

Narrative Perspectives on Mosuo People's Walking Marriage Custom

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Abstract

In recent decades, the matrilineal Mosuo people, who mainly live in the Lugu Lake area located between Yunnan and Sichuan provinces in south-west China, have become famous in China and abroad, both for their matriarchal family system and their “institutionalized sexual union” known as “walking marriage”, or *zouhun* (走婚) in Mandarin Chinese. Over the years, the walking marriage has been portrayed as a promiscuous and licentious custom. These misunderstandings have contributed to the creation of a seductive and erotic stereotype of this ethnic minority group, transforming the walking marriage idea into something of a tourist attraction.

This paper analyses walking marriage narrative by comparing the perspective of the local people and its perception in the tourist space. The ethnographic data reported is the result of extended fieldwork research undertaken among the villages of Lugu Lake and Yongning district, as well as in the “Mosuo House” tourist attraction at Yunnan *Minzu* Village (雲南民族村) ethnic theme park. The methods used to collect data include participant observation, recorded interviews and informal conversations.

Keywords: Mosuo people, walking marriage, tourism

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Introduction

Mosuo people, who call themselves *Na* in their native language, are a Chinese ethnic minority group that live on the border between Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces, mostly around the beautiful Lugu Lake. Lugu Lake is located at a height of 2690 m and touches both Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces.



Figure 1: Map of Lugu Lake (Shih 2010: 2)

The Mosuo population is around 30,000, and since the 1950s, during the complex classification process of Chinese ethnic minorities, the Mosuo people who live in Yunnan Province have been classified as a branch of the Naxi nationality, while the Mosuo people of Sichuan are classified as a branch of the Mongolian nationality. Only the Mosuo people of Yunnan obtained the right to be called “*Mosuo ren*” (摩梭人, Mosuo people) in the 1990s (Harrell, 2001: 219). The Mosuo language (*Na* language), part of the Tibetan-Burman language group, does not have a written system and it is categorized as an eastern variety of Naxi language (Lidz 2010; Michaud and Vaissière 2008). The latter is spoken in the areas of Yongning, Ninglang/Beiqu and Guabie.

The Mosuo people are known in China and abroad as “the last living matriarchy of China”, and the area they inhabit is also known as “Eastern Country of Daughters” (*Dongfang Nü'er guo*, 東方女兒國). Their unique “institutionalized sexual union” (Shih 2010:1) called “walking marriage” in English, *tisese* in Mosuo language, and *zouhun* (走婚) in Mandarin Chinese, has been the subject of many studies, much curiosity and widespread misinterpretation. *Tisese* literally means “walking back and forth” (*ibid.*: 3), as a matter of fact, and the two partners generally have meals and work in their respective maternal households. When they do meet, “the man visits the woman, stays with her overnight, and goes back to his household the next morning” (*ibid.*). Mosuo women who practice walking marriage don't share property, household or financial support of children with their partners, and children belong to the maternal household. In this context, the male figure of reference for the children in education is the maternal uncle, who fulfills the societal role of the father.

The Mosuo people's matriarchal family and walking marriage custom, together with the beautiful natural scenery of the Lugu Lake, have become tourist attractions in the last thirty years. Tourism in Lugu Lake started during the 1990s, initially as a spontaneous phenomenon limited to a few visitors a year. From the late 1990s, it became a growing

phenomenon that involved at least three principal stakeholders: local people, private investors, and local government institutions. Local people attended tourist activities, and in some cases, organized tourist performances themselves. Private investors are involved in the construction of hotels and restaurants, for example, while local government institutions are strengthening infrastructure and have introduced environmental protection regulations. Moreover, in the late 90s, Mosuo folk culture was included as a tourist attraction in the ethnic theme park of Yunnan *Minzu* Village (YMV) in Kunming. The theme park hosts life-sized replicas of the following ethnic groups “villages”: Achang, Bai, Blang, Buyi, Dai, Aung, Dulong, Hani, Han, Hui, Jingpo, Jinuo, Lahu, Manchu, Miao, Mongolian, Naxi, Nu, Shui, Tibetan, Yi, Yao, Dai, Zhuang and Pumi.

In this paper, a selection of the ethnographic data, collected by the Japanese scholar Hatsumi Kanenawa during her twenty years of research experience, has been compared and integrated with those collected during the fieldwork research carried out, from November 2017 to April 2019, by the Italian Doctoral candidate Stefania Renda. Since 1997, Hatsumi Kanenawa has focused her research primarily on the Mosuo ethnic group. During this time, she has spent many months of field research attempting to better understand their way of life, and integral to that, their familial relationships and social structure. During the course of this research, she has become increasingly aware of their fragile state and struggle to adapt in contemporary China. The researcher Stefania Renda carried out her first ethnographic research in some villages of Lake Lugu in 2014. Since then, she has focused her research on the themes of tourism development and the representation (and self-representation) of Mosuo culture, as well as on gender roles within the domestic and tourist space.

The fieldwork data research presented was collected in some villages of Lugu Lake (Dazu and Luoshui) and Yongning plain (Wenquan), as well as in the ethnic theme park YMV of Kunming. The working language was Mandarin Chinese.

In addition to the participant observation method, the methodologies of data collection included informal conversations, recorded interviews, tourist performance recordings and the consultation of tourist websites, brochures and flyers.

Representations of Mosuo Culture

The Mosuo culture became a subject of interest to Chinese researchers during the late 1950s and early 1960s, in the course of the identification and classification process of ethnic minorities. During this period, at the request of the government, researchers had the goal of classification and association of ethnic minority groups with the stages of Marxist cultural evolution theories from primordial communism, slave society, feudalism and capitalism to socialism (Yang Yuqing 2017: 107). These stages also coincided with those of family and marriage development, which, according to Morgan (1877), moved from matriarchy to nuclear family, and analogously from a status of promiscuity to one of monogamy.

In 1962, a team of six researchers including Yan Ruxian 嚴汝嫻 and Song Zhaolin 宋兆麟 went to Yongning district in order to conduct fieldwork. From the first ethnographic data collected, it emerged that among the Mosuo of Lugu Lake and Yongning plain the matri-clan was an established family organization, together with the matriarchal family, coexistent family and patriarchal family (Harrell 2001: 243). The fact that these different family systems coexisted within the same ethnic group led Yan and the other Chinese researchers to believe that Mosuo people were a “living fossil” of a primitive matriarchy organized in matri-clans (Yang Yuqing 2017: 108).

The walking marriage custom, from the earliest studies but also subsequently substantiated, was subject to misunderstandings and defined in terms of a promiscuous custom. In a 1976 article by Song Enchang 宋恩常, the walking marriage custom was

presented as a relic of group marriage, in which the Mosuo did not know, or did not need to know, who their father was (Yang Yuqing 2013: 214). A few decades later, Cai Hua (2001) in his doctoral thesis that brought the Mosuo into the international anthropological debate, described walking marriage as follows:

Not only do men and women have the freedom to foster as many *axia*¹⁾ relationships as they want and to end them as they please, but each person can have simultaneous relationships with several *axia*, whether it be during one night or over a longer period. In fact, a woman may receive two or three visitors a night, and a man may visit two or three women in one night. (p.202) [...]

In keeping with the plurality of *axia* and the intermittence of such relationships, we can observe the following: the Na might guess who has inseminated the mother if the child bears a physical resemblance to one of her *axia*. If the child has no physical trait in common with any of his mother's *axia*, it is impossible to say who the genitor (*ada* in Na) is. (p. 227)

After suffering decades of misconception, in the 1990s some members of the Mosuo community began to speak out. For example, the scholar Lamu Gatusa 拉木·嘎吐薩 in his writings (1998; 2005; 2008) clarified some fundamental issues of his culture, in particular the walking marriage custom:

The couple will not set up a new family and do not share property. Any children resulting from the union of the couple are the woman's children, and the man helps to raise the children of his sister. On the basis of not having any economic ties, or political or family pressures influencing their decision, the erotic love and affection are the only basis of their relationship. As a result, any development in the relationship which results in them separating, is not going to influence children at all. (Gatusa 2005)

1) *Axia* is a Mosuo language term that is improperly used to indicate the two lovers involved into a walking marriage relationship. As the Mosuo scholar Lamu Gatusa pointed out, the term “*axia*” refers to the female partner, while the term “*azhu*” refers to the male partner (Mair and Bender, 2011: 53).

The monograph of Zhou Huashan 周華山 (2010), and that of the Naxi scholar He Zhonghua 和鍾華 (2016), inaugurated a new line of ethnographic studies on Mosuo culture that took a different line to the ethnocentric approach of previous research.

The representation of the Mosuo in the tourist space, on the other hand, is linked to the image of “exotic” and “primitive”. As a matter of fact, from research reported by O'Connor (2012) on the language used on Chinese tourist websites, the most used words to describe Mosuo people and their culture are: mysterious (神秘 *shenmi*), mystical (神奇 *shenqi*), primitive (原始 *yuanshi*), ancient (古老 *gulao*), simple (古朴 *gupu*), pure / honest (淳厚 *chunhou*), natural (自然 / 天然 *ziran / tianran*), romantic (浪漫 *langman*), freedom (自由 *ziyou*), love (愛情 *aiqing*), partner (阿夏 *axia*), beauty (美麗 *meili*) and matriarchal (母系 *muxi*) (*ibid.*: 34). The use of these terms have contributed to reinforce the association of Lugu Lake with an “earthly paradise”, showing Mosuo people as a “living fossil” leading a “simple and primitive” lifestyle.

Walsh (2005) focused on the appellation “Eastern Country of Daughters” with which the area of Lake Lugu inhabited by the Mosuo people is commonly called. As highlighted by the scholar, the appellation “Nü guo” (女国, “the country of women”), in use until the early nineties, was replaced by “Nü'er guo” (女兒国 “the country of girls / daughters”). The replacement of the term “Nü” (女, woman) with that of “Nü'er” (女兒, girl/ daughter) call to mind the fresh image and young age of the Mosuo girls, which fills the sexual fantasies of many tourists who visit Lugu Lake. Within the tourist image of this place, we have multiple visions of the same tourist space: the land of women and the land of sex, which is transformed into “the land of woman for sex” (*ibid.*: 472). The diffusion of prostitution, and the construction of a red-light district, which was dismantled by the local authorities in 2004, have been a negative product of tourism in this area. Recently, it seems that prostitution continues to exist, but in a more discreet manner (*ibid.*).

Alongside the representations of Mosuo culture developed by researchers, the tourist market, the tourists themselves, and self-representation by local people, there is also that made by government institutions on ethnic minorities that emerged from the analysis of the YMV tourist attraction in Kunming. Although the ethnic theme park is a recreational space, it also serves a political purpose. As reported by Li Yang (2010) the central theme of the YMV is to present the “healthy and progressive” aspects of minority culture that is a guiding principle of the central government’s cultural policy (p. 43). Today, ethnic minorities are not represented as “primitive” and “backwards” as in the past, and selected aspects of their performing arts (dances, songs, festivals), and cultural materials (handicrafts, costumes, architecture) have become a marketable tourism product, as well as an opportunity for economic growth (*ibid.*). On the contrary, in the tourist space of YMV, the display of other aspects of minority culture, such as religious rituals, has been discouraged. As a matter of fact, “dancing people in colourful dress often appear in cultural shows, whereas it is not common to see solemn religious rituals” (*ibid.*).

Moreover, minorities are encouraged, on one hand, to revive their culture, and on the other, to maintain ethnic characteristics as members of a multi-national and harmonious country (*ibid.*), just as expressed in the famous Chinese lyric “愛我中華” (*ai wo zhonghua*, Loving my China):

五十六個星座五十六隻花
五十六族兄弟姐妹是一家
五十六種語言匯成一句話
愛我中華愛我中華愛我中華
愛我中華

56 stars, 56 flowers
56 brothers and sisters are one only family
56 languages flow into one voice:
I Love my China, I Love my China,
I Love my China!

Walking Marriage: The Local People Narratives

The traditional values and precepts of the Mosuo group, as we have seen, are increasingly facing challenges from both inside and out. In one notable example, a Mosuo man from Sichuan Zuosuo married a Han woman who had a child from a previous relationship. They also had a child together and set up a new family unit. The child from the previous relationship was then adopted, at the age of three, by the Mosuo husband's matriarchal household. In other situations, in which a matriarchal household has no daughters, a woman from another household with several sisters may move into the male group and eventually become the matriarch of that family group. This has also been seen to work in the opposite case, in which a household comprising no adult males will invite the husband/partner of one of its daughters to become a member of the household, thus providing a male role model for the children of that household. As we can see from these examples, although the *modus operandi* of the Mosuo people is the walking marriage, the over-riding concept is one of harmony, in which the basic structure is unyielding but the means to attain it is fluid and open to interpretation.

The Mosuo concept of familial harmony may seem like an idyllic situation in which, should conflict arise, children are ultimately protected from the negative fallout of separated parents in the bosom of the matriarchal home, however, human nature being what it is, there are occasionally negative consequences. A woman in Muli (Sichuan Province), for example, was emotionally hurt when she learned that her walking marriage partner was in love with another woman, and she had her friends swear at him in the street, and try get revenge on him. In a separate incident, a woman from Yongning (Yunnan Province) had a walking marriage with a man in the same village, but when she said she wanted to break up with him, he would regularly come to her house to cause a disturbance,

and even went as far as entering her house and acting violently. Even in these difficult situations, the strength of the Mosuo custom is evident in the support structures that are available to the aggrieved parties and the solace that a large family can provide.

In recent times, the relative freedom of the Mosuo to “marry” and father or raise the children of several fathers has been somewhat curtailed by the increasing interest of the Chinese government in their lives. However, within the modern restrictions of marriage certification, the recognition of parental responsibility and the recording of names on official documentation, the Mosuo people have further demonstrated their willingness to adapt. Many fathers, although not cohabiting with their off-spring, are taking greater responsibility than ever before, most noticeably in terms of financial and emotional support. In recent years, many young Mosuo have decided to get married, however, unless they live outside the Lugu Lake area, it is rare for them to create a nuclear family. Often it is the husband who goes to live at his wife's house after marriage, as in the case of Bima from Luoshui village, a young 27-year-old woman whose husband, a Han man from Yongning, has gone to live in her maternal home. However, this is very much dependent on the sensibilities of each household. In the village of Luoshui over the past seven or eight years, about thirty marriages have been celebrated, but this doesn't mean that whoever gets married necessarily leaves his or her own maternal house. According to Bima, the marriage certificate is only a formality, “just taking a picture and registering the documents”, while a male interlocutor reported that a certified marriage is necessary in order to be in compliance with the national law. Under this law, however, they are not forced to cohabit. For this reason, some people from the same village, subsequent to their official marriage ceremonies, continued to live in their maternal household instead of with their partners. This is true for example in the case of Qizhu, who has been involved in a walking marriage relationship with a man from the same village for many years, and with whom she has two sons. After the birth of their second child, it was necessary to stipulate a marriage contract

in order to be in compliance with the national laws. However, the two partners do not live together, but have continued to live in their respective maternal houses in Luoshui, and practice the walking marriage custom.



Figure 2: A wedding celebration in Luoshui village, 2016

Photograph by Stefania Renda.

Nowadays, it seems the walking marriage custom is still preserved, but in different ways. Although marriages among young Mosuo are on the rise, when the household and working conditions permit, local people make a concerted effort to sustain practices aimed at safeguarding the extended matriarchal family, as evidenced by their choice to continue to live in their maternal home even after marriage.

Walking Marriage Narration in the Tourist Market

In this section through the presentation of three tourist activities distinct narratives of the walking marriage in the tourist space will emerge. The three tourist activities examined will be: 1- the tourist performance at the “Mosuo House” in the Yunnan *Minzu* Village (YMV) of Kunming; 2- the bonfire dance performance in Dazu village; 3- the visit to a local house in Luoshui village.

1- The “Mosuo House” at YMV ethnic theme park

About 22 years ago, the Mosuo ethnic group was included in the YMV theme park, where the so-called “Mosuo House” was built near to the “Naxi village”. Inside the “Mosuo House”, where a faithful reconstruction of a wooden Mosuo housing complex was reproduced around a square courtyard, a dozen young people from villages in the Yongning district worked as performers, taking part in two 20-minute shows on a daily basis. The content of the shows was not decided by the performers, but by the managers of the theme park, in agreement with the provincial government. In fact, the employees of the “Mosuo House” performed together with those from the “Naxi village”. During the show, in addition to the song and dance performances, some general information was given on these two ethnic minorities, and, naturally, on the theme of walking marriage:

Anchorman: What are you most interested about Mosuo people?

Guests: The “walking marriage”

Anchorman: Yes, it is exactly the walking marriage. It is told only that Mosuo people have the walking marriage custom, and some people believe that the walking marriage of we Mosuo people is very free, but actually it is not, dear friends! First of all the walking marriage of we Mosuo is a relationship that exists among a couple of a man and a woman. Some people believe that we Mosuo today have a partner, and tomorrow have another one, but it does not work in this way! [...] In the walking marriage custom, you can find a person who you love for life. It is not a kind of random sexual relationship. I wonder if you can understand?

According to the entertainment program, the purpose of the ethnic theme park was to represent the ethnic diversity in a single locality in one panoptic sweep (Li Yang 2010: 35), the “Mosuo House” performers, within a compact space and a tight performance schedule, offered the best image they could of their culture. The concepts were simplified to the maximum, and as in the case of the walking marriage custom, compared to something that the visitors already know, i.e. the stereotyped idea of romantic and long-lasting love of the marital union.



Figure 3: Yunnan Minzu village dance performance, 2019

Photograph by Stefania Renda.

2- Dazu village's bonfire dance show

Dazu village was located on the shores of Lugu Lake on the Sichuan side. As Mosuo people, Dazu villagers recognized themselves as belonging to the *Na* people, but in contrast to the Mosuo of Lugu Lake and Yongning district, their households were organized according to the patrilineal descent, and the patrilocal residence system. Moreover, they didn't practice the walking marriage custom. However, in the tourist space of the bonfire dance, they acted the part in order to let tourists believe they had encountered the “real” matrilineal Mosuo. The construction of the bonfire dance location was financed by an entrepreneur, and the performers received a monthly salary. The contents of the show were

intended to entertain and amuse the audience, and references to walking marriage were present throughout the show. In fact, at the very beginning, the presenter began by saying:

“I wish everyone that your walking marriage experience here at Lugu Lake will be successful!”

The performance revolved around a night visit to the room of a young Mosuo woman: a handsome young man climbed up to the window of his beloved, their shadows then appeared together behind a window, and then disappeared when the lights were turned off. In the same performance, during the dance of the tourists with the locals, the presenter requested everyone to tickle the palm of the hand of the person they liked, three times with a finger and with whom you would have liked to “practice” the walking marriage custom. Moreover, when a spectator finished a singing performance, he or she was lifted and carried away by a group of women or men, according to the gender of the tourist in question. The presenter joked that he or she was going to experience walking marriage, and his words promptly caused hilarity among the spectators.



Figure 4: Dazhu village bonfire dance performance, 2020
Photograph by Stefania Renda.

3- Visiting a Mosuo household in Luoshui village

Luoshui village was located on the shores of Lugu Lake on the Yunnan side. It was a village mostly inhabited by Mosuo and Pumi people, and started to be affected by the tourism development in the early '90s. In this village, almost every evening a Mosuo man, called Geze, hosted small groups of tourists in his household in order to explain the most important features of Mosuo culture, including housing, economic organization, gender roles and, naturally, the walking marriage custom. Geze was a good speaker, and during the roughly one hour-long meeting, he was able to maintain the rapt attention of his guests, who actively participated by asking questions. He usually asked the female guests if they had daughters. If the answer was yes, he let them sit in the higher seats close to the fire-pit, which are normally reserved for elderly people or guests, as a sign of respect and in order to emphasize that women have a very high position in the Mosuo society. He offered some buckwheat tea to his guests, but he let male guests serve it. This simple gesture regularly aroused hilarity among those present.

Concerning the walking marriage, he used the following words to explain it:

When two partners make public their relationship, it is celebrated with a sort of official engagement ceremony. It is different from what happens outside. The criteria according to which we choose our partner is very simple: we don't take into consideration the possession of a house or a car, neither do we care about other material goods. We instead pay attention to our partner's character and personality. Therefore, our judgment parameters are different to those of the people from the city. People from big cities are looking for a partner to spend their lives with, while we are looking for a soul mate. [...]



Figure 5: Tourist activity at Geze house, Luoshui village 2018

Photograph by Stefania Renda.

In the tourist activities examined, we have identified at least three types of narration of the walking marriage custom:

- 1- The association of walking marriage to the romantic idea of marital union, summarized in the expression of the YMV employee: “You can find a person you will love for your life time”.
- 2- The novelization of the walking marriage through the use of irony, evidenced by the comedic tone in which the presenter in Dazu's performance made his introduction at the beginning of the show, saying: “I wish everyone that your walking marriage experience here at Lugu Lake will be successful!”
- 3- The demarcation of the differences between “we” - the Mosuo - and “you” - the Han -, was clearly highlighted by the expression of the Mosuo host in Luoshui village: “People from big cities are looking for a partner to spend their lives with, while *we* look for a soul mate”.

Findings and Discussion

In the tourism space, the word used to refer to walking marriage is *zouhun*, a Chinese term that didn't arouse in Mosuo speakers the same embarrassment that the equivalent in the native language, which is *tisese*, could. In fact, the Mosuo don't usually speak openly about their private lives in public, nor in front of their family members, and this is an aspect of the so-called “culture of shyness” - *sheddo* in Mosuo language - through which moral conduct is taught to each Mosuo person from an early age.

From the ethnographic research on the three tourist activities, where the issue of walking marriage is treated, it emerged that the narrative approaches change according to at least three components: who manages the tourist activity, what the purpose of the tourist activity is and finally the degree of involvement by the locals in the tourist activity.

When a local government is involved in the management of the tourist activity, as in the case of the YMV theme park, the tourist activity itself becomes a political issue, a tool to convey the message of unity and harmony among ethnic minorities promoted by the Chinese government. As a matter of fact, in order to emphasize the belonging of the Mosuo to the Naxi ethnic minority, the employees of these ethnic minorities dance together at the “Mosuo House”. Furthermore, to make the walking marriage custom easier to understand, it is compared to something that tourists know well, namely the traditional marital union. However, the cultural foundation of walking marriage is very far removed from that of marital union, as highlighted by Shih (2020: 13). Its characteristics are non-contractual, non-obligatory and non-exclusive. Similarly, in recent years the Yanyuan local government, which administers the area of Lugu Lake on the Sichuan side, organized a media event entitled “Exchange marriage vows at Lugu Lake” (“情定瀘沽湖”, *qingding luguhu*). This event, in 2017 and 2018, was attended by 99 couples from all over the country, while 66 couples attended it in 2019. These couples went to Lugu Lake in order to promise eternal

love to each other: wearing the Mosuo costumes, they crossed the *zouhun* bridge that connects the two shores of the lake between Yunnan and Sichuan, received blessings from the *ddaba* priests, and finally, performed the bonfire dance together.

Local governments seem to be acting in order to re-signify the walking marriage by comparing it to marital union. Eventually, this makes it more understandable and acceptable to “outsiders”.

In the case of the Dazhu tourist performance, which is financed by an outside investor, the goal of the tourist activity is to entertain the public by involving tourists in the performance, often using what they know about the walking marriage, which usually corresponds to the ethnic stereotype of “free love”. Here, the degree of local involvement in establishing the performance content is far less, as they must meet the demands of whoever is financing the show. Whereas, for example, the bonfire dance organized in the village of Luoshui was completely managed by local people and its contents did not refer to the walking marriage custom.

Finally, the visit to Geze's home in Luoshui village was the only one, among the three tourist activities analyzed, that was managed and organized entirely by a local person. Although Geze had defined an outline of his speech, which was repeated in a similar way at every encounter with tourists, what changed every evening were his interlocutors, the guests, whose questions could broaden Geze's discourse and direct it towards different themes from time to time. In his discourse, the walking marriage was discussed without going too far into his intimate sphere. His narration was based on the similarity but also on the comparison between “we” Mosuo, and “you” Han, from which a strong identity and pride emerged. In this regard, Geze expressed his views on marriage in these terms:

Our customs are opposed to the patrilineal ones. We cannot let the daughter, who we raised with difficulty, go to someone else's household after marriage, nor can we accept a daughter-in-law into our household. This is very difficult to understand for us. Precisely because there are no relationships of affinity in our society, our society is very simple. The puzzling relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law does not exist in our homes. Problems that people have been unable to solve for years, do not exist for us. In our eyes, the women's lives outside our society are very bleak, you are all "daughters abandoned by your mother".

Over the years, in fact, from the comparison with "others" in the tourist space, the Mosuo have identified some cultural aspects that differentiated them from other ethnic groups, and which have strengthened their ethnic identity.

Conclusion

Walking marriage is probably the best known and most misunderstood custom of the Mosuo culture. Over the years, there have been various narratives of this custom, which for centuries has allowed the matrilineal Mosuo to preserve the extended matriarchal family. On the one hand, in the pages of the first ethnographic researches, the walking marriage was described as a promiscuous and licentious custom, and the ethnic stereotype that the Mosuo were a society "without fathers and husbands" has gradually been consolidated, even in the tourist market. On the other hand, we have the narration of local people, as in the case of the Mosuo scholar Lamu Gatusa. In his writings, he tried to clarify the walking marriage custom by highlighting its strengths, such as the shared care of children and the elderly within the extended matriarchal family, as well as the separation between the emotional and economic spheres in love affairs. In fact, the partners do not share assets or property, and in the event of separation, the lives of their children generally don't undergo traumatic upheaval as they continue to reside in the maternal family home.

Alongside these narratives, there are those that have taken hold in the tourist space. From the analysis of the tourist activities of the “Mosuo House” at the YMV, the bonfire dance organized in the village of Dazu, and the visit to the Geze’s house in the village of Luoshui, three different narratives of walking marriage custom have emerged. Each of these narrative perspectives has been influenced by at least three factors: who manages the tourist activity, its purpose, and finally the degree of local involvement.

Where the government is involved in a tourist activity, as in the case of the YMV theme park, there is a clear political message of harmony and unity among ethnic minorities, in addition to its stated purpose of entertainment: 56 brothers and sisters that are one family only. In fact, the employees of the “Mosuo House” performed together with those of the “Naxi village”, thus emphasizing the belonging of the first ethnic group to the second one. Furthermore, the walking marriage notion has been “domesticated”, and compared to the conjugal union within marriage. In contrast, the case of the bonfire dance in the village of Dazu, a tourist activity managed by an external investor, shared little responsibility with the performers in the decision-making of its content. Moreover, the concept of the walking marriage custom has been intentionally sensationalized through the use of stimulating language. Finally, we have the case of the visit to Geze's house in Luoshui village, a tourist activity completely managed by a local man. In the narrative discourse, the strengths of the Mosuo culture, as well as of the walking marriage, were highlighted, and the customs of the Han Chinese, who represented “the others”, were compared to that of the Mosuo people.

In the end, although many contemporary young Mosuo people decide to get married to be in compliance with national law, if they don't leave the Lugu Lake area for working purposes, they generally don't form a nuclear family, and the two partners continue to live in their respective maternal households, especially when they are from the same village. In this way, the custom of walking marriage is maintained, and the extended matriarchal

family preserved. However, as in the past, each person and each household continue to adapt a system of residence according to their family and/or professional needs.

Fears have been raised since the 1990s that the increasing interest of the outside world, in the continuing existence of the Mosuo people and of the walking marriage concept and associated image of a femaleoriented, sexualized society, would lead to a dilution of the culture and its opening up to outside agendas, as has happened with many other minority groups around the world. However, due to its inherent adaptability, the Mosuo culture has, while being undeniably tossed on the waves of political and financial turmoil, remained very much afloat and intact.

It is our firm belief that the prevailing cause of this buoyancy is the unshakeable core belief in the importance of familial harmony and the necessity of maintaining it, no matter the cost.

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