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## Mosuo: Women nurture, adapt to progress

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"In a walking marriage, men visit their partners at night. They arrive after the woman's family has gone to sleep, usually around midnight, and leave before dawn to return to their own family."

In Mosuo society, extended families are centered around grandmothers, forming tight-knit households where belongings are shared equally among all. Both men and women take responsibility for raising all the children in the family, irrespective of who the parents are, creating a collective approach to child care.

Children inherit their mother's surname, and decisions about family planning, such as how many children to have and when, are primarily made by the women, often in consultation with other family members.

"Our language doesn't even have a word for aunt," Geze tells his audience. "Your mother's sisters are all your mothers. It doesn't matter who gave birth to you."

Thanks to this unique social structure, Geze said, male-female relationships are free from possessiveness, jealousy, or concerns about economic status. In fact, Mosuo society has virtually no widows, orphans, war or crime, he said.

It is a utopia sought by Westerners sometimes compared to the mythical "Shangri-La".

## Looking for 'Shangri-La'

Christiane Marchais, a tour guide from the French cultural travel agency Intermedes in Paris, has chosen Lijiang as one of her top destinations for exploring China's ethnic groups. In October, she led a French team to delve into the rich cultural tapestry of Southwest China.

"Yunnan is a melting pot of ethnic cultures and a popular destination for Western travelers. We came here in search of the legendary Shangri-La and to explore the mysterious ethnic cultures," Marchais said.

The concept of "Shangri-La" was popularized by British novelist James Hilton in his 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. Hilton described a small, harmonious village nestled in the Kunlun Mountains where the inhabitants lived in eternal happiness and youth. This mythical place has since become synonymous with an earthly paradise.

In China, the Greater Shangri-La Cultural Circle spans the tri-border area of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces and the Xizang autonomous region. Lijiang, a city within this



**Top:** Tourists take a boat ride on Lugu Lake in Lijiang, Yunnan province, in December. GONG JINZU / XINHUA **Above left:** A woman and her granddaughter introduce traditional woven textiles in a Mosuo village by Lugu Lake. **Above right:** Villagers watch a traditional Mosuo performance during an intangible cultural heritage show in the village. PHOTOS BY WANG LEI / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

region, has emerged as a key destination for both domestic and international tourists.

Before the 1990s, the domestic tourism market was virtually nonexistent, Geze recalls. Those who did visit tended to be academics and photographers looking to gain some insight into the region's highly unusual culture. These visitors were primarily foreign backpackers and official delegations.

"Many female European tourists were amazed by the lifestyle of Mosuo women, and they considered it a true form of feminism. Some even said they would like to replicate a Mosuo-style matriarchal village back in the United Kingdom," Geze said.

Initially, the Mosuo people were unfamiliar with monetary transactions and relied on a barter system. In the early days, visitors would come to the village, and the Mosuo would provide food and accommodation, but get little in return.

This resulted in village resources being depleted, Geze said. Local governments eventually intervened and established a system of fees, and a regulated tourism industry was born.

A portion of the 3 billion yuan (\$423 million) earmarked for tourism development is being allocated to preserving the Mosuo culture. The economic push is expected to create jobs for locals and markedly lift living standards.

Today, Geze's family hosts several tour groups daily for "Mosuo home visits", allowing tourists to see firsthand how Mosuo people live.

"From complete dependence on the land to gradually moving away from it, the transformation in lifestyle has brought more choices and freedom. Although climate affects crop yields, the income from tourism

ensures a stable livelihood," Geze said.

## Green development

"According to the legends we are brought up with, anyone sulling the waters of Lake Lugu or felling the trees around it faces the eternal wrath of the mountains and gods," Geze said.

Lugu Lake, revered by the Mosuo people as a holy lake, holds a sacred place in their hearts and culture. For generations, the Mosuo have lived in harmony with the lake, guided by a deep sense of reverence.

However, the 1990s brought a wave of change that threatened this delicate balance. The rapid growth of tourism, while economically beneficial, led to increasing pollution and ecological degradation. The lake, once pristine, began to suffer under the weight of human activity.

In response, Yunnan and Sichuan provinces have collaborated to protect and manage Lugu Lake through the introduction of a protection convention.

As of 2024, significant progress has been made. According to the Lijiang authorities, 17 waterfront platforms and six piers have been dismantled and those areas of the lake restored to their natural state. In addition, 160 residential inns within the 80-meter ecological red line have been removed, freeing up 118,900 square meters of land.

This land has been repurposed for the construction of ecological corridors and wetland buffer zones, marking a major shift from "human encroachment" to "ecological restoration".

To ensure long-term sustainability, local authorities have also implemented strict regulations on lake activities and surrounding business-



es. Boating zones have been designated, and fuel-powered, motorized and metal boats are now prohibited from entering the lake.

These measures have paid off. Lugu Lake's water quality now consistently meets Class 1 standards, making it one of China's cleanest freshwater lakes, with underwater visibility reaching up to 12 meters.

Geze, a lifelong resident, has noticed the change. "Now, I can see the sea vegetable flowers (*ottelia acuminata*) waving on the lake again, just like when I was a child," he said. The return of this rare aquatic plant, a type of water lily, is a testament to the lake's ecological recovery.

With the environment on the mend, green tourism has flourished around the lake. The local government has introduced architectural planning measures to preserve 127 Mosuo traditional houses and 25 ancient villages.

Efforts to promote Mosuo culture include supporting regional intangible cultural heritage inheritors and organizing traditional festivals. A range of cultural tourism products, such as Mosuo highland red rice, preserved pork, and handmade textiles, have also been developed to enrich the visitor experience.

In 2023, the number of tourists entering the scenic area from Lijiang reached 1.58 million, a 176 percent increase from the previous year. Tourism revenue soared to 92 million yuan, up 232 percent.

Local residents have reaped the benefits, with per capita annual income rising from 829 yuan in 2003 to 34,500 yuan in 2023 — a more than 40-fold increase, according to local tourism authorities.

Today, most Mosuo villagers work in tourism-related roles, from hospitality and boating to traditional

glass," he said, adding that his 2025 renovation plan proposes a compromise — preserving external woodwork while modernizing interiors. "Even as we meet customer demand, remaining true to our cultural heritage is paramount."

Yet transformation runs deeper than architecture.

While half of Mosuo families retain local traditions — where spouses live separately with their maternal clans — the other half now embrace nuclear family units. Even his children have adopted Han-style wedding ceremonies, Dashi said.

Ciren Duoqi, director of the Mosuo Museum in Lijiang, said that Mosuo family structures are diversifying, a process that began in the 1950s. Policies back then encouraged monogamy, and outsiders portrayed walking marriage customs as "lagging behind the times".

However, the economic growth in the 1980s brought an unexpected revival in interest in old matrilineal ways.

"When allowed to choose freely after experiencing different models, many Mosuo consciously returned to walking marriages as both modern and culturally resonant," wrote Duma Lamu of Lijiang Culture and Tourism College in a research article.

Dashi, the hotel owner, said: "Modernity's pull grows stronger as tourism wealth sends Mosuo youth flocking to cities. Many settle outside and start nuclear families."

But he remains optimistic, saying: "With prosperity comes renewed interest in preserving roots. Cultural conservation and development aren't enemies — they're partners."

Ciren said: "Today's youth have bold visions, and society increasingly embraces diverse marital choices. While elders may have worries, most choose understanding over opposition."

As sunlight dances on Lugu Lake, Dashi's lodge stands as a metaphor for his people's navigation of modernity. Within its timber walls, Wi-Fi routers will soon nestle beside ancestral carvings — a testament to the Mosuo's enduring truth: that progress need not erase tradition, so long as cultural codes evolve with care.

"Whether in matrilineal compounds or urban apartments, the Mosuo compass remains fixed on mutual support," Ciren said.

"Our culture's essence isn't about household structure, but about how we lean on each other to find happiness in changing tides."

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**Left:** Green tourism has flourished around Lugu Lake in recent years. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY **Right:** An inheritor of Mosuo traditional costume-making weaves cloth in a village by the Lugu Lake. WANG LEI / CHINA NEWS SERVICE