

The Hero's Theme of Campbell and the Making of Shaman Among the Three Small Minority Groups in China

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After briefly introducing the making of the three small Altaic language speaking minorities in North China, the Daur, the Evenk, and the Oroqen, who are well known for their shamanic practices both in the past and at present, I compare their shaman-making processes with in mind the Hero's theme developed by Joseph Campbell in his *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. I argue that there is a family resemblance between the Campbell's processual model of departure—initiation—the ultimate boon and that of transformation into a shaman—knowledge acquisition—problem solving among the three small minorities in North China. While the core of Campbell's theory centers on the spiritual journey of hero's self-discovery and receiving supernatural aid, it parallels with the psychedelic path that a shaman must go through at a rite held for the occasion. The hero comes to ego consciousness and sets out on his spiritual journey. This is the basis of Campbell's theory and is the psychological experience that a shaman has to undergo as well. The psychic unity of the human kind is a common tie that binds the scholarship of the West and the East.

Keywords: the three minorities, shaman, the archetypal images

The Daur, the Evenk, and the Oroqen

All three groups live largely in the northeastern part of Inner Mongolia and all speak an Altaic language. According to the 2010 census, the Daur has a population of 131,992 (about one hundred and thirty thousand), the Evenk 30,875 (about thirty thousand), and the Oroqen 8,659 (more than eight thousand).

	Population	Language	Distribution	Traditional livelihood
Daur	131,992	Mongolian, Altaic	Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang	Agriculture
Evenk	30,875	Manchu-Tungusic, Altaic	Inner Mongolia	Animal husbandry reindeer industry agriculture
Oroqen	8,659	Manchu-Tungusic, Altaic	Inner Mongolia	Hunting

The Daur language is close to Mongolian and some Daur words are said to have kept ancient forms Mongolian words. They have higher percentage of well-educated people than other groups and some of them, such as Badarangaa (one person's), the former head librarian of the Inner Mongolia Academy of Social Sciences Library, knows as many as eight languages. The intermarriage rate between the Daur and the Mongolians is quite high in cities such as Hohhot, Inner Mongolia. There are some Daur living in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region who are descendants of those who were sent by the Qing government to guard the borderland.

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The Ewenk have three subgroups: One is known as Solon Ewenk who grow crops, one is known as Tungus Ewenk who herd animals, and the last one is Yakut Ewenk who are reindeer herders with a tiny population of less than 200 while a large number of them live beyond the Sino-Russian borders in Yakutia, the Siberian side of Russia.¹ They are well known for shamanism. About 20 years ago they have been moved from Oluguya by the government to resettle in the City of Genhe to “improve their livelihood” according to the state planners. This is their second resettlement. The first occurred around the time of the Sino-Russian war in 1969 when they were moved from Uchirov to Oluguya for security reasons considering the fact that many of their relatives lived beyond along the bank of the Erguna River on the Russian side of the border. Some of the resettled reindeer herders preferred to live in the mountain and they moved back.

The Oroqen used to be excellent hunters in the Greater Hingan Ranges which were largely covered by dense forestry. Since the end of last century, they have been asked to give up their guns by the government on the grounds of environmental protection. It is a great loss more symbolic and psychological than material since guns carry cultural meanings. Recently a performance is given to mark the moment of giving up the gun. Both the performers and the audience are tearful.

Each year the Ewenk and the Oroqen receive subsidies from the government. New schools are built and TV receivers are handed out. However, the help from outside lacks the native points of view and neglects the subjectivity of the locals. This is largely due to the old evolutionary view of social development that divides social formation into the advanced and the primitive or the underdeveloped. Moving the minority people and resettling them is a component of “civilizational project” since an unsettled or mobile life is a token of “backwardness”.

Professor Naran Bilik jointed a research team led by Professor Hao Shiyuan in 1996 to conduct fieldwork in Oluguya, the Ewenk Minority Township deep in the Hinggan Mountains of Inner Mongolia. At that time the Ewenk reindeer herders have already been relocated by the government here from Qiqian in 1969 because of imminent Sino-Russian conflict. Part of his findings are published in *Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit Occasional Papers* (Volume 1, Number 1, 1996), entitled “Emotion Gets Lost: An Ewenki Case”. He said:

Unlike the Mongols, the Ewenki are not so resilient in restructuring their emotion and relocating moral authority. Both time and space are short for them. They are not yet prepared for change while the spaces in mountains and forests, where they could have substantialized their emotions by finding gods in seclusion, or reconstructing some, have been disturbed and re-attributed by the marketing process empowered from outside. (p. 30)

In recent years, new generations of Oroqen intellectuals grow up and raise their voices. One of them, Professor Bai Lan from the Inner Mongolia Academy of Social Sciences, once talked with Professor Fei Xiaotong from Peking University. As a result of which Prof. Fei has called for minority cultural awareness ,[that](#) is warmly received by the academia.

Joseph Campbell's Archetypal Hero

In his most influential book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* Campbell makes use of Joyce's concept of *monomyth* to argue that all mythic narratives derive from a common pattern that exists beneath the narrative

¹ According to Mihály Hoppál and Lajos Nádorfi, with a population as many as 985,528 (2010), the Saha are also known as Yakut who speak a language that belongs to the Turkic branch of the Altaic family. Cf. Mihály Hoppál and Lajos Nádorfi, 2016, *Shamans, Images and Rituals*, p. 30. Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Arts.

surface of most great myths throughout history and everywhere in the world. When this common pattern travels through space and time, it transforms into various local forms like masks due to different social structures and environmental pressures in the receiving society. The basic structure, however, has remained unchanged and can be classified into stages such as “the Call to Adventure”, “Receiving Supernatural Aid”, “Meeting With the Goddess/Atonement With the Father” and “Return”. The psychic unity is most important for him.

It is the business of mythology proper, and of the fairy tale, to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way from tragedy to comedy. Hence the incidents are fantastic and “unreal”: they represent psychological, not physical, triumphs.

Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again—if the powers have remained unfriendly to him—his theft of the boon he came to gain (bridge-theft, fire-theft); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir). (Campbell, 2008, p. 211)

In the same way the cycle of sleep and waking repeats throughout one's lifetime, Campbell quotes the Aztec worldview: the four elements of water, earth, air, and fire of which each terminates a period the universe, forming a repeating round: the eon of the waters brings deluge, that of the earth creates earthquake, that of air causes wind, and “the present eon will be destroyed by flame” (Campbell, 2008, p. 224). It reminds us of the Chinese parallel of the five elements: the gold subdues the wood, the wood the water, the water the fire, the fire the earth, and a full cycle ends at the moment when the earth is eliminating the gold.

The anthropologist Levi-Strauss also embraces the idea of the psychic unity of the mankind without sacrificing all ethnographic details.

He showed that culture is a system with underlying structures that are common to all societies regardless of their differences. Through his analyses he showed that patterns of structures including behaviour and thought are universal to all societies, and rejected the concept of primitive and modern mind, arguing that all men have the same intellectual potential.²

According to Taoism, one creates two, two creates three, and three ends the cycle; three starts and ends a cycle. As we aforementioned the Aztec have the four elements of water, earth, air, and fire while the Chinese have the five elements of the gold, the wood, the water, the fire, and the earth. Here we have a spectrum from three to five. We can add two to the continuum. Based on the account of “The Blockage of Passage Between Earth and Heaven” in classical literature of China *Shang Shu* and *Guo Yu*, at the beginning of the universe, every ancient could reach heaven from earth, that means, everyone is a kind of shaman who can go to heaven wherever and whenever he or she wants. But the legendary King Zhuanxu asked his ministers Zhong and Li to block such connections, and he appointed five officials to be in charge respectively of heaven, earth, the gods, the folk, and the material things. From then on, folks and gods were put into different categories and were governed by different functionaries. Shamans metaphorically become “specialists” who play a role in causing a

² <http://www.philosophers.co.uk/claude-levi-strauss.html>, accessed on April 24, 2017.

divided or a unified China (Bilik, 2015, pp. 237-247). It works the same way as the values of binary digit commonly represented as either a zero or one: either blocking the passage between heaven and earth or unblocking it.

Shamanic Practice Pattern Among the Three Minority Groups

In their article "Survey and Reflections on the Ominan Culture Amongst the Daur", Samina and Wu Fengling point out that all Ewenk, Oroqen, and Daur worship their ancestral gods at the level of a Hala or Mokun (something close to a clan). Generally speaking, they recognize these ancestral gods as Hojor Barkhan. The word *Hojor* comes from the Daur language meaning "root" while the word *Barkhan* means "god".

The three small minority groups	Ancestral gods	Way of worship
Oroqen	<i>Ajoro Borkhan</i>	Main shamanic god of the <i>mokun</i> (clan)
Ewenk	<i>Hojoor</i>	Every clan has its own <i>shewokh</i> (ancestral god)
Daur	<i>Hojor Barkhan</i>	The principal god that a <i>mokun</i> worship

Those that can turn into ancestral gods include: the protection gods for the shaman such as Ewenk's *Shewokh*, who is regarded as a sorcerer-ancestor coming from snakes and other natural gods; such as ancestral shamans who come to the clan to pick up their successors; and such as sorcerer-ancestors who are made by thunders or those who are abnormal.

The shamaness (*yadgan*) are of two kinds: *hojor yadgan* and common *yadgan*. *Hojor yadgan* is the one who performs to evoke *hojor Barkhan* of the *mokun* or *hala*. The common *yadgan* performs to evoke *boodi jurgal* (gods from outside).

The pattern of making a shaman among the Oroqen, the Ewenk, and the Daur agrees with that of Campbell's archetypal hero, a cycle of the separation, the transmission of secret knowledge, and return. Those novices are those who become incurably ill and seek help from a shaman. They are qualified as a full shaman through a rite after acquiring secret knowledge specially transmitted to them. They are transformed to serve their own people by solving problems, curing diseases, and bringing other benefits.

The legend has it that the earliest Oroqen shamaness is *Nichan* who is healthy and wise, powerful and is good at shooting arrows. She is kind and hardworking. At her hand many patients are cured and even the dead can be resuscitated by her. Her deeds, however, irritate the gods: How can a dead person be resuscitated? Dead is dead! As punishment she is thrown into the river and drowned. Though she is dead, shamanism is passed down to a new generation. According to Oroqen practices, it takes some preconditions to make a shaman or shamaness. First, when a baby is born, the placenta has to be cut with a knife to get it out; second, suffering from a chronic disease; third, thrown into sudden madness. A young person is to be chosen from the clan and he or she will become perplexed, unstable, and prefers to be left alone. It is a sign that his or her soul is taken away by the gods and he or she will be taught all kinds of shamanic knowledge. After the initiation rite his or her soul will return to the body and he or she will become "normal" again. The neophytes will practice shamanic performance in the tepee in winter or in the open in summer. The ceremony lasts three days. When the performers enter the condition of dizziness, he or she is said to be possessed and the soul goes either up to the heaven or down the underworld (Guan & Wang, 2010, pp. 51-53). Such psychic journey is typically described as a process of suffering from a painful disease, finding a master and making a vow, and serving the clan. The psychic pattern is in full agreement with that of Campbell's: The hero leaves the earthly world and

sets off on his adventurous journey, acquiring knowledge, and he comes back to his community. The making of shamans among the three small minority groups testifies this pattern. There are some details, however, that are worth mentioning.

1. The making of a shaman is not out of one's own will but by external forces. For example, according to the Daur shamaness Sechengua, all shamans are made not out of their own will. Many are frail and ill at a younger age and nobody can treat them. They have to seek help from a shaman or shamaness who makes a promise to the ancestor-gods that the patient will become a shaman or shamaness. They are cured after the promise is kept and become a shaman or shamaness (Ding & Sain-tana, 2011, p. 223).

Interviewed by a group of researchers from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences who ask her how to maintain shamanism, the Daur shamaness Wo Jufen answers: This is not something for one to protect; if there is a need, it happens and you have to become a shamaness without turning back. You will not die and your destiny is fixed (Ding & Sain-tana, 2011, p. 256).

2. The secrecy of knowledge transmission. I agree with the view held by many scholars that dreams mediated by gods are important channels for transmitting information. All 30 years Sechengua suffers from a disease during which she is possessed with the same dream: An old person visits her. All gods that possess and are worshiped by shamans are substantiated through dreams. Evoking gods for others or treating diseases are all realized through dreams.

3. Like the Campbell's archetypal hero, the Oroqen soul is omnipresent despite all the bodily trials. A shamaness will suffer from all kinds of bodily punishment including death for saving life or curing diseases. The soul will overcome all kinds of physical boundaries and will fly up or down.

Discussion

The family resemblance between the Campbell's pattern of departure—initiation—the ultimate boon and that of transformation into a shaman through the process of abnormal experience such as a sudden attack of disease, knowledge acquisition, and problem solving among the three small minorities in North China, justifies for further analysis. Campbell's theory highlights the spiritual journey of hero's self-discovery and supernatural aid; it echoes the psychedelic experience that a neophyte goes through at an initiation rite. The hero realizes himself and sets out on his spiritual journey. Gaining a psychological experience on the part of the hero through trials is as much an abnormal phenomenon as a patient's painful dismemberment to become a shaman or shamaness. The psychic unity of the human kind is a common tie that connects the scholarship of the West with the East.

Considering Campbell's experience in India and his interest in Sanskrit, it is not surprising that his archetypal hero should parallel a counterpart shaman or shamaness who lives in an "oriental society". I am not eager to jump into a judgmental conclusion by making a statement about the nature of such "family resemblance". Geertz (2000) refuses to take side between universalism and relativism and prefers to engage with "thick description". We have to conduct more fieldwork and come up with more "thick descriptions" before we are able to think of other's thinking and handle properly our own position.

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