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Eileen Rose Walsh

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# *From Nü Guo to Nü'er Guo*

## **Negotiating Desire in the Land of the Mosuo**

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*Tourism at Lugu Lake exploded in the 1990s, drawing on government representations of the Mosuo as “matriarchal” and as engaging in traditional sexual relations (zouhun) outside of marriage. The village of Luoshui is the primary tourist destination; its economy is almost completely driven by tourism. In this article, the author discusses state policy and scholarly representations of the Mosuo, tourist representations that developed from them, and the interactions and responses around ethnicity at Luoshui. Locals daily engage with the commodification of their culture and must continually negotiate tourists’ contradictory desires. The author argues that locals address these contradictions in part through performing both “front” and “backstages.” She interrogates the notion of an “authentic” Mosuo identity while describing how tourism has reified culture as a gendered consumable and has sexualized Mosuo culture in tourist areas.*

**Keywords:** *Mosuo; Na; tourism; gender; ethnicity; Yunnan*

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

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**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *Earlier versions of this article were presented at the American Anthropological Association Meetings (San Francisco, November 2000), at the Canadian Anthropology Society Meetings (Halifax, May 2003), and at the Harvard Globalization/Femininities/Masculinities Workshop (April 2004). This article is based on fieldwork visits spanning 1993 to 2005, but it draws primarily from a year of fieldwork in 1998 and 1999. For research support, I am indebted to the American Council of Learned Societies and the Council on East Asian Studies, Yale University. I also wish to express appreciation to the following colleagues for providing references and comments on earlier drafts: Michael Ennis-McMillan, Ilana Gershon, Judith Goode, Susan Hyatt, Christine Mathieu, Sydney White, and an anonymous reviewer for Modern China. The opinions expressed and any errors remain my responsibility.*

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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.

—Mark Litke, writing for ABC News (19 May 2002)

On the shores of Lugu Lake in Yunnan province, “Nü’er Guo” receives tens of thousands of tourists annually. The small village of Luoshui is the primary destination for tourists coming to this corner of Yunnan. Luoshui’s economy is almost completely driven by tourism, which itself is driven by a desire to encounter the Mosuo.<sup>1</sup> This much-discussed ethnic minority has received national and international attention because, according to state categorizations and media accounts, the Mosuo are “matriarchal” and their traditional sexual relations (referred to as *zouhun* in Mandarin, *sese* in Mosuo) are outside of marriage. Journalists, novelists, and travel agencies have enhanced these descriptions, luring tourists into the long and rather uncomfortable trip to Lugu Lake. Tourists come by the busload to see Mosuo culture, to experience a “land where women rule,” and in some cases to give *zouhun* a try. Residents of Luoshui daily engage with the commodification of their culture, and they must continually face and reshape constructions of Mosuo identity made by outsiders.

China’s recent economic growth has been accompanied by an ethos of consumption and leisure, as well as by increased disposable income for the middle and upper classes. During the past decade, a booming internal tourism market has developed. Media attention to ethnic minority regions has both responded to and fed Chinese desires for entertainment and travel. The tremendous growth of domestic tourism in China has followed a general rehabilitation of ethnicity during the 1980s, and ethnic tourism has emerged during a time when the cultural particularity of China’s ethnic groups is being celebrated. As others have discussed (Diamond, 1988; Harrell, 1995; Schein, 2000; Swain, 2001; White, 1997), official representations of China’s ethnic minorities have created an image of minority people as dangerous, feminine, and erotic. The tourism industry at Lugu Lake exploded in the 1990s, drawing on government representations of the Mosuo to create

a marketing image that has proved compelling to the domestic tourism market. Sexuality and gender figure especially prominently in official representations of Mosuo culture, and in tourist literature as well.

As Stevan Harrell (2001) has suggested, ways of being ethnic vary in China, and southwest China presents particularly complicated interactions between local, national, and cosmopolitan discourses of ethnicity. Mosuo narratives of themselves are fashioned within a context of state policies, reportage, and flashbulbs. The process of imagining ethnic others is also complex, and Susan Blum (2001) describes how within China's ethnoscape different ethnic minorities in Yunnan represent different prototypes of primitivity. The various notions of Mosuo culture that get played out in a context of tourism at Luoshui show that the process of othering is not only not static; for some ethnic minorities in China, it is not even consistent. Luoshui residents are acutely aware that Mosuo identity sells, and they, like many others in China, pin their hopes for economic change on expanding ethnic tourism. While the Mosuo face representations rife with imbedded contradictions, they also face the pressures of tourism and policy to accommodate these representations.

State policies and tourism have made gender salient in new ways for many Mosuo. Early state categorizations of Mosuo gender practices have led to representations of Mosuo ethnicity built around notions of women freely available for sex, to whom present lovers have no future commitments, or of a land where women rule. Matriarchy and sexual availability are central in tourists' desire to visit the Mosuo. In negotiating different aspects of that desire, Luoshui residents must address tourists' concerns about women's power as well as their hopes of finding sexually available young women. The "culture" that tourists hope to consume is imagined through an ideational slippage in which notions of matriarchy and of women as ever-available objects of desire intermingle instead of clash. Tourists find alluring the notion of a Women's Country, in Chinese tradition called both *Nü Guo* and *Nü'er Guo*; yet the practice of tourism at Luoshui is reinventing this area as a country of girls, drawing on the more common use of *nü'er*. At Luoshui, where ethnicity is imagined and consumed through tourism, Mosuo women are the figurative (and sometimes literal) consumable.

My first visit to Luoshui was as a tourist in April 1993. Since then I have conducted a year of field research there (1998-1999), and I have

returned to the area more than half a dozen times, most recently in July 2005. I argue that the residents of Luoshui address these contradictions in part through performing both “front” and “backstages” (MacCannell, [1976] 1999) for tourists. In this article, I discuss state policy and scholarly representations of the Mosuo, tourist representations that developed from them, and the interactions and responses occurring at Luoshui around ethnicity. In considering the issues that Mosuo face in performing identity, I draw on the work of Vincanne Adams and Tim Oakes to theoretically frame identity and encounter and to interrogate the notion of an “authentic” Mosuo identity. For the Mosuo in Luoshui, tourism has reified culture as a gendered consumable, affecting the community’s own practices of gender and culture, as well as its uses of “tradition.”

#### WHO ARE THE MOSUO?

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,  
Lijiang District Post Office  
(produced circa 1997)

The Mosuo have a population of approximately 40,000, live in the foothills of Tibet, and speak a Tibeto-Burman language. Mosuo territory straddles the border of Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, including Ninglang, Muli, Yanyuan, and Yanbian counties,<sup>2</sup> and one of its primary geographical features is Lugu Lake. According to many Mosuo, the Yongning Plain in Ninglang county, Yunnan, is the cultural center of Mosuo territory. The Chinese government does not recognize the Mosuo as an ethnic group, or *zu*; instead, it officially classifies the Mosuo in Yunnan as a subgroup of the Naxi, and the Mosuo in Sichuan as Mongolian (see Mathieu, 1996: 6-14; Shih, 1993: 22-25; Walsh, 2001b: 59-63; Harrell, 2001: 216-38). In the late 1980s, their attempts to gain state recognition won the Mosuo the ability to call themselves “Mosuo people” (*Mosuo ren*). The Mosuo practice Lamaism (predominantly Gelugpa) as well as their own shamanism, *dabaism*. Prior

to 1956, local chiefs (*tusi*) had controlled the area for more than 600 years.

While there is variety in marriage practices and household configurations among Mosuo from different regions,<sup>3</sup> many recorded accounts focus on the customs of the Yongning Mosuo. The cultural traits for which the Mosuo are best known are their matrilineal family system (generally referred to as “matriarchal”) and *zouhun*, “walking marriages.” *Zouhun* is the Mandarin translation of the Mosuo term *sese*, used to describe a relationship in which the man “goes back and forth.” Until the late 1960s, *sese* was the dominant mode of sexual relations among the Mosuo. Adults practicing *sese* customarily remain socially and economically attached to their natal households; the woman receives her lover at her residence in the evening, and he returns to his in the morning. Sexual relations are initiated and continued voluntarily, for indeterminate periods, and are largely free of economic bonds. Children generally are part of the mother’s household and take her surname. Households do not generally include fathers, but they do contain maternal uncles. Most Yongning agricultural households are composed of one or two elders, several siblings or cousins of productive age, and the children of one or more of these women. Others, especially in the area of the township seat, more closely resemble nuclear families because of marriage policies discussed below. Informants say that *sese* relationships are more stable in form now than in the past (He, 1994, 2000; Walsh, 2001b, 2003). In Yongning Mosuo communities today, *sese* continues, alongside legal marriages, and either is acceptable for an individual, but not both.

Mosuo culture, both before and after Liberation, allows a high degree of sexual autonomy to both men and women. Because most households contain grown siblings, there are strong taboos against talking about sex or sexual partners in front of family members of the opposite sex. Therefore one rarely hears joking about sexual matters within mixed groups of men and women, especially if these groups include family members. Generally speaking, joking about sexual matters is limited to small, same-sex groups meeting privately or semiprivately.

The idea of the Mosuo as matriarchal has grown out of state representations of the Mosuo, which then formed the basis of popular representations in the PRC.<sup>4</sup> These greatly exaggerate the matriarchal aspects of Mosuo culture, presenting Mosuo society as one in which

women are in control. The Mosuo are matrilineal, and many Mosuo household heads, *dabu*, were and are women. However, in Yongning agricultural villages nearly one-third of household heads are male (Walsh, 2001b). Moreover, local use of the term “household head” is complicated (Walsh, 2001b: 176-84), and even in the households with women heads, often major decisions regarding property are the domain of either its senior or most economically productive man. Mosuo themselves describe their culture as one in which both men and women are valued members of the household, and all adults have a voice in household decisions.

#### “PERFORMING” MOSUO IDENTITY

The act of performing Mosuo identity has brought wealth to an otherwise struggling community in an area with limited transport and no industry. Luoshui, considered poor by even local standards during the years of collectivization (because it had little and poor-quality land), is now the wealthiest village in the county, with household incomes 20 to 100 times those of other villages. While residents of Luoshui may be Mosuo (more than 40%), Pumi (more than 40%), or Han (about 12%), most tourists believe that they are all Mosuo, and those working with tourists often call themselves “we Mosuo.” Within this article, I will use “Luoshui residents” and “villagers” to refer to all of the residents, and “Mosuo” when referring particularly to Mosuo. During the 1990s, against the tide of de-collectivization, Luoshui residents collectivized key tourist activities. All households contribute one member to the teams that deal with tourists. Team members must wear Mosuo costume and present themselves as Mosuo while engaged in activities for tourists, such as boating on the lake, horse rides, or song-and-dance performances. Those in Luoshui are well aware that Mosuo identity has brought them their newfound wealth, and Mosuo identity is therefore prominent and exaggerated at tourist sites.

Tourists and students frequently ask me to what degree Luoshui residents perform Mosuo identity for tourism, and how this has affected “authentic” Mosuo, or if the Mosuo are still “authentic.” While I try to avoid framing discussions of identity in this way, the issues of performance, deception, authenticity, and loss seem forever

to recur in discussions of ethnic tourist sites. Mosuo identity is a continual negotiation influenced by outsider representations and expectations, as well as by insider desires. I would argue that Luoshui residents are sometimes aware of “choosing” to meet tourists’ desires and at other times are influenced by outsider representations and encounters in ways that are less obvious. Vincanne Adams, in her work on Nepalese Sherpas, suggests that authenticity may not be a useful concept for understanding Sherpa identity (Adams, 1996). She paints a complicated picture of mimesis, in which expectations and desires affect encounters between Westerners and Sherpas. Adams describes a mutual seduction in which both parties try to be the Other that is desired, and each tries to find him- or herself in the Other. Her work is useful in moving a discussion of identity beyond the dichotomies of authentic or inauthentic, staged or backstage.

The historical conditions and contexts of encounters and tourism in Luoshui are different than those Adams describes for Sherpas. Luoshui residents interact annually with thousands of tourists, who call on residents to perform their identity. While engaging with tourists, residents sometimes present exaggerated accounts of Mosuo culture and lifestyle, yet they easily drop some of their more absurd and playful representations when challenged. The obviously performed “front stage” and equally, if less obviously, performed “backstages” are just part of the complicated layerings of lives conducted under the tourist gaze and in a government- and media-controlled soup of representation. Residents are aware of being on- and offstage, and even of being still on- when backstage. Luoshui residents may invite into their homes those tourists who express admiration for Mosuo culture, regaling them with traditional songs or stories. In these encounters, outsiders’ appreciation of “being Mosuo” seductively reinforces certain components of identity. Yet in similar circumstances, others in Luoshui may turn away from tourists with boredom, may be annoyed at an outsider’s intrusion, or may show more interest in pursuing discussions of popular culture. Asking which response is an authentic Mosuo response, or which person is an authentic Mosuo, does not get us closer to understanding the lives of Luoshui residents or of Yongning Mosuo in general.

Tim Oakes (1998) brings a rather different frame than Adams to issues of identity and ethnic tourism. Oakes shows the complicated



interplay of policy, levels of government, and intermediaries that affects ethnic tourist sites in ways never perceived by tourists and that often causes great difficulty for locals. He explains how government discourse can affect tourists' expectations and the nature of encounters. His descriptions of some of the external processes of ethnic identification, modernity, and identity formation in China are useful in considering the Mosuo. In his study of the Miao in Guizhou, Oakes argues that defining their own subjectivity makes the Miao truly modern subjects.

In my examination of encounters at Luoshui, I draw on Oakes and Adams in interpreting Mosuo identity at Luoshui as a negotiated, continual, and relational process, a process that involves agency and internalization. The Mosuo clearly show agency in responding to tourist encounters, yet different Mosuo (indeed different residents of Luoshui) are differently positioned to affect and be affected by the identity processes engendered by these encounters. Among themselves, the Mosuo engage in an identity politics that draws on state and media representations, on discourses of social change and cultural advancement, and of being "civilized" (*wenming*) or "backward" (*luohou*), and that incorporates outsider discussions of cultural preservation as well.

*THE "ESSENTIALS" OF BEING MOSUO—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  
([http://www.travel-to-china.net/destination/spot/yn\\_lijiang\\_lugulake.htm](http://www.travel-to-china.net/destination/spot/yn_lijiang_lugulake.htm))

In Luoshui, the tensions of creating or holding a Mosuo identity are enacted on a stage built by tourism but rooted in decades of Maoist rhetoric. During the 1950s and 1960s, state work teams described the Mosuo as a people in which “children do not know their fathers” (Yunnan minzu diaocha dui, 1964: 1). This has become a common theme of contemporary Han popular discourse on the Mosuo. Mosuo women had (and still have) the freedom to choose and leave lovers. In pre-Liberation Yongning, long-distance traders and merchants were part of their pool of potential lovers. Also troubling to early PRC cadres and researchers was the condition of Mosuo men—they did not control the households they lived in but instead lived in “their mothers’ houses.”

State researchers produced several reports on the Mosuo in the 1960s, including the 1964 *Investigation of the Social and Household Patterns of the Ninglang Yi Autonomous County Naxi* (Yunnan minzu diaocha dui, 1964). The reports concluded that the Mosuo were a primitive people that had not evolved, but were still in the earliest stages of social formation, “primitive matriarchy.” The *Azhu Marriage System of the Naxi from Yongning* (Yang Guanghai, [1965] 1998), a state-produced documentary film, highlights the simplicity of the Mosuo, the oppression to which they were subjected prior to Liberation, and the primitive practice of group marriage in which they purportedly engaged. The Mosuo were used to “prove” Chinese Communist theories of social evolution and became part of the theoretical justification for cultural politics in the Maoist PRC. Although they had developed agriculture and a feudal society, the Mosuo were viewed as stuck in a primitive social form and labeled “living fossils” by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) scholars (Yan, 1982).

As Susanne Knodel points out, the strongly patriarchal Chinese, seeing matrimonial order as one of the foundations of society, must have been “uneasy” with the system in Yongning (Knodel, 1998: 51). The recommendations of early work teams and Communist ethnographers framed state policies aimed at helping the Mosuo “evolve” out of their primitive sexual relations and household structures (Cai, 2001: 385-95); they were intended to develop the people as well as the infrastructure by encouraging the Mosuo to have male-headed nuclear households. Also supporting reform, state health workers described the area as overrun with venereal disease because

of the licentious behavior of the people (Sydney White, personal communication, March 2001).

Most villagers with whom I spoke in 1998 and 1999 did not clearly remember different reforms, but simply recalled the “one husband, one wife” (*yifu yiqi*) policy. By the early 1970s, government pressure to marry was quite strong, and those who refused risked losing their grain rations. Compliance among Mosuo in areas far from easy surveillance was only nominal, but cadres could easily reach many villages in Yongning. Yongning villagers remember the one husband, one wife mandate as a policy that “broke up their families,” and point to the forced cohabitation as causing domestic disharmony as well as violence. Many Mosuo born before Liberation describe the rupture in family arrangements that occurred during this time as the most painful effect of cultural policies during the Mao years.

In the early 1980s, several state researchers involved in the early CCP investigations of the Mosuo published their research on the Mosuo as complete ethnographies. 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 most elite of Chinese travelers, especially cadres. These publications appeared at a time when China was beginning to actively celebrate ethnic diversity, and they have become the basis for the popular representations of this area. In the 1980s and 1990s, state television crews produced documentaries on the Mosuo that drew on these ethnographies. In an ironic reversal, the cultural characteristics the Maoist government tried to change became celebrated as markers of Mosuo cultural uniqueness and value.

*TOURISM IN THE LUGU LAKE AREA:  
DEVELOPING AN UNEVOLVED MINORITY*

In Ninglang county, Luoshui has grown into the premier site for visiting the Mosuo; and until about 2001, Luoshui was virtually the only village that had been successfully refashioned to accommodate tourism. More than 90% of the tourists entering the area stay in Luoshui; smaller groups now sometimes stay at Lige and other lake villages, as well as the Wenquan hot springs further into Yongning.

Currently, the township has plans to turn several villages away from the lake into tourist destinations. Tourism at Luoshui has developed in both structured and unstructured ways, and this growth has occurred both under and outside of village, county, and higher control.

Land redistribution and reforms arrived in Yongning township in 1982, and for the next several years, young men continued to drift out of Luoshui in search of work. Village leaders from the 1980s estimate that at most the village then received a few hundred tourists a year. The early tourists were often government connected, rather than adventure travelers, and tourism development first started around the government environmental protection station, the Baohusuo, which lies approximately 1 kilometer from the village. In 1988, the county began selling admission tickets to the area, and it was not until 1989 that larger numbers of tourists started to come. In 1990, Lugu Lake was officially opened to tourism; in 1992, to foreign tourists.

On my first visit to the lake in April 1993, there appeared to be three private guesthouses in the Baohusuo area, as well as two or three small restaurants attached to the guesthouses. Boat rentals were available and gatherings in the evening for song and dance occurred if there was enough interest. A walk into Luoshui showed a sleepy little agricultural village, with no guesthouses, stores, or restaurants visible. The village head (*cunzhang*) had begun hosting guests in his household in 1992 (it was the village's first guesthouse), but the village had not yet physically changed, though construction was in process on several small sites. On that first visit, no one approached me at all as I wandered through the village—not to sell objects or entertainment of any kind, not to invite me in to sit by his or her fire or engage in conversation. Older women wore traditional Mosuo costume in subdued colors.

At the time, my Chinese acquaintances in Chengdu were almost completely unaware of the Mosuo, or of the lake as a travel destination. In 1993, the trip was seen as rather difficult, to be attempted only in the fall or spring: summer mud slides or winter snows could make the already crumbling unpaved mountain roads quite dangerous or impassable. My first trip to the area was in April, then believed the optimal time for a visit, but I met with few travelers—a small group of Hong Kong journalists and photographers who arranged an impromptu song-and-dance performance, and another small group of cadres on timber business.

The lake is now a travel destination well known to the middle and upper classes in Yunnan and Sichuan, as well as much of urban China. Tourists come year-round, and during holiday times thousands of tourists descend on the village to stay a day or two. Tourism began to greatly expand in this area in the mid-1990s. According to workers at the ticket gates, in 1997 approximately 60,000 visitors purchased tickets, and ticket sales in 2002 were over 80,000, and in 2004 well over 200,000 (Lijiang Lugu Lake Provincial Tourism Zone Management Committee). According to village council members and gatekeepers (interviews 1999, 2002, 2004), at least 90% of these tens of thousands of tourists to Luoshui are domestic (including tourists from Hong Kong).

On my return to the lake in 1997, I noted a marked difference in ambiance. Large guesthouses with decorative gates and signs had sprung up throughout the village, and an entire strip of guesthouses along the lake replaced the quiet shore lined with old trees. Sex workers and escorts in Mosuo costume strolled in the village and along the lake. The village head and village committee had organized tourist activities, set prices for boat and horse rides, and scheduled regular evening performances with a fixed entrance fee. The entire village was working to professionalize tourism in efforts to accommodate the staggering inundation of outside visitors that began in 1996. This growing professionalization of the tourist industry and development of the village was readily apparent during my 1998-1999 fieldwork, and in return visits since. By 2002, several competing photo exhibits on Mosuo culture had been mounted, and a large, private Mosuo cultural center had been built that hosted the village's evening song-and-dance shows. In June 2004, CCTV's exposés on pollution and prostitution at Luoshui brought national attention to growing problems in Mosuo territory, and a team of cadres was sent to design and enforce plans for appropriate growth and development.

The growth of tourism in Luoshui led to several important developments. In 1993 and 1994, more households began to take in guests and to supply larger accommodations for them. Two collectivized teams formed to deliver boat rides, horse rides, and an evening performance to visitors. According to residents, the village head at the time organized the teams so that there would be no ugly competition over these earnings. Since 1993, all households—Mosuo, Pumi, and Han—have

contributed one member to participate in one of the two teams, and all income from the activities is split equally among team members. After the 1995 Qing Ming Festival, when there were more guests than beds in Luoshui, construction of more and larger quarters took off. By 1998, the first four-story guesthouse was being built; in 1999, more than 50 guesthouses and over 1,300 beds were available for tourists in a village of 500 residents; by 2004, locals rushed to provide tourists with regular hotels with individual bathrooms and showers, the number of beds available had nearly doubled, and development has continued apace. In 2005, the village now has beds to accommodate 3,500 guests (Lijiang Lugu Lake Provincial Tourism Zone Management Committee).

Outsiders from Ninglang and Yongning had begun doing business in Luoshui in the early 1990s. Their small buses and taxis were the first transport for hire into the area, and as tourism development quickened, they rented the shops and restaurants that formed the first floor and external face of many of the guesthouses. Vendors from Ninglang and Lijiang started to move in, introducing different cuisine as well as products for tourist consumption. Luoshui villagers who could not find money to develop guesthouses looked to joint ventures with Chinese from outside the area. One household allowed an entrepreneur from Harbin to build a guesthouse on their site. He would be able to use it for ten years, after which it would belong to the Mosuo household.

Leasing to, or in some cases marrying, outsiders who can provide startup capital has become a common method for some residents in Luoshui and Lige to join in tourism development. By 2002, a woman from Shanghai had opened a distillery for *sulima*, a traditional Mosuo liquor; it doubled as a brothel in the evening. Fujianese had opened camera repair shops and other businesses. By 2004, an outsider, under the cover of a local family, opened the three-star hotel that shifted the dynamics of development at Luoshui, setting off a wave of changes as local-owned guesthouses hurried to compete.

Although critical of some of the outside businesspeople (one local commented, "They say once Fujian people move in, then things will go bad very quickly"), until recently villagers managed to keep control over much of the tourist development occurring immediately within Luoshui. They still owned the guesthouses and land, and outsiders were able to set up businesses only if they collaborated with a

resident household. While the sulima distillery and other “joint” businesses were a sign of change, the large hotel seemed to be the spark that opened wider possibilities for development and government intervention. In 2002, the primary concern of most villagers was local tensions and conflicts, especially the increasing power of several well-connected families and attempts by the county to control tourism in Luoshui. But by 2004, the autonomy of the village was under grave threat following the arrival of district and provincial cadres. These cadres responded to the negative reports on tourism in Luoshui by constructing a new plan of development for the village and mobilizing local officials to enforce costly and unpopular regulations. One of the outcomes of this intervention was shifting control of the area away from Ninglang county to the larger Lijiang government, and this included the resources brought in by the ticket gate.

In the mid-1990s, when tourism was just developing and becoming a force for economic change, the county and village governments generally found themselves in opposition on matters concerning Luoshui's tourism. Sources of tension included the ticket gate and use of space. Zoning and the character of the village have been a continual site of struggle at Luoshui since 1997. At that time, the county and district tourism boards drew up plans for the village to develop and yet retain an “authentic” character. These plans designated the Baohusuo area as a commercial zone, restricted the size of guesthouses in the village, and prohibited development in sections of the village. In accordance with these plans, the county government forced villagers to remove the red-light district to the Baohusuo area while razing some of the bars recently built by villagers in areas deemed too close to the lakeside. Only a year later, villagers from some of the wealthiest households had begun to flout the development guidelines. In some cases villagers looked to the county government for help in enforcing zoning rules; at other times, they resented the attempts of the county to manage space and to profit from the natural resources, tourism, and name recognition of the Mosuo at the villagers' expense. In the summer of 2004, after the exposé, a flood of cadres descended on the village to develop a new plan and regulations, and the new Lijiang Lugu Lake Provincial Tourism Zone Management Committee surfaced as in control of implementing these changes.



Through the late 1990s, there was still little tourism development outside of Luoshui and the adjacent Baohusuo. The town of Yongning, some 20 kilometers past the lake over rough dirt roads, had several very basic guesthouses in addition to the government guesthouse, but it saw very few of the tourists visiting the area. Some did pass through, as they visited the recently restored Zhamie Lamasery or went to bathe in the hot springs at Wenquan, even farther away. Recently, however, Luoshui has been facing increasing competition from some of the smaller villages around the lake, notably Lige, which had developed a dozen guesthouses and several teahouses by 2002. Residents and village government in Luoshui, like their counterparts in other touristed areas in China, worry about the boom-bust phenomenon—being hot for several years, overdeveloping, and then losing out as new sites and areas open. But thus far, the popularity of Lugu Lake has continued to attract increasing numbers of tourists, and bus tours, still the major source of tourists, continue to make Luoshui their destination until other areas become developed for tourism. The Lijiang Lugu Lake Provincial Tourism Zone Management Committee estimates that Luoshui will receive nearly 300,000 visitors this year. Last year, however, Sichuan opened a new road to the villages on its side of Lugu Lake. The road is wide and paved, and this area is now also successfully developing for tourism and drawing virtually all the organized tours originating in Sichuan.

#### TOURISTIC REPRESENTATIONS

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, *Lugu Hu: Huigui zuihou de muxi jiyuan / A Trip Back to Lugu Lake, the Last Matriarchal Society* (2002)



Images and representations help to frame tourist expectations of an area and, of course, are developed to create desire for an area. State and private, domestic and international, journalists and filmmakers have been venturing to Yongning to capture images of the Mosuo for the consumption of Chinese at large as well as for international audiences.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the national and international media, Lijiang television stations and tourism bureaus have handled much of the marketing of the Mosuo (most tourists come on tours arranged in Lijiang). In these countless representations of Mosuo culture, the essential components of earlier government reports resurface, sometimes embellished but still acting as core descriptors of Mosuo society. Media accounts of Mosuo culture tend to highlight several characteristics: (1) an exotic sexuality—*zouhun*,<sup>6</sup> which many Chinese interpret as “free love”; (2) matriarchy—a land where women rule; and (3) primitivity—a society that has not evolved. While tourist literature usually intertwines all three elements, *zouhun* has by far dominated the imaginations of those writing and reading about the Mosuo. Song Zhaolin (2002) titled his book on the Mosuo *Zouhun de renmen (The People of Zouhun)*. From cabdrivers in Kunming to chance acquaintances in Beijing, those who heard me mention the Mosuo as my subject of research generally gave me unsolicited comments, advice, and sometimes instruction on *zouhun*, asking if I had seen it and using it as the symbol for Mosuo culture.

Literature as well as ethnographies and documentaries brought Mosuo sexuality into mainstream Chinese consciousness in the 1980s. While intellectuals and cadres became aware of the Mosuo through the ethnographies of Zhan et al. (1980) and Yan and Song (1983), Bai Hua's 1988 novel *Yuanfang you yigi Nü'er Guo (The Remote Country of Women)* made the Mosuo known to a much wider audience (Bai, 1994). Bai's aim was not to instruct Chinese readers on Mosuo society but rather to use this Other as a mirror to critique modern “civilized” society (see Harrell, 2001: 251-53; Blum, 2001: 150-52). Bai tells the story of a disillusioned young Han man—male, it is worth noting—who meets a Mosuo dancer in a county troupe during the Cultural Revolution. He falls in love with the exotic and free-spirited Mosuo woman and they marry. Later, however, his jealousy and possessiveness bring a disastrous end to the relationship. 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 several actual Mosuo women, Yang Erche Namu being the best known, whose singing or dancing enabled them to leave Mosuo territory. Although the Mosuo act primarily as a backdrop for Bai to discuss the modern Chinese condition, particularly issues of individual and societal repression, many Han Chinese I met believed Bai's book to be an accurate representation of Mosuo society. His book circulated widely, and through it countless Chinese became familiar with the Mosuo and Yongning, which they associated with a lost utopia. Bai's story actually provides a rough frame for much of the tourism that has happened in the Lugu Lake area, in terms of both the gendered dynamics around Han and Mosuo interactions and the expectations of romance and escape.

Since Bai's novel appeared, a plethora of articles, travel brochures, documentaries, and books have been produced that tell would-be tourists about Mosuo society. These bear seductive titles that refer to Mosuo society as "alluring" (Ma and Ping, 2000), "mysterious" (Ninglang Yizu zizhi xian luyou fazhan banbian, 1999; Peng and Zhi, 2000; Wang and Zhan, 1989; SDYCZ), "romantic" (SDYCZ), "primitive" (Yu, 1996), a "riddle" (Li and Li, 1999), the "last matriarchal" society (Chen and Qin, 1999; Zhang, 2002; ZYLD), a tribe (SWYC), and even "the last rose" (Yu, 1996). Some rehash the ethnographic material of Zhan et al. (1980) and Yan and Song (1983), while others include "traditional" love songs, stories, and courtship practices.<sup>7</sup> Often works on the Mosuo begin with rapturous descriptions of the lake, described as embracing, protecting, and life-giving. It acts as a figurative mother in the imagined paradise of the Mosuo. Accounts of this symbolic mother often lead into descriptions of the "lovely Mosuo girls" who inhabit this paradise, and who seem to agree to anything if the request is accompanied by a gift of a silver bracelet or brightly colored scarf. The numerous books about the life and adventures of Mosuo entertainer and model Yang Erche Namu (beginning with Yang and Li, 1997) have contributed to the popularity and recognition of the Mosuo, as well as the idea of the Mosuo as a "sexy" ethnic group.

Mosuo territory has been dubbed "Nü'er Guo," a phrase that has rapidly become the brand name of the area. It draws from Tang

dynasty references to Nü Guo, a land of women. Nü'er Guo became well-known in China through Wu Cheng'en's popular Ming literary classic *Xi You Ji* (*Journey to the West*; Wu, 1977-1983), whose protagonists pass through and are tempted by this land of women. Though the literary meaning of *nü'er* is "women," and the popular recognition of Nü'er Guo is of a "Women's Country," I wonder if the more common meaning of *nü'er*, "daughter," is slipping into an interpretation of the area's culture. For example, a Mosuo at Luoshui told a visitor that because they live in Nü'er Guo, the Mosuo give birth mainly to daughters.<sup>8</sup> He himself lived with his wife, and they had two sons. The tourist believed him, and explained to me that since this is the "Nü'er Guo" there are more *nü'er*; she mentioned the information "to help me with my research."

While this belief could be simply an extension of the Nü'er Guo from *Xi You Ji*, in which women gave birth exclusively to daughters, *nü'er* is an ambiguous referent—and the marketing of the area takes advantage of its ambiguity. Also, while the phrase "Nü Guo" did sometimes appear in tourism marketing in the 1990s, the area is now exclusively referred to as "Nü'er Guo." Many business names and products at Luoshui use *nü'er*, translating the word as "daughters" and sometimes "princesses" and combining this with images of young women. The slippage in meaning from woman to girl/daughter is representative of a deliberately maintained conflict in signs and messages about Mosuo culture—a culture of matriarchs, on the one hand, and a culture fulfilling male fantasies of lovers for the taking, on the other. Within either interpretation, or either marketing strategy, Mosuo women are the focus of the marketing of Mosuo territory.

Enticing images of women in Mosuo costume adorn travel brochures as well as products ranging from books and video compact discs to dried fruits and alcohol. Photos in brochures of attractive young women have equally alluring captions such as "Making a date by lake" and "In expectation" (Ninglang Yizu zizhi xian lüyou fazhan banbian, 1999). "Daughters" are generally not engaged in activities in these photos. The implication is that this is a land of women where women sigh longingly, waiting for lovers (perhaps the tourist) to fulfill their desires. Photos that do include Mosuo men often show them courting a lover—giving her gifts, meeting her among the pines, boat-ing to her, or waving good-bye when leaving her quarters in the

morning—clad in cowboy hats and “Tibetan-style” clothes.<sup>9</sup> Pictures that do not present the Mosuo as a society that is somehow predominantly maidens-in-waiting, or young women absorbed in courtship, often represent instead the older women, the matriarchs.

Another motif common in books and documentaries is the harmonious simple life of the Mosuo, unencumbered by modern worries and jealousies. In these representations, the Mosuo still live in large extended families and work peacefully and cooperatively together. But at the head of this household sits not the father but the matriarch. One rather talkative woman who runs a hotel has a scrapbook of newspaper articles (in both Chinese and English) written about her as a matriarch. She makes a good subject for such stories as there are currently no men in her household, which comprises herself, her grown daughter, and her granddaughters. Hers, however, is one of only two such households in the village—and the other is Han.

Collections of Mosuo folk stories, songs, and poetry by the Mosuo scholar Lamu Gatusa (1991, 1993) also elaborate on the themes discussed above. But Lamu includes stories and songs of male freedom and adventure. He paints a romantic picture of life on the *ma ban* (long-distance trading expeditions that used horse teams), replete with danger, excitement, and seductions along the way. While only a minority of Mosuo men engaged in the *ma ban*, both tourists and young Luoshui residents now often refer to this activity alone as Mosuo men’s traditional past. Through his tales, men reenter the imaginary of the Mosuo as adventurers and seducers. (One could certainly argue, though, that men were never left out of images of the Mosuo. Even in brochures that almost exclusively feature images of young women, men are “present,” as the gaze on the coy maids is assumed to be male.) In addition, television and magazine interviews with the couple Da Lang and Helen, a Mosuo man and Han woman who met when she came to Luoshui as a tourist and are now married and live there, have added to the images of the romantic Mosuo cowboy.

Touristic representations of the Mosuo thus include the nubile maid, the wise controlling crone, and the adventuring seductive man (be he a tourist or a Mosuo cowboy). These are the images that bring tourists to Luoshui and that most tourists bring with them. More and more often, however, domestic tourists also bring a contemporary

nostalgia for the pure pastoral life. The ethnic minorities offer a vision of a purer, happier, but lost past to the mostly urban Chinese tourists, who by and large live in nuclear families permitted only one child. Visitors believe that they are finding in the Mosuo, as well as other ethnic minorities, a people who live simpler lives that are richer in human kindness, a people who recognize the value of loving family relationships (for further discussion, see Walsh and Swain, 2004).

#### *ENCOUNTERING MOSUO-NESS: THE FACES OF SONA*

Because the vast majority of tourists to Mosuo territory are domestic, locals must daily negotiate the fantasies sold by Chinese media and travel agencies in marketing the Mosuo. Curious about zouhun, many tourists hope to “see” it, and some wish to try it themselves. Others say that they have come to the area to see the “last” or “only matriarchy,” or to look for a primitive paradise. These different types of tourists hold conflicting and contradictory desires. Some (usually Han men, but not always) wish to be sexually titillated or fulfilled. Others, including foreign feminists, hope to find a society that is somehow better, either because women are in control or because its human relations are more caring. Both types of visitors bring an interest in consuming the Mosuo as a gender—consuming young women as carefree lovers or older women as nurturing mothers and instructors in harmony.

In negotiating tourist desires, Luoshui residents present to outsiders different “faces,” which incorporate key concerns with gender, sexuality, family, and cultural continuity. The faces that the Mosuo have developed for tourists show ambivalence about representations of them as sexually available and matriarchal. Sexual titillation abounds in very obvious, staged ways but is counteracted by the sober backstage view of the Mosuo household and family values that is presented to tourists. The potent issues of sexuality and gender are thus contained and controlled within the package of the Mosuo family. This package downplays matriarchy to stress *tuanjie*, “family unity.” The following incident, which occurred while I was living in Luoshui, helps to illustrate these issues.

Early into my research in 1999 in Luoshui, I met three Australian women who had signed on to a Chinese tour in Lijiang for a two-day visit to Lugu Lake. The women, in their 50s and 60s, were involved in women's groups in Australia, and one had done a higher-level degree in philosophy and women's studies. They did not speak any Chinese, and asked me if I could introduce them to a Mosuo family and help them talk to some Mosuo women. They had 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 had 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 too afraid to pursue it and if she could help me. I laughingly agreed that she could send me partners if they met 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 us 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 dining 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 love 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 from one of the 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. Durma approached me and told me she was a Mosuo from an interior village that did not receive tourists. She and the youngest woman in the kitchen were not Sona’s sisters; they were working at Sona’s family’s guesthouse. Durma did not want me to be deceived, and 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, Durma’s household was wealthier than Sona’s, because it had more and better land. Sona’s family, who were their distant cousins, regularly came to Durma’s in the winter and often would leave with several bags of grains and potatoes, gifts that would help to tide them over until spring. Durma 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 Durma’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 from the field is not to show that residents in tourist villages try to deceive tourists but to underscore how Mosuo culture was presented and how the deception happened (in a way that I later saw repeated in other contexts). 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 to the Australians’ questions 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 for each other. Sona had correctly gauged the interests of her visitors and how to respond to them. When speaking with the Australian feminists, she talked about woman-to-woman bonds and a society of women supporting and caring for one another. 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 the backstage, and indeed 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 by 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.

This simple interaction illustrates how residents employ complementary versions of themselves to accommodate the competing needs of visitors. Because of the disparate interests brought by tourists, Luoshui villagers must present themselves in a variety of ways in their interactions with those tourists. Many exchanges revolve around similar themes and fall into similar patterns, developed through these repeated encounters. Furthermore, Luoshui residents will rarely discuss anything they believe to be negative with outsiders on their first meeting.<sup>10</sup>

In general, Luoshui residents who regularly interact with tourists are a fairly well-defined, albeit changing, group. As mentioned above, the village has recollectivized itself into teams, with each household contributing one member either to row tourists on the lake, lead them on horse rides, or perform songs and dances for them in the evening. These team members have the most contact with tourists and act almost as a buffer for other members of the community. Sona herself had worked on the teams, and her household ran one of the larger guesthouses that often received busloads of tourists. While shopkeepers and guesthouse managers also deal with tourists frequently, they generally do so for much shorter periods of time, and outsiders now rent most of the shops. By 1998, much of the service work in guesthouses was being performed by outsiders—some Mosuo, some not—who migrated to Luoshui for work opportunities. Of the locals, team members interact most with guests, and it is in their quick and easy exchanges that different faces of Mosuo-ness are deployed. These faces alternately play off titillation, exaggerate Mosuo familial harmony, and present the lake as a lost and unchanging paradise (Walsh, 2001a).



SEXUALITY AS PERFORMANCE—WHEN  
ZOUHUN MOVES FROM SHAME TO BANTER

Conversation in Luoshui tourist settings most frequently revolves around the themes of zouhun and Mosuo sexuality. Visitors repeatedly question residents on their sexual habits. Many Mosuo are particularly sensitive to questions regarding sexual customs, and some at Luoshui will avoid talking with outsiders altogether. Tourists, openly or with attempts at discretion, ask Luoshui residents about Mosuo sexuality—how one zouhuns, if they themselves do, when they started, how many lovers they have had, or if they know their fathers. Luoshui residents who frequently engage with tourists play off outside images of the Mosuo as promiscuous and present their area as one big love nest. Their verbal exchanges with outsiders, like Sona's with me, often target the curiosity around zouhun, and they ask tourists in jest if they zouhuned last night, or if they want help finding someone with whom to zouhun (Walsh, 2001a). This focus on sexual titillation is especially noticeable at the primary activities prepared for tourists. When entertaining tourists, "Mosuo" villagers sing love songs and tell jokes about courtship or troubles with multiple partners. Horse rides to the pasture end in staged wrestling matches that eventually become opposite-sex bouts between visitors and locals. One of the Mosuo who acted as a team leader (*duizhang*) for a tourist team joked that he was the *zouhunzhang*—the captain of zouhun.

Outside tour guides lead groups from the county seat or the district capital, and many of these guides have their own stock of jokes or puns about Mosuo sexual habits. They often set the tone for these visits before tourists have even arrived at the lake, thereby contributing to the ethos of titillation as well as sensationalizing the Mosuo. One such joke I heard a tour guide tell was "*Mosuo, Mosuo, luan mo, luan mo.*" The word *luan*, which can be translated as "chaotic" or "disorderly," is often applied to the lower classes, the uneducated, and the uncivilized, who may disrupt society by spreading their disorder. In Kunming, Han and others often described Mosuo sexual relations to me as *luan*. *Mo* here plays off its synonymic meanings, "stroke," "feel," and "grope," and the pun implies that Mosuo sexual relations are indiscriminate and disorderly.

Tourists of both sexes come to Luoshui, and all joke about and inquire into Mosuo sexual relations. Nevertheless, visiting men are the primary targets of representations of the Mosuo. Images of young Mosuo women are everywhere, surrounding the tourist experience in this “Women’s Country.” Prior to 2004, tourists and locals alike expected that it was Luoshui women who would be sought out by guests. Most tourists come from a wider Chinese context in which generally women are the objects and not initiators of sexual encounters and in which elite male identities are constructed around ideas of consumption—in particular, consumption of women. This wider context affects how Luoshui residents interact with outsiders, as well as the expectations that outsiders bring to seduction and sexual relations. Within the touristic frame and imagination, the multiple ways of imagining Mosuo territory, as a land of women and a land of sex, blur into a land of women for sex.

Even as outsiders seek the exotic in a very different Mosuo sexuality, this exoticism is framed within the wider context and dynamics of male-controlled sexual encounters. The familiar methods of marketing women and using women’s images for marketing appear now in the context of Luoshui tourism; indeed, the *wenrou* (soft and gentle) poses of the tourist brochures draw on the same repertoire of female poses used throughout China and are mimicked by hostesses in the red-light district. In both the red-light district and in Luoshui, names of shops, guesthouses, beauty salons, and karaoke bars draw on the themes of “daughters,” “beauty,” and “rapture.”<sup>11</sup> Because there is only one road into Luoshui, all tourists, before arriving at the village, pass through the red-light district, where they see on display professional sex workers in Mosuo costume. Following the 2004 exposé, prostitutes were actually prohibited from openly practicing in the Luoshui area. Now they are slowly, but quietly returning to the area. Once at Luoshui, an ethos of titillation surrounds tourist activities. The books, videos, and cassettes for sale in the open-front shops along the lake nearly all feature images of young women on their covers or highlighted within them. Men head the teams of both male and female villagers working at the main tourist events, a circumstance that in itself contributes to presenting women as the consumed. The complicated reasons for male leadership—including village politics, household customs, gender norms, and the nature of current encounters

between residents and outsiders—are unknown to tourists; what tourists see are men in charge and women as the focus of interest.

In general, tourists traveling in large groups are not likely to seek out the red-light district and professional sexual companions; they are satisfied to engage in sexual banter and view the many costumed women on display, or perhaps to wrestle with resident women at the organized matches at the end of the horse rides.<sup>12</sup> These men consume Luoshui women through images, jokes, songs, glances, and fantasy. However, men traveling singly or in smaller groups often do come with the intent of more direct consumption. Up until the recent news exposé and government crackdowns, the red-light district offered more than a dozen establishments at which men could hire sex workers, and individual cottages had been built for the private enjoyment of patrons and their escorts. 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 (interview, 1999). The cultural center as well offered chances to participate in this aspect of created Mosuo culture.

Female tourists are also interested in tasting local men. Frequently women tourists imagine Mosuo men as adventurous and seductive and, like other ethnic minorities, as uncorrupted by modern life, as closer to nature and more sexual. In the late 1990s, the number of such travelers (usually young Han women) who sought adventure in the arms of a Mosuo man was small compared to the number of male tourists dreaming of female Mosuo lovers or using professional sex workers. Sexual relations at the lake between locals and outsiders were primarily between outsider men and professional sex workers. The presence of sex workers was an obvious part of the landscape of the lake. This even affected local men, and by 2002, village women complained about how their men were now “playing” with sex workers. The number of visiting men having relations with women sex workers is still quite large, despite last year’s crackdown. In contrast, sex is nowhere openly sold by men; there is no male equivalent of the female sex workers in the red light district. However, increasing numbers of local men are interested in relations with visiting women, and likewise the number of visiting women looking for local men has increased dramatically. By the summer of 2005, local women were now openly

resentful of the many local men sleeping with visiting women. Several off-handedly remarked that they thought nearly 90 percent of the local young men had slept with outside women. One talked about how impossible it was to find a local boyfriend because of this, another about how difficult it was to keep one. Even the Women's Representative (interview, 2005) discussed this as one of the negative impacts of tourism for local women.

The men I encountered who had had tourist women as lovers did not openly seek money in exchange for sex. Some themselves sought the exotic in outside lovers; some appreciated the expensive gifts often provided by these women, as well as the status they gained by their conquests of outsiders. At least one used work to get sex and vice versa, and was sometimes hired by female tourists as a "guide." In a top-floor bedroom of his family's guesthouse, he had hung photos of his travels in remoter territories; he brought the women up to show them the photos and otherwise entertain them. Others openly flirted with tourists at the evening song and dance show.

Tourists from many cultures at many destinations experience travel as a break from the usual restrictions and pressures they face at home, often including those pertaining to sexual practices. The marketing scheme that presents the lake as a love nest contributes to the sense of entering a different moral economy of sex. Tourist activities bring sex into a public domain of jokes, songs, images, and insinuations. Sona's clearly joking offer to find me a lover, repeated by others at Luoshui, never occurred in other Mosuo communities. Sex between insiders and outsiders does take place at the lake, of course—relationships between Mosuo men and women outsiders, as well as between local women who are not sex workers and men outsiders. A few of those relationships have endured and been transformed into marriages. The many sexual exchanges between female sex workers and visiting men involve exoticizing and eroticizing the Other, much as Sandra Hyde (2001) describes happening in Xishuangbanna. One outsider who was a long-term visitor at the lake believed that the ethos of sexual freedom changed everyone who spent time there by expanding their concepts of gender. Nevertheless, while tourists may play at being Mosuo, the combinations of economic and sexual politics involved in sex at the lake do not appear to break radically from life outside of Mosuo territory and hardly signal a change in sexuality or gender politics.

As discussed above, the desire and imagery that draw tourists to the lake in search of sexual adventure have already affected them before they arrive. Many tourists stubbornly cling to the representations of the Mosuo, sexual or otherwise, that piqued their fancy, even in the face of evidence contradicting these images. Furthermore, those involved in sex with sex workers are both enacting a relationship that has been represented in the national ethnoscape of the PRC and continuing current habits of consumption popular among segments of the (male) business and cadre population. It remains to be seen what effect the relatively new phenomenon of wealthier outside women “tasting” local men will have on local gender relations. At Lugu Lake, as has been seen at other tourist sites, it is more likely that outsiders’ expectations of “free love” will affect their interactions with locals and their interpretations of Mosuo culture than their experiences at the lake will affect their desire and imagination. Instead of tourists being changed by their visits to Lugu Lake and Mosuo culture (as many claim), the large change is in the other direction: the sexualization of Mosuo culture because of tourism.

Away from tourist areas like Luoshui, sexual habits and experiences are rarely joked about so openly (Walsh, 2001b; Cai, 2001). At Luoshui, in contrast, performed Mosuo culture has undergone a sexualization. Residents use banter and titillation to manage encounters and avoid directly engaging tourists about sexuality while satisfying tourists’ desire. The sexualization of Mosuo culture—through images, words, and interactions that insinuate sex—does not affect tourists alone. Because the site of tourism is the village, even those not engaged in tourist activities still hear and see these events on their doorsteps daily.<sup>13</sup>

*PERFORMING THE BACKSTAGE: WHERE  
“REAL” MOSUO CULTURE MEANS HARMONIOUS FAMILIES*

The sexualized Mosuo culture negotiated between tourists and Luoshui residents generally has a very staged feel at tourist activities, and family-run guesthouses provide residents another space in which to create and present alternative interpretations of Mosuo culture. As Sona aptly demonstrated, villagers offer a backstage face of Mosuo

culture—the family—to those tourists too sober to appreciate the titillation of songs and jokes and the many sexual insinuations proffered at Luoshui. During cultural introductions to their houses and families, or if such visitors ask questions about Mosuo culture, the cultural trait that villagers stress is not *zouhun* but rather *da jiating*, “large families.” The large family, or extended family, is often given as the reason Mosuo have been culturally successful and now are economically successful in the Yongning area (Walsh, 2001b).

The importance of the family and of maintaining the “traditional” family are topics that arose often in conversations between Luoshui villagers and outsiders. Interestingly enough, in these cultural explanations that center on the family, the villagers generally do not refer to themselves as a matriarchy but rather stress the unity of the family and community, as well as respect for elders. Luoshui residents discuss the love and care family members show for one another, the high position of the mother in the family, and the love of children for their mother. Women interlocutors, like Sona, also talk about the love that sisters feel for each other and their mothers. Discussion of the family thus often has a very female flavor, as the father does not figure in the “traditional” Mosuo family, and uncles are not mentioned nearly as frequently as mothers in these exchanges. Just as titillation was constructed primarily on female identity, so, too, the discourse of the Mosuo family is constructed primarily on female identity—that of the mother. This fits in well with a current trend in China’s media to glorify the love of the mother, which in turn works to impress on women the need to be a perfect mother and accept the losses in women’s status during the reform era.<sup>14</sup> Small groups of tourists traveling out of Mosuo territory often talked about the wonderful time they had as they sat around Mosuo hearths listening to songs about the love and sacrifices of *mama* (see Walsh and Swain, 2004). The Mosuo, depicted as a society that reveres the mother, can represent for tourists an ideal mother-child love.

This other face seems to act almost as an antidote to the first. To the mostly urban Chinese tourists, generally living as couples with at most one child, these interactions in kitchens and around the hearth are very compelling. The discussions of family love and harmony ring with nostalgia for a purer past in which people had simpler lives,

richer in human kindness and especially in loving family relationships. While the Mosuo culture presented on the front stage titillates and gratifies those tourists looking for sexual excitement, this performed backstage face gratifies those visitors who have traveled to see a primitive, happier past and a more natural existence. Many tourists believe that in Mosuo families they have found a refuge from modern life where people are less distracted by the cares of an advanced society and where family is still at the center of one's social life and concerns. Luoshui residents do not stress real gender differences or the so-called matriarchal aspects of a Mosuo family (where women are generally in control of their own sexuality as well as often in control of households), but rather emphasize the cohesiveness, love, and support of a Mosuo family. In this way, Luoshui residents offer tourists a family that can satisfy nostalgic longings for what has been lost without threatening them with radical reconfigurations of gender. But by presenting this inviting family as a family of women, they conveniently leave a place for the male tourist to step into and create a loving model for the female tourist to bond with.

#### *MAINTAINING MOSUO IDENTITY*

PRC ethnographers, state agents, and now the tourist industry stress to the Mosuo how important preservation of their matriarchal culture is, and how very interesting their sexual relations are. Anxieties about both cultural change and cultural preservation are present within the current framework of encounters. When Mosuo at Luoshui discuss issues of cultural preservation, they often bring up material culture, but the aspects of Mosuo behavior that are key to outsiders—*zouhun* and family—are also central concerns of Luoshui Mosuo and Pumi themselves. Through the gendered dynamics of tourist interactions, the Mosuo at Luoshui present their culture, their families, and gendered roles within them in particular ways. These exaggerated romanticizations of Mosuo sexuality and family life affect how Luoshui villagers imagine the preservation of Mosuo culture.

Luoshui villagers' descriptions of Mosuo culture, whether intended for themselves or for tourists, highlight a picture of the



family that puts women clearly in the center. This appears to be consistent with Mosuo conceptualizations of the family from pretourist times. Mosuo did and do conceive of women as essential to the successful running and maintaining of the household on which all members depend for their support. However, Mosuo in other nontourist communities, as well as the elderly in Luoshui, portray men not as outside of the household but ideally as responsible, contributing members of it. Although the roles they play in household production and continuity differ from women's, Mosuo men clearly see themselves as contributing members. In tourist performance aimed at tourists, Luoshui men are often discursively left out of the household, and because they are left out of an essential role in Mosuo culture, they are freer to identify with national culture.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Walsh, 2001a), the highly gendered representations of Mosuo-ness that occur at tourist sites affect gender itself. At Luoshui, the romanticized notion of a traditional Mosuo past, brought to life for and daily reinforced by tourism, seems to be influencing how men and women contribute to labor. Tourists, anthropologists, and Luoshui women all note men's lack of participation in household and farming work, as well as heightened levels of male consumption. One 25-year-old Luoshui man told me why he could not do any work around the house or farm: "I would be breaking my own traditional culture" (interview, 1999). His explanation was not unusual among young men, as others also invoked tradition in various ways to justify their refusal to work, echoing the responses of Naxi men in similar circumstances as discussed by Sydney White (1997). In contrast, older men in Luoshui do talk about their contributions to household and farmwork as part of their own pasts, and Mosuo men in other communities help with farmwork and sometimes aid in household chores as well. Thus, at Luoshui a caricature of the distribution of labor in the past, framed in discourses of cultural preservation and authenticity, is used to justify a disproportionate amount of labor being put on women's shoulders.

Some women in Luoshui offer a different interpretation of the growing labor imbalance. These interviewees, some of whom had been involved in Ford Foundation projects targeting indigenous women, felt that increasing wealth was resulting in men doing even less work



than before, contributing less to the household, and consuming more of the household resources. Several believed that men were now embarrassed *to be seen* doing farm labor or helping around the house (*Tamen bu hao yisi bie ren kan tamen zai laodong*). In addition, they, as well as visitors, noted that since the village has become wealthier, a significant number of men gamble and drink during the day. However, during my most recent visit, I saw much less open gambling—another result, perhaps, of the crackdown of upper levels of cadres to clean up tourism at Luoshui. Both men and women work for the teams that entertain tourists and receive earnings, in cash, at the end of each day. Men are more likely to consume their earnings and contribute less money to the household, while women bring most of their earnings home for household use. Some women complained that the young men in the household were acting as a cash drain. A few also confided that some Luoshui men now “play” with the “girls” (*xiaojie*) in the red-light district, behavior that these village women saw as a break with Mosuo culture. Many of these discussions were conducted between 1998 and 2002, and increasing wealth and the growing standardization of public areas are obviously heightening the shifts in residents’ attitudes toward labor and gender.

### CONCLUSION

The Maoist state, drawing on Friedrich Engels and Lewis Henry Morgan, labeled the Mosuo 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. When 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 to tourists.

Government policies and programs and the enormous influx of tourists have brought changes to Mosuo territory. Villagers of

Luoshui must negotiate the very different fantasies that bring tourists, and income, to their doors. Tourism is bringing about both class and gender shifts, through representation and marketing strategies as well as through the way it is practiced. More than the forced marriages of the Cultural Revolution era, tourism may be turning this "land of women" into a "land of girls" as it interacts with, markets to, and serves an outside clientele. Both Nü Guo, a land "where women rule," and Lugu Lake's Nü'er Guo are products of outsider fantasies of the Mosuo. Mosuo society is not one in which "women choose their lovers and men have no say in the matter" (Litke, 2002), in which women completely rule households and control property, and in which there is no conflict. Nor is Mosuo society peopled primarily with young beautiful women, forever willing to love you (for a night), never jealous, and never asking for anything in return.

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 the matrilineal and the matriarchal, and 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 that has women at the center of Mosuo culture. Luoshui residents respond to this construction by presenting and enacting a Mosuo culture centered on women, both in the sexual banter that fills tourist spaces and in the more sober backstage introductions to Mosuo households. When Mosuo culture is consumed, so too Mosuo women, at least figuratively, are consumed. Ironically, the cultural commodification displayed in 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 precisely because they are the symbolic center of Mosuo culture.

Tourists flood the village of Luoshui, often far outnumbering the residents and migrants now living and working there. Tourists and locals meet onstage and in the backstage, and both of these are performed

spaces. "Authentic" Mosuo identity at Luoshui is not somewhere else—somewhere behind even the backstage—but is lived and created in this context of representations, negotiations, encounters, and shifting identity. Those Mosuo who are behind the backstage are also performing identity for each other (albeit in very different ways), negotiating differences of wealth and access, justifying choices. Sona may have had one story for me as a tourist, another for the Australian feminists later on, and yet other stories for herself, her family, and the Mosuo working for her.

One of the obvious characteristics of touristic cultures such as in Luoshui is that ethnic identity is the topic of conversation, day and night; it is a primary explanatory device. Residents must discuss and present Mosuo identity to please tourists, and they worry about losing it and their income. In addition, the continual negotiation with particular representations affects how the residents of Luoshui see Mosuo identity. The obviously staged performance of titillation spills over for some Mosuo, and ethnic culture becomes an explanation for choices about sexuality. The slightly subtler performance of tradition and family affects how residents view their own positions within households and justify the decisions they make vis-à-vis other household members.

## NOTES

1. I refrain from a lengthy discussion here of the etymology and appropriateness of the name "Mosuo" (see Shih, 1993: 16-20; Mathieu, 1996: 10-11; Walsh, 2001b: 59-63), and simply note that in their own language the Mosuo refer to themselves as "Na" people. Scholars in China (such as Wang and Zhan, 1989; Yan, 1982; Yan and Liu, 1986; Yan and Song, 1983; Zhan, 1982) have referred and still occasionally do refer to this group as the "Naxi" or "Yongning Naxi," but more recently "Mosuo" has become most common in scholarly and popular work (i.e., He, 1994, 2000; Yang and Li, 1997). Scholars published in the United States and Europe have used the names "Naze" (Weng, 1993), "Na" (Cai, 2001; Walsh, 2003), "Moso" (Knodel, 1998; Mathieu, 1998; McKhann, 1998; Oppitz and Hsu, 1998; Shih, 1993, 1998, 2001), and "Mosuo" (Mathieu, 1996, 2000, 2003; Walsh, 2001a, 2001b; Zhou, 2001). In November 2002, those Mosuo whom I asked about this issue were split. Because this article focuses on representation and encounter, I use "Mosuo," as that is the name they most commonly use when speaking in either English or Chinese, and the name by which they have come to be known to groups of outsiders.

2. Those in Yanbian do not consider themselves Mosuo, and at least some Mosuo from the three other counties do not consider those in Yanbian to be Mosuo (Christine Mathieu, personal communication, November 2003).

3. The Mosuo/Na include several groupings of people who share a language and sense of relatedness, yet may have different household structures and customs. Because of these variations, the Mosuo display a spectrum of gender practices. For example, unlike Yongning Mosuo, Mosuo/Na in Labei practice marriage instead of *sese* (discussed later in the text). In Yongning, *dabu* (household heads) may be women or men; in other areas, such as Qiansuo, only women will be *dabu* (Christine Mathieu, personal communication, February 2002).

4. For further discussion of the term "matriarchy" in Chinese and the associations of the term, see Mathieu, 2000; Walsh, 2001b: 37-40.

5. For articles and films, see Boavida and Cepa, 1998; Forney, 2002; Hutchinson, 2003; Journeyman, 1999; Lakshmanan, 2000; Litke, 2002; SDYC; SWYC; van Dierden, 1998; ZWSCG; ZYLD. See also numerous CCTV stories on the Mosuo and a ballooning number of travel websites.

6. Because I am discussing encounters with outsiders, I use the Chinese word *zouhun*, which is employed in tourist literature, by those who are not Mosuo, and in encounters between the Mosuo and outsiders.

7. As has occurred with other "traditional" culture in China, Mosuo songs and stories have sometimes been "developed" and improved by state recorders. I interviewed one such county cultural officer who described how he developed stories about Mosuo traditions and sayings, including several about hiding lovers, and spoke of dancers in Luoshui, Ninglang, and Kunming who were taught "better" dances or choreographies by Han instructors.

8. According to 1998 government statistics, boys are slightly more plentiful than girls in Luoshui (Ninglang Yizu zizhi xian tongji ju, 1998).

9. Mosuo men's "traditional" costume varies; it has changed in the past century to a side-closed shirt (the same as worn by women), wide sash, and wide-legged pants (for which contemporary pants are generally substituted).

10. Their reluctance to discuss anything negative explains the continuing myth that the Mosuo have no theft, rape, murder, or even jealousy and that the Mosuo language does not contain words for these. Even the police in Luoshui denied that they had any crime until I asked about specific incidents of which I was already aware.

11. Currently in China, many brothels have legitimate establishments as their fronts. Beauty salons, massage parlors, and karaoke bars may have dual purposes, providing sex work in addition to their other services.

12. My first encounter with these bouts was in 1997, on my second trip to Luoshui. Mud wrestling may have made its first appearance in China at Lugu Lake. The horse rides to the pasture end with wrestling performances: first matches between the Mosuo, then between Mosuo and guests, and finally between the sexes, as visiting men wrestle Mosuo women and visiting women wrestle Mosuo men.

13. On my most recent visit in the summer of 2005, I felt a change in the ethos of this area. As Luoshui has become more developed, direct contact with Mosuo is being minimized and more and more tour groups begin to go to some of the exhibits and photo displays for interpretations of Mosuo life, instead of having their local hosts interpret the culture for them. In addition, more and more young tourists and families touring, as well as the government crackdown of last summer, seem to have reduced some of the ethos of sexual titillation at the lake.

14. Obvious examples of the glorification of mother love can be found in the presentation of family in television serials and in national productions for events such as the return of Hong Kong, the celebration of the PRC's fiftieth anniversary, and New Year and Chunjie productions in which skits showing loving adult children and their relationship with *Mama* abound.

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