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Arriving in the Kingdom of Women

Once in a blue moon, a traveller may be lucky enough to come across the mention of a place so intriguing, so mysterious, that not to answer its call would be unforgivable. It was months since I had quit my job. Following my urge to discover what China would hold for me, I had spent my time travelling to the more widely known cities and countryside of this vast country of my ancestors. Then I came across an article in a travel magazine about a remote tribe in a corner of Yunnan where the people worshipped a mountain goddess called Gemu.

This tribe, located by a lake in the far eastern foothills of the great Himalayan range, apparently was one of the few surviving matrilineal societies in the world. It struck me as incredible that a matrilineal society still existed in the twenty-first century, let alone in the depths of patriarchal China. This is the land where patriarchy is so deep-rooted that a male-biased mentality has, mainly through abortion, produced a skewed gender imbalance of nearly 120 boys born to every 100 girls today. This is also the place from which my grandfather fled to escape poverty and start a new life in Malaysia. There he planted his traditional patriarchal roots, which produced in my father an intransigent

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preference for boys and which in turn produced in me a stubborn advocacy for fair and equal treatment of women in a man's world.

To say that the feminist heart in me was beating a little faster on reading that this Mosuo tribe practises a religious ceremony celebrating a female deity would be an understatement. Even the name given to this tribe by the Chinese, the Kingdom of Women, conjures up an unimaginable world populated by present-day Amazons.

I was curious to find out just how the story of the Mosuo tribe came about. Equipped with only a limited mastery of the Chinese language, I trawled through books and articles written by anthropologists, historians, journalists and sociologists, and pieced together an introduction to the story of the Kingdom of Women.

A couple of thousand years ago, or even longer depending on which book you read, the Mosuos, originally known as the Na people, walked from the high mountains in the north-west to where they are today, in search of a kinder climate. They must have trekked for years and years, passing over countless harsh mountain ranges before coming across a great plateau situated in a lower altitude, much more hospitable than their previous homeland.

There they eyed a beautiful lake under the shade of a high granite mountain. By its shore, they found the weather warmer, the spring water clearer, the soil richer and the pine forests with wild animals and plant life more abundant. Their discovery led them to settle down among the knolls and valleys studded around the Yongning plateau by the lake. They claimed the lake as their own and graced its life-giving waters with a name recalling the greatest female force, that of the Mother Lake, or Xienami. The lake was renamed later as Lugu Lake because it is shaped like a 'lugu', a water container made from the dried shell of a gourd. More significantly, they claimed the mountain as their own, acknowledging it also as female, in the form of a new beautiful

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goddess and protectrix, Gemu.

The Na people brought with them their old way of life, gathering forest produce, hunting animals big and small and planting rudimentary crops on their small homesteads. They also brought along with them something precious from the past, a past so remote that some historians say it was as old as the dawn of human history. This precious relic harks back to a time when the world was full of deities representing the many faces of nature, the main ones almost always wearing a female face. Modern scholars may label them merely as fertility goddesses but they formed the spiritual bedrock of human society then.

This spirit of embracing the female as the building block of society, represented by Gemu Mountain Goddess, was the jewel in the crown brought by the Na to the Mother Lake. As they began building up their new lives, they re-organized their community along the well-worn path adopted by their foremothers, that of creating and linking family members by their matrilineal bloodline. They built large homes with pine logs cut from the mountainside to house their female-descended families, taking pains to stay connected to the primal maternal thread.

The puzzle of how the Mosuos came to be what they are may never be solved definitively, but if I may borrow from the school of thought that suggests that all humankind started out as matrilineal societies, I would venture to say that the history of the Mosuos must have dated back to the beginning of the human epoch tens of thousands of years ago.

That the Mosuos have been strictly matrilineal over time is not in doubt. That they worship the forces of nature just as our forebears did in early pagan societies is also evident. That they revere most of all Gemu, a female mountain goddess, among the many deities they hold dear, harkens back to the oldest human tradition of worshipping the Great Goddess and other lesser goddesses in the Old Stone Age of

human existence.

Archeologists have uncovered many instances of ancient goddess worship throughout the world. There was the original Great Goddess, the Mother Goddess, there was the Goddess Hera in Greece, the female deity Isis in Egypt, Parvati the Goddess in southern India, even Berehinia, the Mother Goddess of Russia. China had her own Great Goddess, Nu-Wa. Following these female-centric traditions, perhaps the Mosuos can claim an unbroken direct link to those early days of human society. And just maybe they can further claim to be one of the few remnants of the original matrilineal human society.

The real puzzle is how the Mosuo tribe has managed to cling tenaciously to that ancient matrilineal tradition without succumbing to later paternalistic influences all around them.

Compare the Mosuos on the western side of Lugu Lake who to this day remain staunchly matrilineal, to their cousins on the eastern side of the lake who have become patrilineal over time. The eastern Mosuos chose to adopt the paternalistic alternative, having paired up with Mongolian troops who remained behind after Kublai Khan annexed Yunnan to China in the thirteenth century. The Mongols brought with them their male-centred way of life to the eastern Mosuo community, who so identified themselves with being the descendants of Mongols that in recent times they had successfully petitioned to classify themselves as belonging to the 'Mongol' minority tribe, not the Mosuo tribe. But despite the patriarchal conversion of their eastern cousins, the western Mosuos remain untouched by male-centric influences.

It was not just against the influence of their immediate Mosuo cousins that the tribe held fast to its matrilineal heritage. Against all odds, the tribe kept its matrilineage despite coming into contact with other neighbouring mountain tribes that venerated male gods and followed a patriarchal tradition.

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More tellingly, the Mosuos have so far been able to withstand the pressures brought about by the male-dominated Chinese culture that took root 5,000 years ago and spread throughout China. Han Chinese patriarchy is intense and all pervasive, continuing to hold sway even in contemporary China. Born and bred in the same cultural milieu adopted by a largely Chinese immigrant society in Singapore, I too am familiar with navigating a world where men are the bosses both at home and outside, and where women find themselves relegated to a place in the family way behind their husbands and sons. Things may have improved for women since they entered the workforce at all levels in this century, but, for all that, patriarchy remains omnipresent in Chinese society.

To me the story of a people who pay homage to a goddess in a world full of father figures as godheads and follow a matriarchal way of life in a world where patriarchy rules is so interesting and entirely unique that it seems too good to be true. I felt the need to get up close to a real goddess waiting to be seen and touched. I wanted to see for myself just how this tribe manages to exist as a feminist oddity in patriarchal China.

Dropping all my other travel plans, I made straight for Lugu Lake, set in the remote south-westernmost province of Yunnan in China. As luck would have it, I timed my visit to coincide with the Mountain Goddess Festival held every summer in honour of Gemu. The festival is known locally as Zhuanshanjie, or 'Perambulating Round the Mountain' in Chinese, and is the most important festival of the Mosuo people.

Gemu the mountain deity is a giant granite mountain sitting 3,600 metres astride Lugu Lake situated deep inside high mountains. Had I travelled there 90 years ago, as did the Austrian botanist-explorer and writer Joseph Rock, it would have taken me seven days to ride horse-

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back from the nearest old tea-trade centre of Lijiang over an ancient mountain trail across nearly 200 kilometres of rough terrain. As it turned out, I set off from Lijiang in the comfort of a chauffeur-driven car speeding on a modern, winding tarmac road.

The drive was scenic although arduous as we wound our way up and down the mountainous route. This was pine-studded countryside with spectacular vistas of snowy mountain peaks and small valleys washed by the Jinshajiang, the Golden Sand River, the first tributary of China's great Yangtze River. The going was not easy, as the narrow two-way single-lane road was perched precariously over steep mountainsides with frequent traffic jams caused not so much by cars as herds of mountain goats and cows ignoring the traffic in search of green pastures on the other side.

At the end of a gruelling seven-hour journey, the car ascended a final crest and, turning round a curve of the road, revealed a picture-postcard view of a majestic blue lake. That first sight of Lugu Lake, no matter how many return trips I make, never fails to take my breath away. Nestled within ring upon concentric ring of mountain ranges, the large lake has a beautiful serpentine shoreline punctuated with hundreds of tiny isthmuses, studded with endless rows of Christmas pine trees dipping right by the clear water's edge.

On the day of my arrival under a clear blue, cloudless sky, the lake reflected an intense azure blue, the bluest blue I had ever seen. On a nasty day, with rain-soaked clouds hanging overhead, Lugu Lake turns a moody slate-blue hue. On a crisp cold winter's day with the sun shining brightly, the lake transforms itself into a bright emerald green body of water.

As I gazed from the lake to the horizon, a tall stone sierra sat majestically across the entire length of the shoreline on the far side. Oddly, the montane structure bore a distinct shape. Squinting my eyes, I

focused on the massif taking on the shape of a human-like figure, the outline of which looked just like a reclining woman in profile, a forehead rising to an aquiline nose ending in an elegant chin, framed with a gentle cascade of long hair flowing down the summit head. The profile traced the chin down to a beautiful neck that rose towards an upturned generous bosom before sliding into a slight hint of a tummy, with the rest of the reclining body trailing down like a long graceful skirt. The entire picture bore an uncanny resemblance to a female form in repose.

‘There she is, Gemu Mountain Goddess!’ my driver chipped in to give voice to my unspoken thoughts.

So I had finally come face to face with the lady mountain deity. This unique female demiurge would be the object of special worship by the Mosuo tribe at the Gemu Mountain Goddess Festival the following day.

On the day of the festival, I rose early to a wet morning, the summer rains having arrived with a vengeance overnight. I waded through puddles to my driver in the waiting car. Making our way to the site of the festival, we swished over a muddy wet track hacked from the side of the mountain meant more for horses than cars. We bumped over squelchy potholes as we drove on until we ran right into a mighty big one. Revving hard, the driver got stuck deeper and deeper, spraying wet mud all over the place. Mercifully a couple of passers-by kindly came forward to help out, and somehow with the help of a few boulders and planks thrown in the path of the wheels, they managed to push us out of the pothole and send us on our way.

Before long, I saw in front of me crowds of people scurrying up a hillside, with more arriving by horseback and motorbikes. We had arrived just in time to witness the start of the festivities.

Unfolding before me was a lively scene. Locals dressed in their ethnic finest were busy pitching makeshift tents, tending to open fires, watching over pots of steaming rice and boiling broths, flitting about

chatting with old friends and relatives. Children screeched with delight as they played catch with each other. In pole position sat a huge tent housing a group of Tibetan Buddhist lamas, the keepers of the faith, with two of their number blowing long alpine horns to herald the start of the festival.

A stream of worshippers trekked slowly up the slope towards a small simple white shrine built on a rise up on the northern face of Gemu Mountain. I trailed them to the worship site and watched the throng of women and men going through their paces as they paid homage to their mountain goddess.

‘How do you do this?’ I asked a friendly face.

‘You first light incense and pine branches,’ she said, handing some to me, ‘and put them in front of the shrine. This is to get Gemu’s attention.’

I followed her instructions. Then she beckoned me to follow her up the few steps to stand before the shrine.

‘Just do what I do,’ she said.

She put her palms together in the universal prayer mode, then positioned them first to her forehead, then her mouth and finally next to her heart before getting on her knees. In a half-prostrate pose, she opened her palms and placed each on the floor on either side of her and lowered her head to place it on the ground. She got up again and repeated the ritual two more times. After the third prostration, she got up and with palms pressed together in front of her face mouthed a silent prayer with her eyes closed.

She waited for me as I went through the paces, and indicated to me that I should follow her as she began her pilgrim’s circumambulation round the shrine three times. This was done in a clockwise direction as she continued to mumble her prayers quietly.

Lastly, she unstrung a length of Tibetan-style prayer streamers and

tied both ends up on tree branches by the side of the shrine in order for the wind to hurry her prayers to the goddess.

‘I prayed for Gemu to be happy and also to bless my family with another year of plentiful harvest and good health,’ she explained later when I asked her to tell me about her prayers.

After thanking her, I followed the crowd down the slope to mill around the merry-makers. People gathered around a patch of green to wait for the start of the entertainment. A Mosuo man strode centre stage and lifted his flute to his lips. Softly he blew a soulful tune which I was later to learn was the usual signal for the start of the circle dance. A few brave souls stepped forward eagerly to link their hands and began moving to the rhythm of the flautist’s music and gait as he led them round the makeshift dance floor.

Soon more locals joined in, hurrying to assume their positions in the dance line, the men in front, the women following and the children trailing behind. And dressed up they all were, the women resplendent in their colourful headdresses matching their multi-hued tops, swishing their long flowing white skirts, with the men jaunty under cowboy hats in their bright yellow tops. Everyone joined hands to form a dancing circle behind the piper as he continued with his four-beat tune. Keeping beat, the men stomped in their high boots, the women danced gracefully and the children struggled to keep up. Now and then the dancing troupe broke out in loud chorus, singing to the familiar tune.

As the dancing continued, the onlookers made their way to their tents for an afternoon of feasting and wining. I too went in search of lunch and struck lucky when I stepped into the tent where a large family had congregated. In the crowded tent an elderly woman held court, surrounded by her many children and grandchildren. I smiled, and offered the woman a pack of cigarettes. She motioned me to sit next to her. Looking around, I spied a not-so-shy granddaughter and

began engaging her in conversation. The teenage girl with a winning smile was called Cher-er Ladzu.

‘What is this festival all about?’ I asked Ladzu.

‘Today is Zhuanshanjie and we come here to celebrate the day dedicated to Gemu Mountain Goddess. I have been looking forward to this all year,’ she told me.

As I settled in hoping for an invitation to the family picnic meal, Ladzu’s grandmother chipped in:

‘Gemu is our protector. Her duty is to look after all the Mosuo people by the lake. We give thanks to the goddess on her big day which falls on the 25th day of the seventh moon in the lunar year.’

Her next words, ‘Would you like to share our meal with us?’, were music to my ears. Lunch, she gestured to the boiling pot outside the tent, was a whole piglet cooked slowly in a soup. We tucked into the delicious meat with our fingers, picnic style. Someone offered me a choice of hot tea, beer or home-brewed *kwangtan* rice wine and I sat with Ladzu’s family, sipping and people-watching the afternoon away.

A festival always opens a window to the soul of the community that celebrates it. To me the Mosuo tribe’s keeping the Mountain Goddess Festival alive suggests a couple of things. Worshipping a mountain deity is part and parcel of the worship of nature, harking back to an ancient pagan tradition. Early humans venerated nature in one form or another, and deified objects such as the sky, the sun, the moon, streams, rock formations, animals and, not least, mountains. The Mosuos are no different and in continuing to celebrate and worship this mountain deity of theirs, they tell us that far from abandoning their ancient beliefs, they set great store in being connected to their cultural and religious origins.

In choosing to celebrate Gemu, a goddess instead of a god, the Mosuos also recognize the position of the female in their world. Here

is the link between the Mosuo choice of a goddess, not a god, and the matrilineal heritage of this particular tribe. The choice of the female Gemu as their most important deity tells us that this community upholds femaleness as the cardinal principle at its heart and soul. It is consistent with their core value of tracing their lineage through the matrilineal bloodline.

These stubborn feminists, both women and men, return annually to Gemu's shrine on the holy mountain to remind themselves of the place of the female in their universe. They are superstitious enough to pay homage to their divine protectrix to make sure that things turn out well for them in the coming year. The quality of their lives, they believe, depends on Gemu's largesse. Her job, after all, is to bless and protect the Mosuo people who live under her shadow.

Besides observing the ancient ritual of worshipping Gemu Mountain Goddess, the Mosuos, I would come to learn, hold dear many other age-old cultural customs that are different and unique to them. One of my favourite stories is about how a Mosuo life is a dog's life, literally. Not in the sense of a miserable life as the phrase is used generally, but in a deep sense of gratitude to the dog, the one animal that made the ultimate sacrifice of exchanging a long life in favour of humans. The lovely story of the dog and its special place in the Mosuo world is told time and again to every Mosuo child, and I would paraphrase it from the words of a Mosuo friend when I asked her about it.

'Once upon a long, long time ago, the Great Spirit decided to dole out different lifespans to all the creatures under the sun. The rule of the game is to be the first animal to respond to the Great Spirit's calling out a number to represent a certain lifespan.

"A thousand years!" the Great Spirit called out for the first time at the crack of dawn. An early riser, the wild goose flying overhead, squawked its claim to the thousand-year lifespan.

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“One hundred years!” the Great Spirit made his second call. Flying behind the wild goose, a duck swooped down to lay claim on that second-best lifespan.

‘And so the calls went on and on, the lifespans decreasing in descending order.

“Sixty years!” was one of the final calls. Already up and wagging its tail, the dog took up that offer.

“13 years!” was the last call made late in the morning. The tardy Mosuo who finally woke up had no choice but to put her hand up. On behalf of humans, she drew the shortest straw on offer.

‘Greedy human nature being what it is, the Mosuo claimant expressed how disappointed she was with humans being granted such a short lifespan. “We want more!” she pleaded with the Great Spirit.

“Ask some other creature to swap its lifespan with you,” came the reply.

‘So she tried, making the rounds from the goose to every other animal down the line. All of them refused to budge. Finally, she reached the friendly ears of the dog.

“How about it? My 13 years for your 60?” the human representative pleaded with the dog. The dog tilted its head, pondered for a moment before its generous nature took over.

“All right, 13 years is long enough if I lead a happy life. Feed me three times a day and never beat me, and I will swap my lifespan with yours!”

‘With that, the deal was done. From that day, humans lived their lives to the ripe old age of 60 years, while the dog lived a shorter but pampered life of 13 years.’

To honour their side of the bargain, the Mosuos came to value their canine donor and to this day live up to the promise of treating the dog as their benefactor. They are exceptionally kind to their dogs, not in the

overindulgent way dogs are treated as pets but certainly in a much more special way than other domesticated animals. Every child is taught to be tender and kind to the dog and I do not know any local who knowingly abuses or abandons one. A Mosuo always makes sure the family dog is fed at family meal times. More than once I have witnessed a Mosuo turning up her nose and shaking her head should there be a mention of the ‘delicacy’ of dog meat being served in a Chinese restaurant.

The timeworn story of the Mosuo and her dog is brought to life whenever a child in a family reaches puberty in her 13th year. Each Mosuo family marks the crossing of this threshold by enacting a coming-of-age ceremony. It signifies the child’s entry into adulthood and is unique, in that reaching puberty is not celebrated in contemporary Chinese culture.

What is more unusual is how the Mosuos link it back to their beloved dog story. The choice of the 13th year as the point of transition into adulthood coincides exactly with the lifespan originally allocated to humans but eventually swapped with the dog. It is in remembrance of their life-long debt to the dog for its special gift that the Mosuos remind the new adult in their family to feed the family dog with a special big meal at the end of the ceremony.

When a family holds the ceremony, it takes place on the first day of the Lunar New Year in the Chinese calendar. The occasion does not occur on the child’s 13th birthday, as one might expect. The Mosuos do not count the birth date of a person to mark her age. Her age is counted by reference to each passing Lunar New Year Day. In the old days before the lunar calendar was adopted, her forebears would have counted her age when spring came along – another spring, another year.

The family with a teenager soon to be 13 years old prepares for the special day well in advance of the big event. The house is spring-cleaned,

new clothing is bought for the teenager and much food is prepared for the big party to which every family in the village is invited.

I had to arrive at the crack of dawn to attend my first such event held at the home of a Mosuo family who owned a lodge in the lake-side hamlet of Lige and would later become my close friends. Squeezing in among the crowd of relatives and curious tourists already gathered there in front of a burning fire by the hearth, I turned to ask a local next to me about the significance of the ceremony.

‘To us Mosuos, the coming of age at 13 years is the biggest day of our lives. We call it the “Becoming an Adult Celebration”,’ she said.

The name of the young girl being honoured on that day was Xiao Wujing (or ‘Little Five-Pounder’, on account of her weight at birth), the daughter of the lodge owners. All eyes were set upon Wujing as she made her appearance into the family room. This was an event she would have been looking forward to for the longest time. That day marked the 13th spring from the year she was born, and was the most significant day in her young life – the day she came of age. On becoming an adult from that moment on, Wujing would be a fully fledged person on whom would be conferred all the attendant rights of a grown-up.

As an adult she would be entitled to wear the full Mosuo dress, something that she was not allowed to do beforehand. Putting on the dress would thus be the principal symbolic act of the ceremony.

Little Five-Pounder, dressed in an everyday track-suit ensemble like any other teenager, looked a little nervous as she walked over to the ‘female’ log pillar on the left side of the room (see p. 26 for an explanation of gendered pillars).

Someone led her over to stand with one foot on a big bag of rice while the other foot was placed on a dry-cured whole pig, a symbol of wealth to the Mosuos. The rice signified an adult life blessed with ample food on the table and the pig with bounteous fecundity.

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The eldest maternal aunt of Wujing had the honour of conducting the ceremony of the 'Wearing of the Skirt'. The aunt began by holding a long, white, pleated skirt for the girl to step into before tying it around her still tiny waist. Then she helped the girl into a bright red jacket, cinching it with a bright pink sash around her middle. For the finishing touch, the aunt placed the traditional decorative braided head-dress on the girl's head. Suddenly Little Five-Pounder was transformed from a tomboy in sporting gear to a fully dressed-up young Mosuo woman.

Continuing with the ritual, the aunt chanted in the Mosuo language.

'Today you are matured as a person. I wish you a long, smooth life with few problems. Go forth into your adult life, for now you know how to conduct yourself properly.'

Looking a bit bewildered, Little Five-Pounder looked up and nodded, her eyes revealing that she understood the solemnity of the occasion.

Her adulthood having been witnessed by her entire family and the entire village, Wujing gave thanks by prostrating herself three times before each of her elders, first to her aunt, then to her mother and everyone else. Steamy yak butter tea was served all around to mark the end of the formal ritual while Wujing stole away to present a special big meal to the family dog.

Soon after, we were all ushered outside into the courtyard to join in a big feast. Every household in the community was invited to the celebration, and, as is local custom, at least one representative per household was there to bear witness to the occasion and to recognize the new adult as a full member of their community.

I came to understand that coming of age at puberty for a Mosuo person is more than wearing adult clothes. Before the ritual, a Mosuo child would have been considered not so much a non-person as a 'yet-

to-be-recognized' person in the community. If a child should die before becoming an adult, she would not be entitled to a full and proper funeral rite. On becoming a person in the 13th spring of her life, she could look forward to a long life as part of her matrilineal family and a member of the larger community.

Fast forward a couple of years and I was given the chance to take a more active role in another 'Becoming an Adult' ceremony. On that occasion, Nongbu, the younger brother of Ladzu, was turning 13. The parents of the youngster had come to me with a strange request when I arrived at their home.

'Can you conduct the "Wearing the Trousers" ritual for our boy?'

'Er, is this similar to the "Wearing the Skirt" thing for girls? I am not really sure how to do this. Why don't you do it?'

'We are also not sure how to do it!'

I gave in, instinctively realizing that an honour was being presented to me and was something I could not refuse. Going purely by my recall of what I had seen at Little Five-Pounder's coming-of-age event, I pretended I knew what to do.

'Is there a male pillar in the room?' I asked.

'Here, on the right, where I have placed the rice and dried whole pig,' Nongbu's mother replied.

I led the boy still dressed in a jumper and jeans to the correct gender pillar and got him in position on top of the two symbolic temporary footstools. His mother handed me a large pair of trousers. I held them before the boy and motioned to him to step in. With that, he wore his first pair of grown-up trousers.

Prompting me on, his mother gave me a long Tibetan-style jacket, much too big for the still undeveloped 13-year-old. I managed to get his arms into the long sleeves but got into trouble when I tried to tie the bulky thing around his tiny frame. Nongbu's maternal aunt quickly

stepped in to give a hand. Fully attired in adult clothes, Nongbu waited for the final touch, which I quickly supplied by placing a furry hunter's hat on his small head.

Then came the moment for me to say something special to give meaning to the ritual. I improvised.

'Nongbu, you are now a man. Remember to always do the right thing, and never forget to look after your family,' I said softly, hoping that the words sufficed.

For this young man, becoming an adult meant he would be gradually inducted into the role of the Mosuo male. Among other things, he would be expected to contribute his physical strength to the manual chores around the family farm while continuing to live among his maternal relatives for life. He would be free to form a relationship with any woman he chose but would not marry the *axia*, a 'lover' in the Mosuo language, nor bring her home because the home comprised members of his matrilineal family only. He also had no responsibility or claim over any offspring that his *axia* might give birth to, as that baby will belong to his *axia*'s family, not his. No husbandly or fatherly duties for him.

For a young woman such as Wujing, she gets an extra perk on reaching adulthood, her very own room at her maternal home. She too is given a free hand to live and love in her maternal home, where she will cohabit with her siblings, her maternal cousins, her mother, her maternal aunts and uncles and her maternal grandmother, an arrangement which will last a lifetime. She is at liberty to practise the 'walking marriage' way of Mosuo love life, choosing her *axias* without ever having to marry any of them or move away to his home or indeed to form a family of her own with him. As she grows older, she will be encouraged to bear children to add to her matrilineal family. Any child born to her will belong solely to her matrilineal family.

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None of these unique social arrangements practised by the Mosuos exist anywhere else in China, whether in historical or modern times. Probably none of them exist anywhere else in the rest of the world today. None of them could ever exist in any male-dominant society that is the antithesis of matriarchy.

Through the labyrinthine mix of folktales and legends of their pagan past overlaid by their Tibetan Buddhist present, the Mosuos hang on to one preponderant unbroken thread, that of the celebration of the female. While the moon is considered a female force of nature in most cultures, with the Mosuo culture also venerating it as a goddess, the sun is usually seen as a male deity in many ancient cultures. In the Mosuo spiritual world, the sun is a goddess, irrefutably female. To this matriarchal tribe, mountain deities can either be female goddesses or male gods, but the most adored of them all is a female, Gemu the Mountain Goddess. This is the very reason that drew the feminist in me to Lugu Lake in the first place. As I left the festival, a fleeting thought flashed through my mind. Right here in China's hidden mountains lies the promise of the most intriguing story about women.