, a female bo. Most of the early shamans were women. My headdress has hanging strings to cover my eyes when I go into trance. My eyes go white and may frighten onlookers. The hanging strips covering my eyes represent female bangs.

I hope you can bring my drum sound to America."