

# UNHITCHING THE HORSE FROM THE CARRIAGE: LOVE AND MARRIAGE AMONG THE MOSUO

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## I. INTRODUCTION

If there were an international endangered species status for vanishing family forms, I would nominate the Mosuo<sup>1</sup> people of Southwest China without delay. The contemporary world stands to lose a great deal, I believe, if we allow the unique, ancient Mosuo family system to expire. We would lose a species of happy family life that Tolstoy never contemplated, one that offers creative solutions to inherent contradictions between individual eros and family security that seem particularly pertinent today. The resilient premodern Mosuo family system anticipated by millennia core principles of what sociologist Anthony Giddens

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars use diverse terms and spellings to designate this culture. Most prefer “Mosuo,” some spell it “Moso,” while a minority use neither term, but refer to them as the Na people.

termed the pure relationship of late modernity.<sup>2</sup> Giddens theorized that late twentieth century economic and social conditions enabled the emergence of a utopian practice of intimacy that he termed “confluent love”<sup>3</sup> and “plastic sexuality.”<sup>4</sup> Plastic sexuality signifies “decentred sexuality,”<sup>5</sup> in Giddens’s lexicon, “severed from its age-old integration with reproduction, kinship and the generations.”<sup>6</sup> Equals can pursue intimacy purely “for its own sake,” and intimate relationships endure only so long as they “deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it.”<sup>7</sup>

## II. THE MOSUO

In 1995, I cotaught a graduate seminar on family and kinship, East and West with the late William Skinner, an eminent Sinologist and anthropologist. That was how I first learned of the existence of the Mosuo people, a small ethnic-minority culture in southwest China who, Bill reported to my utter amazement, did not practice marriage. A dozen years were to pass before I finally made a pilgrimage to the magnificent mountain habitat of the Mosuo in order to observe this exotic family system with my own skeptical eyes and ears.

Thus, in August 2007, I became one of hundreds of thousands of annual visitors who willingly journey seven uncomfortable hours from the nearest city, Lijiang, over jagged, hairpin switchbacks to reach the remote environs of Lugu Lake in Yunnan province. The Chinese state officially recognizes fifty-six ethnic “nationalities,” and Yunnan is home to a hefty share of them.<sup>8</sup> Perched high in the Himalayan borderlands of Yunnan and Sichuan provinces near the Tibetan frontier, Lugu Lake is one of the most popular destinations in China’s flourishing domestic tourist industry. Promotional materials lure visitors, 90 percent of whom are Chinese nationals, to savor spectacular natural scenery and colorfully clothed members of ethnic minority cultures.<sup>9</sup> The prime cultural magnets drawing

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<sup>2</sup> ANTHONY GIDDENS, *THE TRANSFORMATION OF INTIMACY: SEXUALITY, LOVE AND EROTICISM IN MODERN SOCIETIES* 58 (1992) (stating that a pure relationship is one with sustained association entered into as long as both parties are satisfied with it and that it is more synonymous with marriage than other relationship views).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 61–64.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 58.

<sup>8</sup> *See* Ethnic Minorities in China, <http://www.c-c-c.org/chineseculture/minority/minority.html> (last visited June 19, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> *See* Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas, China, [http://www.eoearth.org/article/Three\\_Parallel\\_Rivers\\_of\\_Yunnan\\_Protected\\_Areas\\_China](http://www.eoearth.org/article/Three_Parallel_Rivers_of_Yunnan_Protected_Areas_China) (last visited June 19, 2009) (“85 - 95% of visitors are from China . . . [and] 5 - 15% originat[e] from overseas.”).

travelers to Lugu Lake, however, are the fabled family and sexual customs of the estimated forty to fifty thousand surviving members of the ancient Mosuo culture who inhabit its surrounding villages.

The Mosuo consider themselves to be an autonomous ethnic group, but the Chinese state officially classifies them as a distinctive subculture of the much larger Naxi nationality.<sup>10</sup> Distinctive, indeed. For the family regime the Mosuo practice is one of the world's oldest, most flexible, and resilient, and arguably its most original. Approximately two millennia ago, Tibeto-Burman ancestors of the contemporary Mosuo devised what appears to be the only family and kinship system in the anthropological or historical record that is not based on marriage.<sup>11</sup> Mosuo family principles violate some of the deepest and most popular contemporary convictions about marriage, parenting, and family life. A preponderance of contemporary citizens, policy makers, and even many scholars, East and West, seem to believe that research supports the following claims:<sup>12</sup>

- Marriage is a universal institution.
- The ideal family structure for raising children is an “intact” family which includes a married heterosexual couple and their biological or adopted children.
- The quality and stability of a couple's marriage profoundly affects their children's welfare and security.
- Children generally, and boys particularly, need and yearn to know and live with their biological fathers.
- Parents who engage in multiple, short-term, extra-marital sexual liaisons irresponsibly threaten their children's emotional development.

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<sup>10</sup> See STEVAN HARRELL, *WAYS OF BEING ETHNIC IN SOUTHWEST CHINA* 70 (2001); Eileen Rose Walsh, *The Mosuo—Beyond the Myths of Matriarchy: Gender Transformation and Economic Development 10–12* (2001) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University).

<sup>11</sup> Scholars are not certain how distinctive the Mosuo kinship and sexual system was compared with other Naxi and nearby ethnic groups, particularly the Pumi. McKhann speculates that the Naxi cultures were once more similar and overlapped with bilateral, bilineal practices generally, but that they evolved in different directions. See Charles F. McKhann, *Naxi, Rerkua, Moso, Meng: Kinship, Politics and Ritual on the Yunnan-Sichuan Frontier*, in *NAXI AND MOSO ETHNOGRAPHY: KIN, RITES, PICTOGRAPHS* 23, 25 (Michael Oppitz & Elisabeth Hsu eds., 1998).

<sup>12</sup> See generally Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *THE CASE FOR MARRIAGE: WHY MARRIED PEOPLE ARE HAPPIER, HEALTHIER, AND BETTER OFF FINANCIALLY* (2001); Glenn T Stanton, *WHY MARRIAGE MATTERS: REASONS TO BELIEVE IN MARRIAGE IN POSTMODERN SOCIETY* (1997); David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and David Blankenhorn, *PROMISES TO KEEP: DECLINE AND RENEWAL OF MARRIAGE IN AMERICA* (2000).

Traditional Mosuo family life, however, presents an exception that profoundly questions, rather than proves, all of these rules. Mosuo kinship, in startling contrast with traditional Chinese patriarchy, is primarily matrilineal and matrilocal. “[H]appiness is defined as the ability to live in harmony with matrilineal kin,” explains one of the anthropologists who know the Mosuo best.<sup>13</sup> “The ultimate meaning of life in this world is to uphold and maintain household harmony.”<sup>14</sup> Instead of marrying and sharing family life with spouses, adult Mosuo children remain in extended, multigenerational households with their mother and her blood relatives.<sup>15</sup> Families assign the role of *dabu*, the household head, to whichever adult woman or man it judges most competent to manage its domestic and economic activities.<sup>16</sup> Together family members own, maintain, and inherit the family property, perform the necessary labor, rear all children born to the women of the household, and care for aged and dependent members.<sup>17</sup>

Traditional Mosuo family values radically separate sexuality and romance from domesticity, parenting, caretaking, and economic bonds.<sup>18</sup> Sex life is strictly voluntary and nocturnal, while family life is obligatory and diurnal.<sup>19</sup> The cultural attitude toward heterosexual desire is permissive, relaxed, and nonmoralistic, so long as individuals observe strict verbal taboos against discussing their erotic activities among relatives or in mixed gender settings.<sup>20</sup> At the age of thirteen, a girl undergoes an initiation “skirt” ceremony that culminates in receiving a literal sleeping room of her own.<sup>21</sup> In what the Mosuo language terms her “flower chamber,” she can freely receive (or rebuff) nocturnal visits from any male suitor who comes to call.<sup>22</sup> An analogous “pants” ceremony marks the cultural passage to maturity for boys who turn thirteen, but they do not receive private sleeping quarters.<sup>23</sup> Instead, mature males become eligible to practice *tisese*, which the

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<sup>13</sup> Chuan-kang Shih, *Tisese and Its Anthropological Significance: Issues around the Visiting Sexual System among the Moso*, 154–55 L’HOMME 697, 704 (2000).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *See Id.* at 707.

<sup>16</sup> *See* Chuan-kang Shih, *The Yongning Moso: Sexual Union, Household Organization, Gender and Ethnicity in a Matrilineal Duolocal Society in Southwest China* 157–61 (1993) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University) (on file with University Microfilms International).

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 156–57.

<sup>18</sup> *See* CAI HUA, A SOCIETY WITHOUT FATHER OR HUSBANDS: THE NA OF CHINA 121–22 (Asti Hustvedt trans., 2001).

<sup>19</sup> *See id.* at 121–22, 186, 192–93.

<sup>20</sup> *See id.* at 127, 195.

<sup>21</sup> Chuan-kang, *supra* note 16, at 143–44, 189–90.

<sup>22</sup> *See* MICHAEL PALIN, HIMALAYA 186 (2005).

<sup>23</sup> *See id.* at 141, 189–90.

Chinese misleadingly translate as walking marriage (“*zuohun*”).<sup>24</sup> The Mosuo term, however, literally means that a man “goes back and forth.”<sup>25</sup> Men live, eat, and work with their maternal families by day, but after nightfall, they can seek entry into the flower chambers of any women they desire.<sup>26</sup>

Traditionally the primary form of *tisese*, which anthropologist Cai Hua termed “furtive” or “closed” visiting, entailed no public acknowledgement or obligations between the parties.<sup>27</sup> Under the cover of night, adults were free to enjoy erotic intimacy with as many or as few partners as ignited reciprocal desires.<sup>28</sup> Evidence suggests, however, that the secondary form of *tisese*, termed the “conspicuous” or “open” visit by Cai Hua,<sup>29</sup> is the more widespread practice today, and perhaps always has been.<sup>30</sup> Couples who wish to declare and solidify their intimate bonds conduct a modest ceremony in which the man’s representative presents gifts on his behalf to his lover’s kin.<sup>31</sup> The ceremony entitles him to openly visit his lover on an indefinite, presumably exclusive basis and establishes modest expectations of reciprocal assistance between the pair and sometimes their households.<sup>32</sup> However, whenever a man spends the night with a lover [*axiao*] whether furtive or open, he is expected to return to his maternal homestead by morning.<sup>33</sup> That is the locus of his domestic life and labor, the site of his primary intimate bonds, his social status, obligations and security.

Among the many extraordinary features of traditional Mosuo family and kinship, perhaps none is as rare as the equality and autonomy it afforded women over their sexual<sup>34</sup> and procreative lives.<sup>35</sup> Mutual desire alone governed romantic

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<sup>24</sup> See *id.* at 47–49.

<sup>25</sup> See *id.* at 50.

<sup>26</sup> See *id.* at 51.

<sup>27</sup> CAI, *supra* note 18, at 185.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 202.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 237.

<sup>30</sup> See also Chuan-Kang Shih, *Genesis of Marriage Among the Moso and Empire-Building in Late Imperial China*, 60(2) J. OF ASIAN STUDIES 381, 403 (2001) (noting that “[b]oth *tisese* and marriage have served in Moso society as legitimate patterns of sexual union and reproductive institution.”) [hereinafter Chuan-kang, *Genesis of Marriage*]; Chuan-Kang, *supra* note 16, at 78, 89–90; Walsh, *supra* note 10, at 92–95 (detailing the Maoist pressure on the Mosuo to adopt conventional marital practices).

<sup>31</sup> CAI, *supra* note 18, at 237–40.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*; Chuan-kang, *supra* note 16, at 55–57.

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., CAI, *supra* note 18, at 186, 240.

<sup>34</sup> See Chuan-kang, *supra* note 16, at 58. At least in respect to their heterosexual desires. I have been unable to locate any data or even scholarly discussion about homosexuality in Mosuo culture, and my repeated attempts to ask questions about this during my visit were met with uniform denial of its existence.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 58–61.

and sexual unions for women and men alike.<sup>36</sup> Parents and kin did not meddle or concern themselves with the love lives of their daughters (or sons), because mate choice carried almost no implications for the family or society.<sup>37</sup> Under the *tisese* system, men, who must “walk back and forth,” exercise slightly more initiative (or bear somewhat more of a burden) than women when it comes to petitioning for sexual and romantic access.<sup>38</sup> However, Mosuo women can freely refuse any undesired visits and explicitly invite desired ones.<sup>39</sup> They do not suffer the nearly universal double standard that regulates women’s sexuality elsewhere. Mosuo culture does not venerate female chastity or judge women’s sexual behavior differently from men’s.<sup>40</sup> Girls and boys alike learn traditional courting songs and receive encouragement to desire, pursue, and enjoy (hetero)sexual lovers.<sup>41</sup>

Likewise Mosuo women enjoy an extraordinary degree of freedom from reproductive demands, one that is particularly mind boggling compared with both the Confucian and Chinese Communist regimes.<sup>42</sup> Male lovers or in-laws do not pressure women to produce (especially male) heirs, or to engage in sexual activity at all if they are not in the mood.<sup>43</sup> Mosuo maternal families do not need or want each daughter to bear as many children as patrilineal peasant families need their daughters-in-law to do. For its economic and social survival, a Mosuo matrilineage needs each generation of women to bear at least one daughter and to collectively produce a gender mix of children, but no individual woman is compelled to procreate.<sup>44</sup> Nor is she individually responsible to care for her children, if she does.<sup>45</sup> Lactating sisters traditionally shared breastfeeding as well as childrearing tasks. The Mosuo language does not distinguish between a mother and a maternal aunt, but employs the same word, *emi*, for both.<sup>46</sup>

Mosuo women’s reproductive autonomy resulted in distinctive historical fertility patterns compared with women in nearby ethnic groups, and particularly with Han women before the revolution. During the twentieth century, Mosuo women gave birth to fewer children overall, spaced their pregnancies further apart, and were more likely to forego childbearing entirely or to give birth to only one child.<sup>47</sup> The Mosuo also achieved lower mortality rates than their neighbors until

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<sup>36</sup> CAI, *supra* note 18, at 202–05.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 241, 250.

<sup>38</sup> *See id.* at 232.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 205.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 186.

<sup>41</sup> *See id.* at 191.

<sup>42</sup> *See id.* at 226–31.

<sup>43</sup> Chuan-kang & Jenike, *A Cultural-Historical Perspective on the Depressed Fertility Among the Matrilineal Moso in Southwest China*, 30 HUMAN ECOLOGY 21, 38 (2002).

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> CAI, *supra* note 18, at 250.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 142.

<sup>47</sup> Chuan-kang & Jenike, *supra* note 43, at 33.

interventions by the Chinese Communists wreaked havoc on their family economy.<sup>48</sup> In fact, traditional Mosuo men exercise much less reproductive agency than their sisters. Because men generally do not live with or coparent their biological progeny, their sexual behavior has no implications for their own parenting careers or family size.<sup>49</sup> Instead, the collective childbearing of their sisters determines men's parental roles. Mosuo men are primary social fathers to their nieces and nephews.<sup>50</sup>

So potently does the typical patrilocal Chinese peasant family need and desire male heirs that it generally considers the birth of a daughter to be at best a "Small Happiness," as the title of Carma Hinton's 1984 documentary film about Chinese gender relations in the revolutionary village Fanshen put it.<sup>51</sup> The Mosuo, in contrast, claim to have no gender preference in their offspring.<sup>52</sup> Western audiences who view *Tise*, a more recent documentary film about Mosuo kinship,<sup>53</sup> experience a mind-bending moment along these lines. Describing the birth of her third child, a Mosuo woman recounts asking her mother, who had delivered the baby, whether her newborn was a girl or a boy. The new mother claims, perhaps apocryphally, that her mother replied, "I didn't notice."<sup>54</sup>

In fact, the matrilineal character of traditional Mosuo kinship generated at least a modest structural preference for daughters over sons. However, Mosuo culture also developed adaptive mechanisms to cope with the arbitrary effects of infertility or gender imbalance among a family's offspring.<sup>55</sup> Relatives and close friends sometimes exchanged or adopted children amongst themselves when their families needed to gain (or to relinquish) daughters or sons.<sup>56</sup> Yang Erche Namu, an international celebrity Mosuo singer, model and entrepreneur, describes how her mother had been offered just such an exchange by a close friend. Because Namu's mother lacked a son, her close friend Dujema offered to trade her youngest boy for infant Namu.<sup>57</sup> Gender-skewed families could also recruit needier relatives or sometimes invite an "open" *axiao* of the missing gender to join their

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<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 41–42.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* at 146–47.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*

<sup>51</sup> SMALL HAPPINESS (New Day Films 1984).

<sup>52</sup> Chuan-kang & Jenike, *supra* note 43, at 25.

<sup>53</sup> TISESE: A DOCUMENTARY ON THREE MOSO WOMEN (Asian Educational Media Service 2001).

<sup>54</sup> *Id.*

<sup>55</sup> See Chuan-kang, *supra* note 16, at 147–56 (describing the Mosuo method of adoption); Walsh, *supra* note 10, at 172–74.

<sup>56</sup> See Chuan-kang, *supra* note 16, at 152–53; Walsh, *supra* note 10, at 172–74.

<sup>57</sup> YANG ERCHE NAMU & CHRISTINE MATHIEU, LEAVING MOTHER LAKE: A GIRLHOOD AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD 14–15 (2003).

households, enabling a genre of *de facto*, but not contractual marriage to form within a maternal extended family.<sup>58</sup>

A. *A Society Without Fathers or Fatherlessness*

Whenever I report that I journeyed to a culture in which adults do not normally marry or live with their lovers, most Western listeners respond with a series of anxious questions about fatherhood: But do the children know who their fathers are? Don't the children want to have fathers? Don't fathers have any responsibility for their children? What happens to the men in the maternal family? What happens to the children, (and especially the boys) who grow up without fathers? Questions like these reveal more about contemporary Western family ideology and preoccupations than about Mosuo kinship or concerns, of course. They presuppose that biology determines family bonds, that our contemporary taken-for-granted family relationships are natural and universal, and that what Westerners call "fatherlessness," inherently injures children and societies. It routinely seems to strain credulity when I try to explain that the traditional Mosuo family and kinship system did not assign social significance to the role of male genitor, and jaws invariably drop when I quote Namu's claim that, "People of my mother's generation did not inquire about their fathers: whatever happened in a woman's room, in the warm light of her own private fire, was a woman's private affair."<sup>59</sup>

All children born to the same Mosuo woman are full siblings, whether or not they share the same genitor.<sup>60</sup> Mosuo culture lacks the Western concept of half or step siblings.<sup>61</sup> The woman in the *Tisese* documentary who claimed that her mother had not bothered to notice the gender of her newborn had given birth to three children, and each had a different biological genitor.<sup>62</sup> The woman's first great love had died in an accident soon after her first child was born.<sup>63</sup> She discovered she was pregnant a second time after indulging in a casual, brief liaison with a man she met in an urban center she visited on family business.<sup>64</sup> She never had contact with that lover again, nor informed him of her pregnancy.<sup>65</sup> With her next long-term *axiao*, she had conceived her third and last child.<sup>66</sup> Despite these diverse

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<sup>58</sup> See Chuan-kang, *supra* note 16, at 70, 82–88, 154 (stating that demographic exigencies may require a woman to call in her *tisese* partner and providing examples of forming relationships to "continue the hearth").

<sup>59</sup> See YANG & MATHIEU, *supra* note 58, at 53.

<sup>60</sup> See CAI, *supra* note 18, at 120–22.

<sup>61</sup> See *id.* at 140–50 (discussing Mosuo kinship classifications).

<sup>62</sup> TISESE: A DOCUMENTARY ON THREE MOSO WOMEN, *supra* note 54.

<sup>63</sup> *Id.*

<sup>64</sup> *Id.*

<sup>65</sup> *Id.*

<sup>66</sup> *Id.*

genetic origins, the three children share identical family statuses and identical parents.<sup>67</sup> None is fatherless.<sup>68</sup>

If biological paternity carries no inherent implications for Mosuo kinship, it is nonetheless now often a matter of common local knowledge.<sup>69</sup> Genetic fathers of children born within open *tisese* relationships typically acknowledge their offspring, give them occasional gifts, and develop avuncular relationships with them, at least for as long as the adult *axiao* relationship with the mother endures.<sup>70</sup> In a sense, one could say that Mosuo-kinship rules reverse the social expectations that American culture assigns to fathers and maternal uncles. Likewise, although Mosuo kinship is not rooted in marriage, the culture did not entirely preclude marriage.<sup>71</sup> Mosuo kinship has been a flexible system open to pragmatic adaptations that helped families to survive. As we have seen, one strategy families devised to redress gender imbalances allowed for exceptions to the cultural rule against couples living together.<sup>72</sup> There were historical precedents for both uxorilocal and virilocal instances of de facto marriages.<sup>73</sup>

Nonetheless, traditional Mosuo culture did not employ the idiom of marriage to depict such relationships, and the categories of husband and father did not apply.<sup>74</sup> Contemporary Mosuo informants regard *tisese* rather than marriage as their practice “since time immemorial,” which according to some scholars extends back earlier than 200 BC.<sup>75</sup> Although there have been substantial changes in Mosuo family practices over time, particularly upheavals since the Communists came to power that I describe below, *tisese* remains the primary institution for sexual union and reproduction.<sup>76</sup> It now coexists with secondary forms of contemporary marriage and cohabitation.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Id.*

<sup>68</sup> *Id.*

<sup>69</sup> See Chuan-kang, *supra* note 16, at 60.

<sup>70</sup> See *id.* at 56–57.

<sup>71</sup> See *id.* at 70 (noting that “marriage as we understand the term . . . has been present in Moso society for hundreds of years . . .”).

<sup>72</sup> See *id.*

<sup>73</sup> See *id.* at 57–58 (noting that the “duration of a *tisese* relationship depends entirely upon the couple’s affectional commitment to each other,” and that “an enduring relationship could result in uxorilocal, virilocal, or neolocal residence and last up to decades”).

<sup>74</sup> See *id.* at 71.

<sup>75</sup> Chuan-Kang, *Genesis of Marriage*, *supra* note 30, at 386; Chuan-kang, *supra* note 16, at 69.

<sup>76</sup> Chuan-kang, *supra* note 16, at 52 (noting that *tisese* is “still by far the most prevalent pattern of institutionalized sexual union among the Moso”).

<sup>77</sup> See *id.* at 70.

Although few Americans, and even few family scholars, seem to have heard of the Mosuo, they have attracted substantial media attention.<sup>78</sup> In fact, the popularity of contemporary ethnic tourism to Lugu Lake is largely a product of the widespread, titillating media treatment that the Mosuo have received both in China and more globally since three provocative books about them were published in the 1980s and 1990s. The books' titles alone sensationalize Mosuo gender and kinship arrangements. *The Remote Country of Women*, a biting satirical novel about China's coercive Cultural Revolution, romanticizes Mosuo free sexuality and harmonious mother-centered family life in order to condemn the fanatical repressive authoritarianism of the Maoist regime.<sup>79</sup> *A Society Without Fathers or Husbands*,<sup>80</sup> an ethnography published in France with an introduction by Claude Levi Strauss nearly a decade later, remains so controversial in the People's Republic of China ("PRC") that it still has not been translated into Chinese.<sup>81</sup> That same year, Mosuo celebrity Yang Erche Namu published the first of a series of uninhibited memoirs that are widely credited with (or blamed for) generating much of the ensuing onslaught of media exposure and domestic tourism.<sup>82</sup>

Recurrent feature stories about the Mosuo have appeared in the popular media in China and abroad ever since in venues ranging from CCTV in China,<sup>83</sup> ABC's "Evening News with Peter Jennings"<sup>84</sup> in the United States, and the BBC's *Frontline*,<sup>85</sup> to *National Geographic*,<sup>86</sup> *Time Asia* magazine,<sup>87</sup> and the *Lonely Planet*.<sup>88</sup> These typically portray the Mosuo as "living fossils" of a lost world,

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<sup>78</sup> See Eileen R. Walsh, *From Nü Guo to Nü'er Guo: Negotiating Desire in the Land of the Mosuo*, 31 MODERN CHINA 448, 449, 463 (2005) (discussing the media attention received by the Mosuo people).

<sup>79</sup> BAI HUA, *THE REMOTE COUNTRY OF WOMEN* 53–54 (Qingyun Wu & Thomas O. Beebe trans., 1994).

<sup>80</sup> CAI, *supra* note 18.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Ling Yi, Dongba Cultural Institute (Aug. 27, 2007). See generally Charles F. McKhann, Book Review, 62 J. ASIAN STUDIES 225, 227 (2003) (noting that the book has not yet been translated into Chinese).

<sup>82</sup> See Walsh, *supra* note 79, at 448–86.

<sup>83</sup> *Lijiang* (CCTV television broadcast Apr. 5, 2005).

<sup>84</sup> *Evening News with Peter Jennings: Mosuo Matriarchy* (ABC television broadcast May 13, 2002).

<sup>85</sup> *Frontline: The Woman's Kingdom* (PBS television broadcast June 27, 2006) [hereinafter *Frontline*].

<sup>86</sup> *China's "Kingdom of Women"* (National Geographic Television broadcast June 17, 2008).

<sup>87</sup> Matthew Forney, *Minority Report: The Mosuo, a Small Matrilineal Tribe in Central China, are Preserving their Traditions by Exploiting Them*, TIME ASIA, Nov. 11, 2002, available at [http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/china\\_cul\\_rev/minorities.html](http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/china_cul_rev/minorities.html).

<sup>88</sup> Nick Mackie, *The Lake of Free Love*, LONELY PLANET.TV, May 2007, <http://www.lonelyplanet.tv/Clip.aspx?key=A1A45082E248670C>.

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alternately characterizing them as “the last matriarchy” or as a utopian land of peace, harmony and free love.<sup>89</sup> According to ABC News

[A]nthropologists say because the men have no power, control no land, and play subservient sexual roles, there is nothing for them to fight about . . . making this culture one of the most harmonious societies on the planet. The Mosuo people, estimated to number around 50,000, have no word for war, no murders, no rapes, no jails.<sup>90</sup>

Or, in *Lonely Planet*'s more succinct summary, “The society’s run by women, they don’t marry; and taking lovers is encouraged.”<sup>91</sup>

Surprisingly, some scholars represent the Mosuo in similar starry-eyed terms. For example, a literary critic’s review of *The Remote Country of Women*<sup>92</sup> is more hyperbolic than the media examples above:

[T]here is no marriage; women freely take lovers and are primarily responsible for home and family. The men only have a roof to sleep under if they are accepted as lovers by a woman and only so long as she or he desires. The Mosuo are not only unabashed in their sexuality, but live powerful emotional lives, which, however, almost never erupt into violence because they lack a sense of possessiveness.<sup>93</sup>

Romantic and nostalgic depictions of the Mosuo like these foster what anthropologist Louisa Schein calls “internal orientalism” among hundreds of thousands of Asian visitors whom the tourist industry now lures to Lugu Lake annually.<sup>94</sup>

Of course, however, the Mosuo are by no means “living fossils.” While their traditional family system has proven impressively resilient, it is far from impervious to history or unchanged. The Maoist Cultural Revolution followed by capitalist modernization and tourism instigated profound, paradoxical shifts in Mosuo family practices and ideology. Before I discuss these ironic transformations, I want to introduce three contemporary Mosuo families whose

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<sup>89</sup> See Frontline, *supra* note 86.

<sup>90</sup> *World News with Charles Gibson: In China, Mosuo Women Rule* (ABC television broadcast May 19, 2007).

<sup>91</sup> See Mackie, *supra* note 89.

<sup>92</sup> See Jeffrey Twitchell, Book Review, 17 CHINESE LITERATURE: ESSAYS, ARTICLES, REVIEWS (“CLEAR”) 167, 167 (1995).

<sup>93</sup> *Id.*

<sup>94</sup> Louisa Schein, *Gender and Internal Orientalism in China*, 23 MODERN CHINA 69, 70 (1997).

elder members I visited and interviewed during my own ethnic tourist foray in August 2007.

*B. Three Contemporary Mosuo Families*

An anthropologist at the Dongba Culture Research Institute in Lijiang arranged for Gezo Ita,<sup>95</sup> a Mosuo woman, to organize and guide my ethnographic tour of her home community. When Gezo was ten years old, her family had sent her from their village near Lugu Lake to attend school in distant Lijiang where she later married and continues to live and work. I had asked to visit families who live in Luoshui village, the Mosuo tourist Mecca on the shores of Lugu Lake, as well as some in more distant locales not yet on the commercial tourist radar. Gezo accompanied me and my multiethnic support entourage<sup>96</sup> first to the home of the Dashus, the “traditional Mosuo family,” she had selected to host us overnight. The Dashus inhabit a working family farm compound situated a twenty-minute drive or an hour’s hike beyond Yongning market town, the county seat, and more than an hour’s drive from the popular tourist villages on Lugu Lake. At the time of our visit, ten members of four generations of Dashus resided in the family’s traditional, large, ancestral Mosuo residence.

The household dabu, fifty-four-year-old Jiama, had been her mother’s only child and was also the sole member of her generation of Dashus. Most likely this is because Jiama was born in 1953, just a few years before the first team of Communist Chinese People’s Liberation Army cadres arrived to “liberate” the Mosuo from their family, cultural, and property system, using draconian methods I will describe below. Jiama’s mother had died long ago, but her aged, hunchback maternal aunt occupied the revered Mosuo status of grandmother and with it residence in the household’s focal “grandmother’s room,” even though infertility had prevented her from giving birth to any children herself. No other members of this oldest generation of Dashus remained. During our stay, “grandmother” participated in lighter household chores—fetching kindling from the courtyard for the eternally lit hearth, emptying plastic wash basins used for morning tooth brushing, feeding the chickens and pigs, and gesturing enthusiastically to cajole

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<sup>95</sup> All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.

<sup>96</sup> In addition to Gezo, who arranged the visits and translated from Mosuo to Mandarin, my retinue included three other translators, guides and companions: a driver, Mr. Li, a 30 year old married Bai man with one daughter who lives in Lijiang; Wang Fen, a 23 year old female graduate student in anthropology from a university in Kunning who was hired to translate Mandarin to English; and Ron Cho, my seat-mate during my flight from Shanghai to Lijiang, a 27 year old software engineer who was taking a week’s vacation. Ron turned out to be a born anthropologist, and an enthusiastic volunteer research assistant and translator who agreed to join my journey to Lugu Lake.

guests like me to sample the fried bread and oil tea the family had prepared specially for our visit.

Fortunately for the once-endangered Dashu lineage, Jiama had proved much more fecund than had her mother or aunt. For more than three decades, she had sustained an exceptionally long-lasting, exclusive “walking marriage” with a man with whom she had conceived seven living children. At the time of my visit in August 2007, her four daughters and three sons ranged in age from nineteen to thirty-eight. Three of the daughters, but only the youngest son still lived at home. Jiama’s oldest daughter had suffered a severe head injury when she was a small child that had left her both deaf and mute. During our stay, she performed most of the visible domestic chores of food preparation, cleaning, and serving. Her two resident sisters, both of them mothers, made only brief appearances in the central grandmother’s room or the public courtyard during our visit.

Jiama’s youngest child, bilingual in Mosuo and Chinese, was planning to go to a provincial university next year. I observed this affectionate, engaged young uncle reading to his younger nieces and nephew, drilling them on Chinese words, and patiently looping himself in rope for the endless rounds of Chinese Jump Rope his nieces loved to play. Close upon the heels of our arrival at the Dashu residence, Jiama’s twenty-nine-year-old son arrived home for a visit from distant Lijiang where, I was told, he and his wife lived and worked in “the tourist industry.” Accompanying this son home for the visit were two women friends and colleagues, one Han, the other a Turkish-Swede who, like me, spoke neither Mosuo nor Chinese. Jiama’s other two adult children also live and work elsewhere, one of them reportedly also in a “modern” marriage with children.

Three members of the fourth, youngest generation of Dashus were home during my visit, each born to a different mother. Jiama’s ten-year-old grandson was her second daughter’s son. However, I discovered that only one of the two avid Chinese Jump Ropers actually was a full-fledged member of the Dashu lineage and homestead—Jiama’s third daughter’s seven-year-old girl. It turned out that the girl’s five-year old playmate was not a Dashu, because she was the daughter of Jiama’s married son who had brought his women friends home with him from Lijiang. He had arrived laden with new Western clothing and toys for his daughter, who was the primary reason for his visit. The little girl no longer lived with either of her genetic parents. She was spending the summer in this, her father’s household, in part because it offered her companionable playmates. During the school year, however, she would return to her maternal grandmother’s household, located closer to her school in Yongning. One year earlier, her parents had moved together to distant Lijiang to work in the tourist industry, and since then they had been taking turns visiting their daughter as often as they could.

The second “traditional Mosuo family” that Gezo arranged for me to visit lived in an even larger farm-family compound than the Dashus and even further off the trodden tourist trail. Nonetheless, this family proved to be even less traditional than the Dashu lineage. Ayi, the second family’s dabu, was once again a woman in

her fifties and the only household member of her generation. Ayi headed a three-generation family composed simply of her own mother, herself, and four of her six adult children. When I inquired about grandchildren, she told me that so far only her oldest son had any offspring, and thus her first grandchild lived with his mother's matrilineal family. However, Ayi felt optimistic that soon her matriline would have a grandchild of its own, because, she said, one of her daughters had recently married.

In fact, when our party had entered the courtyard, my travel companion Ron Cho had pointed out that a large Chinese "red double happiness" wedding sign was prominently displayed on one of the windows. We learned that the "newlywed" couple it blessed were not legally married and did not live together, but had conducted the ceremony for an open "walking marriage." Ayi's third daughter was cohabiting with her husband elsewhere in an urban "modern marriage." One of Ayi's three sons, in contrast, lived in a Buddhist lamasery where he was studying to become a lama. He had come home for the weekend with his teacher, and throughout our two-hour visit, they were chanting in the family's elaborate worship room. One other daughter and Ayi's other two sons still lived at home, and none of these had a publicly recognized mate.

Ayi, also like Jiama, had been in an exclusive walking marriage for several decades, and all of her children shared the same father. What's more, Ayi and her children regarded her longtime *axio* as her husband and their father, and they were grateful to him for how much help he had provided them during very difficult times. When their father's own mother died, therefore, the children had invited him to move into their matrilineal home. Reportedly, Ayi's long-term mate spent most nights and days living and working with Ayi and her family, but he also spent a couple of nights each week in his own maternal home now headed by one of his sisters. In addition, he often accepted overnight hospitality from a married daughter and her husband who lived in a town where he participated in occasional construction work.

On our journey from these two more remote Mosuo families to Loushui, the famed, affluent tourist Mecca on Lugu Lake, we made several detours to inspect aspiring competitors vying for the tourist trade, including a smaller lakeside village and the controversial, new, upscale cultural "palace" guesthouse that celebrity Namu had built. We also hiked across a lengthy, beautiful new "Walking Marriage Bridge" over a marshy "Sea of Grass," which, according to the signage at its entrance, had been built to facilitate *tisese* between lovers in Mosuo villages on the rapidly developing Sichuan side of the lake.

In Luoshui, Gezo set up a third formal home visit and interview for me with one of the seventy-two official Mosuo families who own and operate the three popular ethnic tourist commercial activities in the village—trough boat rides, donkey rides, and nightly courtship song and dance performances. Like most Luoshui property owners, this family had converted their ancestral home into as large a hotel as the site and village regulations would accommodate. Gezo was

eager for me to see the homestead's 400-year-old grandmother's room and to introduce me to Halba, a man of considerable intelligence, cultural sophistication, and political savvy who was the senior uncle of the household. She warned me, however, not to embarrass him (or her) by asking any sensitive questions about his personal life, because, she said, he was a childless bachelor.

Gezo's enthusiasm about this lakeside house and its thoughtful, articulate senior male proved amply justified. I had been duly impressed with the form, space, and traditional decor of the first two Mosuo domiciles I had visited, but this Luoshui homestead was on a decidedly grander scale. Grandmother's sleeping alcove was elaborately carved and carpeted, the requisite "female" and "male" supporting pillars were taller and thicker, and a richer array of antique Buddhist ceremonial objects adorned the center altar behind the hearth, although incongruously they shared the honor with a modern fax machine. It was Halba, the astute, articulate senior uncle, however, who made my visit to this family so enlightening and memorable. He was not the family dabu, but unquestionably its chief moral authority and spokesperson. In fact, I only met the surprisingly young dabu, one of Halba's nieces, as we were about to leave the premises. Gezo introduced the niece to me as the dabu, but later quipped that while the young woman was the dabu of the household, Halba was the director.

After Halba welcomed us, he propped his somewhat senile 84-year-old mother on the honorific senior woman's cushion to the immediate left of the hearth where she nodded in and out of consciousness during our stay. He then assumed the senior male's perch on the right and briefly outlined the four generations in his family. Like Jiama and Ayi, Halba is in his mid-fifties. Unlike them, however, he was not an only child and was not the only member of his generation residing in the family. Halba had four sisters who collectively had given birth to seven children. I met only one of his sisters and one niece—the young woman who had returned after university to become dabu (and run the family hotel). Most of the rest of Halba's nieces and nephews were away at university or living and working elsewhere. Thanks to Luoshui's affluence, all seventy-two of its official Mosuo families could afford to send all of their children to university and no longer needed their labor at home. I mistakenly presumed that the teenage girl who bustled around the kitchen, served us tea, kept the kettle boiling, and ministered to Halba's mother was also a niece. Later I learned that she was a hired domestic worker, an ethnic Pumi recruited from a poorer nearby village that had not shared in the tourist-industry bounty.

Although Gezo had warned me not to raise the subject, Halba volunteered how fortunate he felt to have such wonderful, loving nieces and nephews, because he himself had not married and had not had any children of his own. Thanks to his sisters, however, he was now blessed with young grandchildren, the emergent fourth generation of his family. His niece, the dabu, was toting one of these newest family members on her hip when we crossed paths with her in the courtyard. When I asked if the toddler was her only child, she told me that in fact he was not hers,

but one of her sister's sons. She hoped to have children some day, she added, "but I'm not married yet."

### C. Conquerors, Communists and Marriage Politics

As even this skeletal sketch of three families indicates, contemporary Mosuo culture has incorporated some of the rhetoric of marriage as well as instances and forms of marital relationships. Over the centuries, waves of first imperial and then Maoist conquerors actively intervened in Mosuo kinship practices. Mosuo sexual, gender, and family values had mystified and offended ruling imperial Chinese and Communist sensibilities at least as much as they challenge contemporary Western convictions about proper family life. Mongol, Confucian and Communist invaders were nonplussed when they encountered the absence of marriage and the maternal domestic units in Mosuo communities, and they applied varying degrees of coercion to correct both affronts.

When Kublai Khan founded the Yuan Dynasty in the thirteenth century, his forces subjugated the indigenous cultures of southwestern China and incorporated their native chieftain system into the state's centralized bureaucracy.<sup>97</sup> In order to maintain lineal inheritance of their royal authority, Mosuo chieftains began to adopt patrilocal marriage for the ruling families, while commoners, serfs and even other members of the elite continued the *tisese* system.<sup>98</sup> According to Chuan-Kang Shih, one prominent scholar in the field, the *tisese* system began to include exclusive pairing at that point, that is, to incorporate the kinds of monogamous "walking marriages" that Jiama, Ayi, and other members of the families I described have developed.<sup>99</sup> Shih claims that the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) institutionalized these two modifications of traditional Mosuo kinship patterns.<sup>100</sup> The Qing imposed patrilineal primogeniture on the chieftains, which normalized patrilocal marriage among them.<sup>101</sup> Marriage never became normative among commoners, however, nor even among members of the elite who were not chieftains.<sup>102</sup> Nonetheless, "walking marriage," or what Cai Hua termed the

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<sup>97</sup> See Chuan-kang, *Genesis of Marriage*, *supra* note 30, at 388.

<sup>98</sup> Scholars disagree over whether *tisese* was the original universal form of Mosuo kinship that was later modified to incorporate marriage, or whether a mixed system, with patrilineal marriage for rulers, was present from the outset. See, e.g., Chuan-kang, *The Yongning Moso*, *supra* note 16, at 52–58 (noting that the Mosuo were matrilineal and practiced non-conjugal kinship all the way back to the Han period); McKhann, *supra* note 11, at 34–35 (believing the Mosuo were originally bilineal, and the matrilineal non-marriage system was a later strategic adaptation to the caste system and a means to maintain power by elites).

<sup>99</sup> See Chuan-kang, *Genesis of Marriage*, *supra* note 30, at 383–87.

<sup>100</sup> *Id.* at 401, 405.

<sup>101</sup> *Id.* at 405.

<sup>102</sup> *Id.* at 404.

“conspicuous” visiting relationship, developed into a secondary institution of sexual union at that time.<sup>103</sup>

Thus, over the centuries Chinese imperial dynastic policies modified the Mosuo’s exclusively mother-centered and nonmarital traditional culture. Far and away the most dramatic and disruptive interventions in Mosuo family and society commenced in the late 1950s and early 1960s when teams of Chinese People’s Liberation Army cadres made their way to Lugu Lake.<sup>104</sup> Close on their heels, the Chinese Communist Party sent research teams comprised of Marxist anthropologists who had been schooled in the evolutionary-stage theory of family and kinship that Friedrich Engels derived from the work of nineteenth-century anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan.<sup>105</sup> These Communist anthropologists conducted extensive fieldwork among the Mosuo and published the first, portentous ethnographies about their kinship and culture.<sup>106</sup> They generated representations of Mosuo gender, sexual, and family practices that now lure hordes of titillated tourists. Originally, however, their depictions provided targets for ruthless Maoist efforts at “modernization.”

Viewing Mosuo maternal family residence and *tisese* through Marxist evolutionary spectacles, the researchers believed they were observing forms of primitive matriarchy and group marriage amidst a culture that had failed to evolve. A paradigmatic Chinese ethnographer of the period marveled, “They are like a colorful historical museum of the evolution of families in which one finds living fossils of ancient marriage formations and family structures.”<sup>107</sup> Similarly, an early state-produced documentary film portrayed what it imagined to be the primitive group-marriage system of the Mosuo as evidence of their oppression prior to Communist liberation.<sup>108</sup> Ranking high among several ironic (and painful) chapters of Chinese Communist family history, was the ensuing set of Maoist campaigns to liberate the Mosuo from their oppressive kinship regime by helping them to “evolve” from their primitive sexual and household relations into a modern, male-headed, nuclear family system.<sup>109</sup> Namu sarcastically recalls the Maoists’ relentless attempts “to reeducate the people—because the Moso shared everything, including

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<sup>103</sup> CAI, *supra* note 18, at 237.

<sup>104</sup> See Walsh, *supra* note 79, at 456 (describing state work teams’ observations of Mosuo families after intervening in the 1950s and 1960s).

<sup>105</sup> *Id.* at 479.

<sup>106</sup> See *id.* (noting researchers produced several reports on the Mosuo in the 1960s, including the 1964 Investigation of the Social and Household Patterns of Ninglang Yi Autonomous County Naxi).

<sup>107</sup> Yan Ruxian, *A Living Fossil of the Family: A Study of the Family Structure of the Naxi Nationality in the Lugu Lake Region*, 4 SOC. SCIEN. IN CHINA 60, 61 (1982).

<sup>108</sup> See Walsh, *supra* note 10, at 93.

<sup>109</sup> See *id.* at 92–95.

their lovers, which amounted to a form of primitive communism that was a health hazard and a blight on the face of modern China.”<sup>110</sup>

Two decades of increasingly coercive waves of this Maoist-style “liberation” began in 1956.<sup>111</sup> Teams of Communist cadres and Red Guards staged vigorous campaigns to eradicate *tisese* and usher Mosuo villagers into modern marriages.<sup>112</sup> They came repeatedly, in Namu’s words, “to harangue the people there on the dangers of sexual freedom and the benefits of monogamous marriage.”<sup>113</sup> Illustratively, a Party cadre in Bai Hua’s scathing fictional parody of the Cultural Revolution exhorts Mosuo villagers:

We want you to live a decent, monogamous, legitimate life. What kind of life are you leading now? Only cavemen living ten thousand years ago had lives like yours, so chaotic that a child knows his mother but not his father. This is the residue of group marriage. . . . Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves?<sup>114</sup>

Two of the novel’s protagonists, Comrades Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyan, instruct local officials on, “how to accomplish [their] great historical mission.”<sup>115</sup> They explained, “[i]n the shortest possible time, by force or by persuasion, you must drag our Mosuo kinsmen out of the Stone Age and into modern life with the rest of us!”<sup>116</sup>

Access to party membership and political status served as potent means of indirect persuasion. Just as the Ch’ing Dynasty made marriage necessary for chieftains in order to bequeath royal status to their lineal descendents, under the PRC, marriage became *de rigueur* for political cadres seeking to establish their political correctness and status.<sup>117</sup> The inverted class hierarchy of revolutionary Maoist ideology led peasants to fear intimacy with landlords and “rightists,” and so the universe of potential mates diminished as the formerly democratic practice of *tisese* became much more class conscious and stratified.<sup>118</sup>

When the People’s Liberation Army first arrived in Ninglang County in 1956, between 10 and 14 percent of Mosuo couples were formally married.<sup>119</sup> The first marriage campaign during the Great Leap Forward in 1958 marginally increased

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<sup>110</sup> See YANG & MATHIEU, *supra* note 58, at 94.

<sup>111</sup> See Chuan-kang, *supra* note 13, at 701.

<sup>112</sup> See Walsh, *supra* note 79, at 92–95.

<sup>113</sup> YANG & MATHIEU, *supra* note 58, at 94.

<sup>114</sup> BAI, *supra* note 80, at 7–8.

<sup>115</sup> *Id.* at 8.

<sup>116</sup> *Id.*

<sup>117</sup> See Chuan-Kang, *supra* note 30, at 387–403.

<sup>118</sup> Chuan-kang, *supra* note 13, at 701–02.

<sup>119</sup> *Id.* at 706.

the proportion of couples living jointly (whether married or not) to approximately 20 percent in 1960.<sup>120</sup> A more aggressive campaign during the Cultural Revolution convinced perhaps half of Mosuo partnered couples to get married. However, once again, a few months after the campaign ended, two-thirds of the newlywed pairs divorced and returned to their maternal homes.<sup>121</sup>

When persuasion proved insufficient to propel the Mosuos' sexual and domestic "evolution," the PRC turned to force. The early sporadic campaigns had been organized at the county level, but after they failed, the provincial government stepped in to wage the draconian "One Husband–One Wife" campaign of 1975.<sup>122</sup> The Party made marriage compulsory for every adult who had a partner and posted night-time sentries in village streets to ambush men en route to visit their lovers.<sup>123</sup> Zealous cadres dragged visiting couples out of their beds and exposed them naked to their relatives.<sup>124</sup> Officials forced the Mosuo to build houses for married couples to inhabit jointly.<sup>125</sup> They withheld grain and cloth rations from children whose mothers refused to reveal the names of their biological fathers as well as from men who were caught attempting a night visit.<sup>126</sup>

Coercion proved more effective than had exhortation. This time, virtually all couples married, and the vast majority remained so at the time of Mao's death in 1976.<sup>127</sup> Through meticulous fieldwork in the 1980s, Shih identified 424 couples in the Yongning area who had been forced into registered marriages.<sup>128</sup> Jiamā Dashu and her lover would have been among these, as were three of Halba's four sisters and their lovers. Jiamā reported that she managed to tolerate living with her husband's family in her forced marriage for only three months before she quietly moved back to the maternal home where she is now the dabu. Ayi told me that she had been spared a forced marriage because she was an only child who had already had a child. However, she knew many people who were forced to marry, and she claimed that most of those marriages quickly fell apart. Halba's family had depended heavily upon the labor of his sisters and was short of men. Consequently, when cadres compelled three of his sisters to marry their lovers, Halba's family invited the men to move in with them.

Mosuo adults who lived through the marriage campaigns recount endless stories of domestic disharmony and even violence unleashed by this coerced

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<sup>120</sup> Susanne Knödel, *Yongning Moso Kinship and Chinese State Power*, in NAXI AND MOSO ETHNOGRAPHY: KIN, RITES, PICTOGRAPHS 47, 57 (Michael Oppitz & Elisabeth Hsu eds., 1998).

<sup>121</sup> *Id.*

<sup>122</sup> See Chuan-kang, *supra* note 13, at 701.

<sup>123</sup> See YANG & MATHIEU, *supra* note 58, at 94.

<sup>124</sup> *See id.*

<sup>125</sup> *See id.*

<sup>126</sup> *See id.*

<sup>127</sup> Knödel, *supra* note 121, at 57.

<sup>128</sup> See Chuan-kang, *supra* note 13, at 701.

cohabitation, especially when women were forced to move into their husbands' families or to live with their husbands and children in modern nuclear households. This Maoist modernization compelled Mosuo couples suddenly to merge domains of romance and eros with economics and domesticity that their culture had always deemed incommensurable. Forced family evolution also plunged the Mosuo into a challenging crash course on a category of kin quite novel to them—in-laws. The Mosuo language did not contain a word for this relationship.<sup>129</sup>

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the Mosuo who survived these campaigns, “describe the rupture in family arrangements that occurred during this time as the most painful effect of cultural policies during the Mao years.”<sup>130</sup> Halba, for example, reported that most of the forced marriages that took place in Luoshui village ultimately failed and many extended Mosuo families broke up during the Cultural Revolution. According to Halba, prior to Liberation, only seventeen large, extended maternal lineage households inhabited Luoshui. The Cultural Revolution wreaked so much havoc on family life that these households repeatedly divided. By the time Mao died in 1976, the initial seventeen families had fractured into seventy-two smaller ones. Although Halba's family also had suffered considerable conflict after his sisters were forced to marry and their husbands moved into the household, his family stoically resisted the urge to separate. They uncomfortably endured the unwelcome marriages in their midst for what turned out to be several years until Deng Xiao Ping's regime came to power and reversed the Maoist assimilation agenda toward ethnic minority cultures.

In 1981, the national minorities in Ninglang County received official permission to resume their traditional customs.<sup>131</sup> Halba informed me that as soon as the reform policies were announced, Luoshui families held a village meeting at which they collectively agreed to return to the traditional *tisese* system. At that point, Halba's three imposed brothers-in-law departed the household and returned to their maternal domiciles. The former conjugal couples converted their Maoist modern marriages back into walking marriages that continue to this day. Research indicates that this was a widespread pattern throughout Ninglang County, with the vast majority of conscripted Mosuo spouses moving back to their maternal homes.<sup>132</sup> Recall that two-thirds of Mosuo couples still were married when Mao died in 1976.<sup>133</sup> In 1983, however, a mere two years after the new policies were implemented, the marriage rate dropped and stabilized at 32 percent.<sup>134</sup> This brought the Mosuo marriage rate to a level below what it had been before the 1975

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<sup>129</sup> See Chuan-kang, *supra* note 13, at 403–04.

<sup>130</sup> Walsh, *supra* note 79, at 457.

<sup>131</sup> Knödel, *supra* note 121, at 58.

<sup>132</sup> *Id.*

<sup>133</sup> *Id.* at 57.

<sup>134</sup> *Id.* at 58.

One Husband–One Wife campaign and only 10 percent above what it had been in 1960, several years before the Cultural Revolution.<sup>135</sup>

Novelist Bai Hua depicts the revival of Mosuo *tisese* in the characteristically romantic terms of what Louisa Schein terms internal orientalism:

The Mosuo were a simple people. They soon consigned the second political encroachment of the civilized world to oblivion, as if they were forgetting two invasions by mammoths or hordes of elephants. They healed instantly. No sooner had the engines of the departing work team started snorting than the *axiao* embraced each other.<sup>136</sup>

The reality, of course, was more complex. Although one cannot fail to be impressed with how rapidly the Mosuo divested themselves of the conjugal products of Maoist modernization, they did not develop social amnesia or emerge unaffected from two decades of this crude social engineering. Not only had most Mosuo families suffered and then splintered, but the years of Maoist interventions also introduced some lasting ideological changes in Mosuo family values, discourses and practices that I will return to later.

#### *D. Performing Kinship for Extramarital Tourism*

The PRC decision to relinquish its attempt to forcibly modernize the cultures of ethnic minorities coincided, ironically again, with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) startling shift from socialist class struggle to the Four Modernizations development strategy in 1978. Paradoxically, at the same time that the CCP adopted its momentous turn toward the global capitalist market economy, it granted formal recognition and state support to preserving its distinctive ethnic minority cultures. This unlikely conjuncture allowed the revival of Mosuo maternal families and *tisese*, but also unleashed forces that continue to reshape and threaten the kinship and cultural system that the new policies sought to preserve.

As China began to embrace ethnic diversity in the early 1980s, ethnographies based on the earlier team reports about the Mosuo were published, and state TV produced documentaries that featured their provocative sexual and family system.<sup>137</sup> This ignited the Chinese public's appetite for ethnic tourism to Lugu Lake just when private enterprise was fostering the development of a domestic tourist industry. And so it happened that the very customs and practices that the Maoists had tried to eradicate came to be celebrated as sources of Mosuo cultural and economic value. Savvy Luoshui villagers seized the moment. Although the population of the well-situated lakeside village included almost as many ethnic

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<sup>135</sup> *Id.*

<sup>136</sup> BAI, *supra* note 80, at 29.

<sup>137</sup> *See* Chuan-kang, *supra* note 13, at 699.

Pumi as Mosuo, they joined to capitalize on Mosuo ethnic allure.<sup>138</sup> During the post-Cultural Revolution meeting that Halba described to me at which representatives of the then seventy-two resident families agreed to resume the Mosuo *tisese* sexual system, they also decided to freeze the number of official Mosuo matrilineal households in Luoshui at that number. In a self-conscious attempt to prevent jealousy, inequality and community schisms that they feared would arise were families to compete for the burgeoning tourist trade, the village established a cooperative to operate, regulate, and share the profits from its three commercial tourist activities—the boat and mule rides and the evening folk song and dance performances. Each family must contribute one worker to these activities, and they divide the profits equally. As a further self-protective measure, the cooperative agreed never to sell Luoshui houses to outsiders.

Ironically again, whereas the period of Maoist collectivization worked to privatize Mosuo families by coercing intimate couples into a form of state-arranged marriage, the turn to unbridled market capitalism led villagers of mixed ethnicity to collectivize earnings gained from performing the Mosuo's nonmarital brand of ethnic kinship. Capitalizing on public fascination with traditional Mosuo family and sexual practices among first mainstream Chinese, and later a global clientele, Luoshui rapidly made itself the premier ethnic tourist destination in China. Lugu Lake officially opened to domestic tourism in 1990 and to foreign travelers two years later.<sup>139</sup> Tourism really took off in the mid-1990s, and by 2004 over 200,000 visitors annually, 90 percent of whom were Chinese, were making the long trek to Lugu Lake.<sup>140</sup> My driver claimed that 500,000 tourists had visited in 2006. More than 90 percent of this trade includes a visit to Luoshui, which has become astonishingly affluent as a result. Once among the poorest Yunnan peasant villages,<sup>141</sup> Luoshui is reputed to have become a community of millionaire hoteliers and merchants (and their much less affluent employees).<sup>142</sup> There were more than 3,500 guest accommodations in tiny Luoshui in 2005.<sup>143</sup>

As the title of a *Time Asia* magazine feature story in 2002 put it, “The Mosuo, a small matrilineal tribe in central China, are preserving their traditions by exploiting them.”<sup>144</sup> Feminist anthropologist Eileen Walsh illustrates how local and external entrepreneurs profitably harvest three, somewhat contradictory, seeds of

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<sup>138</sup> See Walsh, *supra* note 79, at 453.

<sup>139</sup> *Id.* at 458.

<sup>140</sup> *Id.* at 459.

<sup>141</sup> Walsh, *supra* note 10, at 140–41.

<sup>142</sup> However, local families increasingly find themselves struggling with outside developers and the state who have appropriated as much of the local profits as possible, including the dance performances, and the state has imposed fees to enter the mountain region. Interview with Halba in Yunnan, China (August 22, 2007). See *id.*

<sup>143</sup> Walsh, *supra* note 79, at 460.

<sup>144</sup> Forney, *supra* note 88.

the Mosuo's exotic appeal, all of which center around women. The most potent and problematic lure is the Mosuo reputation for free love.<sup>145</sup> Misrepresentations of *tisese* as sanctioned promiscuity disseminated in the books by Bai Hua, Namu, Cai Hua and the popular media attract numerous wishful male sex tourists to Lugu Lake.<sup>146</sup> "Within the touristic frame and imagination," as Walsh suggests, "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."<sup>147</sup> With the tourist trade, a red light district quickly developed on the outskirts of Luoshui where at least a dozen establishments employed female sex workers of diverse ethnic and geographic origins who dressed as Mosuo women to service male tourists.<sup>148</sup> An expose of the sex industry in 2004 generated campaigns to eradicate it, but after several years, sex commerce began to reappear.<sup>149</sup>

There is no evidence of male sex workers in Lugu Lake, but the Mosuo reputation for free love also attracts some Han women who seek romantic refuge from their more patriarchal and puritanical sexual culture.<sup>150</sup> Widespread publicity about Helen Xu, a rare Han woman tourist who fell in love with a Mosuo man and married and settled in Luoshui with him, stoked this less prevalent brand of romance tourism.<sup>151</sup> Walsh claims that most local men happily accommodate female tourists who wish to experiment with *tisese*, much to the distress of local Mosuo women.<sup>152</sup> During a hired boat ride on the lake, I asked the three brothers who took turns rowing and napping about their experiences with women tourists. They recounted receiving frequent flirtatious overtures, but only one of the three acknowledged, rather reluctantly, that he had ever acquiesced. There was no point in doing so, they claimed, because such romances could not last. Because outsiders cannot purchase local property and lack a local family residence, they cannot integrate into Mosuo family life unless they secure an invitation to join a lover's household. Such an unlikely circumstance also violates the basic principles of *tisese* that attract tourists to begin with. I interviewed a twenty-five-year-old Han man from Guangdong who had come to Luoshui six months earlier to work on a local education project for the children of migrant workers. He told me that he and other Han men he knows would love to enter a Mosuo "walking marriage," but that this was virtually impossible, because they had no families to live with. As a result, outsiders rarely attain access to anything beyond an episode or two of furtive *tisese*.

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<sup>145</sup> See Walsh, *supra* note 79, at 474–76.

<sup>146</sup> See, e.g., CAI, *supra* note 18, at 185–262.

<sup>147</sup> Walsh, *supra* note 10, at 472.

<sup>148</sup> See *id.*

<sup>149</sup> *Id.*

<sup>150</sup> THE WOMEN'S KINGDOM (Xiaoli Zhou & Brent E. Huffman eds. 2006).

<sup>151</sup> See Walsh, *supra* note 79, at 466.

<sup>152</sup> *Id.* at 471–72.

The seductive sex appeal of the Mosuo collides somewhat with two other ethnic images marketed to tourists. Popular depictions of the Mosuo as matriarchal attract a smaller clientele of feminist tourists, including second-wave feminist scholars like me who are veterans of debates about the universality of patriarchy. Aware that Western feminists hope to find households of cooperative sisters led by wise, respected mothers, some Luoshui families perform the desired script. Walsh observed a visit by two Australian feminist tourists to the family of one of her Mosuo friends who feigned a loving sister relationship with a cousin from a poorer village.<sup>153</sup> In reality, the cousin worked for her wealthier Luoshui relatives whom she resented and regarded as “not Mosuo anymore.”<sup>154</sup>

If the Mosuo’s matriarchal image strikes the fancy of a limited feminist market, it overlaps with a third ethnic image with far broader allure. Romantic notions of a lost primitive world intensify rampant nostalgia among mainstream Chinese members of the one-child family era for the imagined harmony of the large extended families of yore. Walsh suggests that the Mosuo self-consciously cater to these desires by performing family harmony for tourists.<sup>155</sup> Indeed, the Mosuo I interviewed uniformly claimed that their families were more harmonious than families based on marriage, because it is easier for adult children to get along with their natal kin than to have to adapt to life with spouses and in-laws. Perhaps, I was too readily taken in by the theatrical skills of the families I visited, but from what I observed, such claims seemed to have merit.

#### *E. Marriage Markets*

Many Mosuo themselves have begun to worry about how long they will be able to sustain their unique family structure. The *tisese* system revived impressively after the Cultural Revolution, but as we have seen, not without alterations. Previously marginal concepts of marriage, husbands, and fathers gained greater cultural currency and consequence. Current Mosuo family life represents a hybrid accommodation between traditional *tisese* and modern marriage. On the one hand, the tourist industry coyly markets *tisese* as a free-love regime. After we returned to Lijiang from Lugu Lake, Ron Cho and I attended an elaborate ethnic-minority spectacle concert in the city’s massive new Cultural Center Performance Hall filled with thousands of passengers deposited by tour buses. The show portrayed the Mosuo through modern dance choreography that pantomimed night visiting. First each of three beautiful Mosuo maidens warmly welcomed three suitors who had climbed the imaginary walls to their flower chambers and then hung their hats outside the window to signal that the room and

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<sup>153</sup> *Id.* at 468–69.

<sup>154</sup> *Id.* at 469.

<sup>155</sup> *Id.* at 476–77.

its resident were occupied. Next, the delighted audience laughed on cue when the tardy ascent of a disappointed fourth suitor was greeted by a competitor's cap.

Despite the apparent effectiveness of a ubiquitous marketing strategy that features the titillations of *tisese*, all the Mosuo I met were quick to distance their culture from implications of promiscuity. With near universality, contemporary locals convey a cultural narrative that downplays notions of sexual freedom and stresses a norm of long-term "walking marriages" like Jiama's and Ayi's. Both the title and the author of the ethnography, *A Society Without Husbands or Fathers*,<sup>156</sup> elicit widespread hostility from contemporary Mosuo. They insist that Cai Hua exaggerated and distorted the amount and significance of sexuality in their culture, and contrary to Hua's claims, they now routinely employ the vocabulary of marriage and paternity.

Self-representations of Mosuo intimacy hew closely to endorsing a norm of long-term monogamous, visiting marriages.<sup>157</sup> Whatever the empirical reality of their contemporary practices, it is significant that the Mosuo reject the very image of their sexuality that the government and private tourist industry so successfully exploit. I found no one willing to acknowledge having personally engaged in multiple, casual "furtive" visits, and most were loathe even to concede the existence of such behavior by others. Just to elicit the concession that not every Mosuo enters a permanent "walking marriage" with her or his first lover, or that not all such "marriages" endure permanently, demanded persistent, skeptical questioning on my part. This represents a notable change in norms from earlier descriptions of *tisese* by anthropologists, journalists and biographers. Mosuo ideology, and perhaps behavior as well, seems to have shifted toward more committed, stable monogamous coupling.<sup>158</sup>

Contemporary Mosuo apply the term "marriage" broadly to both long-term visiting couples and registered, cohabiting ones. Recall the "Walking Marriage Bridge" sign over the *Sea of Grass* and the red double happiness symbol that Ayi displayed to honor her daughter's newly recognized visiting relationship. Similarly, whenever I asked a particular young woman, like Halba's niece-dabu or a university-educated docent at the Luoshui cultural museum, whether she had children, I received a standard response, "no, I'm not married yet." Mosuo women

<sup>156</sup> See CAI, *supra* note 18, at 237–38.

<sup>157</sup> Cai Hua claimed, quite implausibly, that multiple, furtive visits were practiced "without exception" even by those who were in "conspicuous" longterm visiting relationships. See *id.* at 237, 249, 261. I encountered substantial hostility toward Cai Hua and his account of Mosuo culture and later discovered that his faculty position at Beijing University has come under threat due to charges about plagiarism and inaccuracies and distortions in his data. Xiaoxing Liu, *Research on the Na and Academic Integrity*, 28 CRITIQUE OF ANTHROPOLOGY 297, 297–301 (2008). Gezo & Wang Li both claimed that Cai Hua is not welcome to visit at any of his field sites.

<sup>158</sup> Walsh, *supra* note 10, at 65; Chuan-kang, *supra* note 13, at 154–55; HARRELL, *supra* note 10, at 16–18.

today seem to routinely refer to *axiaos* who visit openly and regularly as their husbands, and typically these men seem to become identified, engaged fathers when children are born. These days, it is not easy to guess whether a man caring for a child is its uncle or genitor. I interviewed a forty-year-old café proprietor in Luoshui who discussed his own walking marriage of fifteen years while one of two sons from that relationship draped himself affectionately around his father's shoulders. This surprised me less than it might have before I had lodged with the Dashu family and observed the close ties that Jiamá's youngest granddaughter enjoyed not only with her genetic father, but with her paternal kin as well.

Moreover, as rising numbers of younger Mosuo go to university and move to cities for work, many like Gezo wind up entering the modern, registered, cohabiting marriages that the Maoists largely failed to impose. During the long car ride back from Lugu Lake to Lijiang, I stumbled onto the genealogy of one such modern marriage laden with more ironies than a Noel Coward could conjure. After learning that my driver was a friend of the married son of Jiamá's I had met, I was asking about the sort of work that the latter did in the tourist industry. That was how I heard about Dongba Valley Cultural Village, the newest of a variety of ethnic museums that the state and private enterprise have established in locations more convenient for tourists than Lugu Lake.<sup>159</sup> My driver explained that Jiamá's son and his wife, as well as one of his nieces, all live and work in a privately owned "authentic minority culture valley" that opened outside of Lijiang in 2006. They had been hired to quite literally perform Mosuo kinship and culture as the sort of living fossils of ancient family life in a "colorful historical museum of the evolution of the family" that the Marxist anthropologists had mistakenly imagined the Mosuo to represent decades ago.

Dongba Valley Cultural Village hires members from a variety of Chinese ethnic minority groups to inhabit "traditional" houses and serve as living displays of their respective cultures, almost as if Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts were populated by time-capsuled colonials. My driver Mr. Li explained that in addition to Jiamá's son, his wife, and his niece, three unrelated young women earn their livelihoods by inhabiting and enacting a living diorama of putative Mosuo domestic life in the Village. Fortuitously for me, just as my driver was describing Dongba Valley, Jiamá's son, who was driving back there, flagged Mr. Li to pull over to help him reattach a dangling license plate. That gave me an opportunity to inquire further about Jiamá's son's family and work life at Dongba Valley and to make a remarkable discovery. It turned out that before Dongba Valley had opened one year earlier, Jiamá's son and his wife had been involved in a normative Mosuo walking marriage. He had lived in his mother Jiamá's household, while his "wife" and their young daughter resided in their separate matrilineal homestead. The employment opportunity at Dongba Valley precipitated a dramatic family change.

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<sup>159</sup> The state runs Yunnan Folk Culture Villages in Kunming, and additional cultural villages have been set up in the province.

In order to display “authentic” Mosuo life for hire, the couple had been compelled to abandon their former traditional walking marriage along with their young daughter, their maternal households and native Mosuo communities and to become an employed cohabiting couple who lived and worked far from their Mosuo homes.

Further ironies emerged. Jiama had also applied to live and work as the dabu in the living museum’s Mosuo household, but the proprietors had rejected her because she does not speak Chinese. Because Jiama only speaks her traditional Mosuo language, she lacked the ability to explain her “authentic” culture to primarily Han tourists. Instead, the museum manager had assigned the paid “matriarchal” role to Jiama’s son’s wife, until skeptical tourists astutely objected that she was not old enough to be her husband’s mother! The museum then abandoned the performative kinship charade and scaled back the live displays to donning traditional costumes and performing domestic activities and songs and dances. Moreover, although the museum employs parents of young children, like Jiama’s son and his wife, no children reside in the ethnic display houses. I asked Mr. Li, who ferries many tourists to Dongba Valley, what they think when they find no children living in these supposedly authentic families. His witty, bemused reply: “Most tourists aren’t anthropologists.”

Back in Luoshui, tourism is also inducing subterfuges and changes in Mosuo kinship. I belatedly learned that only 40 percent or so of the members of the seventy-two official Mosuo families actually are ethnically Mosuo. Another 40 percent are Pumi, and perhaps 12 percent are Han.<sup>160</sup> Like I did, tourists presume that almost everyone they meet in Luoshui is Mosuo, and members of other ethnicities who interact with tourists reinforce the mistake by deploying Mosuo costumes, roles and locutions, like “we Mosuo.”<sup>161</sup> Affluent Mosuo families, like Halba’s, hire workers from other ethnic groups to perform domestic and service work. Even some of the official cultural performers are not actually Mosuo. For example, Jama, a twenty-six-year-old Pumi woman featured in the *Time Asia* story, rows a boat for tourists while dressed in Mosuo garb.

What is more, the high status of Mosuo women that attracts tourists risks becoming a victim of such success. Mothers are now more reluctant to school their daughters than sons for fear of losing them.<sup>162</sup> Walsh reports that because tourists regard women as the essence of Mosuo family and ethnicity, men have begun to find it embarrassing to be seen doing household labor, and they feel freer to identify with national rather than ethnic culture.<sup>163</sup> Luoshui women complained to her that men were becoming lazy and spoiled and that affluence led many to drink

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<sup>160</sup> Walsh, *supra* note 10, at 59–62

<sup>161</sup> Walsh, *supra* note 79, at 453.

<sup>162</sup> Knödel, *supra* note 121, at 62.

<sup>163</sup> Walsh, *supra* note 79, at 478–79; *see* Walsh, *supra* note 10, at 337.

and gamble.<sup>164</sup> Some women claimed resentfully that most local men were intimate with outside women visitors and sex workers and that it was now harder for a Mosuo woman to find and keep a boyfriend.<sup>165</sup>

Some of the state's affirmative action benefits for ethnic minorities also undermine the distinctive Mosuo culture and family system that the state seeks to sustain. In contrast with most of China, schooling is free through the ninth grade in Yongning,<sup>166</sup> and affluence enables all qualified Luoshui children to afford university education. Studying in ethnically mixed schools in which the instructional language is Chinese introduces Mosuo children to Han culture along with global concepts of modernity and family. Ethnic minorities were exempted from the one-child family policy and allowed more liberal birth quotas, depending on local demographic and economic conditions.<sup>167</sup> Mosuo women were allowed to have three children each, but increasingly, the state has been restricting ethnic minority groups to a two-child policy.<sup>168</sup> Given the small remaining numbers of Mosuo and their traditionally low fertility rates, they may not be able to reproduce the traditional extended households that attract tourists.

Fully aware of these threats to their family and culture, the Luoshui collective of seventy-two families has taken some protective measures. In order to dissuade the young from entering modern marriages, it does not allow couples to establish new households in the village, and it restricts participation in the tourist jobs to the seventy-two families. Halba claimed that the cooperative's principle of economic distribution likewise seeks to preserve the walking-marriage system. It divides collective profits equally among the families irrespective of their size to discourage smaller families from adding a spouse in order to qualify for a greater share. However, I suspect that this could also have perverse effects by making it sensible for larger families to expand their sources of income by dispersing some members to work elsewhere, like Jiana's son, daughter-in-law and niece are doing in Dongba Valley.

Halba soberly regards these policies as stopgap measures that might help to retard but cannot prevent the ultimate erosion of the Mosuo family system. Today, thirteen-year-old Luoshui boys as well as girls have come to expect rooms of their own, and families with sufficient space allocate individual bedrooms even to younger children. Traditional customs, like signaling a nocturnal visit with animal calls or songs have succumbed to technology, enabling lovers to send text messages from ubiquitous cell phones. Families in Luoshui all have become much

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<sup>164</sup> Walsh, *supra* note 79, at 478–79.

<sup>165</sup> *Id.* at 473–74.

<sup>166</sup> Knödel, *supra* note 121, at 58.

<sup>167</sup> See Fu Qi, *Family Planning among Ethnic Minorities: a Review*, HUMAN RIGHTS 16–17 (2009).

<sup>168</sup> See David Holley, *China's Minorities Resent Limits on Size of Families*, SEATTLE TIMES, Nov. 19, 1990, at A10.

more affluent, but Halba does not think they are happier than before. He rues the “declining morals” he perceives in a generation that has been educated in Han schools and exposed to TV, university education, and affluence. Perhaps the Mosuo family system can survive in remote areas, Halba hopes, but he doubts it can withstand the impact of wealth on Luoshui and the expanding number of tourist-oriented villages. The forty-year-old café owner I interviewed shared the perception that affluence and tourism were eroding traditional Mosuo families. He noted that many of the youth sent to universities wind up intermarrying with Han and staying in cities, as Gezo has done. Like Halba, he pins his hopes for the survival of Mosuo kinship on more remote areas where he anticipates it may last “at least for another seventy to eighty years.”

On the other hand, the café owner pointed out that local ethnic Pumi have begun to adopt the practice of walking marriage, raising the possibility that Mosuo family practices might spread to other cultural groups. A Pumi woman who ran a stall in the popular outdoor evening barbeque market told me that her mother participates in a walking marriage with a Mosuo man. The *Time Asia* feature on the Mosuo also reported that walking marriage was spreading rapidly among the Pumi near Luoshui. Jama, the twenty-six-year-old who rows tourist boats attired in Mosuo garb, has adopted Mosuo family values as well. She chose a walking marriage rather than marrying her boyfriend, the biological father of her young daughter, because “if I decide my boyfriend isn’t worth it, we’ll split up, so we don’t fight like married couples do.” However, only those who have cooperative residential families nearby can make such a choice, and rapid development is likely to diminish the local ranks of families like these.

The greatest dangers of tourism for Mosuo culture, however, may be indirect. Halba has traveled widely throughout China, partly to investigate the impact of tourism on communities elsewhere. He came away from his journeys preoccupied with the environmental dangers of development. The biggest looming threat to Lugu Lake is the state plan to build an airport on the Sichuan side of the lake. Initial development plans located the airport directly in the exquisite *Sea of Grass*, but concerted local opposition to such environmental damage convinced authorities to site it a bit further from the lake. Halba took understandable comfort from this hard-won concession, but the airport nonetheless will unleash unavoidable and fiercely destructive effects on Mosuo cultural life as well as the environment. Considering the staggering growth of tourism even while Lugu Lake remains relatively inaccessible, direct access by air is certain to geometrically expand the number and character of visitors. A newly paved road and massive five-star hotel that were under construction on the Sichuan side of the lake foreshadow the dramatic changes they invite.

## III. ENDANGERED KINSHIP

Mosuo *tisese* can fruitfully be understood as a remarkable premodern version of the pure relationship, and arguably purer and more egalitarian than what Giddens envisioned.<sup>169</sup> *Tisese*, as we have seen, separates sexuality and romantic love from kinship, reproduction and parenting, and does so more radically, I believe, than the late-modern transformation of intimacy that Giddens endorsed. It also enables greater gender equality in heterosexual intimacy than feminists anywhere have yet achieved. Traditional Mosuo sexual unions are governed exclusively by mutual desire and reciprocal affection, unencumbered by other responsibilities. Lovers do not share domiciles, finances, childrearing, daily labor, or kin. Because mate choice carries no implications for a family's resources, labor, security, or status, families need not intervene, approve, or even know when it occurs. Lovers may freely enter exclusive or multiple relationships, enduring or short-lived, and across class, age, and ethnic boundaries, as they prefer.

Giddens has been taken to task legitimately for ignoring the implications of his idealized vision of the pure relationship for parenting, kinship, dependency, and caretaking. Feminist legal theorist Martha Fineman, on the other hand, places caretaking front and center in her search for legal strategies for redefining family in ways that avoid "tragedies" inherent in what she terms the "sexual family."<sup>170</sup> Fineman employs that jarring concept to designate a family system generated by the adult sexual pair, precisely opposite, one might say, to plastic sexuality.<sup>171</sup> The "tragic" flaw of this modern family structure is to link family security, property, and especially the welfare of women and children to the vagaries of Cupid's antics. Most of the seismic upheavals and divisive controversies in Western modern family life over the past half century radiate from this fault line—constituencies battling over the sources and consequences of "the divorce revolution," unwed childbearing, "fatherlessness," abortion, day care, the "second shift," same-sex marriage, lesbian and gay parenthood, and more.

Most premodern societies opted for patriarchal control of female sexuality and reproduction to manage conflicts between individual eros and collective (particularly male) family interests. The remarkable Mosuo, in contrast, devised a brilliant, time-tested alternative both to patriarchy and to the modern sexual family. Mosuo *tisese* boldly exceeds Fineman's proposal to make the mother-child dyad

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<sup>169</sup> See GIDDENS, *supra* note 2, at 58 (describing the pure relationship as a restructuring of intimacy where each person remains in the relationship because of the mutual benefit gained by staying together).

<sup>170</sup> See MARTHA ALBERTSON FINEMAN, *THE NEUTERED MOTHER, THE SEXUAL FAMILY, AND OTHER TWENTIETH-CENTURY TRAGEDIES* 9 (1995) (noting that society does not value caretaking, but that caretaking should be recognized as a major contribution to society).

<sup>171</sup> See *id.* at 143.

the central unit of family law. It radically frees family fortunes from the capriciousness of sexual love by eliminating marriage altogether. “Women and men should not marry,” as Namu explains the Mosuo perspective, “for love is like the seasons—it comes and goes.”<sup>172</sup>

With the surgical stroke of excising marriage, Mosuo kinship circumvented a plethora of Fineman’s “twentieth century tragedies.” A society without marriage is one without divorce and with no spinsters or bachelors, widows or widowers, or unmarried, solitary individuals of any sort. Nobody’s social status or fate hinges on the success or failure of their love life or marriage, whether chosen or arranged. Although Halba does not have a “wife” or biological children, he is embedded in an intergenerational family. He spoke convincingly of his love for his nieces and nephews and his gratitude for the love and support they provide him in return. Likewise, Jiamā’s deaf and mute adult daughter enjoys an integrated, stable and productive family life. In a family system without marriage, no children are illegitimate, “fatherless” or “motherless,” and few are orphaned. No marriage or divorce means no remarriage as well, and thus no wicked stepmothers, stepsisters, or Cinderellas. Rarely need anyone become a single parent, and even biological only children, like Jiamā’s three grandchildren, can grow up with siblings and playmates in their households. It seems likely that this helps to explain how the Mosuo achieved lower fertility and lower mortality rates than their neighbors long before they experienced the modern economic developments that generally propel that demographic transition.

Eliminating institutionalized marriage profoundly alters sexual meanings and consequences, and in the case of the traditional Mosuo, with striking gains for women. Lacking concepts of premarital or extramarital sex, Mosuo culture did not fetishize female virginity and chastity or judge women and men by a double standard of sexual behavior that divides women into Madonnas or whores. For this reason, most outsiders presume that *tisese* implies widespread promiscuity, an impression reinforced by Cai Hua’s controversial ethnography and Namu’s salacious memoirs that the tourist industry is happy to leave unchallenged. To be sure, most scholarship supports the view that traditionally Mosuo women and men alike felt free to engage in sexual intimacy with a variety of partners if they so desired without fearing social disapproval.<sup>173</sup> Less often noticed, however, is the fact that *tisese* also grants equal respect and agency not only to those who practice

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<sup>172</sup> YANG & MATHIEU, *supra* note 57, at 7.

<sup>173</sup> See CAI, *supra* note 18, at 20 (stating that Mosuo men and women freely engage in sexual intimacy with whomever they desire without creating economic or social bonds); Chuan-kang, *supra* note 16, at 3 (describing the lack of social and economic consequences for Mosuo men and women who engage in sexual intimacy); Walsh, *supra* note 79, at 452 (stating that both sexes in Mosuo culture experience a high degree of sexual autonomy); Yan, *supra* note 108, at 60–61 (analyzing the different types of families among the Naxi people).

monogamy, but to the sexually chaste as well. Counter to popular titillating representations of the Mosuo, they seem to have sustained significant rates of chastity, a second factor that contributed to their lower fertility rates.<sup>174</sup>

It is impossible to determine how durable most open, visiting unions were in prerevolutionary China. On the one hand, many features of “walking marriages” can sustain romance, passion, and affection longer than is typical for legal marriages. Couples who do not share residences, finances, childrearing, relatives or other obligations bypass most of the primary triggers of conjugal conflict. Members of such couples need not adapt to the often-incompatible preferences, habits and quirks of an individual (of a different gender) who was socialized in another mother’s household. They do not struggle over how many (if any) children to have, how to reward and discipline them, who does the dishes, what church (if any) to attend, how much money or time to spend on what, where, when, or with whom. All of the Mosuo I interviewed claimed that “walking marriages” last longer than other marriages, because they generate so few sources of conflict.

On the other hand, traditional Mosuo couples experience few social or economic incentives or pressure to sustain unsatisfying relationships or to be sexually exclusive. Mosuo country promises scant profits to a couple-counseling industry. If and when lust, love, or affection wanes, “like the seasons,” scant countervailing social or economic glue, public rituals, or investments work to sustain commitment to maintain a flagging union. What’s more, the fact of lifelong family security and the tolerant sexual norms of *tisese* make it easy for a disaffected lover to stray, or to just walk away. Predictably, therefore, the question of how the Mosuo manage sexual jealousy, a theme central to the plot of *The Remote Country of Women*, preoccupies many outsiders.<sup>175</sup> Cultural norms operate to suppress sexual possessiveness, as Namu explains:

Although we feel such passions, we must repress jealousy and envy, and we must always be prepared to ignore our differences for the sake of maintaining harmony. All this possibly sounds utopian, but it is absolutely true. In Moso eyes, no one is more ridiculous than a jealous lover, and short of committing a crime such as stealing, nothing is more dishonorable than a loud argument or a lack of generosity.<sup>176</sup>

If Mosuo culture discourages displays of jealousy and anger, it does not seem to promote promiscuity or to honor fickleness. Small-scale societies exert potent indirect influences on behavior through gossip and reputation. The docent at the

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<sup>174</sup> See Chuan-kang & Jenike, *supra* note 43, at 43 (suggesting that further research is needed to determine if celibacy could be a reason for the lower fertility rates).

<sup>175</sup> See BAI, *supra* note 80, at 364–69 (describing the experience of a non-Mosuo man finding his Mosuo wife in bed with another man).

<sup>176</sup> YANG & MATHIEU, *supra* note 57, at 69.

Mosuo cultural museum claimed that individuals earn bad reputations if their romantic behavior appears too licentious or selfish and that companionship, loyalty, and affection cement walking marriages as much as eros does. Although I was surprised to learn that both Jiama and Ayi have sustained their walking marriages over the course of several politically and economically turbulent decades, neither woman considered this noteworthy.

In the end, however, asking whether or not Mosuo walking marriages typically dissolve sooner or later than legal modern marriages is an ethnocentric sociological question, one that assumes a particularly obsessional public status in the United States. Traditional Mosuo culture granted individuals autonomy over such matters of the heart and hormones, because it made their consequences socially irrelevant. What mattered was the durability, stability, and harmony of the maternal family household. More meaningful, in my sociological view, is the durability of this premodern family system itself and the ingenious way in which it reconciles the contradictory goals of individual eros and family security. Mosuo *tisese* and the maternal extended family combine the democratic and libertarian features of the pure relationship with family stability and solidarity. Coming close to eating their cake and having it too, the Mosuo can enjoy plastic sexuality and gender equality without threatening “reproduction, kinship or the generations.”<sup>177</sup>

Mosuo freedom from pressure to find a spouse contrasts vividly with the circumstances of many contemporary Chinese as well as Westerners. Patriarchal preference for sons and the one-child family policy in China have shrunk the ranks of girls born and raised and thereby the marriage prospects of low-income Chinese men. At the same time, many highly educated, professional women on both sides of the Pacific Ocean anxiously confront a shortage of husbands they consider suitable.<sup>178</sup> In the United States, a vigorous marriage promotion movement censors premarital sex and stigmatizes single parents, worsening the plight of women across the class spectrum—disproportionately African-American women—who face a dearth of marriageable suitors. Children born to unmarried women are a “big happiness” for their Mosuo families, but they incur discrimination and financial duress for single American and Han Chinese women.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the Mosuo I interviewed were unable, or perhaps unwilling, to identify any downsides to *tisese*. I repeatedly asked about disadvantages and difficulties in their family system, but to no avail. Everyone emphasized how much more harmonious their families were than what they observed among the Han and other marriage-based cultures. No doubt this sunny narrative reflects some rays of entrepreneurial ethnic self-interest. It helps to

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<sup>177</sup> See GIDDENS, *supra* note 2, at 2 (noting that plastic sexuality is not tied to the needs of reproduction and not centered on sexuality).

<sup>178</sup> Ron Cho and Wang Fen claimed that extreme anxiety and gold-digging now is common among Chinese professional women who hope to find husbands to liberate them from fulltime employment.

sustain the remunerative cultural image that lures visitors like me to Lugu Lake. Likely too, it reflects cultural taboos against public discussions of intimacy and a propensity to suppress controversy and conflict. Locals denied the existence of sex workers in Lugu Lake, claimed that Mosuo culture never included homosexuality, and that HIV is an outsider problem. Only persistent prodding elicited minimal concessions about the existence of sex and romance tourism. Well, yes, some outside sex workers had operated near Luoshui in 1999, Gezo reluctantly acknowledged, but she immediately reassured me that they were quickly driven away. Likewise, Mosuo men and women insisted that although tourists flirt and sometimes attempt to seduce them, locals do not cooperate, because they know such relationships will fail.

A more individualistic, modern Western perspective would chafe at the level of conformity to family and social norms that Mosuo kinship demands. It is difficult for mobile, modern Westerners to imagine residing permanently with natal kin. Practicing *tisese* within the context of verbal taboos over sexuality and cultural denials of HIV and homosexuality should place the Mosuo at high risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Indeed, early twentieth century opium traders introduced sexually transmitted diseases into Mosuo society that further depressed Mosuo fertility until effective treatments overcame the crisis.<sup>179</sup> One wonders too about genetic risks posed by the opportunities that *tisese* provides for inadvertent incestuous sexual intimacy among genetic half-siblings. Finally, it seems possible that practicing the pure relationship, Mosuo-style could impose exceptional barriers to intimacy on anyone considered physically unattractive, because it elevates the realm of individual desire above all else. Factors like status, money, family connections, character, achievement, competence, and to some extent even personality, lose some of their compensatory power to attract a mate.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In the end, however, the fate of Mosuo kinship will not depend on this sort of cost-benefit analysis of its upsides and downsides. Somewhat poignantly, the very factor that dooms durable relationships between the Mosuo and outsiders now threatens the survival of the Mosuo kinship system itself. To reconcile the pure relationship and family stability, *tisese* depends upon a high degree of geographic immobility, and perhaps on social and economic stability as well. Cultural conformity also is crucial to sustain intergenerational, extended families. Inherent Mosuo family conflicts over whether or when to divide households due to size and discord seem certain to increase under the centrifugal and individualizing pressures of market capitalism. The ultimate paradox is that after having been rescued from Maoist repression by market reforms that propelled lucrative ethnic tourism to Lugu Lake, Mosuo *tisese* and maternal families may fall victim to the sources of

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<sup>179</sup> See Chuan-kang & Jenike, *supra* note 43, at 39–42.

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their success. Sadly, our world risks losing its most successful, egalitarian, and enduring species of nonmarital kinship just when the viability of modern marriage seems in gravest doubt.