



Traditional costume is worn by many shamans in Siberia and Mongolia, and one of the most noticeable features of this costume is the metal discs which are tied onto it. These discs are Chinese metal mirrors, generally made of bronze and sometimes thousands of years old; they form a very important part of the ceremonial equipment used in much Siberian and Mongolian shamanism.

China's ancient civilisation influenced its neighbours - Korea and Japan to the east, Tibet and Central Asia to the west, and Siberia to north. This influence included many of the shamanic and magical practices of these regions.

The history of ceremonial bronze mirrors in China can be traced back 4,000 years. They are generally round, have a central raised knob on the back with a hole in it, and decoration on the non-reflective side. They were often made using the 'lost wax' method in which a clay mould is made around a wax, mirror-shaped original. The enclosed wax shape is removed by heating the mould, and then molten bronze is poured into the mirror-shaped cavity left by the 'lost wax'. The bronze is finally

separated from the clay mould, revealing an exact copy of the original wax shape.

The high point of Chinese mirror making was from the start of the *Han* (206 BCE - 220 CE) to the end of the *Tang* Dynasties (618 - 907 CE), and many shaman's mirrors date back to these periods, although new mirrors have been made continually up to the present day.

MAGICAL MIRRORS

Mirrors in China have always held a magical as well as a practical purpose. They are used to ward off and reflect evil, and they have played an important part in traditional Feng Shui, where they are used both to reflect negative influences, and alter the shapes of things to increase positive influences.

Magical mirrors are often found as grave goods in archeological digs. They had a major role in ancient Chinese death traditions, where a mirror was often placed on the dead persons chest as a 'heart protecting mirror' to keep the person safe on their journey to the next world, and wall-paintings in Chinese tombs show people holding up mirrors faced outward, to frighten spirits away.

In Asia, many shamans (even those who have abandoned the rest of their ceremonial dress) wear at least one mirror. This may be suspended on a cord which passes through the hole in the raised knob, or tied on a simple tabard of cloth or leather.

Mirrors have different names depending on the region the shaman comes from, for instance, they are called *toli* in Mongolia, *panaptu* in Manchuria and *melong* in Tibet, although here the mirrors used are generally not antique Chinese ones (see the article on *Tibetan Oracles* in *Sacred Hoop*, Issue 47).

The most desirable shaman's mirrors are the very old ones, and they do not have to be perfectly shiny to be useful for shamanising, indeed many of them are hazy or even black with age.

The use of mirrors in shamanic societies varies a little depending on the people. They are used by some tribal groups as an aid to seeing the other worlds in a manner similar to scrying. This scrying includes seeing into the future, looking for lost objects and

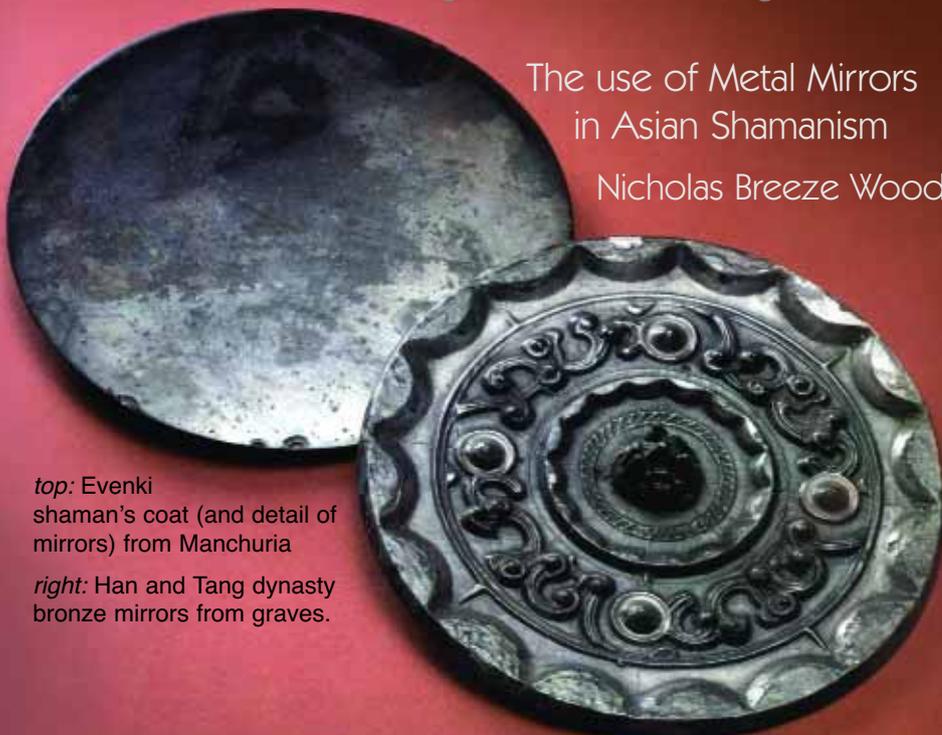
MIRRORS OF THE SOUL

The use of Metal Mirrors
in Asian Shamanism

Nicholas Breeze Wood

top: Evenki shaman's coat (and detail of mirrors) from Manchuria

right: Han and Tang dynasty bronze mirrors from graves.



diagnostic work, where the shaman will gaze into the reflection of the sick person and determine the nature of their illness.

In healing, the mirror can be used not only to reflect illness, but also as a container for healing power (*windhorse*) which is gathered in the mirror and then transferred to the sick person by placing the mirror on them. Sarangerel (see the article on page 12) in her book 'Riding Windhorses', further mentions that a mirror in which healing energy has been accumulated may also be put into water to turn the water in to *arshaan* (spiritually empowered nectar) which the sick person can drink.

Mirrors can be used as containers for spirits, either the shaman's own helper spirits, the spirits of disease taken from the sick person, or as a container used by the shaman to hold missing parts of the sick person's soul which they have found in the spirit worlds during a soul retrieval ceremony.

A mirror may also be used as a window or portal through which the shaman passes to enter the spirit worlds on a shamanic journey.

TIBETAN MELONG MIRRORS

The Tibetan melong has its origins in the ancient Chinese shamanic mirrors of Asia, and have many associated practices in common with Mongolian and Siberian shamanism; but over the years the 'mirror's' physical appearance has changed.

Melong are generally small metal discs, concave on one side and convex on the other. They may be simple, undecorated discs of metal, or they may be decorated on one or both sides with Buddhist astrological symbols or Buddhist images. They are sometimes made from a special blend of eight metals; gold, silver, mercury, copper, nickel, tin, iron (sometimes from meteorites) and lead, but more commonly are simply brass or silver.

The melong is still used and worn by many lamas, astrologers, healers and lay people. They are used as aids to divination, astrological charms, containers of beneficial 'sky energy' and protectors against harm. Sky energy is a beneficial energetic influence in Tibetan geomancy, and melongs help to activate it in order

to improve health and general well-being, and to increase lifespan.

Melongs are also used to wash sacred objects. To do this, the object will be reflected in the melong and water poured over the reflection, so cleansing it.

Often, small melong are worn as amulets, and here it is important to remember the different effects attributed to the convex and concave sides. The convex side reflects by distorting and magnifying the images in it, like a shaving mirror, and worn with this side facing outwards, the wearer is protected. The concave side focuses light into a central spot, and increases energy, so it is worn facing the body to increase personal windhorse energy.

There is a folk belief that melong dispel troublesome mental states and emotions. To do this a melong is held at arms length, concave side towards you. then you visualise your problems leaving your mind and passing through the melong, when they will appear on the outer, convex side, and will be dissipated.

FINDING YOUR OWN MIRROR

If you wish to obtain your own mirror, there are several ways you can do so.

Traditionally, when they died, a shaman might well be buried with their mirrors, or a mirror may be deliberately passed on to the next generation.

Or a shaman might 'hunt' a mirror by going on a quest to find

one in places where shamans were buried. Sometimes a buried mirror would speak to a shaman in a dream, the spirits in the mirror wanting to work with the living shaman instead of staying with their deceased owner.

In the West, however, mirrors are more easily 'hunted' among traders in specialist antiques! But here the price of a genuine old mirror can range from several hundred to several thousand pounds. However, if you are not too bothered about the age and provenance of a mirror, there are many excellent Chinese reproductions - often described as genuine antiques - to be found on ebay. Despite 'ageing effects' these reproductions are generally very well made and accurate copies of ancient ones and can be bought for just a few pounds.

Tibetan melong can be bought quite easily at generally a low cost from suppliers of Tibetan Buddhist ritual objects.

Some useful websites if you are searching for old or reproduction mirrors include:

www.garudatrading.co.uk (melong)
www.tibetanspirit.com (melong)
www.asiawind.com (original mirrors)
www.markajohnson.com (original mirrors)
www.ebay.com (original & copies of mirrors and melong)



left: modern reproduction toli bought on ebay

below: front and back views of an antique Tibetan melong charm



left: silver melong from Garuda Trading, showing its convex front

below: Mongolian Shaman Sarangerel in ceremony wearing a toli



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We hope you enjoy reading the article. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)