

# From House Structure to Gender Relations: Exploring the Na (Mosuo) of Yunnan Province, China

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## Abstract

*Architectural features of houses are frequently loaded with meanings expressing fundamental values embedded in social relations. The symbolism of such features is a convenient starting point for exploring the organization of social life. Among the Na of Yunnan province house symbolism raises a range of questions relating to the character of gender relations and the universality of marriage. The qualitative cultural factors structuring gender interactions are analyzed by drawing on perspectives from role analysis. Finally the quantitative behavioral consequences of these interactions are documented.*

**Key words:** Na (Mosuo), China, matrilineality, gender relations, house symbolism.

*“--researchers in the field should strive to be curiosity-driven (not theory-driven) and thus always open and willing to adapt to findings that are surprising or unexpected”*  
(Walters, Bradley B. and Vayda, Andrew P.)

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to give an impression of how rather trivial observations may stimulate research oriented curiosity, and how the researcher in her/his attempt to find

answers to the questions that the observations stimulated may try to discover and pursue ‘tracks’ of very different kinds. Curiosity and capacity to discover interesting ‘tracks’ depends on the researchers ‘sociological imaginations’ (Wright Mills), and this is stimulated both by individual personality, and theoretical orientations. The next step is to adopt appropriate techniques of observations that may serve to eliminate ‘false tracks’ and to justify more plausible answers. While there are no ‘methods’ or rather techniques to discover interesting hypotheses, there are methods to falsify, modify and corroborate the initial hypothesized ‘traces’ of interdependencies in the world of interacting people.

During fieldwork the anthropologist in many respects work like a detective engaging in a range of activities: to a large extent fumbling around in the social environment she is exposed to in order to somehow get a more or less intuitive understanding of the meanings and interconnections being played out between the people surrounding her. The ability to conceptualize such understanding is to a large extent influenced by her ability to metaphoric reasoning, as well as by systematic collection of observations that can serve as “objectified” corroboration, modification or falsification of her subjective understanding. Research thus has both subjective and objective aspects. The reasons for this are well expressed by the cognitive scientists Lakoff and Johnson in their book ‘Philosophies in the Flesh’. Among the many thought-provoking statements in the book we would like to draw attention to the following:

”Reason is not completely conscious, but mostly unconscious.

Reason is not purely literal, but largely metaphorical and imaginative.

Reason is not dispassionate, but emotionally engaged” (1999: 4), and “conscious thought is the tip of an enormous iceberg. It is the rule of the thumb among cognitive scientists that unconscious thought is 95 percent of all thought - and that may be a serious underestimate. Moreover the 95 percent below the surface of conscious awareness shapes and structures all conscious thought. If the cognitive unconscious were not there doing this shaping, there could be no conscious thought” (1999: 13).

With such idea in my head Wu Yunchuan I left for lake Lugu in 2000. I had been informed about a group of people called Na who practiced an extreme form of matrilineal descent. Wu and I stopped at a village called Luoshui, a rather touristy place. Our time was short, only two days. What can one get in two days?

The most important is that one as Sperber says,”manage to link up with people in daily interaction”. Here one needs some luck as well as having the ability to “carpe diem” (take the opportunity). Our opportunity came in the form a nice lady called Damatzu who we met in a local cafe. She was Na, but spoke fluent Mandarin and Wu soon engaged her in conversation. What to talk about?

Having read Bourdieu’s article about the Berber house, and on the background of field-experiences among Omotic speaking people of South-east Ethiopia as well as among the Newars of Nepal I had become aware of how house construction, its spatial features and the activities being played out in different spatial areas might express important practical and symbolic aspects of peoples’ life. In most places the house is loaded with meanings because it encompasses a

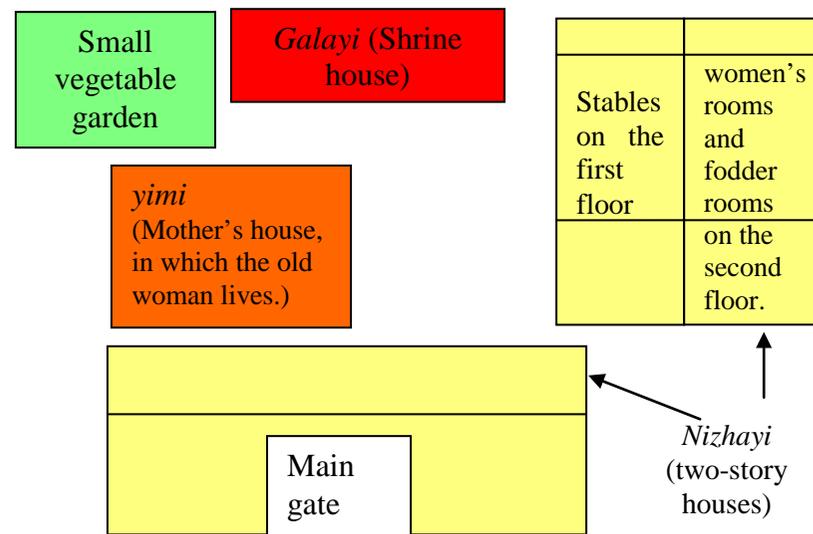
social unit of fundamental importance for the social identity of the people occupying it.

## 2. The symbolism of the house

Starting our exploration by looking at the house, we thought this might lead us on to “tracks” that could help us in understanding of Na social life. Consequently we asked Damatzu to take us to a Na house. Many of the “tracks” were corrected first in a household survey in Luoshi, and later on an in-depth study in another Na village, Walabi.

We shall start our exploration by looking at the house structure in Walaby (essentially similar to Luoshi). Physical features of houses in a *yidu* (homestead) are loaded with symbolic meanings about the people who identify themselves with the homestead and about the way different kinds of people should comport themselves within this architectural framework:

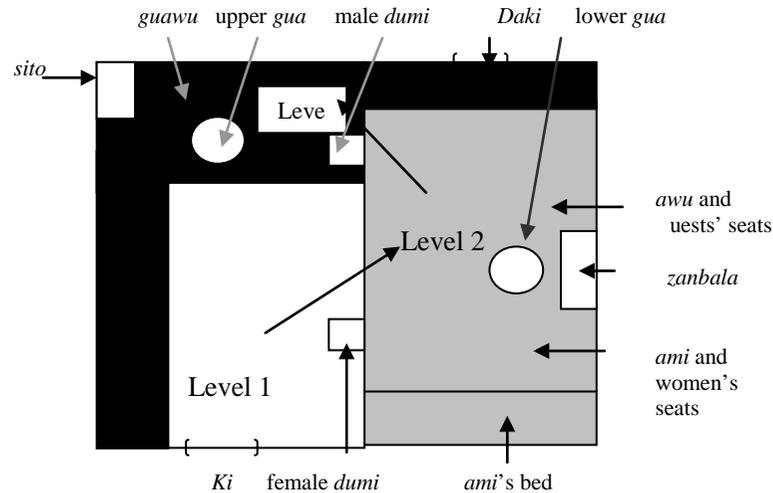
Figure 1: The house structure of *yidu*



A homestead is built around a courtyard and usually consists four houses - the *galayi* (shrine house) the *yimi* (mother's house), and two *nizhayi* (two-story houses).

*Yimi* is the center of the *yidu*, and it is related to the gods of the Na. The senior woman (*ami*) lives beside the fire place. Other mature women have their own rooms in the *nizhayi*, while young children will either live with their mother or with their grandmother. For adult males, traditionally, their *yidus* don't have fixed rooms for them - they may stay in the *galayi*; in the room for fodder in the *nizhayi*, or at night in the room of their lover in another *yidu*. Girls give birth in the room next to the mother's house where food for pigs is cooked. After having given birth, a woman may move to the *yimi* and stay with the *ami* for a period of time

Figure 1: The interior structure of the *yimi* (mother's room)



*Yimi* plays an important role in the life of Na people. The room has three levels each loaded with different symbolic meanings: the first level is earth ground.

The second level is a platform made of wood. It is symbolically associated with women, birth and domestic life. On this level, there is a lower fireplace (*gua*), an alter for the god of fire (*zanbala*), a bed for *ami* and a female pillar (*dumi*). The *gua* is very important for the whole *yidu*. Together with the *zanbala*, it is a sacred place associated with the domestic gods (ancestor/rests). Before *yidu* members start eating, they will ritually (*cuodo*) serve food to their ancestor/tress. The fire should always be burning.

The *gua* is a place around which the *yidu* members spend most of their time: cooking, eating, and chatting. The carpet between the *ami*'s bed and the *gua* is reserved for the old *ami*. Other women sit beside her according to age. The seats opposite to *ami*'s bed are for *awus* (*ami*'s's brothers) and for guests. The closer a seat is to the *zanbala*, the more respect is required. Guests, lamas and *dabas* (priests) will be invited to sit on the carpet close to the *zanbala*.

In the *yimi*, close to the third level is a male wooden pillar (*dumi*) taken from the same tree as the female pillar and connected to it by a beam ideally from the same tree. The female *dumi* close to the *ami*'s bed is taken from the root part of the tree, while the male *dumi* (close to the *daki*) is from the upper. At the age of 13, a girl will stand beside the female *dumi* to have an initiation ceremony, while a boy is initiated at the male *dumi*.

This is metaphorically associated with the idea that women generate children and that brothers and sisters are inseparable like the root part and the top part of a tree.

The third level is another platform made of wood. While the second level is symbolically associated with women and the domestic sphere, the third level is associated with men, death, and the public sphere. The male *dumi*, *guawu* (seats of men, guests and *daba*), and the *daki* (the back door) are all in the third level. The room behind the *daki* is where dead bodies are kept before cremation. When a *yidu* member (male or female) dies, two men will be invited to wash the corpse, then a group of men will bury it in a hole dug in the room behind the *daki*. Women are required to stay away during the funeral. Being associated with guests, non-*yidu* gods and death, the third level expresses the opposition between the domestic and the public dimensions of *yidu* members. Women should keep away from the third level.

The association of women with the second level is expressed in the daily *cuodo* ritual for worship of the domestic ancestor/tress while worship non-*yidu* gods (associated with mountains, water, etc.) is performed by the *daba* on the upper *gua*.

The meanings spun into the architectural features of the *yimi* expresses and foster values connected with gender relations among the Na. Women are the source for production of children and reproduction of the *yidu*. The contribution of non-*yidu* genitors are under-communicated and the role of *yidu* males are focused on their position in the division of labour within the *yidu*.

The symbolism of the *yimi* expresses a contrast between women and men, between domestic and public, between *yidu* ancestor/tress gods and outside gods, and between guests and *yidu* members.

The important thing is that features of the rooms not only express cultural values emphasizing the importance of matrilineal descent and sibling solidarity, they also foster these values among the people who daily participate in these activities in the rooms.

### 3. Matrilineal kinship

Matrilineality is so dominantly expressed that the Chinese anthropologist Cai Hua (2001) has claimed that the Na is a society without husbands and without fathers.

This poses a range of challenges to kinship theories whether of the descent variant or the alliance variant.

We shall here not focus on implications for kinship theory, but rather draw on some perspectives from conventional role analysis in order to explore some features relating to behaviour between males and females. The starting point is our puzzlement about some apparently contradictory features. The Na are on the one hand rather free in sexual matters, while they on the other hand in many situations give the impression of being extremely shy with regard to talking about sexual matters or in expressing affection between lovers.

This shyness is expressed in the so-called *tisese* visit that male lovers (*azhus*) make to girls at night. The girl's room is the accepted place for sexual activities. The lover does not enter her room through the main door, but climbs to the upper floor where she lives. Since it is quite obvious that people in the girl's household (*yidu*) know what is going on, why does the male lover make such a fuss about it?

We shall try to show that such apparent contradictions are quite consistent features when we have analyzed them in the context of important values in Na society and the social contexts in which they are acted out.

We shall base our argument on observed cases of behaviour from a village called Walabi (Wu 2005). We assume that people in the presence of others will have motives for trying to control the impression others will receive, i.e. we assume that they in their behaviour will try to project an image of themselves that elicit responses that are favourable to her/him. The image they project of themselves implies a moral statement about what kind of person they claim to be. Inconsistencies between image projected and image received by others threatens disruption of the definition of the interactional situation. As Goffman has argued “Preventive practices are constantly employed to avoid such embarrassments”. The features that puzzled us we shall try to look at as preventive practices. To do so we have to place them in contexts of cultural values and social organization.

Let's start with the basic unit of Na social organization, namely the *yidu*. This is a family based corporate group having an agricultural estate in the form of land and livestock with a gender based division of labour. Recruitment to the group is through children borne to its women. Sex between male and female members of the *yidu* is strictly prohibited. Reproduction of the *yidu* thus requires that its women have sex with males of other *yidus*. While sexual relations are socially regulated, they neither seem to establish any social arrangement with rights and duties of a kind commonly labeled as marriage, nor do they lead to relations that can be considered as social fatherhood, although the Na do

recognize men who are the genitors of the children borne to the women of the *yidu*.

The *yidu* thus lacks two dyadic relations generally found in family units, namely: Husband – wife relation and father – children relation.

How do we place such a family arrangement in a framework that allows us to compare it with institutions that are commonly classified as marriage? According to Leach (1961) such institutions should involve one or several of the following features:

- a) establishment of legal father and mother of children borne to a woman,
- b) establishment rights of husband and wife to each others sexual services,
- c) allocation of rights and duties between husband and wife with regard to labour services and control over the family unit's property,
- d) establishment of a partnership between husband and wife for the management of a joint fund for the benefit of their children,
- f) establishment of a relationship of affinity between the husband and his wife's brothers.

The *yidu* does not seem to share any of these features. Does this then mean that they do not have any marriage institution? We think they don't, but so what.

How can we construct a conceptual framework that place the Na family in a comparative perspective?

Our solution is to focus on two relations involved in reproduction of family units:

- a) women have sexual relations
- b) children borne to women produces sibling relations

If sex between siblings is prohibited by incest taboo, their sexual relations have to be with males from other families.

The question is what relations of social solidarity are based on sexuality and on sibling relations respectively? Emphasis on a) which produces family units based on marriage institutions, or emphasis on b) which produces sibling based family units, as the case is among the Na.

A special organizational problem with the b) solution is that affections between sexual partners may possibly lead to challenges to solidarities based on siblinghood. In order to explore how this problem is tackled we have to look at the cultural values underlying the dominance of sibling ties over sexual ties.

To go further into the conditions that serve to maintain these values we have to explore how they are insulated from experiences that might challenge them, most importantly challenges arising out of interactions between women and men of different *yidus*.

#### 4. Role analysis

We shall here draw on Francis Hsu's (1971) perspectives on dominant relationships and explore how this may help us to understand the behaviour that originally puzzled us.

Several forms of stereotypical behaviour can be seen as solutions to the dilemmas involved when actors are in the presence of alters to whom they are connected in different kinds of relationships. Alter in one relationship is audience and spectator to ego's interaction with others in other

relationships. In shaping one's behaviour towards one alter, one is constrained by the need to avoid repudiating values which are important in one's relationship to another alter being present. The values that are intrinsic to these different relations may be conflicting. The question is: Which relationship becomes my dominant concern in shaping my performance when different alters are present? – i.e. which values are expressed and which suppressed. Behaviour that communicates the values involved in my lover tie is suppressed by emphasizing behavioural solutions that over-communicate solidarity with my siblings.

The behaviour that initially puzzled us, we think can be seen as preventive practices that serve to maintain the dominance of sibling relations over lover relations. Avoiding the main door and entering through the window while visiting girl friends, as well as avoidance behaviour between lovers and their partners' *yidu* members are idioms clear enough to express which relation – sibling or lover - take precedence over the other. These practices block the use of idioms expressing qualities (e.g. affection, solidarity) which would challenge or repudiate the intrinsic attributes that are the defining characteristics of the dominant sibling relationship (Barth, 1971)

Among the Na attributes of continuity, inclusiveness, authority and asexuality have institutional correlates in matrilineality, joint property of the *yidu*, responsibility of *yidu* members for maintenance of the assets of the group, maternal authority, and incest taboos among matrilineally related partners. In daily life this is manifested in the respect children express to their mother's brother (*awu*); in the symbolic importance of the senior woman's position in the

spatial arrangements in the main house; in cooperation of *yidu* members in economic activities; in the initiation of children at the *dumi* pillars in the mother's house. This emphasis on matrilineal solidarity is contrasted with the values attached to sexual/love relationships. Such relationships are a domain where *yidu* partners may create exclusive relations to partners outside the *yidu* - relations that may challenge the integrity of the *yidu*

What makes villagers shy is not the sexual act in itself, but behaviour that communicate the importance of a sexual tie that may threaten *yidu* solidarity. The idea of *suodo* can be seen as a cultural mechanism serving to prevent expression of the importance of sexually based relations that may challenge the salience of the sibling relation. This is expressed not only in restrictions on conversations alluding to matters of sexual relations among *yidu* members, it is also expressed in the way *azhus* avoid expressing behaviour in public that may indicate their relationship. That the young *azhu* climbs into the room of his partner is of course not to keep the relationship secret to his partner's *yidu* members; by not entering the main door his behaviour rather explicitly communicate that he does not belong there. It certainly also serves to avoid embarrassment caused by encountering his *azhu's yidu* members (the closer to his/her *yidu* member, the more *suodo* s/he feels). In other words, *suodo* is not focused on sexuality, but on social relationships. Sexuality is necessary for reproduction of the *yidu*, but it should be confined to the room of the girl under the constraints of *suodo* rules.

## 5. Implications for kinship theory

A final reflection on implications for kinship theory. The Na case indicate that the building blocks of kinship systems may not be the nuclear family as Radcliff Brown claimed, neither need it be the affinal relation between sibling groups as Levi-Straus claimed. The Na represent a simple form where ramifying kinship relations are based on families including only mother - children relations, siblings relations, and relations between children and mother's brothers and sisters. This contrast with most ethnographic cases where more complex systems emerge with increase in social recognition given to relations between males and females from different families of origin – relations that may be conceptualized as connecting overlapping nuclear families in linkages backwards and sideways to ancestors and collaterals, as well as downwards to descending families, or conceptualized as linkages between sibling groups allied in affinal relations created by exchange of women.

## 6. The quantitative dimensions

On the basis of this detective-like investigation of objects and behaviour in a variety of contexts we made our interpretation of cultural meanings underlying the events of behaviour we observed. This interpretation was guided by analytical perspectives drawn mainly from role analysis as developed by Goffman. If our hypothesis really caught important dimension of the socio-cultural reality of Na communities, we expected that this would be reflected in household composition. We therefore constructed a simple questionnaire where every household in the village of Luoshi was registered with reference to the ethnic identity of its members, the relation between their members, the gender of

the head of household, outmigration of members borne in the household, ownership of land measured in mu (1 mu=0,07ha), number of pigs, horses, cows, number of hotel rooms. Such a confrontation of the real composition of households with the interconnections we had tried to establish in the interpretative phase of our work would serve to indicate whether our interpretation was on the right or the wrong “track”.

The survey showed that Luoshi village was more ethnically complex than we initially thought. In addition to Na, there were also Han and another matrilineal group called Pumi. The result of the survey was as follows:

### 7. Household Survey in Luoshui

F-Female. Ma-Male, M-Mother, F-Father, Si-Sister, B-Brother, D-daughter, So-Son A-Azhu (friend, also used for the man visiting a woman), SiSo- Sisters son , SiD – Sisters Daughter, MB-Mothers brother, SoD-Son’s daughter, AB-Azhu’s brother, SoA-Son’s azhu, MSiSo- Mother’s sister’s son, DSo – Daughter’s son, DD- Daughter’s daughter, Fa-Father (no Na term, sometime they use the Yi (a neighbouring patrilineal group) term ‘ada’ referring to the man living with the woman or who is considered genitor of her child, sometimes it is used for those who have registered marriages according to Government rules), W – Wife (no Na term, they use the Chinese term ‘Laopo’ for couples married according to Government rules), H – Husband (no Na term, Chinese term – *zhangfu* - used for those registered as married according to Government rules), MiL – Mother in law (No Na word, they use the Chinese word ‘Laopopo’) FiL (Father in law.No Na word, Chinese term ‘Laogong’gong’) n - Na. p – Pumi (neighbouring matrilineal group), h – Han

	HH	Age	Females	Males	Females migrants	Males migrants	mu	pigs	cows	horses	Hotel rooms & rent room
1	F n	35	M,MSi, D	MB,MB, B, B	0	B, B	26	20	3	1	32
2	F n	65	D,DD,D	So,Dso,D So,DSO		So	16	22	5	3	31
3	F n	47	Si,Si,M,D, D,Si	B,SiSo	0	MB	18	12	1	1	16
4	F n	35	Si, Si	BSo	0	B	10	16	3	2	31
5	F p	27	D	H,So			1	3			19
6	F p	56	D,D,D,D,D ,DD	So,SoSo			16	10	2	2	30
7	Ma p	55	D	DSo,DSo			8	3	1	1	16
8	F p	53	D	So,So	D		12	12	1	1	0
9	F p	63	D	So,DSO,	D		8	8	1	1	0
10	F p	58	Si,D,SiD,Si DD	B,SiSo,B, So,SiDSO			20	10	6	1	0
11	F p	65	Si,SiD,	So	SiD		14	12	3	1	0
12	F p	38	M,Si,D,D, SiD	B,SiSo		B,B	12	13	3	1	0
13	Ma h	38	W ,D	So			3	1	1	1	0
14	Ma h	53	W,D			So,So	8	14	1	1	
15	Ma p	55	W,D,DD	So,B,So,D So			8	15	4	8	29
16	F p	53	D,D,DD,D D	H,So,So			8	5	1	1	5
17	Ma p	44	M,W	So,So			12	3	1	2	0
18	F p	58	Si	SiSo,SiSo		B	12	10	1	1	0
19	F p	42	M,D,D,D	H, B,	Si	B	12	12	5	1	
20	F p	64	D,D,M	So,So,DS o,DSO	DD,D D		25	10	5	1	10
21	F n	50	M,D, DD	A., So, So, DSo	0	0	16	10	1	1	22
22	F p	71	D,D,D,DD	So,DSO,D So,DSO	D	So,So	18	20	5	2	0
23	F h	28	MiL,D,D	FiL,H	b		6	6	2	1	0

24	F p	62	D,DD	H,So,DSo, DSo			12	12	4	1	0
25	F (?) h	28	M,Si,D	H ,So,F	Si		8	7	1	1	0
26	Ma n	24	M	B			8	8	1	1	12
27	F p	60	M,Si,D,DD	B,B,'So,Si So,SiSo			20	23	8	1	0
28	F p	37	m,d,si,sid	so,b,siso		B	12	10	2	1	0
29	F n	38	D	A, So	0	0	2	3	0	1	32
30	Ma n	38		Fa			4	3	1	1	36
31	F p	60	D,D	So,DSo		So,So	16	25	2	2	0
32	F n	34	AM,D	So	0	0	4	4	1	1	0
33	F n	31	D, D	MB, B, B	0	0	16	7	1	1	21
34	Ma h	39	W,D,D,M	So,F			8	10	1	1	10
35	F n	51	SoD	So, So, So, So, SoSo	0	0	8	10	0	1	13
36	F n	46	Si,SiD	MB,SiSo	D	So	14	15	1	1	15
37	F n	29		A, AB, AB, So, So	0	0	10	6	1	1	17
38	F n	38	D,D,D	A	0	0	2	2	0	1	6
39	F p	67	D,D,DD,	So,So,DS o,SoSo	DD		14	15	3	1	0
40	F p	68	D,SiD,SiD D, DD,SiDD	So,So,So, SiSo,DSo, SiDSo,			15	10	6	1	30
41	F p	52		So,So	D		10	10	7	1	0
42	F p	34	M,Si	SiSo		b,b	6	9	4	1	0
43	Ma h	46	W,D,D	So			12	12	1	1	0
44 h	Ma	44	W,D,D	So			4	4	1	1	0
45	F h	40	M,D,D,				6	5	1	1	0
46	Ma h	24	M,W,D,D	B,Fa			7	4	1	1	0
47	F n	40	D	So,So	0	0	8	6	0	1	21
48	F n	46	D	So, So, DSo	0	0	10	10	1	1	14
49	F n	62	SoA, SoD	So, So	0	0	12	5	1	1	9
50	F n	37	M, D	So,So	0	0	10	10	1	1	12
51	F n	62	D,	B,	0	So	20	20	7	2	17

			D,DD,DD	So,So,DS o							
52	F n	50	D,D,SoA, SoD,SoD	So,So,So, So	0	0	12	6	1	2	18
53	F n	41	M,D,D	MSiSo,, B, So	0	0	10	5	1	1	10
54	F n	73	D,DD,DD	0	0	0	6	7	1	1	26
55	F n	39	M, D, D	B, B, B,So,MSi So	0	B,B	10	9	2	1	21
56	F n	56	D,D,D	So,DSo,D So	D		20	13	2	2	14
57	F n	53	D,D,DD,D D	So,So			12	20	1	1	0
58	F n	58	M,Si, SiD,D	B,So,	Si		16	7	2	2	32
59	F n	38	M	B,B,So,So ,so	MSiD		12	8	2	1	24
60	F n	62	D, DD,DD	DSo	0	0	6	7	1	1	15
61	Ma h	39	W,D,	So			4	3	1	1	0
62	F n	31	M,D,D	B	Si	B	12	10	3	0	30
63	F p	61	D,DD	DSo,So	D		14	11	3	1	
64	Ma h	42	W	So,So			6	4	1	1	13
65	F n	39	0	So,So,So	0	0	6	5	1	1	25
66	F p	38	Si,SiD	Fa(??), H ,So,So	Si	B,B	14	12	1	1	11
67	F p	39	So,So	H			5	4		1	0

**Comments on some households**

15. This is a Pumi household where the man played an important economic role in managing the hotel and on the basis of this claimed to be head of household.

16. Also pumi, but the female head is Han.

17. Pumi male hh head living with wife

19. Female head but living with male 'husband'

24. Pumi but with 'husband' They get married when the forced monogamy policy was enforced upon them 30 years ago.

25. Han, but female head living with husband

66. Pumi husband. They use the Chinese term for "husband"

Although there may be some wrong registrations in the survey the pattern is rather consistent in the sense that the overwhelming number of households among the Na are composed of women and men who are matrilineally related to the female head of household. There are some interesting variations where women live in the household of their *azhu*, as well as the other way around where men live in the household of their *azhu*. This is related to demographic processes that may produce imbalances between the female and male labour force in a household.

## 8. Conclusion

The main lesson we draw from this little exercise is

- a) The importance of "curiosity driven research" – research that is triggered by things that make us wonder, to ask why questions and not just take what we see for granted;
- b) The importance of theoretical orientations and comparative ethnographic knowledge in stimulating the way we work as "detectives" in the field. Obviously in our quest to make sense of the world we explore we may get on to wrong tracks. Being conscious about this we should try to discover as quickly as possible that our investigation is taking us

in wrong directions. However we may never be able to make a representation of the empirical reality we study that is identical with that reality. What we can hope for is that other researchers may be able to improve on our representation. Keep in mind that "a poor map" is better than "no map" and the task of research is to improve on our "maps", As the philosopher of science Karl Popper says: "Research is an unending quest".

- c) We should keep in mind what Einstein somewhere has expressed: "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant." Unfortunately "We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift".

By starting with something concrete – in this case architectural features of the house and then systematically searching for semiotic and causal contexts which we somehow could connect to these features we gained a certain understanding of important socio-cultural dimensions of the Na particularly with regard to male-female relations.

Since Wu and I did our work a number of further studies have contributed to improving this understanding e.g. books by Cai Hua, and Elisabeth Hsu); a chapter in Fredrik Barth's book "Vi mennesker" (We humans); and a chapter in Harrel's book "Being Ethnic in south west China" where he describes the Naze, a group that in China's Stalin inspired ethnography is classified as Mongols (a culturally completely different group) although they consider themselves Na (Mosuo).

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