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## **PEACH MŰHELYTANULMÁNYOK 21.**

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***Where Have Superstitions Gone?  
A Case Study on the Connection Between 'Secularization' and  
'Heritagization' Among the Chinese Sibe***

**Budapest  
2018**

**ABSTRACT****Where Have Superstitions Gone? A Case Study on the Connection Between  
'Secularization' and 'Heritagization' Among the Chinese Sibe**

The Sibe living within the borders of the People's Republic of China originally lived in Manchuria in north-eastern China. Some of the Sibe were relocated to north-western China in the mid-eighteenth century, and the two separated groups were only able to re-establish contacts two centuries later in the 1950s. After contacts had been re-established, the reformulation of Sibe identity and the (re)construction of Sibe history began parallel with the attainment of the ultimate goal of creating the Chinese national identity set by the communist regime, which ascended to power in 1949. The culture of ethnic groups as part of the cultural heritage gradually became the key to nation-building aspirations in this latter process. But how and why did Sibe religious traditions become part of Chinese national culture—religious traditions that were initially classified as superstitions and the judgement of which changed depending on the existing political situation? And what is the connection between 'secularization' and 'heritagization' in this process? This study seeks to find answers to these questions by demonstrating how the Sibe's faith in an ancient deity, the worship of Sirin Mama turned into intangible cultural heritage.

**ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ****Hová lettek a babonák?****'Szekularizáció' és 'örökségésítés' összefüggéséről a kínai sibék példáján**

A Kínai Népköztársaság határain belül élő sibék eredetileg Mandzsúria vidékén, Északkelet-Kínában éltek. A 18. század közepén azonban egy részüket áttelepítették Északnyugat-Kínába, és az egymástól elszakított két nagy csoport csak két évszázaddal később, az 1950-es években tudta ismét felvenni egymással a kapcsolatot. Az újbóli kapcsolatfelvétel után a sibe identitás újrafogalmazása történelmük (re)konstruálása mentén folyt, párhuzamosan az 1949-ben hatalomra jutó kommunista rezsim legfőbb célkitűzésének megvalósításával, a kínai nemzeti identitás életre hívásával. Ez utóbbi folyamaton belül az etnikumok kultúrája – a kulturális örökség részeként – lassanként a

kínai nemzetépítési törekvések záloga lett. De hogyan és miért váltak a kínai nemzeti kultúra részévé azok a vallási hagyományok, amelyeket eredetileg a babonák közé soroltak, és amelyek megítélése a mindenkori politikai helyzet függvényében változott? Tanulmányomban ezekre a kérdésekre keresem a választ, bemutatva, hogy a sibék egy ősi istenségbe vetett hitéből, Sirin mama imádatából hogyan lett szellemi kulturális örökség.

**ILDIKÓ GYÖNGYVÉR SÁRKÖZI****WHERE HAVE SUPERSTITIONS GONE?  
A CASE STUDY ON THE CONNECTION BETWEEN 'SECULARIZATION' AND  
'HERITAGIZATION' AMONG THE CHINESE SIBE<sup>1</sup>****TRANSLATED BY KATALIN VARGA****I. INTRODUCTION**

*"... After the rain the sky cleared up and a rainbow arched over the Xubu River, it was on such a wonderful day that Sahanji gave birth to a child!*

*With the coming of night, the moon slowly climbed over the yurt [...], as if goddess Yisanzhu was beholding a new fate.*

*Oh! On this wonderful night, near the fire burning in the yurt, Wu'erguntai played his beloved tambura and sang the tribal song.*

*The man and his woman named their female child Xili,*

*this is how Xili, the unsurpassable, was born*

*on this day in the great forest of Mount Sayan..."<sup>2</sup>*

Tungus people consider supernatural creatures to be similar to humans; they can be male or female, young or old. The main characteristic they share in common is their ambivalent relationship with the world of humans: they can cast both blessing, or curse on the living.

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<sup>1</sup> This study was written in the project 'Heritagization in Contemporary China' no. Prémium-2017-6 in the framework of the Premium Postdoctoral Research Programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Research that helped me to write the study was done thanks to cooperation with the Institute of Ethnology and Sociology, Xinjiang Normal University. Chinese words in this study were transcribed using the internationally accepted pinyin system. Transcription of words in the Manchu/Sibe languages was done using the scientific transcription accepted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

<sup>2</sup> AJI XIAOCHANG – A SU 2009. The poem was documented with the authors' permission during my fieldwork in 2012. According to the authors' references, the geographical names in the quotation can be found in Siberia, the land of origin as presumed by the Sibe intelligentsia.

Offering sacrifice is the only way to win their goodwill, failing to present offerings may cause illness or even death.

Gods that bring good luck and wealth have an illustrious place in the pantheon of Tungus people, and their figures are often intertwined with deities imagined in the form of old ladies who protect children and grandchildren. One of them is Sirin *Mama*,<sup>3</sup> whose birth story the above poem is about. Isanju *Mama*,<sup>4</sup> who is also named in the poem, is imagined to be a woman as well and considered to be the ‘mother’ of all shamans.<sup>5</sup>

The poem drew on stories passed on by word of mouth. The publication of this and similar poems was not always allowed in China. There were times when all religious traditions were regarded as superstitions that had to be banished as part of the ‘secularization’ process. However, there are religions today that have become a key component of the identity of ethnic groups again as a result of the ‘heritagization’ process among other processes.<sup>6</sup> The examination of the connection between these two processes that are apparently at the end of the two opposite poles is the aim of this study.<sup>7</sup>

Aji Xiaochang and A Su, the authors of the above-quoted poem, are Sibe people. Aji Xiaochang is a paramount figure of the Chinese Sibe intelligentsia, and A Su is one of the most loved contemporary Sibe poets. They were born in the Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in north-western China. Only a fraction (appr. 30.000 individuals) of the total Sibe population (190.000 individuals) live in Xinjiang;<sup>8</sup> the majority is dispersed throughout Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning Provinces (Map 1). This extreme geographical separation is accounted for by historical circumstances.

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<sup>3</sup> The name Sirin *Mama* is transcribed phonetically into Chinese as Xili *Mama* or Xilin *Mama*.

<sup>4</sup> The name Isanju is transcribed phonetically into Chinese as Yisanzhu.

<sup>5</sup> NARA – YONG 1992: 113–115.

<sup>6</sup> See YAN 2018 for more details on the Chinese intangible cultural programme or ‘heritagization’.

<sup>7</sup> The process of ‘secularization’ has many levels of meaning, both as a historical process and as a theory. ‘Secularization’ in my study refers to the historical process in which religion loses social and cultural significance, but I need to stress my opinion that this process is promoted by political elites to enhance their own status and influence. The word ‘heritagization’ refers to the process in which heritage is used as a resource to achieve social goals.

<sup>8</sup> Demographic data from 2012 were provided by colleagues of the History and Culture Research Centre of Northeast Ethnic Groups in China, Dalian Minzu University.



**Map 1: Map of provinces of the People's Republic of China. Provinces with the highest population of the two large Sibe groups: Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning Provinces in north east China (proceeding from north to south), and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China's westernmost province. Cartographer: Zsolt Horváth.**

The Sibe population was split into two in the mid-eighteenth century. At the time, the Sibe served in the famous Eight Banners Army of the Manchu Qing empire (1644–1911), the last imperial dynasty. They originally lived in Manchuria but in 1764 a small group of the Sibe was relocated to the western area of Xinjiang on imperial orders to defend the borders there against the enemies of the empire. The Sibe soldiers moved with their immediate families, and they left behind not only their homeland, but their clans and family ties as well. This event is known today as the Great Western Resettlement, and in fact, the Sibe living in Xinjiang today are the descendants of the soldiers who were relocated in the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> After this smaller Sibe group had been relocated to present-day Xinjiang, they set about building up their villages in the valley of the Ili River.

<sup>9</sup> For more details about drafting the Sibe into the Eight Banners Army and for an overview of relevant literature in Chinese and English, see SÁRKÖZI 2018: 6–9.

These villages were modelled after the military camps of the Eight Banners Army, but they enabled their inhabitants to preserve a Sibe identity. Discrete settlements were one of the most important factors in sustaining the awareness of being Sibe. In contrast, the Sibe groups that remained in the north-east were scattered across the military camps of the Manchu Eight Banners in areas where *Han* culture had a powerful presence.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of this process, the two torn-apart groups of the Sibe had different fates. Firstly, the Manchu/Sibe language and script was preserved only by the Sibe living in Xinjiang. The Sibe inherited the Manchu language and script around the mid seventeenth century when they were drafted into the Eight Banners Army. The script was reformed among the Sibe in Xinjiang thanks to a linguistic project in 1947. This is when the Sibe language was officially distinguished from Manchu.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, most of the Sibe traditions were also preserved only by the relocated Sibe in Xinjiang.

After some 200 years of separation, the representatives of the two Sibe groups first had the opportunity to meet anew in the 1950s. This was the time when the Chinese Communist Party, acceding to power in 1949, embarked on the monumental initiative of taking a census of ethnic groups living in China and categorising them into national minorities. Within the framework of this process, the so-called Ethnic Classification Project delegated a key role to Chinese social scientists, especially ethnologists and linguists, to categorise non-*Han* groups.<sup>12</sup>

Closely connected to the Ethnic Classification Project, the nationwide initiative to write the concise histories of ethnic groups was the precondition for creating and shaping the Chinese nation. After the official recognition of the Sibe as a national minority in 1954, this nationwide programme of history writing allowed the intelligentsia of the two Sibe groups to re-establish contacts. The first contacts that were documented were made in 1956. Three years later, in 1959 Sibe cadres, who were born and brought up in Xinjiang were sent to Beijing and were trained and tasked to write the concise history of the Sibe.<sup>13</sup> Thanks to them and to the contribution of the Sibe intelligentsia in the north-east, Sibe history was (re)constructed step-by-step, and the first edition of the 'official' Sibe history entitled the *Summary of the Concise History and Chronicle of the Sibe Nationality* was

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<sup>10</sup> Sárközi 2018: 10.

<sup>11</sup> "XIBOZU JIANSHI" BIANXIEZU – "XIBOZU JIANSHI" XIUDINGBEN BIANXIEZU 2008: 137.

<sup>12</sup> MULLANEY 2011: 39.

<sup>13</sup> SÁRKÖZI 2018: 97.

published in 1963.<sup>14</sup> This was followed by further publications: the second book with the title *The Concise History of the Sibe Nationality*<sup>15</sup> was published in 1986. The third book, which bears the same title as the second, was published in 2008.<sup>16</sup>

Parallel with drawing up a common ‘ancient’ past there was an emerging desire to keep alive or revive ‘ancient’ Sibe culture. This is demonstrated by the amount of ethnographical research that focuses on Sibe religion and especially on the Sibe’s ‘ancient’ shamanic traditions.<sup>17</sup> Studies on shamanism far outnumber studies on other religious traditions of the Sibe related to Tibetan/Mongol Buddhism or ancestor worship.

In fact, the first ethnographical study on the Sibe written in 1912 also focused on a shamanic ritual of the Sibe in Xinjiang.<sup>18</sup> The author, who was a Russian consul and also a graduate of the Chinese-Manchu Department of St. Petersburg University, wrote the article in the conviction that shamanic tradition, the most characteristic feature of Sibe culture would soon disappear. Yet, an abundance of studies was published on Sibe shamanism<sup>19</sup> several decades after Krotkov’s study. The overvalued significance of this line of research is best illustrated by a collective volume *The Essence of Sibe Culture*<sup>20</sup> published in the Chinese language, in which more than half of the 23 studies focused on ‘shaman culture’.

However, as indicated by the above term in single quotation marks, when the ‘ancient’ past was drawn and ‘ancient’ religious traditions were taken stock of, more focus was placed on their cultural content than on their religious content with the two sharply distinguished from one another. This is part of the process that is known as nationalist secularism or the secularism of nation-states. Within this process, religions or at least their recognized and ‘rationalized’ forms have become important to building a nation-state and thus elements judged as superstitious and irrational were scoured off.<sup>21</sup> However, it is an extremely delicate question who can and where they can draw a line between religion and culture, if such distinction can be made at all, which is confirmed by my own fieldwork experience.

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<sup>14</sup> ZHONGGUO KEXUEYUAN MINZU YANJIUSUO – XINJIANG SHAOSHU MINZU SHEHUI LISHI DIAOCHA ZUBIAN 1963.

<sup>15</sup> “XIBOZU JIANSHI” BIANXIEZU 1986.

<sup>16</sup> “XIBOZU JIANSHI” BIANXIEZU – “XIBOZU JIANSHI” XIUDINGBEN BIANXIEZU 2008.

<sup>17</sup> For more details on Sibe shamanism, see SÁRKÖZI – SOMFAI KARA 2013.

<sup>18</sup> KROTKOV 1912.

<sup>19</sup> See STARY 1993, PANG 1994, QI 1997.

<sup>20</sup> HE 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. NEDOSTUP 2009: 3.



I spent a total of 33 months between 2012 and 2014 with both large Sibe groups living several thousand kilometres far apart. Although my research primarily focussed on questions related to the (re)construction of history, I also strived to collect as much material as possible about the religious traditions of the Sibe. Staying with the example of shamanic traditions, the experience I gained in my fieldwork revealed that there was not a single shaman who could practice healing as prescribed by Sibe traditions to be found either in the north-east or in the north-west today. A shaman can do healing only after doing the ritual of ascending the so-called knife-ladder and the last Sibe shaman who stood the test died in 1976 in the Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County in Xinjiang. Shamans who had ascended the knife-ladder have descendants (either the children of shamans, or students of shamans) who still live in Qapqal but they do not practice healing (Figure 1). It is also true that there are self-appointed healers who strive to prove their healing power in different ways in their communities, but they cannot be considered shamans in the traditional sense.<sup>22</sup> And there are also people who volunteer and commit themselves to the preservation of shamanic traditions.

When I conducted fieldwork in Qapqal and did observations on the power of traditions to build communities, I followed the formation of a dance group, mainly constituted by elderly farmers, for several months. I documented the dance competitions for seniors, organized by the local government for art enthusiast pensioners, where the group delivered performances; I saw how the activities of the dance group gained the support of Sibe intellectuals; I accompanied the group on a pilgrimage, and said farewell to them in the conviction that the preservation of traditions, so precious to them, was in good hands. But a couple of months later I learnt that one of the party secretaries in Qapqal banned the group on reasons that their activities no longer concerned culture but religion (Figure 2).

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<sup>22</sup> SÁRKÖZI – SOMFAI KARA 2013.



*Figure 1: Shaman Fu Shou and his wife.  
Qapqal, Xinjiang, 2010. Photo by the author.*



*Figure 2: Shaman dance group of pensioners.  
Qapqal, Xinjiang, 2012. Photo by the author.*

This example allowed me to draw two conclusions. On the one hand, my experience demonstrated that there did exist a sharp distinction between religion and culture. On the other hand, this distinction, which can affect the lives of individuals and communities alike, depends on rather many factors—for instance on the personal opinion of power-holders in this case. The question is whether my experience with the shaman dance group was in fact only an example for individual understanding of religion and culture? Or is there something more to it?

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When this question emerged, I began to ponder how interesting it would be to examine what can be read about the Sibe's religious traditions including Tibetan/Mongol Buddhism, shamanic traditions, and ancestor worship in the above-mentioned books that give an account of the Sibe's 'official' history. However, the Sibe's concise history published in 1963 and its subsequent editions contained a number of contradictions, which I shall discuss in more detail later. This is why I decided to examine the relevant contents of books that offer an insight into Sibe history and culture through research done by local, non-professional historiographers and Sibe ethnographers.

It is known from relevant literature that China's history has been bifurcated because a linear grand historical narrative has established the repressive teleology of history and silenced those "different and non-narrative modes".<sup>23</sup> Moreover, as Haiming Yan says: "there is no monolithic national memory. Rather there are various forms of memoires", such as official memory or local memory,<sup>24</sup> which also offer a variety of pictures of the survival of religious traditions embedded in history. Moreover, history writing is a Janus-faced phenomenon, and the ongoing (re)construction of Sibe history that included the (re)construction of 'ancient' Sibe culture, which was meant to contribute to building Chinese national unity, has also led to an unfolding of Sibe ethnonationalism. In other words, the Sibe intelligentsia formulated the idea that the 'ancient' past and culture that were being reconstructed did (would) not necessarily and only serve the establishment of Chinese national unity. On the contrary, a national identity could be conceived where Sibe (ethnic) belonging is not overshadowed by the consciousness of (Chinese) national belonging.

Thus I compared the information contained in the books on the Sibe's 'official' history with the contents of other three books. One of these was the book *The Chronicle of the Sibe in Shenyang* published in 1988.<sup>25</sup> The other two books *The Essence of the Culture of the Sibe Nationality*<sup>26</sup> and *The Chinese Sibe People*,<sup>27</sup> published in the early 2000s, are

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<sup>23</sup> DUARA 1997: 19.

<sup>24</sup> YAN 2018: 20.

<sup>25</sup> SHENYANG SHI MINWEI MINZU ZHI BIANZUAN BANGONGSHI 1988.

<sup>26</sup> HE 2009.

<sup>27</sup> NA – HAN 2010.

works on Sibe history and culture that have set a framework for and determine Sibe self-image even today.

As I studied these books, my focus began to shift gradually from the Sibe's shamanic traditions to the Sibe's faith in an ancient deity. This deity was no other than *Sirin Mama*, whose above-quoted birth story was written in 2009 by Aji Xiaochang and A Su. It is indeed fascinating that *Sirin Mama* had a very long way to go before Aji Xiaochang and A Su were able to devote a poem to her memory. The Sibe's faith in *Sirin Mama* first appears in the Sibe's 'official' history as if it were a religious tradition that actually no longer existed. Then her figure became all the more important and more alive, first of all, because *Sirin Mama* embodied the faith in the common ancestry of both Sibe groups and was associated with 'ancient origins'. In the end, the stories about *Sirin Mama*, which were passed on orally, transformed into intangible cultural heritage as a result of the intangible heritage programme, which inspired a good number of Sibe to return to offering sacrifice to her. In my case study, I intend to explore step-by-step how the Sibe's faith in *Sirin Mama* has transformed into intangible cultural heritage—which offers pride for a small ethnic group and satisfaction for a big nation. I am hopeful that my study will contribute to researches that aim at exploring the deeper layers of notions about religion and culture in today's China, and the role they play in building a nation-state.

## II. RELIGIONS AND SUPERSTITIONS

When Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and the CCP rose into power in 1949, the creation of a new 'unified, multinational country' was set as an ultimate goal. To attain this goal, the CCP offered equality for all Chinese ethnic groups. The CCP also pledged that Chinese ethnic groups would be enabled to preserve or reform their traditions, customs and religious beliefs. But what did CCP ideologists mean by 'religious beliefs' that would be allowed to be preserved or reformed?

To answer this question it might be helpful to look at how 'religion' and 'superstition' are distinguished or categorized. These specific terms corresponding to the western concepts were adopted in China from Japan in the early 1900s. During the Meiji Restoration (1868), dozens of Japanese translators and thinkers worked on the understanding and Japanese language adoption of western notions in order to be utilized

for social advancement. Their work was considered to be a model by the cream of Chinese intelligentsia in favour of modernization in the early twentieth century. The reformer Liang Qichao (1873–1929) was one of them, who defined the western concept of ‘religion’ in February 1902 as a phenomenon composed of ‘superstitions’ and ‘faith’. However, already by October he had changed his view and stated that superstitions could be scoured off of religions without losing their moral force.<sup>28</sup> Thus Liang Qichao judged ‘religion’ and ‘superstition’ to be independent concepts that could be pitted against one another and his ‘exploration of possible definitions’ illustrates what great challenges the understanding of these concepts posed to the Chinese intelligentsia in the early twentieth century.

The ideologists of the CCP were no exceptions, who applied ‘superstition’ instead of ‘religion’ as a collective concept to a variety of faiths/beliefs. Three large categories were distinguished: ‘simple superstitions’ that included traditions related to ancestor worship practiced in families; ‘feudal superstitions’ such as exorcism, geomancy or shamanic traditions; and ‘religious superstitions’ such as Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism.<sup>29</sup>

The ideology on the above religions followed the Soviet model from the outset, and CCP ideologists were in favour of waiting out regarding the future of religions. However, the CCP left nothing to chance in the practice of religious policy and overruling the above categories a sharp distinction was drawn up between ‘religion’ and ‘superstition’: only faiths in the category of ‘religious superstitions’ were regarded religions in the sense as these categories were understood in the early twentieth century. Institutional religions that could be scoured off of superstitions were considered to be vehicles for the execution of a secular policy.

Accordingly, the Office for Religious Affairs (ORA) set up in 1950 was responsible for control over the believers of the five institutional religions only. Using the influence of religious organisations supervised by ORA, the main duty of its officials was to extend control over religious people. In exchange and with strict restrictions, the state allowed recognized religious communities to have their own churches, monasteries, and schools, and delegate representatives to legislative and advisory bodies at various levels. Believers belonging to the first two categories were not ‘officially’ recognized as religious and had

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<sup>28</sup> NEDOSTUP 2009: 7–8.

<sup>29</sup> ANAGNOST 1987: 43–44.

no rights to practice their religion.<sup>30</sup> Their control was not a duty of ORA, but the responsibility of public security bodies since their activities in extreme cases could even be classified as counter-revolutionary crimes.<sup>31</sup>

In terms of internal security, ‘simple superstitions’ practiced within families posed no real threat to the existing power. And in fact, such superstitions were difficult to control. Unlike ‘feudal superstitions’, which also included unorthodox elements of ‘official’ religions alongside geomancy, etc.<sup>32</sup> These were the superstitions that practically underlay the life of the entire rural population; this is how these superstitions became the carriers of ethnic identity, which were seen by the CCP as the manifestation of the greatest enemy.

The uncertainty of the understanding of religions and religiosity can also be traced in the publications on the ‘official’ historiography of the Chinese Sibe, the compilation of which began in the late 1950s in the framework of the CCP’s project that aimed to explore the histories, societies, cultures and last but not least the religions of Chinese ethnic groups.

## II.1. SIRIN MAMA IN SIBE HISTORY WRITTEN PRIOR TO THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

The so-called Ethnic Classification Project, which aimed to establish the number of ethnic groups and to categorize and classify them, was launched in the early 1950s and lasted for several decades.<sup>33</sup> As a result, 56 nationalities including the *Han* Chinese, are officially registered in China today. The Sibe were included in the list of nationalities already in 1954 as I have already mentioned it in the Introduction, and the population of the two groups totalled around 19.000 according to the figures of the first census (1953–54).

The two separated Sibe groups re-established contacts already in 1956, soon after being classified as a national minority. This was due to to the ‘project for the national level data collection on the societies and histories of national minorities’ initiated by the CCP in 1956. When the ‘national level project for the compilation of the concise histories and

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<sup>30</sup> SALÁT 2000: 144.

<sup>31</sup> SALÁT 2000: 144.

<sup>32</sup> ANAGNOST 1987: 44.

<sup>33</sup> WU 2006: 47–48, GLADNEY 1988: 109.

chronicles of national minorities' commenced in 1958, ties between the Sibe intelligentsia in the north-east and the north-west grew even stronger.

In 1959, two cadres, born and brought up in Xinjiang, were tasked to contribute to writing the concise history of the Sibe: one of them was Xiao Fu, a secondary school history teacher, the other was Ji Qing, the head of the General Office of the People's Government of Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County.<sup>34</sup> The research team they headed began research in Xinjiang and continued work in the north-eastern provinces. Data collection was completed in August 1959 and the *Summary of the Concise History and Chronicle of the Sibe Nationality*, the first book on Sibe history was published as *internal* source material in 1963 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

The CCP had been in power for over ten years when the book was compiled, but the official policy on religion did not change since the early 1950s. When the CCP rose to power, a pledge was made that religious beliefs would be allowed to be preserved or reformed, yet there was no mention of the religion or religious beliefs that the Sibe had *at the time* of writing the first official Sibe history. The editors dealt with Sibe culture in chapters 8 and 9 in the book; chapter 8 looked at building 'socialist culture' and its stages with a focus on the development of education and health care; chapter 9 presented folk customs such as wedding and burial traditions, main festivities or folk costumes.<sup>35</sup> But did religion, in any form, exist in the life of the Sibe at the time the book was published? The editors shed no light on this – Sibe religious beliefs were relegated to the past.

However, the editors dedicated chapter 2 to the 'ancient Sibe', where a small segment of Sibe religion and religious beliefs was, in fact, revealed. This chapter is divided into three sections: the origins of the Sibe are discussed in section one; circumstances the Sibe lived in before the end of the sixteenth century are presented in section two; Sibe history from the end of the sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century is the subject of section three.<sup>36</sup> The excerpt below is from section two:<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ji 2004: 2.

<sup>35</sup> ZHONGGUO KEXUEYUAN MINZU YANJIUSUO – XINJIANG SHAOSHU MINZU SHEHUI LISHI DIAOCHA ZUBIAN 1963: 82–115.

<sup>36</sup> Zhongguo Kexueyuan Minzu Yanjiusuo – Xinjiang Shaoshu Minzu Shehui Lishi Diaocha Zubian 1963: 6–19. The reason for identifying the end of the sixteenth century as a turning point in Sibe history is simple: the *first* written records go back to 1593; no earlier written records related to the Sibe are available.

<sup>37</sup> Quotations in the study were translated into English by Katalin Varga. The English translation was done from the text translated from Chinese into Hungarian by the author of this study.

The ancient Sibe respected and believed in gods since the standard of production was low and various [seemingly] inexplicable phenomena had to be coped with.

The Sibe used to present offerings to “Sirin *Mama*” and “Harikan”. “Sirin *Mama*” was the deity [responsible] for the peace of homes and for the flourishing number of [family] members. [Sirin *Mama*] was made of a rope that was about two *zhang*<sup>38</sup> long, on which small bows and arrows, tiny boots, quivers, cradles, copper coins, pieces of cloth and bits of bones were hung. [All this] was stored in a paper sack that was hung in the north-western corner of the house for most part of the year. When Lunar New Year would set in, [Sirin *Mama*’s rope] would be removed from the sack and stretched diagonally between the north-western and south-eastern corners; incense was lit as sacrifice and people bowed deeply. [When] the second day in the second lunar month arrived, [the rope] was returned to the paper sack and hung in its usual place. To prepare the things “Sirin *Mama*” was made up of, a household with many members and complete generations had to be contacted in the village; moreover, the oldest member in a family with plenty of children and grandchildren had to be asked to prepare [the rope of Sirin *Mama*]. All this was [done] so as to record the number of generations and members of a specific family and [within this] to record the number of male and female children; and presumably [all this also aimed] to have a god that safeguarded children and household peace. [If] there was a new generation [to the family], then a bone had to be hung [on Sirin *Mama*]; if a boy was born a bow, if a girl was born, a piece of cloth was hung [on the rope]. Thus “Sirin *Mama*” also functioned as a family tree.

“Harikan” was the guardian of domestic animals. [...] In the old times, the Sibe would burn incense as offering to “Harikan” on a wooden board fixed on the westernmost part of the southern outer side of their house [...].

In addition, the Sibe also believe in shamanism, Lamaism [...], etc.<sup>39</sup>

What does the above reveal about Sirin *Mama*, her role in the Sibe’s life and the religion of the Sibe in general? The excerpt suggests that Sirin *Mama* (Figure 3) and Harikan (Figure 4) are complementary deities: one ‘existed’ in the space people lived in, the other outside this space. This division is not uncommon in the pantheon of deities respected by peoples in Asia,<sup>40</sup> but it is rather difficult to tell what ties connected Sirin *Mama* and Harikan on the basis of information contained in the book. Neither is it easy to tell the exact position of Sirin *Mama* in the Sibe pantheon; her importance can only be deduced from the fact that Sirin *Mama* was described in most detail in this first edition of the ‘concise history’ of the Sibe. In fact, she was the sole deity discussed as the name of Harikan, Tibetan Buddhism or shamanism were only made mention of.

<sup>38</sup> Chinese unit of measurement; 1 *zhang* = 3,33 metres.

<sup>39</sup> ZHONGGUO KEXUEYUAN MINZU YANJIUSUO – XINJIANG SHAOSHU MINZU SHEHUI LISHI DIAOCHA ZUBIAN 1963: 9–10–

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Vargyas 2008: 107.





**Figure 3: Sirin Mama**

*Kaiyuan, Liaoning, 2012. Photo by the author.*



**Figure 4: Harikan Mafa**

*Fushun, Liaoning, 2012. Photo by the author.*

However, the excerpt seems to confirm that *Sirin Mama's* figure was closely linked to deities responsible for the continuance of the fundamental unit of Sibe social organisation, that of the patrilineal clan branch;<sup>41</sup> *Sirin Mama* was the symbol of unity and belonging together of a group of people with common descent. The time when sacrifice was presented to her is also relevant: stretching the rope that symbolized *Sirin Mama* coincided with Lunar New Year festivity, when the Sibe, similarly to the Manchus, held their clan branch assemblies. This was when clan branch leaders enumerated the

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<sup>41</sup> The patrilineal branch (= *gargan*) is the fundamental unit of Sibe society. Bound by solidarity and common rituals, a clan branch is an exogamous group whose members can *verify* descent from a common ancestor.

good and bad deeds of members, delivered praise, rewards or punishments, overviewed the financial position of the branch, and discussed plans for the coming year. These assemblies, where rituals were performed before *Sirin Mama*, offered an excellent opportunity to recollect and keep in memory the past and to reinforce the feeling of belonging together; the tiny objects hung on *Sirin Mama*'s rope served this purpose. This is why the editors of the book refer to *Sirin Mama* as a family tree 'without written characters'.

But the question arises: are we to talk in the past tense about faith in *Sirin Mama*? The introduction written by the editors to the section on *Sirin Mama* suggests beyond doubt that the Sibe's faith in *Sirin Mama* and *Harikan* belonged to the long-gone past when the book was published in 1963. This is also indicated by the fact that their description was included in the chapter on the 'ancient Sibe'. Moreover, these two deities were implicitly discussed as 'superstitions', in which the Sibe used to believe when they still lived in 'ignorance'.

However, there is the last line of the quoted passage that may suggest manipulation of time: the Sibe *also believe* in shamanism, etc. This last paragraph on the Sibe's religion written in 1963 was definitely not formulated in the past tense.

## II.2. SIRIN MAMA IN THE CONTINUED HISTORY WRITING AFTER THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Whether the Sibe had faith in *Sirin Mama* and other 'superstitions' in the early 1960s when their first official history was published can only be seen more clearly on the basis of research findings on history and ethnography published much later. Publication of these findings began in the early 1980s, twenty years after the first edition of the Sibe's concise history. Radical changes took place in China in these two decades.

These changes commenced with the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when the communist regime launched its campaign to destroy the 'Four Olds'. The 'Four Olds' embraced everything the ethnic groups of China could have drawn on for their self-imagining; consequently, Chinese ethnic groups were drifted by the overwhelming force of the revolution towards national unity where ethnic identities were about to dissolve for good. Destruction was followed by a period of cultural rehabilitation. Held between 18 and 22 December 1978, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary Session of the CCP's 11<sup>th</sup> Congress

marked a turning point in political life: CCP's leadership consented to Deng Xiaoping's realistic policy line that put the focus on building the economy and cultural rehabilitation.

In the meantime the number of Sibe within the PRC radically increased: they already numbered 83.000 by 1982.<sup>42</sup> The distribution of the population between the two largest groups also changed: in 1964, 51.48 per cent of the Sibe were recorded as living in Xinjiang and 45.24 per cent were recorded in Liaoning Province. In 1982, the respective figures were 32.72 per cent and 59.03 per cent.<sup>43</sup>

The backdrop to these changes was a process that aimed to have an *adjustment* to the classification of national minorities. Relevant literature on the Ethnic Classification Project reveals that several million people requested to have modification of the classification of their individual nationality in the 1970s and 1980s. A great number of these people were Sibe, who might have been registered as *Han* or Manchu in the initial stage of the Ethnic Classification Project.<sup>44</sup>

The Sibe's aspirations for adjustment drew on the process that aimed to rewrite their history.<sup>45</sup> The ties between the two large groups split in 1764 grew increasingly strong in this process. In 1979, when the revolution was over, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, in charge of coordinating cooperation between the central government and national minorities, made the decision that history writing that had begun in the 1950s and was discontinued during the revolution should be resumed. As a result, the second version of the Sibe's official history *The Concise History of the Sibe Nationality* was published in 1986, among others, thanks to Xiao Fu, who had also contributed to the first book in 1963.

Rewriting the history of ethnic groups began in the spirit of patriotism, and 'official' Sibe historiographers aligned with this requirement. They primarily aimed to draw up a picture of Sibe history, including origins, that was more accurate than ever before. The crucial question was whether the Sibe were the descendants of the *Xianbei*<sup>46</sup>, or those of the Jurchen, who were regarded as the ancestors of the Manchu.

Without taking a standpoint on the question, I would only highlight here that descent from the *Xianbei* was relatively widely accepted by the Sibe intelligentsia. Thus

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<sup>42</sup> YANG 1995: 288.

<sup>43</sup> YANG – ZHANG – XIONG 1988: 52.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. WU 2006: 50.

<sup>45</sup> SÁRKÖZI 2018: 17–21.

<sup>46</sup> A nomadic people that lived in today's Eastern Mongolia and Manchuria, and played a crucial role in the development of the history of China (GERNET 2001: 153–156).

there was a picture of Sibe history, all the more complete, and threads that would serve as evidence of Sibe patriotism had to be picked up in this context. Due to size limitations of this study, I cannot go into much detail here in this regard. Instead I would like to return to the question of ‘religion’ and ‘superstitions’ as significant changes can be traced in this respect in the 1986 edition of the Sibe’s official history.

The word ‘religion’ still referred to the five institutional religions in the ‘post-Maoist’ period when the volume was published. At the same time a lot of popular religious practice, which had been labelled as forbidden ‘superstitions’, was already incorporated in the system of Buddhism or Taoism and gained greater legitimization than ever before.<sup>47</sup> This was part of the political direction that aimed to liberalize the economy and restore minority rights.

Thus it is not surprising that the 1986 version of the Sibe’s concise history included a new chapter dedicated to the religion of the Sibe, to their ‘religious beliefs’, to be exact. This was intended to refer to the terminology that the CCP adopted and used to indicate values that Chinese ethnic groups were allowed to ‘preserve’ and ‘reform’. In this volume, the editors still made a sharp distinction between ‘religious beliefs’ and Sibe culture (such as language, education, literature and arts) or customs (such as burial and wedding traditions, festivities or taboos). These are described in two separate chapters.

The chapter on ‘religious beliefs’ discusses various religious traditions of the Sibe such as shamanism for instance. The section on shamanism is followed by a section on the faith in *Sirin Mama* but references are not related to the past this time unlike in the 1963 edition. Below is a passage on *Sirin Mama* taken from the Sibe’s concise history published in 1986:

The Sibe pay special respect to ancestors. Ancestor worship comes before shamanism, Lamaism or faith in any other deity. The Sibe present offerings to (a) male and female ancestor(s). The female ancestor is called “*Sirin Mama*”, the male ancestor is called “*Harikan Mafa*”.

[The name of] *Sirin Mama* was translated into Chinese as “*Zisun Mama*” by the Sibe in the north-east. This means that [only] if there is a female ancestor, [then] are descendants able to multiply with continuity and descend from generation to generation. *Sirin Mama* is symbolized by a two-*zhang*-long silk string to which small bows and arrows, tiny boots, quivers, cradles, cooper coins, pieces of cloth and bones, wooden shovels and wooden pitchforks were hung. [...] The cradles, boots, etc. are to symbolize the multitudes of descendants; quivers express [the wish] that male

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. KIPNIS 2001: 36.

children should become excellent hunters when they grow up; copper money refers to the wealth of the family; wooden shovels and pitchforks, etc. are the symbols of abundant crop. [...]

The Sibe's traditions of ancestor worship can be traced to the Xianbei people. The significance of religions diminished with time in people's eye but ancestor worship has been preserved.<sup>48</sup>

As the above excerpt indicates Sirin *Mama's* description, at least that of Sirin *Mama's* string, more or less corresponds to what was written in 1963. However, it is noteworthy that significant content has been added to Sirin *Mama's* function. In the text written in 1986 Sirin *Mama* is no longer simply referred to as the guardian of children and grandchildren or a version of family trees 'without written characters'; her figure is explicitly and clearly intertwined with ancestor worship. Sirin *Mama* seems to combine all the divinized (female) ancestors of the Sibe and children and grandchildren are born into this world thanks to Sirin *Mama's* role in this process.

The presentation of Sirin *Mama* as the 'female ancestor', that is a *single* common ancestor, is a remarkable shift and idea, and especially noteworthy in the light of the significance ancestor worship had in the homogenization of the Sibe.

When the Sibe intelligentsia re-established contacts in the 1950s and began writing their concise history, the Manchu/Sibe language and script and the majority of Sibe customs had been preserved only by the relocated Sibe in Xinjiang. When the Cultural Revolution was launched, all carriers that would help to preserve or establish ethnic identity were doomed to destruction; this second wave of *forgetting* ancestors and the common past affected the two separated Sibe groups to the same extent.

When the revolution was over and *rectification* began, the knowledge preserved of ancestors or its (re)construction became all the more important to the Sibe in the reformulation of Sibe identity. This segment of Sibe culture lost none of its significance. On the contrary! It nourished the desire for identity-shaping remembering. In this context, the significance attached to the figure of Sirin *Mama* lay in the fact that her memory had been preserved by the Sibe both in the north-east and north-west although traditions related to Sirin *Mama* had been lost. Thus, as part of the Sibe 'religious beliefs', Sirin *Mama*, explicitly and implicitly, was to symbolize the unity of the Sibe groups torn apart centuries earlier.

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<sup>48</sup> „XIBOZU JIANSHI” BIANXIEZU 1986: 137–138.

### III. SUPERSTITIONS TURNED INTO HERITAGE

Constituting a part of the economic reforms and modernization, the political and cultural paradigms that were intended to regulate the everyday life of nationalities<sup>49</sup> began to consolidate in the 1990s. The CCP's idea of the 'Four Identities' deserves special attention as the identification with 'Chinese culture' emerges as the main vehicle for the establishment of Chinese national unity.

The role of strengthening consciousness about the 'Four Identities' in promoting the establishment of Chinese national unity was pointed out by Hu Jintao (1942–), who thus provided a framework for his Marxist's views on state, nation, and culture. His concept became integral to the systemic implementation of the CCP's theory and policy on nationalities in the five-year plan published in the Beijing-based China Ethnic News on 13 September 2011. Concerning the propaganda of the theory and policy on nationalities and the development of education of ethnic groups, the plan proposed a particular way to harmonise the aspirations of national minorities, to integrate resources, and to create a cohesive force for the establishment of the Chinese national unity. This is nothing less than raising awareness to the 'Four Identities': identification with the *great motherland, with the Chinese nation, with Chinese culture, and with the road to socialism with Chinese characteristics*.<sup>50</sup>

There is a single condition in practice for raising awareness to the 'Four Identities' as an integrative framework in the CCP's ideology: Chinese ethnic groups are to be convinced that they are respected as cultural entities by the communist regime and granted their rights.<sup>51</sup> This is why CCP's propaganda puts emphasis on *Chinese culture that was created together* with the national minorities of China,<sup>52</sup> and on *the ancient, glorious culture that developed the sublime sentiments for the Chinese nation, and nourished the spirit of the Chinese nation*.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. CHANG 2010: 15.

<sup>50</sup> To my knowledge the CCP has been added to the 'Four Identities' as fifth in the meantime.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. ERIKSEN 1993: 143.

<sup>52</sup> DENG 2012.

<sup>53</sup> SUN 2012.

However, identification with Chinese culture first of all requires the ‘nationalization’ of the culture of China’s ethnic groups. This implies nothing else than emphasizing that the culture of all ethnic groups constitute a part of China’s national culture. This is an ongoing process in the framework of the intangible cultural heritage programme,<sup>54</sup> which demonstrates that nationalist rhetoric is still dominated by the old dual concept of culture that propagates the continuity of the Chinese nation, and supports the (re)construction of national history and the establishment of national identity.<sup>55</sup> As an outcome of this process, the Sibe’s faith in Sirin *Mama* first became national minority heritage and then shaped into intangible cultural heritage that forms a part of the Chinese national heritage.

### III.1. SIRIN MAMA IN THE SIBE’S TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY HISTORY

The idea that the Sibe’s faith in Sirin *Mama* was to be looked upon as part of their national minority heritage did not emerge in the concise histories of the Sibe but in a book *The Chronicle of the Sibe in Shenyang* published in 1988. The book was published two years after the second edition of the official Sibe history and the editorial board included a teacher called Han Qikun. There is evidence that Han Qikun assisted researchers working on the concise history of the Sibe already in the late 1950s, which is from the initial stage, and he himself became known as a non-professional historiographer in Shenyang, his homeland in the north-east.<sup>56</sup>

Therefore it is no coincidence that the volume edited in 1988 by Han Qikun (and others) and the subsequent editions of the official history include many overlaps. However, a number of remarkable differences or contradictions can also be found as the brief passage on the Sibe’s faith in Sirin *Mama* quoted below indicates:

In the past, all the Sibe presented sacrifice to Sirin *Mama* and Harikan irrespective whether they had big or small families. Sirin *Mama* is the female ancestor the Sibe worship; Harikan is the male ancestor the Sibe worship. All this was left to us from the clan system [...]. The Sibe continued to

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<sup>54</sup> For more details on the question, see YAN 2018: 19–22.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. FEJŐS 2005: 44.

<sup>56</sup> For details of the activities of Sibe historiographers and their role in the spread of Sibe ethnic nationalism, see: SÁRKÖZI 2018.

present sacrifice [to Sirin *Mama*] after the liberation.<sup>57</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, Sirin *Mama*, belonging to the “Four Olds”, was burnt by some families while this national minority heritage was kept and passed on by others.<sup>58</sup>

The above excerpt reveals that the editors of *The Chronicle of the Sibe in Shenyang* openly state that the possible preservation of traditions related to Sirin *Mama* always depended on events in history. It is especially remarkable that Sirin *Mama* was discussed as part of the ‘national cultural heritage’ in this book published in the late 1980s. This was intentional as activities to collect and preserve cultural heritage began in these years, in the period of cultural rehabilitation that followed the Cultural Revolution.

It was the goal of building ‘socialist culture’ or the wish to meet what this goal required that encouraged the editors of *The Chronicle of the Sibe in Shenyang* to present Sirin *Mama* not only in terms of religion but also as cultural heritage. The fact that Sirin *Mama* was *not* first of all important (and acceptable) as a ‘religious belief’ and practice to power-holders became obvious only twenty years later. This is revealed in the last edition of the concise history of the Sibe published in 2008. Below is an excerpt about Sirin *Mama*:

The Sibe pay special respect to ancestors and this has a long history. Ancestor worship comes before shamanism, Tibetan Buddhism or faith in any other deity. Irrespective whether they have big or small families, the Sibe present sacrifice to Sirin *Mama* and Harikan, thus distinguishing (a) male and female ancestor(s). Sirin *Mama* is the female ancestor; Harikan Mafa is the male ancestor. [...]

A festive ritual is to be held when Sirin *Mama* is made; pigs or sheep need to be slaughtered and all the clan members should be asked to have a feast [together] after offerings have been presented. [...] <sup>59</sup>

Although editors of the volume do not reference it, the new elements in the above-cited description such as the animal sacrifice to be presented when Sirin *Mama* was made were taken from *The Chronicle of the Sibe in Shenyang*. It is remarkable that despite the insertion of new details, Sirin *Mama*’s ‘official’ twenty-first century story still offers no orientation in terms of crucial events in history that determined religious life or the social reality of religious life. The faith in Sirin *Mama* in the concise history of the Sibe in 2008

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<sup>57</sup> After 1949.

<sup>58</sup> SHENYANG SHI MINWEI MINZU ZHI BIANZUAN BANGONGSHI 1988: 80–82.

<sup>59</sup> “XIBOZU JIANSHI” BIANXIEZU – “XIBOZU JIANSHI” XIUDINGBEN BIANXIEZU 2008: 194–196.



is characterized by the same timelessness as in the 1986 volume. This segment of the Sibe's religion was presumably presented by the 'official' historiographers in this way in order to emphasize the Sibe's 'ancient origins' and national continuity.

Yet there is a significant change: in the last edition in 2008 the section on the Sibe's 'religious beliefs', and sections on ancestor worship, shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism, were included in the chapter on the 'culture of the Sibe nationality'.<sup>60</sup>

Why is this change significant? Just recall that the editors of the 1963 concise history of the Sibe included no chapter on religions. They wrote about the Sibe's 'religious beliefs' as if they were memories that already belonged to the past. Then in the 1986 edition, there was a separate chapter on the Sibe's 'religious beliefs' but this chapter was sharply distinguished from the chapter on Sibe culture. The editors of the last edition of the Sibe's concise history in 2008 included the chapter on the Sibe's religion under culture. Presumably, this was a well-considered editorial decision, which evidently indicates that by the early 2000s, emphasis on the cultural aspects of religions was a determinant factor in thinking about religions.

### III.2. SIRIN MAMA'S STORY AND THE SIBE'S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Twenty years passed between the publication of *The Chronicle of the Sibe in Shenyang* and the last official history of the Sibe published in 2008. In the meantime, Sibe historians and ethnographers along with the best of the Sibe intelligentsia worked on drawing up a picture, as complete as possible, of the history and culture, including religion, of the two torn-apart Sibe groups. Unfortunately, no source to draw on for information exists regarding this work process. What we can draw on for some information is only a book published in 2010.

This book is *The Chinese Sibe People* and the same Han Qikun was one of the editors who had also contributed to editing *The Chronicle of the Sibe in Shenyang* published in 1988. Some scattered information can be found on the Sibe's faith in Sirin Mama that

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<sup>60</sup> One of the reviewers of this study drew my attention to the close connection with Chinese political aspirations that aim to support 'ethnic traditions' in order to enhance tourism. In my opinion, this observation is not contradictory to what is stated in my study. What's more it confirms that the cultural heritage programme of China, heavily intertwined with the question of increasing economic and touristic profits, constitutes an important part of building a nation-state. However, the discussion of economic and touristic questions would go far beyond the size limitations of this study.

existed in the 1980s and 1990s under the heading ‘social investigations’ on pages 10–102 of *The Chronicle of the Sibe in Shenyang*. Below is a translation of a brief story collected among the Sibe in the north-east:

When I was a child I would often hear my great-grandparents say that Sirin *Mama* was the guardian [deity] of children. Long ago in our homeland, our ancestors were hunters and when the adults went hunting in the mountains, they placed children in leather sacks, hung them on tree branches and would call Sirin *Mama* to protect them [...]<sup>61</sup>

This short story reveals that the Sibe’s faith in Sirin *Mama* was much more part of their memory than actual religious practice towards the end of the twentieth century—at least for the Sibe in the north-east. This is confirmed by an ethnographic study written by He Ling, one of the best-known Sibe ethnographers, which was included in the volume of studies *The Essence of Sibe Culture* published in 2009.

He Ling published his study with the title “The Culture of Sibe Folk Beliefs” and the title itself is noteworthy. First of all because the use of the term ‘culture of folk beliefs’ may explain what train of thoughts and what interpretations of concepts led to the end of the process as a result of which one-time “superstitions” could be turned into intangible cultural heritage.

He Ling makes the first mention of Sirin *Mama* in his study when he presents the Sibe’s folk beliefs at the time of the Qing dynasty. His description mostly corresponds to the earlier-cited descriptions; moreover, the author referenced *The Chronicle of the Sibe in Shenyang* from 1988 as a source. In agreement with this source, He Ling goes against the ‘official’ history writing and removes the Sibe’s faith in Sirin *Mama* from timelessness. He states that the Sibe both in the north-east and the north-west presented sacrifice to Sirin *Mama* in the Qing era and the Sibe’s faith in Sirin *Mama* still existed when the People’s Republic of China was proclaimed.<sup>62</sup> However, the Cultural Revolution brought irreparable destruction and the subsequent cultural rehabilitation and economic development could not make up for what had been lost. As He Ling puts it:

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<sup>61</sup> Na – Han 2010: 33.

<sup>62</sup> HE 2009: 255–256.

Regarding the culture of the Sibe's folk beliefs today, it can be stated that [...] its systematic feature and completeness have been lost, and we are left only with the branches and leaves of this specific culture.<sup>63</sup>

The excerpt suggests that the concept of the 'culture of folk beliefs' in He Ling's interpretation included the religious aspect of the faith in *Sirin Mama* (in the anthropological sense), and it is this religious aspect that has been lost today and only 'branches' and 'leaves' are left. What else could this refer to than a religious belief that has been scoured off of its religious content?

In fact, it no longer mattered for power-holders whether the Sibe's faith in *Sirin Mama* still existed or not. What mattered were the 'branches' and 'leaves' that could be used to propagate the nation's ancient history. Take for instance the multitudes of stories passed on from mouth to mouth, one version of which is presented below:

"Sirin Mama's story" tells us that there was a tribe living at the foot of the great Hinggan in the grassy wilderness of Hulunbei'er a very long time ago. They were the ancestors of the Sibe. One summer when Sibe ancestors set out to hunt in the mountains, the old, the young and the ill were left on their own in the cave. A maiden called Sirin and her "*ama*" (father) were put in charge. Sirin was an eighteen-year-old girl, beautiful, clever and brave. The hunters had been away for many days and hadn't returned. The food for those at home was growing scarce so Sirin talked to his father. She then took her bow and arrows and set out to find the hunters. But when she reached the top of the mountain, the volcano erupted; everything shook, and Sirin, unable to see anything, had to find her way back to the cave. Near the cave, Sirin hunted for hare, caught fish and crayfish, collected roots and bark for the old, the young and the ill to survive. Some of the ill turned worse and left this world. Eventually, apart from Sirin and her father, nine boys and nine girls survived. Sirin had the responsibility to be a mother to the eighteen children. [...] In order to protect their lives and save them from all hardship that awaited them in the wilderness, Sirin called upon the Jade Emperor<sup>64</sup> to ask for help. The Jade Emperor was impressed by Sirin's story. [...] In the end, the nine boys and nine girls survived and so did the father. [...]

Sirin extended protection over the children, who grew up, started their own families and Sibe descendants multiplied. The father died at the age of 99. Sirin saved the Sibe and the Jade Emperor took her to be his daughter and named her "Sirin Mama" so that she could live with the Sibe for ever [as their guardian].<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> HE 2009: 259, 262.

<sup>64</sup> The Jade Emperor is the most respected Chinese Taoist deity.

<sup>65</sup> „XIBOZU JIANSHI” BIANXIEZU – „XIBOZU JIANSHI” XIUDINGBEN BIANXIEZU 2008: 150–151.

This masterwork of Sibe folk-poetry was published in the 2008 edition of the Sibe's official history and the story served as evidence for national history writers: Sibe origins can be traced back to the ancient *Xianbei*; the knowledge of their origins was preserved by the Sibe people; and this memory was preserved thanks to the Sibe's faith in Sirin *Mama*. This is why timelessness had to be attached to this faith as seen in the earlier-quoted passage taken from the Sibe's official' history.

It is remarkable that even though Sibe folk-poetry had been discussed and masterpieces had been presented in the earlier editions of the Sibe's official history, Sirin *Mama*'s story was not published until 2008—neither in 1963 nor in 1986.<sup>66</sup> A somewhat longer version was published in *The Chronicle of the Sibe in Shenyang* in 1988. But why were these stories not presented in earlier editions of the concise histories of the Sibe? How was it possible that the stories that offered evidence of the Sibe's ancient origins emerged in the late 1980s, at the very time when it was all the more important to prove that Sibe origins went back to the *Xianbei*.<sup>67</sup>

In lack of evidence, it is obviously pointless and unethical to turn these questions into guesswork. In any case, the adoption of stories about Sirin *Mama* in the Sibe's official history demonstrates the efforts exerted by the Sibe's 'official' and non-professional, local historiographers in order to find a way to have recognition for the 'superstition' that was so dear to them. As we now know their efforts were not in vain: Sirin *Mama* took off her robe woven of 'superstitions' and as intangible cultural heritage Sirin *Mama* entered Chinese national culture. Indirectly, this was thanks to an old man and the Sibe intellectuals who supported him.

The old man called He Junyou was born in 1924 in Shenyang in Liaoning Province in the north-east. The tradition of telling stories was passed on from generation to generation in his family and He began to put down and systematize stories, which had often been narrated, in 2005. In the end, he filled more than fifty notebooks with stories and typed up some of the manuscripts with the help of a local teacher called Han Hengshun.

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<sup>66</sup> Chapter eight in the 1963 edition is about building 'socialist culture'. Section two in this chapter discusses Sibe folk-poetry but Sirin *Mama*'s story was not included. Chapter six in the 1986 edition focuses on culture and discusses the characteristics and masterpieces of Sibe folk-poetry, but no mention is made of Sirin *Mama*'s story either.

<sup>67</sup> SÁRKÖZI 2018: 145.

As He Junyou said he had not even known at the time what intangible cultural heritage was. The staff of the local cultural office learnt about his activities in their 'fieldwork' aimed at mapping intangible cultural heritage.<sup>68</sup> He Junyou was 83 years old at the time. The material collected by He Junyou was systematized and recorded in two stages in June 2008 and February 2009 with the contribution of the staff of the Ethnography Department of the Liaoning University.<sup>69</sup>

The book entitled *Stories About the Sibe by He Junyou* was the outcome of this work. Following the publication of the book, stories about Sirin *Mama* were included in the list of the provincial-level intangible cultural heritage of Liaoning Province. As Jiang Fan, professor of the Liaoning University stated He Junyou's stories about Sirin *Mama* were important but not only and not in the first place due to their uniqueness in terms of completeness and artistic value in Sibe folk-poetry. In his opinion, these stories are valuable due to their historical character: they present the Sibe's historical development and trace Sibe origins back to the *Xianbei*.<sup>70</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This is where the metamorphosis of Sirin *Mama*'s story ends. Before I go back to the poem quoted in the Introduction, I would like summarize the main points of this study.

On the basis of sources, it can be stated that Sirin *Mama* existed/could have existed in the Sibe's mind as a deity that lived in the house, in the same space as the Sibe. Everything that happened in the house took place in her presence. Her figure was composed of numerous functions and components: she was the Sibe's family tree 'without written characters'; she safeguarded (multitudes of) descendants and the peace of the home; she seemed to render all the divinized dead of clan branches into one deity of (a) female ancestor(s). She embodied the common descent of clan branches and ancient origins closely associated with it. It was this latter attribute that equipped Sirin *Mama*'s figure with the ability to represent the unity of the torn-apart Sibe in the process of homogenization and to propagate the continuity of the Chinese nation in the formation.

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<sup>68</sup> The People's Republic of China joined UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage programme in 2004. Organized data-collection started in 2007 (TONGJIA – WEN 2009: 208).

<sup>69</sup> HE – SHENYANG SHI YUHONG QU WENHUAGUAN 2009: 002–005.

<sup>70</sup> HE – SHENYANG SHI YUHONG QU WENHUAGUAN 2009: 002.

The quotations from the work of local historiographers and ethnographers draw up a distinct and clear picture how the Sibe's faith in *Sirin Mama* gradually faded. However, it is a question whether this was merely a consequence of the Cultural Revolution. Obviously, a much more complex process was involved the course of which was primarily set by the CCP's secular policy. This is why I considered it important to contrast sources that were written by Sibe local historiographers and ethnographers well with sources in the Sibe's concise histories denominated as official histories.

The editors of the latter sources, who rendered historiographical 'services' to the existing power,<sup>71</sup> had no choice, all they could do was to try to reconcile social reality with the ideas about social reality as best as possible. This is why the Sibe's faith in *Sirin Mama* was relegated to bygone beliefs in 1963 when the strongest anti-religious campaign swept across China. This was followed by a period when religious restrictions were eased and the bygone belief was first turned into 'religious belief' and as such it became a part of Sibe culture.

However, the official history writing reflects the opposite of what is contained in the literature written by local Sibe historiographers and ethnographers. A comparison of quotations clearly reveals that the Sibe's religious culture was declared dead in the official history (1963) when the Sibe's faith in *Sirin Mama* still existed as demonstrated by ethnographic research;<sup>72</sup> and the Sibe's religious faith was resurrected when it was no longer an actual part of existing religious practice but much likely that of memory.

All this served the single goal of creating the appearance of continuity and this goal was attained through the intangible cultural heritage programme. However, it would be difficult to tell today where this process would lead to; the process has certainly not ended yet. Sibe intellectuals still feel responsible for keeping alive and passing on the knowledge preserved of *Sirin Mama*. Aji Xiaochang and A Su call themselves the 'successors' of He Junyou, who compiled the stories about *Sirin Mama*. They continue writing *Sirin Mama*'s stories and the quotation at the beginning of this study was taken from a volume of poems they published. Their activities and similar initiatives encourage families and clan branches in many places to reproduce the silk strings that symbolize *Sirin Mama* (Figure 5). Thus the question remains open: Can *Sirin Mama*, no longer associated with superstitious beliefs, ever put on her old robe?

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<sup>71</sup> LIPTÁK 2000: 192–194.

<sup>72</sup> See for instance NA – HAN 2010: 33.



**Figure 5: Re-creating Sirin Mama.**  
*Shenyang, Liaoning, 2012. Photo by the author.*

This question is topical for two reasons. On the one hand it is topical since the Sibe's faith in *Sirin Mama* was included among religious folk customs in the folk customs category of the national list of Chinese intangible cultural heritage in 2011. On the other hand, it is topical as no segment of the Sibe's religious culture has gained such recognition so far despite all the efforts of the Sibe intelligentsia. This is all the more remarkable as the Sibe's shamanic traditions under the entry of 'shaman dances and songs' were among the first to be included in the provincial level list of intangible cultural heritage of Xinjiang. Nevertheless, all efforts exerted ever since failed to gain recognition for the Sibe's shamanic traditions.

In the past few years, I participated in a number of meetings where plans were discussed for the 'shaman village' to be built in one of the historical villages in Qapqal in the framework of the intangible cultural heritage project. I saw the visual design of the

‘ancient Sibe town’ in progress of construction today also as part of the intangible cultural heritage project. The visual design also included a shaman knife-ladder to be erected between four columns that symbolize Buddha in the town centre. However, neither the ‘shaman village’ nor the shaman altar has been built—for the time being.

The reasons are obviously rather complex. The main problem is perhaps caused by the contradictions that derive from the ‘official’ interpretation of the word ‘religion’ and its distinction from ‘superstition’. The definition of these categories was further obscured by the process of ‘heritagization’ since ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ have never been openly pitted against one another in the process of ‘secularization’. These conditions that existed concurrently allowed for specific individual interpretations that had and have an impact on the entire life of communities.

Such individual interpretations led to decisions about the fate of the Sibe ‘shaman village’, about the shaman altar not to be built or about the ban on the activities of the shaman dance group of seniors. The party secretary mentioned earlier may have interpreted ‘religion’ as a concept that was associated with a negative, ‘forbidden’ activity that posed a threat to public order as opposed to ‘culture’, the foundation-stone of the Chinese nation. The only excuse the party secretary can have for his strict and apparently too severe decision is offered by the fact that identity is very much malleable and it is not any easy task to draw a distinct line between its various forms.

I say the above since ‘heritagization’ that complements the process of ‘secularization’ can support not only the development of ‘socialist culture’ and not unconditionally either. Parallel with this process, Sibe intellectuals work with more assertion for the recognition of all Sibe religious traditions with the aim of bringing them back to life by following the trajectory the ‘metamorphosis’ of Sirin *Mama* has taken.

Budapest, November 2018



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**Published by:**

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Editor: Dr. Gergely Salát, Director of the Research Group

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