

Article

The Changes of Chinese Oroqen Shaman Culture in the Context of Social Transformation

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Abstract: With the settlement under the mountains, the Chinese Oroqen has started comprehensive interaction with other ethnic groups, and gradually adapted to the wider society. During this process, the shaman culture, which has accompanied the Oroqen's daily life and social development for a long time, has changed accordingly. Through looking at the changes of shaman culture, the self-adjustment process of Oroqen people in the transition from traditional to modern society can be better understood. It is also an important entry point to understand the social and cultural transformation and community consciousness of Oroqen people, which helps to understand their cultural self-confidence and identity consciousness. Grounded in ethnographic observations, especially "the last shaman" Guan Kouni's life story, this paper traces the shaman culture and its social significance in the traditional society for Oroqen people. With the help of the research paradigm of "embedding–disembedding–re-embedding", the article compares the reshaping of the identity of Oroqen shamans under the combined effect of various socio-historical events since the settlement, smoothing out the changing process in the Oroqen shaman culture, and discussing the transformation of the social function of Oroqen shaman. This article offers a more comprehensive picture of the cultural changes of Oroqen shaman since the settlement under the mountains, in order to clarify the role and functions played by Oroqen shamans at contemporary society and provide a reference case for understanding the significant transformation of the original functions and status of the traditional elites of ethnic minorities in the theoretical sense. The study explores motivations for the deepening of cultural consciousness among ethnic groups in the context of modernity.

Keywords: Oroqen; shaman; sacred authority; cultural symbol; traditional elite



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1. Introduction

The Oroqen previously hunted in the areas of Siberia and the Great Khingan Mountains of China. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Oroqen settled down in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Heilongjiang Province in 1953 under the guidance of the CPC and the Chinese government, starting a leap forward development. In the same year, China carried out the first national population census and started the work of ethnic identification. Through identifying, the government collected more than 400 ethnic names at first, and then identified 38 ethnics including Oroqen. According to the data of China's first national population census in 1953, the population of the Oroqen totaled 2256 ([State Ethnic Affairs Commission and National Bureau of Statistics of China 2008](#)).

After the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the government broke down family and ethnic boundaries and reorganized people according to class and interests, bringing them firmly under the administrative organization ([Taylor 1993](#)). At the same time, the Oroqen people also constantly adjusted their understanding of their ethnic, civic, and social identity, gradually integrating from a relatively independent living ethnic group into the Chinese ethnic community and becoming one of the 56 ethnic groups in China.

Subsequently, the Oroqen began to interact with other ethnic groups to varying degrees in the social and cultural fields, constantly dealing with the relationship between the “self” and the “other” in terms of traditional customs, folk practices, ways of behavior and modern life, modern scientific concepts, and information society. With the deep interaction among ethnic groups, more and more modern cultural elements appear in Oroqen society, and the symbolic characteristics such as ethnic language and traditional culture are gradually fading in their daily life—and even within the ethnic group, which has caused many ethnic intellectuals to worry whether the ethnic culture can continue to be inherited (Wu 2006; Bai 2015; Liu and Guan 2018).

According to the data of China’s seventh national population census, the population of Oroqen reached 9168 at the end of 2020. They mainly live in “One Town, Five Counties and Eight Villages” (“One Town” is Ulaga Town; “Five Townships” are Baiyinna Oroqen Ethnic Township, Shibazhan Oroqen Ethnic township, Xin’e Oroqen Ethnic township, Xinxing Oroqen Ethnic township, Xinsheng Oroqen Ethnic Township; “Eight Villages” are Baiyinna village, Shibazhan village, Xin’e village, Xinxing village, Xinsheng village, Shengli village, Hashitai village, Elunchunminzu village.) in Heilongjiang Province, Oroqen Autonomous Banner and the Oroqen people Township in Nanmu of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China. The intermarriage rate of the Oroqen reached 88.63% (The data are derived from the author’s compilation of the 6th National Census data.) as early as the sixth national population census in 2010, becoming the highest among 56 ethnic groups of China. With the continuous transformation of the Oroqen society, the people are in the process of gradually transitioning from the traditional hunting life to the modern settlement life. Nowadays, some young Oroqen people who are more receptive to modernity and actively try to integrate into modern society are constantly adjusting their understanding of their ethnic identity. However *ethnic boundaries are maintained in each case by a limited set of cultural features. The persistence of the unit then depends on the persistence of these cultural differentiae* (Barth 1969). When the influence of modernity is deepening, the root factor of Oroqen’s cultural self-confidence and self-awareness is changing, and the relationship between culture and identity is becoming detached. What kind of spiritual world and community consciousness should be used to further interact with others, and how to deepen self-awareness and clarify self-identity, so that the “cultural gene” of Oroqen can be passed on, are crucial questions.

In this reflection, Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong once put forward the proposition of “save people and save culture” in a conversation with a Oroqen scholar at the end of 20th century. He proposed that preserving culture means preserving life, and preserving people is also the only way to have culture, because culture is created by people and is a tool to save life. So, everything should be people-oriented in order to obtain prosperity and development (Fei 2002a, 2002b). According to the data from the fourth to the seventh national census of China, the population of Oroqen is stable on the whole, and has a small increase, which shows that the protection of “people” has achieved certain results. In the process of protecting “people”, especially in the process of interacting with other ethnic groups, the Oroqen face a series of development dilemmas, which appear to be challenges to their traditional livelihood patterns, production life, way of thinking, and behavioral norms. However, *Ethnicity is a cultural construct and its construction materials are cultural as well* (Schlee 2008). What is challenged is precisely the cultural materials for constructing “what is Oroqen”, which directly affects the adjustment of Oroqen’s cultural self-confidence, identity consciousness, and the transformation of its root factors. In this regard, taking the shamanic culture as an entry point, which was once in the traditional elite class, as one of the focal points in the game between tradition and modernity, can help to explore the close connection between the significant changes in the original functions and status of the traditional elite class within the Oroqen people. It provides a new perspective for understanding the cultural changes and identity transformation of the ethnic group.

The study of cultural change has a long history in anthropology and ethnology. It has been interpreted by many scholars of different schools from a diachronic, synchronic, or

interactive perspective (Barnard 2000). With the expansion of the scope and depth of the research on cultural change, Pierre Bourdieu proposes that what researchers of our time need to do is not to discover the fracture and causality of cultural change, but to search for the reproduction and interaction agency of fields themselves among different social and cultural fields. It is not about cutting history, but about finding the points of communication between our worldview and behavior in the concrete events of society and human practice. In addition, the Chinese ethnographer He (2019), in his exploration of the epistemological turn in ethnic studies and the reconstruction of ethnology knowledge, suggests that contemporary ethnic studies should establish a relationalist cognitive model, for after all, everything exists in specific processes and interacting relations, objects are nothing but 'ties' in a web of relations, their nature can only be presented in relations, and changes in relations change the nature of things. On this basis, this paper understands ethnic cultural change as the process of continuous absorption of the "other" culture and adjustment of the "self" culture in the interaction of various ethnic groups and the process of social transformation. Since 2017, the authors have begun fieldwork among "One Town, Five Counties and Eight Villages" in Heilongjiang Province and Oroqen Autonomous Banner and Nanmu Oroqen Township in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, where Oroqen people mainly live. This paper focuses on the evolution of Oroqen society in the context of interaction between various ethnic groups in the modernization process, and discusses the transformation of shamans' function and identity in the inter-ethnic interaction and cultural interchange as the main line. It seeks to draw on Giddens' theories of embedding and disembedding, and uses the paradigm of 'embedding–disembedding–re-embedding'. Giddens' theories of embedding and disembedding provide insights into the tensions between cultural and social systems from a relationalist perspective, based on the extension of spatio-temporal processes. However, the concepts of "embedding", "disembedding", and "re-embedding" mentioned in this paper are not exactly the same as those of Giddens and others. Giddens' reference to disembedding is based on the study of the relationship between self and society, meaning that the actor breaks out of the temporal and spatial constraints and breaks free from the original field in order to re-enter a new one. The concepts of "embedding", "de-embedding", and "re-embedding" mentioned in this paper have another meaning in addition to the aforementioned one, i.e., from a structural-functionalist perspective, considering the various components of human society and culture as one. It is in this way that the relationship between the various parts of society and culture and the whole is restructured in such a way that their functions change, leading to the maintenance of a balanced and smooth functioning of society. This is conducive to understanding Oroqen society and its transformation under the influence of modernity, and can provide theoretical inspiration for exploring the transformation of the identity of the traditional elites of ethnic minorities in social transformation, and understanding the survival and development of the less populous ethnic groups and the awareness of cultural self-awareness in social and cultural transformation.

2. On the Mountains: The Shaman Embedded in the Social and Cultural Life of Oroqen People

Shamanism is a universal phenomenon (Eliade 1964) and a traditional religion of the Tungus (Lewis 2003). The shaman itself is self-evident as a religious functionary in Siberia (Harva-Holmberg 1938). In the culture of the Oroqen society of China, which is a Tungus-speaking group, the shaman has the meaning of wise, knowledgeable, and inquiring, and at the same time, the shaman is also a substitute for the great god dancer in the shaman culture, a "prophet" and "the incarnation of wisdom", and is regarded as a special envoy for communication between the gods and humans, able to convey the will of the gods to people and to convey the prayers and wishes of people to the gods, enjoying great respect. Although the atheists among the people usually regard shamanism as a synonym of feudal superstition, treating the shaman as a wizard or a liar in the Chinese context, the Chinese researchers who pay attention to the shaman tend to understand it from the perspective

of folk beliefs and religious culture. The authors acknowledge Thomas' understand of shamanism, that *I understand shamanism to refer to cultural representations of direct communication between human beings and bodiless beings in a séance event for the benefit of the community.* (Michael 2017).

The Oroqen people have long believed in shamans, and according to the statistics at the early stage of settlement, there were more than 15 Oroqen shamans in the area of Greater Khingan Mountains alone. They presided over rituals, prayed for blessings, dispelled disasters, cured diseases, etc. Guan Uliyan (c. 1898–1978, female, a famous shaman of the Huma River valley in the Greater Khingan Mountains Region), Zhao Liben (c. 1927–1980, male, a famous shaman of the Huma River valley in the Greater Khingan Mountains Region) Guan Baibao (c. 1927–1983, male, a famous shaman in the Baiyinna area of the Greater Khingan Mountains Region), and Meng Jinfu (Meng Jinfu in Chinese, or Chuonasuan in Oroqen, c. 1927–2000, male, a famous shaman in the Shibazhan Village of Shibazhan Township in the Greater Khingan Mountains Region) are among the representatives. To this day, there are still many historical memories and legendary stories of shamans passed down among Oroqen folklore. For example, “the story of hunter and bear”, “the story of shaman helping to find things”, “the story of sending away gods collectively”, etc., all show the importance of shaman culture in the culture of the Oroqen people.

Before the establishment of PRC, Lindgren, Shirokogoroff, Akiba Takashi from Japan, Izumi Seiichi, Iwai taikei, and other researchers from East and West came to the area where Oroqen people lived intensively, conducting field work and collecting relevant information about Oroqen people and Evingian shamans. There were many accounts about Oroqen shamans.

However, after the establishment of PRC, foreign researchers seldom came to conduct shaman research due to the influence of the domestic and foreign environment, and domestic shaman research also stepped into a low point. It was not until the late 20th century after China's reform and opening up that foreign researchers such as Whaley, and Noll and Shi (2009) re-entered China to conduct shamanic research and produced a series of results. At this time, domestic researchers also renewed their attention on shamanic culture; for example, Noll and Shi and others specifically described the life history of Oroqen shaman Meng Jinfu. Because Meng Jinfu was the last Oroqen shaman who passed away in the traditional sense of Oroqen and completed 3 years of shamanic rituals, so many domestic and foreign researchers including Noll and Shi called Meng Jinfu “the last shaman”. In addition to Meng Jinfu, there was another Oroqen shaman who experienced the shamanic ritual but did not complete the 3-year training—Guan Kouni. Although it was not as “orthodox” as Meng Jinfu, but as the local government where Guan Kouni lives started to promote ethnic culture tourism in the early 21st century, because of Meng Jinfu's death and Guan Kouni's practice experience, Guan Kouni was called “the last shaman” and this was gradually accepted by the people.

At present, the Oroqen shaman who is relatively well known and influential is Guan Kouni, who passed away in October 2019 and is declared as “the last shaman” by both the officials and the people. From the case of Guan Kouni becoming a shaman, we can recognize the general pattern of Oroqen shaman becoming gods and the general recognition of shamans in Oroqen society at that time. The process of becoming a shaman, as dictated by Guan Kouni in the Oroqen language, translated and supplemented by her niece, and collated by the author, is as follows:

One morning in the spring of about 1950, Guan Kouni set out from “Cuoluozi (It is also called “Xierenzhu” or “Xianrenzhu”, which is the residence of Oroqen people before settling down from the mountains)” to grassy marshland to check on the birth of her mare. On the way, she fell to the ground due to a sudden pain in her chest and waist and difficulty in breathing. When she woke up, she gritted her teeth and returned home. When her stepmother Meng Agu, asked why it had taken her so long to return, she was in so much pain that she could not speak. During the next six months, even though her stepmother took good care

of her, she still did not get well. During this period, her stepmother even asked a shaman named Guan Uliyan to do a shamanism dance but to no avail. Then she asked another shaman named Guan Baibao to treat her and also do a shamanism dance, Guan Kouni got better later but was still not cured. In the same year, Guan Kouni's family moved from the south bank of the Baiyinna River to Bragahan (now the Xingjian Village, Shibazhan Township, Tahe County, Heilongjiang Province), but her condition did not improve and instead worsened.

So, her parents asked the shaman Zhao Liben, and received the following answer: her condition would only improve if she became a shaman. However, Guan Kouni was already engaged arranged by her father at that time. Nonetheless, her grandfather did not agree to do so because Guan Kouni was about to marry and there was no need to receive god. It was difficult for Guan Kouni's parents to disobey the elderly, but considering their daughter's illness, they invited Guan Baibao to persuade Guan Kouni's grandfather. The grandfather proposed that Guan Baibao was a shaman, could he let the gods on Guan Kouni transfer to him, and then he could take the gods away. Then, Guan Baibao tried to do a shamanism dance, but the gods still attached to Guan Kouni after a day of dancing. The grandpa then asked what would happen if the gods do not go? Getting the answer that Guan Kouni might die. Then the grandpa finally agreed to let her receive the gods and become a shaman.

After suffering from a strange illness that had not improved for a long time, Guan Kouni was considered to have the prerequisites to become a shaman. So, her family asked the shaman Zhao Liben to make arrangements. According to the traditional rules, a set of the sacred clothes, including the shaman god clothes, bronze mirror and waist bell, the hat with two pitchforks (The number of pitchforks on the Oroqen shaman's hat symbolizes the level of the shaman, and the more pitchforks, the higher ability, level and grade of the shaman), etc., was prepared by nine people from the same family. In the ritual for treating illness, Guan Kouni followed Zhao Liben's order to invite the gods and do a shamanism dance with the sacred clothes. She quickly entered the "spirit possession" state without being taught, chanting some words, which she said afterwards that she did not know what she was rapping about. After that, she recovered completely and started a three-year shamanic practice in late 1951.

It is recognized from Guan Kouni's experience of becoming a god that the creation and healing of disease was the key to Guan Kouni's transformation from mortal to shaman, as [Shirokogoroff \(1935\)](#) and [Eliade \(1964\)](#) have specifically discussed the classic model of a shaman being initiated by disease. From her experience, we can also recognize the general recognition and acceptance of shaman among Oroqen before they settle down. However, as a shaman with a supreme status in the secular society, the godhood also led to the necessity of abandoning some general aspects of social life. At the time when Guan Kouni started to practice, a shaman was still considered sacred and inviolable by Oroqen society, with clear taboos and behavioral requirements, and was explicitly given the Charisma as [Max Weber \(1919\)](#) said. The sacred clothes and utensils should not be placed in a dirty position or touched by other women than his wife, and no women are allowed to walk behind the shrine, the shaman's clothes must be made by nine people from one family, and the "pitchfork" on the shaman's hat must match the shaman's own ability and status. The shaman has to offer the appropriate sacrifices when he dances with the gods, and he has to pray to the gods and make wishes with devotion and respect to avoid calamities, and has to worship "Bainacha" ("Bainacha" is the transliteration of Oroqen language, meaning god of mountains)" before he goes hunting in the mountains.

All these are evidence of the status and importance of the shaman in the Oroqen society. It can be said that the shaman and shamanism are completely embedded in the social daily life of the Chinese Oroqen.

3. Under the Mountains: The Shaman Disembedding with the Society and Cultural Life of the Oroqen People

The long-term existence of shamanic culture is based on the needs of the daily social and cultural life of the Oroqen people. Such a “person” or “culture” is needed to satisfy their spiritual needs, to comfort their souls, and to provide physiological supplements and healing when necessary. An act occurs because it is worth doing or has meaning, so the “act” is a behavior that is given subjective meaning by the actor, and it must be subordinate to a certain purpose or embody a certain meaning. Believing with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, Geertz take culture to be those webs and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (Geertz 1973). It is such a cultural dimension that gives meaning to the shaman to play its function in the historical process of the Oroqen for a long time.

After settling down from the mountains, many external factors, such as the introduction of modern science and technology and medical knowledge, the spread of materialistic concept, and the publicity and education to break the feudal superstition, have shaken the position of the shaman in the Oroqen community. As a result of the joint action of internal and external factors of Oroqen society, as well as the attitude of elite group of the Oroqen to the external society, the unprecedented activities of “sending away the God” were carried out in the Oroqen settlement. This is the landmark beginning of the substantial transformation of Oroqen people’s understanding of shaman culture, and also the beginning of alienation of the Oroqen society from “shaman” in a general sense. Regarding the Oroqen’s practice of “sending away the God”, the author has collected the following two different arguments. The Oroqen people in the Greater Khingan Mountains region of China are the main focus of this explanation.

The first theory is the softer “sending away the gods”, which has been confirmed by Oroqen folk scholars, the oldest members of the tribe and Guan Kouni herself. In June 1953, under the persuasion of the famous shaman in the Greater Khingan Mountains Region Guan Baibao, many shamans, such as Zhao Liben, Meng Jinfu, and Guan Kouni, held a solemn and unprecedented “farewell-to-the-altar” ceremony on the bank of Huma River. More than a dozen shamans danced for three days and nights, communicating with the gods, explaining the reason for sending the gods away, asking the gods to understand, sending them away and putting shamanic tools like the gods’ clothes to a clean place in the mountains (like “Oren”. The word “Oren” is the transliteration of Oroqen language, referring to the storage warehouse in the air built with the natural growing trees in the mountains and forests.) for preservation.

The second one is the “view of reformation of shamanism”, which is with more violent approaches. This viewpoint originated from an investigation report made in the 1950s. According to the report, due to some cadres’ misunderstanding of the party’s ethnic policy, they blindly announced to the masses the policy that no one would be allowed to invite gods to treat diseases in the future, and if the patient’s medical treatment was seriously affected by inviting the shaman, the patient would be fully responsible for any consequence arising therefrom. Some cadres also rallied support from the shaman activists and encouraged them to take the lead in carrying out reforms without approval from the higher authorities. The prestigious shaman Zhao Liben gradually lost faith in shamanism because he often went out to attend meetings and study scientific and cultural knowledge. He proposed that not only did he have to change the identity of the shaman himself resolutely, but he also wanted to let other shamans change theirs, which was consented and supported by the local cadres unconditionally. One night in 1953, Zhao Liben gathered all the shamans (7–8) in the village together and destroyed all his god clothes and tools one by one in front of all the shamans, which were made into some daily necessities, such as shoes, towels, and foot-covering cloths. Among these shamans who came with the good intention to do a shamanism dance collectively, some were stunned, some immediately stopped him from destroying the tools, and some persuaded or scolded him. After this incident, some

shamans followed suit and threw their sacred clothes, bells, and drums into the river while some shamans hid their tools for shamanism dances for later use. The report concludes: "In views of the reactions of the shamans, it appeared that some shamans did not reform voluntarily but by administrative means. However, there were some shamans who were willing to reform, and they were those who were really willing to make progress".

Regardless of the authenticity of the above statements, shaman's voluntary or involuntary "sending away the gods" accelerated the absence of shamans in the Oroqen society, and many social responsibilities originally performed by shamans were missing and gradually filled by other cultures. Fieldworker Wang Ken in China found that it was difficult to see shaman's clothes and hats in Oroqen village when he carried out field survey in 1956. It was difficult to see the shaman's clothes and hats in the Oroqen village, few people talk about shamans openly, and the former shamans were reluctant to talk about them. For those people who had praised shamans directly, even though they still believed shamanism in their hearts, they were afraid to say anything (Wang 2002). When Wang Ken's investigation team took photos of shaman clothes, they tried by every means to borrow one; the shaman who owned the sacred clothes dared not wear the clothes himself, so the investigation team members had to wear the clothes to complete the photo shooting.

At the beginning of the settlement, most Oroqen people believed in shamans. After "sending away the gods", the number of people who still worshiped shamans was decreasing. The shaman as a social fact was increasingly becoming a popular historical memory, and its sanctity was under attack within the community, as people begin to reflect ideologically on the sacredness of the shaman. Not only those who used to believe in shamans, but even shamans also doubted themselves. Before the settlement, shamans did help the people because of their command of natural knowledge and knowledge of herbs as well as their psycho-spiritual guidance. Hence, the existence of shamans has certain modern medical reasonableness or psychological utility. After all, *Religion, in this stage of belief, marks a new formative agent in the ascent of man* (Whitehead 2011). As a faith or belief, the shamanism dance performed by shamans may be the key to comforting the patient, but its medical effect is far from that of the modern medical treatment. In Baiyinna Oroqen Township, there is a record that, in 1955, a child of a shaman surnamed Ge fell ill and was diagnosed with pneumonia by a doctor. However, the shaman firmly believed that "there must be a god", and proposed a "match" with the doctor. As a result, the shaman did shamanism dances for a long time to no avail. In contrast, the child recovered three days later after being given an injection of antibiotics and taking sulfonamide by a doctor. Then, the shaman conceded defeat, and after that he would go to the doctor when he was sick (Guan and Zhang 2002). The shaman and doctor's "competition" seems to be a joke, but this typical case fully demonstrates the attitude of the Oroqen to modern science. In addition, after nurses of the Oroqen came back after finishing medical school, more and more Oroqen people have learned to use science and medical knowledge to solve problems, and have made it more clear that they cannot rely on the illusory gods but instead rely on their own ability to strive for a better life.

The Oroqen shamans had already "sent away the God". However, under the influence of many political movements, the negation of shamans in the whole society became extreme and reached its peak during the "Cultural Revolution". Shamanism as a crucial part of the Oroqen culture system also suffered a devastating blow, and shamans were criticized by the society and reduced to the bottom of the society. Although Guan Kouni only studied shamanism for one year and participated in "sending away the God" early, terminating her shamanic practice to join the development and construction of the Greater Khingan Mountains Region, she was still criticized as a "monsters and freaks (referring to class enemies)" and a "Soviet agent" during the "Cultural Revolution" because of this history.

Under the combined effect of many social factors, the Oroqen people have deeply reflected on their faith in shamans, which plays a great role in the acceptance of modern science and technology, especially modern medicine. However, this extreme negation completely eliminated the position and significance of shamans in the Oroqen society

and made shamans lose their original sacred glory. This practice negated the important role played by shamans in the development of the Oroqen society and culture and completely cut off the positive function of shamans in condensing Oroqen's ethnic consciousness, strengthening their ethnic identity and enhancing their cultural confidence.

As Max Weber mentioned, the prominent manifestation of modern society is the disenchantment of the world, and the Oroqen shaman is gradually completing the historical disenchantment of "the secularization from the holy to the mortal" and "the return from the spiritual to the physical, from the heaven to the earth". Oroqen society is moving to the stage of modern society at a wider and deeper level. *It is the knowledge or the conviction that if only we wished to understand them, we could do so at any time. It means that in principle, then, we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle control everything by means of calculation. That in turn means the disenchantment of the world. Unlike the savage for whom such forces existed, we need no longer have recourse to magic in order to control the spirits or pray to them. Instead, technology and calculation achieve our ends. This is the primary meaning of the process of intellectualization (Weber 1919).* With the disenchantment since the settlement, the identity of Oroqen shaman has been deconstructed, and the shamans have been disassociated from the social culture and daily life of the Oroqen.

4. The "Rebirth": The Shaman Re-embedding with the Society and Cultural Life of the Oroqen People

With the reorganization of Chinese society and the emancipation of the mind, shamans like Guan Kouni resumed their normal life as ordinary villagers (see Figure 1 below). The shaman, as a belief and priesthood, no longer functions as he or she once did, but the shamanic culture and shamanic identity are still inherited by the former shamans as a social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1992). A capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field. The 'cultural boom' in China in the 1980s and 1990s brought shamanic culture back into the limelight, which led domestic researchers to start collecting and organizing information on shamanic culture, and published numerous fundamental research materials of great value, such as the co-authorship of Guan and Wang (1998, 2010). For example, the documentary film "The Last Mountain God" (1992) by Sun Zeng-tian, director of CCTV, recorded the real life and spiritual beliefs of Oroqen shaman Meng Jinfu and his family, depicted the mountain life and spiritual world of Oroqen people, and showed the ancient mountain hunting culture and the pure and beautiful spiritual world of the Oroqen people. The film was awarded the Television Award of Asia Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU) in 1993 and the Special Award of the Ninth "Parnu" Film and Anthropology Film Festival in 1995.

The footsteps of foreign researchers also stepped into northeast China again and produced a series of records and research about Oroqen shamans. For example, in 1986, a Japanese television crew from NHK made a special trip to the Greater Khingan Mountains region of China to film the documentary "Secret Xing'anling", which was released by the Japan Broadcasting and Publishing Association in 1988. In the same year, Japanese scholar Hatanaka Sachiko, after visiting Oroqen and other ethnic groups in northern China, wrote an article to put forward the assertion of cultural composite of minority groups in northern China.

With the attention of researchers and public media, since the 1980s and 1990s, the frequency of shamanic cultural exhibition or recording interview activities with the participation of Meng Jinfu and Guan Kouni had increased year by year. By the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, a series of events such as the Huma County Kaijiang Festival and the Shaman Mountain Ritual Exhibition were gradually restored or created, and shamanic rituals were designed and arranged as an integral part of them.



Figure 1. Shaman Guan Kouni and her assistant Meng Shuqing in daily life, 2018.

On 3 October 2000 (the sixth day of the ninth lunar month), the death of shaman Meng Jinfu (male) marked the passing of all Oroqen shamans who became shamans in the traditional sense and completed their practice. As a result, Guan Kouni became the only living Oroqen shaman in China, and the inheritance of shamanic culture became extremely important and has attracted much attention. Especially with the rise of “intangible cultural heritage” in China, the attention of ethnic culture has increased sharply. In addition, the Oroqen shaman culture drew the attention of all parties again because of its economic value, cultural value, and many other connotations; the inheritance of shamanic culture and heirs of shamans became the focus of social attention. Consequently, Guan Kouni, known as “the last shaman” (The “last shaman” was a verbal reference used by the local government in the early 21st century to promote ethnic cultural tourism, and has been widely accepted and used by the people since then), has also become the core of public opinion.

In the traditional sense, Oroqen shamans do not rely on the master–disciple relationship to pass on, but also have a connotation of “descent”. According to the contemporary Chinese Oroqen researcher of Han (1991), only three kinds of Oroqen people can become shamans: the first type is the child whose fetal cell is not broken at birth and needs to be cut to take out the baby; the second type is the person who had not been cured of serious or strange diseases for a long time and has recovered after the shamanism dance by shaman; and the third type is the person who suddenly suffers from epilepsy, gnashing of teeth, and jumping around, and recovers finally. China’s first Oroqen doctorate recipient Liu (2015) refers to the second and third of the above as the “sickness-induced gods” highlighted by Shirokogoroff (1935) and Eliade (1964), and points out that two other types of people can also become shamans: the first type is the person who can tell the old shaman’s situation after being possessed by the spirit of the old shaman after his death; the second type is the person with high enlightenment, penetrating power, or strong hunch, or the person who can see what others cannot see, etc. These people can also become shamans under the training of the old shaman (Liu 2015). Especially, according to the Survey on the Social History of the Oroqen People” (The Revision Editorial Committee of the Social and Historical Survey Series of Chinese Ethnic Minorities 2009) and Oroqen folklores, if an

ordinary person wishes to become a shaman, he cannot become a shaman without being possessed by gods.

If we follow the above model to do some rational thinking, the selection of Oroqen shamans does not need human intervention. In the view of some Oroqen elders, human intervention may also be punished by the gods. However, *the powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by the everyday worlds in which they live, yet even in these rounds of jobs, family, and neighborhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern* (Mills 2000). Around 2008, the county and town governments communicated with Guan Kouni many times about the inheritance of shamans for the sake of cultural inheritance and tourism development. As “the last shaman”, Guan Kouni had a strong sense of responsibility and mission to inherit shamanic culture, trying to follow the traditional “séance” and practice mode to train heirs of shaman culture. However, due to the urgency of the shaman’s cultural heritage, as well as the interference of power and public pressure from the government and society, and in order to gain the attention and importance of the wider society, “the last shaman”, as an “ordinary person”, finally accepted the selection of the shaman’s successor, and took her second daughter as her successor to pass on shamanism as a culture to the next generation in the form of teaching, in which she followed the traditional ritual of the goddess jumping as much as possible.

In the evening of the 55th anniversary celebration of Oroqen settlement in 2008, the shaman inheritance ceremony was held on the Huma River jointly deployed by the party committee and government of the county, and organized by the Civil and Religious Bureau of the county as well as party committee and government of Baiyinna township. During the preparation and progress of the ceremony, all parties wanted to collect more information and take more “interests”, which led to the supposedly “pure” inheritance ceremony having some elements of secularization and utilitarian. There were also what were known as ominous omens or incidents in the community (for example, too much human intervention during the ritual, the bad behavior of some individual ritual preparers, Guan Kouni falling down due to exhaustion while doing shamanism dancing, the gods expressing their disapproval of the inheritance of shaman through Guan Kouni, etc.). Nevertheless, the ceremony was finally completed, and Meng Juhua, the second daughter of Guan Kouni, became the recognized successor of the shaman and began three years of practice. However, at the end of the following year, Meng Juhua died in a car accident, which was called “God’s will” by some villagers. This not only made Guan Kouni heartbroken, but also caused the shamanic culture to lose its heir. Director Gu Tao began filming the documentary “The Opaque God” in 2007, which was released in 2011 and directly documents the daily life of Guan Kouni and the shamanic ceremony of special significance.

Despite the occurrence of the above incidents and the spread of folk rumors, out of the consideration of many factors like inheritance of national culture, after complicated layers of approval reports and the coordination of multiple relationships, the niece of Guan Kouni—Guan Jinfang—became the officially recognized shaman cultural successor. She also held a ceremony to complete the inheritance of shamanism and began to practice. At about 4:30 p.m. on 3 October 2019 (the fifth day of the ninth lunar month), Guan Kuyuni died, which means that the traditional Oroqen shaman who had gone through the traditional shaman rituals have all gone (see Figure 2 below). Guan Jinfang became the only Oroqen shaman in China (The so-called “the only Oroqen shaman in China” in this paper refers to the Oroqen shaman who basically conforms to the norms and requirements of the Oroqen cultural system through the shaman ritual, and is basically recognized or tacitly approved by the authority and the Oroqen people. If we take into account the case of the shaman who inherits the shaman by the non-Oroqen shaman inheritance system, according to the field work of the author, there are other shamans with Oroqen ethnic components in China).



Figure 2. Wind Burial Ceremony of Shaman Guan Kouni, 2019.

Although the Oroqen shaman is no longer “pure” in terms of shamanic inheritance, the shaman is still a symbol of the Oroqen people, and its capital and value are coming to light. As mentioned, “The shamanic landscape comprised numerous instructed in atheism, but are now beset with economic disaster and new uncertainties. They, and often the shaman’s natural sites, such as sacred mountains, springs, trees, or lakes, where ancestral and other spirits were said to dwell.” (Humphrey 2020) However, nowadays, shamans’ lives have become increasingly distant from nature. With the fame of the shaman, the county and township have created an exclusive “tourism card”, and a large picture of the “Chinese Oroqen Shaman” can be seen near the county border; a number of tourists and researchers come for this purpose. When Guan Kouni was alive, she already enjoyed a high reputation and status in the Oroqen community by virtue of her identity as a shaman, and as the oldest person in Baiyinna village. She was able to unite the ethnic consciousness and had the rallying power to unite her people. Even though some have different attitudes towards the “purity” of the shaman identity of Guan Kouni and Guan Jinfang, all the Oroqen people still regard the shaman as an exclusive symbol of Oroqen and try their best to participate in every inter-ethnic communication and external publicity activities hosted by the shaman, such as the Kaijiang Festival and the Shaman Mountain Festival, and even many sons-in-law from other ethnic groups will come to participate and help (see Figure 3 below).

“We all have special respect to the old shaman Guan Kouni. For instance, when we do small celebrations, and some activities like the Kaijiang Festival and the Shaman Mountain Festival, we all participate and come to help. We all participate in the activities of our own people. Now sometimes when Guan Kouni is not in good health, Guan Jinfang would arrange the activities. And we all go for the sake of our people. Apart from ourselves, in my family, the sons-in-law from other ethnic groups also come to help. They even have special clothing. All of these are very good.” (GT, female, Oroqen, 53 years old, whose spouse is Han Chinese).



Figure 3. Shaman Guan Kouni at the time of Huma County Kaijiang Performance, 2019.

In the minds of some Oroqen and sons-in-law from other ethnic groups, it is no longer important whether Guan Kouni has practiced for three years or not, and whether Guan Jinfang's shaman identity is "pure". What is important is that they are able to call on and unite all the human and material resources of the whole ethnic group or region with the shaman identity to manifest the Oroqen spirit of the present time (see Figure 4 below). Emile Durkheim ([Durkheim and Swain 2008](#)) analyzed the function of collective rituals for social integration, arguing that the commitment of actors in the process of rituals to procedurally established ritual activities would psychologically create a sense of mutual support for people, thus contributing to the integration of social relations. The worship activities in rituals are essentially worship of the community itself, and participation in common religious activities can strengthen people's sense of familiarity and identity with each other. It is not that people do not understand the scientific principles behind the ice cracking at the river festival, but people who return to the real-life world, through the perception of their own lives, continue the continuous national traditional culture, revisit the established national spirit, break the barrier of time in the same space, and find the roots of Oroqen culture.



Figure 4. Shaman Guan Jinfang at the Huma County Kaijiang Performance, 2019.

It is difficult to combine an atheistic education and a shamanic calling . . . some people cannot bear it. A person may lose their mind or commit suicide (Korotkova 1998). We (the writers) heard the same during field work. It is not that people do not know the scientific principle behind the ice cracking when the river is opened for the activities, but—as does recur in all shamanistic societies, the idea of “play” or “game” (Hamayon 1992)—they were simply enjoying their life in the Oroqen social area and culture area. People who realized the real-life world by the perception of their own mind continue the continuous national traditional culture, revisit the existing national spirit, break the time barrier in the same space, and find the root of Oroqen’s culture.

In essence, instead of revering the gods, what people really revere is the law of nature, or the ethnic spirit inherited by the Oroqen people till now. The hunting culture that they were once proud of has disappeared due to factors such as conversion, and if the shaman culture is lost again, there will be a greater impact on the Oroqen. The shaman who could do everything has passed away, but in daily life, the shaman as a common person has been reborn in the new era, the legendary “God” has been transformed into a myth in the mouth of everyone, and the shaman has been sublimated into a symbol of the Oroqen people. It can be said that the shamanic culture is re-embedding into the social culture and daily life of Oroqen people in a new form, playing its positive function.

5. Reflections and Discussion

Taking the reinvention of the shaman identity and typical cases as clues, the temporal changes of the shaman culture and Oroqen society in the process of embedding, disembedding and re-embedding are presented. Whether it is the different perceptions of the same shaman held by the government and the Oroqen people at the time of disembedding, or the synergy between them around the shaman in the current re-embedding process, the attitudes and actions of the government and the people towards the shamanic culture always revolve around the original purpose of making the shamanic culture serve to meet the needs of the Oroqen people for a better life.

In the process of satisfying the need for a better life, the rhythm of Oroqen life changes and the cultural field of daily life changes, just as Giddens’ discussion about “time-space transformation” and “detachment”. In the process of social change from traditional to

modern, the understanding of time and space of Oroqen people has been transformed or separated compared with the traditional society. With the continuous operation of the mechanism of dislocation of Oroqen traditional society, the influence from modernity has increased. Influenced by modernity, the traditional culture of Oroqen people keeps evolving and changing, and nowadays it realizes the re-embedding with the contemporary Oroqen society.

Although the pattern of co-existence of religious beliefs and science and technology in today's world is a more common fact, science and technology as a substitute has led to the collapse of the shamanic belief system, and some researchers pointed out that the Oroqen shamanic culture living in the era of high modernity has "died". They believe that the culture of shamanism is no longer mastered, but displayed in museums, in research laboratories to witness the history of shamanic culture, which has changed into a silent "dead" form to confirm the real existence of the shaman. In fact, in the background of "Shamanism has a strong revival in the 21st century" (Qu 2020), the Oroqen shaman is still "alive", and Oroqen society in the process of modernization and transformation, which is reshaping the spiritual world. With the gradual disappearance of the invisible constraints from nature, subjective initiatives are greatly explored, and new connotation is continuously injected into modern times, so that the future direction of shamanic culture has many possibilities, and modernity gives Oroqen shamanism different meanings from the past.

When Oroqen traditional society under the influence of modernity has undergone transformation and change, facing anxiety and crisis of identity due to the destruction of its traditional self-identity rules, the reshaping and re-embedding of Oroqen shaman culture under the influence of modernity has enabled contemporary Oroqen people to gradually construct a new set of self-identity benchmarks and to reconstruct them through continuous reflective choices. The change of shamanic belief and the transformation of Oroqen people's understanding of shamans directly reveal the root change of their self-identity. In addition, the changed shamanic culture is gradually becoming an important entry point to deepen Oroqen's cultural consciousness.

A living culture does not, by nature, seek to remain static, but rather is ready to find possibilities for adaptation in response to the stimulus of external conditions. As ethnic cultures change, the root elements of a sense of identity often change as well. Cultural traits are often seen as key to a people's identity. The shamanic culture of the Oroqen people is the "living" existence that keeps adjusting itself in the contact with "others", or moderately adjusting, or striving, or selectively changing, and even gradually possesses the inner motivation that can inspire the Oroqen to start to dialogue and exchange with other people with firm cultural confidence. Today's shaman is not the core of power in the Oroqen tribe, nor does it have a very high political status, and has even been replaced by doctors and other professions or modern technology for its once unique medical and other functions. However, the times have given the Oroqen shaman new responsibility and mission, so that it has a key role to unite the consciousness of the community and strengthen the cultural consciousness of the Oroqen. In the process of interaction with other ethnic groups, the deep intra-ethnic cohesion brought by this national cultural symbol presented by the shaman itself is stimulating the strong identity of Oroqen ethnicity in the heart.

The cultural factors scattered in daily life seem to be small and trivial, but in fact they are a living and powerful cultural force (Fei 2004). In the background of globalization where the interaction between various ethnic groups is growing deeper, especially for the young generation of Oroqen people who have been educated by modern civilization and integrated into modern social and cultural life, taking shamanic culture as the starting point, using the reshaped shamanic culture as a symbol to maintain the identity consciousness of the Oroqen people, strengthening their understanding of national culture and strengthening their self-confidence and consciousness of their own culture has become a great manifestation of the contemporary significance of shamanic culture. It can be said that the Oroqen people use their own historical practice to give an ongoing answer to the question of how to integrate into the Chinese national community in the process of inter-

ethnic interaction while maintaining the “self”, and also provides a case of the Oroqen people for other ethnic groups to deepen their understanding of “self”.

Not only Oroqen, but also other less populated ethnic groups, are undergoing social transformation and structural adjustment compared with traditional societies in the context of globalization with increasing modernization process and deepening influence of modernity, enriching the modernity representation and receiving the consequences of modernity. The traditional elite with Charisma, in the process of continuously dispelling Disenchantment, has gradually become a cultural symbol from the long-regarded sacred authority. As a cultural symbol, the identity of these traditional elites has been given a new mission, with a different value and function from the past, and reveals more contemporary and modern qualities. The new traditional elite identity with cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital as the leader, so that all ethnic groups can enjoy the joy of national culture in their daily lives and realize the real meaning of national culture for themselves and their groups, will definitely become an important source of motivation for all ethnic groups today to deepen their cultural consciousness and become the key to construct their own national discourse and consolidate their collective consciousness, becoming the key to ensure that they do not lose their “self” and do not become the “other” when interacting with other ethnic groups in the wave of modernization and globalization.

6. Conclusions

Based on the presentation of cases such as the shaman Guan Kouni, this paper shows that the Oroqen shamanic culture under the influence of modernity is also changing in the process of transformation, by examining the changes of the Oroqen shaman and the Oroqen society, which are embedded, disembedded, and being re-embedded. In the process of cultural change of the Oroqen shaman, the functions played by the shaman are constantly being adjusted, from once being a sacred figure of authority to becoming a symbol of conformity for the whole nation. Its function in meeting the needs of the people such as medical treatment and divination is no longer or has been replaced, but it still has a positive function in uniting the Oroqen community consciousness, strengthening the community identity and enhancing cultural confidence in contemporary times. It is precisely for this reason that the shaman is constantly taking a new form of integration with the modern Oroqen society, which is different from that of the traditional society, and this form will become one of the important cultural boundaries that distinguish the Oroqen from other ethnic groups.

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