"From Namu to Najie: Tourism, Titillation and the Reshaping of Mosuo Identity"

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Mosuo … women traditionally choose a male companion for the night or a year or a lifetime – and the men have no say in the matter. In almost every way this is a society where women rule the roost… run the households, control the money, and own the land and property…. It may sound bizarre to a Western visitor, but anthropologists say because the men have no power, control no land, and play subservient sexual roles, they have nothing to fight over – making this one of the most harmonious societies on the planet. -ABC News. May 19, 2002.

On the shores of Lugu Lake in Yunnan Province, southwest China, the small village of Luoshui receives tens of thousands of tourists annually. Luoshui economy is almost completely driven by tourism, and this tourism is driven by a desire to encounter the Mosuo. This much-discussed ethnic minority has received national and international attention because, according to state categorizations and media accounts, the Mosuo are "matriarchal" and traditional sexual relations (referred to as zouhun in Mandarin, sese in Mosuo) were outside of marriages. Journalists, novelists, and travel agencies have enhanced these descriptions to lure tourists into the long and rather uncomfortable trip to Lugu Lake. Tourists come by the busloads to encounter the Mosuo, to see their culture, to experience a "land where women rule" and, for some, to give zouhun a try. Residents of Luoshui are daily presented with and part of the commodification of Mosuo culture, and must continually face and reshape constructions of Mosuo identity made by outsiders.

During the 1990's, the tourism industry at Lugu Lake exploded, drawing on a rapidly growing Chinese desire for entertainment and exploration, and a marketing image that has proved compelling to the domestic tourism market. China's recent economic growth has been accompanied by an ethos of consumption and leisure, and as the disposable income of the middle and upper classes grew, a booming internal tourism market has developed. Media attention to ethnic minority regions has both fed and responded to Chinese desires for entertainment and travel and the southwest has profited greatly from this. By 2000, Yunnan was receiving over 40 million domestic tourists annually (People's Daily 2000a), had become the premier destination for Chinese domestic tourists, and ranked as first choice among over 7000 surveyed Chinese urbanites (People's Daily 2000b). The village of Luoshui, with it's local population of about 500, receives over 100,000 tourists annually, and of these, well over 90% are domestic tourists.

State policies and tourism have made gender and gender issues salient in new ways for many Mosuo. Early state categorizations of the Mosuo were based on judgments of unacceptable gender practices. Matriarchy and sexual freedom were central concerns of communist projects in Mosuo territory and are central in tourist desires to visit the Mosuo. The "culture" that tourists hope to consume is imagined through an ideational slippage in which notions of women in power and of women as ever-available sexual objects intermingle instead of clash. At Luoshui, where ethnicity is imagined and consumed through ethnic tourism, Mosuo women are the figurative (and sometimes literal) consumable.

The Mosuo present us with a genuinely different configuration of household and sexuality within their large matrilineal households and "walking marriage" relations that appears to have existed for centuries. The Mosuo have been imagined and configured by a national media and intelligentsia because of gender difference, and the image of them as a primitive matriarchy has operated as part of the justification for cultural politics in the PRC, while matriarchy and "free love" now act as enormous marketing devices.

Within this paper, I would like to discuss the multiple ways in which Mosuo identity is being contested and recreated. Mosuo have been described, imagined, and created as objects of desire within the media, and this plays out in various ways within tourists' fantasies of the area. In addition, though, residents of Luoshui as well as other Mosuo both within and outside of Ninglang County create identities that sometimes at least partially reflect these media images, sometimes subtly reject or transform them, and at other times engage more within urban Chinese modernity than the Mosuo designatede role as primitive ethnic.

In considering the ways in which the Mosuo are used and act as an Other within China, I discuss the various fascinations both Chinese and Westerners have shown for the Mosuo, fascinations which the tourist industry has turned into sources of income for several Mosuo communities and a glut of media images around "The Daughters' Kingdom". I begin this paper by describing how state representations of the Mosuo have contributed to the images that fueled the tourist boom in Mosuo territory, as well as brought the Mosuo to the world stage. I look at the complex ways the Mosuo are "Othered", including ways in which empathy is developed between Mosuo and tourists. I consider the complexities of how ethnicity plays out for the Mosuo in the well-touristed Lugu Lake area, drawing on stories of women at the lake, as well as Mosuo women who have left. Mosuo may be representing more than just the backward and for this claim I use as an example Yang Erche Namu, unquestionably the most famous Mosuo. Her books about her life and exploits have made her a larger-than-life personality in China, while her recent book written in collaboration with Christine Mathieu and published in English has brought her international recognition.
(Unfortunately, because of length constraints, I do not include a discussion of Mosuo culture and society outside of the frame of tourism and representation, but have added a brief appendix at the end for those interested.)

From State Categorizations to Popular Representations:

The Mosuo people … still retain some remnants of the matriarchal society. Men and women are not bound by marriage, each living at one's mother's home. Men work at home during the day and spend their night with the women they love in their homes. … This unique wedlock values affection and gives more freedom to men and women in their relationships. They may choose to unite or separate at will. It has been considered as the living fossil as a basis for a study of social patterns and matriarchal marriage customs in today' s world.
China Travel and China Vacation Packages Website – May 31, 2003
http://www.travel-to-china.net/destination/spot/yn_lijiang_lugulake.htm

Early PRC state ethnographers researching the Yongning area concluded that Mosuo social structure was a remnant of the first stages of human social evolution. These social scientists focused on Mosuo unique family structure and sexual relations above all else, and listed the group as a "primitive matriarchy", labeling them "living fossils" (Yan 1982). During the 1950's and 1960's, state work teams described the Mosuo as a people in which "children do not know their fathers" (Yunnan minzu diaocha dui 1964:1), which has become a common theme of contemporary Han popular discourse on the Mosuo. State researchers produced several reports on the Mosuo in the 1960's, including the 1964 Investigation of the Social and Household Patterns of the Ninglang Yi Autonomous County Naxi. The Azhu Hunying Marriage System of the Yongning Naxi (Institute of Minority Studies, 1966), a state-produced documentary film, highlights the simplicity of the Mosuo, the oppression to which they were subjected prior to liberation, and the primitive group marriage in which they engaged.

During the early 1980's, several state researchers involved in the early CCP investigations of the Mosuo published their ethnographic research on the Mosuo. The works of Zhan Chengxu, et al. (1980) and Yan Ruxian and Song Zhaolin (1983) sparked new interest in the Mosuo, and Yongning became an exotic destination for the elite Chinese travelers, especially cadres. These publications came during a period when China began actively celebrating ethnic diversity and have acted as the basis for the popular representations of this area. State television crews produced documentaries of the Mosuo in the 1980's and 1990's drawing from these ethnographies. The tremendous growth of domestic tourism in China has followed a general rehabilitation of ethnicity during the 1980's, and ethnic tourism comes during a time of celebrating the cultural particularity of China's ethnic groups. In an ironic reversal, the cultural characteristics the Maoist government tried to change became celebrated as markers of Mosuo cultural uniqueness and value, and were used in marketing image that has proved compelling to the domestic tourism market.

Tourism – From Globalized Desires to Local Negotiations:

Some believed that the Lugu Lake area is the last paradise in the human world because the people there are always in love but never get married. Others said that the Mosuo tribe is a romantic minority group. Men ride horses in the evening to visit their lovers, casual and romantic, while women wait at home with tender affections. Still others said the area is the most ideal place for people to look for the feeling of home return because the people there have never left their mothers. They always live with their mothers just like the stars that move around the moon.
Zhang Feng. 2002 Lugu Lake: A Trip Back to the Last Matriarchal Society, p 37. Printed in both Chinese and English.

Journalists and filmmakers, both state and private, have been venturing to Yongning to write about the Mosuo for the consumption of Chinese at large (and recently foreign production companies, such as ABC News and National Geographic, are also presenting stories on the Mosuo). State representations of Mosuo culture in documentaries and ethnographic articles repeated several essential components of Mosuo culture: 1) uncontrolled sexuality – *zouhun*, 2) "matriarchy" – a land where women rule, and 3) "primitivity" – a society that has not evolved. All three of these components are well represented in tourist literature, although zouhun has far and away captured the imagination of those writing about and reading on the Mosuo.
Mosuo sexuality entered mainstream Chinese consciousness in the 1980's through literature as well as the above mentioned ethnographies and documentaries. In his novel *The Remote Country of Women*, Bai Hua (1988) tells the tale of a disillusioned young Han cadre, male, who falls in love with a free-spirited Mosuo dancer in a county troupe during the Cultural Revolution. While much of what Bai described is a product of his imagination, he also drew on ethnographic reports of the Mosuo to give his novel an air of authenticity. (In addition, the story of the Mosuo heroine seems to parallel that of Yang Erche Namu, discussed below.) His book circulated widely, and through it countless Chinese became familiar with the Mosuo and Yongning, and associated Yongning with a lost Utopia, and freedom from social/sexual restrictions.

By the mid-1990's, articles, travel brochures, documentaries, and books abounded which told would-be tourists of Mosuo society. These books bore seductive titles referring to Mosuo society as "mysterious", "primitive", a "riddle", and the "last matriarchal society". Some of these rehash ethnographic material, while others include "traditional" love songs and stories. As has occurred with other "traditional" culture in China, songs and

stories have sometimes been “developed” and improved by state recorders. I met with one county cultural officer who described how he had helped “develop” stories about Mosuo traditions and sayings, and he claimed credit for several sayings regarding hiding lovers.

Many of the books and articles on the Mosuo aimed at a general audience begin with rapturous descriptions of Lugu Lake, which is described as embracing, lovely, protecting and life giving. It acts as a larger-than-life figurative mother in the imagined paradise of the Mosuo. Descriptions of this symbolic Mother often lead into descriptions of the “lovely Mosuo girls”, Daughters, who inhabit this paradise, and who seem to agree to anything if it is asked for through a gift of a silver bracelet or brightly colored scarf. Mosuo territory has been dubbed “Nu’er Guo” and this has rapidly become the brand name of the area, the “Daughter’s/Women’s County”. The slippage in meaning from woman to daughter is symbolic of what I would claim is a maintained conflict in signs and messages about Mosuo culture, a culture of matriarchs on the one hand, a culture fulfilling male fantasies of lovers-for-the-taking on the other.

The essentials of touristic representations of the Mosuo include, then, images of the nubile maid, the wise old crone (who heads a harmonious “family”), and also the adventuring seductive man (be it the tourist or the Mosuo cowboy). Enticing images of women in Mosuo costume are included in travel brochures, and on products ranging from books and vcd’s to dried fruits and alcohol. The implication is that this is a land of women where women sigh longingly waiting for a lover (perhaps the tourist) to fulfill their desires. Photos which do include Mosuo men are often of several stock poses showing them, clad in cowboy hats and “Tibetan-style” clothes3 courting their lovers – offering a gift to a young woman, playing his flute for her, or even waving good-bye as he leaves her quarters in the morning. Those photos which do not present the Mosuo as a society that is somehow predominantly young maidens-in-waiting, or absorbed in courtship, often represent instead the older women, the matriarch.

These are the images most tourists bring with them to Luoshui. More and more, however, domestic tourists also bring with them a contemporary nostalgia for the pure pastoral life. Books and documentaries of the Mosuo stress the harmonious simple life which the Mosuo live, unencumbered by modern worries and jealousies. To the mostly urban Chinese tourists, who by and large live in nuclear families only permitted one child, the ethnic minorities offer a vision of a purer, happier, lost past of simpler lives, richer in human kindness and loving family relationships. Residents of Luoshui and other touristed villages daily engage with tourists who visit the lake area, and must engage as well with the hopes for exoticism and desires for fantasized encounters which these tourists have built out of representations of the Mosuo and bring to Lugu Lake. The Mosuo are not “Othered” in a single coherent way, but are imagined and represented as both controlling matriarchs and frolicking maids, as both backward and needy, and yet instructive in their pure and loving relationships. While many of these imaginings are similar to the contradictory ways in which other groups are imagined, in the case of the Mosuo the tangible contradictory images of female power and male sexual fantasy dominate interactions between locals and outsiders.

In negotiating tourist desires, Luoshui residents present different "faces" to outsiders, which incorporate key concerns with gender, sexuality, family, and cultural continuity. The "faces" which the Mosuo have developed for tourists show ambivalence to representations of the Mosuo as sexually available and matriarchal. Sexual titillation abounds in very obvious, "staged" ways. This is counteracted by presenting tourists the sobriety of a "backstage" view of the Mosuo household and family values. The potent issues of sexuality and gender are contained and controlled within the package of the Mosuo family, and downplays "matriarchy" to stress tuanjie, family unity.

The following incident helps to illustrate these issues.

Early in my research in 1999 in Luoshui, I met three Australian women who has signed onto a Chinese tour in Lijiang for a two-day visit to Lugu Lake. They did not speak Chinese, and asked me if I could introduce them to a Mosuo family and help them talk to some Mosuo women. They has heard that there was a matriarchy here and very much wanted to interact with locals and try to understand what their lives were like. One was trying to film and record women from around China to create a presentation for her women's group.

I took them to visit a Mosuo woman in her early 30s with whom I had visited and joked several times. Sona and I had first met on the shore of the lake, as she unloaded from a boat greens that she has gathered, She joked about, but permitted, my photographing her, and then invited me in for tea, delighted that I could speak Chinese. During our first few interactions, Sona kept much of our conversation centered on jokes about zouhun, asking if I were afraid to pursue it and if she could help me. I laughingly agreed that could send me partners if they net all of my many criteria.

On the day that I brought the Australian women to Sona's, she invited us in to drink tea in the large kitchen; attached to her family's guesthouse restaurant, it also frequently doubled as the place where family meals were cooked. Sona and the two younger women that she introduced as her sisters were preparing a meal. After reassuring is that our visit was no bother, Sona acted as the main, and virtually only respondent during our interview. The Mosuo women continued their work while we talked; the middle one occasionally served lunch to the few guests that trickled into the adjoining room. The Australian women asked about the Mosuo women's lives and families, what was important to them, what they valued in life, and what they wanted for their children. Sona answered these questions with an air of gravity. She talked about how important her family was to her and said that the most important thing in the world was her lover for her sisters and her mother. Her main desire was that she might be able to spend all of her life with them. As for her children, she hoped they would not go very far away, because the love of one's family is so important. In response to a question one of Australians about cultural change, Sona assured us that tourism had not altered the village.

Several evenings later, as I was walking by the lake, I met up with the middle "sister" from that interview at Sona's. Na Jie approached me and told me she was a Mosuo from and interior village that did not receive tourists. She and the youngest women in the kitchen were not Sona's sisters; they were working at Sona's family guesthouse. Na Jie did not want me to be deceived, ans she also did not want her own identity erased. In addition, she wanted to talk about the wealth that had flowed unevenly into the area with tourism, and the ways in which people had changed because of it. Before tourism, Na Jie household was wealthier than Sona's, because it had more and better lands. Sona's family, who were their distant cousins, regularly came in the winter and often would leave with several bags of grains and potatoes, gifts that would help to tide them over until spring. Na Jie was upset not only because her identity had been misrepresented in the interview with the Australians but also because she was working for a previously poorer branch of the family that did not treat her as a family member. In Na Jie's opinion, shared by many in Yongning, the Mosuo in Luoshui now consider themselves better than those in other villages, and "are not Mosuo anymore."

My point in telling this story is to underscore how Mosuo culture was presented. Sona did not want us to know that her household had grown wealthy (by local standards) and had hired workers. Her focus was on maintaining a particular representation of Mosuo-ness, especially for a camera, and on maintaining an image of the Mosuo and the village as unchanging. Her responses depicted Mosuo culture as centered on the family, the love that the Mosuo feel for their mother, and the deep enduring bonds that sisters feel. Sona had correctly gauged the interests of her visitors and how to respond to them. However, when I had first met Sona, she had joked about my taking pictures and then later about whether or not she should send a man to zouhun with me. Her laughing, almost cocky demeanor had changed to thoughtful, heartfelt seriousness when confronted with the respectful questioning of the

Australian women. They thought they were seeing backstage, and indeed they we were literally back in the kitchen, sitting on little stools as we chatted. During the interview, I myself was impressed by Sona's thoughtfulness, although later I was more impressed with her facility in adapting to different contexts. What she had done was to switch faces, shifting from the most public face of humor and sexual titillation to the backstage face of maternal and sororal love. But she has simultaneously erased the face of Na Jie, the poorer Mosuo migrant worker.

Normatives, Extra-Normatives and Ethno-Tourism

Brownell and Wasserstrom ask "Whose femininity and masculinity are being produced and displayed, and by whom? And Whose purposes are served by this production and display?" (2002: 34). Within the setting of ethno-tourism these questions become doubly meaningful. Ethnic tourism is premised on an encounter with an othered group. One of the ironies is that the differences which are attractive to tourists often become packaged, sometimes to make them more market accessible, and at other times to make difference "less different" and package it in a way more comprehensible to the tourist. Along the lines of gender, the Mosuo are the minority par excellence for radical gender difference from a Confucian or Chinese communist normative ideal. While this radical gender difference entices, it becomes packaged within the logics of the tourist industry and marketing. Many purposes are served in the production of Mosuo culture at that occurs through the tourist industry, including those of the Mosuo engaging in the tourist trade, the tourist agencies themselves, district and provincial interests for publicity, and a national interest in identity building through oppositionary minority identities.

In tourist encounters at Luoshui, whose femininity and masculinity produced and displayed by whom? The aspects of Mosuo culture which allure, matriarchy and sexual autonomy, become re-imagined within the two contradictory, yet safely recognizable packages of Mother or Maiden. National normative notions of gender and family become tropes for much of the marketing as well as tourist play which occurs at Lugu Lake. Matriarchy shifts to Mother as the unsettling idea of women in charge of households and household members becomes modified to representations of loving mothers. The alternative household configuration the Mosuo live becomes represented through images of Mother so popular in late 1990's media. Both marketers and Mosuo themselves take part in this game. Mosuo sexual relations become imagined through a sanitized yet familiar notion of romance and courtship.

Through this packaging, the titillating yet threatening notion of female sexual autonomy becomes modified into popular media embodiments of femininity, and the movements and poses of the Mosuo in movies and travel brochures, or Chinese actresses portraying them, look like those of other, non-Mosuo, models and actresses. Local Mosuo women at times joke about these as ridiculously *wenrou* (feminine), and see them as outside of their own experience. The radical difference which draws researchers and tourists to investigate the Mosuo becomes slyly abandoned as marketers produce and display a femininity and masculinity that may have little to do with Mosuo culture, that is neither threatening nor radical, and that discourages engagement with any radical difference and discussion of gender potentialities. So, while gender is the reason to desire the Mosuo, gender difference becomes erased through the large-scale interactions of tourism and encounter. At the site of most actual encounters, Luoshui, sexuality is safely packaged in two ways for tourist consumption, one is through titillation and play around the idea of zouhun, the other is through the small but thriving red light district.

Tourists of both sexes come to Luoshui, and are part of joking about and inquiry into Mosuo sexual relations. These tourists come from a wider Chinese context of sexuality, albeit shifting and contested, in which male identity, especially elite male

identities, are constructed around ideas of consumption, and in particular consumption of women. This wider context affects the ways in which Luoshuirs interact with outsiders, as well as the expectations outsiders bring to seduction and sexual relations. The multiple ways of imagining Mosuo territory, as a land of women and a land of sex, become blurred within the touristic frame and imagination to a land of women for sex. Yet this frame itself speaks to the tourist as a generalized category, and clearly does not address the multiplicity of tourists to the area. However, I would argue that until the past two or three years, this one size did fit nearly all.

While outsiders seek the "exotic" in a Mosuo sexuality perceived as uncontrolled, this is framed within the wider Chinese context and dynamics of male-controlled sexual encounters. The very familiar structures of marketing women and using women's images appear not only in tourist brochures outside of the lake, but also in the context of Luoshui tourism. In both the red-light district, as well as Luoshui, names of shops, guesthouses, salons and karaoke bars draw on the themes of "daughters", "princesses", "beauty" and "rapture". Because of the single road into Luoshui, before arriving at the village, tourists all pass through the red-light district where they see on obvious display professional escorts wearing Mosuo costume. Once at Luoshui, an ethos of titillation surrounds tourist activities. As mentioned above, the books, videos and cassettes for sale in the open front shops along the lake nearly all have images of young women on the covers, or highlighted within.

In general, tourists traveling in large groups are not likely to actively seek out the red-light district and sexual companions. They are often satisfied and engaged, however, with the sexual banter and plentiful costumed women on display. For these tourists, consumption of Luoshui women occurs through images, jokes, songs, glances, and fantasy. Men traveling singly or in smaller groups do often come, however, with the intent of more direct consumption. Han men visiting Luoshui joked with me about the necessity of trying zouhun in order to experience Mosuo culture. According to them, to experience an area, "tasting" local women was just as essential as tasting local cuisine. The number of female travelers (usually young Han women) who seek adventure in the arms of a Mosuo lover is still minuscule compared to the numbers of male travelers who hope to find female Mosuo lovers. Also, there is no open sale of sex by men, no male equivalent of the female sex workers in the red-light district or even of beach boys and gigolos found in other tourist areas. The few men I encountered who had had tourist women as lovers did not seem to seek money in exchange for sex, but rather themselves sought the exotic in outside lovers, which was sometimes accompanied by gifts and lucrative work as a "guide".

The sexualization of Mosuo culture by tourism -through images, words and interactions which insinuate sex does not just affect tourists, however, for Luoshuirs live in this context also. Chinese fascination with the Mosuo has so centered on sexual practices, visitors repeatedly question Mosuo on their sexual habits. Some Mosuo are particularly sensitive to questions regarding sexual customs, and some at Luoshui will avoid talking to outsiders altogether. Those engaging with tourists seem to use the banter and titillation to avoid direct serious engagement with tourists about sexuality, and both deflect and satisfy tourist desire.

Beyond the Minority as Primitive Other

The Mosuo people who live by the lake are the pet of the nature. They love freely as in heaven, so it's called women's kingdom and become spectacular.

– "Lugu Lake" postcard package, produced by the Lijiang District Post Office.

In the above sections of this paper I investigated how the Mosuo are represented by

the state and media, the growth of tourism because of the alluring albeit softened images of matriarchy and sexual freedom in this remote "Daughters' Country", and local responses to the tourist industry. In this next section, I would like to explore some of the alternative images of the Mosuo, as well as consider ways in which the images and especially that of primitivity are ruptured. There are several outside challenges to the image of the Mosuo as backward which may ultimately prove competitive with other images of the Maiden/ Matriarch Mosuo within China. One, already discussed, is the empathy tourists feel with the Mosuo around issues of family. So, despite the potential distortions in tourists imagining Mosuo families as like the ones the tourists believe they have lost, this acts as a space in which clear notions of cultural superiority are ruptured. Another is the perspective of some younger Chinese, especially women under forty, who see the Mosuo as offering an example of female sexual freedom. Another perspective on the Mosuo comes from those older foreign feminists (generally over fifty) who have embraced the Mosuo as offering a vision of a feminist Utopia. Ironically, both of these latter groups have been influenced by books about the life of one Mosuo woman, Yang Erche Namu, whom I discuss later in this section.

In anthropology as well as popular culture at times, the modern tourist has acted as a metaphor for shallowness and alienation. Perhaps in this discussion, however, the tourist is also an actor that on occasion challenges some of the stereotyped relationships between Han and Other that we have come to expect in China. Younger Chinese travelers to Mosuo territory do often echo the stereotypes and feelings of cultural superiority which I described above (see Walsh and Swain 2004). Others, though, are moving beyond these images to imagine the Mosuo as more than just living "primitivity". Marketing the Mosuo uses bizarre twists to bring them into standard sexual hierarchies through representations of coyness, romance and love. Yet some young Chinese travelers (and probably some older, too) are coming to see the Mosuo as representing a version of the modern, albeit wrapped in the romantic garb of the exotic, because of their sexual freedom. The Mosuo especially provide, not just minority difference, but the idea of a radical sexual escape from Confucian, or "civilized" standards, and in this regard can represent the modern. Yes, some female tourists are seduced by the image of the ethnic minorities as closer to nature, more adventurous or more sexual, and seek out Mosuo men for lovers. Others, though, appear to consider the potential for sexual freedom that the Mosuo may represent and to consider this potential in parallel with the growing desires of urban youth for greater sexual autonomy, and the links drawn between such autonomy and the modern. Some draw on the story of Helen Xu in considering Mosuo men a potential loves or husbands. Helen, a Han Chinese woman who as a tourist men and married Dalang, a local man, is widely known among tourists, who flock to her successful bar and guesthouse on the lake front. She and Dalang have been interviewed on CCTV and had several news articles written about them, their "romance" is another twist in the ways outside Chinese imagine life and sexual relations in this area.

While probably only a million or so Chinese tourists have been to Mosuo territory, the number of visitors/ voyeurs through print and film are well into the tens if not hundreds of millions. Bai Hua's book was followed by at least a half dozen Chinese documentaries on the Mosuo, as well as countless news articles and travel stories. While one could argue that all of these representations leave the Mosuo in primitivity, Yang Arche Namu brings images the Mosuo well into the modern. Born on the Sichuan side of Lugu Lake, Namu left her Mosuo home when she was sixteen to study in Shanghai as a singer. She afterwards moved to Beijing and launched a successful career there, before marrying an American and moving to the US. In San Francisco, she dabbled in clothing design and modeling and learned English. When she left her husband it was to return to Beijing and pursue multiple careers – modeling, film, singing, clothing design and writing. The details of her jet-setting life and the multiple foreign lovers and destinations that she has

conquered are well-known by many Chinese readers, as she has written over twenty-two books about herself.

The public personality Namu has developed sells well – Namu offers her personal successes, observations on life and the world, and sexual exploits for public consumption. She has tapped into the contemporary hunger for "private" lives, for personal stories and disclosures so evident in Chinese readers. But she has also provided the modern success fairy-tale – a rags to riches story that happened not just once, but twice. Namu transformed herself from a raggle-taggle, yak-herding, barefoot girl of the remote Tibetan foothills into the successful singer and fashion model in Beijing. If her move from the periphery to the core was breathtaking, her move onto the international scene was meteoric. Namu's persona is not that of naïve or exotic primitive, but rather she is the hyper-modern, internationally jet-setting alternative to a more mundane Chinese life.

As a performer and fashion model, Namu has achieved the quintessential modern success roles for a woman in China. Beautiful and famous, she provides a vicarious dream life. Namu's success came through daring, skill and circumstances, and the success of her persona is increased through her fantastic marriage and love affairs. In her books, Namu writes without shame about her lover affairs, and projects an exultation in life, love and herself. So not only is Namu beautiful and successful, well-traveled and recognized internationally, but she is sexually active and proud of it. She is Mosuo, she is rich, and she is modern. She is one of the most public and obvious displays of a break between the Mosuo and the primitive, and a break that hinges on the cosmopolitanism of an open sexuality.

Namu entered the foreign media scene first through a National Geographic article written about her in 1994. Her more recent and more profound entry came through the publication of her memoir *Leaving Mother Lake*, co-authored with Christine Mathieu6 (2003). The book tells of Namu's childhood through her teens, focusing somewhat on her relationship with her mother, and ends just after Namus's leaving "Mother Lake" to study in Shanghai. I was fortunate to attend several of their book launches in San Francisco (March 2003), where both Mathieu and Namu read selections from the book, and engaged in conversation with the audience on how the book was written, Mosuo culture, and Namu's life. The largely American crowd was respectful to almost reverential. Alice Walker came to one of these openings and addressed Namu as her "sister", and thanked her for her beautiful memoir and sharing her story. In credit to Namu, she did not try to perform feminism or matriarchy for these audiences, and answered questions directly, without changing them for the particular crowd (although certainly including her own Mosuo image management at times). In one rather amusing set of questions, Namu talked about how she loved her people, and how beautiful the are, but then several statements later, when asked if she preferred Mosuo lovers, she answered immediately, "Oh no, I don't sleep with Mosuo men. They stink. I like Armani and Guchi, not the smell of the stables." So her statements contained both romanticization of the Mosuo, as well as her own honest preference for the modern and luxurious.

In China, the Mosuo have not been perceived as a model for feminism; relegated to primitivity, they could not provide anything interesting to modern women. In the United States, the Netherlands and Germany (at least), foreign feminists believe that they have discovered a feminist dream and model (I met with several of these German and Dutch women at a conference in Europe in September, 2003). At least a few of the American feminists at these book launches, as well as foreign feminists I met in Yongning and at a matriarchy conference in Luxembourg (2003) were interested in the Mosuo as representative of the Mother Matriarch in all her unspoiled superiority. For these women, the assumption of the ancientness of Mosuo culture and its traditions made Mosuo superior rather than inferior. Those at the book launches struggled somewhat with accepting a Namu that lived in world of Armani and cell phones, with a Namu that, when asked if she had been to Tibet

answered enthusiastically, “Oh yes! with a Beijing tv crew-55 girls in bikini in front of the Potala Palace -beautiful!” After reading the book, many American women also struggled with those aspects of Namu’s past world that departed from their own version of a mother-centered society, with the idea that women might exchange babies (to gain a son or daughter for their households), or that women might suckle each other’s children. Yet still, for many foreigner women, the Mosuo represent an unchanged superior society, a return to a feminist Eden, and a culture that we should learn from and grow into, rather than one that is “primitive”.

Namu’s two reading audiences are quite divergent. There are those in China who read books filled with photos of her in expensive clothes and international surroundings, and who look to her as exciting female example of modernity and success, as well as cosmopolitanism and sexual freedom. There are those in the US and other Western countries that have read Leaving Mother Lake, or read about the Mosuo through other publications, and are interested in Mosuo culture for the lessons a feminist could take away from it, or for the alternative that it holds for them. So while foreign women tend to be interested in Namu because of a promise of feminist vision and an unchanged superior society, because she is a representative of Mosuo culture despite her modern appearance, her Chinese readership are fascinated with her, not because of “Mother Lake”, but because of her leaving, and the hyper-modern life she has achieved.

Conclusion:

As Brownell and Wasserstrom (2002) as well as Mueggler (2001) and Herrall (2001) and many others point out, it is important not to think of a single China, a single gender configuration, or a single ethnic category or way of being ethnic. There are many Chinese people, including the border peoples, and there many different models of femininity and masculinity, of appropriate or proper men and women and relations between them, of interactions between members of different status categories, of ways of being an ethnic group. By looking at the “Other” groups in China, we see the wide range of masculinities and femininities, and the productive interactions not just between the center and the periphery, but between groups we might classify on either side of this divide. This allows us to interrogate the usefulness of a divide between Han and Other, between those imagined as modern and those imagined as backward, and how this divide at times obstructs as much as clarifies the complex issues of gender and ethnicity in the PRC. The Mosuo are but one thread, with several swirling popular identities, in the tapestry of ethnicity and gender in China which allow us to investigate how the center uses and imagines peripherals and the many complications and contextualizations which must be brought to this issue, as well as how the periphery understands and responds to center.

Brownell and Wasserstrom ask, at the end of *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities*, what would happen if instead of using history to explain gender, one used gender to explain history (2002:435), if one engendered history. Mosuo history cannot but be engendered. Gender is the only comprehensible means of understanding Mosuo history in the twentieth century, and the interactions and immense impacts of the Chinese state and non-Mosuo on the Mosuo. The Maoist state used gender difference to define the Mosuo as a “primitive matriarchy” and sought to help the Mosuo “evolve” beyond their chaotic sexual lives and an economy held back by women’s control. During the Reform Era, the state switched to tolerance and even celebration of difference while quietly continuing “development” of its peoples through education, media and migration. As tourism, and especially domestic tourism, came into its own as a growing sector of the Chinese economy, the government rehabilitated cultural difference as a source of economic development and increasingly opened ethnic areas and made them accessible for tourism. For the Mosuo in Luoshui, this has proved an undreamed of economic boon, as the

marketing of their exceptional gender has led to incomes 50 to 100 times those of neighboring villages.

Is tourism, both through representation and marketing strategies as well as through practice, undermining women's status within Mosuo territory and turning this "land of women" into a "land of daughters"? Both Nu Guo, a land where women rule, and Nu'er Guo, a "Daughters' Country", are products of outsider fantasies of the Mosuo. In Luoshui, the negotiation between tourist desires, outsider representations, and identity creation has resulted in a reification of culture as a gendered consumable. State and popular representations of the Mosuo focus on gender and sexuality, and these have become the foci of tourist interest in this area. Tourists come to consume a "culture" that is imagined through the ideational slippage between matrilineal and matriarchal, and in these conceptualizations of women as matriarchs and women as ever-available objects for sex intermingle instead of clash. In addition, most visitors to Yongning, be they tourists, journalists, or anthropologists, have constructed an interest in the Mosuo which has Mosuo women at the center of Mosuo culture. Luoshui residents respond to this in presenting and enacting a Mosuo culture centered on women, both in the sexual banter that fills tourist spaces, as well as the more sober "backstage" introductions to Mosuo households. When Mosuo culture is consumed, so too, Mosuo women are, at least figuratively, consumed. Ironically, the various strategies used in bringing tourists to this "matriarchal" paradise and in entertaining them while there, and the influx of wealth that has resulted, are undermining the position of Luoshui women because they are the symbolic center of cultural commodification.

The Mosuo are not "Othered" in a single coherent way, however, and the contradictory models, and ambivalence the Mosuo feel towards them have led to forms of othering which complicate a straightforward interpretation of the relationship between tourists and locals as orientalizing. The multiple ways of imagining the Mosuo show the many fracturings of the "Chinese Tourist", which is clearly not a unified group. For some Chinese tourists, the two most obvious areas in which the Mosuo may no longer represent the backward are around the family and, for younger, especially female tourists and Namu readers, around women's sexuality. Examing the ways in which the Mosuo are imagined (and imagine their neighbors) not only shows that gender can operate in different ways in inter-and intra-ethnic perceptions and relationships, but points to asking if women's sexual autonomy has been de-linked from its association with the primitive and has moved into the status of the cosmopolitan.

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