

# Sárközi, Ildikó Gyöngyvér (ed.): *Sirin mama nyugati hadjárata, avagy egy istennő születésének csodás története [Mama Sirin's Western Campaign, or the Miraculous Story of the Birth of a Goddess].*

Bölcészettudományi Kutatóközpont, Néprajztudományi Intézet – PTE  
Néprajz – Kulturális Antropológia Tanszék – L'Harmattan – Könyvpont.

2022. 167. ISBN 978-963-414-905-7

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## BOOK REVIEW

Published online: February 12, 2024

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A small yet remarkable part of the folklore of multi-ethnic China is presented in the volume entitled *Mama Sirin's Western Campaign, or the Miraculous Story of the Birth of a Goddess*, edited and published by Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi, a senior research fellow at Institute of Ethnology, HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungary. She has carried out in-depth research on the cultural heritage of the Sibe people and its role in the construction of national identity in the last decades. This volume presents a set of narratives of this nomadic people, who are barely 200,000 and now live in various parts of China. The narratives incorporated in the volume occupy a pivotal position in Sibe identity constructions. As the author writes, “The stories of the Sirin Mama are seen by Sibe intellectuals as one of the main sources for unraveling the origins of their people and for tracing their ancient past, which is becoming obscure.” Somewhat fatefully, in the spirit of research that intends to save cultural values in the 24th hour (a motive often invoked by Hungarian ethnographers), this corpus of text was recorded less than a decade and a half ago. Thanks to the memory of He Junyou (1924–2012), a Sibe storyteller from north-east China, whose family's storytelling tradition has been passed

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down from generation to generation until the mid-20th century, and the folklorists who contributed to the recording, the Mama Sirin narrative has miraculously survived.

Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi's more than 50-page introductory article provides an excellent insight into the historical and cultural background of this text. From a generic perspective, the narrative can be best classified as an epic. In this article, she introduces the Sibe people, who lived in the northern border regions of China for at least two thousand years and are probably descendants of the Xianbei people, one of the nomadic peoples who ruled the steppe in this region. Their main groups today live in the eastern part of Inner Mongolia and are scattered along three provinces in northern China as well as in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, on the northwestern border. These groups split apart in the 18th century when they were conscripted into the Manchu army and deployed as border guards in various garrisons as part of a defense system against the expanding Russian Empire. It is from here that the significant Manchu influence on their language, writing system, and some of their customs dates. However, the Manchu/Sibe language is nowadays only spoken by the Sibe settlers in Northwest China, most of whom were linguistically assimilated into the Chinese (Han) majority by the end of the 20th century.

This volume and the introductory article continue the author's monography on Sibe identity construction, which analyses in detail the complex and controversial history of preserving the Sibe cultural heritage. This multifaceted cultural legacy has been passed down orally. Therefore, the epic of Mama Sirin is much more than a single significant piece of folk poetry, as it encapsulates centuries of rituals, beliefs, and a sense of ethnic self-identity. It is possible to reconstruct a process from this Sirin Mama-cult that fits neatly into Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's theory (*The Invention of Tradition*, 1983) on the power of cultural heritage. Many instances testify that among the Sibe, cultural heritage shapes collective memory. Indeed, the inheritance of the figure and cult of Mama Sirin is a key factor in the interpretation of Sibe popular culture: it shows how this mythical historical figure became a cultural hero, a deity responsible for the survival of families, and a protector of children. Its symbol, the rope (or cord), is still a highly respected cult object in most traditional Sibe families. This cord is strung up in a specific place in the home on the lunar New Year and on which various symbolic objects are hung.

The symbolic forms of this cult, which vary from place to place and family to family, have survived into the 21st century, in contrast to all other narrative traditions that have survived only as a diving trail. Further field research in Xinjiang will probably clarify this picture, but our current knowledge is that the story of Mama Sirin (and the other Sibe deities) has survived in its most complete form in the Shenyang region of Northeastern China. The Sibe groups who settled in this area in the early 18th century are associated with the Sibe Ancestral Temple, their main religious-spiritual center until the Cultural Revolution. As Sárközi meticulously traces, it is in the book *The Chronicle of the Shenyang Sibe*, published in 1988, that the story of Mama Sirin first surfaces in written form, albeit as a concise prose narrative. Excerpts from this version were published again twenty years later. That is why the narrative tradition that came to light in the early 2000s was a revelation even for researchers and shed a completely different light on the whole of the previously known tradition.

From a folkloristic point of view, this is where the most exciting part of Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi's study begins, which is about how, after the sporadic collections of Sibe folklore from the 19th and 20th centuries, the mythology of the Sibe, which had taken on narrative form,



suddenly emerged in its impressive completeness, as the primary source of their original tradition. According to the epic, translated by Sárközi from Chinese into Hungarian, Sirin is a nomadic girl who, with the help of a mysterious “ancient immortal,” acquires miraculous powers and then, replacing her parents, goes to war to defeat three Western raiding chieftains who terrorize the tribes of the grass steppes. After her victory over the enemy, Sirin takes the children taken by the raiders under her protection and brings them home to their parents, thus becoming the protector of children and families and earning the honorable name of Mama Sirin. This original sujet, to which many other layers of tradition have subsequently been added, elevated Mama Sirin from an epic hero to a role of deity.

Relatively little is known about the storyteller, He Junyou. According to the researchers who have published his stories, he was born in 1924, a storyteller of outstanding ability. Indeed, the tradition of storytelling was passed down from generation to generation in his family, and his great-grandfather told these stories in Manchu, while younger members of the family mixed Manchu and Chinese. He was already in his eighties when he decided to record the oral tradition he had heard from his ancestors and filled a series of notebooks — in Chinese. He was assisted in his work by the local school principal, who may have brought him to the attention of researchers (staff from the Yuhongqu Cultural Centre as well as teachers and students of ethnography from the Liaoning University) who began recording He Junyou’s narrative repertoire on a tape recorder in the summer of 2008. This collection continued with remarkable intensity over several months and was completed by the spring 2009. This text corpus was published with exemplary speed in two volumes, entitled *Sibe Stories of He Junyou* in 2009. The first volume is 263 pages long, the second consists of 353 pages, and while the former is only about the story of Mama Sirin, the latter is a collection of stories and traditions about Harkan and other deities revered by the Sibes. The excerpt in Hungarian by Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi is the first major chapter of the Chinese publication *Sirin’s Western Campaign* (dividing the large-scale epic into 23 smaller chapters).

The story of Mama Sirin, regardless of its cultural significance and aesthetic value, raises many scholarly questions. Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi addresses several of these in her introduction to the work. Since the two Chinese volumes mentioned are not critical editions, further research is needed to determine how the stories published relate to the versions of the texts recounted (perhaps read out?), mentioned in the preface. Which sujet elements are part of the manuscript, and which emerged semi- or spontaneously during the recording process? To what extent did the collectors and editors intervene before publication? Moreover, what kind of performative skills did He Junyou possess, and, following the terminology of Gyula Ortutay, was he a creative or a reproducing storyteller?

There is another crucial folkloristic question: how the story of Mama Sirin is part of a wider narrative heritage. Is it a more or less unique work, or is it embedded in the social context and motif treasury of the great epic tradition of Central Eurasia? Furthermore, what was the genre of this magnificent work of prose epic narrative centuries ago? Was it an epic, and like other related works, was it told or sung initially in verse or rhythmic prose? Indeed, the trend towards dissolution into prose has affected many major epic genres in international folklore (epic, epic poem, ballad). In any case, the story of Mama Sirin’s campaign in the West (the storybook), as we know it today, can be compared to the sagas, a “naive epic” (cf. János Arany) which, as an epic cycle, presents the adventures of a prominent hero in a linear form. In a footnote, Sárközi points out another sujets from folk poetry about a girl who goes to war in place of her parents is



also known among the Sibe (f. i. the poem of Mulan), and argues that this type of story has been widely used in China over the centuries. I am convinced that the spread of this narrative motif is worthy of a broader Eurasian investigation.

The series of adventures chronicled in Mama Sirin's Western Campaign can be understood mainly as a piece of oral tradition rather than accurate historical documentation. However, the fact that the cultic veneration of this hero has remained dominant to the present day makes the almost complete absence of any religious content in this work all the more striking. As Sárközi points out, this is clearly a matter of heritage: given the social context and the ideologies of the 20th century, the story of Mama Sirin (also) became an essential document of a micro-history (re)constructed in the spirit of patriotism. A document of, as Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi puts it: "what these people remember, or rather, what they want to remember and recall."

So far, only about a tenth of He Junyou's folklore legacy is available in Hungarian. It would indeed be of outstanding academic benefit if the researcher who edited this volume undertook to publish both volumes or at least to translate the whole of the first volume on Mama Sirin. The fact that Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi has spent more than half a decade in China as an anthropologist, carrying out field research the regions inhabited by the Sibe, predestines her to continue this research. She writes that although she did not meet the elderly storyteller during her fieldwork, she participated in the sacrifices presented to Mama Sirin in several villages and heard stories about her. So, with some luck as a collector and researcher, especially in the Sibe-inhabited areas of Xinjiang, the body of tradition preserved by He Junyou could certainly be expanded with further epic fragments, sagas, and other genres of oral literature. In the meantime, the volume published by Sárközi, the latest in a series of publications of World epics in Hungarian, is a fine example of the researcher's up-to-date knowledge and deep commitment to the subject of her research.

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