

The Contemporary Expression of Mosuo Matrilineal Culture in the Context of Tourism: An Ethnographic Study Based on Lugu Lake

Shan Gao

*Shanghai New Epoch Bilingual School, Shanghai, China
gaoshan_best@163.com*

Abstract. Mosuo culture around Lugu Lake has long been a focus of academic and touristic discourse; however, systematic discussions from an emic perspective remain scarce. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Lugu Lake area in July 2025, this paper explores the contemporary expression of Mosuo matrilineal culture in the context of tourism through in-depth interviews with the museum curator, a Daba cultural inheritor, a young Mosuo individual, and an external settler. The findings reveal that Mosuo society is not characterized by female supremacy, but a relatively balanced social system centered on the structure of the "mother house" and intergenerational cooperation. Under the dual gaze of tourists and scholars, local residents have developed a strategic distinction between frontstage display and backstage preservation, with the museum emerging as a key arena for cultural reconstruction. The younger generation demonstrates a high degree of cultural self-awareness in navigating the tension between tradition and modernity, rather than passively accepting change. This paper argues that the continuity of Mosuo culture relies on its dynamic adaptability, and that cultural preservation should respect the community's subjectivity and its right to self-definition. This study provides an emic perspective to complement existing understandings of cultural change in ethnic tourism destinations and offers insights for policy-making on minority cultural preservation.

Keywords: Mosuo people, Matrilineal culture, Tourism, House society, Cultural expression

1. Introduction

Since the inception of tourism in the Lugu Lake area in the late 1990s, Mosuo culture has been under continuous scrutiny and discussion by external audiences. Academic circles have generated substantial research findings on kinship systems, marriage forms, and social structures. For instance, Cai's conceptualization of Mosuo society as one "without fathers or husbands" sparked extensive theoretical debate [1]; Shi interpreted the tise (walking marriage) as an "institutionalized sexual alliance" [2]; and scholars like Chen have focused on the social transformation and cultural changes brought about by tourism development [3].

While these studies have greatly deepened the understanding of Mosuo society, they have predominantly focused on institutional structures and social functions, with limited attention paid to

the expressions and interpretations of cultural subjects themselves. This gap raises questions worthy of further exploration: How do the Mosuo people themselves understand concepts like matriliney, tise, and Daba culture? In what ways do these understandings differ from the narratives constructed by tourists, scholars, and the media? In an era in which cultural preservation has become a dominant discourse, could preservation itself become another form of pressure exerted upon the Mosuo community?

This paper attempts to present the subjectivity of Mosuo cultural expression from an emic perspective. The study employs qualitative research methods, conducting 14 days of intensive fieldwork in the Lugu Lake area in July 2025. The specific methods included: (1) In-depth interviews: Interviews were conducted with key informants, including the curator of the Mosuo Museum (male, aged 50), Daba cultural inheritor La Bai (male, aged 37), Mosuo youth Ji Bao (male, aged 18), a Mosuo boatman (male, approximately aged 45), and an external settler Qi Mei (female). (2) Participant observation: The researcher participated in the daily operations of the Mosuo Museum, bonfire parties, mother house hearth rituals, and boat rowing labor. (3) Spatial analysis: On-site mapping and symbolic interpretation were conducted on the layout of Mosuo mother houses and the museum building.

The theoretical significance of this study lies in moving beyond the prevalent approach of viewing Mosuo culture merely as an object of change, and instead focusing on the expressive strategies of the Mosuo people as cultural subjects. Its practical significance lies in offering reflections on cultural preservation policies in ethnic tourism destinations: preservation should not mean freezing culture, but respecting the cultural holders' right to self-definition and their choices regarding development.

2. Literature review

2.1. Classical themes and interpretive frameworks in Mosuo research

Research on Mosuo society has undergone a paradigm shift from an evolutionist framework to the house society theory. From the 1950s to the 1980s, scholars like Yan Ruxian and Zhan Chengxu viewed the Mosuo matrilineal system as a "living fossil of matrilineal clan society," interpreting tise as a "vestigial form of pairing marriage" [4]. At the turn of the century, Cai Hua proposed the startling thesis that Mosuo society is "without fathers or husbands," arguing that it lacks marriage institutions and family organizations [1]. Shi Chuangang critiqued this view, suggesting that tise is a form of "institutionalized sexual alliance" and that the matrilineal family is a cultural choice of the Mosuo people, not an evolutionary remnant [2].

Lévi-Strauss's house society theory offered a new interpretive framework for Mosuo studies. Scholars like Weng Naiqun and Elisabeth Hsu pointed out that the Mosuo "Yimi" (house) is not merely a kinship unit but a moral community comprising people and objects, the living and ancestors, and the secular and sacred [5]. The house takes precedence over descent, and flexibility over rigidity—this is the core code underpinning the millennia-long continuity of Mosuo culture.

2.2. Research on cultural change in the context of tourism

Following the official opening of Lugu Lake to tourism in 1992, the impact of tourism development on Mosuo culture became a research hotspot. Scholars like Chen Gang systematically reviewed the transformation of Mosuo society from a traditional agricultural economy to a tourism-oriented market economy, noting that changes in production methods led to comprehensive shifts in family

structure, marriage forms, gender roles, religious beliefs, and values [3]. Researchers such as Gao Yuanyuan and Tu Yue focused on the impacts of tourism development, pointing to issues like the replacement of traditional architecture with modern styles, the uniformization of clothing, language sinicization, and a decline in the practice of tiseese [6,7].

2.3. Research positioning: from culture being looked at to culture expressing itself

Existing research exhibits two common tendencies: first, placing Mosuo culture within a binary tradition-modernity narrative framework, where cultural change is often equated with cultural loss; second, a predominance of external etic observational perspectives, leaving the cultural understandings and expressive strategies of the Mosuo people themselves insufficiently represented. This paper attempts to fill this gap by centering its analysis on the cultural narratives of the Mosuo museum curator, a Daba inheritor, and members of the younger generation, thereby presenting the subjective practice of "how the Mosuo speak about themselves" within the tourism context.

3. The contemporary expression of Mosuo culture in the tourism context

3.1. The realistic form of tiseese: from romantic symbol to life choice

In the popular imagination, tiseese is often romanticized as an emotional utopia of meeting at night, parting at dawn and being unfettered. However, field data reveals a much more pragmatic understanding among the Mosuo themselves. The boatman's account illustrates the everyday operational reality of tiseese:

"My partner is in a village on the Sichuan side. After rowing in the evening, I ride my motorcycle for 40 minutes to her place and have to be back by 6:30 AM. When a child is born, after a month we hold a 'father-recognition ceremony' to make it public. We don't have a marriage certificate, but our families are like kin. If something happens in her family, I must be there to help; when I'm busy here, her brother will come and lend a hand." (Boatman, July 13, 2025)

This narrative reveals three key characteristics of contemporary tiseese. First, it is not "responsibility-free"; men have substantive obligations to assist their partner's family. Second, the father-recognition ceremony serves as a crucial social confirmation mechanism—when the child turns one month old, the father's family must present gifts to the entire village, publicly acknowledging the father-child relationship. Third, tiseese and obtaining a marriage certificate are not mutually exclusive but can be flexibly chosen based on family needs.

The younger generation's attitude towards tiseese is equally pragmatic. Eighteen-year-old Ji Bao stated clearly:

"I personally recognize and am willing to inherit the tiseese tradition. If I met a suitable Mosuo girl, I would follow this custom. Matters of love and marriage are decided by myself; my family wouldn't force anything." (Ji Bao, July 13, 2025)

Notably, Ji Bao refers to tiseese as a custom rather than an institution. This subtle difference in wording suggests that contemporary Mosuo understanding of tiseese is shifting from a mandatory social norm to a chosen traditional practice. Rather than simply dying out, tiseese appears to be transforming from an institutionalized alliance into a form of cultural expression.

3.2. The actual operation of the matrilineal family: responsibility, not power

External narrators often imagine Mosuo matriliney as a system of female dominion. However, field data reveals a more nuanced and complex picture of family division of labor and authority

structures. The museum curator explained:

"Men are responsible for building and repairing houses, herding livestock, etc.; women are responsible for the three meals a day, taking care of the needs of the elderly and children, managing neighborly relations, and so on. Major decisions are generally made by the elders. In Mosuo understanding, turning 60 is a milestone; elders still hold an important decision-making position within the family." (Museum Curator, July 12, 2025)

This statement indicates that power within the matrilineal family is not unilaterally concentrated but involves a system of sharing out the work and cooperation based on gender and age. The observations of Qi Mei, an external settler, further enrich this understanding:

"Books say women have high status, but what I saw was the elder sisters (Ajis) getting up before dawn to cook, manage the household finances, care for the elderly and children—working so hard they'd say, I wish I were a man in the next life. Their high status was never a given; it was earned by bearing the family's responsibilities on their shoulders." (Qi Mei, July 14, 2025)

These accounts collectively reveal that the essence of the Mosuo matrilineal system is not female power but female responsibility. The status of the mother/grandmother derives not from monopolizing resources but from her irreplaceable contribution to the family collective. The museum curator's statement is particularly profound: "The two pillars (male pillar, female pillar) are the same height; if one side is missing, the house collapses." (Museum Curator, July 12, 2025)

This interpretation from within Mosuo society stands in stark contrast to external academic analytical frameworks like matrilineal power or the paternalization of the uncle's authority—the Mosuo do not primarily understand their society through the lens of power but rather see balance as the fundamental cultural logic.

3.3. The living logic of Daba culture: oral tradition, flexibility, and embeddedness in daily life

Daba culture is the essence of traditional Mosuo culture, but its transmission faces severe challenges. The learning experience of Daba inheritor La Bai illustrates the core characteristics of Daba culture:

"The transmission of Daba culture has no textbooks; it relies entirely on oral instruction and rote memorization, passed down from generation to generation in our own language... If these contents were written down, they'd probably fill over a hundred books, divided into sections like textbooks, with each section corresponding to a specific ritual procedure." (La Bai, July 1, 2025)

Daba culture is not a religion separate from daily life but rather a practical wisdom integrated into the Mosuo life cycle:

"In Mosuo life, many situations require a Daba to preside over rituals, such as building a new house, offering sacrifices, etc. Even before each of the three daily meals, we first make an offering to the gods." (La Bai, July 1, 2025)

La Bai's explanation of the ritual logic reveals the deep-seated worldview embedded in Daba culture:

"We believe humans have their own space, surrounded by natural spirits like mountain spirits, water spirits, tree spirits... the relationship between humans and nature is close. When we don't have enough to eat or wear, we can take appropriately from nature, but once we have enough, we must not destroy it. Before cutting down a tree to build a house, we must perform a ritual to inform nature. The core is the pursuit of balance in the world." (La Bai, July 1, 2025)

This statement resonates with the museum curator's two pillars of the same height: balance is the core cultural logic permeating Mosuo cosmology, social views, and family concepts. This finding is crucial for understanding the contemporary adaptability of Mosuo culture. Precisely because the

cultural core is balance rather than rigid adherence, the Mosuo people can maintain great flexibility when facing external impacts.

3.4. The cultural implication of the mother house: a condensed worldview

The Mosuo mother house is the key to understanding Mosuo culture. When explaining the museum's architecture, the curator noted:

"Most importantly, we preserved the living space of the Mosuo people, which is this house. The hearth in every house, the hearth culture—daily meals and extended family activities all happen here; the fire mountain next to the hearth is the space for ancestor worship, and the part of the building shaped like fire is where we offer sacrifices to the gods. There's also the grandmother's bed, the layout symbolizing yin-yang and life-death, the positions of the male and female pillars... These spaces present many core Mosuo concepts; it's a condensation of Mosuo culture." (Museum Curator, July 12, 2025)

The mother house exhibits a structure where the sacred and the secular are superimposed. The hearth is both a place for cooking and a site for honoring ancestors and gods. The yin and yang doors correspond to birth and death, with both life and death accommodated openly under the same roof. This spatial layout embodies the spatial expression of the Mosuo balance worldview [8-10].

It is noteworthy that the museum curator emphasized the exhibition philosophy of "returning to simplicity and returning to life":

"The current exhibition uses everyday language that even elementary school students can understand. The aim is precisely to return to simplicity and return to life." (Museum Curator, July 12, 2025)

This statement carries significant methodological implications. For the Mosuo people, culture is not a system of symbols that needs to be interpreted externally but a daily practice that needs to be lived. The in-depth interpretations of Mosuo culture sought by the outside world might, from the Mosuo perspective, represent a deviation from the authentic state of culture as lived experience.

4. The weight of the gaze: reflecting on the role of scholars and tourists

During the fieldwork, what struck the researcher most was the Mosuo people's complex feelings about being "studied." The museum curator mentioned:

"They call those scholars 'heartless scholars,' asking them offensive questions. For example, someone once asked them straight out if they could accept female homosexuality." (Author's Field Notes, July 2025)

This account forced a deep reflexive consideration. Whether scholars or tourists, they often enter Mosuo society with pre-conceived frameworks of questions: "Isn't tiseese promiscuous?", "Doesn't matriliney mean women are in charge?", "Isn't the Daba a shaman?" Before being asked, such questions already position Mosuo culture as abnormal, an exotic spectacle, or something requiring explanation. The Mosuo people, under this sustained external gaze, have long developed coping strategies: hospitality is politeness; silent refusal is the genuine sentiment. Qi Mei's observation is particularly sharp:

"When I first arrived and heard an Ama (mother/grandmother) say, I wish I were a man in the next life, I felt disappointed: so matriliney isn't a female paradise after all? Later I understood, it's like when we work overtime and complain I never want to work again—the words are real, but they don't define the whole picture." (Qi Mei, July 14, 2025)

This reflection highlights a fundamental dilemma of external research: collecting fragmentary statements from Mosuo individuals and assembling them into a complete explanation of Mosuo culture—this mode of knowledge production itself may constitute a dissection and distortion of the Mosuo life-world. The Mosuo are simply living their lives, yet too many people have treated them as cultural specimens—this is an ethical dilemma that all Mosuo researchers must confront directly.

5. Conclusion

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Lugu Lake area, this paper explores the contemporary expressive strategies of Mosuo matrilineal culture within the tourism context, starting from the cultural expressions of the Mosuo people themselves. The study reaches the following conclusions:

First, the core of the Mosuo understanding of "matriliny," *tise*, and "Daba culture" is "balance" rather than "power." The two pillars standing equally tall, the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, the complementary division of labor between men and women in the family, the open accommodation of life and death under the same roof—these cultural logics permeating Mosuo cosmology, social views, and family concepts enable them to exhibit remarkable flexibility when facing external impacts. The vitality of Mosuo culture lies not in clinging to an imagined "authenticity," but in this elastic adaptive capacity centered on "balance."

Second, facing the dual gaze of tourists and scholars, the Mosuo people have developed a differentiated strategy of "frontstage display and backstage preservation." The museum has become a key site for cultural reconstruction and meaning negotiation: the Mosuo have reclaimed the power of cultural interpretation, setting aside the "authoritative narratives" of external experts and instead telling cultural stories rooted in their own life experiences using "everyday language." This form of cultural expression, "coming from life and returning to life," stands in stark contrast to the external world's pursuit of "in-depth interpretation."

Third, the younger generation demonstrates a high degree of cultural self-awareness in navigating between inheriting traditions and facing modernity. They are not passive recipients of cultural change but have developed a reflective identification with their traditional culture through interaction with the outside world. "Modernity" in career choices and "traditionality" in cultural identity can coexist harmoniously—this attitude of "choosing rather than rigidly adhering" is precisely the contemporary manifestation of the Mosuo "balance" logic in intergenerational transmission.

Fourth, the very discourse of "cultural preservation" itself requires reflection. The practice of the Mosuo museum curator demonstrates that cultural preservation is not about freezing artifacts but allowing culture to endure through use; it is not about freezing the Mosuo people as cultural specimens, but respecting their right to self-definition and their choices regarding development as cultural subjects. Current preservation policies oriented towards salvaging, recording, and preserving often overlook a fundamental question: Do those being protected agree with this approach to preservation?

This study has the following limitations: First, the fieldwork period was only two weeks, limiting the diachronic understanding of socio-cultural change in Mosuo society. Second, interviewees were primarily drawn from "visible cultural carriers" such as the museum and Daba culture, with less attention paid to the daily cultural practices of ordinary villagers. Third, due to language barriers, some interviews were conducted through translation, which may have resulted in the loss of subtle nuances in the Mosuo language.

Future research could delve deeper in the following directions: First, conduct long-term fieldwork to track the evolution of cultural identity among the younger generation of Mosuo. Second, compare

the differences in tourism development models and cultural preservation strategies between Mosuo communities in Yunnan and Sichuan. Third, place the Mosuo case within a comparative framework of global studies on matrilineal societies, exploring the common fate and local responses of matrilineality in the face of modernization.

Finally, borrowing the museum curator's words as the conclusion of this paper: "The Mosuo extended family and marriage model have been able to persist for thousands of years, not because they are primitive or backward, but rather quite advanced—they are a way chosen for survival and development." Instead of asking how much longer can Mosuo culture survive, it is more important to respect the Mosuo people's right to choose how to live. They have never needed to be saved—they simply need to be seen, on their own terms.

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