

Between Myth and Reality: Examining Mosuo Society's Portrayal in Digital Spaces

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Author Biography

Rui Wang, a senior at Miss Porter's School from Yunnan, China, is a researcher and filmmaker passionate about identity, culture, and feminism. Her work, including Mosuo's Call of Home, blends visual storytelling, academic inquiry, and personal connection to amplify underrepresented voices, showcasing her commitment to fostering cross-cultural understanding and meaningful dialogue.

Abstract

Lugu Lake in Yunnan, China, celebrated for its breathtaking beauty, has been a sought-after destination for tourists for many years. This influx of visitors has brought significant attention to the local inhabitants, who have a unique matrilineal culture. The Mosuo Museum, a private institution founded by two Mosuo village leaders, has played a pivotal role in promoting this culture to a wider audience. The museum primarily promotes itself on RED, a platform popular among young women in first and second-tier cities. Although the museum seems to offer valuable insights into Mosuo culture, there's an underlying question of whether it represents this culture holistically. It frequently highlights the term “母系” (matrilineal) in its posts, and this situation also exposes the illusion of a matriarchal utopia and feminist haven crafted to attract tourists. This paper employs content analysis to examine posts about Mosuo on RED, primarily focusing on the account “摩梭人博物馆 (The Mosuo Museum)”. The museum aims to educate visitors about the true nature of Mosuo culture. Despite its growing recognition, it is notable that the museum's leadership and principal staff, including the curators, the secretary, and the guides, are predominantly male. Women at the museum typically hold roles such as housekeepers, volunteers, and social media operation team members. This raises another question: Has the Mosuo truly achieved “gender equality” as they claim, and how are women represented in their society?

Keywords: Mosuo; Matriarchal Society; Digital Feminism; Tourism in Lugu Lake; Chinese Ethnic Minority; Social Media

Introduction

Mosuo Museum:

Founded in 1997 by Ruheng Duoqi and Engei Erqing, the Moso Museum (formerly Mosuo Folk Museum) is a self-financed cultural institution in DaLuoShui village, Yunnan. It proudly claims to be the most grassroots-themed folk museum in Yunnan's minority areas. As the first and only private museum in the Mosuo region, it spans over 6,000 square meters, with a building area of more than 3,000 square meters, a display area exceeding 1,000 square meters, auxiliary facilities of 600 square meters, and an activity space of over 1,000 square meters.

The main building of the museum is a traditional Mosuo courtyard, comprising four distinct structures: Yimi (the single-story main building, also known as the Grandmother's house), Galayi (the Sacred chamber), Nizhayi (a two-story structure for adult Mosuo women, known as the flower house), and Zuowo (used for storing grass and domestic animals, known as the grass house). The museum boasts a collection of over 1,000 cultural relics and features seven exhibition areas: Our Mother House, Our History, Our Beliefs, Our Marriages and Families, Our Lives, Our Ancient Rules, Taboos and Proverbs, and the Mosuo Portrait Exhibition.

Under the guidance of the Lijiang City Museum, the Moso Museum also functions as the Lugu Lake Mosuo Cultural Research Society, a Southeast Asia Film and Television (Lugu Lake) base, a Daba cultural heritage base, and a Mosuo folk performance center. To date, it has attracted more than 800,000 tourists and over 1,000 domestic and international scholars. The museum asserts that it “systematically, objectively, and comprehensively introduces and disseminates Mosuo history, culture, and folk customs, playing an irreplaceable role in cultural preservation.” In 2016, the Yunnan Provincial Museum designated the Moso Museum as a branch of the provincial museum. The museum has organized documentary film screenings, photography exhibitions, and Mosuo cultural conversations in cities across China, including Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chongqing, Hangzhou, and Kunming. The museum aims to promote rigorous academic and cultural research while presenting an authentic picture of Mosuo life. It seeks to “conduct in-depth research on Mosuo culture

from the perspective of the Mosuo people, to display and protect it. While helping the people build cultural confidence, it also brings the unique Mosuo culture to the world through exhibitions, documentaries, and other forms.”

The Moso Museum's primary influence is online, with its RED account becoming the main resource for visitors seeking information on Mosuo culture. Its efforts and success are undeniable. The museum has undertaken numerous projects to protect Mosuo culture, architecture, and traditions, bringing Mosuo culture to a global audience. However, its online presence can also distort the true nature of Mosuo culture, creating an illusion of a feminist utopia and matriarchal kingdom. While it benefits society and the economy, it also perpetuates entrenched gender roles and inequality under the guise of feminism.

Most previous studies on Mosuo culture have focused on ethnography. This study aims to approach Mosuo culture from a different angle: popular culture and media, using the method of content analysis to analyze Mosuo's online representation. As future generations are likely to learn about this culture through digital information, it is crucial to have accurate representations. Social media platforms like RED have become primary sources of information for many young people in China, making it important to uncover the true messages behind the media portrayal of Mosuo culture.

Literature Review

Digital Feminism in China:

According to Wang and Tavmen (2024), “fourth-wave feminism” has emerged since 2010, using advanced digital technologies to achieve a new level of global reach. This wave builds on intersectional principles, utilizing digital platforms as vital tools for activism. In China—a society that traditionally values collectivism and harmony, where feminism was initially linked to national liberation and socialist modernization—digital feminist activism faces unique challenges.

Feminism, introduced from the West in the 20th century, is often viewed in China as a “threat to domestic social stability, national security, and the

credibility of law enforcement authorities” (Wang & Tavmen, 2024, p.5). The term “feminism” has become politically sensitive online, with feminist organizations encountering government backlash and facing stigmatization as unpatriotic. Social media’s anonymity gives women control over their online identities, allowing them to protect their privacy and physical safety—an especially critical factor in authoritarian contexts. Alongside pervasive online misogyny, Chinese activists must also navigate intense government censorship and surveillance (Wang & Tavmen, 2024).

Despite these obstacles, feminist movements such as #BeenRapedNeverReported and #MeToo have shown that digital activism can foster solidarity, raise awareness, and drive social change. While stigma, misogyny, and platform precariousness persist, social media remains a relatively accessible space for feminist discourse. Even under authoritarian rule and sophisticated censorship, Chinese feminists have developed new tactics and platforms to launch impactful campaigns (Wang & Tavmen, 2024).

Given the growing influence of digital content on social movements, this paper examines posts on RED—one of the most popular platforms for Chinese women—to explore the representation of Mosuo culture online and its impact on women’s understanding of gender and social structure.

Matriarchal Society:

The Mosuo are often labeled a “matriarchal” society, a term that is frequently seen as the antithesis of patriarchal societies marked by patriarchal dominance. In patriarchal contexts, power often derives from structures of enforcement, private ownership, colonial rule, and religious conversion, typically installed by a conquering minority (Goettner-Abendroth, 2018). However, as Goettner-Abendroth (2018) points out, matriarchal societies are not simply the reverse of patriarchal ones; they do not replace dominating men with dominating women, nor do they rely on hierarchical structures for governance.

Instead, Mosuo society centers around women, with generations of women living together alongside their nephews and uncles, embodying a clan structure that reflects the nurturing and cyclical essence of Mother Nature. As the Minangkabau of

Sumatra says, “Mother Nature is our teacher,” and this divine motherly principle guides every Mosuo woman. Social, economic, and political actions in these societies align with a maternal ethos that pervades every aspect of life. On a cultural level, such societies could be seen as reversing the “Divine Feminine” or Goddess (Goettner-Abendroth, 2018).

According to Goettner-Abendroth(2018), a social order centered on motherhood deeply influences the economic structures within the Mosuo community. As a subsistence economy, the Mosuo way of life lacks private property and territorial claims, and women hold authority over resources, including clan houses, fields, flocks, and food sources. This central role of women in resource management is a key characteristic that defines a society as “matriarchal” rather than merely “matrilineal.” In these communities, goods are placed in the hands of the clan mother, or matriarch, who ensures equal distribution among her children and grandchildren and takes responsibility for the welfare of all clan members. This collective economy fosters mutual support, where any relative advantages or disadvantages in resource acquisition are balanced through communal guidelines.

While Goettner-Abendroth (2018) reclaims important knowledge about societies shaped by women in various domains, I am still hesitant to call the Mosuo a “matriarchal society.” This label can imply a straightforward inversion of patriarchy, which can be misleading and does not fully represent the current Mosuo social landscape. From my observations and research within local organizations, villages, and museums, leadership often includes men, which aligns more with a “matrilineal” framework. “Matrilineal” accurately describes Mosuo kinship, where lineage, group membership, and inheritance are traced through female lines, granting women significant influence over the family structure and children (Lowes, 2022).

Walking Marriage, Tourism, and Misrepresentation:

After decades of study, the Mosuo have experienced various forms of intervention and were once misunderstood by the general public. The traditional Mosuo community practices a unique form of romantic relationship known as *tise*, or “walking marriage” (Cai, 2008; Mattison, 2011; Shih, 2020). Once women reach the age of maturity, typically

around 13, they are free to choose male partners from within their community, with the option to have multiple or few partners throughout their lives. Male partners spend their days contributing to their own households or working in roles such as farming and fishing, often initially in secret (Shih, 2020). The only requirement for these relationships is mutual consent between the individuals to engage in a sexual relationship, whether for a single encounter or a more extended period. Throughout their relationships, partners usually maintain separate residences (Yong & Li, 2022).

After spending time among the Mosuo and gaining firsthand experience, I learned that this unique form of romantic relationship practiced by Mosuo was once interpreted as polyandry, and according to local villagers, many tourists visit Mosuo seeking casual relationships, which they view as disrespectful and degrading to their culture and traditions. As Qian, Wei, and Zhu (2012) have noted, sexual encounters between tourists and the local Mosuo are shaped by popular imaginative geographies surrounding Mosuo sexual practices. Lugu Lake has been transformed by folk and tourist imaginaries into an “erotic frontier” associated with free love.

Against a wider backdrop in which most ethnic minorities in China are quickly acculturated with the dominant cultural ideologies of the majority Han Chinese, the preservation of walking marriage makes the Mosuo society a perfect target for the construction of the erotic Other. The popularity of the Mosuo is partly attributed to Yang Erche Namu, a Mosuo born in Lugu Lake who eventually left her indigenous community and became a singer, model, and actress. She is believed to be the first Mosuo who broke out of the ‘pre-modern’ indigenous world and entered the ‘modern’ society lying beyond. In her bestseller book “Zou Chu Nv Er Guo (Out of the Girls’ Kingdom),” she depicts Lugu Lake as a place where matriarchal power was dominant and the erotic sex practice could be of special sexual attraction (Yang, 1997). Full of sensuous descriptions of youthhood love and sex, this book romanticized Lugu Lake into an Arcadia of wild and innocent love affairs (Qian, Wei & Zhu, 2012).

Her description of the matriarchal social practices of the Mosuo conjures a sense of difference which is seductive enough to invite popular imaginative geographies. In media and tourist

discursive representations of the Mosuo society, the native people are constantly portrayed as a pre-modern group that enjoys incredible freedom of sex: there is no contract of fidelity between women and men, while anyone can simultaneously keep several lovers, and freely abandon his/ her lovers for the sake of seeking new affairs. In such representational spaces, Lugu Lake has been depicted as a paradise of free sex. As a consequence, a large number of tourists come to Lugu Lake, seeking erotic and sensuous experiences that cannot be found in the places where they come from—the places of progressive modern society (Qian, Wei & Zhu, 2012).

However, during my time with the Mosuo in various villages, including Da Luo Shui, Wa La Bi, and others, I encountered significant negative feedback about Yang Erche Namu. Many local Mosuo expressed feelings of shame and resentment toward Yang, viewing her as a traitor to their culture. They believe she exploits her heritage and people, having fully embraced modern life, ultimately becoming an American citizen and not returning to her Mosuo homeland.

Nevertheless, Qian, Wei, and Zhu (2012) have argued that this geographical imagination is a reciprocal process, where the Mosuo actively renegotiate their place-based identity in pursuit of imagined progress and modernity. Today, the local community’s focus on tourism development and economic modernization remains a central factor in shaping the imaginative geographies of Lugu Lake. As Qian, Wei, and Zhu (2012) noted, within this framework of economic development, the relationships between the indigenous community and tourists are generally non-exploitative and non-dominant, with tourism providing the Mosuo with a substantial income.

In my interviews with locals, tourism development and the resulting material prosperity are often discussed positively. Through tourism, aspects of Mosuo culture, such as matriarchy and the practice of walking marriage, have become key attractions at Lugu Lake. In the past, these cultural practices were reframed to satisfy tourists’ fascination with free love (Qian, Wei & Zhu, 2012). More recently, they have been rebranded with a feminist perspective; organizations like the Mosuo Museum now highlight themes of motherhood, sisterhood, and female authority to draw tourists’ interest.

According to Yong and Li (2022), the Mosuo “walking marriage” provides solutions to several challenges women face, such as evaluating the commitment and resource-providing abilities of their partners. Since partners live separately and children are primarily cared for by the mother’s family, it alleviates pressures typically associated with traditional marriages.

For men, this system reduces the pressure of demonstrating mate quality and competing for status and wealth, which helps promote societal stability while lowering the risks of harm. Additionally, “walking marriage” addresses issues related to having multiple partners, paternity uncertainty, sexual violence, family instability, conflicts over whom to invest in, and long-term relationship dissatisfaction or dissolution (Yong & Li, 2022).

The Mosuo Museum actively promotes these benefits on platforms like RED. For instance, in its post from September 7, 2025, titled “Walking Marriage De-stigmatized | Does Pure and Lasting Love Still Exist?” The museum highlights the advantages of this system, such as societal stability, reduced pressure on parents raising children, and the absence of class-based barriers to romantic relationships. In contrast to traditional marriage, where wealth or family background may determine suitability, Mosuo culture emphasizes personal freedom. Many comments under such posts reflect positive feedback, with some expressing a desire to be part of Mosuo society.

Findings

Figure 1
BBC “China’s ‘Kingdom of Women’”



Social media has shaped a perception of the Mosuo as a feminist haven. Reputable news sources like The Guardian, BBC, and National Geographic have described this culture with phrases such as “The Kingdom of Women,” “Men Are Never the Boss,” and “Where Women Reign.” These characterizations often stem from their matrilineal structure and the practice of “walking marriage.” Yong & Li (2022) note that this unique tradition provides women with advantages that are often unattainable in patriarchal societies. This narrative has been amplified online to attract tourists and boost local economies. However, since these practices differ significantly from Western norms, few visitors engage deeply with the community. As a result, many of Mosuo’s challenges—such as limited educational opportunities, the heavy burden on women, and the reinforcement of gender roles—often go unnoticed.

Figure 2
Mosuo Museum’s profile on RED



This narrative is further promoted by the Mosuo Museum, which uses social media to attract tourists and support local economies. Posts highlight why the Mosuo may have a more progressive view on romantic relationships, frequently receiving positive feedback from users. Many of these users are inspired to visit the Mosuo region, yet because the Mosuo’s customs differ greatly from Western norms and urban life, few visitors stay long or engage deeply with the community. As a result, many challenges faced by Mosuo women are overlooked. For instance, while women are in charge of the household, this responsibility often requires them to sacrifice educational opportunities to care for fields, children, and home repairs.

Methodology

This study examines the questions above by analyzing 250+ Mosuo-related posts on RED, employing a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to identify relevant samples. To uncover potential issues in the online representation of the Mosuo and to assess the influence of the Mosuo Museum on its image, the top three posts related to the museum were selected for content analysis. Additionally, to further understand how Mosuo's online representation shapes public perceptions, the study includes a content analysis of one of the most popular Mosuo-related posts on RED: "Staking a High Price on a Mother's Request (重金求母)," an art project by Yaqi Zou.

Figure 3
Yaqi Zou's profile on RED



The Power of Women:

The Mosuo Museum serves as a key resource for understanding Mosuo culture, making its online presence vital. In many of its posts, it mentions the power of women, and on July 16th, 2024, it quoted Chameli Ardagh "Feminine wisdom is not learned; it is remembered. It is the ancient knowledge that stirs within each woman calling her back to her true self" and it follows with "Feminine energy is the energy of the home, the energy of the initial source. The Mosuo view nature, women, and the earth as nurturing mothers; women are closely associated with the concepts of life, fertility, healing, and spiritual power. These roles and symbols are linked to wholeness and vitality in the organic worldview." In the concept proposed by this museum, the mosuo's respect for women is rooted in their worship of motherhood and

maternity, they tie women to their fertility, and they esteem what seems to be not the development of each woman's personality but the worship of her fertility.

Women's Roles in Society

The Mosuo Museum frequently highlights women's roles within the family, drawing attention to the struggles of women in China's patriarchal society to generate interest. It portrays the Mosuo culture as a more progressive alternative, though the presentation is often incomplete and not entirely convincing. For instance, on June 12, 2024, the museum's social media post featured a bolded cover photo with the phrase "good women and bad women" in red, designed to catch attention. Upon closer inspection, the post includes a quote that reads, "Western society idolizes the mother, while Chinese society venerates her, but both are rooted in the denigration of women, dividing them into good women and bad women." Other quotes follow: "The former uses the great mother as a model, always playing the role of caregiver and sacrificing herself, while the latter is selfish, pursuing personal goals at the expense of others." It further states, "Idealizing women as great mothers is actually a means of controlling them," and, "Only by playing the role of a martyr and caregiver, enduring hardships as a mother, can a woman earn respect."

Figure 4
Mosuo Museum's RED post on June 12th, 2024



The tone of these statements seems directed toward women who resonate with these harsh realities, hinting that solutions will be provided in subsequent images. In the second photo, the museum highlights

the esteemed position of the male uncle in the Mosuo family, clarifying that this role should not be mistaken for patriarchal authority. They argue that because uncles and other family members share the same bloodline, their actions are for the collective benefit of the family. In the later images of the post, the concept of the “public/private dichotomy” is introduced. This idea suggests that society is divided into two spheres: the public sphere, associated with politics, work, and social life—traditionally dominated by men—and the private sphere, tied to home, family, and caregiving, often considered feminine and undervalued. In contemporary society, this division implies that the public sphere holds greater power and visibility, while the private sphere remains constrained and marginalized. The post claims, “The key reason Mosuo culture respects mothers without degrading women is that women hold a dominant position in the private sphere, which in turn shapes the already narrow and limited public sphere.” However, this reasoning breaks down upon closer examination, as the intended message is unclear and difficult to grasp.

The post is filled with academic jargon, drawing readers in with the promise that the Mosuo culture offers a solution to the patriarchal issues women face—yet it fails to substantiate this claim. Given the short attention span people typically have for social media content, this presentation could be seen as misleading, bordering on false advertisements of Mosuo culture. Additionally, the attempt to distinguish Mosuo men from men in patriarchal societies reflects a kind of conceptual substitution. Simply because Mosuo men share the same bloodline with the women in their households, it does not necessarily mean women are more liberated. If liberation is defined as increased access to education, careers, and the broader world, Mosuo culture still falls short. Traditional Mosuo values keep women at home while men pursue education and work, which is further evidenced by the fact that village leaders in Mosuo communities are men, not women.

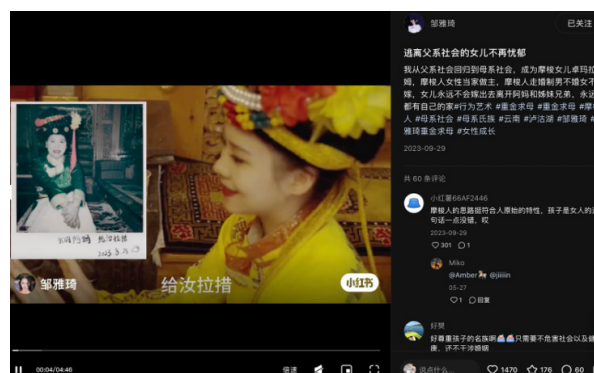
Representations in Art Pieces:

One of the most widely known Mosuo-related projects available online is an art piece by Yaqi Zou titled “Staking a High Price on a Mother’s Request (重金求母).” For this project, Zou paid a Mosuo woman, Geiru Lacuo, 3,000 RMB per day for three days to act as her mother. While Zou and the Mosuo Museum had

no direct interaction, the museum’s efforts to promote Mosuo culture did not go unnoticed, attracting people like Zou to visit this “matriarchal kingdom” to experience its unique way of life. The project stemmed from Zou’s own experience of lacking parental love, and through this performance art, she sought to explore the nature of maternal love and whether money could purchase the maternal affection she longed for. Documented through video, Lacuo became one of the seven “mothers” featured in Zou’s project, which was titled “Daughters Who Escape the Patriarchal Society Are Not Depressed.” Once again, this narrative reinforced the idea that “Mosuo is better than the patriarchal society.”

The project gained significant attention, with over 6,000 likes on RED and more than 500,000 views across various platforms, resonating with audiences who connected with Zou’s portrayal of female bonds in Mosuo culture. In one of her interviews, Lacuo shared, “Mosuo people don’t need dreams,” a quote that was reposted by other users on RED. Zou also conducted a poll asking, “Would you rather be born in a matrilineal or patriarchal society?” Of the 1,502 participants, 99% chose the matrilineal society, with thousands expressing a desire to live in Mosuo culture.

Figure 5
“Daughters Who Escape the Patriarchal Society Are Not Depressed” by Yaqi Zou on RED



Like the Mosuo Museum, Zou’s project mainly focused on the benefits of “walking marriages” and being away from the patriarchal society. Throughout the film, Zou’s understanding and perspective on Mosuo culture were shaped primarily by interviews with Lacuo and her biological daughter, who took on the role of Zou’s sister in the art piece.

The Mosuo have long attracted anthropologists to their communities. As a researcher and documentarian entering a Mosuo village, I quickly noticed that many Mosuo people are adept interviewees, well-acquainted with the typical questions posed by tourists. In Zou's project, it is evident that Lacuo is an experienced interviewee, selectively sharing aspects of Mosuo matrilineal culture that would resonate with audiences, like Zou, who long for familial love and support. This, however, glossed over the reality that many Mosuo women do not voluntarily stay at home but are constrained by traditional expectations.

Equivocation of Gender Equality:

Another aspect of the Mosuo's appeal is their professed commitment to gender equality. At the Mosuo Museum, guides describe cultural practices in the Grandmother's Room, emphasizing mutual respect and the division of tasks between genders. However, this notion of gender equality often diverges from Western interpretations, which typically encompass areas like women's education, social roles, leadership in top firms, and the performance impacts of gender equality (Belingeri, Chiarello, Colladon & Rovelli, 2021).

Most tour guides at the Mosuo Museum are local Mosuo men with some education, though they generally lack formal training in gender studies or sociology. Interviews with tourists and observations at the museum suggest that the museum may use familiar terms, like "gender equality" from Han society, to attract visitors. By simply stating that their society has achieved "gender equality" without further explanation, tourists are often left with the impression that Mosuo society provides equal rights, choices, and responsibilities for all genders. This interpretation, however, misrepresents the complexities of Mosuo values and reveals the inherent contradictions within Mosuo society regarding gender equality.

Challenges With Social Media And Digital Representation

The Mosuo culture and its unique traditions are a major draw for tourists visiting the Lugu Lake area. However, with the rise of tourism, the Mosuo people have faced a great deal of misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and even stigmatization.

Organizations like the Mosuo Museum have made efforts to correct these misconceptions, helping people gain a more accurate understanding of the culture. Despite these efforts, though, linking modern feminist ideals to Mosuo culture is misleading and does not accurately reflect their societal structure.

While gender equality, as defined in Western contexts, is not present in Mosuo culture, many tourists and outsiders perceive Mosuo as having a more advanced civilization in this regard. As mentioned earlier and confirmed by cultural elites, much of the focus on Mosuo society centers around their approach to romantic relationships and family structure. However, having a matrilineal society does not necessarily equate to full female empowerment. The lack of comprehensive education about Mosuo culture has led many tourists to believe in the illusion of a feminist utopia.

Observing various lectures and speaker events held by the Mosuo Museum, it becomes clear that male representatives often outnumber female ones. Although some male speakers grew up within the Mosuo community or worked there for a short time, this does not mean they can fully represent Mosuo women. This lack of female representation is significant, as these cultural elites portray a narrative of how the Mosuo respect women, yet they do not capture the full reality. In my conversations with Mosuo women, many expressed dissatisfaction with their roles, such as serving men within their families. Some were forced to abandon their education, despite a desire to continue, to follow traditional gender roles. While many women later found fulfillment in caring for their families, they also faced significant struggles that often go unnoticed.

There is also a language barrier when promoting Mosuo culture to a broader audience. The Mosuo language is unwritten, relying on oral tradition, which raises the question of whether their culture can be accurately translated. Furthermore, the involvement of Han Chinese from the mainstream culture in curating exhibits poses another potential threat to Mosuo traditions. For example, patriarchal customs of language seep into cultural representations. In patriarchal societies, people commonly say "Father and Mother," but in Mosuo culture, which is matrilineal, the reverse would be more appropriate. Yet, the Mosuo Museum uses the patriarchal order,

which contradicts the matrilineal linguistic logic. Similarly, when introducing the Mosuo family structure, there is an overemphasis on the paternal role, overshadowing the central role of female caregivers.

Linguistic confusion also leads to misunderstandings about Mosuo society. In Chinese, the terms for “patriarchy (父权)” and “patrilineality (父系)” are often conflated, causing people to mistakenly interpret the Mosuo’s “matrilineal (母系)” society as a “matriarchy (母权).” This misunderstanding feeds into the image of the Mosuo as a “matriarchal kingdom.”

Religion, which is a significant part of Mosuo culture, also shows a lack of female involvement. The Mosuo’s religious landscape, influenced by Dharma Buddhism, Lamaism, and other traditions, places men in the priesthood, reinforcing male-centered power and limiting female representation in spiritual leadership.

Limitation

This paper has certain limitations, including a narrow scope of subjects and language barriers. By focusing primarily on popular social media content related to the Mosuo—such as posts by the Mosuo Museum and Yaqi Zou—this study may present a limited perspective on the broader online representation of Mosuo culture. Additionally, some Mosuo cultural concepts, particularly those related to family structure and gender roles, are challenging to translate accurately into Western or Han-Chinese frameworks. This may limit a fuller understanding of how these concepts uniquely function within Mosuo society, potentially leading to varied interpretations. Expanding the study to include representations of the Mosuo culture across a wider array of social media platforms and accounts would offer a more comprehensive view and contribute to a richer analysis of Mosuo culture’s digital portrayal.

Conclusion

This study examines the complex portrayal of Mosuo society as a feminist haven shaped by social media, tourism, and selective cultural interpretations. The analysis of over 250 social media posts, including content from the Mosuo Museum and Yaqi Zou’s project, identifies an idealized representation of Mosuo

culture as progressive and egalitarian. However, these portrayals often romanticize reality, overlooking essential cultural nuances. Content analysis reveals a pattern in which romanticized depictions of matrilineal family structures and “walking marriages” overshadow the realities of gender roles, educational limitations, and economic pressures Mosuo women face. By focusing on matrilineal structures and “walking marriages,” these portrayals promote Mosuo culture as an alternative to patriarchy, resonating with urban audiences who seek new gender dynamics. Yet, this narrative tends to exclude the challenges Mosuo women encounter, such as restricted educational opportunities and traditional responsibilities, favoring a simplified story over a complete depiction.

Two central themes emerge—the commercialization of Mosuo culture through a “feminist” branding aimed at attracting tourists and the misinterpretation of Mosuo gender dynamics as equivalent to Western gender equality. Posts from The Mosuo Museum demonstrate how content is crafted to convey empowerment, though interviews and observations reveal this often overlooks the actual experiences of Mosuo women. Additionally, local guides and museum content occasionally employ familiar language around gender equality without deeper clarification, leading visitors to assume that Mosuo society lacks gender-based constraints. This gap between representation and reality highlights the tensions in an evolving society that balances tradition with economic engagement through tourism.

While Mosuo culture indeed offers distinctive perspectives on gender and family, portraying it as a feminist ideal oversimplifies the complexities of Mosuo women’s lives. This study underscores the importance of nuanced cultural representations that resist simplified narratives, advocating for a fuller understanding of gender dynamics within Mosuo society.

Furthermore, the commodification of Mosuo culture in digital spaces calls for deeper, respectful engagement with non-Western societies to counteract stereotypes and embrace local intricacies. Expanding research across multiple social media platforms and including diverse voices within Mosuo communities would provide a fuller picture, challenging reductive portrayals and contributing to a more accurate and respectful narrative.

Finally, tourism has become central to the Mosuo economy, with earnings distributed among households. The influx of tourists, scholars, and outsiders has led many Mosuo individuals to tailor their responses to meet outsiders' romanticized views of a matriarchal society. Moreover, exhibits at the Mosuo Museum often align with modern feminist narratives, reflecting both civil society interests and economic motivations. As such, portrayals of Mosuo culture through media and tourism should be critically examined by both tourists and scholars to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and inaccuracies.

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