



# **Tourism and forest management in Mosuo Matrilineal Society, Yunnan, China**

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## **Summary**

This paper claims to detail the gender division of labour and how it has been affected by tourism development, changes in forest use regulation and ownership among the Mosuo people of two villages: Luoshui and Zhengbo. The paper commences with a fairly comprehensive description of the sites and the traditional matrilineal marriage system. Briefly Luoshui and Zhengbo are on the Yongning plateau, Ninglang county, in Yunnan province. The plateau is the site for Lugu Lake, which is a tourist attraction, being one of the few deep lakes on the plateau free of pollution. It was listed as a Grade II National Protection Zone in 1989, and this is a factor in the growth of tourism in the area.

The Mosuo had a typical feudal system before 1949 with a nobility, rank and file, and slaves. This system was headed by a feudal lord and amongst these feudal lords the system was patriarchal, which was and is not the case for the Mosuo in general as their system is matriarchal. The Mosuo practice a system of 'visiting' marriage known as 'axia'. When a couple falls in love the man visits at night-the woman remains with her own family and, if children of the union are born, they remain with the woman and the maternal uncle is the guardian, whereas their father is the guardian of his sister's children. The maternal uncle is then responsible for their education and they receive only occasional gifts from their natural father. The Mosuo perceive this custom as maintaining equality between the genders; and, indeed, maintenance of this system seems to have limited outside interference. The changes after 1949 saw a reluctant and gradual end of feudalism in the area, but not of the matrilineal system. There were some forced marriages during the cultural revolution leading to a double marriage system. The current onset of tourism

has led to instances of people from patriarchal families wishing to practice 'axia'. This is particularly the case with Luoshui village which is benefiting from tourism. Zhengbo, on the other hand, is not taking the same advantage of tourism and is more persistent in following its traditional way of life. Notwithstanding, 90% of Mosuo households still practise the matrilineal system.

The author goes to great lengths to describe the Mosuo system and its religious practices. The traditions of the Mosuo are paradoxical in that, whereas the matriarchal marriage customs promote equality of the sexes, the religious system establishes male supremacy, according a status higher than that of women by promoting active worship and involvement of men in religious practices whereas women play a spectator and 'handmaid' role. The text deals first with Luoshui and then with Zhengbo, examining the traditional system and its survival, tourism, and forestry. The survival of the traditional system in the case of Luoshui is intertwined with the advent of tourism.

In terms of tourism per se, there are physical reasons why **Luoshui** is prospering from tourism and Zhengbo is not. Luoshui is in the protected zone, by Lugu Lake, and living among well-protected forests; Zhengbo is not living in the protected zone and the environment is poor and deteriorating due to deforestation for subsistence purposes.

- The paper describes the prosperity that has come to Luoshui in terms of transportation, communications, housing, and tourism infrastructure. Hotels are run by brother-sister
- teams, with women running the day-to-day guest relations and the men looking after the business side. By and large, however, decisions are made by the family as a whole.
- The interesting aspects of Mosuo traditions is that, notwithstanding the matrilineal marriage system, the division of labour is that of men working in the fields and women doing the housework; and thus men take care of public affairs. Despite the claim for gender equality, women are still confined to the 'inside' sphere of activities and men look after the 'outside'. Tourism has brought about changes in that women's and men's roles are not clearly delineated in many areas of tourist service. Some changes are coming from the outside; for example, the insistence that women have places on village committees.

In terms of forest use, before 1956 the patriarchal chieftain owned the forest and controlled its use. A system of holy hills prohibited use of certain spots; and holy hills included water resource areas, scenic areas, and cemeteries. The religion itself, 'daba', has strong animist elements and checks and balances were in place to punish those who violated forest rules. At the same time the matrilineal system itself means that new houses are needed only infrequently, but this changed with the onset of tourism. At one and the same time subsistence-based consumption changed to commercial consumption



and the forests were taken over by the state. This has resulted in the government having to close the hillsides for afforestation. Today, with an increase of incomes from tourism, in Luoshui village, at least, demands on the forest have decreased through realisation of their value for tourism. Luoshui itself had a period of social forestry through a Ford Foundation project, by 1994, however, tourism took over and the project closed. Hence today in Luoshui there are serious problems in terms of timber consumption with the onset of tourism and gradual changes in the matrilineal system. Changes too have taken place in the gender balance. Women have been excluded or unrecognised in terms of their knowledge of forestry, the accent is on 'technology' and men receive training for agroforestry activities previously undertaken by women. The net result is that men do not use the training and women continue to do the work. The authors also report the advent of the sex trade in the area with the onset of tourism!



**Zhengbo** does not have the advantages of Luoshui in terms of tourism. It is on the edge of the Yongning plateau and consists of three villages: the upper, middle and lower. Changes occurred here after 1949 in that, although Zhengbo was originally Mosuo, Han and Zhuang people moved in. The upper village now has Mosuo and Zhuang inhabitants and the middle and lower are exclusively Mosuo; the Han have built a new village. Mosuo influences prevail over these other ethnic groups in all but the matrilineal marriage system.

Zhengbo is fortunate in that the soil is fertile and it retains its traditional agricultural practices with animal husbandry as a subsidiary activity. It is an important rice producer and has substantial maize crops. It has a typical subsistence mix of buckwheat, highland barley, and beans with mushrooms and medicinal herbs being sold for cash. Livestock kept are pigs, cows, and horses. Zhengbo is a subsistence agricultural economy and has no significant commercial opportunities. As a result, the traditional gender roles and division of labour, as described in the opening passages, are maintained in Zhengbo, men perceive women as working harder than men. Control and distribution of family resources are equal, and the family as a whole comes together to make major financial decisions. The Zhuang who live among the Mosuo have a patrilineal system, with the provision of adopting the son-in-law into the family if there is no son. In terms of management of family affairs, that falls to the most qualified family member no matter which gender. Although they do not intermarry normally, some 'marriages' have taken place with the Mosuo as the old system of parents arranging marriages is breaking down.

The Mosuo of Zhengbo have retained their traditional system in terms of agriculture and marriage customs and tourism is not an issue. On the other hand, deforestation is a problem as the traditional norms in forest management practised during the feudal period have disappeared, along with their checks and balances. There is, however, a realisation of the problem and the women of Zhengbo play the greater role in voluntary afforestation (80%

of participants are women) according to the local forest department. Women also make up 40% of the participants when fighting forest fires and have a greater awareness of the problems of deforestation.

Following state ownership, the Mosuo community were given specific hills for forest supplies which they were to care for collectively, but, given the daily consumption of firewood and the distances (20km round trip) of the collectively owned forest areas, villagers tend to cut wood illegally from state-owned forests. With 104 houses in the village, firewood consumption is enormous. Added to the problem of deforestation is that of frequent and fierce flooding, as Zhengbo is located in the lower valley of two rivers. Two-thirds of the fields are inundated when floods occur. Domestic animals also add their impact to the degrading forest land, so it is obvious that the farming economy is under great threat. In short, the standard of living in Zhengbo is quite poor, especially when compared with Luoshui.

## Conclusion

Although the deforestation and environmental degradation of the environment in Zhengbo is obvious, it is clear that the deterioration in Luoshui is displaced to areas further away. Luoshui has opportunities to use other types of fuel, Zhengbo, because of the subsistence economy and lack of cash, is hard put to find alternatives.

It is clear that forest ownership is an issue and also non-farm income-generating opportunities for subsistence agricultural communities. Economic development and a diversity of opportunities are essential for ecological conservation. On the other hand, such opportunities can also degrade the social environment; and this is witnessed by the advent of prostitution in Luoshui. Perhaps such an advent has also been encouraged by misinterpretation of the matrilineal system as permissiveness in sexual mores by outsiders (ed.)

In tracing the history of forest ownership in the area, the authors note that stability of forest ownership is important for maintenance of forests and that Luoshui is an exception because of its being in an area where they can get rich returns despite ownership of the forest being taken over by the state. In this respect it is clear that ownership of forests becomes an issue when people have no other options but to rely on the forests. Villagers are deprived of forest resources in Zhengbo but they need firewood. This is clearly a case in which the state has an obligation to intervene for the benefit of the villagers; it is not ownership per se that is an issue, but ownership for what purpose.

The authors conclude that the matrilineal system is helpful for forest protection and they advocate "gender equality in social relations and women's adequate participation in community and forest management decisions."

