

# LAND OF THE WALKING

*For the Mosuo of  
China, it's a  
woman's world.*

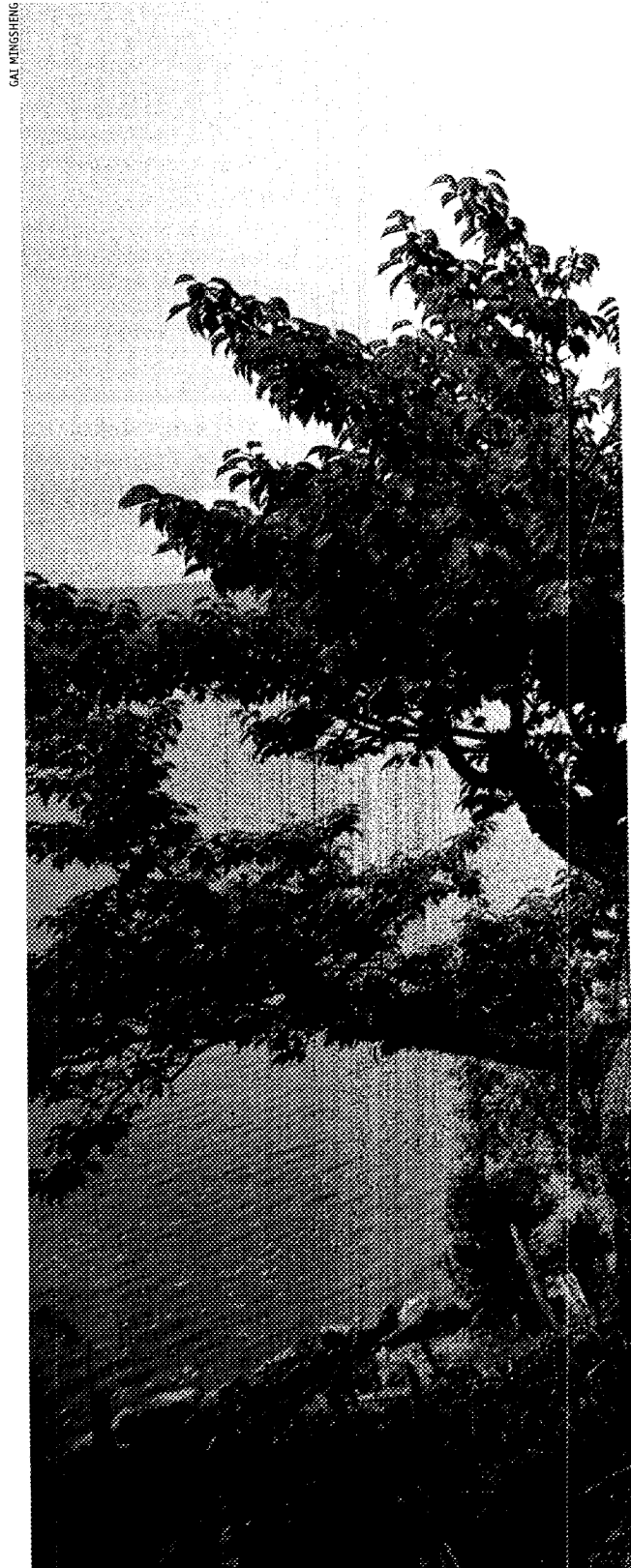
*By Lu Yuan and  
Sam Mitchell*

*There are so many skillful people,  
but none can compare with my mother.  
There are so many knowledgeable people,  
but none can equal my mother.  
There are so many people skilled at song and dance,  
but none can compete with my mother.*

**Liji Peninsula on Lugu Lake: The cairn (right) is a place where people burn incense and other offerings on behalf of their ancestors.**

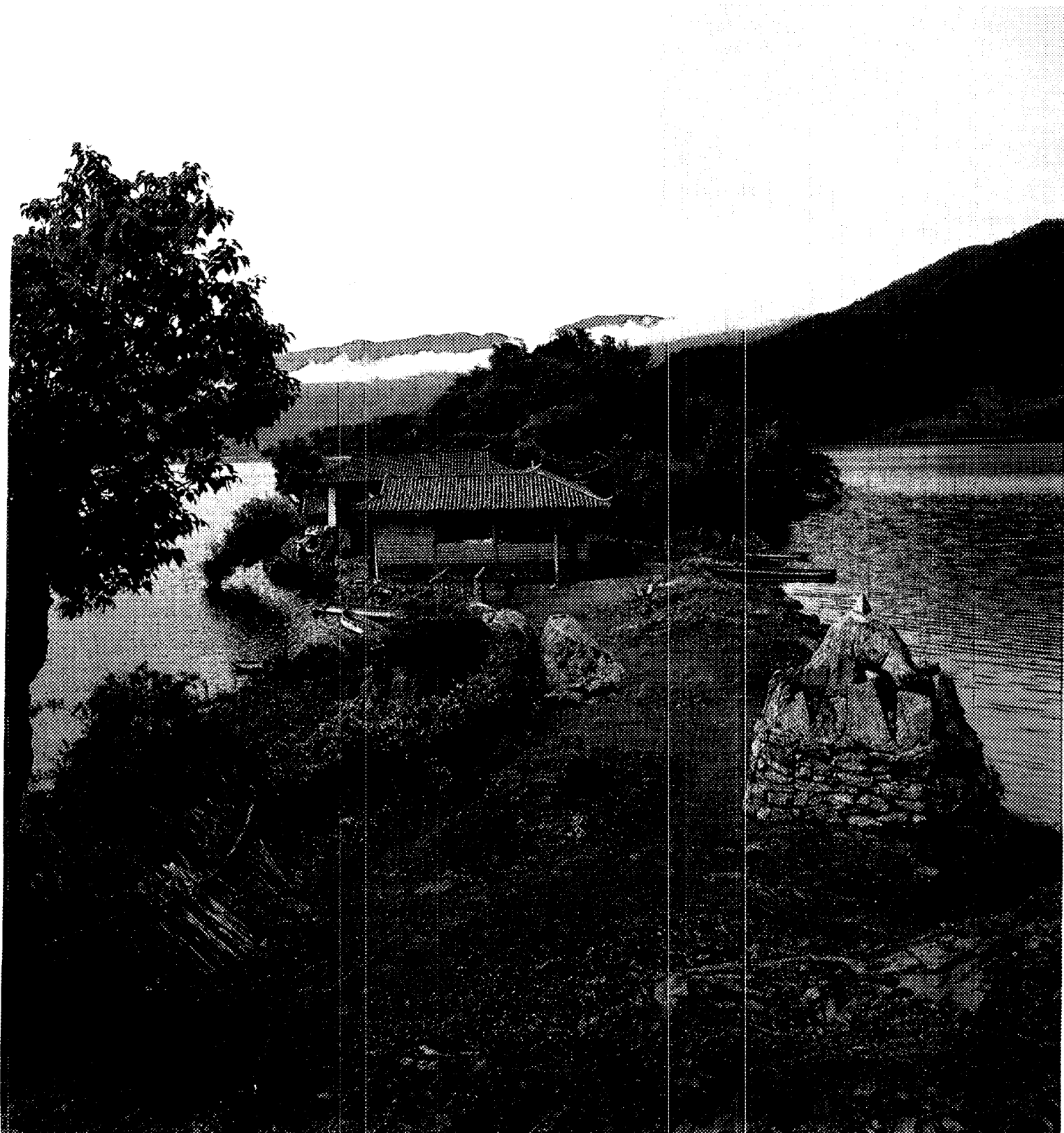
**W**e first heard this folk song around a blazing fire in southwestern China in the spring of 1995. It was sung enthusiastically by women of Luoshui village—members of the Nari, an ethnic group more commonly known to outsiders as the Mosuo. During the past few years, we have returned several times to visit these people, who celebrate women in more than song. Although the majority of China's ethnic groups follow a strong patrilineal tradition, the Mosuo emphasize matrilineal ties, with matrilineally related kin assisting one another to farm, fish, and raise children. Women also head most households and control most family property.

Marriage as other cultures know it is uncommon among the Mosuo; they prefer a visiting relationship between lovers—an arrangement they sometimes refer to in their language as *sisi* (walking back and forth). At about the age of twelve, a Mosuo girl is given a coming-of-age ceremony, and after puberty, she is free to receive male visitors. A lover may remain overnight in her room but will return in the morning to his own mother's home and his primary responsibilities. Children born from such a relationship live with their mother, and



GAI WINGSHENG

# MARRIAGE



the male relatives responsible for helping to look after them are her brothers. Many children know who their fathers are, of course, but even if the relationship between father and child is quite close, it involves no social or economic obligation. And lovers can end their relationship at any time; a woman may signal her change of heart by simply no longer opening the door. When speaking Chinese, the Mosuo will call the *sisi* arrangement *zou hun* (walking marriage) or *azhu hunyin* (friend marriage, *azhu* being the Mosuo word for friend); nevertheless, the relationship is not a formal union.

Chuan-kang Shih, an anthropologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and an authority on the Mosuo, points out that many aspects of their family system have parallels elsewhere in the world. For example, although in most societies a husband and wife live together (usually near his relatives or hers), in others they continue to live in separate households, and one spouse must make overnight nuptial visits. Matrilineal kinship systems, in which a man looks after the interests of his sisters' children, are also well known. And although men commonly wield the power, even in matrilineal societies, women may play important political and economic roles. But the absence of a formal marital union may quite possibly be unique to the Mosuo. In this respect, only the precolonial practices of the matrilineal Nayar of southern India come close. As Shih explains, among some Nayar groups, a woman would take lovers (with due regard for social class), who would establish and maintain their relationships to her through a pattern of gift giving. Despite being expected to acknowledge paternity, the lovers incurred no obligations to their offspring. Still, the Nayar had a vestigial form of marriage: shortly before puberty, a girl would be wed to a young man; although this marriage lasted only three days and was often purely ceremonial in nature, the union marked the girl's transition to adult life and legitimized the birth of her children.

In Luoshui we stayed with thirty-year-old A Long, who runs a small guesthouse. His family consisted of his mother, grandmother, younger brother and sister, and sister's two-year-old son. Each evening A Long departed with his small overnight bag; each morning he returned to help his mother and sister. After several days of eating with the family and becoming friendly with them, we asked A Long what he thought about the *sisi* system. "Friend marriage" is very good," he replied. "First, we are all our mother's children,



making money for her; therefore there is no conflict between the brothers and sisters. Second, the relationship is based on love, and no money or dowry is involved in it. If a couple feels contented, they stay together. If they feel unhappy, they can go their separate ways. As a result, there is little fighting." A Long told us that he used to have several lovers but started to have a stable relationship with one when she had her first child.

"Are you taking care of your children?" we asked.

"I sometimes buy candy for them. My responsibility is to help raise my sister's children. In the future, they will take care of me when I get old."

A Long's twenty-six-year-old sister, Qima, told us that the Mosuo system "is good because my friend and I help our own families during the daytime and only come together at night, and therefore there are few quarrels between us. When we are about fifty years old, we will not have 'friend marriage' anymore."

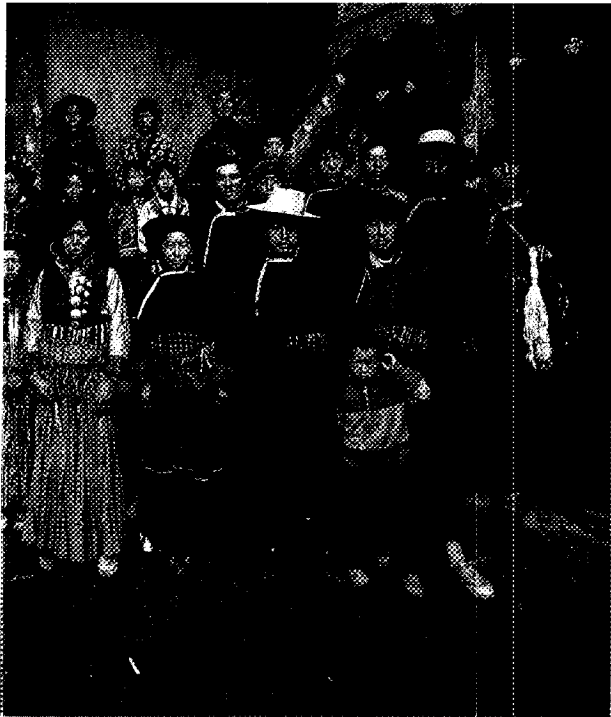
Ge Ze A Che is the leader of Luoshui, which has a population of more than 200 people, the majority of them Mosuo, with a few Han (China's majority ethnic group) and Pumi as well. He spoke proudly of this small settlement: "I have been the leader of the village for five years. There has been little theft, rape, or even argument here. 'Friend marriage' is better than the husband-wife system, because in large extended families everyone helps each other, so we are not afraid of anything. It is too hard to do so much work in the field and at home just as a couple, the way the Han do."



**Mosuo households vary: In one, top, a widower (seated) is the patriarch, while another family, above, is headed by a woman.**

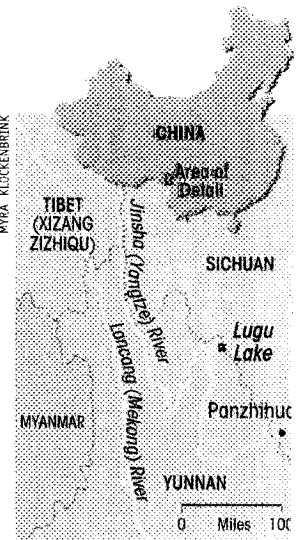
The Mosuo live in villages around Lugu Lake, which straddles the border between Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, and in the nearby town of Yongning. They are believed to be descendants of the ancient Qiang, an early people of the Tibetan plateau from whom many neighboring minority groups, including the Tibetans themselves, claim descent. As a result of Han expansion during the Qin dynasty (221–206 B.C.), some Qiang from an area near the Huang (Yellow) River migrated south and west into Yunnan. The two earliest mentions of the Mosuo appear during the Han dynasty (A.D. 206–222) and the Tang dynasty (618–907), in records concerning what is now southwestern China.

The Mosuo do not surface again in historical accounts until after Mongol soldiers under Kublai Khan subjugated the area in 1253. During the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), a period of minority rule by



Naxi, Pumi, and Han. The “Mongol” people we encountered dressed the same as the Mosuo and spoke the same language. Their dances and songs, too, were the same, and they sometimes even referred to themselves as Mosuo.

Tibetan Buddhism first entered the region in the late thirteenth century and has greatly influenced the lives and customs of the Mosuo. Before the area came under the control of the Communist government, at least one male from almost every family joined the monastic community. The local practice of Buddhism even incorporated aspects of the *sisi* system, although the women did the “commuting.” On the eighth day of the fifth lunar month, monks traveling to Tibet for religious study would camp in front of Kaiji village. That night, each monk would be joined by his accustomed lover—a ceremonial practice believed to enable the monks to reach Lhasa safely and to succeed in completing their studies. And the local Mosuo monks, each of whom lived with his own mother’s family, could also receive lovers. Such arrangements seem to defy the injunctions of many schools of Tibetan Buddhism, but by allowing the monks to live and work at home, outside the strict confines of monas-



*Instead of marriage, Mosuo lovers prefer a visiting relationship. Children live with their mother, whose brothers help look after them.*

tic life, they helped the Mosuo maintain a stable population and ensure an adequate labor force to sustain local agriculture.

The area around Lugu Lake did not come under the full control of China’s central government until 1956, seven years after the founding of the People’s Republic. In 1958 and 1959, during the Great Leap Forward, the nearby monasteries, notably the one at Yongning, were badly damaged. Now, however, with a combination of government funds and donations from local people, they are slowly being rebuilt. One element of recent religious revival is the Bon tradition, which is accepted by the Dalai Lama as a school of Tibetan Buddhism but believed by many scholars to be derived from an earlier, animist tradition. During our walk around Lugu Lake, we witnessed a Bon cremation ceremony and visited the Bon temple on the eastern shore of the lake. The Mosuo also retain a shamanic and animist tradition of their own, known as Daba.



the Mongols, the province of Yunnan was incorporated into the Chinese empire, and many Mongol soldiers settled in the Mosuo region. In fact, during the 1950s, when the government set out to classify the country’s minority nationalities, several Mosuo villages surrounding Lugu Lake identified themselves as Mongol, and some continue to do so today. When we walked around the lake, as the Mosuo do each year in the seventh lunar month—a ritual believed to ensure good fortune during the coming year—we passed through villages that identified themselves variously as Mosuo, Mongol,

**The Mosuo, who live near Lugu Lake, shown in the map at top, are believed to have ancestral roots in Tibet. Above: A Mosuo girl.**

**Tilling the field:  
The fertile  
farmland  
bordering Lugu  
Lake is the envy  
of people who  
dwell in the  
nearby  
mountains.**

In the twentieth century, the West became acquainted with the Mosuo through the work of French ethnographers Edouard Chavannes and Jacques Bacot and through the contributions of Joseph Rock, a Vienna-born American who first journeyed to Yunnan in 1922 while on a botanical expedition. A flamboyant character, Rock traveled through remote Tibetan borderlands accompanied by trains of servants and bodyguards and equipped with such dubious necessities as a collapsible bathtub and a silver English tea set. He made the Naxi

town of Lijiang his home for more than twenty years, until the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 spelled an end to foreign-funded research and missionary activity in the area.

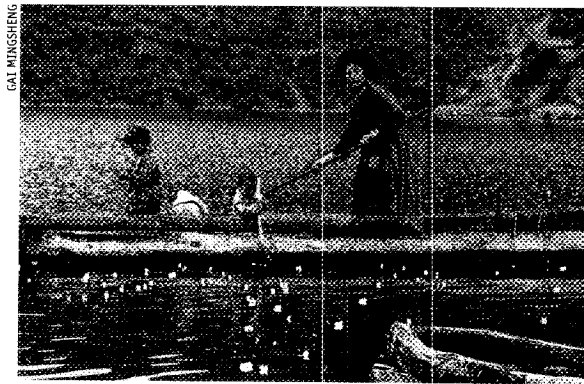
Besides conducting botanical surveys and collecting plant and animal specimens, Rock took many photographs and became the West's foremost expert on the region's peoples and their shamanic practices. He identified the Mosuo as a subgroup of the Naxi, who, although their kinship system is patrilineal, speak a language closely related to that of

JACQUES LANGEVIN; CORBIS SYGMA

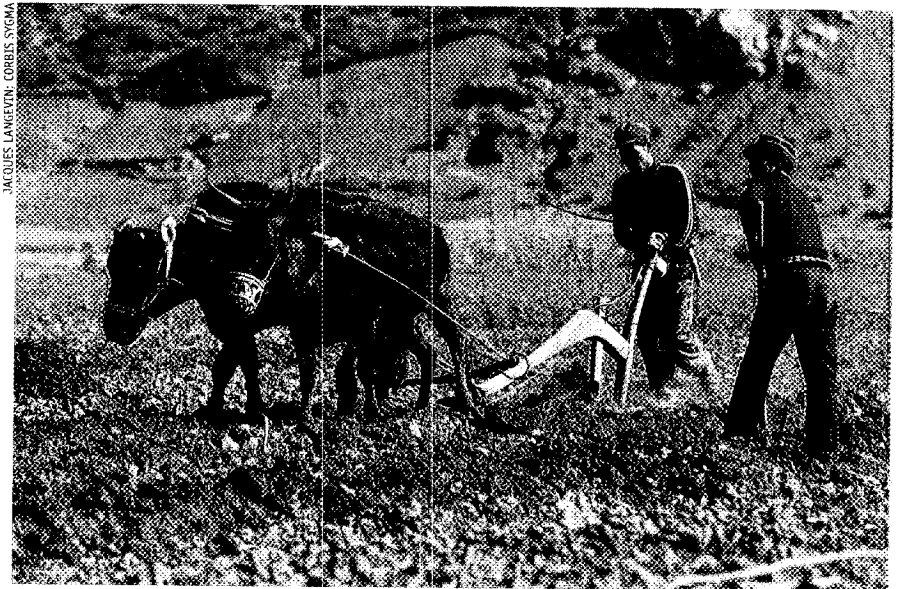
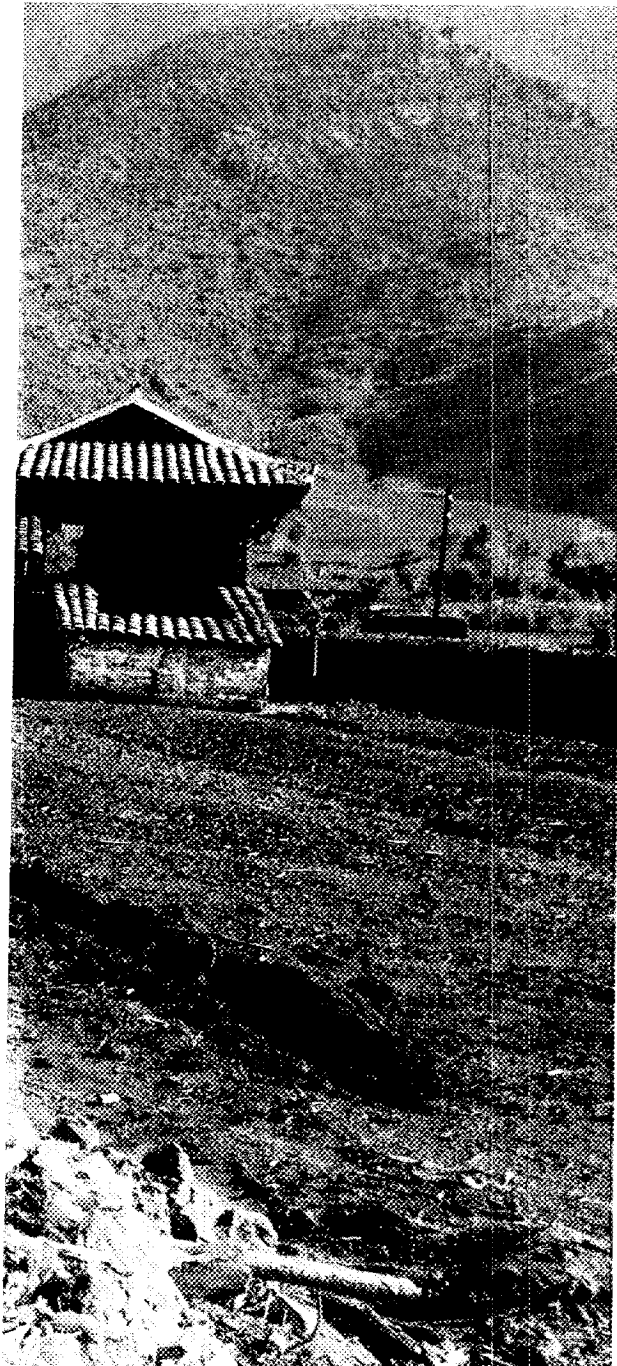




the Mosuo. The Mosuo strongly contest this classification, but it has been retained by the present government, which has been reluctant to assign the Mosuo the status of a distinct minority. The Communists claim that the Mosuo do not fit the criteria for nationality status as defined for the Soviet Union by Joseph Stalin. According to Stalin, as he phrased it in a 1929 letter, "A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of the common possession of four principal characteristics, namely: a common language, a



The lake, left, is a source of small fish. Below: Local farmers grow rice, corn, potatoes, and other vegetables.



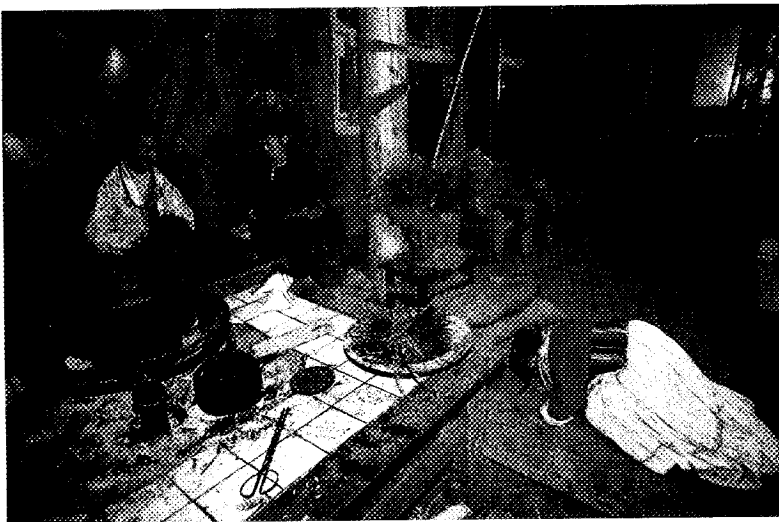
*"A small family is not good for work," says Lama Luo Sang Yi Shi. "Also, mothers and their daughters-in-law cannot get along well."*

common territory, a common economic life, and a common psychological make-up manifested in common specific features of national culture."

In keeping with Marxist interpretations of historical development, Chinese ethnologists have also regarded Mosuo society as a "living fossil," characterized by ancient marriage and family structures. This view draws on theories of social evolution formerly embraced by Western anthropologists, notably the American ethnologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–81). Morgan proposed that societies pass through successive natural stages of "savagery" and "barbarism" before attaining "civilization." He also proposed a sequence of marriage forms, from a hypothetical "group marriage" of brothers and sisters to monogamy. Chinese scholars have argued that a minority such as the Mosuo, with its unusual kin-



JACQUES LANGEVIN; CORBIS SYGMA



*The government, which adheres to Stalin's definition of nationality, has been reluctant to assign the Mosuo status as a distinct minority.*



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**"Wearing the dress," top, is a girl's rite of passage. Above and right: The local buildings are of timber. Opposite page: Mosuo women give a Chinese tourist a ride.**

JACQUES LANGEVIN; CORBIS SYGMA



ship system, fits into this scheme and thus validates Marxist views. Of course, the application of Morgan's theories to minority cultures in China has also enabled the Han majority to see itself as more advanced in the chain of human societal evolution. This kind of thinking, long discredited in the West, is only now beginning to be reexamined in China.

With the coming of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the Mosuo were pressured to change their way of life. According to Lama Luo Sang Yi Shi (a Mosuo who holds a county-government title but is primarily a spiritual leader), "during the Cultural Revolution, the governor of Yunnan came to Yongning. He went into Mosuo homes and cursed us, saying that we were like animals, born in a mess without fathers. At that time, all of the Mosuo were forced to marry and to adopt the Han practice of monogamy; otherwise, they would be punished by being deprived of food." During this period Mosuo couples lived with the woman's family, and divorce was not permitted. But even though they held marriage certificates and lived with their wives, the men kept returning to their maternal homes each morning to work.

Luo Sang Yi Shi criticized this attempt to change the Mosuo and explained that "at the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Mosuo soon returned to their former system of 'friend marriage.' A small family is not good for work. Also, mothers and their daughters-in-law cannot get along well."

Today the Mosuo maintain their matrilineal system and pursue *sisi* relationships. Yet how long will this remain the case? The government of Yunnan recently opened Lugu Lake to tourism, and vans full of visitors, both Chinese and foreign, are beginning to arrive. To some degree, this added exposure threatens to envelop the Mosuo in a society that is becoming increasingly homogeneous. Yet the tourists are drawn not only by the beauty of the lake but by the exotic qualities of the Mosuo people. Ironically, their unique qualities may well enable the Mosuo to endure and prosper.

We asked Ge Ze A Che, the Luoshui village leader, if tourism would change the lives of the Mosuo. "It has already changed their lives to some extent," he observed. "Our young people now like to wear Han clothes, speak Chinese, and sing Chinese songs. In the future they will lose our people's traditions and customs."

And what would happen to "friend marriage"? we wondered.

"It will also change—but very, very slowly!" □

