

2.2 Mosuo

Mosuo is a minority ethnic group living along the provincial borders of Yunnan and Sichuan in southwest China (Figure 1a). Congregating around the Lugu Lake region (Figure 1b), its cultural centre and heart land is in Yongning County, Yunnan (Gatusa, 2005; Lee and Zhao, 2008; Shih, 2010).



Figure 1a & 1b: Map of China, Highlighting Yunnan Province (China Travel Planner, n.d.) and Location of Lijiang and Lugu Lake in Yunnan Province (Top China Travel, n.d.)

The term ‘Mosuo’, a term used by Han Chinese, has no meaning in the Mosuo language. Among themselves, they are known as ‘Na’, ‘Nari’, ‘Na-hing’ or ‘Hlidi’ – meaning – ‘The People of the Peaceful Land’ (McKhann, 1998; Shih, 2010).

The Mosuo group is not officially recognized as one of the ethnic minorities in China. Thus, they have no legal status and they do not enjoy the privileges of being an official ethnic minority (Shih, 2010). Symbolically, it is the loss of pride not to be formally and politically recognized as a distinctive community that has the most affect upon the Mosuo group (Harrell, 2001).

In official writings, the Mosuo group in Yunnan province is classified as a sub-group under the Naxi ethnic minority from Lijiang and for those in Sichuan, they are considered ‘Mongolian’. Consequently, they are one ethnic group with three separate identities depending on their context and geographical locations (Shih, 2010).

The current population of the Mosuo is between 30,000 – 40,000 persons. The regional climate is low altitude altiplano-southwest monsoonal, and the land is covered with

45% natural vegetation (Shih, 2010). Traditionally, the Mosuo practice a combination of agriculture and pastoralism, supplemented with craftwork (McKhann, 1998; Hua, 2001). Until recently, the foundation of the rural Mosuo communities has been subsistence agriculture without accumulating a surplus for trade (Luo, 2008). However, in the past, although trade (through bartering and cash exchanges) was limited, it was an important aspect of Mosuo economy as this region was on the southern 'Tea-Horse Road' trade route from Yunnan to Tibet (Gatusa, 2005).

2.2.1 Principal Features of the Mosuo Culture

Today, there are five contemporary cultural characteristics of the Mosuo people. These are:

- Instead of marriage, the dominant pattern of institutionalized sexual union amongst hetero-sexual couples is a type of duolocal visiting relationship or 'tises';
- The Mosuo society is organized through matrilineal descent and 'grand' matrilineal household systems;
- The gender system situates women rather than men as the central cultural focus;
- Mosuo people observe a unique mortuary practice in which the deceased is cremated and the ashes placed at some secluded spot without burial;
- Mosuo religious practice is a combination of Tibetan Buddhism (Lamaism) and their own native religion, the 'Daba', as well as folk beliefs, rituals, festivals and legends (Shih, 2010).

Mosuo matriarchal society is evidenced by three features: women make the major contribution to the family's economy, lineage is determined through the women's side of the family, and there is a history of rule by women dating to ancient times (Editing Group of Yunnan Province, 2009).

Certain socio-environments favour the development of matriarchal societies. These include geographical seclusion, inward-orientated subsistence agriculture, social activities that are based on domestic life, and extended multi-generational family structures. To facilitate food and social security, it is reported that matriarchal societies prefer isolation over engagement with foreign communities (Luo, 2008).

In rural regions today, a typical Mosuo rural family consists of its matrilineal members: grandmother, mother, maternal aunts and uncles, and the children of the mother and of her sisters. No members of the paternal side are part of the family unit. Children remain in the maternal home throughout their lifetime and work there together with their brothers and sisters. The older males in a Mosuo family are uncles and not biological fathers. As biological fathers do not live with their children (they are only guests in their partner's home), uncles fulfill the male-parental role (Editing Group of Yunnan Province, 2009).

In each household, there is always the 'Dabu'. The 'Dabu' is always a woman who is the symbolic and economic head of the household. The duty of the 'Dabu' is to be a provider for the family by taking charge of the economy of the family. Members of the family who work in towns and cities will hand their cash income to the 'Dabu' who in turn uses the cash to meet needs of the family while allocating income and resources to those family members in need (Editing Group of Yunnan Province, 2009).

In the Mosuo community, gender roles and division of labour are highly specialized. Public and private activities are clearly specified with Mosuo women in charge of the household chores and farming activities while men are more disposed to go to cities and towns to work (Ma 2006).

To be a Mosuo person, one needs to participate in the Mosuo way of life. Residency in the community is also important because it enables one to practice, participate and express Mosuo traits (Yeh, 2001). According to Walsh (2001), even when a Mosuo person moves away from Yongning county, gets married institutionally to a non-Mosuo person and sets up a nuclear family he or she is still a Mosuo person as long the person retains certain core Mosuo values and beliefs (Walsh, 2001).

A non-Mosuo person can also become a Mosuo person through inter-ethnic marriages. However, the person needs to embrace Mosuo culture and participate in the Mosuo way of life. Hence, Mosuo culture is not 'closed' but is rather 'open'; a person's bloodline, genealogy and biology are not considered as essential for a non-Mosuo person to join the community. In this way, Yeh (2011) found that the practice of Mosuo cultural and participation of community life renders a possibility for an outsider to become a Mosuo person.

2.2.2. Tourism Development

Because of the uniqueness of the Mosuo culture and the physical beauty of Lugu Lake, tourism has been the major force for economic development since the late 1980s. The number of tourists has been growing continuously since 2000. In 2004, 202,500 tourists visited the region and in 2005, the number grew to 250,000 (Xinhua Net.com, n.d.; Doc88.com, n.d.). By the first quarter of 2012, the number of people just visiting Lugu Lake had reached 185,000 (Chinanews.com, n.d.). The overwhelming majority, 90%, of the visitors are domestic tourists (O'Connor, 2012).

2.2.3 Cultural Transformation

With the current economic transformation from subsistence economy to commercial tourism, the fundamental characteristic of the Mosuo culture – matriarchy – is undergoing change. Women, in this new economy, are no longer the focus in both the domestic realm and in the social sphere. The new power and political focus is now with Mosuo men. The reasons for this include men's greater mobility (due to gender roles and duties); and that men are more likely to be engaged in the tourist industry, which is located away from the traditional agricultural areas (Tan, 2001; Xiong, et al., 2001; He, 2002; Horth, 2002; Lee and Zhao, 2008; Luo 2008).

Today in tourist centres, the males of the family are often recognized as heads of household as their businesses – tourist lodges and home-stays - are registered with the local government in their name as proprietors of the business. In these circumstances, there is also a tendency for Mosuo families to become patrilineal (Zhang, 1990). In 1956, only about 7% of the families in Yongning village were patrilineal, but this number had risen to 17.5% by 1996 (He, 2002). The meaning and usage of 'Dabu' has also changed. It now refers to 'housekeeper' rather than signifying the female head of the household (Luo, 2008).

Such transformation has also affected the material characteristics of the Mosuo culture. For example, according to Wu and Haaland, (2009), traditional architectural forms of the Mosuo used to express and symbolize fundamental values. But as values change, the traditional house is being transformed into a more conventional modern dwelling.

In contrast, in Walsh's study (2001), she found that because of the exotic nature of the matriarchal society and its attraction for tourists, the matriarchal culture of the Mosuo

was being enhanced. Horth (2002) and Stacy (2009) support this view stating that interest in Mosuo culture from tourists has also resulted in greater interest within the communities themselves, especially in areas where the religion and cultural practices were dying out.

2.2.4 Mosuo Hand-woven Textiles

Mosuo weavers use a horizontal frame loom about eight feet long and six feet high. The loom is mostly made of wood but bamboo is also used for treadles, batten, rods and the teeth of the comb for the beater. The figure below shows a typical Mosuo loom.



Figure 2: Typical Mosuo Horizontal Loom

Rather than sitting on the seat behind the breast beam, the Mosuo weaver sits on a makeshift pillow and straddles the left horizontal beam as viewed when facing the back beam. The process of weaving is generally similar to other hand-looms except that the weaver moves forward (toward the back beam) as she progresses rather than sitting behind the breast beam and winding the completed textiles onto the breast beam. As she moves forward, she also moves all the rods holding the heddles forward (Judson, 2009).

Commercial weaving among the Mosuo developed in conjunction with tourism; hence, it has only been 10 years in existence. As visitors sought to buy something made locally as souvenirs, weaving became a supplementary income activity for women after harvest. According to Judson (2009), this activity was successful on account of two factors. Firstly, the investment in the loom is low as all looms are domestically produced. Secondly, weaving activities fit well with the women's general household

activities and they are able to weave at their convenience, for example, at home while looking after children.

Weavers were, and continue to be, paid by the piece and this motivates them to weave as many scarves as possible. Because of the way that Mosuo households are organized and household duties shared, one woman in the family might weave full time while others share in the weaver's other everyday activities. In return, income earned by the weavers is shared amongst the whole family (Judson, 2009).

In the past, weaving was a lucrative income generating activity, and almost every woman in the Mosuo villages wove, with most girls starting weaving at the age of 15. Most of the products were scarves and shawls. It took a weaver about one and a half hours to weave a single scarf. Over an average 10-hour working day, Mosuo women could weave about six or seven scarves, producing around 40 scarves per week with an average weekly income of 360 – 420 Renminbi (RMB) (Judson, 2009).

Due to the influences of globalisation and urbanisation, the Mosuo community and their hand-woven textile industry faces many challenges. Recently, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in China has established a US\$1million project to contribute to the economic empowerment of ethnic minorities and at the same time, preserve the cultures of ethnic minorities and their environment (UNDP China, 2011).

Started in 2011, the project supports Mosuo weavers in improving their hand-woven industry through training and workshops. Specifically, the project explores how Mosuo weavers are able to innovate within their cultural parameters in order to meet consumers' demands for authenticity while satisfying contemporary aesthetic standards. Also, the project aimed to establish market channels and enhance promotional activities (UNDP China, 2011).

2.2.5 Contemporary Identity of the Mosuo

With multiple challenges in the on-going political, social and economic transformation of Mosuo society, one of the most pertinent confrontations facing the Mosuo is how to protect and sustain their cultural identity. This situation is ever more acute because the Mosuo community does not have a separate political or legal entity. Nevertheless, the State has stressed the importance of the Mosuo group preserving its own distinctive language and cultural traits, practices and belief system (Walsh, 2001).

In the face of contemporary challenges faced by the Mosuo community, Yeh (2001) argues that the Mosuo are able to redefine and reconstruct themselves according to social conditions and needs. Mosuo people are able to ‘incorporate both positive and negative aspects of outside influences while adjusting themselves within a new equilibrium’ (Yeh, 2001, p 80).