

An Analysis of Mosuo Writing System in a Sociolinguistics Context

Jingyi Liao^{1,a*,+}, Yingqi Liu^{2,+}

¹Faculty of Education and Society, University College London, London WC1E 6BT, UK

²The School of Foreign Languages, Zhijiang College of Zhejiang University of Technology,
Shaoxing, 312030, China
a. stnzjl2@ucl.ac.uk

*Correspondence author

+These authors contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors

Abstract: Mosuo language is an official dialect used by the Mosuo ethnic minority group in Southwest China. It has long been regarded as purely oral without orthography. However, newly found hieroglyphics at an isolated Mosuo village demonstrate significant prospects if develop and promote in all Mosuo society. This paper uses the method of in-depth qualitative interviews of people's insight towards this orthography and its critical role in social life and in terms of cultural heritage inheritance. This paper reveals that firstly, the 32 symbols Mosuo people use is the origin of the Dongba hieroglyphs; Secondly, Youmi hieroglyphs are a unique orthography that are exclusively used by Mosuo people live in Youmi village; Lastly, Youmi hieroglyphs has significant cultural importance especially in Mosuo religion. This paper also proposes a detailed plan in which the Mosuo hieroglyphs can be popularized and in its greatest effect.

Keywords: Hieroglyphs, Mosuo ethnic minority, Religion, Cultural heritage.

1. Introduction

China is composed of fifty-six ethnic minorities, and its ethnic diversity is particularly prominent. Each ethnic minority language is differently utilized in different periods and regions, showing distinctive characteristics. With the continuous advancement of the modernization process, minority languages have shown unprecedented demands for changes. Mosuo people are one of the ancient groups with about 50000 population in China. The Mosuo language not only shows their unique ethnic customs and culture, but also demonstrates linguistics significance. It is mainly distributed on the banks of Lugu Lake at the edge of Sichuan and Yunnan. The Mosuo language has speech but no writing system—Mosuo people maintain its traditions only by speaking. With the influence of tourism development and cultural invasion, its language is gradually dying. A language is a tool for to express thoughts, and the extinction of language means the loss of the human "idea gene bank", which is similar to the extinction of species. Thus, it is necessary for us to take certain measures to record Mosuo language [2]. Based on Luoshui Village, Yunnan, through local interviews, a brief overview and in-depth analysis of the writing system of Mosuo language will be made.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mosuo Speech and Symbols

There are 32 initials in Mosuo speech in Luoshui Village, Yunnan. The plosives and fricatives are opposed to aspirated, unaspirated and voiced, forming a three-part pattern [2]. This is a flexible speech pattern with different pronunciation rules. There are 19 finals in total, with more unitary finals and fewer complex vowels. There are also individual nasalized finals, tongue-rolling finals and consonant finals. There are 4 tones [2]. This pattern is similar to Mandarin to some extent. Phrases are structured in much the same way as compound words. It is not difficult to figure out that word orders and sentences of Mosuo speech is quite flexible with special structural particles.

2.2. Mosuo Pictograph

Mosuo hieroglyphs and Dongba scripts of Naxi minority group in Lijiang, Yunnan are located closely geographically. Therefore, there are many similarities between the two. While Dongba scripts are already well-studied, the interview and data in the results part will analyze Mosuo scripts given the context of previous Dongba scripts studies. Dongba writing is one of the earliest impression drawings, characterized by being exaggerated, bold, simple, general and vivid. Naxi Dongba people use bamboo to cut into bamboo pens, use pine smoke and glue ink on a wood fiber, and write tens of thousands of volumes of Dongba scriptures. Some hieroglyphs are also painted with colors [3]. According to Table1, the author shows our ancestors' exploration of universe, heaven, earth, humans, and the philosophical explanation of the origin of the whole world. The smallest visual elements in graphic design, point, line and surface, are widely used in Dongba characters, mainly in the use of affixes. Affixes are added components in the process of character creation, which play the function of assisting in meaning [3].

2.3. Mosuo Writing System's Impact on Mosuo Culture

The lack of Mosuo writing system has a great impact on Daba culture. Writing has been absent in the long history of Mosuo civilization. As the core of Mosuo culture, Daba culture has also been impacted by its inheritance. Due to the tourism development of Mosuo communities around Lugu Lake for its breathtaking landscape, Mosuo culture has faced many challenges [4].

Besides, speaking fluent Mandarin has become an important medium for making a living, as mandarin is a communal language. For this reason, a large number of Mosuo people have begun to learn Mandarin, and it has gradually become the main language used in daily life, replacing local Mosuo language[5]. There are less young people who learn Mosuo speech.

Dabaism is the primitive religion of the Mosuo people with a long history. Because the Mosuo people do not have their own scripts, the classic culture of Dabaism can only be passed down orally. Its abundant content includes how the ancient Mosuo ancestors produced and lived, and their cultural awareness reflects the Mosuo people's world outlook, moral outlook, and natural outlook. Reproduction and development, as well as more detailed national historical origins, migration routes, customs and etiquette, etc., are the spiritual pillars of the Mosuo people[6]. Therefore, Daba culture is highly valued in certain realms, such as anthropology and ethnology. Daba is also what the Mosuo people called literate people, specifically priests. Mosuo people view those who can hold memorial ceremonies to exorcise ghosts, and bless their families as Daba. Da means cutting, and Ba means trace; together Daba represents an iron tool chopping wood, an axe appeared a trace. Such action will be seen by heaven, earth, mountains, rivers and ancestors, and demons and ghosts will be cut off eventually. Daba enables gods to bless their people, and they are wise men who eliminate demons and ghosts. What they pursue is to promote the spirit of the Mosuo people to live in harmony with all

living creatures. Dabaism follows the principle of harmonious coexistence between man and nature, so they place their worship of nature on natural phenomena such as sun, moon, mountains, water, wind, rain, thunder and lightning. They personify nature, and creates various natural gods. Such as the "Mother Gala" god, the "Digala" the earth god, the "Vagara" mountain god, the "Rimu Gujara" the water god, the "Hoogala" the wind god, and the "Gujara" kitchen god [6]. There are not many Daba people who can recite the Daba Sutra at present, so the Daba culture may be lost at any time.

However, in the development of history, the Mosuo language only retained the spoken language, and only 32 pictographic characters remained in the written text, which could not convey the thoughts of the entire Daba Sutra. Due to the lack of written records, the Daba scriptures can only be imparted through oral transmission. Daba has no written words, so in the process of passing down the Daba scriptures from generation to generation, sometimes a few sentences are missed and can't be found again. The form of inheritance by word of mouth is extremely dependent on the state of the inheritor, and it is easy to cause alterations to the original Scripture. The original scriptures have come to this day through generations, but there has been a slow drain under the wear and tear of history and tradition. [7].

The impact of modern society on Mosuo culture can be divided into two stages. The impact before the social transformation was mainly from the policy, which did not fundamentally influence the foundation of the culture. The impact of social transformation mainly comes from the commodity economy, which has a comprehensive impact on Mosuo society[8]. Only through all-round efforts can we protect the culture from extinction. Previous research mostly focuses on Dongba culture and Dongba hieroglyphs. However, they did not consider the realms of the the Mosuo language. Hence, this present study filled in this research gap to the research on the study of Mosuo hieroglyphs and the inheritance and protection of Mosuo language.

Table 1: Symbol and Meaning.

Symbol	Meaning
	Stars on the sky
	brimming
	alcohol
	discussion
	cave

3. Method

10 participants took qualitative in-depth interviews regarding their knowledge of the Mosuo speech and writing system. The sampling method used was theoretical sampling. Interviews were taken place from July 2022 to September 2022. Participants are all dwellers in the Mosuo area (Luoshui Village,

Youmi Village, and Labai County). Aged between 11 to 50, participants vary in four professions; six are males and two are females. Remarkably, most participants are from the Mosuo ethnic minority group. One non-Mosuo anthropologist is interviewed to provide a holistic review of Mosuo language from professional point of view. Among them, one participant is proficient in using the Mosuo writing system. It is expected that all participants are proficient in Mandarin and Mosuo, and all interviews were conducted in Mandarin.

This sample provides a comprehensive reflection on the history, current situation, and prospection of Mosuo writing system and its incorporation with Mosuo culture from a wide range of perspectives. Interviews were conducted face-to-face. Each last about one hour. They were taken place in private settings so participants were comfortable providing original answers.

Table 2: Symbol and Meaning.

	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Profession	Religion	Ethnic
1	A	M	47	Cofounder of Mosuo People Museum	Daba	Mosuo
2	B	F	50	Local folksong artist	Buddhism	Mosuo
3	C	M	45	Priest	Daba	Mosuo
4	D	F	25	College student at Yunnan Ethnic Minority University. Employee at Mosuo People Museum.	Daba	Mosuo
5	E	M	11	Middle school student. Priest apprentice.	Daba	Mosuo
6	F	M	65	Priest	Dongba	Mosuo
8	H	M	29	Anthropologist. Phd at Yunnan University	None	Han
9	I	M	44	Cofounder of Mosuo People Museum	Daba	Mosuo

Participants were asked to talk about their previous understanding of Mosuo language, including interactions in school, social, religious, and familial life. They were also invited to share their opinion on the current Mosuo language situation under the impact of modernization.

4. Results

4.1. The Absence of Writing System

Mosuo history can be traced back to 4000 years ago. The community has developed a distinctive culture and speech language, but it has always been a myth why the people have never established their own writing system. According to interviewees A and D, Daba scriptures record a story, “A long

time ago, Mosuo people have their own writing system, and Daba writes scriptures on animal hides. One day, he brought those scriptures with him while traveling. Suddenly he encountered a flood and ran out of food. In the desperation of starving, he ate all the hides. Mosuo has lost its writing since then.”

It is widely believed that this is only folklore. No other historical documents have record that Mosuo once has writing. For this reason, H provides his speculation for the reason behind the lack of Mosuo scripts, “In most Chinese rural villages, people live in a cluster, geologically and socially close to each other. Often every member in the community shares the same last name, like a big family. In such cultures, face-to-face communication is sufficient in daily life, so there is no need to use writing to, for example, write a letter. Mosuo is a small ethnic group with a total population of less than 50,000 and mostly lives in the same area, and historically has little access to outside people and culture, which makes the writing system unnecessary.”

These days, modernization and tourism bring in an inflow of foreign culture. Mosuo people's life has changed drastically. More people choose to form a family with people from other ethnic groups. Business intercourse has increased too. When asked about whether this change has shifted people's opinion on the necessity of a writing system, Both A and D provide negative answer, “For most families, they do not find the need to use writing to record anything. All they want is just to be economically stable, and no more beyond that.”

However, several participants have emphasized the importance of scripts in their traditional religion: Daba. Because the lack of script, Daba religion faces the challenge of inheritance. For all time, Daba scriptures, more than 40 in total, are passed down by word of mouth. It is especially easy that some information is lost during the teaching process.

4.2. Mosuo Symbols

Although there has not been the development of a complete writing system in Mosuo history, the community uses 32 symbols in their daily life historically, which are still in use today. I described, “In traditional Han Chinese culture, people rely on the Huang Calendar to predict whether a day is auspicious to accomplish something. In Mosuo language, the 32 symbols have similar uses, which represents different days. people look at it if it is auspicious every day before they buy and sell livestock, build bridges, farm the land, etc. However, under the impact of the prevailing constellation, few people are willing to use the symbols these days. It is believed that the 32 symbols are the origin of Dongba's writing.”

4.3. Youmi Dongba Semantic Writing System

A Mosuo village, Youmi, locates across a river from Lijiang, five hours away from Luoshui. Because it adjoins the Naxi ethnic minority community at Lijiang, its culture is highly similar to Naxi culture. For example, priests are called Daba at Luoshui, while they are named Dongba at Youmi (the same as Naxi). Villagers are fluent in both the Naxi language and the Mosuo language. Surprisingly, there exists a semantic writing system at Youmi, which is similar to the well-known Dongba semantic writing system at Naxi, with the addition of 400 characters, in total of 1800 characters. A claimed that, “The Youmi writing system is unique and only used by Mosuo people there. Therefore, it undoubtedly should be called the Mosuo writing system.”

More importantly, Dongba (priest) in Youmi has already proficiently used its Semantic system to record their scriptures. As a Dongba, F mentions that he has written down more than 300 scriptures. Scriptures in Dongba are slightly different from those in Daba. For example, “Worship the Victory God” records some of the Mosuo folklore, and “Burn Incense” is the scripture that every family reads, which introduces eighteen Gods protecting the family. All men in Youmi learn this scripture.

This writing system is highly semantic. For example,  has the meaning of “Mosuo people”, which in the Mosuo language means “people from the sky”. The upper part  means “sky” and the lower part  means “people”. More examples are  meaning “mountain”,  meaning “tree”,  meaning “net”,  meaning “rock”. There are also homographs in the Mosuo writing system. For instance,  means “sun” when pronounced as “bi”, while it means “day” when pronounced as “ni”. Its meaning and pronunciation depend on context.

All in all, Mosuo hieroglyphics has been used for thousands of years in Youmi village and has developed into a complete orthography that is unique to Mosuo.

5. Discussion

5.1. Mosuo Script as a Hieroglyph

Fang Guoyu and other early scholars characterized Dongba script as a hieroglyph, which is the script of the Naxi people in Yunnan Province. For historical and geological reasons, Naxi and Mosuo people develop similar cultures and languages[9]. It is revealed that the Naxi Dongba script originates from the 32 symbols of Mosuo. Youmi script, similarly, transformed from the Naxi Dongba script. When analyzing Mosuo hieroglyphs, it is crucial to draw connections with the Naxi Dongba script, which has had substantial studies already.

As few previous studies focus on this little-known Mosuo hieroglyphics, this paper focuses on the extant Mosuo hieroglyphics from a social perspective. This paper investigates Mosuo Hieroglyphs and demonstrates the urgency and certain methodologies of the inheritance and promotion of the Mosuo script.

This Mosuo writing system is already proficiently used by Mosuo people in Youmi. Dongba uses it to record scripture. Moreover, in Youmi, the trace of Mosuo script is evident everywhere—woven into clothes, and written in family books, New Year Scrolls (a form of blessings people put on their door during Spring Festival), and letters sent to distant friends. Looking up to the Mosuo script's multifaceted contributions to Youmi's religious and non-religious life, this study will discuss whether it is beneficial and necessary to the whole Mosuo ethnic group if promoted [10].

Under the impact of modernization, Mosuo culture, especially religious traditions and spoken language, is gradually dying down. In the Daba religion, Daba (priest) holds ceremonies on special days. Before, Daba holds grand ceremonies for all teenagers who are becoming adults in the same year, newborn babies, and severely ill people. However, now those ceremonies no longer exist, as people choose to go to school in big city instead of staying in the hometown and go to the hospital rather than relying on Daba to expel disease. As a result, few people are willing to take Daba as a job, leading to fewer inheritors of the Daba religion—the core in Mosuo culture. If Mosuo script can be used, all the scriptures in Daba can be preserved even if oral ones are lost.

Facing the dilemma of the endangered Mosuo language and Dabaism, D proposes a specific plan for Daba (priest) to learn the Mosuo hieroglyphs to preserve the Daba scriptures. He suggests that people invite Dongba (priest) from Youmi and teach Daba how to read and write this hieroglyphics and how to use it in scriptures. The first learning session has raised funds of 20000 RMB and will initiate in January 2023.

6. Conclusion

This paper concentrates on Mosuo hieroglyphs, in relation with Mosuo culture, and their inheritance and protection. Based on the results from qualitative in-depth interviews regarding participants'

knowledge of the Mosuo speech and writing system, 3 major findings are discovered: 1) Mosuo people use 32 symbols though there is not a complete writing system; 2) Youmi hieroglyphs are a complete, unique writing system that weigh significantly in the aspect of Mosuo Daba culture. 3) Mosuo hieroglyphs has great potential if widely use in the rest of Mosuo area beside Youmi, because it is perfectly in align with phonetics and semantics of Mosuo language. After the social transformation, the commodity economy has shaken the self-sufficient natural economy, and the Mosuo hieroglyphs and culture are facing an unprecedented challenge of survival threats. How to realize the self-renewal and sustainable development of culture in the state of harmonious coexistence of natural environment, economy and society has become a problem that must be discussed. Some potential solutions can be concluded or derived from the answers in interviews.

Acknowledgment

All authors contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

References

- [1] Liu Lingling. (2015). *Investigation and research on the current situation of language use among Mosuo people in Yunnan* (Master's thesis, Yunnan Normal University). <https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CMFD201601&filename=1015903931.nh>
- [2] Shi Xiangdong & Liu Yun. (2015). Overview of Mosuo Dialect. *Language Studies* (03), 112-124.
- [3] Song Yang. (2009). *Analysis of Dongba Character Graphic Symbols and Inspiration to Graphic Design* (Master's Thesis, Jiangnan University). <https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CMFD2010&filename=2009250058.nh>
- [4] Wang Weiyan, Lin Jinping, Li Qiang, Liu Li & Chen Yizhi. (2009). The "isolated island" of the Mosuo matrilineal culture in Lugu Lake and its cultural ecology perspective - and on the protection of the Mosuo matrilineal culture in Lugu Lake. *Yunnan Geographical Environment Research* (01), 18-23.
- [5] Gao Yuanyuan. (2013). Research on the protection of Lugu Lake Mosuo culture under the background of tourism development. *People's Forum* (20), 162-163. doi: 10.16619/j.cnki.rmlt.2013.20.008.
- [6] Guo Jing. (2017). *Research on the Change and Development of Mosuo Culture in Lugu Lake Area* (Master's Thesis, Yunnan University). <https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CMFD201902&filename=1017209829.nh>
- [7] Liu Hui. (2001). Doubts on "Mosuo Cultural Reserve"—On the Protection and Development of Minority Cultural Tourism Resources. *Journal of Tourism* (05), 27-30.
- [8] Xu Bin. (2006). The impact of modern society on Mosuo culture in Lugu Lake. *Journal of Minzu University of China* (04), 45-49. doi: 10.15970/j.cnki.1005-8575.2006.04.008.
- [9] He Jiquan. (2011). Centennial Research and Reflection on Dongba Literature. *Ideological Front* (05), 34-41.
- [10] Sha Yuying. The development of human concepts from the vocabulary of the Mosuo people [J]. *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, 1996(03): 328-333.