

FADING UTOPIA

How does Mosuo live under modern gaze?



Mosuo, the last matriarchal society in China, described as the fading Utopia, is facing the culture shock with modern society. Changes in economics and culture occur naturally.

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Introduction

The matriarchal clan Mosuo, mostly distributed in Yunnan and Sichuan, is famous as the "last matriarchal society". While Mosuo's unique culture is always in the spot light, we cannot deny that culture always undergoes changes without our awareness. With the curiosity to reveal how modern society has influenced Mosuo culture, we did a field research in Lugu Lake. By interacting with the local hygiene center, residents, and officials, we have a deeper understanding of the changes in Mosuo people' life and found effects of modern culture are debatable.

Values

As the development of tourism and social media, increasing people have developed an interest in this time-honored Mosuo culture. To explore how Mosuo's values have been influenced by modernity, we interviewed two officials, Zhima and Lee, both working in the Tourist Administration, and one local student, Zhuoma, who have studied outside Lugu area. We also talked with many residents to get closer to their daily life.



Photo of interviewing

Marriage and Kinship

Some aspects of Mosuo tradition have changed significantly. Mosuo's marriage system and family form have gradually faded away. The traditional marriage system of Mosuo people takes the form of walking marriage, but as we known from the locals, the majority of the younger generation is now married and only a few people adopt the traditional walking marriage system.

Even though the walking-marriage-couples now receive marriage certificates, which isn't needed in the traditional walking marriage system, they just regard it as a necessity for social organization and their children's legal identity. Also, due to the development of the economy, modern communication and transportation, "outmigration" has drained the indigenous population. Moreover, instead of living in a big family, most Mosuo people leave their extended family when they get married. Not only do more and more people work and live outside, but they also send their children to boarding schools in other regions because of the limited local education resources, leading to inheritance generation faults.

Misinterpretation and Self-esteem

In addition to the changes in Lugu area, outside society has also experienced culture shock. Some people criticize their customs due to misinterpretations. Information flooding and fragmentation result in the dissemination of some outrageous misunderstandings, deviations and even rumors. As we known from Zhima and Lee, some irresponsible commercial medium reports recklessly connect Mosuo's walking marriage system with "one- night stand, promiscuity" to generate eye-catching topics. For throwing the spotlight on Mosuo to attract tourists, they claimed AIDS spread more quickly on account of the walking marriage system. However, the truth is that

the local AIDS in Lugu Lake is not caused by sexual transmission but an accident event.

Besides, some non-mosuo guides mislead the visitors that the children in Mosuo lack paternal love and even do not know who is their father, because fathers do not need to take any responsibility and mothers live in a promiscuous lifestyle. Actually, Mosuo children grow up in a large family (three or four generations of the mother line live together as a big family) with love from kinship. The traditional Mosuo family has a unique public economic family form- each family members give the money they earned to the grandmother with respect and authority to manage and they need to get permission from the grandmother if they want to use the money. Many Mosuo people want to defend their culture, but few people get to know about it.

Modernization and Development

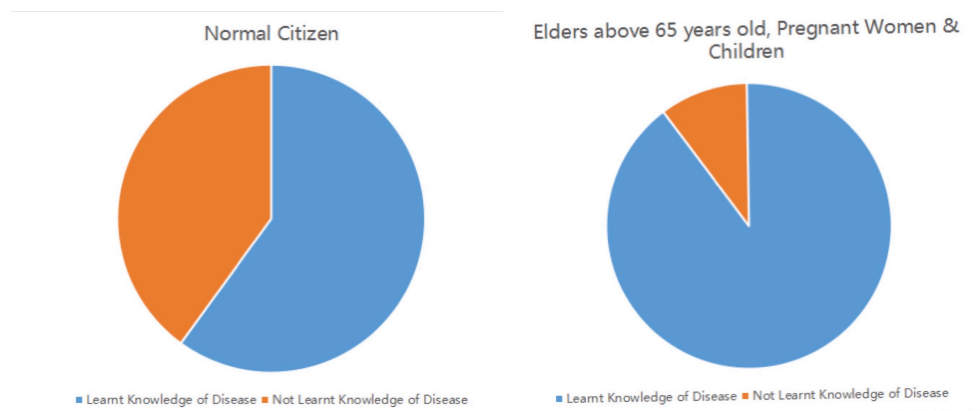
Hygiene Conditions

Since Mosuo is a Mongol ethnic group, it is hard for other ethnic groups to communicate with them, not to mention imparting the medical terminologies. Fortunately, after the visit of Lugu Hygiene Center in Yanyuan Town, we have discovered that Lugu is becoming a more civilized region with higher hygienic conditions, thanks to the supports from the outside area.

Hua Zhou, a doctor who has worked in Lugu area for over 15 years, gave us a thorough introduction.

Firstly, the village head publicizes health education. "We preach in local schools, hand out brochures, and educate patients and visitors." Their effort has a significant achievement: 60% of normal residents and 90% of elders above 65 years old,

pregnant women and children learn basic hygiene information and knowledge of disease from this hygiene center.



Secondly, no pregnant women are found infected with syphilis. As AIDS was introduced to Lugu area by accident, this hygiene center also works hard on solving this problem. Medical assistance, like donating ambulances and medical equipment, from other parts of the country greatly improves the local medical treatment. Starting in 2013, programs such as training and sending doctors who can brought advanced technology have appeared. Now there are 31 doctors arranged by the government.

Thirdly, Mosuo people do not need to worry about the medical cost. Social insurance can cover 90% cost for most people and cover 100% cost for poor people; a lot of charity programs dedicated to helping local medical treatment. The lower medical cost leads to our next topic on economic and educational benefits.

Economy and Education

Besides the hygiene conditions, economic and educational opportunities have also changed.

Firstly, local economy is highly stimulated by tourism. For families, their income has been boosted by burgeoning jobs, such as guides, drivers, innkeepers, or owners of specialty restaurants. "We used to rely on agriculture and fishing only, but now we

have more choices of our own jobs." Almost 60% of family income is from tourism. During the peak tourist month, sharply rising amount of visitors prods a 50% or even 100% surge in family income. For government, increasing revenue ensures better construction of infrastructure: schools, road renovation, subsidies, etc. Optimistic social welfare also leads to higher rate of happiness.

Secondly, local students gain more chances for superior education. Benefited by social media and projects of sharing educational resources, local schools obtain abundant educational support. For example, in the interview with Zhuoma, we found it surprise that their teaching materials are the same ones used in Yucai School Attached to Sichuan Chengdu No.7 High School, the best public school in Chengdu. Also, Zhuoma told us that local high school students regularly watched the online courses in Sichuan Chengdu No.7 High School, the 7th best high school in China, as a tool to enrich their knowledge and experience different teaching patterns.



Photo of Zhuoma

Unsolved Problems and The Future

However, some problems still remain and require long-term supports from modern society.

Firstly, deep-rooted influences of religion and traditional cultural abuses. Although the regular health and hygiene education promoted scientific knowledge in some degree, people who believe in Tibetan Buddhism and pursue doctrine from "lama" still consult about an auspicious day for seeing a doctor. What's worse, some of them just receive "religious treatments": religious rituals, blessing, and practice of expelling ghosts for local ethnic groups like Tibetans, Mongol Mosuo, and Yi. Sadly, some individuals miss the best time for treatment.

Furthermore, rooted unhealthy diet is the main cause for diverse diseases. They have gotten used to drink alcohol in the dinner; high-salt food like cured meat and pickles is popular due to the numb sense caused by alcohol. This diet pattern is highly likely to cause hypertension or similar diseases. Also, some people pick and eat fungus that isn't well-cooked, leading to serious toxic reactions.

Secondly, there is a severe lack of professional doctors. Generally, the proportion of medical professionals to citizens are supposed to be 3:1000. However, in Lugu Lake, 15000 permanent citizens have to share only 30 professional doctors. Specifically, since hospitals lack in permanent professional doctor sent by the government, they have to recruit citizens to satisfy the need of doctors. It causes inconvenience because after hospitals have spent a lot of time, energy, and money to train an impermanent worker to be familiar with the whole system and be equipped with thorough skills, it is the time to say goodbye with the worker.

It is always hard to draw a line between maintaining traditions and adopting new customs. What we can do is promoting deep communication with the respect of their

culture. In the future, we want to continue bringing Mosuo's ideas to the public, breaking the bias, and sharing modern values and technology with them. It is their right to decide how to live under the modern gaze. We believe Mosuo and modern society can achieve long-term harmony.