

"Caring For All the World": The Huzhu Monguor (Tu) Pram

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Introduction

In various parts of Huzhu Tu (Monguor) Autonomous County in Qinghai Province, China, the *pram* is a deity represented in the form of a sedaned image or a cloth-covered pole which is held by four men or a man, respectively. This paper examines the *pram* and its responsibilities and availability, how it is used to find a suitable spouse, treat illness and exorcisms, ensure well-being; guarantee good harvests; and alleviate droughts, its role in the *nhakuara* (discussed later), dangers engendered by disbelieving the *pram*, the relationship between Living Buddhas and the *pram*, and revitalizing a powerless *pram*.

The *pram* falls within the varied multi-ethnic shamanistic traditions of Qinghai, elements of which we have discussed elsewhere (Stuart and Hu 1993, 1992, 1991, 1990, 1989; Stuart *et al.*, 1989; Hu and Stuart 1992b; Feng and Stuart 1992) within the context of various Qinghai cultural phenomena. In general, it may be said that shamanistic practitioners have a history of thousands of years in the present Qinghai (Koknor, Kokonor) Province of China's remote multi-ethnic northwest.¹ Monguor, Tibetans, Mongolians, and longtime Han residents of Qinghai have their own shamanistic practitioners and some Salar² and Hui (both Islamic minorities) consult shamanistic practitioners of other nationalities. Islamic practitioners also conduct exorcistic rituals which include burning pages of the Koran, then mixing the ash with sweetened water and having an ill person drink it in hopes that the ill-causing evil will flee. Schram's work on some Monguor groups (1961, 1957, 1954), which includes considerable discussion of the organizational aspects of religion, and Schröder's (1952-1953) work on the personal aspects

¹ See Feng and Stuart (1992) for a summary of Qinghai's ethnic populations.

² See Li and Stuart (1990b) for a recent Salar study.

of Monguor religious life may also be consulted for background information. Hu and Stuart (1992a) and Li and Stuart (1990a) provide a recent survey of Monguor areas and population statistics.

Sun (1990, 160) gives Mongol dialect equivalents for "shaman" including *bo*: for Monguor. The first author who lived in a Huzhu village before coming to Xining, the provincial capital, to study medicine and knew none of the Han language until he was twelve years old, and other Monguor informants from Minhe and Huangnan, do not recognize this term, which emphasizes differences between Monguor communities. The term "Tu" or "Monguor" tells us little since there is scant similarity in clothing, weddings, funerals, diet, and folksongs other than points of commonality shared by many non-Islamic Qinghai *ren* (longtime residents of the present Qinghai Province). There is such variation in language that Monguor from different areas use Chinese or Tibetan as a common language.

Pram Described

The *pram* is a deity image engaged in *sinquan tinjan towu dang* (Monguor: caring for all the world). It is a conduit for a single god or goddess. The *pram* permeates the life of Monguor villages. It is always available for consultation and represents the possibility that the supplicant's distress may be alleviated. The *pram* answers questions by moving. In the case of a sedaned *pram*, moving forward is affirmative while moving backwards signifies a negative answer. To signify a positive answer, pole *prams* rapidly move up and down in the hands of those who hold them. *Prams* make their will known through interaction between the *xilajin*³ and the *shdenzin*. The *xilajin* is generally an aged man, but in some areas, this office may be filled by a particular person who asks the *pram* questions. The *shdenzin* are always male. In the case of the sedaned *pram*, they hold the sedan poles and in the case of a pole *pram*, they hold the pole. The *pram* must be able to move when it is held by the *shdenzin*. If prospective *shdenzin* hold the *pram* and it does not move, it indicates that they cannot be *shdenzin*. Some *shdenzin* also put questions to the *pram*. Outlawed in 1958, *prams* continued to be consulted secretly although most sedaned *prams* were destroyed. By the late 1980s, *prams* were again being openly consulted.

³ We give all Monguor words according to the system in Li Keyu (1988).

This paper focuses on *prams* found in parts of Huzhu Tu Autonomous County in the last years of the twentieth century. Unlike many grassland areas of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, where the second author found little shamanistic activity in the 1980s, the *pram* was vital to Huzhu Monguor villages in the late twentieth century. There are no *prams* comparable to those of Huzhu in Monguor areas of Minhe Hui and Tu Autonomous County, where the second largest contingent of China's Monguor population dwells, nor are there Huzhu-like *prams* in Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture which is home to approximately 7,000 Monguor. These areas do, however, have trance mediums known as *fala* and *ngawa*.

It also should be mentioned that in some Han villages of Huzhu and adjacent Ledu County, there are *prams* which seem close to those of Huzhu Monguor. We are unable to explain this other than to suggest that Monguor have been greatly influenced by Qinghai Han and, for many Qinghai Han, vice versa. Careful genealogical study would show, for example, that many Qinghai *ren* who call themselves Han have non-Han ancestors. In addition, we know little about the Monguor of Datong Hui and Tu Autonomous County and of Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County in Gansu Province.

Buddhism in Huzhu (home to the influential lamaistic temple Gulang/Youning) was strong enough not to tolerate non-lamaistic trance mediums because of the challenge they might pose to Buddhistic authority. As was the case in many Mongol areas, however, a compromise was reached. Remnants of the old shamanistic tradition persisted, but in a new Buddhistic guise. The *pram* was no exception. As we shall see later, the *pram* is obedient to and dependent on the living Buddhas who are its power source. Among Minhe and Huangnan Monguor, Buddhistic influence was less among the Monguor, and there was a strong Chinese influence, as evidenced in the strength of the Cult of Erlang, a Taoist Warrior deity. In the late twentieth century, Monguor villages in both Huangnan and Minhe have powerful trance mediums whose god is Erlang. Interestingly, Erlang is not venerated in many Huzhu Monguor villages, for Erlang is said to be Gesar, a legendary general, who killed many Huzhu Monguor. Venerating Erlang is seen as tantamount to venerating a deity who slew many ancestors. In

Minhe Monguor villages, trance mediums are unrelated to Living Buddhas, who exercise no control over them despite the strength of the Yellow Sect in the area. There is also no interest in Gesar *per se*, although at least some folklore concerning Erlang links him to Gesar.

The Area of This Study

The first author of this paper is a native of Tughuan (Chinese: Tuguan) Village, located fifteen kilometers east of Weiyan, the county town. He was told by his grandfather that village ancestors originated in Tughuan (in Wushi Commune) and migrated to the present Tughuan Village at some point in the distant past. The first author heard various accounts of *prams* from the many Monguor he met from throughout Huzhu from 1985 to 1988 while attending the minority middle school located in Weiyan. Both authors, however, feel confident that this paper aptly represents only Tughuan Village.

Other Huzhu villages may be much different due to impressive cultural differences between Monguor villages within small areas of Monguor habitation. For example, in the Guanting Sanchuan region of Minhe Hui and Tu Autonomous County, residents of Hu Li Jia (Village), refer to the Mongolian *obo* (mound of stones, a point of high elevation consecrated to Heaven and mountain gods) as *wobo*. Nearby Samawan residents use *lazii*, a derivation of the Tibetan *lapzi*, and many are not familiar with the designation *wobo*. Guanting/Sanchuan is further complicated by Monguor who were practicing Hui in the early twentieth century but now are culturally and linguistically identical to Monguor, which they are classified as. There is also a village where residents are classified as Tibetan, though they speak Monguor and observe Monguor customs and do not speak Tibetan.

For the reader's further reference, Monguor are educated in Chinese, save for some Monguor in Huangnan and Tianzhu who are educated in Tibetan. Although a written system was developed for Huzhu Monguor, it is not widely studied and less than twenty people in China are able to use it with much facility.⁴ It is not taught in any

⁴ *Chileb*, a mimeographed journal (mostly poems, songs, and folktales), written entirely in Li Keyu's system, had, in 1992, been issued for several years. Though rife with punctuation and spelling errors and containing a number of dialectical variants, it remains the only material ever written in a system devised by

primary or middle schools and, because of extreme dialectical variation, Huzhu Monguor (written system) has never been of interest to Monguor areas other than Huzhu. It would be much easier for Monguor to study in Mongolian, but this has never been an option in New China. Education in the Han and Tibetan languages is spelling rapid change to Monguor.

***Pram* Origins**

In village accounts, the *pram* originates in persons devoted to humanity. Examples include brave generals who fought against enemies, skilled physicians who cured many illnesses, and competent officials who aided various emperors in the course of helping their own nationality.

An example of such a general is Pudang Village's Needausang *Pram*, who, according to local accounts, was a general of Chingiz Khan who ordered him to go to Qinghai and suppress a Tibetan rebellion. As he was returning after accomplishing his mission, he was slain by a secret assassin's arrow.

The Tughuan Village *pram* is Tughuan Niangniant (aunt). She was the second of three sisters, all of whom are *prams*. Lanja Niangniang (*pram* of Lanja Village, Wushi Commune, three kilometers from Tughuan), was the eldest. Shdangja (*pram* of Shdangja village, which adjoins Tughuan Village) was the youngest. The three sisters' *pram* sedans are made from wood of the same tree. Wood from the upper part of the tree was used to make Lanja's sedan, wood of the mid-part of the tree was used to make Tughuan's sedan, and root wood was used to make the sedan of Shdangja. The two elder sisters married and, therefore, their faces are visible in their respective sedans. But Shdangja never married and thus her face is not visible in her sedan. Each *pram* has specific duties: Lanja *Pram* is responsible for the temple and if, for example, a lama makes a mistake in the temple, she punishes him. Tughuan is responsible for the safety of Monguor areas and protects Monguor from invasion by other nationalities. Shdangja is responsible for protecting crops.

Pram Locations

An individual household may have its own *pram* or a *pram* may be shared by all village or tribe households. Each household has a *nelshigang* (*pram* room). It is a commodious room within the family compound of several adobe rooms built within a large mud-wall compound. Within some family compounds the *nelshigang* houses a *pram*. In others, in place of an actual *pram*, there is a picture of a Living Buddha and a few red and/or yellow cloths. During festivals, an oil lamp is lit nightly in the *nelshigang* rendering it off-limits to those who have entered a room where a woman is confined.

In a village where households share a *pram*, the *pram* is commonly kept in the village temple and cared for by a villager chosen by the village. The position of temple-keeper usually rotates annually. In the event it becomes inconvenient for some households to use a *pram* because of frequent use, a new *pram* may be made. A new *pram* might also be made if a family's relationship with the *pram* keeper is not congenial.

Clothing

The *pram* is dressed in a Chinese-style unlined upper garment about which is draped a monk's robe. Clothing colors are generally red, yellow, pink, and green.

Pram Services

MARRIAGE. When a boy reaches the age of marriage (eighteen to nineteen years), his family invites the local *shdenzin* and *pram* to their home to divine in which direction the boy's future wife lives, the girl's age (usually seventeen to nineteen), what animal year she was born in, an appropriate time for the marriage, and what people should avoid the bride.

The latter two points stem from the belief that every person is born under a particular animal sign derived from a lunar calendar measuring time in twelve-year cycles. Each year of the cycle represents a particular animal. While some animals are compatible, others are not and there is thus the need to ascertain what animal year the prospective bride should belong to. A marriage might be disastrous if people of two incompatible animal years were wed.

ILLNESS AND EXORCISMS. When illness strikes a household, a family representative visits the *shdenzin* and a time (usually night) is agreed upon for the *pram*'s visit. Beforehand, the host prepares burning incense in the home's main room or at the courtyard gate. At times, the family may also prepare *pan* (twelve steamed bread buns) as an offering to the *pram*. The courtyard and compound rooms are cleaned and all empty objects are removed, for emptiness portends bad luck and angers the *pram*.

Family members kowtow, burn incense and say:

1. *Ubanii manii huang*
2. *Sangjirila xasinju*
3. *Qila xasinju*
4. *Lamala xasinju*
5. *Gindimla xasinju*

The above is derived from Tibetan and few understand it. The meaning, as explained by an old informant, is: "We beseech you the *pram* to help and bless us and we shall never forget you." However, the above phrase is not spoken in this order in many Tibetan areas where the order would be 1-4-2-3-5. A more apt translation of the Tibetan would be: "If there were no lamas, then no *sanji* and *qi* and *genden*." This phrase gives Buddhist titles in order of importance, with the lama being most important, followed in descending order of importance by the remaining three.

The Tibetan meaning seems to have little relevance to the situation and to the meaning as explained by our aged Monguor informant. This does demonstrate, however, the mystical spiritualism the Tibetan language arouses on the part of most Monguor, who do not understand Tibetan. Some Tibetan may be recited to give a meeting added seriousness, regardless of what the Tibetan may mean.

At the scheduled time, the *shdenzin* escorts the *pram* to the distressed home. The *pram* is carried in its sedan by four men holding the ends of two poles supporting the sedan (in the case of a sedaned *pram*). When the *pram* arrives, the *xiilajin* greets it as follows: "If you wish to start now, please walk forward. If you wish to rest before starting, please walk backwards." If the *pram* indicates it desires to rest before beginning, the *xiilajin* and *shdenzin*

eat and drink, although they do not drink liquor at this time.⁵ In the meantime, the *pram* is placed in the *nelshigang* or, in the case of a pole *pram*, on top of a compound building.

After eating and drinking, the *pram* is held again by four men. The host burns new incense as the family chants prayers and kowtows to the *pram*. Young married women carefully avoid facing the *pram*. They go to one side where they kowtow and chant prayers. The *xiilajin* earnestly explains the family's problem and respectfully asks it to indicate the reason. He then asks questions. If the *pram* answers negatively, the *xiilajin* says "*laushizaa*," a respectful summoning of the *pram*. If the *pram* continues to respond negatively, the *xiilajin* prostrates himself before the *pram* and kowtows as the host lights new incense. The *xiilajin* continues to ask questions until the *pram* identifies the problem.

Common sources of illness are problems with the graveyard and with ghosts. In the graveyard, a hole might have been dug in a grave by an animal, and this may have angered an ancestor who then sent illness to the family in order to get their attention so that they will act to alleviate the problem. If the problem derives from the ill person having met a ghost while returning home, the *xiilajin* asks the *pram* if it is necessary to call the ill person's *foneezi* (spirit), since the ghost may have stolen the person's spirit. If the ghost is within the actual household, it must be exorcised through *sutang pughu* (using the *sutang* to drive away or beat it).

The latter ritual involves gathering three round, bluish white stones from a riverbank and heating them until they are glowing red. The stones are dropped in a bucket containing water and cypress needles (the *sutang*). As steam rises, family members dip out water and rub it over the ill person's body--particularly the face, sites of the five bodily organs, and on any painful areas. The host then takes the bucket and runs through the compound, entering every room, including livestock stables, to make sure that the entire compound is cleansed of any lingering evil.

As the host goes from room to room he is careful to keep the bucket lower than his waist. One local explanation for this says that

⁵ Qinghai is noted throughout China for its voracious consumption of liquor and Huzhu is no exception, being home to more than one famous distillery. Clear or white spirits refers to liquor of 100-130 proof distilled from wheat or highland barley.

Jiang Ziya, a minister of the Shang Dynasty (1800-1100 B.C.) designated people to become *prams*. After he finished naming those who were to be *prams*, his wife, who was named Sutang, appeared from under the table where he was and said, "Why didn't you make me a *pram*?" Jiang laughed and said, "You are much like a *maudaya* (part ghost, part *pram*; Chinese: *maudayi*)! From now on, you shall be in the countryside, helping local people rid their lives of evil." Afterwards, people used the *sutang* (the bucket, water, heated stones, and cypress) to expel evil, but they were careful to keep the *sutang* in a low position. If it was raised to a position level with or above that occupied by the *pram*, the *pram* would become angry and visit additional difficulties on the afflicted family. After each room has been visited by the *sutang*, the courtyard gate is opened, the steaming water is poured out, and the door is barred.

A second way of expelling ghosts from a household is the ritual known as *xaxidugo* (sand: *xaxi*; *xaxidugo*: use sand to drive away), which the *pram* may prescribe. Sand is taken from a road or riverside and a subsequent night is agreed upon for performing *xaxidugo*. When the *pram* visits, the courtyard gate is opened wide and the *xiilajin* directs the host to hurl sand throughout the compound while following the *pram*, shaking and circling. The *pram* moves from one area to another of the compound. It is followed by the host, who violently flings sand into every compound room. Finally, the *pram* exits the compound from which the host tosses sand in every direction at the fleeing ghost.

Once this is accomplished, the *pram* turns back inside the compound, turning, twisting, and circling. The *shdenzin* are, at this point, often near exhaustion because of their exertions in being led about by the *pram*. The host burns incense and the family kowtows to the *pram*, which has now quieted and is placed on the *xinhguari* (small flower plot in the courtyard center). The *Shidenzin* wash the sweat from their faces, drink, and eat. The *pram* spends the night in the family compound.

In the case of ill or dying livestock, human illness, or other unfortunate occurrences, the *pram* may indicate that *padula* (prevent and expel difficulties caused by ghosts) is needed. There are two types of *padula*.

In the first, weapons made of wood or iron such as a knife, bow and arrow, and spear are used. In accordance with the *pram*'s

instructions, *padula* is done on a courtyard gate roof or under the courtyard gate threshold. If it is the former, a sharp-pointed weapon is pointed in the direction of the evil's visitations. The weapon is made immovable by placing a stone on top to prevent a change of direction, which might be caused by opening and closing the gate. If *padula* is to be done under the threshold, a pit is dug at a point identified by the *pram* and the weapon is buried with the point facing the direction of the evil's visitation. Finally, the object is covered.

The second form of *padula* involves the use of evil-suppressing pots or black bowls (if a black bowl cannot be found, a white one smeared with soot is used). Owl or mule heads or mill-stones might also be used. Mule skulls or heads are obtained by digging up dead mules. Mill stones are rarely used because of their expense. The latter objects are utilized in the same way weapons are: If a bowl or pot is employed, a pit is dug according to the *pram*'s instructions. The bowl or pot is placed inside, several stones are placed on top, and the whole thing is covered with soil. This is left untouched for several years, after which time it may be dug up and the pot or bowl reused.

Ghosts causing long-standing illnesses may also be expelled by using *ranglijingi ghua* (avoid make/make to avoid ghosts). The *pram* directs the host to cut pieces of white, yellow, and red paper. These pieces are made into a paper ghost, male or female, depending on the ghost's gender, and this paper ghost is pasted onto two thin poles. The *pram* designates a night during which the paper ghost is taken to a remote place where the poles are placed in the ground, allowing the paper ghost to face the direction of the ghost's source. The paper ghost is burned and an oil lamp is lit. Those present kowtow three times and then leave. Burning the paper ghost sends the ghost back to its source.

The *pram* might also decree the necessity of the *ranglijin* ritual, which requires inviting one to three lamas to the home to chant scriptures. As the lamas chant, they fashion, as indicated by the *pram*, a large ghost and several small ghosts, either male or female, from highland barley flour. Then, at a time given by the *pram*, the dough ghosts are taken to a crossroads and tossed in the direction from which the ghosts are thought to have come. The crossroads is a common choice for this ritual because ghosts often congregate and move about there--so much so that passersby are

wary lest their souls be captured or they are possessed. After the dough ghosts are tossed away, incense is lit and those who have come to the ritual then kowtow.

Another way of dealing with ghosts involves the *fulan nughun gharighana* (sending red and blue) ritual. Ghosts are fond of red and blue colored cloth and may follow a person dressed in such colors, hoping to go to their homes and steal many pieces of red and blue cloth. But once in the home, the ghost may not leave, bringing illness. The ritual requires collecting pieces of red and blue cloth and taking them to a crossroads. Hopefully, the attracted ghost will follow and the ill person will recover.

In the case of little boys, the *pram* may order that the room where the little boy is kept be off-limits to visitors for a period of three days to one month. A small rectangle of red paper and coniferous tree limbs are attached to the door, indicating it is taboo for visitors to enter.

At the *pram*'s suggestion, *shden* (brightly colored silk and pieces of red and yellow cloth given to the *pram* for its clothing) may be taken from the *pram* by the *xiilajin* or *shdenzin*. The material is then placed around the neck or sewn into the upper clothing, benefitting the wearer by expelling the evil that is causing the illness.

In cases when the *pram* indicates it is suitable, *xomii* (highland barley and/or wheat seed) is used in the treatment. The *pram* orders the *xiilajin* to take out a handful of seed grain from where it is stored in a large wooden cabinet, commonly kept on the *kang* (heatable bed made of adobe bricks). The *pram* chooses (with a shoulder pole in the case of a sedaned *pram*; with the pole in the case of a pole *pram*) three seeds which the *xiilajin* wraps in paper. These seeds are boiled and offered to the ill person, who eats them. The ill person also washes his face with the water the seeds were boiled in and also rubs the afflicted body area with the water. Other *pram* only instruct that the seed be wrapped in *pram* clothing and given to the ill person, who sews the seed-containing packet into his clothing.

Xinkua is a related ritual in which *shiden* or *xomii* is placed inside red or yellow cloth and worn around the neck. This charm is common for boys and old men, but is also used by a great many women. The *pram* may indicate a certain period of time for it to be

worn; if not, it may be worn for a lifetime, even accompanying the wearer to cremation.⁶

Qirghuala (locket) is very similar to *xinkua*. What is worn about the neck, however, is a chain, rather than cloth. It is common among very young boys and is often worn until the age of fifteen to twenty. It is especially common if a family has only one son.

Finally, if the ill person has lost his soul, the *xiilajin* ask the *pram* in what direction it went and how the spirit should be called back. Often, all family members are required to summon the lost soul, and generally, the family calls at night after bedtime. The family retires outside, faces in the direction the *pram* indicated, bows in that direction, and calls "*Kankan qi harijira!*" (Please Return!) and then slowly walks back into the home while repeating this call. This is done for three days. If the spirit stubbornly refuses to return (as indicated by the ill person showing no improvement), the family will do this for nine days.

ENSURING WELL-BEING. Related to illness is the *guanji* ritual, which the *pram* rarely calls for. It may be done at a household or village level.

For the former, a large pot is filled with spring water. *Xomii* and cypress needles are added. The pot is heated until the water boils. As in *sutang pughu*, household members anoint themselves with the water. When livestock are ill, the household head sprinkles the livestock with the water as well as the pigsty, sheepfold, and compound walls. This cleanses the livestock of illness and helps to bring prosperity and security back to the household.

In the case of a village *guanji*, a large pot (with a capacity of 350 *sheng*, approximately 250 liters) is set on three large stones on a threshing ground and heated. As it heats, the *larailamo* dance is done--a slow graceful circling around the pot by all present, who accompany themselves with singing. When the water boils, those in attendance rush forward to anoint themselves in the manner described earlier. Finally, the pot is carried by many young men in a direction identified by the *pram* and emptied.

At times, the *pram* dramatically makes known the need for a village-level *guanji*. In one instance, according to local accounts,

⁶ Huzhu Monguor, unlike their brethren in Minhe County, routinely cremate every dead person. In Minhe, only lamas are ritualistically cremated.

the *pram* was taken to a household within a village where representatives of every village family gathered. The *xiilajin* and a few old men put many questions concerning village welfare to the pole *pram*, which was on the second floor of a wooden building. As many kowtowed to the *pram*, which was agitatedly moving back and forth on the second floor, the *shdenzin* asked that everyone beseech the *pram*. The crowd instantly began frenziedly kowtowing and chanting.

After a few minutes, a few elders lit incense and lamps. The *shdenzin* took up the pole *pram* again and asked what had made it so angry. The *pram* indicated that it needed a red-hot chain. Some young men quickly kindled a fire and prepared one. Held by the *shdenzin*, the *pram* leapt down from the second floor. Barehanded, the *shdenzin* took the red-hot chain and bound it about his neck, then tossed it into the sky, where, informants said, it resembled a red dragon in the dark night sky. Holding the *pram*, the *shdenzin* raced to a small thatched room and rushed out of a small window. Amazed, the crowd watched as the *pram* moved agitatedly in the courtyard center and made known the need for a village *guanji*, which was subsequently held.

Village well-being is also the concern of the *lazii* ritual, which is held on the third, sixth, or fifteenth day of the first moon. Representatives from every household gather in a *pram* room, where the requisite incense is burnt and kowtows are made. In response to specific inquiries about the village's welfare, the *pram* is generally non-committal, other than suggesting that supplicants visit specified mountain tops to chant and offer a large offering of burning incense. In the case of an absent son (for example, one working away from home), worried parents and grandparents may invite the *pram* to their home to beseech it to bless the absent son. The *pram*, through questions put by the *shdenzin*, may advise inviting lamas into the home to chant protective scriptures or it may suggest that the family visit Youning Temple and request resident lamas to chant scriptures. The *pram* might also suggest that the concerned elder go to a village *lazii* on a certain day and offer incense to beseech Heaven to bless the absent son.

A similar ritual may be prescribed by the *pram* if a person has lost something valuable, been bit by a dog, or had a frightening nocturnal experience. The *pram* tells the supplicant to climb to a

mountain *lazii* to beseech Heaven to *loshidogo dola* (make one spirited in order to resist evil and obtain good luck). The supplicant builds a fire, offers incense, and kowtows to Heaven. *Qanma* (Chinese: *qianma*) are small woodblock-printed pieces of paper carrying the image of a sacred horse. As the incense offering burns, *qunma* are thrown on the fire. As the papers soar into the sky, the supplicant's spirit is also uplifted. Firecrackers are lit, and as they rattle-tattle, slumbering deities are awakened and, once they understand the supplicant's problems, they render assistance.

ENSURING GOOD HARVESTS. *Huxxi xangla* (killing a sheep and offering it to the *pram*) is done to obtain a bountiful harvest and beseech protection for both man and livestock. This ritual is held on a mountain or in a particular household. At this time, a person from every village household participates. A sheep is slaughtered, put into a pot, and boiled. After cooking, a small piece from each part of the sheep is cut off and placed in a large bowl as an offering to the *pram*.

Those assembled surround the *xiilajin* in preparation for what will follow. Holding the bowl and facing Heaven, the *xiilajin* intones, "*Loshizo, doma budahgi qimu hunni xanglaya, qi buda hgidi nudungi nii, qi nige baist*" ("*Pram*, now we are offering mutton to you, please open your eyes to us, may you be happy"). Immediately after finishing, he flings the contents of the bowl Heavenward. Those in attendance struggle to catch the mutton that rains down which, if caught, is considered to bring very good luck.⁷ The remaining mutton is divided among those who have attended, as is the broth in the pot.

DROUGHT. When drought strikes, the *pram* may indicate the necessity of visiting a mountain top or spring. If it is the latter, the *pram* chooses a certain day and time. At the appointed time, the *pram* and its entourage arrive at a spring. If it is a pole *pram*, it is thrust in the ground near the spring. If it is a sedaned *pram*, the sedan is placed near the spring. Several flagpoles are also thrust in the ground near the spring. If it is a sedaned *pram*, the sedan is

⁷ Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, Chabros' (1992) study of ritualistic "beckoning fortune" has a number of parallels with some of what we have described.

placed near the spring. Several flagpoles are also thrust in the ground nearby. A large incense-fire is built. Facing the spring, all attendants kowtow.

Meanwhile, the *pram* visits the spring's dragon emperor and then goes to Heaven to the rain god's palace. In both cases he beseeches the concerned deities to have pity on the suffering common people and send rain.

THE *NHAKUARA*. The *Nhakuara*, the largest village gathering, takes place during the fourth moon (in a few villages during the fifth moon). Crops have just sprouted and the *pram* is paraded in order to ensure crop safety as well as to protect the village's land borders. A long procession forms made up of male representatives from every village household. If a household does not have a man who can attend, they must invite a relative to participate. The *pram* heads this procession, and is followed by *xoda lajin* (flag bearers; generals) holding flags of white cloth imprinted with the image of the *pram*'s head or body. Flagpoles are made of pine or cypress wood. These woods suggest great age and are symbolic of the remote antiquity in which this ceremony originated.

The *pram* and his "generals" lead the "soldiers," who boast murderous looks and carry sticks and wooden knives, spears, bows, and arrows. The procession parades around the periphery of the village land and is keenly scrutinized by neighboring villages. If they feel the procession has encroached upon their own land, a battle of a real and serious nature might ensue. If the village of the procession has land requiring it to pass through another village, married women whose former home was in the processional village will come out and offer tea and liquor to their kinsmen and former neighbors. After marking the boundary of village land, the *pram* is set down in an elevated place and the "soldiers" begin *walidi* (wrestling). Old men sit together drinking liquor and tea.

Dangers of Disbelieving the *Pram*

Those who question the validity of the *pram* often meet a sorrowful end. For example, one man disbelievingly held a *pram* sedan pole. The *pram* violently circled three times, then suddenly, the heretic fell on a pile of stones and broke his left leg. Convinced, the man later expressed sincere belief in the *pram*.

A second example involves a man who continually criticized others for foolishly believing in *prams*. Within several years his two horses died, one ox was eaten on a mountain by wild animals, and his wife fell from a high place and was paralyzed. As though this were not enough, his daughter-in-law fell ill and he spent much money in taking her to various hospitals for treatment--all to no avail. At last he asked the *pram* for help. The *pram* said the reason for the man's misfortunes was his lack of faith and ordered him to invite more than ten lamas to his home to chant as well as to establish the *pram* in his household. The man dutifully did so. In time, his daughter-in-law was cured and misfortune seemed to leave his family.

Even so, the *pram* seems to recognize its own limitations. Some *prams* indicate: Use the *pram's* cure, but in the meantime, go to the hospital.

Living Buddhas--Source of the *Pram's* Power

The *pram's* power derives from Living Buddhas.⁸ When a village or tribe wishes to make its own *pram*, a well-known carpenter

⁸ Living Buddhas occupy a powerful supernatural firmament, as illustrated by these two accounts:

Account One. Long ago, Danma Living Buddha was out traveling and happened to pass through today's Zhucha Township in Tianzhu County where he found a bridge in the final stage of construction. Fittingly, he desired to be the first person to walk across, but just as he was about to start across he was stopped by some who had gathered. They felt that because he was clad in ragged clothing he was not worthy of such an honor and, despite his pleas, he was not allowed to cross first. He then disrobed, placed his clothing on the river, squatted on it, and floated to the opposite bank. He said to his dumbfounded audience, "You shall need to rebuild this bridge once every three years." This is exactly what happened. At least once every three years there was a flood of such magnitude that it swept the bridge away.

Account Two. A Living Buddha went to a restaurant where he ordered liquor and a bowl of noodles (note: we have recorded this account as given, recognizing that liquor is generally considered taboo for Living Buddhas). When he finished, he discovered he did not have enough money to pay. He explained this to the manager and promised to return in a few days with the money. The manager did

is invited to construct a *pram* image. Upon completion, it is stuffed with *rinbuqi* (Tibetan: precious) which include: gold, silver, a round, tube-like buddhistic banner, if possible, bits of a dead Living Buddhas bones, grain seed, oil, Buddha scriptures, and *babo* (Chinese: *babao*, the eight valuables). *Babo* refers to the Eight Auspicious Signs: *ndel*, *srina*, *baima*, *danggayinqiri*, *wunba*, *njirican*, *nkuloo*, and *ghklowuyiu* which are transliterations of the Tibetan. They refer, respectively, to an umbrella used for the *pram*, golden fish, peonies, a conch horn, treasure jar, cloth banner, round wheel-like patterns, and the Buddhist swastika.

A Living Buddha is then invited to the village to perform the *ranmii* ritual, which involves chanting scriptures. The *pram* thus receives the Living Buddha's instruction and now will do the Living Buddha's bidding. Individual *prams* might be imbued with power to summon wind and rain, help livestock, or aid families in distress.

The Pram Loses Its Power and Is Revitalized

After receiving power, the *pram* must not be sullied. If, for example, a man who recently participated in a funeral or was in a room where a woman was confined touches the *pram*, it may lose its power. *Ranmii* must be repeated if the *pram* is to regain its lost power.

Conclusion

The *pram* is a remnant of an archaic, shamanistic past. The *shdenzin's* role approaches that of a trance medium. He holds the pole *pram* or the sedan and is the medium through which the *pram* dictates its will. On occasion, questions put to the *pram* by the *shdenzin* (especially in the case where the *shdenzin* is holding a pole *pram*) give the *shdenzin* even more latitude in interpreting the *pram's* desires. Additionally, some men are able to be conduits of the *pram* while others are not. This is the same for many trance mediums in Qinghai.

not agree and finally shouted, "If you have no money, please return my noodles and liquor!" The Living Buddha then held out his arm. From his sleeve ran liquor which filled the liquor bottle.

The *nhakuara* bears some resemblance to the *nadun* (after harvest festivals) widely observed in the Guanting/Sanchuan region. During the *nadun*, two villages meet in a ritualistic way. One village is the host and the other is the visitor. The latter, led by its sedaned *pram*, meets the host village some distance from the host village. The host village may also be led by its *pram*. In the case of both villages, a *fala* may follow the *pram*, if either village has a *fala*. The double line of village males following the *fala* also carry wooden weapons and flags.

As we write this in 1992, we are struck with the fact that our readers might feel such a phenomenon could no longer exist--particularly in China; that cultural policy was severe enough at times to exterminate the last vestiges of such beliefs. However, most Huzhu Monguor live in remote, impoverished, densely-populated demographic islands surrounded by people of other nationalities. In Huzhu County, for example, where the largest group of Monguor live, Monguor make up less than one-fiftieth of the total population.

Geographical isolation, intermarriage, poverty, little education, and minimal modern medical care have combined to create conditions conducive to the continuation of belief in the *pram*. Though a villager may not have money or the language skills to attempt a difficult trip to Xining to seek modern medical care, the *pram* is immediately available and operates within a cultural context the supplicant readily comprehends.

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