

## Shamanism—Religion, Culture, Both or Neither: A Case Study of a Pensioner Song and Dance Group among the Chinese Sibe\*

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BUDAPEST

*The story this study is based on begins in 2012, in the Seventh Village of Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County in today's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwestern China. The protagonists are the members of a Sibe shaman song and dance group, mainly comprised of elderly farmers. The formation of the group was encouraged by Sibe intellectuals in the village, who drew their motivation from China's intangible cultural heritage program. In today's China, this program has an impact on all levels of social life, determining how Chinese people are supposed look upon their cultural heritage. The process, however, is accompanied by numerous conflicts, raising a great many questions regarding the conversion of religious traditions, once considered to be "superstitions," into "heritage," as clearly shown by the story of the shaman song and dance group made up of pensioners. Formulating and answering these questions require an examination of how heritage construction is intertwined with both secularization and desecularization processes. This study focuses on this complex phenomenon.*

The story of the Sibe song and dance group of pensioners begins in the area known today as Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. When the power of the Manchus, founders of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), appeared to be consolidating in northeastern China, the territories between the heart of this area and the Qinghai Lake were still dominated by Mongol tribes. In 1757, the Manchus eventually gained a stronghold in the region. This is when the valley of the Ili River was subjected to Manchu control and the occupation of the Tarim Basin followed in the next two years (Dimulati 2008, 6; Wu and Zhao 2008, 58). The construction of the Manchu military line of defense was the task of soldiers who were transferred here to

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\* This study was written as part of project No. 134244, funded by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office, Hungary, and was translated from the Hungarian original by Katalin Varga.

the northwest from northeastern China. In 1764, more than a thousand Sibe soldiers were selected to be relocated. The soldiers set out with nearly three and a half thousand relatives on their long journey across Mongolia. Going through a great deal of hardship, they eventually arrived in the valley of the Ili River in 1765 to set up their military camps on the northern and then on the southern bank of the river (Wu and Zhao 2008, 61–2). The villages of today's Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County evolved from these camps,<sup>1</sup> and in fact all the Sibe who live here today are descendants of the soldiers who resettled in 1764. Following their relocation to the west, the fate of the two large groups of Sibe that had been torn apart unfolded rather differently. Their language, the Manchu/Sibe language and most of the Sibe traditions were only preserved by the Sibe in Xinjiang. All this knowledge sank into oblivion by the early 1900s among the Sibe who remained in northeastern China.

It was in 2010 that I embarked on my cultural anthropological fieldwork in the Sibe communities that live separated by a distance of several thousand kilometers and possess entirely different linguistic and cultural characteristics. I received permission to conduct research by living together with residents in Qapqal's historical villages at the end of December 2011. Over a couple of days in early January 2012 I moved to the countryside, to the Fifth Village in Qapqal, where I found lodging in the house of a farming family. This house became my base, where I could always return after my field trips to the other villages. While doing fieldwork, I also enrolled in a Manchu/Sibe language course organized by the Party School in the county center at the end of January 2012.<sup>2</sup> I met a teacher there who invited me to the Seventh Village at the end of February 2012 to introduce me to the heritage group she was the leader of.

I remember clearly the first meeting with the group. I was welcomed by a group of elderly people, all smiling, in the community center in the village. With the exception of a few retired Party officials, they were all farmers,

<sup>1</sup> The region where the Sibe battalions first set up camps had several names over the course of time. The Sibe's one-time military camps were awarded the title and rank of an autonomous county on 25 March 1954.

<sup>2</sup> Regrettably, a decreasing number of people are using the Manchu/Sibe language even among the Sibe in Xinjiang and even fewer are familiar with the script of their language. For this reason, the Organizational Department of Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County Committee of the People's Republic of China, the Party School of Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County Committee of the People's Republic of China, and the Linguistics Work Committee of Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County regularly organize elementary, intermediate, and advanced language courses for the adult population.

who enthusiastically practiced Sibe shaman songs and dances under the guidance of the teacher. As I later learnt, these songs were recorded in the 1980s, when a large-scale ethnographic collection project took place in Qapqal's historical villages, and the idea of learning the songs and staging a performance in some form had been promoted by Sibe intellectuals for a long time.<sup>3</sup> Acting as a mediator between Sibe intellectuals and ordinary farmers in her village, the teacher eventually set about organizing a shaman song and dance group made up of pensioners. She repeatedly emphasized that the shaman songs recorded in the 1980s constituted an integral part of the Sibe's intangible cultural heritage and that the group's mission was to preserve and pass on this "ancient" form of Sibe culture.

The political leadership paid keen attention to the performances staged by the group from the outset. The group debuted in the village main square on 17 January 2012. The performance was attended by the local Party Committee Secretary along with the village head and the assistant village head, as well as the department head of the county's Cultural Affairs Bureau and the leader of the Cultural Center. In addition, the head of the Commission for Guiding Cultural and Ethical Progress of the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China was also present. The political leadership was present with a similar apparatus at the group's performance on 5 March 2012, which took place as part of a competition at the county center's movie theatre.

This competition was open to groups from all Qapqal villages, regardless of gender, age or ethnicity. Members of the group were aware that stakes were high: the possibilities for their continued operation depended on their placing in the competition. Not surprisingly, they practiced long into the night before the day of the contest. Eventually, the group won the contest, and Sibe intellectuals embraced their cause, with the intangible cultural heritage program in their mind. On 17 March 2012, directors and choreographers from northeastern China came to see their rehearsal, and a decision was made: the group would carry on with activities under the guidance of invited professionals.

These professionals asked for new costumes to be made to put on a more spectacular show and wanted additional dancers in order to create a more powerful impression. They insisted that the new members of the group to

<sup>3</sup> Messages exchanged in a dedicated internet "chat room" that was visited by some Sibe intellectuals and some members of the heritage group greatly helped me in reconstructing the history of the group.

be recruited should also all be farmers; in their eyes, this was a precondition for staging an authentic performance. However, what was considered to be a key to authenticity also posed a problem that hindered their work: in the spring, as the weather grew warmer, fewer and fewer people turned up at the rehearsals; the women had more chores to do around the house, and the men began to work in the fields. To make things worse, the group's run of success seemed to be broken after losing a county competition, which all the members of the group took to their hearts.

In May, however, everything changed. The group was given the opportunity to perform their songs and dances—in their new costumes and in larger numbers—on a national holiday marking the “Western Resettlement,”<sup>4</sup> so dear and important to the Sibe (Figs 1–2). Their success was unquestionable in every aspect: by then it was certain that the members of the group would be able to travel to Dalian in northeastern China in the summer to represent their county at a national art festival and competition organized for middle-aged and elderly people. This decision carried major significance for the pensioners in the shaman song and dance group. Some of them felt they were the chosen ones, whose mission was to preserve the Sibe's ancient traditions and revive their shamanic beliefs. Others were overjoyed that the competition allowed them to travel to their ancestors' sacred land in northeastern China; many of them would never have been able to do so on their own. The decision also carried no less weight for Sibe intellectuals. They believed they were one step closer to having the religious traditions of the Sibe, once considered harmful to society, recognized as part of their intangible cultural heritage.<sup>5</sup> All this not only nurtured their pride, but also seemed to offer political and economic opportunities and privileges.

Thus, it can be seen that the events described in the case study, revealing the conversion into heritage of a religious tradition proclaimed to be dead, bring to the surface a variety of motivations, viewpoints and mindsets, and pit them against one another. To understand the underlying reasons, this process that shapes knowledge, memory and identity needs to be

<sup>4</sup> For more details on the history and significance of this Sibe national holiday, see Sárközi 2018, 13–179.

<sup>5</sup> The statements I make here are based on what was said in conversations with members of the group and Sibe intellectuals in structured and semi-structured interviews.



Fig. 1 Members of the group practicing Sibe shaman songs and dances in the Seventh Village of Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County.  
Photo: Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi, 2012.

placed in a social, cultural and political context.<sup>6</sup> In my study, therefore, outlining historical aspects with a broad brush, I will attempt to present how the thinking about the Sibe's faith in shamanism was shaped in past

<sup>6</sup> In social sciences, the concept of *heritage*, embracing *cultural heritage*, came to the foreground as the outcome of a longer process in the history of ideas and research. From their inception in the 1980s, heritage studies saw contributions from archaeologists, geographers, historians, sociologists, art historians, museologists and tourism professionals, among others, who focused on the theme because of the growing role of heritage in society. Historians who initially played a key role in social science research on heritage—for example, David Lowenthal or Pierre Nora—focused on examining heritage as a dynamic relationship between the past and society. At the same time, this significantly contributed to establishing critical thinking in terms of heritage within the field of social sciences (cf. Borbély and Ispán 2019, 9–10). Among contemporary research trends, critical heritage studies, which have emerged since the 2000s, have the greatest influence on the development of the field of science today. In line with these studies, what I mean by *heritage construction* (*heritagization*) is the meaning-making process through which—within the extremes of globalism and localism, universalism and nationalism—a variety of political, cultural and social mechanisms that produce and reproduce knowledge, memory and identity are represented.

decades. I seek to find answers to how this religious tradition has become a secularized cultural heritage, and how efforts may still be made to continue to interpret it, or perhaps to set it again in a religious context. At the same time, this also requires an examination of the process of heritage construction against *secularization* and *deseccularization* theories.<sup>7</sup>

*In the Shadow of Building Socialism: Sibe Shamans and their Communities before the “Cultural Revolution”*

Determining themselves as believers in Buddhism and shamanism, the Sibe in today’s Xinjiang region had a far better chance of preserving their religious traditions than the Sibe living dispersed in northeastern China (Shirokogoroff 1924, 14). One of the earliest and most complete studies (to my knowledge) describing the Sibe’s shamanic beliefs was also recorded among the Sibe living in the valley of the Ili River. N. N. Krotkov’s work, written in 1921, offers an account of the climbing of the knife-ladder, the rite of initiation for Sibe shamans. This was the ultimate test for candidate shamans that would determine what kind of shamans they would be: only those who climbed the knife-ladder unscathed could become *iletu*, that is real shamans who could perform healing in their community. Those who failed the test became *butu*, that is shaman assistants: religious specialists who possess a shaman’s knowledge latently but cannot perform healing.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The meaning of the concept of *secularization* as a concept and the debate on secularization theories continue to be an undecided issue today. The majority of thinkers in social sciences had long regarded the process of *turning away from religions* and the *declining role of religion in society* as the concomitant of modernization, but a growing number of theoreticians began to question the linear and irreversible nature of the process from the second half of the twentieth century. One of the most influential studies elaborating the secularization thesis was written by José Casanova, who defined secularization, firstly as the differentiation of the secular spheres from religious norms and beliefs; secondly as the decline of religious beliefs and practices; and thirdly as the social marginalization and privatization of religion (Casanova 1994, 211–29). To describe the opposite process to secularization, i.e., the resurgence of religion in formerly secularized societies, Peter L. Berger (1999) introduced the concept of *deseccularization*, which gained growing popularity. Berger’s theory was developed in detail by Vyacheslav Karpov, who adopted the same conceptual framework to define deseccularization as used by the theoreticians of secularization. An important foundation this study is based on is Karpov’s theory, according to which different areas of social existence can undergo deseccularization relatively independently; hence, varied instances of deseccularization are seen in concrete cases (Karpov 2010, 250–5).

<sup>8</sup> For details on the two types of Sibe shamans and issues related to legitimizing shamans, see Sárközi and Somfai 2013.



Fig. 2 The group performing their songs and dances in the Sixth Village of Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County on their national holiday.  
Photo: Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi, 2012.

The last Sibe shaman to successfully climb the knife-ladder was a woman called Morniang. She was put to the test in 1928, and her initiation ritual took place with the participation of her entire community, as is known from a study written on the ritual (He 2009b, 222–4). This allows for the assumption that Sibe shamans in Xinjiang still played an important role in their communities at the time. However, it is difficult to draw a picture of their subsequent fate. The few decades between the fall of the last imperial dynasty (1911) in China and the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China (1949) were one of the most chaotic periods in Chinese history. Moreover, very few sources on Sibe shamanism in Xinjiang are available from the three decades and more following the Communists’ ascent to power. Reports on Morniang’s initiation ceremony only came to light towards the end of the twentieth century, thanks to eyewitnesses

who had attended the event at the time.<sup>9</sup> Reasons for this lie in the early ethnic and religious policies of the Chinese Communist Party.

The pledge made by the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, that once their power had been consolidated, all non-*Han* groups that supported their rise to power would be officially recognized and granted privileges or autonomy, affected the whole of China. In light of this pledge, the Ethnic Classification Project was launched and the two large Sibe groups that split apart in 1764 were both officially recognized as one of the Chinese ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup> Two hundred years after their relocation to the west, representatives of the Sibe living in northeastern and northwestern China were able to reestablish contacts in 1956 under this program. Also, in the context of the Ethnic Classification Project, a nationwide data collection was announced in 1958 aimed at writing the “concise histories” of ethnic groups in China, giving the Sibe, living thousands of kilometers apart, the opportunity to set about (re)constructing their history. This also translated into an opportunity to reformulate their Sibe identity in an effort to bridge differences in language and culture that characterized the Sibe.<sup>11</sup>

However, the Sibe’s religious traditions did not constitute a part of their official history that was taking shape at the time. In 1963, the Institute of Nationality Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences published the first official work written on the Sibe’s history as internal source material with the title *Xibozu jianshi jianzhi hebian* (Summary of the concise history and chronicle of the Sibe nation). This book, taken as the representation of official memory, gives an idea of what the intellectuals editing the book at the time considered to constitute a part of Sibe culture or what could have guided their thought and whether religious traditions were considered to belong to the conceptual class designated as culture. The editors of this book discussed Sibe culture in chapters eight and nine: the first examined the possibilities and phases of building a “socialist culture” with a focus on issues related to the development of education and

healthcare; the second described popular customs such as wedding and burial practices, the main festivities and traditional costumes (Zhongguo Kexueyuan Minzu Yanjiusuo and Xinjiang Shaoshu Minzu Shehui Lishi Diaocha Zubian 1963, 82–115). However, the editors of the book made no reference to religion as existing in any form in the life of the Sibe—thus relegating the Sibe’s religious beliefs to the past.

Evidence of this is the book’s second chapter, which the editors dedicated to the—I quote word by word—“ancient Sibe” (Chin. *gudai xibozu*). In this chapter, a small segment of Sibe religion and religious beliefs was, in fact, covered: the Sibe’s beliefs related to Sirin *Mama* and Harikan *Mafa*.<sup>12</sup> However, the editors discussed religious beliefs related to these two deities as beliefs that had existed in the life of the Sibe at one time, long ago in the past (Zhongguo Kexueyuan Minzu Yanjiusuo and Xinjiang Shaoshu Minzu Shehui Lishi Diaocha Zubian 1963, 9–10). Despite the fact that in addition to the pledges mentioned above, the Chinese Communist Party, having risen to power, also promised that all ethnic groups could preserve or reform their traditions, practices and religious beliefs. There were two problems with this promise, inducing a deep silence over the existing religious traditions of the Sibe in the 1963 version of the Sibe’s official history: the sacral role the Chinese Communist Party gradually assumed after coming to power, and how the concept of “religious belief” (Chin. *zongjiao xianyang*) that could be preserved or reformed was interpreted and communicated to Chinese ethnic groups by the ideologues of the Party in light of this role.

The gradual sacralization of the Chinese Communist Party and the ideology advocated by the Party could be explained by applying the notions—adapted to the Chinese context—proposed by the Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev in his work *The Origin of Russian Communism*. In this book, Berdyaev points out that Russian communism was not fighting as a social system but as some form of religion against all other religions. It was striving for absolute power and sought to be the only source to satisfy all the religious needs of the human soul. Likewise, the Chinese Communist regime wanted to take full control of social life, extending its values to every aspect of life. This required, above all, the legitimization of the communist

<sup>9</sup> The eyewitnesses to Morniang’s initiation ritual were children at the time. For excerpts of the English translation of one of the studies written in Chinese on Morniang’s ultimate test (He 2009b), see Sárközi and Somfai 2013, 73.

<sup>10</sup> The Ethnic Classification Project aimed to determine the number of Chinese ethnic groups and classify the population into ethnic categories after the Chinese Communist Party had risen to power. The monograph by Thomas S. Mullaney (2011) offers one of the most comprehensive overviews of the project. For particulars regarding the project for the Sibe, see Sárközi 2018, 17–19.

<sup>11</sup> For more details on the Sibe communities, separated in 1764, reestablishing contacts, as well as on writing the Sibe’s official “concise history,” see Sárközi 2018, 75–88.

<sup>12</sup> Sirin *Mama* was a female deity that protected children and grandchildren and was responsible for the continuance of the clans while Harikan *Mafa* was a male deity that safeguarded livestock. For more details on the Sibe’s faith in Sirin *Mama* and related practice, see Sárközi 2019, 247–75.

system, and attempts at gaining legitimization stemmed from the system undergoing sacralization and were expressed through political rituals.<sup>13</sup>

This, however, did not imply that the Party's ideologues would define the ideology they represented as a religion. Moreover, this ideology never focused on questions such as life after death or unexplained phenomena. The option to offer answers to these questions was left to religions doomed to slow demise. However, it was not "religion" (Chin. *zongjiao*) but "superstition" (Chin. *mixin*) that was chosen to be the collective concept to embrace a variety of faiths and beliefs. Superstitions were divided into three large categories: "simple superstitions" (Chin. *yiban mixin*), which included traditions related to ancestor worship practiced in families; "feudal superstitions" (Chin. *fengjian mixin*) such as exorcism or geomancy; and "religious superstitions" (Chin. *zongjiao mixin*) such as Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism (Anagnost 1987, 43–4).

In contrast to the above categories, the ideologues of the Chinese Communist Party drew up a sharp distinction between religions regarded as legal and superstitions judged to be illegal in their religion-policy practice. Only institutionalized religions classified as "religious superstitions" were officially considered "religions." Accordingly, the Office for Religious Affairs (now Authority for Religious Affairs) set up in 1950 was responsible for control over the believers of the five institutional religions only. In contrast, believers falling in the first two categories were not officially classified as "religious." On the other hand, the superstitions in these categories practically permeated every aspect of the life of the entire rural population; these superstitions were the primary carriers of ethnic identity, which were seen by the Party, with a strong preference for a "scientific approach," as the manifestation of one of the major threats to its political power. This was the reason why their control was not a duty of the Office for Religious Affairs, but the responsibility of public security bodies (Salát 2000, 144).

Therefore, religious communities such as those of the Xinjiang Sibe, with shamanic beliefs, posed a great threat to the legitimacy of the politi-

<sup>13</sup> All this chimes with the ideas Christel Lane (1981) formulated regarding "political religion." However, I have decided not to use the term in this study for two reasons. Firstly, the limited scope of this study does not allow me to elaborate on and interpret intertwined concepts such as "political religion" and "civil religion" in the context of Chinese communism. Secondly, I consider the classification and rigid separation of the given concepts to be possible only on a theoretical level (Cristi 2001). For an excellent overview of the question, examining the Soviet/Russian system, see Mácsai 2012.

cal and religious power of the Chinese Communist Party. This could have been the underlying reason for the deep silence of the writers of the Sibe's first official history when it came to their religious traditions, classified as "superstitions."

*Sacrifice on the Altar of Nation-building:*

*Sibe Shamans and Socialist Culture after the "Cultural Revolution"*

Barely three years after the Sibe's official "concise history" was published (1963), the first devastating waves of the "Cultural Revolution" (1966–1976) swept across China. This extreme period in the history of the People's Republic of China drove Chinese ethnic groups with an apparently unstoppable force towards a national unity that seemed to disintegrate ethnic identities for good.

It was only the policy of "reform and opening up" that brought relief to ethnic groups, marking the beginning of a new era in China: the country embarked on building "socialism with Chinese characteristics," the accomplishment of which is still in progress. In the spirit of this era, Sibe culture—including the free use of the mother tongue and the free practice of religion—began to flourish once again in the 1980s. It was part of the Chinese government's early reform program to denounce the horrors of the "Cultural Revolution" and, at least in principle, to guarantee all Chinese ethnic groups the right to practice their religious traditions. At the same time, the ideologues of the Chinese Communist Party were convinced that modernization would sooner or later bring about the decline of religious traditions, and they called on their followers to unwaveringly promote atheist ideas. In the documents released by the Party, ideologues sought to resolve contradictions by stating that religion should be treated as a private matter, since cultivating religious traditions is everyone's own choice, but the practice of religion can only be tolerated as long as it truly remains within the private sphere (Madsen 2010).

Based on the above, the term secular may well be applied to the religious policy adopted by the communist regime. However, if these aspirations in religious policy are interpreted as part of nation-building, then the process should rather be seen as a religious ritual. The executors of this ritual treat the fundamental principles that shape the Chinese nation as rules that can be changed on a theoretical level, but on a practical level, treat them as principles that cannot be altered. Their goal is to absolutize the existing political order (Lane 1981, 36), to *sanctify* the collective secular entity that has been called to life and embedding it in their ideology, to use

it in shaping the new frames for the meaning of social existence. Within this process, the shaping and sanctification of national history continued to play a crucial role after the “Cultural Revolution,” as collective entities, already sacralized, can only be kept alive by political liturgies nourished by a sanctified national history.<sup>14</sup>

In 1979, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, which had the main task of coordinating cooperation between the central government and ethnic groups, decided that the historiographical activities—writing and rewriting histories—started in the 1950s and disrupted during the revolution, should be resumed under the slogan of patriotism that had become the dominant ideology by this time. Adopting the concept of “patriotism” to replace “nationalism” as a catchword used in reference to creating China’s national unity was one of the major turning points in the ethnic policy of the Chinese Communist Party at the time. This concept was intended to prevent the escalation of potential conflicts between ethnic groups and the state, as well as between ethnic groups since being patriotic in China equated to the love of the Party and serving the Party’s objectives.

In 1986, the second, rewritten version of the Sibe’s official history under the title *Xibozu jianshi* (The Concise History of the Sibe Nation) was published in the context of such prevalent nation-building aspirations (Sárközi 2019, 260). Besides a number of other additions, editors of the revised version devoted a separate chapter to Sibe religious traditions or “religious beliefs,” to use the precise terminology. The choice of terminology indicated that this was the concept the Chinese Communist Party, when it rose to power, classified as values Chinese ethnic groups were allowed to “preserve” and “reform.” On the other hand, it is true that a sharp distinction was drawn in the volume between “religious beliefs” and Sibe culture (including language, art, etc.) and customs (such as wedding and burial traditions, major festivities or taboos), which were described in two different chapters (“Xibozu Jianshi” *Bianxiezu* 1986, 96–120; 135–8).

In contrast to the 1963 edition, the chapter on “religious beliefs” in the revised volume described various Sibe religious traditions, including shamanism (“Xibozu Jianshi” *Bianxiezu* 1986, 135–6). However, the brief descriptions inserted in this chapter only focused on specific segments in the Sibe’s shamanic religious traditions—such as the test of climbing the knife-ladder—suggesting that the Sibe communities still cultivated these

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Stowers (citing Gentile) 2007, 26. For an analysis of the process of political sacralization described above, see Mácsai 2012, 229–33.

religious traditions as existing traditions in the 1980s, when the book was published. This was a major shift compared to the previous edition of the Sibe’s “concise history” that nearly denied the existence of religious traditions. The reality, lying between these two extremes, was far more complex. In this reality, consideration of religious traditions was informed by a concept that pervaded the tiniest village communities and whole national societies alike, and served as a cultural and political resource for nation-building powers. The concept was *cultural heritage* (Chin. *wenhua yichan*) (cf. Sonkoly 2011, 10).

Like anywhere else in the world, it took a long time for the concept of heritage to gain ground in China. In relevant literature, the practice of preserving heritage adopted in China is considered to have taken place under Western influence, with the roots of the process traced to the 1890s. It can be taken for certain that the Chinese understanding of heritage was filled with new scientific values and meaning under the influence of newly arrived Western disciplines such as archaeology, history and ethnology (Lai 2016, 50–1, 79). However, it is important to emphasize that the practice of preserving natural and cultural values already existed in China, and thus the Western idea of heritage preservation did not emerge as entirely new but as something *different* (cf. Cao 2007, 4–5; Yan 2018, 29).

The first developmental phase of the discourse on the Chinese understanding of the concept of heritage and setting up related institutional and organizational frameworks lasted until the mid-1980s, according to relevant literature. In 1985, China ratified the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention—WHC) adopted by UNESCO in 1972. The concept of cultural heritage rarely appeared in official documents at that time, as opposed to the concept of *cultural relics* (Chin. *wenwu*), a widely accepted and understood term.<sup>15</sup> The use of these two concepts remained inconsistent during the second, transitional phase of thinking about heritage that lasted until 2005, and the term “cultural relic” was still mostly used in documents discussing issues related to the preservation of culture. How-

<sup>15</sup> To categorize cultural relics, from the 1960s, the Chinese state developed a specific system that divided relics into five groups: (1) architectural, etc. sites that commemorate historical events, revolutionary movements; (2) archaeological sites, ancient buildings, cave temples, etc. that are of historical, aesthetic or scientific value; (3) valuable works of art; (4) revolutionary or ancient documents that are of historical, scientific, etc. value; (5) objects that represent various social systems, economic and/or social activities (Yan 2018, 35).

ever, the function assigned to these two concepts was one and the same: propagating patriotism (cf. Bai 1986, 16–26).

All this leads to a string of questions related to the concept of heritage subordinated to political goals (Yan 2018, 10). From the point of view of my study, the most important of these questions is the intertwining of the national construction of the past and the conversion of traditions into heritage. Heritage, accommodated within the interpretative domain of history, has become the ultimate ideological and political instrument for the Communist regime in creating the “ancient” national past. In fact, the rhetoric of historical continuity was one of the main tools of the Communist regime to legitimize its authority when it assumed power. The cultural heritage program, however, created new opportunities for the regime to cherry-pick the “essence” of the traditions of Chinese ethnic groups and, deep-freezing them into history, to align them with the narrative of historical and cultural continuity (Yan 2018, 21).

This is why the religious traditions of the Sibe were presented as existing, unbroken traditions in the 1986 rewritten version of the Sibe’s official history. And indeed, according to ethnographic works published from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, more than ten shamans were active in the village communities in the Qapqal region in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see, for instance, He 2009a, 263–4). However, none of them were shamans who had ascended the knife-ladder, and their knowledge and skills, once carefully guarded from others—such as songs shamans sang at initiation rituals or when healing that were passed on as secret teachings from masters to disciples—were gradually disclosed to the public as a result of the work of ethnographers (see, for instance, Nara and Yong 1992). The terminology used in ethnographic works published around the turn of the millennium also changed, more and more frequently replacing *shamanism* (Chin. *samanjiao*) with *shaman culture* (Chin. *saman wenhua*). This was an indication that this religious tradition could only survive as heritage, divested of its religious content, under the auspices of “culture,” like a tree stripped of its branches and leaves, whose trunk was cast into a blazing fire in front of the altar of nation-building.

#### *Shaman Faith and Intangible Cultural Heritage: The Way Ahead*

I was inspired to compare the Sibe’s religious beliefs, stripped of religious content and reformulated as heritage, to a tree with broken-off branches by He Ling, one of the most renowned ethnographers of the Sibe. The book *Xibozu wenhua jingcui* (The Essence of Sibe Culture) that He Ling

edited included two of his studies (2009a; 2009b), in which he abandoned the notion of the survival of the Sibe’s religious beliefs as something timeless, and gave a portrayal that was contrary to what was written in the Sibe’s “official” history. He pointed out that the “Cultural Revolution” had brought immense destruction in all fields of life and introduced the term “culture of popular faith” (Chin. *minjian xinyang wenhua*), which is of great significance to my study. He Ling wrote:

A national popular-faith culture is just like any other national culture; it has its own features, such as its historical or ancient character [. . .]. As to the current Sibe popular-faith culture, [. . .] it has lost its systematic character and completeness, and only the branches and leaves of that culture are left. (He 2009a, 259, 262)<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, it was of no help that the “Cultural Revolution” was followed by cultural rehabilitation, He Ling noted, implying that something had already been lost. His thoughts are of the utmost importance for this study: they bear witness to the idea that at the end of the twentieth century, the Sibe’s faith in shamans, stripped of religious content, could only survive as a “popular-faith culture” under the auspices of heritage.

It is important to highlight that it was only in 2000 that the concept of cultural heritage appeared in the titles of official documents and in the names of institutions (Yan 2018, 45); thus, cultural heritage had come to replace cultural relics in the official terminology related to the preservation of culture. According to relevant Chinese literature, the replacement of terms did not merely imply the adoption of new terminology but also brought about changes in narratives in official documents, in political speech and in the thinking of individuals regarding heritage (Cao 2007, 4–5): the discourse on cultural heritage seems to have proceeded slowly in a direction that reversed priorities in existing thinking in terms of the use of culture and the preservation of culture (Huo 2016, 499; Yan 2018, 31).

However, it is questionable whether the turning point that relevant Chinese literature attributed to the terminological adoption of the concept of cultural heritage had actually taken place. The fact that the preservation of cultural heritage continued to aim primarily at the legitimization of nation-building aspirations seems to contradict this. Ironically, the world-heritage program, declared to be universal, seems to encourage

<sup>16</sup> The quotation was translated from Chinese into Hungarian by Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi. The English translation was made on the basis of the Hungarian translation.



the Chinese government to reinforce the narrative about the glorious past of the Chinese nation and its historical continuity with the help of the program—in the same way as it did in the decades-long, nationwide project of writing histories (Moles 2009, 130). Regarding such efforts, no substantial change took place with the spread of the concept of intangible cultural heritage either (Chin. *feiwuzhi wenhua yichan*).

UNESCO ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention—ICHC) and China was among the first countries to join the program in 2004. This resulted in the establishment of new institutions<sup>17</sup> and in the formulation of new heritage rhetoric with an emphasis on identity, ethnic solidarity and social harmony. This rhetoric—the development of which was largely thanks to the contribution of scientists involved in the dialogue on heritage<sup>18</sup>—simply used and is still using ICHC’s approach to intangible cultural heritage promoting local cultural diversity as a tool to legitimize (cultural) control over ethnic groups (Yan 2018, 80–2).

Hence, it may be understood why China’s new heritage rhetoric failed to result in the tolerance of a variety of cultural and religious practices and merely opened up a new way to manage them. The cultural heritage program was delegated a key role in the development of tourism; numerous studies examine how tourism became the main vehicle for rural development in China (see, for example, Svensson 2016, 41), or how local governments realized the assets in heritage related to ancestors and raised them to the category of (tangible or intangible) heritage to be officially protected, resulting in religion becoming an ever-growing business in China (Chau 2014, 953). The official cultural heritage discourse, for example, celebrates the monumentality and antiquity of the ancestral temples belonging to ethnic groups, but never the religious practices associated with them. Therefore, the authorities in charge of preserving cultural heritage continue to regard these sites as cultural relics rather than as a living link to ancestors (Svensson 2016, 42).

<sup>17</sup> Today, the most important organizations responsible for the preservation of cultural heritage include the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, the Ministry of Construction and its provincial, city, regional and county-level representations, the Ministry of Culture and its local bureaus, the Government Offices for Tourism and Religious Affairs, the Chinese Communist Party itself and its Publicity Department and their local units (Svensson 2016, 34).

<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of the sudden rise in the number of articles on the subject, see Blumenfeld 2018, 171. For an overview of most significant topics, see Svensson and Maags 2018, 11–15.

The “metamorphosis” of the shaman faith of the Sibe in Xinjiang cannot be detached from this process; hence this religious belief as a lived phenomenon within its traditional social context seems to be slowly disappearing. During my fieldwork trips to Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County, I still had the opportunity to meet some *butu* shamans, who no longer used their knowledge and skills, or at least only in very small communities (Figs 3–4). But increasingly few people know about them, as the Party only lends support to their activity in one form, reduced to folklore, which serves political propaganda purposes. This is what is inscribed as a value in people’s minds through the various channels (television, museums, etc.) used for nation-building. This also explains how Sibe people living in one village are aware that shamans still exist, while those in another village believe this tradition to be dead, and some take their own action, seeking to preserve and pass on arbitrarily selected elements of a tradition thought to be dead. This is what the shaman song and dance group made up of pensioners did in the Seventh Village<sup>19</sup> under the auspices of the intangible cultural heritage program, whose influence has permeated even the lower strata of society.

At the same time, as the case study also highlighted, a tradition which is on the way to being remembered merely as a piece of cultural heritage has different meanings for different groups in society. The rest of the story of the shaman song and dance group indeed exemplifies how the shaman faith of the Sibe can still constitute a source of numerous conflicts depending on whether it is considered a religion or culture. My case study did not end with the members of the group winning the entitlement to travel to northeastern China to represent their county at a national arts festival and competition organized for middle-aged and elderly people, for their story then took an even more interesting turn than before.

The group set out on 7 June 2012 to travel several thousand kilometers by train to the city of Dalian in northeastern China. Their journey was supported by the local office of the Party Committee with 200,000 yuan, while donations of 4–5,000 yuan were collected from individuals for the group. The competition took place from 11 to 15 June 2012, and entrants represented their communities from across the country, with a total of 32 performances. The shaman song and dance group of pensioners from the

<sup>19</sup> When I recorded structured interviews with the members of the group, I was confronted with the fact that most of them were unaware of shamans living three or four villages away, with one of them being a female shaman who still practiced healing in her village in 2012.



Figs 3–4. Sibe shamans living in Qapqal.  
Photo: Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi, 2010.

Seventh Village staged their performance on 12 June 2012, and won the contest with a sweeping victory.

After the competition, the group set off on their pilgrimage in the northeast, during which they visited Sibe schools and sacred places known from their history. The most important was the visit they paid to the Sibe ancestral temple in Shenyang.<sup>20</sup> There, before entering, they put on their festive folk costumes and lined up behind their leaders. They then proceeded through the main entrance. As offerings took place in the temple to honor their ancestors, the two leaders heading the procession carried two trays with various seeds from the fields of Qapqal and some silk cloth with the names of individuals in the group written on it (Fig. 5). One by one, the participants in the group fell on their knees and bowed before the altar to the ancestors, and following the ceremony, they performed their dance in

<sup>20</sup> The Sibe believe that their ancestors who relocated to the west in 1764 presented sacrificial offerings in this temple before embarking on their journey. For more information on the controversial story of the church, see Sárközi 2018, 75–108.



Fig. 5 Members of the group carrying offerings on their procession to the Sibe Ancestral Temple in Shenyang.  
Photo: Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi, 2012.

the square in front of the temple. Then they dispersed to have a look at all the halls in the temple. Many burst into tears while walking around the site.

After returning home to Qapqal, the members of the group sacrificed in the village temple to thank their ancestors by offering soil and water taken

from the sacred lands in the northeast. From mid-July 2012, the local press covered the group's achievement extensively. Journalists were delighted to write about the story of the farmers' victory, emphasizing that although the religious practice of shamanism had now diminished as a result of social progress, the Sibe's respect for their ancestors had not lost any of its significance, as exemplified by their treasuring these "ancient" songs. Following suit, village leaders—under the watchful eyes of the staff of the Propaganda Department—also stated that the songs and dances that members of the group had learnt were the most beautiful forms of expression of Sibe shaman culture. To make progress in preserving this culture, the village leaders emphasized that they would make every effort to have this Sibe cultural heritage officially classified as intangible cultural heritage.

The tone of the reports published on the internet on the group's activity changed by the autumn of 2012 and rehearsals were discontinued. In her correspondence, the teacher who had founded the group complained that everyone was asking her why the rehearsals had come to an end. And why couldn't people talk about their shaman culture at the county cultural labor inspectorate? When I too asked the teacher about these issues at one of our last meetings in person, she only replied that they couldn't resume rehearsals. Then she repeated the comment that the secretary of the Party Committee's local office made, to the effect that what they practiced was "no longer culture but religion"—a word-for-word quotation.

### Conclusion

Unfortunately, I have no information about subsequent events. I was only able to follow the online correspondence for a while. From these exchanges, I know that the teacher who founded the dance group did not give up her plans after the rehearsals had been stopped. She appealed to the Sibe heritage and political elite in Xinjiang for help in organizing a symposium to discuss how their songs and dances could be included in the provincial list of China's intangible cultural heritage. This symposium was convened in 2012, and in addition to nominating the group's activity for inclusion in the list, a much larger-scale plan was also discussed: this was nothing less than transforming the Seventh Village into a "Village of Shaman Culture" (Chin. *saman wenhua zhi xiang*), building a village that could become a research center for Sibe shaman studies.

The idea for this plan was presumably inspired by the development project launched in the Fifth Village, two villages away, with the aim of building the Sibe's "ancient town," as part of the cultural heritage

program. According to the original plans, a platform with three levels would have been erected there, in the main square of the new "ancient town." The top level of this structure was designated as the place for the knife-ladder, the ultimate symbol of both the initiation of Sibe shamans and the Sibe's "ancient" culture. However, when I last visited Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County in 2019, the knife ladder was not in its place in the "ancient town" of the Fifth Village. And as far as I know, the "Village of Shaman Culture" has not been built either.<sup>21</sup> In the meantime, however, Sibe shaman dances and songs were added to the provincial-level list of Chinese intangible cultural heritage. This was achieved not as a result of the efforts of the Sibe dance and song group of pensioners but thanks to a *butu* shaman in the First Village, whose father was an *iletu* shaman, one who had ascended the knife-ladder.<sup>22</sup>

In my view, these events and my case study are excellent examples of the imaginative nature of heritage—shaped by national interests and offering a variety of interpretations—which often makes the process of heritage formation a source of economic, political and cultural conflicts. The Chinese heritage regime is at one end of these conflicts. Embodied in conventions, reformulated but declared to be universal, as well as in policies and laws, the Chinese heritage regime directs the system of relationships that define and employ heritage from top to bottom. In fact, the heritage-formation process signifies for the heritage regime precisely an opportunity to interpret, manipulate and invent the past for interested parties in the present and the future (Chan 2005, 65).

At the opposite end of the process, all of this not only raises numerous questions regarding the rights of local communities (Beazley 2010, 63) but also turns out to be a double-edged sword in many instances. After all, the steady growth of heritage may lead to a renewed intensification of ethnic identities, as a result of which an increasing number of groups and individuals seeking to prove their legitimacy will question the role assigned

<sup>21</sup> To my regret, in the last few years I have not had the opportunity to continue long-term fieldwork in Qapqal owing to the current ethnopolitical issues in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Moreover, since 2017, I have not been granted permission to enter any of the villages except for the Fifth Village, and in 2019, I was only allowed to visit my former data providers in the Fifth Village under supervision. For this reason, I am using the conditional mood in the concluding part of my study, and I apologize if the plans described above have become a reality in the meantime.

<sup>22</sup> The online source fails to indicate the name of the author of the article. The article was published in *Yili Wanbao* on 16 October 2014. Source: [http://www.chinaxinjiang.cn/ziliao/whys/4/201410/t20141016\\_447235.htm](http://www.chinaxinjiang.cn/ziliao/whys/4/201410/t20141016_447235.htm) [Retrieved on 19 January 2021].

to them in the process of heritage formation. In the case of the Sibe, the resulting conflicts become evident through examining the conversion to heritage of religious traditions, which fundamentally determine the deep structure of Sibe identity, revealing the intertwining between the question of the heritage-formation process and secularization.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, the relationship between heritage formation and secularization is a rather complex phenomenon, all the more so in that religious traditions as heritage play an important role in the self-interpretation of numerous nation-states officially declared to be secular. Just like many other nation-states, China is no exception in this regard, where the process of secularization unfolding after the Chinese Communist Party had come to power was accompanied by a process of sacralizing the Chinese nation: while party ideologues made all efforts to marginalize religious life in every respect, new nationalist myths and ideologies emerged. On the one hand, the process of converting religious traditions into heritage in China is put at the service of secular modernity, inducing the sacralization of the nation. On the other hand, despite all the efforts exerted by the Communist regime, various religious traditions have still not lost significance in many local communities, or are being reborn in a new form, intersecting the new pathways designated by the modern bureaucratic state and market economy (Madsen 2010).

The sacralization of the Chinese nation and secularization that characterizes the religious policy pursued by the Communist regime are divergent yet complementary and interdependent processes. At the same time, as the story of the shaman song and dance group of pensioners from the Seventh Village shows, these processes, in conjunction with or in spite of the cultural heritage program, can very easily lead to inducing desecularization processes. Religious beliefs and practices that have faded or sunk into oblivion may revive or gradually intensify (Karpov 2010, 250). Undoubtedly, it would be difficult to answer how deeply this process pervades consciousness, yet one thing can be taken for certain: even if the Sibe's shaman faith can never regain its one-time "classic" power of shaping communities, it can potentially continue to influence the self-imagining and activities of small communities distanced from the secularized sectors of individuals and modern society. All this is reflected in the words a Sibe Party official from the Seventh Village. In answer to

<sup>23</sup> For an illustrative example of this process, see Sárközi 2021 on the conversion into heritage of the Sibe's genealogical writing tradition.

my question what he believes in, he said he had two religions: shamanism rooted in his love of his people and his party membership.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> I took note of the cadre's words in 2010, during my first visit to Qapqal (field-diary notes, 14 October 2010).

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