

## BECOMING SHAMANS TO BE HEALED: REASONS FOR CONTEMPORARY PROLIFERATION OF HORCHIN SHAMANISM\*

URANCHIMEG UJED

Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, University of Cambridge  
61 St Thomas's Square, Cambridge CB1 3TG, United Kingdom  
e-mail: uborjigin@yahoo.co.uk

Healing through ritual has often been a common facet of shamanic traditions. Catching “shamanic illness” is recognised as a sign of a candidate in many cultures. However, among the Horchin Mongols in China, this phenomenon has taken on a modern twist. Many individuals, who are afflicted by so-called “incurable” illness, are turning to shamanism. What is interesting is that they do not do this to get healed by shamans, but rather seek self-heal through initiation as a shaman themselves. Horchin shaman masters take on hundreds, and even thousands, of “disciples” who would cure themselves in this way. This occurs among more rural folk. Key reasons appear to be the negative effects of industrialisation, urbanisation and technological advancement, coupled with the failure of medicine and health services to catch up with social change and growing expectations in China, and particularly in Horchin Mongolia. This paper investigates the reasons for the dramatic increase in “shamanic illness”, i.e. how people become shamans to heal themselves.

*Key words:* Horchin shamanism, self-healing, “shamanic illness”, mental health, development.

### Introduction

Returning to the Horchin Mongolian area in the east of Inner Mongolia (China) for the first time after thirty-five years, I was surprised to see the enormity of the changes since my childhood during the 1960s and '70s. My first impression can simply be described as “abundance” – the abundance of substances and free time; and “easiness” –

\* This paper is a result of a British Academy funded research project entitled “Becoming shamans to be healed – Self healing practices in Horchin Mongolian shamanism in contemporary China”. It focuses on the reasons for proliferation of Horchin shamanism rather than the changes in shamanism itself. The self-healing process of the initiates will be examined in another paper as another part of the project.

the ease life, at least compared to the past. However, I was also struck by an unusual proliferation of shamanism<sup>1</sup>, which had been a scarce practice. It is now said that every village has at least one shaman in Horchin Left Flank, Rear and Middle Banners, Tongliao Municipality (Former Jirim Aimag), Inner Mongolia.<sup>2</sup> A certain village called Būdūūn Modun Ail is even said to contain more than 80 shamans. Master shamans often have hosts of disciples which are constantly on the increase. One of the best known shamans, Muunohai (1954–2017), once claimed to have at least two thousand disciples (in fact, he himself did not know the exact number as he did not keep count). I wondered if there was any correlation between the two striking changes noted above.

According to Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, “meaning of religion in a given society is determined primarily by feelings of existential security and by threats posed by physical, social, and personal risks. In societies, where greater existential risks abound, the need for religion is purportedly greater than in societies that wield a higher degree of existential security” (Norris–Inglehart 2004, p. 4).

This theory is an excellent explanation for the reasons for revival and proliferation of shamanism in other Mongolian societies, such as those in Russia and Mongolia, where shamanism plays a role of dealing with difficulties and uncertainties after the collapse of socialism (Buyandelgeriyin 2007; Buyandelger 2013), especially where shamanism is linked to cultural revival. However, in the context of rapid economic growth and social development in China, and the above-mentioned abundant and easy life of Horchin Mongols, where traditional culture was never as eroded as in other Mongolian societies, one may wonder what threat and insecurity compel so many people to turn to shamanism?

Shamanism in Mongolia and Russia has been revived and reconstructed also as an indigenous national religious form and is playing the role of an agent of cultural revival or identity construction, history recovery (Shimamura 2014) after seventy years of socialism. It is even recognised as an indigenous national religious form (see Balogh 2010, p. 238).<sup>3</sup> However, the socio-political conditions and religious status of Horchin shamanism is different. On one hand, the period during which traditional culture and identity was repressed was very brief, mainly during ten years of the Cultural Revolution. There were no “lost” generations or a break in the transmission of culture, especially in the countryside. Even shamanism, though politically repressed, managed to maintain an unbroken lineage, albeit somewhat outside mainstream society. Its growth today, though indeed a proliferation, cannot be called a revival in the

<sup>1</sup> Horchin Mongols are one of the few Mongolian groups that preserved shamanism. For the distribution of Mongolian shamanism, see Balogh (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Horchin Mongols had been under the rule of Chinggis Khan’s younger brother Khasar and always been relatively independent but powerful supporters of the Chinggisids throughout the Yuan Dynasty. During the Qing Dynasty they became close allies of the Manchu rulers. In comparison to other Mongol groups, Horchin Mongols, numerous in number, are sedentary (semi-pastoral, semi-agricultural) in livelihood and very rich in culture. Banner (*hoshuu*) is an administrative unit lower to League (*aimag*) and higher to Arrow (*sumu*) introduced by the Manchu Qing court.

<sup>3</sup> A certain shaman was even entitled the “State Shaman” and conducted a president convene state offering to the holy mountain Burhan Haltan Uul.



Figure 1. Muunohai shaman is training his disciples

sense of shamanism in Mongolia and Russia. On the other hand, however, shamanism is still labelled as superstition and is still outside the scope of recognised religions under the state religious policy. It is mainly confined locally and has not been brought into any major national cultural arena.

On the international stage, Horchin shamanism has just started drawing academic interest (Zikmundová 2006, 2008; Balogh 2010), both scholars noted the similarities of Horchin and Manchu Sibe shamanism. Local scholars have conducted very comprehensive studies on the beliefs and practices of Horchin Shamanism (Hürelsha–Bai 1998) and the art of Horchin shamanic music (Chen 2010). However, as yet, there has been no other study that would make an attempt to explain the contemporary growth of Horchin Shamanism.

In order to understand why Horchin shamanism has proliferated, I have carried out extensive research among Horchin shamans from 2014. The most famous contemporary shaman masters are disciples of Serinchin (1925–2007) who was one of the most influential Horchin shamans of his generation. I chose to shadow the late Muunohai shaman (Figure 1) and his disciples as my main informants for this project. T. Muunohai was one of the most prominent contemporary shamanic masters who held an unbroken lineage going back to five generations. His extensive network of disciples also made contacting a large number of informants possible. This paper comprises over a dozen fieldwork observations and interviews with Munnohai and his disciples from 2015 to 2017.

Muunohai lived in Nugusutai Town of Horchin Left Flank Rear Banner, Tongliao Municipality. It is located 36.6 km to the south of Tongliao city. Muunohai used to work for a local granary. He had always been in ill health and, although informed of his shamanic destiny since his young age, he had kept refusing it. However, when his health deteriorated in his thirties, he could not resist it any longer and became a disciple of Serinchin shaman. His own disciples had come from all corners of eastern Inner Mongolia. Some have themselves taken disciples. My fieldwork findings show that what makes the modern proliferation of Horchin shamanism unique is the predominance of the patients' self-healing practice. The so-called "shamanic illness" is the primary, if not the sole reason for people's decision to become shamans, and consequently the cause of the boom in shamanism. Healing others is virtually never a motivation. Almost all initiates claim that there was no other choice than to become shamans because they had fallen victim to "shamanic illness" that is considered undetectable and unresponsive to medical examination and treatment. They had exhausted all other alternatives and turned to shamanism as a last resort.

### 1. "Shamanic Illness"

"Shamanic illness" (Hor. *bee-nai ebchin*; *suudal-in ebchin*, Wr. Mon. *böge-yin ebedchin*; *sagudal-un ebedchin*)<sup>4</sup>, is used to refer to ailments which often cannot be diagnosed by modern medical practice and which are long-term, intractable and/or incurable illnesses. It is called "shamanic illness" because sufferers are often considered as a sign for being chosen by a spirit to be a "mount" (Hor. *hüleg*; Mon. *hölüg*). It is said that such illnesses cannot be cured and can even lead to death if the chosen one does not accept the spirit and embark on the path of becoming a shaman. Often, those who turn to shamans for help do so after years of ineffective, expensive medical treatments. Most initiates claim that they experienced periods of hesitation and refusal to be a shaman and that ultimately they had no alternative and their healing was only through their shamanic initiation.

"Shamanic illness" is not peculiar to Horchin shamanism, it is also acknowledged in shamanism in other Mongolian groups, and also by some of the other shamanic traditions where the initiation of the candidate is equivalent to a cure (Diószegi 1962; Badamhatan 1965, p. 229; Humphrey–Onon 1996; Balogh 2010; Eliade 1972, pp. 27–28; Walter–Fridman 2004, p. 420).

"Shaman's sickness", or initiatory illness, refers to the specific, physical and/or mental illness that results when a spirit chooses a new shamanic candidate and possesses the candidate or takes his or her soul into the spirit world. The sickness does not respond to normal treatment, nor does it progress like a normal illness. It may advance and retreat without reason and defy our understanding of how similar symptoms normally function in the body. This illness is cured only when the one stricken surrenders to the will of the spirit (Pratt 2007, pp. XL, 435).

<sup>4</sup> Hor. Stands for Horchin; Wr. Mon. for written Mongolian.

However, the application, function, scope and nature of “shamanic illness” in Horchin shamanism have a “modern twist”. There are often more opaque reasons and complicated motives behind this seemingly straightforward reason to pursue the path of a shaman.

### ***1.1. Shield against Ridicules***

As mentioned, “shamanic illness” tends to be the primary reason for becoming a shaman in Horchin today. In the past, there were other ways to recruit shamans in Horchin as well as other shamanic traditions apart from illness. For example, hereditary transmission, appointment, dream, vision and exhibition of a “special power” (Humphrey 1999, p. 5), chance encounter with a source of “power” and individuals’ quest for it (Eliade 1972, pp. 13–23). Illness is becoming less important in most modern “revival” traditions in Inner Asia. In Mongolia, most of the leaders of urban shamanic centres claim that their special talents such as art and music are shamanic traits (Balogh 2010). Buryats in Mongolia become shamans to solve economic hardship, misfortunes and uncertainties encountered after the collapse of socialism (Buyandelgeriyin 2007).

On the contrary, the cause of why “shamanic illness” has become fundamental in Horchin lies in complex historical, religious, political and cultural factors among which Horchin shamanism operates. In Inner Mongolia, traditional shamanic norms of practice and transmission continued to exist through the communist period relatively undisturbed. We therefore have a curious situation. Whilst shamanism has remained an unbroken tradition, the cultural dominance of Tibetan Buddhism also continues, along with the historical distrust and prejudice towards shamanism fostered by Buddhism since the end of the 16th century. Most people, including followers and even practitioners, do not like or trust shamans. This was reinforced during the modern period. Politically, as mentioned above, shamanism was labelled as superstition during the Cultural Revolution and is still outside the scope of recognised religions under the current state religious policy. In contrast, Buddhism is now recognised as an official religion to the point where it has become fashionable even among some political circles to openly demonstrate piety. On the one hand, traditionalists view shamanism with distrust and label it as “black magic”, whereas modernists look down on it as being primitive superstition; indeed it is still officially labelled as such by the state government, or as less fashionable than Buddhism by more cosmopolitan types. That is why people take the incurable “shamanic illness” as their reason for becoming shamans; they do not think it is decent to be a shaman, so almost all of them had experienced a period of hesitation before accepting the shaman masters’ “diagnoses” and invitations to become initiates. For example, Zhang Meirong, a 44-year old shamaness said “I did not believe in the master’s suggestion of me becoming a shamaness in the beginning. When it was possible not to, I did not come to the master, but came only when I could not stand suffering any longer. Even now I do not believe in it completely”.

Apart from their own disbelief, they are also concerned about being mocked and looked down upon by other people as being ignorant, superstitious and hidebound. Zhang Meirong remarked “Village people mocked me saying I was mad at the start. Some say that we [shamans] were just a group of imprudent people. Some said that we were part of Falun gong<sup>5</sup>. We are embarrassed [by this] but the problem is we feel ill and suffer”. So, “shamanic illness” no matter what it really is, serves as a shield for Horchin shamans from ridicules and criticisms.

Furthermore, “shamanic illness” serves only as a trigger for one becoming a shaman whereas in many other societies it is often an important component, or even a “must” of the initiation process which often requires the initiates’ death and resurrection (Eliade 1972, p. 33; Pratt 2007, pp. XL, 375).

“Adoption of the shamanic role is often motivated by a psychological crisis, an initiatory period characterized by illness or insanity provoked by the afflictions of spirits. This crisis generally leads to a death-and-rebirth experience involving the dismemberment and reconstruction of the initiate’s body that imbues them with powers” (Winkelman 2004, p. 64). Even the psychopathological and somatic disorders are considered the prerequisite traits of shamanic vocation (Eliade 1972, pp. 23–26). In contrast, “shamanic illness” in Horchin shamanism is simply a message of the spirits’ demand for the candidates to accept them. As long as the afflicted accept the master shamans’ diagnoses and get initiated, the spirits would lift the affliction. Recurring symptoms are considered the neophyte’s lack of commitment. Muunohai shaman said: “The illness caused by *shütgen* (Wr. Mon. *shitügen*, tutelary shaman spirits, often that of dead shamans) and *sehüüs* (Wr. Mon. *sahigusu*, animal spirits) is called *üljii mürte ebchin* (Wr. Mon. *öljei mörtei ebedchin*, fortunate illness)”. One gets well, once the spirits are installed. If the spirits are not accepted and installed, they would at least take his/her limbs or even life at most.

As most of those initiates are reluctant shamans, they do not want to take up shamanic profession if it is possible not to. Technically, having their spirits installed and passed their *dabba* (shamanic tests which have been an essential part of traditional Horchin shamanism), disciples become fully fledged shamans. Unlike in other religions, and indeed other shamanic traditions, there is no necessity for them to practice; it is not a profession to be a Horchin Shaman, the clear majority of disciples do not go on to take their own disciples or conduct rituals. Some remain silent and go back to their ordinary lives after they get well, but they still consider themselves to be shamans, because they have shamanic spirits installed and passed necessary tests. More say they had to return to their masters to participate in ritual, drumming, dancing and singing to propitiate their spirits as soon as their symptoms returned. In this case, shamanic rituals serve as a continuing therapy. A 55-year-old initiate called Wu Jinrong said she had to come frequently to her master’s place to participate in dancing, otherwise she felt agitated and could not carry out functions in her normal life. Bao Tuyaa also said that if she did not go into trance for some time, she would feel ill

<sup>5</sup> Banned religious group in China, often ridiculed by the people due to how negatively they are presented in news media.

and that she felt much more relaxed after a trance. Most such initiates do not take up shamanic profession actively, they do not call their spirits to possess them at their homes, only at their master's place. A smaller number of initiates took up shamanic profession and practise healing, and conduct rituals on behalf of other people. Such people also take disciples when they become confident. For most initiates, shamanism essentially exists as a form of psychotherapy.

### ***1.2. Upsurge of “Shamanic Illness” – Side Effects of Development***

Apart from having prerequisite traits and the necessary initiation process for one to become a shaman, “Shamanic illness” in Horchin shamanism today tends to cover a wider range of psychological disorders and related somatic complaints which are undetectable and incurable by bio-medicine, at least as it is in rural Inner-Mongolia. Thus, the distinct particularities found in the shamanism of Horchin's past and other societies become blurred. According to Muunohai shaman, “there are 404 kinds of illnesses, of which 101 are cured by medicine, 101 are cured automatically by themselves, 101 by folk remedies, and only 101 by shamans. The ones cured by shamans are mostly those caused by supernatural forces. ‘Shamanic illnesses’ caused by shamanic spirits belong to the last category”.

The question here is why such a large number of Horchin people are getting “shamanic illness” today? Contrary to other Inner Asian countries, where shamanism proliferated due to economic difficulties and hardships, as well as the cultural revival, in Horchin the rise in “shamanic illness” is attributable to economic development and modernisation. There are negative consequences of the social changes that paint a rather different picture than the usual one presented by development and international health experts. As Sugar–Kleinman–Heggenhougen (1991, p. 213) and others observed:

“The behavioural and social outcomes of development will be formed by interaction of local knowledge and practices (including cosmologies, idioms of distress, and health practices) and structural changes. Variation is to be expected in the epidemiology, clinical course and outcome of such behavioural pathologies as depression, suicide, anxiety, substance abuse, psychoses and psychosomatic conditions.”

The symptoms of those diagnosed as “shamanic illnesses” have some commonalities, of which the majority are primarily psychological symptoms, often with some accompanying physical complaints. Common mental symptoms include depression; paranoia; mood swings; inertia and ennui; alcohol abuse; excessive anger; hostility or violence and suicidal thoughts. Accompanying physical complaints include fatigue; low energy; insomnia; pain in certain parts of or all over the body; headaches; heart palpitations; dizziness and feeling sick. Following are a few of the typical examples.

In her description of her symptoms, Bao Tuyaa, a 44-year-old neophyte shamaness said:

“I had no energy all day, felt fatigued and dizzy; eyes blurred; I did not feel like doing anything. There is nowhere without pain from head to toe, I would wail, laugh, smashing bowls and plates, could not eat, no desire to live any longer. I felt very relaxed and comfortable at the thought of dying. I acted as a mad woman towards my husband, shouting and yelling at him.”

Wu Chun yan, a 33-year-old neophyte shamaness told me how much she suffered:

“I had headache and felt dizzy. I could not sleep at night but slept soundly during the daytime. Nothing went smoothly or successfully. I knew I had no disease. When I went to hospital everything was normal. I took pain-killers by the handfuls but nothing happened in neither good nor bad ways. Nearby pharmacists all knew me because I often went to buy medications. I would stare into the mirror at night, even in the darkness. Actually, I could not see anything but was just messing about. As I was no longer fit enough to do the hotel job I had, I quit it and got a job through acquaintance in the dining hall of Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities. My work involved merely scanning student’s card for payment. But sometimes I could not even scan a card on the machine and one day I just collapsed at work.”

In comparison, the symptoms of male shamans tended to be more hostile and violent.

Li Shobuu, a 25-year-old neophyte shaman told me:

“I drank and quarrelled with others. Felt so irritated that I did not know what to do. I was scared of nightfall, sitting there watching out for the signs of dusk in the far away horizon. I could not sleep, just smoke at night. I could not and did not like doing anything. I often beat people. Those who were beaten by me stayed in hospital for a couple of months on my parents’ expenses. Someone had got 9 stiches on his hand. Once I was wounded after fighting with a dozen of people. In the end, I ran over someone by motorcycle and also beat him. I was arrested and sentenced to prison for half a year.”

Another shaman, 47-year-old Xia Mergen also reported very violent behaviour. His wife, also a shamaness, related:

“From 2001 Mergen’s personal character changed and became unrecognisable. He drank liquor as if it was plain water in the daytime and did not eat, did not sleep at night but troubled us in various ways. He was gone for days and weeks and returned only a few days after the “full month” of my daughter’s birth. After he came back, he grabbed my hair and started beating me. I was very scared and ran away to my mother-in-law’s. He did not stop when he saw his parents. While his mother was trying to stop him, the chopping knife at his hand fell on my hand and cut through the tandems of my three fingers. Sometimes he chased



us with a sickle in his hand shouting “I will kill you”. I hid or slept in other people’s homes with my children for days. I lived with him for three years during his “madness”, and was tortured by him and suffered so much that I could not sleep day and night, could not eat properly and my body weight reduced to 72 *jin* (31 kg). I regretted everything and was disappointed with my life and considered divorcing him but did not do so due to pitying my two children.”

These are just a few examples. The symptoms of all the other shamans interviewed contain many overlaps as well as individual particularities. If compared to Western psychiatric diagnosis, some might fit into depression, others into anxiety some into MUS (medically unexplained symptoms),<sup>6</sup> and some may even be explained as symptoms of menopause. Although there are some common features of “shamanic illnesses”, it is a culture-specific and situational phenomenon which allows room for practitioners to manipulate in accordance with their cultural logic. In contemporary Horchin shamanism, anything that cannot be detected and diagnosed by means of medical examinations, such as laboratory tests and scans etc. are taken as “shamanic illness”.

### 1.3. The Ones “Anointed” by Spirits

In the past, although there were cases when people who had no shamanic lineage in their family became shamans because they were chosen by spirits (Hor. *toomal*, Wr. Mon. *togumal* meaning ‘chosen’, in which case, the candidate might have had suitable mental traits to be a shaman), most shamans were hereditary from either their father’s or mother’s side. However, in present-day Horchin, most initiates are “chosen ones” because of being diagnosed by shaman masters as being afflicted by “shamanic illness”.

When I asked Muunohai shaman about who his disciples were and how they came to be shamans, his answer was: “They are the people who have spirits on their body, so they are ill and come to make me teacher, and then I help them *üjüür gargah* (Wr. Mon. *üjügür gargahu*, meaning to solve the problem like finding the end of tangled yarn).” The question is what kind of people get this kind of illness?

There are clear patterns amongst people who were diagnosed with “shamanic illness” that led them to become shamans:

Firstly, there are more women than men, which represents a significant shift in gender division of Horchin shamans compared to the past. There is a list of shamans

<sup>6</sup> A study of specialist care showed that the number of lifetime somatic symptoms was significantly and positively related to the increase in the number of current and past episodes of anxiety and depression. The presence of somatic symptoms, whether medically explained or unexplained, was associated with psychiatric morbidity (Nimnuan – Hotopf – Wessely 2001). Sometimes symptoms of a mental health disorder appear as physical problems, such as stomach pain, back pain, headache, or other unexplained aches and pains.

from three Banners, Darhan, Bowang and Hūree by Han Togoo (2012).<sup>7</sup> He listed 55 shamans who lived in the 20th century (active in the first half of the century) and only 8 of them were female; 1 out of 10 from Bowang and none out of 9 from Hūree were women. However, today, the majority of shamans in these areas are female. Although there is no formal and accurate statistics of the number of shamans in Horchin, we can see a sharp contrast between the female and the male shaman's number based on a few occasions of test (Hor. *dabaa dabah*, Wr. Mon. *dabag-a dabahu*, going through passes, tests) ceremonies I recorded, two of Muunohai (Figure 2) and one of Wang Tegshi (Figure 3) who was from Darhan Banner.

Date	Female	Male	Master shaman
13th June 2013	24	13	Bai Muunohai
1st August 2015	18	6	Bai Muunohai
2nd August 2015	30	10	Wang Tegshi

Secondly, according to Bai Muunohai, the age range of his disciple shamans is between 25 and 55. However, from the statistics of the test ceremonies he held on the 1st August 2015, people in their 30s and 40s occupy the majority.

Age \ Gender	Female	Male
20s	1	1
30s	1	3
40s	15	1
50s	1	1

Regarding a correlation of gender and age, the majority of females are in their 40s and males in their 30s.

Thirdly, by occupation or livelihood, the vast majority of the disciples come from the countryside, and there is a small number of migrant workers from cities and towns. There are a few exceptions who come from other backgrounds, such as primary and secondary school teachers. In terms of education, they are mostly people with low levels of education who did not have education beyond primary or junior secondary school. There are also a few exceptions who pursued university studies and one rare exception of a doctorate candidate.

<sup>7</sup> Han Togoo is a writer who began to investigate Horchin shamanism for the purpose of writing a novel. However, he ended up recording everything he had “seen and heard”, and after many years of participant observation and extensive interviews, he wrote an ethnographical monograph entitled *The Essence of Horchin Shamanism*.



Figure 2. A Neophyte is climbing the Nine Blades ladder which a major test



Figure 3. Wang Tegshi shaman's disciples dancing before passing their tests

## 2. Shamans – the “Step Children” of Development

My curiosity about the increase of “shamanic illness” in Horchin shamanism sparked the question: “what is the relation of this phenomenon to the rapid economic developments and technological advances that took place in Horchin society?” Sztompka’s argument is applicable to explain this.

“The concept of trauma, borrowed from medicine, suggests that change per se, irrespective of its content, but provided that it is sudden, comprehensive, fundamental and unexpected, may produce painful shock for social and particularly cultural tissue of a society. Paradoxically, this applies also to changes which are otherwise progressive, welcome, and intended by the people” (Sztompka 2000, p. 275).

It is because “progress is not uniformly and unequivocally good for all members of society: what is good for some, may be bad for others” (Sztompka 2000, p. 277).

It is important to examine what development and prosperity mean for a certain group of people in the Horchin countryside. Since the 1980s, many people have gone to cities or towns for university education and employment. People who are left behind in the countryside are those who have really no other options.

Living in the countryside is now considered backward, boring and lowly, consequently, these people are not content with their present situation. Through television and media, they can see, but cannot themselves reach the glamorous lifestyle in the cities that their successful peers enjoy and as a result they have a feeling of being stuck, like Li Shobuu who used to venture around Tongliao and Chifeng cities for many years. Some of those who are “left behind” have actually tried to work in the cities, but failed.

Marriage in the countryside is still mainly arranged, although not forced. There are limited opportunities or choice for people who stay behind the countryside. Even if marriage turns out unsatisfactory, women are still subject to traditional ethics and moralities and bound by public opinion in the village. Like a shamaness called Sechen, aged 32, who felt she could have left the countryside due to her beautiful voice and talent for singing, but was held back by her early marriage and children in the village which left her with no other choice but living a country life.

Another phenomenon in the countryside is that there is a proliferation of young single men because there are not enough girls staying in the countryside. It is easier for girls to get odd jobs in the cities such as waitressing, cleaning and working as nannies. It is also easier for women to get partners in the cities, especially given the shortage of Chinese women due to the one child policy, and Chinese preference of boys, which has led to a gender imbalance. Today, many inner Mongolian girls are marrying Chinese men.

When those successful city-goers occasionally return home on holidays, mostly for Lunar New Year, they tend to show off their wealth and prosperity by bringing nice gifts to their families and wearing expensive clothes and gold jewellery. This

also adds stress to those “left behind”. I noticed my relatives were very disappointed by my ordinary clothing and jewellery made of semi-precious stones. At the start, I wondered why a niece of mine straightforwardly asked me “why don’t you wear your gold jewellery? I told my younger sister<sup>8</sup> to wear all her gold jewellery to show off when she comes back next time.”

Whereas “shamanic illness” is mainly a countryside phenomenon, it also affects some Horchin Mongolian migrant workers in the city. While those migrant workers are one step away from being considered “successful” by remaining in the city through getting odd jobs, it is not always easy for them, because they cannot properly integrate into the urban community. They mostly take on jobs considered “working class” or “low level jobs” (打工) such as physical work, building work, waitressing, cleaning and nannying, or running small business such as a small restaurant (饭馆 rather than a 饭店, 酒店 which are often attached to grand hotels) or vending vegetables and fruits on the markets. They often have no connection with their co-workers due to language and cultural barriers as there are only few other Mongols in such places. Bai Muunohai had around 20 disciples in Tongliao city.

Wu Chunyan’s case is a typical example of this group of “city shamans”. Wu’s husband was working on a building site in Tongliao for two years leaving her and their daughter in the countryside in Horchin Left Flank Middle Banner. When her daughter started school, they sent her to her grandfather who was a primary school teacher in a small town so that he could supervise her studies. Wu came to Tongliao to join her husband in March 2015.

Wu started working in a small restaurant as a waitress, but as her earnings were trivial, her sister convinced her to go to work in a hotel. Wu found the work in the hotel to be very stressful. At night, she had to look after two entire floors on her own. She said:

“I was so busy and scared. Whenever a guest leaves, I have to make sure that the bed sheets are clean. If there was any dirt, I had to wash them by hand, rubbing very hard to make sure it is clean. Especially when there was a blood stain, it was so hard to clean. If it was left dirty, I had to pay 140 yuan for a sheet. I earned only 70 yuan a day.”

From June 2016, she started feeling very ill (see the symptoms above). As she was no longer fit enough to do the hotel job, she quit it and got a job through acquaintance in the dining hall of Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities. Her work was just to scan students’ cards for payment. But she found even scanning very difficult and just collapsed at work one day. Someone told her that a shaman master might be able to help. When she saw the shaman master, the latter told her that she had got the “shamanic illness”.

While Wu’s case is due to elevated levels of work related stress, Bao Jinhua’s case contains ethnic cultural elements related to intermarriage:

<sup>8</sup> One of her four younger sisters went to work in the city and married to a Chinese businessman from Hebei Province.

Bao jinhua, a 44-year-old shamaness from Manghan sumu of Hüre Banner, now lives in Tongliao city. After finishing her junior school, she came to live with her aunt in Tongliao when she was 15. She worked in a restaurant in the beginning. She was married to a worker through her aunt's matchmaking. They had a son who is 17 years old. Her first husband died from cancer. She met her current husband while they were both selling fruits on the street and got married 10 years ago. Her current husband is a Chinese from Harbin, Heilongjiang Province. They have no other children. She does not plan to have any other child. She said "Actually, I started suffering 4–5 years ago and could not control myself. At the start, my eyes had distending pain like bursting out, heavy exploding headaches. I had heart palpitation, was always angry and smashed things. I had no idea about anything to do with shamanism. I became disciple to two Chinese teachers (巫师) through my husband's relatives' introduction. They could not cure me but made me worse. People say that I was living like a mad person. I was fighting with my husband countless times and disgusted with the sight of him. My Chinese teacher told me that I had a Mongolian spirit who was not allowing a Chinese spirit to be attached to me. I got well after coming to master Muunohai. My husband supports me. He drives me anywhere I want to go. Some people became mad because their spouses did not support them so they could not go to a shaman."

Her husband's family worship Chinese spirits of foxes or yellow weasels.<sup>9</sup> Bao Jinhua said that Chinese spirits do not get along with Mongolian spirits, so her husband cannot put the seats of his spirits on her family altar (she has two altars, one for Buddhist and her ancestor spirits (Figure 4) and one for her animal spirits, *lus* (snake) and *xian* (fox) (Figure 5).

In addition to her unprivileged position in city life, Bao Jinhua's case also shows a cultural clash. Bao Jinhua could not accommodate to Chinese culture and there was a struggle of power with her husband. She won and her position was elevated by installing her "Mongolian spirits" and getting well. So, her husband had to accept and support her becoming a shaman, and even agreed not to put his spirit seats on the main altar. Their relationship has also improved as she is healthy and happy, and not acting mad around him any longer. Interestingly though, on one occasion, Bao Jinhua scolded her husband when she was possessed by her shaman spirit saying "you did not prostrate to me (spirits speaking) yesterday when I came, now kneel down and kowtow to me". The husband obeyed without resistance.

The reason why this group of people in the city turns to shamanism is that they are still socially, ideologically and culturally rooted in the countryside worldview and customs. They have neither integrated into the Mongolian community which usually consists of intellectuals nor the Chinese communities, neither were they able to form a community of their own, because they are dispersed with no social, financial or cultural bases.

The spirits "favoured" not only those who are unprivileged in the eyes of the rapidly developing society, but also those idle ones that are "created" by economic development and technological advancement.

<sup>9</sup> This is a very popular animal spirit the Northern Chinese worship. In contrast to fox spirits which are getting more popular, weasel spirits are not accepted by Horchin shamans at all.





Figure 4. Bao Jinhua in front of the main Altar for her Buddhist and Ancestor spirits



Figure 5. Bao Jinhua's altar for her minor Snake and Fox spirits in a separate room

### 3. Idleness Deprived of Motivations

It is to be noted that there is no implication here that the Horchin countryside does not enjoy development and prosperity. In fact, life in the countryside is much easier than it is in the city. There is no fear of unemployment, being fired from work, tight time schedule or competition. In recent years, due to agricultural mechanisms popularised in the Horchin countryside, the length of labour and intensity were greatly reduced. They only need a few days for sowing in the spring by machinery, at the same time mixing chemical fertiliser in the seeds, a few days for weeding by chemical weed killers, a few days for applying pesticides, and then a few days for harvesting by machinery. They no longer grow miscellaneous grain crops for their own consumption, not even Mongolian millet and buckwheat which used to be the main staple food sources in the area. They only grow commercial crops, mostly corn. They collect the corns on their cob and pile them up somewhere without tending to them until buyers come with corn threshing machine and take them away. Due to expanding agriculture, there is not enough pastureland, most people no longer keep livestock, and there is no milking involved.

Every household has a machine well. As soon as the switch is turned on, water flows. So, irrigating fields and domestic water use have become very convenient. Every household owns multiple motorcycles if not a car. Transportation is easier than before and roads are being laid to every corner of the countryside. Especially women's work is reduced radically in comparison to the pre-1980s. Apart from cooking, washing, cleaning and looking after the children and the elderly, women used to milk cows, tender calves, feed pigs by collecting wild vegetables and chickens, fetch water from the well and sew seasonal clothes and shoes for all family members. They also had to do commune labour and attend meetings during the Cultural Revolution. Most of these roles are today non-existent for women. They no longer milk cows even if they keep them to tend and sell. They feed pigs but with store bought fodder. Fetching water is not necessary as families even have tap water fitted into their homes in addition to machine wells. There is no need to sew clothes and shoes. They use washing machine for laundry. Most households consist of core families, and young people do not tend to or live with their parents. Women are even freed from (or deprived of) their mothering duties as children who reach the education age in the countryside leave home to go to boarding schools in the cities or towns.

However, such increase of easiness and freedom have not elevated some people's state of mind, conversely, led to idleness which in turn causes problems. Experimental studies show that "People dread idleness, yet they need a reason to be busy". "Without a justification, people choose to be idle; that even a specious justification can motivate people to be busy; and that people who are busy are happier than people who are idle" (Hsee–Yang–Wang 2010, p. 926). The same study concludes that idleness is potentially malignant, if idle people remain idle, they are miserable (ibid., p. 929).

Apart from idleness, development has not provided alternative, constructive and meaningful activities to the people in the Horchin countryside. Idle people try to



be busy, but their experiences are rather negative. Class reunions and gatherings for all levels of schooling is a very attractive activity for some, but it is only a few times a year and costly. *Mahjong* gambling and drinking are addictive and cause problems. In the countryside men and women, old and young, virtually everyone gambles. Like in other parts of China, Weixin (Weichat), a type of social media application is extremely prevalent in the Horchin countryside. Everybody has a smart phone and many people are addicted to it, spending hours and hours checking, chatting and even singing to their groups. This also generates isolation between family members and aggregates tensions. Due to constantly attending and checking new messages day and night, they have no genuine attentiveness to people around and are always distracted from work and things they are doing. Some people even constantly check it at night. While some couples are busy with their respective Weixin Groups, others quarrel, because one of them objects to the other's obsession with it. People are also going to Weixin group gatherings near and far. All these activities again cause further financial, emotional and health problems and family breakdowns sometimes. They are barely constructive activities, but physically retiring, socially withdrawing from human to human contacts and financially wasteful. The easiness of life and the increase of spare time have created idleness, anxiety and new problems instead of boosting happiness and well-being in the Horchin countryside. This ultimately adds to increasing the number of "shamanic illnesses".

#### 4. Disintegration of Society

Change in family structure, kin and social relationship and marriage also affect people's mentality in the countryside. There are fewer and fewer extended families and most families consist of parents and one child. Although birth control policy allowed minorities to have two children, most people opted to have one claiming that bringing up children nowadays was too difficult, costly and uncertain for children's future in this competitive world. Bringing up children has always been a major concern for parents. When the only child goes to school in the towns and cities, the parents often lose a big part of their endeavour.

Due to market economy, the kin and community relationship disintegrated and most things are counted by money. For example, in the past, a well someone dug and a mill someone bought, were used by everyone in the villages. There used to be only a few *hele* makers (special tool for making buckwheat noodles) and cradles in the whole village and they were often going around the village and everybody could use them when need arose. Now, if one family has a threshing machine, it is intended for hiring when it is bought and nobody expects to use it for free. In the past, there were always many aids when a family needed financial help, such as taking a long trip, illness as well as major life-related rituals like marriage, funeral etc. Although they were reciprocal and the receivers often returned the favour sooner or later, the exchange side of them was not apparent. Nowadays, people often complain that kin and social relationships are driven by profits. People seek all kinds of excuses to get money. There are

many banquets to collect money. Money replaced gifts (*beleg*) on occasions such as marriage, baby showers, birthday celebration, entering university, anniversary celebrations (by one's animal year), funeral etc. They have become a great burden and people want to avoid such occasions as much as possible. Avoidance results in isolation.

## 5. Asymmetrical Development Made Room for Shamanic Diagnoses

Although economy developed, technology advanced and medicine improved, infrastructure has not yet caught up to cope with development and change. There is no concept of depression and anxiety or stress as mental disorder among people and no recognition of them publicly and medically in the local health care system, not much even at the higher administrative levels of society. When people go to hospitals, they expect only physical examinations and prescriptions of medicine. Even the concepts of adolescence and menopause are not widely accepted and no procedure is in place to deal with them. Their symptoms are often considered as bad personal character and criticised and rejected by society. They are considered healthy if nothing pathological is found by hospital examinations. They take medications anyway either from Chinese or Mongolian medical doctors or just buy medicines from pharmacies according to their self-diagnosed symptoms. Traditionally, mental illness means extreme madness. Apart from big hospitals in the city where patients are treated by locking up, there are no health services dealing with minor mental problems. Social workers, psychologist and psychotherapist, or any other kind of support groups are not popular amongst those living in the cities let alone known among ordinary Horchin people. Shamanic diagnoses represent themselves, to these individuals, as the only viable explanation and self-healing through initiation as the only available treatment.

## 6. Relaxed Requirement for Shamanic Admittance

Finally, Horchin shamanism also changed its perspective to adjust itself to meet the needs of the people, which directly contribute to the increase of the number of shamans. As in many societies, shamanic profession has primarily been hereditary in Horchin shamanism, and spirits of both paternal and maternal lines may choose one as their *hüleg* (Wr. Mon. *hölüg*, mount). However, there are traditional exceptions. A spirit of a certain shaman who has no kin relationship might choose one randomly as its mount, which is called *toomal* (liked, chosen), or *jelig* (Wr. Mon. *jerlig*, wild) *böö* (shaman). While hereditary shaman numbers may have a limit, the latter type made room for contemporary shamanic proliferation. Unlike as it is in Buryat shamanism, in Mongolia where finding out one's true root spirit was a costly, serious and long endeavour (Buyandelgeriyn 2007), it is not of much importance for a Horchin shaman to have a hereditary ancestral shamanic spirit to become a shaman. If one is diagnosed with "shamanic illness" and found out that there were no shamanic spirits in either side of their parents' ancestral lines, it is decided that he/she is a "chosen"

one. Another phenomenon is that more and more animal spirits, mostly snakes and foxes are believed to be the spirits who are taking *hüleg* (mount). Snakes are called *lus* and foxes are called *xian* (from Chinese 仙 immortals) or *daofeng* (derived from Chinese 道封, usually referring to highly accomplished Taoist practitioners with magical power). Even more interestingly, shamanism not only adopted *laiching*,<sup>10</sup> which are Buddhist oracles who were considered to be attached to monasteries in the past, taking deceased lamas' spirits as their *shütgen* (tutelary spirit). It is interesting because of the traditional belief that lamas would take rebirth if not went to nirvana so they would never stay in the world as spirits. When someone who is diagnosed cannot find any shaman from earlier generations, the shaman master would ask if there were any lamas in his/her family. Of course, every family had at least one lama in the past because towards the end of the Qing dynasty, 40–50% of the male population of Mongolia became monks (Delige 1998, pp. 152–158).<sup>11</sup> So, some people have a lama spirit installed on him/her. Some people have many spirits, such as animals, ancestors, *laiching* installed until he/she gets well. This also serves as legitimacy for the increase in shaman numbers, and especially the acceptance of people with Borjigin (bao) family name<sup>12</sup>. Traditionally, there used to be a strong conviction that no one from the Bao family could become shaman. Historically, this might always have been the case, but the explanation was attributed to a Mongolian Buddhist missionary's (called Neichi Toyin) suppression of shamanism with support of Horchin nobles in the 16th century (Heissig 1992; Kollmar-Paulenz 2008; Ujeed 2011).<sup>13</sup> Now more and more people with the Bao family name are becoming shamans thanks to the *toomal* method of choosing mounts. The most "relaxed" example can be seen in the case when a master shaman asked a neophyte called Bao Yongjun to find out if there was a shaman in his family, he said he did not care if there was one or not, as long as his illness is cured, he would be happy.

## Conclusion

Asymmetrical developments, sudden and dramatic changes and prosperity coupled with the corresponding infrastructure lagging behind in Horchin, especially in the countryside, have had some negative effects on a certain group of people. On the one

<sup>10</sup> *Laiching* was from Tibetan *nechung* which refers to the Dharma Protector and the Chief Tibetan Oracle.

<sup>11</sup> About one third of the entire population in Heissig's estimation (1980, p. 1).

<sup>12</sup> Bao is a sinicised short form for Borjigin which is the clan name of Chinggis Khan, so Borjigins were nobles, also called Taiji in the past. Horchin nobles are supposed to be Chinggis Khan's younger brother, Khasar's descendants.

<sup>13</sup> The legend of Hobugtai Böö from the Borjigin noble family who was said to have been defeated in a mystic duel by the Buddhist monk Neichi Toyin in the 16th century is still widely told in Eastern Inner Mongolia. They say that due to Hobugtai's defeat, there had been no shaman from the noble Borjigin family since that time. Shamans say Hobugtai was tied by a thick iron chain onto a big tree and the chain is getting thinner and thinner due to Hobugtai's struggle. When the chain breaks someday in the near future, Hobugtai will come back and shamanism will prosper greatly. The legend of Hobugtai Böö was examined by Zikmundová (2008, pp. 160–161).

hand, seeing the “successful ones” who have sought fortune in the towns and cities, and are enjoying all the glamour of urban life, the people left behind in the countryside feel hopeless. On the other hand, easiness and leisure, due to modernisation and machinery, have not been directed towards productive alternatives. As a result, some people tend to become idle which generates boredom, lack of motivation and even mental problems. When mental problems occur, there is no effective knowledge and method to appropriately recognise and address the matter accordingly. In these circumstances, people turned to politically, religiously and culturally obnoxious shamanism which attuned itself to meet the people’s needs. The shaman masters use “shamanic illness” as a diagnostic tool which provides them with various sources of legitimacy by drawing upon a range of past practices and items of knowledge to convince their followers with particular, usually therapeutic, needs. For the sufferer-practitioner, shamanism fills a gap in medical services. It provides both a placebo for as of yet untreatable or misdiagnosed illnesses and a form of social, and even group, therapy for psychological issues that are either medically not recognised in China or constitute social taboos in Horchin society.

### References

- Bacigalupo, A. M. (2004): Mapuche Shamanism. In: Walter, M. N. –Fridman, E. J. N. (eds): *Shamanism: An Introduction of World Beliefs, Practices and Culture*. Santa Barbara, ABC-KLIO pp. 417–423.
- Badamhatan, S. (1965): *Khövsgöliin Darkhad Yastan* [Darkhad People of Khövsgöl]. Ulaanbaatar, Shinjilekh ukhaany akademiin khevlél [Academy Press].
- Balogh, M. (2010): Contemporary Shamanisms in Mongolia. *Journal of Asian Ethnicity* Vol. 11, Issue 2, pp. 229–238.
- Buyandelger, M. (2013): *Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Buyandelgeriyn, M. (2007): Dealing with Uncertainty: Shaman, Marginal Capitalism, and Remaking of History in Postsocialist Mongolia. *American Ethnologist* Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 127–147.
- Chen, Y. 陈永春 (2010): 科尔沁萨满神歌审美研究 [Aesthetics of Horchin shamanic sacred songs]. Beijing, 民族出版社 (Nationalities Press).
- Delige 德里格 (1998): 内蒙古喇嘛教史 [History of Inner Mongolian Lamaism]. Hohhot, Inner Mongolia People’s Press.
- Diószegi, V. (1962): Tuva Shamanism: Intra-ethnic Differences and Interethnic Analogies. *Acta Ethnographica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* Vol. 11, pp. 143–190.
- Diószegi, V. (1998): How to Become a Shaman among the Sagais. In: Hoppál, M. (ed.): *Shamanism: Selected Writings of Vilmos Diószegi*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, pp. 27–35.
- Eliade, M. (1972): *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (trans. Willard R. Trask). Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Government White Paper: “Medical and Health Services in China” (2012/12/29), at <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/bps/t1001641.htm>, accessed on 13 October 2016.
- Han, Togoo (2012): *Horchin böge-yin soyul-un degeji* [The essence of Horchin shamanic culture], Ulaanhad, Öbür Monggul-un shinjilehü uhagan teknik mergejil-ün hebelel-ün horiy-a (Inner Mongolia Science and Technology Press).

- Heissig, W. (1980): *The Religion of Mongolia*. Berkeley–Los Angeles, University of California Press.
- Heissig, W. (1992): A Mongolian Source to the Lamaist Suppression of Shamanism in the 17th Century. In: Heissig, W. (ed.): *Studies in Oriental Religions*. Wiesbaden, pp. 61–136.
- Hsee, C. K. – Yang, A. X. – Wang, L. (2010): Idleness Aversion and the Need for Justifiable Busyness. *Psychological Science* Vol. 21, No. 7, pp. 926–930.
- Hürelsha – Bai, Y. C. (1998): *Horchin bōō mörgül-ün sodulul* [Studies of Horchin shamanism]. Beijing, Öndüsüten-ü heblel-ün horiy-a (Nationalities Press).
- Humphrey, C. (1999): Shamans in the City. *Anthropology Today* Vol. 15, pp. 3–10.
- Humphrey, C. – Onon, U. (1996): *Shamans and Elders: Experience, Knowledge, and Power among the Daur Mongols*. Oxford, University of Oxford Press.
- Kollmar-Paulenz, K. (2008): Forming a Mongolian Buddhist Identity: The Biography of Neichi Toin. In: Elverskog, J. (ed.): *Biographies of Eminent Mongol Buddhists*. Halle, International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies GmbH, pp. 13–28.
- Nimnuan, C. – Hotopf, M. – Wessely, S. (2001): Medically Unexplained Symptoms: An Epidemiological Study in Seven Specialties. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* Vol. 51, Issue 1, pp. 361–367.
- Norris, P. – Inglehart, R. (2004): *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Prajñā Sāgara (2010): *Bogda Neichi Toyin dalai manzushiri-yin domug-i todurhai-a geigülügchi chindamani erihe hemegdehü orusiba* [Rosary of wishing-stones – illuminator of the narrative about the holy Lama Neichi Toyin Dalai Mañjuśrī] (Beijing, 1739). In: Altanorgil (ed.): *Öbür bogda-yin namtar* [Biography of His Holiness of Inner Mongolia]. Hailar, Öbür monggul-un soyul-un heblel-ün horiy-a [Inner Mongolia Cultural Press], pp. 99–183.
- Pratt, Ch. (2007): *An Encyclopedia of Shamanism*. New York, The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc.
- Shimamura, I. (2014): *The Root Seekers – Shamanism and Ethnicity among Mongol-Buryats*. Yokohama, Shumpusha Publishing.
- Sugar, J. – Kleinman, A. – Heggenhougen, K. (1991): Development's 'Downside': Social and Psychological Pathology in Countries Undergoing Social Change. *Health Transition Review* Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 211–220.
- Sztompka, P. (2000): The Ambivalence of Social Change. Triumph or Trauma? *Polish Sociological Review* No. 131, pp. 275–290.
- Ujeed, Uranchimeg (2011): Persecuted Practice: Neichi Toyin's Way of Conducting Missionary Work. *Inner Asia* Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 265–277.
- Walter, M. N. – Fridman, E. J. N. (eds) (2004): *Shamanism: An Introduction of World Beliefs, Practices and Culture*. Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO.
- Winkelman, M. (2004): Cross-cultural Perspectives on Shamans. In: Walter, M. N. – Fridman, E. J. N. (eds): *Shamanism: An Introduction of World Beliefs, Practices and Culture*. Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, pp. 61–67.
- Zikmundová, V. (2006): Some Common Aspects of the Sibe and Khorchin Mongol Religious Vocabulary. In: Vacek, Jaroslav – Oberfalzerová, Alena (eds): *Mongolo-Tibetica Pragensia '06. Ethnolinguistics and Sociolinguistics in Synchrony and Diachrony*. Prague, Triton, pp. 115–140.
- Zikmundová, V. (2008): Walking on the Edges of Swords: Notes on Analogies in Shaman Rituals of the Khorchin Mongols and the Jungarian Sibes. In: Vacek, Jaroslav – Oberfalzerová, Alena (eds): *Mongolo-Tibetica Pragensia 08, 1/2. Ethnolinguistics, Sociolinguistics, Religion and Culture*. Prague, Triton, pp. 149–188.

