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# The Evolution of Chinese Shamanism: A Case Study from Northwest China

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Received: 26 October 2018; Accepted: 30 November 2018; Published: 3 December 2018



**Abstract:** This paper presents information on the shamanic religious system practiced among the Tu ethnic group of Qinghai Province in Northwest China. After presenting ethnographic information on the spirit beliefs, rituals, and shamanic specialists of the Tu, the paper will use a systemic definition of religion to (1) identify changes that have occurred in the focus of Tu shamanism and the role of the shaman, and (2) identify a cluster of causal factors—techno-economic, sociopolitical, and ideational—exogenous to the religious system itself that appear to have played a role in generating these changes. The paper will focus on two specific changes: (1) a decrease in the frequency of private shamanic healing rituals, and (2) a corresponding increase in the importance of shamanic leadership in collective rainfall rituals that affect the entire community. The explanatory paradigm utilized is a modified adaptation to contemporary Chinese reality of the Historical Materialist paradigm pioneered by Marx and Engels and the Cultural Materialist paradigm developed by Marvin Harris. While continuing to emphasize the causal power of technological and economic factors, the Chinese experience, both at the macro level of transformations of the Chinese economy and at the micro level of Tu shamanism, forces analytic attention on the causal impact of socio-political and ideological variables.

**Keywords:** shaman; religious system; Chinese ethnic groups; historical materialism; Cultural Materialism

## 1. Introduction

The following pages have a dual purpose: (1) We will first provide focused ethnographic information on the structure and evolution of the shamanic religious system of the Tu, an ethnic minority in Qinghai province of Northwest China. (2) We will then explore a method for shedding light on the possible causal factors underlying changes that have occurred in the role of shaman in that system.

### 1.1. Theoretical Paradigm and Data Gathering

“Causality” may set off alarm bells among contemporary cultural anthropologists. The attempt at causal explanation of the similarities and differences among cultures is a controversial undertaking that has had its high points of acceptance and low points of rejection in Cultural Anthropology. The current disciplinary emphasis (in the U.S.) on critical anthropology, on hegemony dynamics, and on identity, ethno-racial, and gender issues has placed causal analysis of cultural issues on the back burner, or eliminated them as part of the pseudo-science that has to be critiqued. In this paper, we espouse a pro-explanation position in full recognition of the tentative nature of most explanations dealing with the evolution of religious systems.

The conceptual paradigm that guides our presentation and interpretation of the data gathered on Tu shamanism falls within a causal paradigm that pays careful attention to the power of technological, economic, demographic, and other material transformations to trigger off transformations in the

organizational and ideational domains of human life, including religious belief. The ancestral source of this approach emerged in the 19th century in the “historical materialism” of Marx and Engels. The paradigm migrated in modified form into American anthropology. After decades of descriptive ethnography guided by Boasian rejection of causal or evolutionary generalizations, a materialist explanatory model re-emerged. White (1959) identified improvements in the technology of energy harnessing as the driving force of cultural evolution. Steward (1963) opted for a multilineal model of change that sought for the material causes of change in local conditions that differed from one locale to another. Marvin Harris (1968, 2001) systematized the materialist approach in his paradigm of Cultural Materialism (CM), which he continued to promote in numerous books, Harris (2001) being one of the last. Other anthropologists have subsequently conducted research within the CM framework, including Margolis (1973, 1984) on social change in Brazil and on American women; Brown (2007) on the evolution of obesity in human society; Murray (1980, 1985) on the economic functions of Haitian Vodou and on structural determinants of rites of passage in rural Haiti; Johnson and Earle (1987) on the evolution of social organization from foragers to agrarian states; Murphy (1991) on sugar plantations in the Dominican Republic; Earle (1997) on the evolution of chiefdoms; and Dickson et al. (2005) on the material determinants of eschatological beliefs. Several edited compilations (Ross 1980; Murphy and Margolis 1995; Kuznar and Sanderson 2007) have also been made of anthropological studies that explicitly used the CM framework. Throughout the decades, scholarly reviews of the CM paradigm have been published, beginning with early ones by a psychologist (Lloyd 1985) and an anthropologist (Price 1982), and a more recent one by anthropologist Margolis (2013).

The CM analytic paradigm posits for every human society a pyramidal tripartite structure that distinguishes among the technoeconomic base (the “infrastructure”), the organizational structure of the society (which includes economic and political organization), and (at the top of the pyramid) the ideational component of society (the ideological “superstructure”). For Harris, the shamanic system of the Tu would be assigned, as would all religion, to the ideological superstructure of a culture. In Harris’ model, most of the causal forces that transform society in the long run emanate from changes in the technological and economic base of the society. Forces from the other two sectors—social organization and ideology—can also have causal power, but in the long run, it is minor and of secondary importance to the causal power emanating from the techno-economic base.

Our analytic paradigm is informed by Harris’ tripartite division of sociocultural sectors. However, the reality of China forces three modifications to the model as follows. (1) Religion is not simply part of the ideological superstructure. Religious systems have all three components: a material base, an organization, and spirit beliefs. (2) We will phrase analysis explicitly in terms of cultural sub-systems interacting with and influencing other subsystems. (3) Above all, given the recent history of China, it is impossible to accurately relegate organizational variables (of which political organization is one element) as having only incidental, occasional secondary power. There have been unprecedentedly rapid and powerful oscillations in the economy and material condition of the Chinese population, from the famine and poverty generated by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution to the current economic surge of a large middle class and a group of Chinese private sector millionaires and billionaires. These oscillations have been driven not by technological inventions or ecological or demographic changes but by oscillating political orientations and or economic idea systems. China demonstrates that the organizational “structural” component of a society, including and particularly its political system, is by no means the compliant servant of economy and technology. Forces emanating from the political sector can either destroy or catalyze the elements of the economic base. China dramatically exemplifies the powerful causal impact—sometimes destructive, sometimes creative—of organizational and political variables on the direction of a society’s economy and technology. The Chinese experience since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) provides a powerful antidote to any facile model of simple economic determinism.

We have, therefore, used a modified variant of the tripartite explanatory model. Rather than elaborate here on the theoretical model, we will simply apply it to analyzing changes that have

occurred in the shamanic system of the Tu and discuss the theoretical implications at the end of the paper. The empirical data that we present on Tu shamanism are derived from the field research of Xing (2015) among the Tu. The fieldwork was conducted primarily in Huzhu County of Qinghai Province in Northwest China, which is the county of heaviest Tu concentration. Xing herself is a member of the Tu (Mongour). For this project, she did fieldwork in Huzhu and other Tu areas from 2009 to 2018. The other author (Murray) also made several field trips to the Tu areas between 2013 and 2018.

Following standard anthropological procedures of participant observation and interviewing, data collection focused on public festivals, domestic rituals, temple scenes, folkloric accounts, and oral traditions concerning the past. Particular attention was paid to the observation and interviewing of shamans. In addition, historical documents, previous publications on the Tu, and official documents were collected from local libraries and from the local government. In addition to descriptive ethnographic methods and key-informant interviewing, questionnaires were designed for survey research and statistical analysis to be reported in other publications. The observations and interviews were carried out in a number of sites: religious centers, homes, villages, government offices, organizations, and in places of public social events. Xing participated in numerous religious rituals, festivals, weddings, and funerals. She not only observed external behaviors but also elicited local opinions concerning Tu religious traditions. Xing lived in Huzhu County for ten months, during which time she interviewed 45 different religious specialists and made random visits to numerous families. During this time, she conducted intensive interview on myths, legends, and local religious beliefs.

In addition to field visits to the Tu region, Murray (1980, 1985, 1991) has carried out research on shamanism in Haitian Vodou and has provided a comparative perspective. He was responsible for drafting much of the theoretical and analytic parts of this article.

### 1.2. Background to the Literature on Chinese Popular Religion

It is now standard practice in the scholarly world to classify Chinese shamanic beliefs and practices with respect to the spirit in the category of religion. What now seems obvious was not always the case when village beliefs and practices were dismissed as “folk superstitions” as distinct from the presumably real religions in China: Daoism and Buddhism. Based on research in Fujian, the Dutch sinologist Groot (1854) felt constrained to argue that Chinese folk belief and ritual complexes can indeed be called a “religion.” Yang (Yang 1991) classified Chinese folk religion as the religion of the lower classes. “Religions” in the plural might be more appropriate. However, a major task in earlier years was to rescue Chinese shamanism and Chinese folk beliefs and folk rituals from the category of helter-skelter superstitions that lacked the status of a bona fide religion like Daoism or Buddhism.

In this paper we will go beyond description and will be documenting causal relationships between the shamanic system of the Tu and other systemic elements in the Chinese society in which the Tu religion is embedded. The recognition and documentation of such linkages is in harmony with many earlier studies of Chinese religion. The linkage between rituals (particularly ancestor and clan rituals) with Chinese kinship and family systems, and the importance of ritual for preserving family solidarity and harmony has been particularly emphasized (Ahern 1973; Baker 1979; Hsu 1948; Yang 1991).

Other studies of Chinese religion are less sanguine about its integrative function. They emphasize instead the dynamics of social hegemony and conflict in Chinese popular religion. The *Modern China Journal* published a special issue, “Hegemony and Chinese Folk Ideologies” (Gates and Weller 1987). In that issue the relationship between folk and official beliefs and rituals was examined in terms of the emerging research themes of cultural hegemony and struggles for cultural autonomy (Sangren 1984, 1987; Gates and Weller 1987). Needham (1956) on the other hand was concerned less with intersectoral linkages than with the cosmological dimension of folk religion and argued for viewing Chinese folk religious beliefs in terms of the Five Elements and the Ying/Yang dichotomy.

The debate between a harmonious solidarity model of religion and a conflict model has gone beyond academic journals and is now an important official theme of the Chinese State. In the earliest years of the PRC, freedom of religious belief was tolerated but looked down upon. Religion was

viewed either as an opiate of the masses or as a relic of feudalism that would die out on its own. Since after two decades, religion had not died on its own, the Cultural Revolution took steps to accelerate its demise, destroying temples, mosques, and churches all over the country. The official stance toward religion was one of hostile conflict.

From the 1980s onwards, government policy switched from a conflict to a solidarity model of religion. Freedom of religion was restated in 1982, though Party members were explicitly excluded. Furthermore, the rejection of religion as an opiate of the masses was replaced rather quickly by a view of religion as a mechanism of social harmony. Social harmony (社会和谐) is now described as a central attribute of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” It was the justification for instituting a policy of giving legal and financial support to five major religions: Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism, ethnic religions like that of the Tu being supported indirectly under a Cultural Heritage rubric. The official turnabout in favor of religion was not motivated by a sudden governmental desire to placate the spirits. It was motivated by an explicit and publicly stated conviction of the power of religion to promote social harmony. In 2008, Jia Qinlin, a high level official, publicly declared in a speech to international journalists that the Chinese government was willing to respect religious freedom and to “... guide religious leaders and believers ... and to make full use of [religion’s] positive role in promoting social harmony” (Reuters World News 2008). The desired solidarity is societal rather than familial. Furthermore, the State will have final say on what is considered harmonious. However, the academic theme of the integrative function of religion has become the official policy of the Chinese State.

Academic studies on Chinese religion share in common: (1) the recognition that there are widespread popular beliefs and rituals in China that are distinct from those of the institutional religions Daoism and Buddhism, (2) that these other complexes are not helter-skelter collections of feudal superstitions but rather have the status of bona fide religions, and (3) that they are in dynamic relationship to other dimensions of Chinese social life. We would add for purposes of this article that these popular religions generally recruit the ritual services of specialists that fit into the broad category of *shaman*, another controversial term that will also have to be discussed.

### 1.3. Terminological Issues

We can begin that discussion immediately. There are three theoretically sensitive concepts that will inform our analysis and that warrant discussion: “religious system,” “shaman,” and “causal explanation.” For the moment, we will simply operationalize and explain our use of the terms here.

#### 1.3.1. Religious System

This paper will refer to the “Tu religious system” rather than to “Tu religion.” This minor terminological shift reflects a systemic view of the components of human cultures. There are certain systemic components found in every culture: an economic system, a reproductive system, a kinship system, a healing system, a conflict-resolution system, and many others. Religion itself can also be analyzed as one of many cultural systems that are present in any human group. Cultural systems have components (they will be called *elements* in these pages) that are dynamically linked to each other internally, but are also linked up externally and dynamically to other systems (economic, political, educational, and others) in the same culture. They are systems in the sense that changes in one element may trigger off changes in others. To study religious systems, including shamanistic systems, we consider it useful to use a paradigm that studies the cognitive component, the behavioral component, and the organizational component of the religious system under study.

- (1) **Pantheon:** In terms of cognition and ideation, all religious systems depict an inventory of invisible spirit agents that are believed to have the power to influence either nature and/or human lives, and that can themselves be influenced by humans. Both Daoism and Buddhism, as well as the Western Abrahamic religions, have such active spirit agents who are aware of and can be

approached by humans. (Impersonal forces such as the Dao, qi, or Ying and Yang would not be classified as spirit agents in this definition. They affect humans but are not conscious agents who can respond to human petitions.) By spirits we refer to invisible, conscious agents with whom humans can communicate, either directly as in prayer or through a medium. A religious system's *pantheon* is the sum total of spirits recognized by any particular religious system.

- (2) **Rituals:** Religious systems also have behaviors—collective or individual—that individuals and groups carry out to contact and influence the spirits. We will call these *rituals*. Our use is narrower than the semantic scope of the word “ritual” in contemporary English, which could include any repeated behavior such as daily tooth brushing or social “rituals.” In our sense, a behavior is a ritual if it is intentionally directed to the spirit world. They can be done by a group or they can be done by an individual.
- (3) **Specialists:** Religious systems also have publicly recognized experts believed to have the knowledge and/or power to guide people with respect to the spirits as well as to the rituals that will most effectively earn their pleasure (or at least curb their anger). Many rituals do not entail specialist services. Chinese may make food offerings, for example, and burn incense at family graves with no ritual specialist present. However, in virtually every religious system studied by anthropologists, including that of the Tu, specialist experts are called on for different ritual services.

The three core systemic elements have been found in all religions systems, shamanic as well as institutional and can legitimately be called universals of religions. Just as all languages have phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical subsystems, so also the systems that anthropologists and other social scientists refer to as “religion” all have spirit agents, rituals, and leadership roles. Other spatial and temporal universals, such as sacred places, sacred times, and rites of passage, may also be universal. We will focus on the above three systemic elements. The spirits, rituals, and specialists form a more or less coherent system. Daoist priests do not usually officiate at Catholic masses in praise of Allah. There is internal systemic consistency among the core components of any religious system. Since changes in one of the three elements can easily trigger off changes in the other two, we can conceptualize the entire complex as a system, not as a helter-skelter collection of beliefs and behaviors. In the present paper we are interested not only in the internal linkages among spirit beliefs, rituals, and specialists. We are interested as well in external systemic linkages between a society's religious system and other societal systems, particularly economic, political, and educational systems. Changes in these other systems have triggered off adaptive changes in the Tu shamanic system.

### 1.3.2. Operational Definition of Religion

In the light of these three core components, the present paper defines religion operationally as follows: “A religion is a cultural system in which (a) humans attempt to interact with invisible spirit agents (b) via collective or private rituals (c) under the guidance of specialists believed to have more knowledge and/or power with respect to the spirits and rituals.” This is a componential definition of religion that identifies its core systemic elements. It differs fundamentally from Geertz (1966) widely cited definition, which in essence defines religion as a system of symbols whose principal effect is the generation of certain emotions. Though symbols and emotions are definitely elements in the religious experience, they provide a flimsy ethnographic guide for studying Chinese religion or any religion. Our definition of a religious system entails a broader gamut of ethnographically documentable systemic elements involving spirit beliefs, rituals to interact with the spirits, and specialist leaders who guide followers in their spirit beliefs and rituals. In his book on the anthropology of religion, Crapo (2003) expresses a comprehensive, tri-elemental view of religion similar to that which we employ. Such a paradigm is more useful for guiding ethnographers as to what should be looked at when studying a religion.

### 1.3.3. Separation of Core Components from Functions

There is something intentionally excluded, some would say “missing,” from this systemic definition of religion. The definition nowhere alludes to the core “functions” of religion, the conscious purposes for which people access religion or the unintended and unconscious effects which it has. The omission is intentional. It is important to distinguish between a *componential* definition, the building blocks of the object or system being defined, and a *functional* definition that focuses on the purposes or effects of what is being defined. An example of a good componential definition would be: “A knife is a tool with a short handle and a blade.” In the case of a knife, we can safely add its core function to the definition “used for cutting.” There is widespread agreement on the core function of a knife, and this function can harmlessly be tacked on to the definition.

Is there scholarly agreement on the core function of religion that could be included as a core element in the definition? The answer is an emphatic no. Scholars have cleverly discovered (in some cases, perhaps, cleverly invented) a mind-boggling variety of functions of religion. It can be a *cognitive* mechanism for explaining the unknown, a source of *emotional* comfort in moments of danger or loss, a vehicle for creating certain moods, a vehicle of inter-class *oppression*, as a mechanism of political *resistance*, a mechanism of social *solidarity*, and/or a source of *healing* during illness episodes. The two authors have themselves proposed functional explanations. Xing (2015) has analyzed the religious practices of the Tu as a source of strengthened ethnic identity. Murray (1980) has analyzed the power of rural Haitian Vodou to function as a ritual mechanism for land circulation. No religious system addresses all of these functions, however, and none can be considered the “real” or “core” function of religion in general. The functions of religion are so varied, analytically obscure, and controversial that *no specific function should be incorporated into the definition of religion*. Functions are important to detect and analyze. However, specific functions are to be empirically discovered and documented, not built a priori into the definition of religion.

### 1.3.4. Shamans and Shamanism

Where do shamans fit into this paradigm? The men and women that have been called shamans in the anthropological literature belong unambiguously to the third systemic element mentioned above, that of religious specialists who are called on to interact with the spirits and guide rituals. What remains ambiguous, however, are the features that define shamans as a group, that justify a special label, and that distinguish them from other religious specialists. The word was derived from early Siberian ethnographies and has been exported somewhat willy-nilly to other religious specialists around the world. The research on shamanism is voluminous. It is documented with annotated bibliographies by Osterreich (1998), DeMiller (2002), and Jones (2008). A frequently cited classic work is that of Eliade (1964).

The most frequently reported activity of shamans is diagnosing and healing illness, whence the term “medicine man” or “medicine woman” used by sympathetic observers, and “witch doctor” by hostile missionaries. The literature gives overwhelming evidence that the principal activity of shamans around the world is the curing of illness (Lyon 1998; Heinze 1984; Kalweit 1992; Plotkin 1993; Rogers 1982). Shamans are called on to perform other services, such as the weather control functions that will be documented here. Furthermore, shamans also contact the spirits of deceased ancestors and non-ancestral spirits as well. (See Wilson 2013). Indeed, one of the central findings of the current study is a reduction in the healing role of the Tu shaman. It is therefore difficult to draw precise semantic boundaries to the term shaman on the basis of the functions that they perform. We will nonetheless use the term shaman, but in full recognition of its status as a loosely defined category. In the territory of the Tu, it is useful for separating popular local religious specialists’ practitioners from the institutionally validated Buddhist lamas and Daoist priests with whom the Tu also have ritual interactions.

## 1.4. Causal Explanation

As stated above, our goal goes beyond description of a system. Our intent also goes beyond pointing out how X religious practice is related to Y social element. We wish to identify ongoing societal

changes that are triggering off changes in the shamanic systems. Because of their linkages to traditions from the distant past, religious systems may change less rapidly than technological or biomedical healing systems. However, we will document in this paper that the shamanic system of the Tu has in fact changed through time, partially as a result of interactions with other religious systems (Daoism and Buddhism). Changes, however, have also been triggered via interaction with the transformed political and economic systems of China, with improvements in the health care system, with the spread of the educational system, and with improvements in transportation and road infrastructure. The only religious systems that are immune to change are those that have died out. Living religious systems, including the shamanistic system of the Tu, interact with other cultural systems, which in the case of China, have been changing rapidly. These interactions lead to changes in the religious systems.

## 2. The Tu Ethnic Group

The Tu ethnic group (土族) is one of 56 ethnic groups officially recognized by the People's Republic of China. In the past, the Tu called themselves "Monguor," "Menggu'r Kong," and "Chahan Menggu'r." Western publications generally refer to them as "Monguor" or "Mangghuer." According to the national census of 2010, there were 289,595 Tu distributed throughout several regions of China's northwest. Though classified by the Chinese government in 1953 under a single label Tu Zu (土族), there is in fact substantial linguistic and cultural heterogeneity within the ethnic group (some have even disputed the accuracy of their inclusion under the Tu category).

In terms of language in a classic ethnic-minority situation, all members of the group will speak the ethnic language as their first language and all members of the group will understand each other. They will also learn the dominant local language. The Tu do not adhere to this classic pattern. Several Tu communities do in fact speak mutually intelligible dialects of Tu. Others speak a variety of Tu that is not mutually intelligible with other Tu, which linguists would therefore classify as a different language. In certain counties, the Tu language has been maintained; in others it is disappearing. The universal alternative to the Tu language is the local variety of Chinese spoken in Qinghai. Children also learn Mandarin in school (which is not mutually intelligible with the local Qinghai Chinese language.) "Chinese" is actually a Sinitic language group containing many non-mutually intelligible languages.

Among the Tu (and among many other ethnic minorities speaking non-Sinitic languages), there is a situation of *triglossia*, three languages that individuals may master and use in different contexts. All Tu can speak Qinghaihua, the Sinitic language spoken by the Han majority and by ethnic minorities living in Qinghai province. It is the dominant regional language (*fangyan*), not mutually intelligible with the official Mandarin (which leads us to call it a language, not a "dialect"). Many older people are monolingual in that language alone. Second in importance is the local Tu language, which belongs to a different language family from the Qinghai language. The Tu in different villages, however, speak mutually unintelligible variants of the Tu language group. The older Tu maintain a higher level of fluency in their local Tu language, whereas it is disappearing among younger generations. All Tu speak Sinitic Qinghaihua, but only the older Tu speak the Tu language as their first language. Third in statistical importance, but dominant in sociopolitical importance is Mandarin, referred to in China as *Putonghua*. All Chinese learn Mandarin in school and many become as fluent in Mandarin as they are in their local mother tongue learned before they went to school. Whereas all Tu speak Qinghaihua, not all, particularly the older generations, achieve functional oral fluency in Mandarin.

Most of the research to be discussed here was carried out by Xing (herself a member of the Tu ethnic group) in Huzhu County in Qinghai Province. Huzhu County is classified as a Tu "Autonomous County" because the Tu constitute the largest group in the population of the minorities. However, Huzhu and other counties inhabited by the Tu have a large number of ethnic groups. Besides the Tu, there are ten other ethnic groups in Huzhu County, including Tibetans and Hui (the former are Buddhists, the latter are Muslims).

Each Tu community is administratively autonomous. They are under the administrative control of Qinghai provincial authorities and local municipal authorities. However, their villages are contiguous

to Han villages and those of other nearby ethnic groups and are thus under the same authorities as other ethnic groups. Furthermore, though there are villages where the majority are Tu, there will also be Han Chinese living in those villages. That is, there is no specialized administrative structure that clusters all members of the Tu ethnic group under an exclusive administrative structure unique to them. The religious system itself, however, provides village-level leadership in the form of an elected religious committee that manages the temple and other religious structures, requests (or demands) contributions from individual households for the temple and for religious festivals, resolves conflicts between individuals, punishes infractions, and makes certain decisions concerning community matters. There are also official county-wide and village-level authority structures staffed by Party cadres. At the village level, the religious committee and its manager exercises greater de-facto authority.

In terms of their economic base, the Tu of Huzhu County are principally farmers, with a secondary emphasis on animal husbandry. Their chief crops include wheat, highland barley, rapeseed plants, and potatoes. Their livestock activities focus on sheep but also include horses, cattle, and pigs.

### 3. Focused Ethnography of the Tu Religious System

#### 3.1. Pluralistic Involvement by the Tu in Distinct Religious Systems

We will now focus on the Tu religious system. There is something that must first be pointed out, particularly for Western readers accustomed to exclusive monotheistic religious worlds whose adherents commit themselves to one religious tradition, register themselves as members of a synagogue, church, or mosque, and (at least in the past) would dismiss other religions as false religions whose religious rituals should be avoided and whose practitioners may be destined for post-mortem punishment.

This cluster of exclusivist religious attitudes is alien to the Chinese religious world and to that of the Tu. A general practice found among many Chinese who involve themselves with the spirits is to comfortably oscillate between Buddhist, Daoist, and village temples with no sense of disloyalty. There is also little sense of “membership.” Since most are not registered members of any temples, they will (if surveyed) say they have “no religion,” even though they burn incense and kowtow in temples and leave food offerings and burn paper money at the graves of their ancestors (the “no religion” category on surveys in China should not be misinterpreted as “atheist”).

Almost all of the Tu who were researched participate in Tibetan Buddhist rituals, especially for important rites of passage. An outside observer might assume they are Buddhist. In fact, at a wedding or funeral, the ideal (for wealthier sectors) is to contract specialists from all three traditions. A fancy wedding will involve the services of a Buddhist lama, a Daoist priest, and a Tu shaman to co-officiate at the ritual. There are few, if any, who restrict themselves to the Tu temples. In describing the Tu religious system, we are therefore describing only one of the religious systems in which Tu participate.

Our exposition will proceed systematically, discussing in turn each of the three core systemic components discussed above. As a book length manuscript could be written on the Tu religious system studied in Huzhu County, we will focus our ethnographic remarks on the points of highest analytic relevance to be discussed in the final part of the paper.

#### 3.2. Spirit World of the Tu

The spirit world of the Tu includes spirit beings that have entered the pantheon from the Tibetan Buddhism heavily practiced in their region and from the Daoist spirit world of the Han Chinese.

##### 3.2.1. Longwang Dragon Kings

The two major classes of spirits that Tu villagers invoke are the *longwang* (dragon kings) and the *niangniang* (“queen mothers” might be the best English rendition). The Chinese dragon (usually wingless and not fire breathing as are Western dragon depictions) is a benevolent mythical figure who is associated with water, particularly rainfall and oceans. Dwelling in subterranean seas, his emergence into the air could bring turbulent seas and destructive typhoons. If placated he could bring nourishing

rains for the crops. The pronoun “they” is more appropriate than “he.” In Ancient China, the invisible Dragon King was eventually divided geographically into five distinct Dragon Kings, four of them assigned to cardinal points and the fifth in the middle.

The dragon kings of the Tu temples studied by Xing are by far the most important figures in the Tu pantheon. Though inherited from the broader Daoist pantheon, at the hands of the Tu, the dragon kings have been transformed in three ways. In the first place they have been territorially demoted and localized. There are no longer five dragon kings reigning over different parts of China and surrounding countries, but rather *each village has its own dragon king or kings* who will be lodged in the village temple. They function as tutelary spirits responsible principally for the village in which they reside and for its surrounding agrarian plots. They are responsible for the care of the village in whose temple they are housed. If one Tu village steals a dragon king from another (as has happened) and lodges him in their temple, the kidnapped dragon king becomes responsible for his new village.

Second, the dragon kings, as conceived by the Tu, have become *aniconic theriomorphic spirits*. That is, a dragon king among the Tu is conceptualized as a male dragon, not as a human who controls dragons. And they are not lodged in statues or other icons. Anthropomorphic representations of dragon kings are found elsewhere in China (examples can be seen at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragon\\_King](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragon_King)). However, in terms of iconic depiction, the Tu traditionally do not lodge him in the statuary that houses most Buddhist and Daoist spirits. The village dragon king is more frequently viewed as residing in a consecrated spear-length rod. In more recently constructed temples, they may be given pictorial representation as dragons or even, more rarely, anthropomorphically as human in form. Temples may have cast metal dragons on the roof or dragons engraved on the gates. A recently built temple has replaced the traditional cloth-covered sacred spear with a huge painted glass surface on which two dragons surround the sun, with plastic flowers placed in front of them. Glass and plastic, however, are modern innovations. In their traditional mode, the dragon kings reside invisibly in cloth-covered aniconic spear-like rods carried on litters, rather than in pictures or statues.

A third transformation has also occurred. The Tu dragon kings have become multifunctional spirits. They are most frequently venerated in the context of their traditional power over the rains. However, they have, in the past, been called on to cure individual illnesses. Furthermore, they continue to be invoked to resolve interpersonal conflicts, to assist in identifying propitious times for life cycle events, such as weddings or house building, and other matters. Thus, though they have been territorially demoted to a single community, they have also been functionally diversified, and in a sense, elevated in power. However, it still remains the case that the principal contribution of dragon kings in the religion of the Tu is their ability to intervene in matters meteorological.

### 3.2.2. Niangniang Queen Mothers

Next in importance in Tu temples is the female *niangniang*, a term that connotes an elderly female with royal connections. It can perhaps be accurately rendered in English as “queen mother.” Whereas the *longwang* is conceptualized theriomorphically as a male dragon, the queen mother is conceptualized anthropomorphically as a human female. Whereas all Tu temples house the dragon king, only some additionally house one or more queen mothers (they often occur in groups of three, in line with ancient myths of the Three Sisters). As with dragon kings, they are of Daoist origin and, among the Tu, they have been transformed into territorial spirits. That is, as is true of the dragon kings, queen mothers are tutelary spirits that belong to and protect the community in which she is housed. Within the temples themselves, the queen mothers are generally lodged inside the same type of sacred spears, covered with cloths, that house the dragon kings. Pictures may be painted of the queen mothers, but the spirits are believed to dwell, not in the paintings, but in the cloth-covered spears. When the queen mother is moved from the temple for any reason, she is moved on a litter whose surrounding veils hide the spear that houses her.

As for her role, the queen mothers of the Tu maintain the female fertility and childbearing roles that they play among the Han. However, the Tu in certain villages have assigned to her an

environmental role parallel to that of the dragon kings. The spirits make agriculture possible by sending the rain and protecting against excessive rain. In this sense, though the veneration of the queen mother is not as widespread locally as that of the dragon king, her power is viewed as equal. However, another problem arises when the community is confronted with the danger of excessive rain or of destructive hail. In this sense, the environmental role of the dragon king and the queen mothers is not only productive, in making the rain fall, but also protective, in making the rain or hail stop. (In temples with no queen mothers, the dragon kings themselves are called upon to protect against hail and floods). At any rate, the Tu attribute equal ecological roles and power to both the male dragon kings and the female queen mothers. The protective role is particularly important in certain years, in which destructive downpours and hailstorms are a greater menace than drought.

The queen-mothers are also called upon in cases of individual illness (more in the past than at present). The healing ritual entails transporting a queen mother to the home of the patient. The sacred rod in which they are lodged is placed on a litter and carried from the temple to the patient's home. One dilemma arises during the rainy season. The queen mother is supposed to stay in the temple to swing into quick action if menacing weather approaches. One of the Tu temples that was observed by Xing lodged three queen mothers. During the rainy season the older ones remained in the temple while the youngest was transported to the house of the sick person. When questioned why, the villagers explained that the older *niangniangs* are more powerful in the case of destructive rains. They must remain in the temple in case of a sudden threat of torrential rain or hail. One assumes that the older *niangniang* would also be more skilled in healing than the younger ones. However, their principal role now centers on their environmental powers that affect the community, not their healing powers that affect individuals.

### 3.2.3. Ancestor Spirits

We have focused on the dragon kings and queen mothers because they receive most attention in Tu public rituals and they are the principal spirits invoked in rituals of rainfall control that remain at the center of Tu religious concerns. However, the spirit world of the Tu includes dozens of additional invisible inhabitants that merit at least brief mention.

With respect to ancestral spirits, the Tu share with other Chinese the belief in the post-mortem survival of the souls of the dead and the obligation to ritually honor them. Because they are invisible spirits who receive ritual attention, the spirits of the dead should be considered as part of the spirit pantheon of any religion that believes in their post-mortem survival. In most Western Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Catholicism, and Islam), the living can help the dead through prayers for forgiveness of their sins and eventual admission to Paradise. (Protestantism does not offer this ritual option; the souls of the dead are believed to be consigned immediately and irrevocably to heaven or hell). There is no widespread expectation in these Abrahamic religious systems, however, that one's ancestral dead play an active role in helping their living descendants.

In Chinese traditions of ancestor veneration, the emphasis is quite different. The living can help the dead by giving them the ritual attention without which they would suffer and wander about as dangerous "hungry ghosts." However, the dead are also believed to have the power to help their living descendants economically and in other ways in return for ritual honor both at home in the ancestral altar and at the gravesite. Domestic altars or clan altars with tablets listing the names of male ancestors are now less common in the Chinese population; annual gravesite rituals, however, continue to be done by the population at large. The Qinghai Tu follow generic Chinese traditions in these matters. The ancestral spirits are invoked for personal, familial matters, not for environmental matters. Besides the ancestral spirits, Tu families may also erect domestic shrines to venerate non-familial deities whose role is to protect the specific household. There are numerous other spirits as well including a nameless *maoguishen*, a type of "cat ghost" with which women can make a secret compact to lash out at people that are hostile to her. However, the most important spirits who affect the destiny of the Tu are the above-discussed *longwang* and *niangniang*. They are the principal targets of interventions by the ritual specialists. We will now turn to those specialists.

### 3.3. Religious Specialists among the Tu

#### 3.3.1. Temple Custodian and Assistants

The preceding section dealt with one of the three core elements of religious systems: the world of spirit agents. The current section will discuss the religious specialists of the Tu. The Tu religious system in the major village studied by Xing utilizes the services of three distinct types of religious specialists. The first fits clearly into the category of shaman. The second is on the margins; some would call him a shaman, others would not. The third plays an important religious role in the Tu religious system, but would not be considered a shaman by most anthropologists. (The ethnographic reality of the Tu exposes the blurry nature of the concept *shaman*).

We will begin with the third, the non-shaman. This individual, always a male, concerns himself with the organization and maintenance of the sacred sites that are found in Tu villages. The major site is the village temple which houses the spirits lodged in statues or in other non-iconic objects. There are minor additional sites: small pavilion-like structures (*benkang*) located at crossroads near the entrance to a village; *lashize* shrines located on mountain tops; and *marnyi* (heaps of stones) with inscriptions and icons incorporated from Tibetan Buddhism. However, most ritual action occurs within and around the village temple. Following patterns found in Chinese Daoism and Buddhism, the village temples of the Tu are usually complexes consisting of different buildings, halls, and shrines.

The temple is maintained by the 青苗会 (*qingmiaohui*—literally, “green seedling association”), an elected village council with 21 members. The name suggests its original agrarian mission: the protection of growing crops. Elsewhere, in northern China, the village *qingmiaohui* is reported to be a quasi-military organization originating in the late Qing period in which villager patrols circulate around the perimeter of the village and literally protect the crops at night against thievery (Liu 2007; Pan 2017). This village council has been a major force in maintaining community structure. In the Tu community, it is no longer a secular council but has adopted a religious role. It still maintains its agrarian mission and still functions to enforce laws and maintain order. The members can enforce community decisions, collect fines, and resolve intra-village conflicts.

However, it now plays its agrarian and communitarian role largely in a religious context. Ever since their shift in the distant past from pastoralists to agriculturists, the religion of the Tu has been intimately concerned with weather and crop fertility and with recruiting the help of spirits who can intervene in these matters. The key figure in this process is the 青苗头, the *qingmiaotou*, the head of the “green seedling” council, who now functions principally as an unremunerated temple custodian, a rotating position that lasts at least a year, sometimes much longer if the incumbent is willing. In most rural settings, the tradition was for the head of the village association to be elected. Now that it is a religious role among the Tu, the incumbent is often chosen by the spirits, through divination procedures. The association also has eight respected elders (*laozhe*) and twelve younger assistants (*tuqiu*). All of these officials are male, a patriarchal gender pattern that will be discussed below.

The custodian is the key figure. He has a full time unremunerated job in the temple. He gets up early every morning to wipe altars and tables, to light yak-butter lamps, to put out water bowls, and to clean the courtyard. He also performs certain standard rituals such as burning incense several times a day and occasionally burning ghost-money, special ritual bills of different denominations, used all over China, which permits a devotee to send money for use by dead ancestors without burning real money. He enjoys a prestigious but time-consuming status requiring full-time presence in the temple. This may interfere with normal economic activities; the honor is therefore often declined by those elected by the community (or selected by the spirits). During his tenure as temple manager, the custodian may eat at home at night but may not touch his wife’s hands or have sexual intercourse.

The temple custodian, however, has no special spiritual power. He is a manager and organizer rather than a spirit medium with special ritual powers. Nonetheless, he has responsibilities with respect to the agrarian well-being of the community, particularly with regard to protecting the village against storms (inundation is as much a danger as drought). If menacing clouds appear that threaten hail or

heavy rains, the custodian and his assistants launch into a protective ritual. Sacred divination rods containing the dragon kings or queen mothers are brought out from the temple to the courtyard; incense is burned and white conches are blown to implore the spirits to prevent bad weather. The custodian and his assistants do not engage in divination or become possessed with spirits. However, they must be constantly present to swing into ritual action if the need arises.

For all practical purposes, they are confined to the village during the year or years of their service. If bad weather damages the crops in the absence of the custodian and his assistants, they will be blamed for the misfortune. As we shall see, what is of particular analytical importance here is the prominence of the climatological and agro-pastoral concerns of the Tu temple, much more salient among the Tu than the concern with healing that dominates most shamanic systems.

The *qingmiaotou* (“green seedling manager”) and his assistants on the village ritual committee manage the temple, organize collective rituals, and perform several ritual acts. Does this make them shamans? They do not have the ability to enter into possession trances, to do special dances, to enter into personal contact with the spirits, nor do they have special clothing. Most analysts would therefore probably exclude them from the category of “shamans.” This simply illustrates the definitional ambiguity which continues to surround the term “shaman” despite the use of the term in thousands of academic articles.

### 3.3.2. The *Bo*

The second type of specialist fits neatly into the category of *shaman*. He is referred to locally as the *bo*. As is true of shamans around the world, the *bo* becomes possessed by spirits and connects individuals to the spirits in search for solutions to collective, familial, and individual problems. Also in common with shamans in other traditions, the *bo* uses special religious paraphernalia (principally a drum and special clothing), and performs in public with special chants and special dances.

There is another feature of the *bo* that is commonly found in shamanistic systems. Unlike the monks and priests at local Buddhist and Daoist temples, the *bo* is not a full-time specialist deriving all income from ritual services. In daily life he is a farmer or a herdsman. However, he has special knowledge and skills that permit him to make the spirits physically enter the community through his mediumship during a special annual three days festival whose principal goal is ensuring good weather. He is also approached by people in times of personal transition points, illness, or other crises.

The pronoun “he” is used advisedly. Only males may become a *bo*. There is a paradoxical inconsistency between the gender-egalitarian character of the local pantheon, with both dragon kings and queen mothers holding equal power, and the exclusion of females from the shaman role. Not only do they not become shamans in the Tu community, in certain more traditional villages, they are not even permitted after menarche to enter into temples. (Xing was prevented from entering certain temples during her fieldwork.) (After menopause the restrictions are lifted.) There seems to have been diachronic change in this matter. Tradition has it that in the past, not only could females function as *bo*, but that the *bo* were typically females. That is now emphatically no longer the case.

The *bo*'s ritual clothing may reflect this tense duality. He has two options in this regard. One costume consists of a long tunic with large red flower patterns and a colorful crown, painted with depictions of spirits that include female spirits. Part of this garb also includes hemp braids for the head, similar to female braids. This clothing clearly reflects female dress and is special to the Tu tradition. The other outfit, however, resembles that of Daoist priests: blue robe, black hat, one-sided drum. Furthermore, the *bo*, as part of their ritual performance, often read from Daoist texts.

There has, in short, been a syncretic incorporation of Han Daoist practices into the inventory and repertoire of the *bo*. Though some Daoist traditions elsewhere in China have incorporated women into the priesthood (Kirkland 2004), Confucian patterns of Han patrilineality, patriarchy, and patrilocality have had the heaviest influence among the Tu. The contemporary absence of females among the *bo* may be the result of a transition that came as an adaptation to Han Daoist influence. Despite the transformation of women's roles that has come since the founding of the PRC, this transformation has

emphatically not taken place in the Tu religious system (these gender issues are discussed in more detail in an article currently under preparation).

### 3.3.3. The Shidianzeng

A third type of specialist is referred to as the *shidianzeng*. This individual, also male as in the case of the temple manager and the *bo*, could be labeled a spirit-possessed spear-shaker, plays an ancillary oracular role in many public rituals. When questions are posed to a spirit, the *shidianzeng*, while standing in the center of the temple courtyard with a long spearlike rod, the *shidianzeng* is possessed by the spirit being consulted. In response to the questions his particular movement of the divinatory tool indicates either a yes or a no answer.

His status as a “shaman,” however, is questionable. He receives no training and wears ordinary daily clothing. He is not skilled in the chanting of texts or the execution of dance movements required of the *bo*. Though he is possessed, he is simply an oracular voice of the spirits but has no power over them. Most analysts would probably not recognize him as a shaman. This uncertainty reflects the ambiguity of the term shaman. At any rate, for purposes of this article, we will focus on the role of the *bo*.

## 3.4. Rituals of the Tu

### 3.4.1. Community Rituals

A third universal component of all religious systems, including that of the Tu, is the category of *rituals*, behaviors to establish interaction between humans and the spirit world. Not all rituals need involve a specialist; people can burn incense or venerate ancestors on their own. However, other rituals entail the participation of a specialist. The most important contemporary role of the *bo* is his performance in a public festival whose principal objective is the recruitment of spirits to help in controlling the weather. This public climatological function of shamanic performance is compatible with, but differs in ritual emphasis from, the cross-culturally more common role of the shaman as a healer in private diagnostic and therapeutic sessions.

The event in question is an annual three-day community ritual known as the *biangbianghui*, which is coordinated with the planting season for several major crops. The major venue for the celebration is the village temple. As stated above, each village is believed to have its own protective spirits who are physically lodged in the temple. The items containing the spirits are all brought out into the courtyard to receive, through the hands of the *bo*, the gifts that villagers make to the spirits to ward off natural disasters and to secure blessings for the community. Spirit assistance is recruited not only by giving them gifts but also by entertaining them. The mood of this ceremony is lighthearted and quasi-recreational. The spirits are entertained with music and dance. It is more than a ritual to placate invisible spirits. The spirits make themselves physically present and join the community by possessing the *bo* during his ritual dancing. The *bo* becomes possessed sequentially with different spirits, performing the dance and donning clothing and headpieces characteristic of each spirit. This ability to sequentially “become” different spirits via possession trances permits the *bo* to bring the spirits physically into the community during this important planting season. Though the festival is oriented toward the well-being of the community, there is a space in the ritual for individuals to make specific requests. While possessed by a spirit, the *bo* will sit on a table placed in the middle of the courtyard. His shivering indicates the active presence of a spirit. Individuals may pose questions to which the spirit will give an answer through the mouth of the *bo*.

In the literature on shamanism, however, the most frequent problems requiring divination and intervention center on illness and health. The *bo* is also consulted on these matters, although the importance of this particular function has dwindled over time for reasons that will be discussed below.

### 3.4.2. Emergency Rituals: Coercing Inactive Spirits

The rituals performed for the rains do not always produce the desired result. If the community has done its ritual duty but the rains do not come, there are two possibilities: either the spirits have lost their power, or the spirits are negligently refusing to keep their part of the ritual bargain. The first hypothesis is not accepted until the second has been explored. There are procedures for punishing the spirits in hopes of coercing their compliance with their meteorological duties. They will be ceremoniously removed from their place of honor in the main hall of the temple and sent to a hall where Buddhist spirits are housed. It is hoped that the Buddhist spirits will reprimand them, like a school headmaster reprimanding a misbehaving student, and move them into action. The persons responsible for administering this punishment are not the shaman *bo's*, but the village ritual committee.

There are numerous other rituals which would be described in a book-length ethnography of the Tu. At present, however, we will turn to analysis of the causal forces that have brought about the patterns which we have already described.

## 4. Causal Questions and Hypotheses

As stated in the introductory paragraphs, both classic Marxist analysis (to which all Chinese college students are routinely exposed) as well as the materialist traditions that have emerged in American anthropology, including the Cultural Materialist traditions that have guided our work, are interested in causal explanation of cultural phenomena. We will now go beyond description and venture into causal analysis. We wish to analyze specifically how changes in a religious system, whether institutional or shamanic, can be linked to changes in other societal systems. We will focus on the multiple causes underlying two shifts: the decline of healing in the shaman's repertoire, and the concomitant intensification of the prominence of shamanic intervention in weather rituals.

### 4.1. Decline of Shamanic Healing

We have indicated above that healing is the major role attributed in the scholarly literature to shamans around the world. We have seen, however, that among the Tu there has been a radically diminished involvement by shamans in the diagnosis and healing of illness. This shift has been produced, not by a decrease in the frequency or importance of illness episodes among the Tu population, nor to ignorance of the healing rituals on the part of new shamans. The shift is due rather to four changes that have occurred in other societal systems: technological, organizational, economic, and ideational.

#### 4.1.1. Improvements in the Technology of Diagnosis and Healing

The decrease in shamanic involvement in healing is by no means unique to the Tu. Chinese of all social classes now have access to the diagnostic and therapeutic alternatives provided by modern biomedicine, as well as to physicians and nurses trained in that tradition. The quality of the healthcare is not equal across the country. However, access to modern biomedicine is now virtually universal.

In addition to biomedicine, Chinese shamans have long had to compete with a Chinese non-religious healing tradition which involves no spirit agents: traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). The concept of 气 (qi, "vital energy") that is at the heart of that bi-millennial tradition does not posit a conscious spirit agent open to ritual supplication by shamans, but an impersonal force that is managed by natural balancing procedures. The same can be said of the Yin and Yang dichotomy.

Biomedicine and TCM provide healing alternatives that require no shamanic supplication of the spirit world. Changes in the technological component of biomedicine have been rapid. TCM has not experienced an equivalent volume of recent innovations in diagnostic and therapeutic concepts and procedures. However, as we shall see below, TCM has benefited from an organizational shift: the spread of the Chinese medical outreach system.

#### 4.1.2. Organizational Variable: Expansion of the Medical Outreach System

Technologies, such as those of biomedicine and TCM, are socially meaningful only if they are widely available to the population. Both biomedicine and TCM were initially concentrated in larger cities. However, China experienced a massive intentional expansion of healthcare to the rural areas beginning in 1965 with the institutionalization of the 赤脚医生; *chìjiǎo yīshēng* “barefoot doctors.” The barefoot doctors were basically paramedics who used a combination of biomedicine and TCM, providing their services free of charge to the rural population. This program was an alternative to—and posed a serious challenge to—shamanic healing, which until then was the major healthcare option (along with herbal medicine and massage techniques not requiring spirit interventions) available to most Chinese, but which was considered by the government to be part of the feudal superstitions that had to disappear. Shamanic spirit healers were neither sought out nor invited to receive training as barefoot doctors. The latter were an alternative to the former.

The barefoot doctor program was formally dismantled in the 1980s along with the dismantling of collectivized agricultural communes. This reduced healthcare outreach and was replaced by a “user-pays system” (WHO 2008), and the option of universal free healthcare was replaced by a system of universal health insurance.

#### 4.1.3. Improvement of Infrastructure and Modes of Transportation

Though medical care is now not as widely available in rural areas as during the apogee of the barefoot doctors, massive road-building programs and improved transportation have increased the ability of villagers to access biomedical or TCM services in towns and cities. The need for this increased with the elimination of the barefoot doctor program. Vastly improved road infrastructure and the concomitant increase of rural transportation service providers continued the challenge to rural dependence on folk medicine and shamanic healing.

The spread of these alternative medical technologies that require no spirit interventions has reduced the demand for the spirit healing procedures of the Tu shamans. They are now approached for healing services either when the alternative techniques have failed or when the problems are specific mental or behavioral dysfunctions with which neither Western biomedicine nor TCM are easily able to cope. These mental and behavioral abnormalities are more easily attributable to hostile spirit agents.

#### 4.1.4. Transformation of the Economic System: Massive Rural Exodus to Urban Areas

Shamanic healing is not confined to the rural areas, but it is stronger there than in cities with access to biomedicine and TCM. As of 2012, the National Bureau of Statistics reported that the urban population of China exceeded the rural population for the first time in Chinese history (Simpson 2012). By the decade of the 2030s, the urban ratio is expected to reach 75%. Even with improved infrastructure and transportation in the rural areas, access to biomedicine and TCM will remain greater in urban than in rural areas.

Shamanism does not disappear in the urban areas, neither in the cities of China nor in those of the U.S. where Murray and other anthropologists have observed the transplanting of the healing rituals of Haitian Vodou. Shamanic healing, however, may experience two shifts as the urban population of China mushrooms: (1) an intensification of the focus on mental and behavioral disorders (less amenable to healing via biomedicine) rather than somatic illnesses; and (2) a shift to female shamans, quite unlike the current monopolization of the shaman role by males among the rural Tu. Research carried out by Zhang in a village of central China (Zhang and Hriskos 2003) documents such a shift, even in a rural setting.

In analyzing the rural exodus and urbanization as causal factors that have driven modifications in the shamanic role, a difference must be pointed out between the Tu shamanism studied by Xing and the Vodou studied by Murray. The shamanic practices of Vodou, including its spirits, rituals, and specialists, have been exported to New York City and Miami. The same has not occurred and will probably not occur with the shamanic practices of the Tu. Unlike Haitians, who form large

demographic blocs in U.S. cities that in certain neighborhoods are the majority, the Tu that emigrate are still a small minority, principally young men. The Tu migrants are still a dispersed, statistically marginal minority surrounded by the Han majority and other ethnic minority groups in Chinese cities. Tu temples and Tu shamans, and specifically Tu rituals, will probably stay confined to the Tu region in Qinghai. Not only are the Tu migrants few in number, but the spirits are, as we have pointed out, territorially restricted in their powers, unlike the more mobile spirits of rural Haitian Vodou, who are more linked to specific families than to specific territories; they go wherever their followers go (Murray 1980, 1985; Brown 1999).

The migratory phenomenon in China thus has a potentially more destructive impact on minority religious systems than is found elsewhere in the world where migrants from the same ethnic group can form large urban clusters in which they are the local majority. Shamanism itself will continue, but as suggested above, it may well be a type of neo-shamanism with three characteristics: (1) the shamans may be mostly women; (2) the focus may be on mental and behavioral disorders, or on urban dilemmas, not on somatic illness; and (3) it will probably not be derived from nor linked to any specific regional or ethnic tradition.

#### 4.1.5. Ideational Factors: Exclusion of Shamanic Healing from Protected Cultural Heritage

Back in Tu territory itself, there is yet another element militating against the traditional healing function of the shamanic role. We have alluded to a surge in official State support for five officially recognized religious systems in China. Ethnic religious practices like those of the Tu are not formally included, but they receive support via other mechanisms, including the program to support Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage.

However, there continues to be a strong ideological factor that guides government support for the preservation of local ethnic traditions. Government support *does not include shamanic spirit healing traditions*. We are aware of no specific policy statement prohibiting such support. However, though hostility to shamanic healing is not official, it is real. The Chinese State, and its local agents, will support festival songs and dances performed in traditional ethnic garb in local minority languages and even finance the building or restoration of temples. Local authorities, as well as local communities themselves, are aware of the income-generating potentials of these activities, all of which may attract, in the cool highland region that the Tu inhabit, the income of Chinese tourists fleeing during the hot summer months from the eastern lowland coastal regions (there are well known potential downsides to this “commodification of culture,” which will be discussed in subsequent articles).

Among public employees who decide on the allocation of Cultural Heritage funding, even among those employees who are Tu, there are negative attitudes toward shamanic healing. Shamanic healing incantations are often mimicked and mocked as silly mumbo-jumbo and treated as something falling outside the cultural elements targeted for revival and protection. Shamanic healers are often dismissed by Cultural Heritage officials as charlatans taking economic advantage of the less educated. In addition, shamanic healing is usually private. Any attempt to publicly display shamanic healing for visiting tour groups would more likely draw ridicule than admiration from middle or upper class urban tourists from other parts of China. The shamans are fully aware of this mindset and have managed to reorient their ritual priorities and to emphasize instead their public role in ideologically less controversial elements of their ethnic traditions.

#### 4.2. *The Heightened Importance of Shamanic Rainfall Rituals*

Among the Tu, the domain of rainfall rituals has been the major venue for the reorientation of ritual priorities and the shamanic role. In addition to the factors that have diminished their healing role, there are technological and ecological factors that have contributed to the survival and intensification of their role in the control of weather.

#### 4.2.1. Technological Factors

Stated succinctly, there are no technological breakthroughs in weather control analogous to those that have occurred in healthcare. We have seen that in this agrarian setting, the major public community rituals are all related to rainfall. If shamanic healing has been threatened by technological innovations in biomedicine, in a reverse mirror-imagine mode we would propose that it is the *absence* of technological development in rainfall management that has played a role in the survival and enhancement of weather-related rituals. This is likely to be especially true in mountainous agricultural regions that depend on rainfall, rather than in lowland regions where farming is based on irrigation from the rivers of the plains. We have seen that modern techniques have been developed to deal with infectious disease and other somatic maladies, leading to a lowering of the demand for shamanic curing services. However, no effective modern technologies yet exist for bringing the rains when they are delayed or for tempering their force when they create flooding and crop destruction.

Attempts have been made to bring weather under technological control, both in the West and in China. Cloud seeding techniques to increase rainfall have existed in the U.S. since the 1940s. They presuppose, however, the presence of rain clouds to be seeded. A condition not always met in situations of drought. Furthermore, any increase in precipitation is in the order of a modest 15% (Moseman 2009). Rain seeding is not, in short, a viable technology under conditions of genuine drought. The Chinese government has also made efforts to bring a greater degree of human control over the rains by deploying hundreds of rain-making machines on the Tibetan plateau (Lin and Singer 2018). However, the goal (still unrealized) is to provide water for China's rivers. This would benefit farmers using downstream irrigation systems, not the farmers in rainfall-dependent upland areas such as those inhabited by the Tu. In short, unlike advances in the effectiveness and spread of medical care, the rains continue to elude human control. For the Tu the rains continue to be under the control of the dragon kings and queen mothers of their spirit world.

#### 4.2.2. Ecological Factors

The spirits have a particularly challenging task in the region inhabited by the Tu. Data from the China Meteorological Association (Current Results 2018) are revealing in that regard. Southeastern provinces, such as Guangzhou and Guilin, average over 100 days of rainfall a year, yielding some 70 inches of annual rainfall (Hong Kong and Macau, on the sea, each receive over 80 inches). In contrast, the region that the Tu inhabit in the mountains of Northwest China gets fewer than 50 days of much sparser rainfall per year for an annual total of some 13 inches with certain micro-niches getting much less. Furthermore, the Tu live in one of the three regions in China that have been most vulnerable to drought.

In this context the Tu religious system has, quite predictably, maintained its emphasis on weather control. It should be recalled that torrential rains and storms and hail can destroy crops. Weather-related rituals, therefore, continue to be practiced even during periods in which the rains are falling.

#### 4.2.3. Social-Organizational Factors

Besides the influences from the material factors of technology and ecology, social-organizational factors have also intervened to preserve and accentuate Tu rainfall rituals. For clarity in this matter, it is useful to distinguish between shamanic rituals directed towards the needs of individuals and individual households, on the one hand, and those shamanic rituals directed toward the solution of collective, community-wide problems. Healing rituals deal with the problems of individuals; rainfall rituals, in contrast, address dangers to the community at large. They are public rituals that involve the community at large and that therefore have acquired *powerful additional social functions* that go beyond the rainfall issues that ostensibly motivate them.

In this regard, we can see among the Tu two distinct patterns. In the first place, the entire annual ritual cycle of the Tu, the sequence of calendrical festivals that ritually delineate the entire year, is built

around issues of agriculture and rainfall. Second, the Tu rainfall rituals entail obligatory support and participation by the entire community. These two patterns are linked but conceptually separate.

With respect to the first, the major festivals that occur in the Tu's annual ritual calendar are all organized around annual pluvial and agrarian cycles and explicitly linked to meteorological concerns affecting rainfall. The annual cycle of Tu festivals in Huzhu begins on the eve of the lunar New Year's and last through the end of the year. All the major festivals and rituals are timed to mesh with the farming cycle. The *biangbianhui*, the major annual festival, begins the cycle with a public shamanic dance, attended by the entire community for several days, aimed at entertaining the local spirits to ward off Both drought and its opposite, destructive torrents and hail. It is done in proximity to the village temple. The *zhuanshanjing* is an annual procession that leaves the temple precincts and publicly demarcates the territory under the pluvial tutelage of every local dragon king. The *xiazhen* and *chapai* are rituals that invoke local spirits for protection against damage by hail. Furthermore, the *xiejiang* is the ritual at the end of the year to thank the spirits and to request from them protection of the crops nearing harvest. The point is: *the entire annual liturgical cycle is explicitly organized around issues of weather and crops*. Similar festival events are found among other agrarian groups in Northern China (cf. (Overmyer 2010; Jones 2004) and his well-documented blog in (Jones 2018)).

However, it should be pointed out that *this focus on ritual control of the weather constitutes a major difference from the focus of China's official religions*. It is true that Daoism and Buddhism in China do have rituals to address rainfall. However, neither religious system organizes its entire annual ritual cycle around weather issues. Nor do the monotheistic religions of the West, three of them now officially recognized in China. Three examples are illustrative:

- The annual cycle of Judaism, the predecessor of Islam and Christianity, focuses on events in the history of the Jewish people such as the escape from Egypt, the dwelling in tents in the Sinai desert, the annual atonement rituals in the Jerusalem temple, and the destruction of the temple. Earlier linkages with harvest times have been submerged under texts that focus instead on the history of the people.
- The Catholic liturgical year is organized, not around rainfall cycles, but around events in the life of Jesus: accounts of his conception and birth in the Advent/Christmas cycle, and accounts of his death and resurrection in the Lenten and Easter cycle. Via the leap year mechanism, the Catholic feasts remain synchronized with winter and spring. However, the themes are related to the life of Jesus, not related to weather cycles or farming.
- The fasting during Ramadan, the major annual calendrical event among Muslims, is totally divorced from seasonal fluctuations. Since the lunar calendar used by Muslims for liturgical purposes provides for no adjustment such as a "leap year," in some years Ramadan occurs during the Spring; in other years it will occur in November or December. There is no explicit relation to rainfall or farming cycles.

It is true that Western monotheistic religions do have rainfall rituals (particularly Judaism whose official daily prayer texts explicitly mention weather). However, neither they, nor Daoism nor Buddhism, organize the calendrical feasts of their entire liturgical year around rainfall issues.

As such, the explicit pluvial/agrarian focus of the Tu liturgical year is fundamentally different. The annual public rain festivities are thematically oriented toward pleasing the dragon kings and queen mothers to secure their favorable interventions in the weather. However, because they involve the entire community, *they serve powerful social functions as well*: (1) they increase village solidarity; (2) they serve as a vehicle for buttressing ethnic identity and ethnic pride; (3) they give the shaman, whose healing prowess is becoming less trusted, a new "lease on life" as the key performer in the major annual rain rituals. We can go point by point.

- (1) **Village solidarity**: The entire village is expected not only to participate in the rain rituals but also to contribute monetarily and materially in other ways. Members of the village ritual association will go door to door for the expected contributions. People are pointedly reminded of their

in-group status. The collections give prosperous community members the ability to demonstrate their prosperity by generous public contributions. The rain festival, in short, buttresses the link between individuals, their village, and their neighbors.

- (2) **Ethnic identity:** It is hazardous to make generalizations about the identity sentiments of an entire ethnic group. Nonetheless, the collective rainfall rituals, which are regularly repeated annual *calendrical* rituals rather than occasional special crisis rituals, have a power to enhance a sense of membership in an ethnic group. Not only do the ritual actors don ethnic garb, the community members who come to observe and participate on the sidelines and sing the traditional songs may also dress up in the special clothing characteristic of their ethnic group. The use of the Tu language, rather than the local Qinghai language, for at least some of the rituals once again enforces a sense of ethnic uniqueness in those who understand Tu, and a sense that they “should” know Tu among those Tu observers who cannot understand Tu. These rain-related religious rituals may in fact be the principal, or perhaps sole, venue for a public declaration of Tu uniqueness.
- (3) **A revitalized shamanic role:** Of great relevance to this article, the ritual focus on rainfall also protects and revitalizes the Tu shaman role. It rescues the *bo* shaman from the danger of irrelevance in view of the declining spirit-healer role. The major annual temple festival is organized and managed, not by the *bo* shaman, but by the village ritual association. As pointed out, they collect the obligatory donations from households in the Tu community. They organize the details of the ceremonies that will take place. The *bo* is not the key authority figure in these weather rituals. The *bo* nonetheless is the main *performer* at the major festivals. He utilizes the event as the occasion for his most public performance throughout the year. He alone masters the different dance routines that will call down different spirits. He is the center of public attention for several days. During his dance performances, he wears a colorful gown and beats a single-sided sheepskin drum. Moving to the rhythm of the drum, he executes complex dance steps, each with several distinct phases, to entertain and secure the good will of the spirits. He may actually be possessed by spirits and function as their spokesman. Even during the intermissions, the *bo* is the center of attention. He tells jokes and is rewarded with hearty laughter from the audience, who enjoy the amusement as much as the spirits.

In short, though the *bo* has lost his status as the principal source of help in illness episodes, the public rainfall rituals give him an even more public venue for displaying his ritual talents. His performance is viewed by the entire village, unlike healing rituals, which have a limited audience. It may also be viewed by busloads of tourists visiting the cool high-altitude region in summer months. It has the elements that are considered valid parts of ethnic culture: singing, dancing, ethnic costumes, and a nearby temple. This annual festival can be displayed proudly to Han visitors in a way that healing rituals cannot.

There are possible downsides to any type of “performative shamanism,” particularly if it is done in front of tourists. Murray has been at ceremonies of Haitian Vodou that were done for an exclusive tourist audience, that involved selling soft drinks and snacks to the tourist observers, that involved the goriest aspects of Vodou (e.g., drinking chicken blood), and that involved timed spirit possessions. The spirits came and possessed the dancers at the proper time, and left precisely when the hour was up. Either the *houngan*, the Haitian shaman, had incredible power over the spirits, or the “possessions” were staged and fake.

In the case of the Tu, however, the rituals are not done *because of* the tourist presence. They long antedate State support of tourist-related Cultural Heritage practice. Most of the rituals in the Tu religious system, including long ritual community processions to invoke the rainfall support of spirits on distant mountain tops, are done only in the presence of the Tu. No tourists (and few anthropologists) race with the Tu to the mountain tops at the crack of dawn. These are genuine community rituals of an ethnic group aware that what they are doing sets them apart from other ethnic groups and from the Han majority. The busing of curious Han tourists to some of these public events indeed enhances a

sense of ethnic uniqueness. However, the rituals would be enthusiastically carried out without the presence of a single tourist.

## 5. Conclusions

We have presented a snapshot of the Tu religious system using a systemic definition of religion that sensitizes ethnographic researchers to three key systemic components that appear in virtually all religious system: spirit beliefs, rituals, and specialists. We have also used an analytic perspective that links the Marxist analytic paradigm taught in all Chinese universities and a parallel materialist paradigm that has been used by many U.S. anthropologists: Cultural Materialism. The two causal paradigms are similar in three crucial senses that we consider analytically healthy: (1) they go beyond description and attempt to identify the causal forces propelling transformations in human social systems; (2) they divide societies into different sectors (material and non-material); and (3) they place emphasis on the causal power of material forces to exert an influence on the development of other sectors, including idea systems.

We have been forced, however, to look at what has happened in the People's Republic of China, both in China as a society and among the Tu as practitioners of a shamanic system undergoing change. The Chinese reality forces an analyst to make several theoretical adaptations. In this reality the drama has not been one of technology and economy imposing their will on a socio-political system. On the contrary, political decisions, motivated by ideology, have exerted a causal impact on the economic organization of society, creating famine during the Great Leap Forward, economic chaos during the Cultural Revolution, and incipient prosperity during the abandonment, from the 1980s onward, of failed economic models. These catastrophes had been produced in the first place by political and ideological forces, not by anything intrinsic or essential to a Chinese mode of production.

These pages have attempted to place Tu shamanism in its proper synchronic and diachronic perspective. Synchronically, we have viewed religion as a cultural system, and proposed a descriptive paradigm that looks at three core elements that seem to characterize religious systems in general. Diachronically we have identified some specific changes that appear to be occurring: shamanic healing is dwindling and shamanic involvement in weather-control is becoming correspondingly more prominent. In no way do we propose these as universal trends. They are occurring in a specific shamanic setting. They are not occurring in all others. We have tried to identify the causal forces generating these local changes.

And we have been concerned with the development of effective explanatory paradigms. The current tendency is for China to import social science paradigms from the West, many of them couched in unintelligible esoteric jargon with little explanatory, predictive, or pragmatic utility. The evolving new work of Chinese anthropologists could generate Chinese-derived paradigms from which the West could borrow, instead of vice-versa. The Chinese State has tweaked Western Marxism and has generated what it calls a market-driven Chinese variant of socialism quite different from that of the 1960's and 1970's. Chinese anthropologists will hopefully tweak Western theoretical models and enrich them with modifications based on the realities of China, a society that currently houses 1.4 billion people undergoing anthropological changes of unprecedented rapidity and demographic scope.

**Author Contributions:** H.X.: Funding acquisition, Investigation, Data curation, Resources, Writing, original draft. G.M.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing, review & editing.

**Funding:** The Project Supported by National Social Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 17BMZ047).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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