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# Visiting the kingdom of women

The matriarchal traditions of the Mosuo and captivating Lugu Lake continue to lure tourists

By HARVEY THOMLINSON

Although it is far — in every sense — from Hong Kong, where I run a literary press, I always had a hunch that I would visit Lugu Lake someday. The alpine lake, nestled in the sub-Himalayan roots of Southwest China's Yunnan province, has long been a fashionable retreat for Chinese writers fleeing urban modernity.

One of our more famous novelists would occasionally appear in our offices, dressed in flowing ethnic threads, announcing she was back from Yunnan — by which she meant Dali, Lijiang and Lugu. Inseparable from the lake's modish mystique is the much-misrepresented matriarchal culture of the Mosuo people who live on its shores.

So when photographer Pamela and I finally arrived in Yunnan to work on a new book, after a few days in Lijiang we felt it was time to move on to Lugu. The 200-kilometer ride was a spectacular one, through passes deep in the Yulong mountain range with stunning vistas of snowcapped peaks.

Our bus stopped at a high-altitude ticket station and finally we saw how the fabled lake unfolded: Alpine flowers blooming around the glittering waters, forested slopes, beaches and pearl-like islands.

The bus rolled into Luoshui village with its clusters of characteristic *lengfang* — chic yet orderly Mosuo houses. We reached the lakeside and found a curved gravel promenade with weeping willows that was described as a “Mosuo-style road”, offering Mosuo-themed guesthouses, boat tours and bonfire parties.

Our simple room was not warm on that winter's night, but the balcony had a table and great views of the lake. I guessed it would be a decent place to sit and write a novel.

Like most of the village's guesthouses and restaurants, our inn was run by a Mosuo family. The men wore wide-brimmed felt hats, gold pants, belts with knives, and boots with trousers tucked into them, hinting at their nomadic herdsman tradition.

The women favored collar and cuffs and pleated, ankle-length skirts, and they seemed to love a bit of bling. The Mosuo famously have sexual relationships called *tisese*, sometimes referred to as “walking marriages”.

*Tisese* differs from conventional marriages in that men and women as couples do not



Lugu Lake has nurtured the Mosuo people for centuries.

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generally live under the same roof; neither do they have contractual relations to each other. However, we had read that the term matrilineal does not reflect the full complexity of their social organizations.

The village makes a big deal of its Mosuo dance displays, which turned out to be good-humored community affairs. I linked arms with a Mosuo woman who towered over me, and I would have liked to have asked her about how she saw her future at Lugu Lake.

As young people increasingly leave their clans to work in Mosuo tourist sites and distant cities, some are marrying Han Chinese to start families. However, the language barrier (and no doubt my repetitive line in shallow questions) limited our chance for conversation.

The Lugu Lake scenic area has many villages, and while there are several different ways to explore them, we decided to rent bikes. If you have good physical stamina, it is said to be possible to cycle around the lake in one day, but two seemed more manageable for us.

The first section of the Mosuo Road from Zhaojia Bay via Luowa to Wuzhiluo has steep sections.

One of our first stops along the road, Gemu Goddess Mountain, looms 1,000 meters above the northeast peninsula of the calm lake, watching over the Mosuo children playing along its shoreline.

Already thinking about saving our legs, rather than climbing the mountain, we joined the easy riders enjoying the vistas by cable car. The peak harbors Goddess Cave, with its bizarrely shaped stone stalactites and an image of the

white goddess.

The myths of the Gemu goddess make it very clear that she has many lovers. In one story, a mountain spirit found Gemu occupied with a love rival and rode away, but on hearing the horse's neigh, Gemu realized the situation and gave pursuit.

It was too late, however, because she saw only a large hoof print at the foot of the mountain, which made her tearful. The male spirit, touched by such celestial emotion, threw a few pearls into the lake, which then became an island.

We spent that night in Lige village, which is located on one of the most beautiful of these pearls. Climbing up to the viewing platform, we enjoyed a panorama of peaceful Lige Island casting a clear silhouette on the lake under the blue sky and white clouds.

Lige is home to more than a dozen Mosuo people, living in apparent matrilineal family harmony. Our lake-view rooms at the Mosuo Inn offered us exquisite night views of a sky full of stars.

The next morning, a visit to a village *lengfang* raised a curtain on the mysteries of matriarchal society. Traditionally, the Mosuo live in clan houses with their matrilineal families, from the cradle to the grave: Earnings are controlled by the family's female head, the *dabu*.

During the day, men live and work with their maternal families, while at night they go to their lovers in their homes.

We entered the main room of the *lengfang* that houses the “fire pit”, which is the front stage of Mosuo living, cooking, eating



Mosuo women favor pleated ankle-length skirts, and love a bit of bling.

and gatherings. Beside this central area were chambers where elder women and children live, although the “grandmother chamber” is traditionally out of bounds to visitors.

By now we had fully surrendered to the charm of Lugu Lake. We cycled to Caohai Lake, or the Grass Sea, a southern section of Lugu that is known as the soul of the Mosuo people.

This part of the shallow lake has a murmuring growth of dense reeds where Mosuo girls dressed in red and white expertly navigate their boats. The color of the water changes throughout the day and there is a huge variety of avian and water life.

A 300-meter-long wooden bridge connects the two sides of the Grass Sea. Walking Marriage Bridge is the symbolic center of dating culture for the young Mosuo men and women, who meet on it to express their affection through dancing and singing.

The Mosuo men are referred to by their sweethearts as *azhu*, and the women by their beaux as *axia*. On a clear winter afternoon, it was a stirring sight to see a Mosuo youth walking the bridge across the rippling grass sea.

As we stood there, Hong Kong seemed a long way away. Much of China's ancient history has been penned into its ethnically diverse margins. Though we had resisted its fashionable allure for so long, the soul of Lugu had won us over.

*The author is a Hong Kong-based writer, translator and publisher. In Search of the Forgotten Kingdom, a cultural guide to this part of southwestern Yunnan, is out now from Make-Do Publishing.*