
Mosuo Matriarchy: Uncovering How Mosuo Men And Women Share Power

**An in-depth investigation of roles taken by Mosuo men
and women in a rural family in Liangshan, Sichuan**

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*Zhuoma, a 28-year-old peasant at Lijiazui village, picking weed on field on 19th June.
Weeding is a daily activity for a Mosuo woman. Photo by Zhang Yichen*

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Introduction

A hidden village deep inside Liangshan, Sichuan, still possesses the beauty of matriarchy and the Mosuo's marvelous traditions. On the peaceful cornfields at Lijiazui Village, Sichuan, stand the Mosuo who cooperate harmoniously and equally. Many journalists have reported Mosuo society as a progressive, feminist world where women are able to be in charge of their families, making important decisions and having complete freedom of choosing partners. However, a visit to Mosuo in June 2018 found surprising differences between what the world thinks of Mosuo and what is actually happening there.



An overview of Lijiazui Village, Muli County, Liangshan, Sichuan. The main economic source comes from farming and raising livestock. Photo by Wang Zeqi

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What is Matriarchy?

Generally speaking, a matriarchal society is defined as a place where women dominate. The family structure is composed exclusively of members of female bloodlines; women act as the head of households, having control over money and domestic activities, while men play more subservient roles.

Who are the Mosuo?

Reputed to an exotic “Kingdom of Women,” Lugu Lake, the home of the Mosuo located in southwest China, has drawn large number of tourists. The Mosuo tribal community is one of the last surviving matrilineal and matriarchal societies in the world. Furthermore, most Mosuo people endorse a unique matriarchal marriage pattern known as “Tisese (walking marriage)” — the culturally approved form of “institutionalized sexual union”, which is “non-contractual, non-obligatory, and non-exclusive” (Chuan-kang Shih. 2010. Quest for Harmony: The Moso Traditions of Sexual Union and Family Life). Meanwhile, some tourist companies portray the Mosuo as licentious for their unique “walking marriage” to attract consumers, and some books praise the Mosuo matriarchy as the heaven for women for greater freedom, power, and equality.

One group of the most traditional Mosuo live in Lijiazui Village, Muli County, Liangshan, Sichuan. The village contains 52 households and 475 persons (official statistics). Nevertheless, due to the worldwide cultural interaction and modernization process, there has been drastic cultural change in the past decades of Mosuo tribe. Many people leave the village to seek jobs in the main cities. The actuality of the traditional Mosuo there is largely unknown to the mainstream society.

In order to present a clearer picture of the Mosuo, we, a group of 4 reporters, travelled to Lijiazui Village and stayed with a local family for 5 days in June 2018. We carried out a series of interviews and recorded our observations.

Work Distribution

Lijiazui is not an utopia for women. Instead of being served by men, all women work arduously and are responsible for farming. Zhuoma was the only young female adult with labor capacity in her family at Lijiazui, so the burden was left on her shoulders. She was not only an ‘omnipotent’ and strong woman but also a caring mother of a 3-year-old boy.

According to the semi-structured interview, Zhuoma lived a life of a normal peasant. She would wake up around 6 a.m, and before breakfast, she would play with her son and then travel to the farmland to pick some weed as food for pigs. After returning, she had her breakfast prepared by her grandma. Next, she would go to the farmland again to weed, apply fertilizer and more. Usually, she would have her lunch on the cropland in order to save time. She would spend the whole afternoon doing farm work. Around sunset, she would return and cook dinner for the family. She would repeat this schedule almost everyday. All of these above gradually take the shape of the daily routine for a normal woman peasant in Lijiazui.



Zhuoma's aunt is herding the pigs near the river on 19th June. Raising livestock is the women's responsibility. Photo by Luo Jie

In the interview, Zhuoma also revealed the distribution of work between Mosuo men and women. She said,

“We have both (segregated and joint roles of men and women). For the differences, women do not have the strength to build houses. At almost, we help with the cement paste. Men and women sometimes do the farm work together: we plant the seeds and harvest together. However, only women are responsible for raising the crops. My mom and aunts often herd pigs and cows as well.”

“Boys do not do housework, such as picking weed, cooking , or feeding livestock. Only when we need to plant corn seeds, we call them for help (to drive the farming machine)”

“You do what you can. No one assigns you to do anything or commands you. There is no rule. If you’re interested, you do. If not, no one will force or blame you.”

Further, she explained,

“These are the old traditions (that boys don’t do housework) from the previous generations. If he does, others may mock him. So they become unwilling. Gradually, this becomes a common habit that housework is not the boys’ responsibility, so they don’t learn.”

Zhuoma admitted that she felt bounded by her family responsibilities as she wanted to go outside. However, she believed that her family will be exhausted and even “pitiful” without her, so she stayed. Sometimes, she would complain about the fatigue and boredom. Sometimes, she enjoyed the freedom at countryside and gains from harvest.

Lurong, Zhuoma’s younger brother, who we also interviewed, would now spend most of his life in larger towns or cities to find manual jobs. Usually working with his uncle at home, Lurong has a more unpredictable and flexible daily routine: one day, he went to the riverside to shovel some grit to help out the family, yet on the other day, he worked part-time in a larger town.

Unexpectedly, despite they are in a matriarchal society, men are in control, in relation to power in the family and the village. The uncle of Zhuoma and Lurong, Ercidaer, was the head of the village. Usually, he would not participate in farming, but had most authority when making important family decisions. In his interview, Lurong said,

“(Grandma’s authority is) less than uncle’s. My uncle has the biggest influence, but he will also listen to the suggestions from families. This is how we solve problems: when having meals, we discuss together, sharing thoughts and finding the most practical idea. We tend to rely on my uncle when making the final decision.”

“He doesn’t do much but if there is any problem, he will be responsible for looking after it. The pressure is huge.”

Similarly, in contrast to the previous research which argued that the grandma was head of household, Zhuoma agreed that her uncle was the most authoritative because he had the best ability. She said,

“Uncle manages the family finance. Families working outside will hand in some wages to him. If a member needs money, he will allocate some.”

“We (girls) never think about becoming head of village. We are easily satisfied, living happily with great food and wine. I will be more satisfied if they fix the signal.”

However, the Mosuo are satisfied with this way. They often emphasize the harmony within the family and society. Mosuo men and women usually collaborate with each other. Both parties are strong and independent. During the Dragon Boat Festival, they held a celebration on a plain. From our observation, they naturally knew their own tasks and all participated in preparing meals. The men looked after the pigs while the women controlled the chicken. The men slaughtered the animals, and chopped the meat, whereas the women washed the food. They seemed to be very content with each other’s company, having card games and water fights. No one commanded or complained. At the end, everyone helped to move objects and clean the surrounding. There was no clear distinction between the work done by men and that by women. Both sexes were self-reliant yet willing to assist each other.

Overall, the Mosuo’s way of distributing work is similar to the traditional Han’s: the men work outside and the women stay as housewives. The men are stronger to do heavier work and have more opportunities to explore while the household needs females to take care of the housework and farm work. Additionally, men tend to manipulate machinery, just like any patriarchal society. The middle-aged male is also the most powerful, though the family is democratic to some extent. Equality is reflected by their harmony and satisfaction.



Fifteen-year-old brother of Zhuoma and Lurong stands on his family tractor near the riverside on 20th June. Mosuo boys usually become capable of driving a tractor at a young age. Photo by Wang Zeqi

Preserved Mosuo matriarchy

In Lijiazui, the mother's name will be her children's surname, which means that the offspring belong to the clan of mothers. In the context of walking marriage, the Mosuo do not form a nuclear family. Instead, a couple may remain to live in their mothers' family in the daytime, staying with their brothers, sisters, cousins, mothers, aunts, and uncles, and visit either's house at night. A household usually contains over 10 members. Moreover, the children are mainly looked after by their mothers. However, fathers still have some responsibility for their children. Zhuoma said,

“His father is working in Shandong province. He often sends money to us. He also buys clothes or some other gifts to me and our son. If our son is sick, my husband will also come and take care of him with me”

Unlike what most people may assume, the preserved matriarchy of Mosuo in Lijiazui is not the reversed version of the patriarchy: women are not taking control. However, although the women in Lijiazui do not hold the absolute dominant power positions as the women in the original matriarchy did, they are relatively independent and make decisions by themselves. Bianma, a villager in Lijiazui, said in the interview,

“We women make decisions on housework. For example, we decide what we are going to plant next year: maize or barley.”

Different from the traditional concept of matriarchal and patriarchal families, which may emphasize the dominance or a superior power of a certain role, the equality is greatly demonstrated in the daily life of the Mosuo people in Lijiazui. Wives and husbands respect each other, showing no relationship with dominance of any direction. Zhuoma laughed and said,

“My husband and I seldom quarrel. We treat each other in a comfortable way. And our property is separate, so we never have conflict on such things. The argument seems to be the common stories that take place in the TV series we watch.”

Free from economic ties, political and family pressure, the Mosuo are believed to separate emotional issues from the complicated material world, managing to maintain relationships based on love and affection.

What's the future?

The 5 days with the Mosuo family are only a glimpse at the Mosuo life. The interview also does not cover every villager. The opinions held by the interviewees could certainly not represent the whole group, yet they provide some insights. From the research, it is still clear to see the exaggerations and misconceptions created by the businesses. The Mosuo actually possess an earthier lifestyle than the portrayal on media. Despite the similarity in work distribution, the Mosuo still differ from the Han in many ways. People in Lijiazui are able and willing to preserve their invaluable traditions. In the future, the Mosuo may change in a gradual process.



The Mosuo family that we mainly investigated in front of their house on 21st June. The standing man on the left is Lurong; next to him is his uncle Ercidaer; the 2 standing women in the middle are the Lurong's mother and grandma; the child is Zhuoma's son.

Zhuoma was out on the farmland when the photo was taken.

Photo by Wang Zeqi