

The Tame, the Wild, And the Sacred Circle

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After returning from the 1995 Foundation for Shamanic Studies expedition to China, I discovered that I was unwilling and/or unable to talk or write coherently about my experiences. This seemed strange to me, since I had harbored a powerful desire to go to China since the early 1960s when, as an undergraduate student, Chinese history was my great interest and focus. And I had been drawn to Chinese culture and people for an even longer period. After months of soul-searching and agonizing because of this impasse, I had not so much as viewed my more than 800 35mm slides of the expedition. I began asking myself, "What happened to me in China?" Something was wrong. I assumed that it must be something wrong with me.

I reached a turning point six months after returning to the United States when my partner handed me an article by Gretel Ehrlich, one of America's foremost nature writers. In this article she states:

I just abandoned a book, something I've never done before. I went to China and I was so dumbfounded by how hideous the Cultural Revolution was and what it's done to those people, then and now. They continue to live in a police state where no human rights exist, except the right to make a little money, usually in a pretty scuzzy way. There are no visible remains of a culture that in the 12th century was probably one of the most sophisticated on the planet. It's unbelievably corrupt, like a living hell to me. I couldn't think how to write about it in a way that would be useful to anybody. I climbed some of the sacred Buddhist mountains, and I started crying and couldn't stop for 12 hours. The place is so defiled. I know in Tibet it's even worse. I thought, I'm strong; I can see anything. But what I saw in China was so gray and so bleak and so kind of lower-depth landscape-dead souls in the lower depths. I felt so sorry for what the people had been through—prisons, labor reform camps, betrayal. I couldn't get past it. I haven't quite decided what to do next.¹

Ehrlich is exploring the relationship between humans and "the natural." Her honest assessment of her experience in China validated my own, that which I had been unable to speak about and unwilling to confront because it was so much in conflict with the China I had wanted to find. As I read her article, I felt

my energy and enthusiasm begin to return. A tight coil of tension and pressure relaxed deep within me as I began to identify my own feelings of fear and apprehension. I e-mailed a copy of the quotation to Bill Brunton, which began our dialogue about how the China experience had been for me.

The beginnings of this article then began to unfold over the Internet. I knew already from phone conversations with some of the other expedition members that their lives, like mine, had been turned upside-down in various ways after returning home.

In my case, this turbulence was certainly not due to ordinary culture shock borne of unfamiliarity with travel, of finding oneself in an alien culture or in difficult living conditions in a third world country. I have had the good fortune to spend a decade living and exploring throughout Europe and along the Mediterranean coasts, then sailing my small boat across the Atlantic to live and work four years in the Caribbean. Eight years later, my family and I lived for a time in Thailand and Sri Lanka. At the end of this experience, I sailed home to Seattle along the coast of Asia and then across to North America via the Aleutian Islands. After all of this "exposure," I had a hard time understanding my reaction to China. But, as I began to rethink aspects of these past journeys, I realized that the "feeling tone" of my time in China reminded

me very much of living in fear with my family during a bloody and devastating civil war in Sri Lanka. For some reason, being in China this past summer plunged me back into this foreboding sense of life and death hanging in the balance. I did not feel my life was in immediate danger in China (except on the roads), but I did sense a powerful underlying threat, the first sign of which was at the Beijing airport when we arrived: a short statement detailing, in no uncertain terms, rules of appropriate conduct and what would not be tolerated "during your enjoyable staying in China." This was only the first glimpse of the heavy hand of human control that framed my emotional reaction to this great and ancient land.

While we awaited our scheduled flight to the North to meet and observe some of the Manchu shamans living there, we were taken on a standard tour of the Beijing area. The host group for this tour and for the rest of our travels in China was China Youth Tour Service, whose services were a practical necessity. Our itinerary began with a visit to the Great Wall. During a raging electrical storm some of us explored a part of this giant, manmade barrier, a writhing dragon's tail suddenly petrified upon a precipitous mountain landscape, a wall of stone flung across a vast area in an attempt to thwart invasions by powerful energies destined to bring great change.

Our next mandatory visit was to the Imperial Palace, or "Forbidden City." We little-suspected the impact its images and memories would have upon us. The palace is past residence for 24 emperors, many of whom remained cloistered within its walls their entire reign. Some of the monumental halls served as practice stages for emperors' courts to act out complex ritual court etiquette in preparation for public and formal enactment, still all within the confines of vast walls of the Forbidden City. The design, detail, and scale of the architecture surely place the Forbidden City among the wonders of the world. In pouring rain, we made our way through endless, vast, marble-paved courtyards, temples, and emperors' throne rooms capped by giant, cunningly-fitted beams; their brilliant colors and great artistry continually beguiled and allured me, overwhelming my senses. I shot roll after roll of film, drawn in and on by the splendor of the vast geometry of this place. It wasn't until nearly at the north gate of this city-within-walls that I found myself in the first and only garden sanctuary, one not characterized by carved rock, bronze urns, and lustrous tiles, but a blessed haven of ancient cypress trees, cedars, and a pool of water with carp and naturally eroded stones. A sense of great relief



John Lawrence quickly adopts China's most popular mode of travel.

came over me. At first I didn't know why, but later discovered that other members of our circle also felt the burden (of hierarchical order) lift in that garden sanctuary. After the dominion of huge verticals and vast horizontals, we all agreed that the presence of living plants and even a false mountain with a secret cave through which the emperor could pass was a tremendous relief from the suppression of all natural soul and spirit.

Tiananmen Square was the next stop on the official tour. I had imagined a large, walled-in square, but found a gigantic, stone-paved open space. We had not planned to create a circle in Tiananmen Square, but being there together, we felt drawn to facilitate a healing of the great wound left by the massacre of so many there, a wound in which we experienced ourselves to be standing. We opened to spirit and found that we were surrounded by the ghosts of the dead. In the midst of this experience, we noticed people we took to be the secret police approaching us. We responded by taking on the appearance of a group of tourists chatting with one another, whereupon the intruding police melted back into the milling mass of visitors, tourists, and men flying kites crafted in the form of birds, dragons, and other animals. We worked in spontaneous accord as psychopomps, beginning in a small way a mass healing for a nation. What an indescribable and powerful feeling it was to have the honor and privilege to be part of a group which was shown a way to make a difference at such a profound level!

In looking at the photos I took there that day, I found one in which the ubiquitous red flags lining the square are reflected in standing rainwater and appear as pools of blood, for me an appropriate image for the thousands of young people killed here on June 4-5,

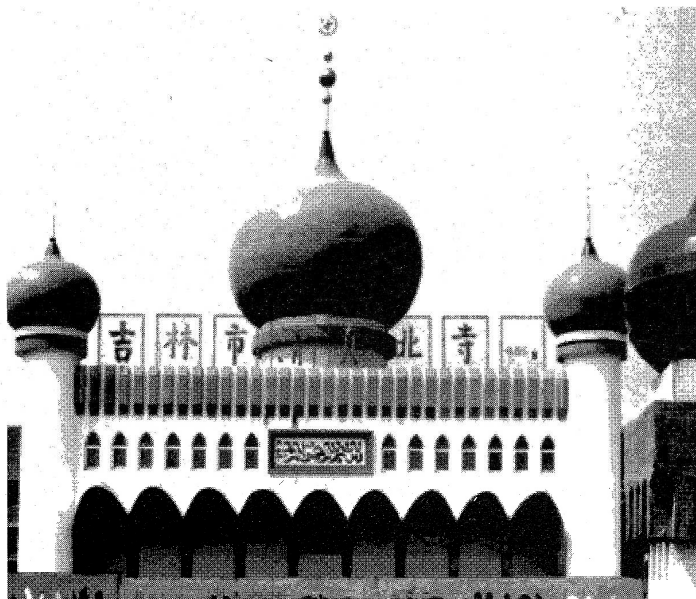
1989. We were there almost exactly six years after the massacre. Though we didn't speak about our shared experience at that time, we began there in Tiananmen Square to form the threads of a powerful group connection, a sacred circle.

We spent two more days in Beijing and then flew to Jilin City (just south of Manchuria), a large, industrial city in the northeast of China. This city is situated on the broad Songhua River, which flows through its midst, its two sides being linked by several amazing suspension bridges. Jilin, where we were ultimately to spend most of our time, became our base camp, from which we made excursions to villages where SHI Kun and the organization known as the Manchu Cultural Society had made arrangements for us to meet shamans and observe their rituals.

When we were finally away from the metropolitan areas that marked the early part of our stay in China, and were finally in the countryside, I was struck by the beauty of the enormous agricultural plain into which we traveled. The small, often deeply potholed gravel roads were everywhere lined by closely-spaced trees, which added their vertical greenness to the luxuriant, irrigated fields that stretched as far as we could see in every direction. Contradicting this "natural" splendor, however, was another stark reality. When I looked around during many of our road stops, I did not see or hear any songbirds, sparrows, crows, or even pigeons. They seemed absent from the country and the cities. For that matter, I often did not see *any* wild things. There were fish raised in irrigation ditches, canals, and rivers. There were pigs, chickens, and an occasional dog, but I wandered in vain along rivers, ponds, lakes, and streams looking for frogs, snakes, and turtles. I saw none. We later learned that, during the Cultural Revolution, it had been ordered that the



The Forbidden City in Beijing is an architectural wonder and a statement of human domination over nature.



Although the State is officially atheistic, China's people follow many religions. Here is an Islamic temple in Jilin City.

birds be killed; they ate too much. The environmental impact has been tremendous. What are the human costs?

If sharing food was the only way of bonding and becoming community, our process of becoming a close-knit circle would be easy to explain, for we were fed extravagantly well, even though some of the food seemed alien. I loved the extreme variety of dishes and flavors offered us. It was hard to get a clear idea of the ordinary diet of typical Chinese from what we were served. We often ate in dining rooms, small cafes, and sometimes in a home set aside for us while we were in one of the villages observing shamanic rituals. Meat (largely fat pork, chicken, and fish) was ever-present. In hotel dining rooms we were seated around a large round table with a very large lazy-susan in its center, this carrying the many bowls and plates of the numerous courses we were served. As a meal progressed, these plates and bowls were soon stacked in layers, often reaching three and four deep by the end of the meal. We were never able to keep up with the amount of food served. This was good, since to have eaten it all would have constituted an embarrassment to our hosts. Rice was not as prevalent as we had expected. The round tables allowed us to sit close and converse easily.

The most spectacular feast was hosted by the Manchu Cultural Society in Jilin City. Our servers were dressed in long, silk, red and gold brocade dresses, their long black hair tied up in tight buns, and finally topped by tall, black, flower-covered head-

dresses hung with long red tassels. This ethnic dress is particular to the Manchu peoples.

Alcohol was served in vast quantities, ranging from wine and beer, to distilled spirits, which included one dubbed "rocket fuel" by SHI Kun. This very strong, crystal-clear fire-water was (mercifully) served in tiny shot glasses. It must have had a magical property, for the small glasses were always full to the brim, no matter how often they were emptied. The beer was very good, as well as inexpensive and weak. This was a fortunate combination, for we were constantly on the lookout for something to quench our ever-present thirsts. Otherwise, we relied on finding bottled or boiled water, of which we never seemed to locate enough.

On the road to Tongliao, Inner Mongolia, we traveled westward in a small, twenty-passenger bus. At first we encountered the usual mix of traffic: trucks, buses, tractors pulling wagons, bicycles, and many horse- and donkey-drawn wagons. We passed several extremely serious head-on accidents. Only

after passing a terrible crash scene involving a bus larger than ours lying completely demolished and upside down in the deep ditch beside the road did we prevail upon our driver to slow down somewhat.

A large, wrought-iron arch over the road welcomed and informed us of our arrival in Inner Mongolia. A few hours afterward we made contact with the Gobi Desert. At first there were just windblown yellow sand tendrils on the black of the macadam road. Then dunes began to rise up on either side of us. We stopped the bus and I headed up a dune with a camera in hand. I was very happy to discover bleached bones of various small creatures in the sand, a sign of nature.

In the middle of a flat and rather desolate agricultural area, we made a sudden right-hand turn onto another road that was different; there was no traffic. We continued for hours, finally encountering the reason for the absence of vehicles. With no signs or other warnings to alert our driver or anyone else, we came upon a huge earthen barrier which had been constructed across the highway. After considerable difficulty (we scraped loose our spare tire that was suspended beneath the rear of our bus), we managed to get past the road block. Further down the road we encountered a similar barricade. This time we found a policeman who, riding ahead on his motorbike, helped us get past this and other road blocks that had been erected because the local government had decided to repair the road. Many miles later we arrived at a manned gate that had been erected across the

road. There was to be no getting around this one without the agreement of the local officials. This involved a lot of negotiating by our hosts, including a story about us being expected by the mayor of Tongliao, implying that we had celebrity status that was of economic interest to the mayor. Fortunately, we were allowed to pass without contacting him.

When we finally arrived in Tongliao, we found that the hotel for which we had reservations was so bad that our hosts and SHI Kun decided that we would not stay there. We drove away to search for another. The one we found appeared quite nice: two long wings of four floors with a big fountain in front portraying a young Mongolian woman pouring from a large bucket, a symbol (we soon learned) of Mongolian hospitality toward guests (the traditional milk offering of central Asian nomads).

It was here in Tongliao that we were forbidden to visit a village in order to meet and observe a shaman. The local authorities had to be convinced by scholar colleagues of SHI Kun to even allow us to surreptitiously meet a shaman in the city. He had to be transported in secrecy by taxi from his village to Tongliao. We had to rent a dance studio for the shamanic performance. The shaman brought an apprentice with him, a lovely young woman who assisted and attended to him. She danced and sang with him as he performed a ritual preparatory to healing work. In their ritual dance they wore skirts made of many, brightly-colored cloth strips. The individual pieces looked like overlarge neckties; all together they were splendid. Over these were worn wide, heavy, leather belts with large, brass plates attached. These clanged together with the dancers' movements. Their drums were goat skin stretched over wrought-iron, oblong hoops, with handles that had metal rings for additional noise-making. I felt both fascinated and intrigued. Our group was intensely engaged in observation, moved by the shamans' integrity and compassion when doing a healing for several members of our group.

After leaving Tongliao, we drove south into another tongue of the Gobi Desert, passing through an even larger area of sand dunes than in our first encounter with this great desert. China, in its long history, has had an ongoing battle with the vast Gobi, which has continually encroached upon the fertile lands to the east. We saw large, brick buildings, portions of which had been buried under the onslaught of sand. It seems that no human construction will ever stop the vast natural forces at work here. I found myself silently siding with and admiring the wild, untamable nature of these vast, windblown waves of sand.

Huge efforts are being made now to stabilize the

encroachment, and this may be a hopeful sign of what might be the beginnings of a conservation movement and ecological sensitivity. The only way to stop the sand movement is to establish grasses, shrubs, and trees that can survive while holding the sand. The Chinese are doing this. Their living barrier has formed a pale green fence where no amount of engineering has succeeded. Standing upon the dunes, I could look for miles along this broad ribbon of green that is finally beginning to hold back the sea of sand that has been moving eastward for thousands of years.

It was up one of these high dunes that we climbed with our drums and rattles. We formed a circle in the open air, surrounded by sand and sun. Mongolian ponies grazed on sparse grasses nearby. We called to the spirits of the four directions, and our voices began to sing in unknown tongues, creating an opening between times and worlds. We were gone from ordinary reality and China with its constant domination of our thoughts. We were free, each of us standing in his or her own wild place, drumming and chanting. I was transported far out over the mountains of sand, fully alive once more, one with the elements of nature and wildness.

As I have revisited the major events of our journey to China, I have found meaning in the wildness of all things and in the depth of commitment and intent of our shamanic circle. The memory of the power, support, and the depth of caring have stayed with me. Their loss has generated a deep longing since my return home. I am yearning for that quality of shamanic community. Now that we are separated by miles and time, I have seen that I want to reach out, not only to those who shared this with me, but also to anyone with whom I can share shamanic practice.

What healing and wholeness can be derived from this China experience? How can we champion a vision of shamanism / animism in such a way that healing can begin to rule our world? Is it possible that the lasting contribution of core shamanism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is not merely the healing of individuals, the technology of soul retrievals, extractions, and so forth, but rather, that shamanic work brings people into intimate community with each other and with nature?

NOTES

1. Ehrlich 1995

REFERENCES CITED

- Ehrlich, Gretel
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