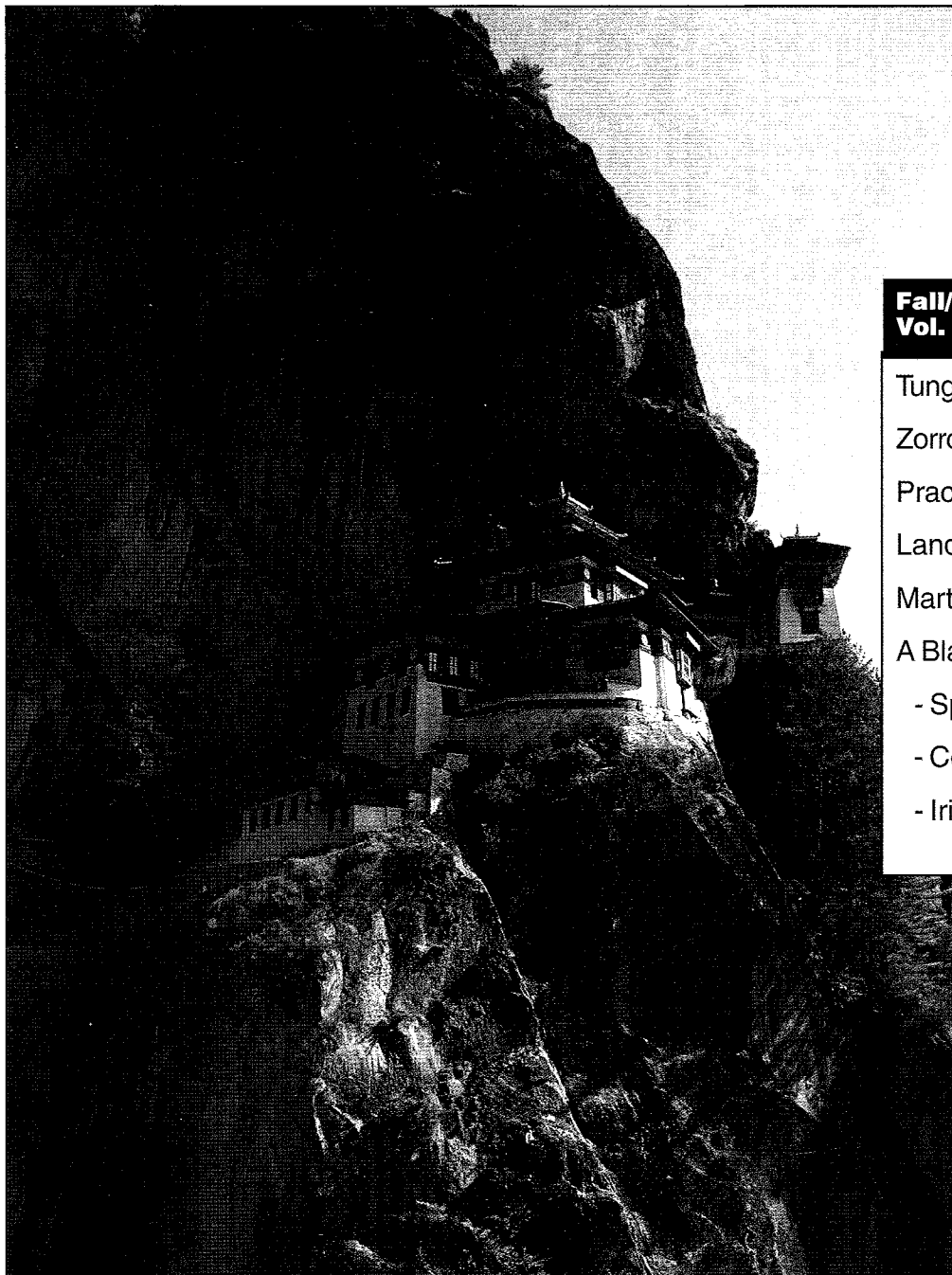


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Tungus Shamans

Zorro

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Good News Regarding the Tungus Shamans in Northern China: Field Notes from Changchun and Wulajie in Jilin, China, May 2006

Susan Grimaldi and Kun Shi¹

In May 2006, through Kun's coordination, we were invited to attend the opening of the Museum of Shamanic Culture at Changchun University in Jilin Province, China. Thanks to Michael Harner and Bill Brunton of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS), we are pleased to share our experience with readers of the FSS journal, *Shamanism*.

While in China, we sensed a willingness among researchers to explore the application of shamanic practices within the context of psychology and other fields of social sciences. Given the present revival of shamanic traditions in northern China, coupled with increasing academic freedom, Chinese researchers are valuing the shamans as transmitters of culture and keepers of cultural traditions.

Eleven years ago, we were members of an FSS sponsored expedition to this same area, where we visited practicing Manchu and Mongol shamans and recorded their harvest and healing rituals. As a result, several articles were published in the 1996 Spring/Summer issue of *Shamanism*, and a documentary video was made titled, *Drums of the Ancestors: Manchu and Mongol Shamanism*.²

In August 2004, right after the seventh Conference of the International Society for Shamanistic Research (ISSR), which was held in Changchun City, two independent Centers for Shamanic Culture emerged in the same city: one at Changchun Univer-

sity and the other at Changchun Normal University. Both of these centers have been working hard to advance the knowledge of shamanism and seem to have become the world center stage in the field of shamanic studies.

In November 2005, Kun returned to Changchun and discovered that the Center for Shamanic Culture at Changchun University was planning to open a new museum dedicated to shamanic culture. Kun was entrusted by the museum's organizing committee to obtain a Native American shaman costume for display at the museum, in addition to the numerous shaman costumes collected from the Tungus groups and Mongols. The plan was to open the Museum by the middle of 2006. (For more about Kun's visit to Inner Mongolia and Changchun, see his report in *Shamanism* Vol.19, No. 1.)

Kun proposed that the opening date for the Museum for Shamanic Culture be on May 18, as this is the day declared by UNESCO as the International Museum Day. The proposal was well received by the museum planning committee. Susan was willing to donate her costume, allowing it to become a part of the museum's permanent collection. This trip was made possible through Kun's coordination, Susan's donation, and with the generous support from Changchun University, with special thanks to the university's president, Zong Zhanguo.



Figure 1: Sign of the Museum for Shamanic Culture

Heading for Changchun in Jilin Province, May 16

Before traveling to Changchun, we met in Beijing with Ms. Meng Huiying, a research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. She wrote the first dissertation on shamanism in China and has since worked with dozens of shamans and written many books based on her field research.³ She was interested in finding out about Susan's history as a Native American and a practicing shaman. Dr. Meng shared many wonderful stories and photographs of her years of fieldwork with shamans across China.

While we were at the Beijing airport waiting for our flight to Changchun, we saw a sight we had never before seen. Outside, there was a solid mass of whistling whiteness, blowing so hard that our instinct was to move away from the windows. It came upon us in an instant and lasted about five minutes. It was much stronger than fifty jet engines at take off. People jumped up from their seats looking alarmed and amazed. Soon, after it stopped, we could see wet areas on the tarmac. People were bustling around looking to see if the aircraft parked

at the gates had been blown over. The sky flashed with lightning and we began to wonder if we should try to get our luggage and take the night train. We were told that our flight would be delayed for one hour as rain began to fall. We were soon boarded and bound for Changchun. We had to trust their version of the FAA to determine whether it was safe to fly. Kun thought perhaps that it had been a sand storm or a spiritual test of our will to revisit the land of shamans.

We were met in Changchun by Ms. Lan Ting and Mr. Sun Yunlai. Lan Ting is the Vice Director of the Center for Shamanic Culture of Changchun University. She coordinated arrangements for getting Susan's costume to the university. Sun Yunlai is also a Vice Director of the Center for Shamanic Culture and a senior research fellow of the Jilin Nationalities Institute, with numerous publications, particularly translations of Russian studies. Kun and Mr. Sun have known each other for twenty years and have worked together on several projects, including a documentary video of the Yao *shigong* (shaman) in Guangxi, southern China.⁴

A Preview of the Museum of Shamanic Culture, May 17

We got to visit the museum before the opening day. The staff of the Center for Shamanic Culture wanted to make sure that Susan's costume and tools were properly displayed. Mr. Sun also wanted to conduct an extensive interview with Susan regarding all of the components of her shamanic costume and tools.

We found the museum to be fantastic. It occupies the third floor of the brand-new Multi-purpose Building of the university, and only three of the five exhibit halls were then ready for public view. There was so much on exhibit! It took us hours to examine everything. There are over twenty shamanic costumes, twenty shaman drums, 100 shamanic idols, and many works of art. The costumes and other articles come from the Tungus-speaking groups (Manchu, Xibe, Ewenki, Orogen, and Hezhen), Mongolian-speaking groups (Mongol and Daur), and Koreans. Some articles came from the Nanai, which are located along the Russian border. The person instrumental in designing the

museum is Mr. Su Ritai, who was the director of the Hailar Museum in Inner Mongolia. He was suffering from a serious illness and could not attend the museum opening.

The staff at the museum was very proud to have an American-Indian shamanic costume included in their collection. Susan was overcome with emotion upon seeing her costume displayed there in the glass case. That day, Mr. Sun conducted an in-depth interview with Susan regarding the articles she had donated. He also told us that his center at Changchun University is producing a series of documentary videos on Tungus shamanism.

As planned by the museum organizing committee, we were asked to make a presentation at a seminar during the opening ceremony the following day. Susan was to talk about her healing work as a shaman, and Kun to present the current trend of shamanic studies in the U.S. That evening, we spent hours revising our presentations. We both agreed that a connection must be made between shamanic healing and psychotherapy because that



Figure 2: Shaman costumes and drums in one of the three exhibit halls.

Figure 3: Susan and Kun with President Zong Zhangguo.



approach is more suitable to and acceptable to the Chinese researchers. In the past, almost all Chinese researchers were interested in shamanism from the perspective of folklore and history. We hoped our presentations could spark some interests in the psychological aspect of shamanism. To our pleasant surprise, the Chinese researchers, particularly those at Changchun Normal University, are now extremely interested in the study of the consciousness and healing work of shamans.

Opening Ceremony of the Museum, May 18

By 8:30 AM on the opening day, dozens of people, including several reporters, had arrived at the conference room with a huge table and rows of chairs. There were forty-one researchers specializing in shamanism from across China at the opening ceremony. The gathering began with President Zong Zhangguo's opening speech welcoming everyone and stating the importance of the study of shamanic culture. Then Vice President Li Zhangguo invited



Figure 4: Dedicated staff of the Museum of Shamanic Culture [from left to right: Li Xiaoli, Lan Ting, Sun Yunlai, Wang Chengming, Han Lingeng].

everyone to go out for the unveiling of the museum sign. The group was then allowed into the three exhibit halls, one at a time. There was excitement expressed as the researchers appreciated the costumes, drums and artifacts. Several television and newspaper reporters were also busy interviewing President Zong and other researchers.

When we got back to the conference room, Susan presented her costume to the university president. It had been taken out of the glass case and placed on a big, red cloth tray. After giving this to the president, she was surprised and thrilled to receive a certificate making her an honorary guest faculty of the university.

Then, the seminar began with the following four presenters: Susan Grimaldi, Kun Shi, Mandu Ertu (a Daur scholar), and Fu Yuguang (a Manchu scholar).

Susan was introduced as a Choctaw tribal member and a practicing shaman. She began her presentation hoping to interest researchers in designing projects to be conducted in China with a focus on shamanic healing. Her talk emphasized how shamanism is now being recognized in the U.S. as an alternative approach to psychotherapy and how it is now gaining endorsement from the medical field. She discussed the mind-body link, stating the fact that she had lectured at the Medical School of the University of Vermont and worked in a hospital setting with doctors' approval. She spoke about treating depression with a shamanic approach and described the article on depression in a mainstream magazine that had featured her work.⁵

Kun presented to President Zong the original 5,000-colone currency note from Costa Rica which has the gold shaman figure printed on its front. (He discovered it by matching the currency note with the pre-Columbian gold figure displayed at the National Gold Museum in San Jose, Costa Rica.) An enlargement of this note is exhibited in the museum. Kun then talked about current shamanic studies in the U.S., using a Powerpoint presentation to show photos of recently published books, magazines, and organizations featuring academic work and experiential research, including the Foundation for Shamanic Studies.

Mandu Ertu (a Daur) is a professor of the Ethnological and Anthropological Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, and consultant to the new museum. He is an expert on Sibe and Daur shamanism. His presentation included congratulatory remarks to the museum and a brief review of shamanic studies in China.

Mr. Fu Yuguang (a Manchu) is considered a pioneer of shamanic research in China. He is a professor at Changchun Normal University and consultant to the new museum. He is an expert on Tungus shamanism (especially the Manchu) in Northeast China, and has played a vital role in the recognition of shamanism as the foundation of traditional cultures of the Tungus peoples. His presentation offered congratulations to everyone who made the museum possible and extended good wishes for more research work for Changchun University. He also reviewed the history of shamanic studies in Northeast China.

Finally, Susan was asked to demonstrate for the participants. Enjoying the feel of putting on her costume again as she prepared to demonstrate, she was led into the conference room as she began to chant a prayer to the four directions while using her rattle. As she began to play the shells, she shifted consciousness. Then, putting on her belt, she began to drum, feeling a powerful gathering of intent and help. With the rattle, she watched as seeds were scattered to help the practice of shamanism flourish again in China. She worked to discover and remove any obstacles that might block open-mindedness. There was a "charge" in the room as people scurried to get their pictures taken with her. Then everyone went outside for a group photograph.

Together with other participants, we were treated by President Zong to a banquet for lunch. At the lunch tables, people continued their discussion of how to move the study of shamanism to a higher level. One thing worth noting is that, when Kun explained Myron Eshhowsky's shamanic healing work with delinquents,⁶ President Zong encouraged his staff at the lunch table to explore the shamanic healing methods that could be useful in helping troubled youth.

That night, dinner was hosted by Mr. Chang Jilin, who is the Associate Director of the Jilin Province Commission for Minority Affairs, and Ms. Fei Liyang, Vice Director of Jilin Nationalities Institute. It is important to note that Jilin Nationalities Institute was the center for shamanic studies before the Centers for Shamanic Culture emerged at Changchun University and Changchun Normal University, and that most of today's primary researchers came from this institute. Mr. Chang Jilin also expressed his interest in the psychological aspect of shamanism.

During dinner we saw the story of the museum's opening ceremony on the prime-time TV news of Jilin Province. The headline was, "A new museum was born on the International Museum Day." President Zong Zhanguo and Professor Mandu Ertu were shown speaking about the great value of shamanic culture and saying that this museum is the first of its kind in the world. Susan was shown dancing and playing the drum while wearing her costume. The story of the museum opening was also reported by all major local newspapers the next morning. As with most social change, shifts occur gradually. When

shamanism is featured on the news and a major university is supporting research and opening a museum dedicated to shamanism, public attitudes are influenced.

Revisiting the Manchu Shamans, May 19

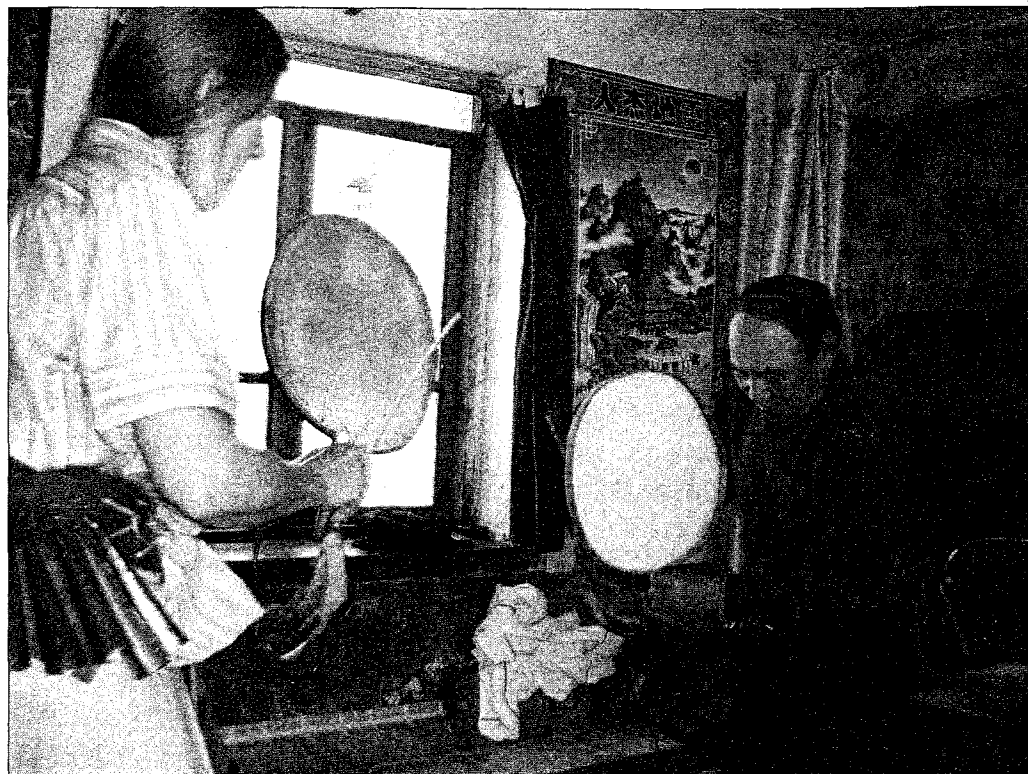
The weather was perfect with a clear blue sky and we were looking forward to revisiting the shamans we met eleven years ago. Changchun University was generous in providing transportation and arranging the visit to the home of the lead shaman (Zhang Zhonghua) in a Manchu village in Wulajie Township. This is the village of the master shaman, Zhang Yuhai, who was featured in the second segment of the documentary video, *Drums of the Ancestors*. Unfortunately, he passed away a few years ago. His son is a shaman living in this same village.

We rode in a van for two hours, and when we arrived, we were greeted warmly and invited to sit on the edge of a bed made of brick and covered with linoleum. Such a "brick bed" is common in rural areas of northern China, for it can be heated during the cold winter months. All five shamans who were



Figure 5: Kun and Susan with the shamans in Wulajie.

Figure 6: Susan dancing with master shaman Zhang Zhonghua.



performing with master shaman Zhang Yuhai for us eleven years ago met us with excitement. Some of the people were so emotional that we noticed tears in their eyes.

As our greetings and casual conversation continued, Kun got some important information. The current master shaman, Zhang Zhonghua, had medical training through a secondary school for nurses. He spoke of his concern that the local young people are not interested in becoming shamans and that he wants to pass on the knowledge to them. He is trying to get his son interested. He noted that in the past, people suffering from various illnesses would seek the help of a shaman and that some young patients would become shamans. The shamans in the Wulajie region are descendants of the Hanjun, Han military families of the Manchu rulers.

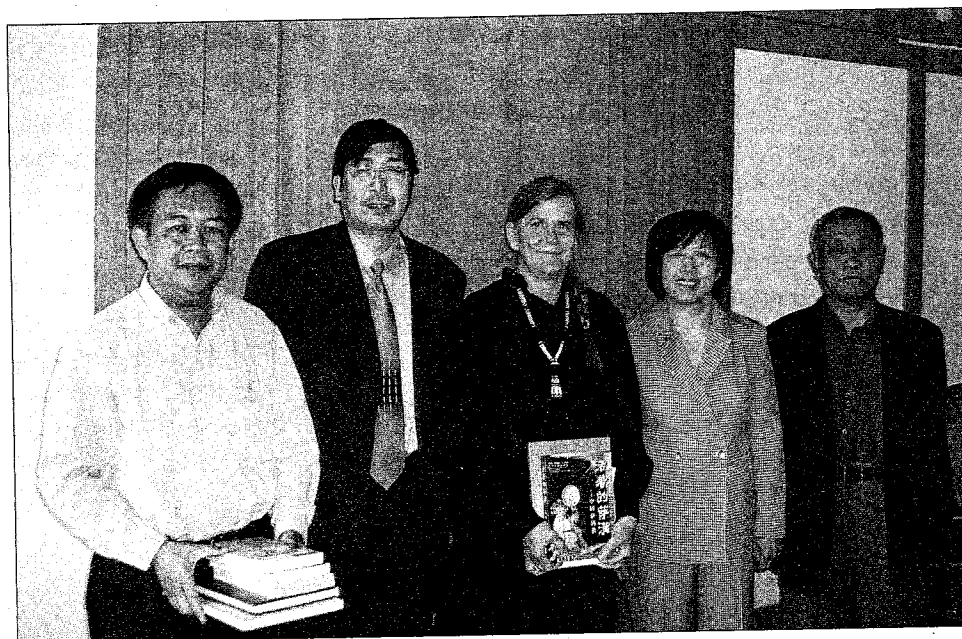
Among the Hanjun shamans, a master shaman is called *ling tang*, meaning (shaman) group leader. He is able to communicate with the spirits on behalf of his people, much the "same way as an interpreter for a foreigner." Each *tang* (shaman group) consists

of six to eight shamans, one being the master shaman. The *ling tang* would pass the knowledge to a younger shaman in the group once he became too old to perform the leading role. Each *tang* is formed by shamans of the same clan or with the same surname.

The Hanjun clan shamans have thirty-two bells on their waist belts. The Manchu shamans usually have thirty bells and the healers have twenty-eight. (The higher number implies superiority). Master shaman, Zhang Zhonghua told us that the Hanjun shamans often conduct rituals for community well-being and that they sometimes perform healing rituals for individuals. He said, "Those specializing in healing only are not real shamans, but are simple *wuyi* (healers)." Such remarks are probably due to a combination of factors: his medical training background, the Hanjun shamanic traditions focusing on large rituals, and the fact that few local residents seek healing from shamans.

When Susan had the opportunity to ask questions, she explained that after her last visit, she had

Figure 7: Kun and Susan at Changchun Normal University [left to right: Kun Shi, Vice President Liu, Susan, Guo Shuyun, Fu Yuguang].



gone home and decided to make a drum like theirs. She told them how she had heated the iron, hammered it and shaped the rim and handle, and then welded it, but that she had encountered some problems getting the rawhide onto the rim. The master shaman began by telling Susan that he would show her how to do this and proceeded to open a cabinet, then a chest, from which he pulled out five drums. He laid them on the brick floor and kept talking. "First, you get your hide soaked and wet and lay it flat on the table. Then place the rim like so." He pulled out a little, handmade, metal tool that looked like an old bottle opener. He demonstrated how to use this tool to tuck the edges of the rawhide around and under the drum rim. When the rawhide becomes dry, it contracts and the drum face is tight.

The master shaman also brought out a belt with conical metal clangors. What happened next was unprecedented. Susan asked if it might be possible for her to try on the belt. The lead shaman thought for a whole minute and then said, "Since she is a shaman it will be okay, but if she were not a shaman, it wouldn't be permitted." He helped her to tie on the belt. In the next moment, he put on another belt, handed Susan a beater for the drum, and they

began to drum and dance together. He then started to get fancy with his drum, swirling and tucking it behind his back.

We were reluctant to leave the shaman's village, but the planned time was up. Ms. Lan Tin and Mr. Sun Yunlai arranged a lunch for us and the five shamans in the nearby town, paid for by Changchun University. We are grateful to the university for its generous support throughout the trip.

Visiting the Research Institute of Shamanic Culture, May 20

Right after lunch on May 20, we went to Changchun Normal University to give a presentation to the faculty from various departments. Ms. Guo Shuyun is the director of the Research Institute on Shamanic Culture and the Center for Shamanic Culture of Changchun Normal University. She kindly coordinated our visit to her institute and the university on a Saturday. The very next day, she went to Wuhan University in central China to defend her dissertation, *A Study of Shamanic Ecstasy and Possession Phenomenon of Ethnic Groups in Northern China*, which is the first major study in Chinese on shamanism from a psychological perspec-

tive. We learned, happily, that her dissertation defense went through with "flying colors" and that it is a great contribution to the study of shamanism in China.

The Research Institute of Shamanic Culture at Changchun Normal University has a strong team of researchers who focus on the study of shamanism. Between the director (Guo Shuyun) and honorary director (Fu Yuguang), they have published several books, made numerous documentary videos, and collected many artifacts of Tungus and Mongol shamans.⁷ The institute will soon be releasing the first issue of its *Journal of Shamanic Studies* (in Chinese with table of contents in English).

Upon our arrival at Changchun Normal University, we received a warm reception by Vice President Liu Baoyuan, Ms. Guo, and her staff. As we entered the conference room, we found a dozen professors from many departments, including psychology, history, sociology, and philosophy. We began our presentations similar to what we did the previous day at Changchun University. Since we were the only two presenters, we decided to extend our talks and leave more time for questions. Susan spoke at length about her youth and how she became a shaman; she gave more details about the types of problems people come with who are seeking help.

The questions that followed were perceptive and suggested a great receptivity to understanding the true nature of shamanic healing practices. The first question was, "How much does Susan's background as a psychotherapist shape her sessions?" She explained that her training as a psychotherapist is quite useful in the initial part of the session when she is asking about what is concerning the patient, and that she draws on these skills when eliciting the patient's trust, but that when she plays the drum to seek a vision of the healing, she is no longer relying on the things she studied in school. She said, "When the healing is conveyed, there are no psychological theories that I use." They asked, "What makes the vision happen?" Susan explained that by listening to the drum beat and to the overtones simultaneously, consciousness is shifted and that while in the visionary state, she can see with a

greater perspective that yields insightful connections which come easily and quickly.

Kun made his presentation. He spoke again about what is happening currently in the U.S. with shamanic studies, including publications, experiential research, and healing. He presented information supporting the uses of shamanism for psychotherapy.

Again Susan was asked to demonstrate. Mr. Fu had brought a beautiful Manchu drum for her to use. She had her rattle and a beaded headband with her. She began by rattling and honoring the four directions, calling for help. Her intention was to let these people be touched by the spirit of inspiration and feel openness to this light of wisdom. When she beat the drum she became imbued with ecstasy. She was drawn to one side of the room as she perceived two men openly receiving the drum. She later identified the men as Mr. Fu and Mr. Song Di, a researcher from the Office of Jilin Local History. Mr. Song confided that he could feel the drum in his head and that it was like dreaming.

As the participants became interested in our presentations, we felt a strong connection with them. Everyone we met at Changchun Normal University, including Vice President Liu, is open to the study of shamanism, including its healing tradition. Our conversations continued over a delicious dinner and we were reluctant to leave to catch the evening train to Beijing. We promised we would come back for more exchange of ideas.

Concluding Remarks: Pleasant Surprises

As we are often surprised by the "great leap-forward" changes in China, such as the reports of a booming economy and modern infrastructures, we were equally (and pleasantly) surprised by the development of shamanic studies in China. When Kun visited Changchun in November 2005, the building to house the Museum of Shamanic Culture was still under renovation, and he was doubtful if the museum could be completed by May this year. When we reached Changchun, we were deeply impressed by the quality of the museum and the dedication of the staff at Changchun University. We want to thank Ms. Lan Ting and Mr. Sun Yunlai, with

total support from President Zong Zhanguo, for creating this wonderful museum for everyone around the world who has an interest in shamanism.

Most of us in the West tend to believe that Chinese researchers have to strictly follow the "Party line" in the study of shamanism. Again, we were pleasantly surprised to learn that Chinese researchers are actively exploring new territories of shamanic studies, including shamanic healing. Some of the questions raised at the Research Institute of Shamanic Culture of Changchun Normal University are not much different from those in a class on a U.S. campus. As if this surprise was not enough, we later learned that Changchun Normal University was approved by the national Ministry of Education to enroll M.A. students with a focus on shamanic studies starting in the fall of 2007 (perhaps the first graduate program in shamanic studies in the world). We want to thank Prof. Fu Yuguang and Dr. Guo Shuyun for their great contribution to the development of shamanic studies. Despite challenges, we sincerely hope this trend can continue to benefit people, both in and outside China.

There are even more surprises. After returning from China, Kun learned over the phone that several organizations in Jilin Province (including Changchun University and Changchun Normal University) are jointly submitting an application to register shamanism in northern China for a UNESCO World Intangible Cultural Heritage status. Regardless of the approval process, this action alone indicates how far China has developed in the revival of shamanic tradition and the study of shamanism.

Finally, we learned that several organizations in Jilin are planning to co-host another international conference on shamanic studies within the next year or two. We are looking forward to the opportunity and hope more pleasant surprises will come from Changchun, China.

Notes

1. Susan Grimaldi is from Montpelier, Vermont, and Kun Shi is from Columbus, Ohio. Kun is a guest professor of both Changchun University and Changchun Normal University. He has published many articles and book chapters on shamanism in China (SHI 1993: 47-57; 2004: 597-601).

2. The video (Grimaldi 1997) was produced by Susan Grimaldi and sponsored by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS). To order copies of the video or DVD, contact the FSS at www.shamanism.org.
3. MENG Huiying's books on shamanism (all in Chinese) include: HUI 1992; 1998; 2000; 2004.
4. Both Sun Yunlai and Kun Shi are editors of a documentary video. See Sun and Shi 1989.
5. Abramson 2003.
6. For Myron Eshowsky's work with delinquents, see Eshowsky 1998; 1999.
7. Fu Yuguang's books include: FU 1990; 2001; 2005. Guo Shuyun's books include: GUO 2001a; 2001b; 2005. The documentary videos and artifacts are for internal research.

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