

A Funeral as a Festival: Celebrations of Life in the Mosuo in China

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Abstract

This article attempts to provoke a discussion concerning the definition and nature of festivals by considering the process of Mosuo funerals in Southwest China as a festival event. The role of women and men in daily life and within the funeral ceremony is discussed – the Mosuo is a matriarchal society – as are the vernacular architectural settings which have evolved for both ritual and everyday activities. The article looks at the religious perception of death in Mosuo culture, which considers funerals as celebrations of a life cycle including birth, growing up, and death; through onsite observations, it documents the process of a Mosuo funeral in relation to its physical space. Even though funerals occur at unpredictable times, unlike most other festivals, it is argued that for the Mosuo, the funeral event is also a festival.

Key words: funeral, matriarchal, Grandmother's House, life cycle, religious celebration

Introduction

A festival is an event or social phenomenon encountered virtually in all human cultures.¹ In Latin, there were two terms for festive events: *festum*, for “public joy, merriment, revelry” and *feria*, meaning “abstinence from work in honour of the gods.”² A funeral can be seen as a form of festival that celebrates life, taking on either or both of these connotations.

Alessandro Falassi has written that festival is commonly understood as “a periodically recurrent, social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events, participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees, all members of a whole community, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and sharing a worldview.”³ This definition puts strong emphasis on understanding the festival as a form of expression of community spirit. Jacqueline Thursby suggests that mourning, in most funerary behaviors, sits in line with the festival form. The death of a family member calls for an acknowledgement of a life

lived and completed, marked by a temporary withdrawal from normal forms of daily life, whether accompanied by revelry or not.⁴

In the Mosuo communities discussed in this paper, death calls for a reversal of ordinary behavior. Daily social and occupational routines are disrupted and people participate in Falassi's "series of coordinated events," united in a common worldview. The Mosuo believe that both human life and the transmigration of the soul are part of an ongoing lifecycle; as a consequence these events are both "sacred and profane, private and public."⁵ To relate the realm of the sacred to that of the profane, the Mosuo have devised a series of formalised rites to be performed on occasions such as the rituals of death, rites that are concerned with "sanctioning tradition and introducing innovation, proposing nostalgic revivals."⁶

The Art of Matrilineality in Daily Mosuo Life

The Mosuo people are a small ethnic group living in Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces in China. Mosuo are known as the "Kingdom of Women" because they are a matrilineal society. In their prime, women are heads of households; property is passed through the female line and women make the business decisions. In order to preserve the social order and the family business, Mosuo women have a "walking marriage"⁷ instead of a civil marriage as a sexual and reproductive institution; they neither share a residence nor have economic relations with their husbands.

The matrilineal Mosuo ideology is not only demonstrated in the rules of descent, but also more fully in the concept that women instead of men are situated at the centre of their world.⁸ Women are at the centre of power and make decisions for everyday life activities for everyone in Mosuo. As the director, the leading woman in the family takes charge of money and distributes daily tasks to others.⁹ There is clear division of labor between women and men: women are responsible for household duties such as cooking, cleaning and child care, and men for heavy labor such as agricultural production.

Although the role of women is weakened in the religious activities of the Mosuo, in which they do not directly participate, the power of Mosuo women is still manifested in the local religion. The Mosuo religion is guided by two coexisting beliefs, Daba

and Tibetan Buddhism, both of which are male dominated.¹⁰ Once Tibetan Buddhism became prominent in Mosuo culture¹¹ it was usual that within almost every Mosuo household which had more than two sons, at least one of them, usually the youngest, would become a professional Lama. Equally, a Daba is usually a role passed down from one generation to the next by men in one family. However, there is a difference: the native Daba worship a mother goddess and “the Mosuo are alone among their neighbors to have a guardian mother goddess rather than a patron warrior god.”¹²

Mosuo funerals as festivals

The funeral ceremony is the most elaborate rite-of-passage in Mosuo culture. Chuan-Kang Shih argues that “in the household-based Mosuo society, performance of death rituals ... [is one of] the most important vehicles to reaffirm and reinforce their unique kinship ideology centered around matrilineal harmony.”¹³ It is not only an event of mourning and sorrow but also a time to celebrate life. The Mosuo people believe that death is not the end of life but a life-relief. Because of the inevitability of death and a belief in an active life after death, the Mosuo have developed elaborate rituals to ease the pain of physical separation and to guide the dead into the spiritual world of the ancestors. During the funeral, the families are sad and cry only for a short time. Otherwise they seem relaxed, even laughing; everybody expects the deceased’s spirit to leave the family and meet with the ancestors as soon as possible. The Mosuo believe that their well-being will be greater in the afterlife, thus funerals become a grand and lively scene for the community to celebrate the freed souls.

The living spaces, including the house, the courtyard, the street and mountains, become stages for the community to set up ritual activities for a funeral. Drawing on the onsite observation of a three-day Mosuo funeral in August 2016, the paper discusses the spatial transformation from everyday activities to festive and celebratory moments in the Mosuo funeral, considering participants as performers.

The process

The Mosuo funeral process can be considered in six stages, from the preparation of the corpse in a fetal sitting position in the temporary mourning hall, to religious chants and feasting which lead to the climax of the bonfire dance and the cremation

itself at the final stage. Each stage of the funeral rituals and activities strongly connects with the dwelling space.



Figure 1 Different stages of Mosuo funeral rituals and activities in the courtyard: (1) preparation of the body, (2) decoration of the temporary mourning hall, (3) religious chants, (4) food celebrations, (5) bonfire dance and (6) cremation. Photomontage: Huichao Feng, 2017.

Once a person expires, the face of the dead person is turned away from the hearth and an oil lamp is lit to illuminate the way to the other world. In the shortest possible time after death, the deceased's family members are obliged to go out individually to carry the grievous news to the other households of the same lineage and to inform the village. During the preparatory period of the funeral, the dead body is first cleansed and wrapped in a white cloth in such a manner that it looks like a fetus, and then put into a pit dug in the "Grandmother's House" for temporary interment. The Grandmother's House, also called *Yimi* in the Mosuo language, is the heart of the Mosuo inhabited and central space where the daily life of the household takes place, centred by women. A temporary "mourning hall" is set up in the Grandmother's House, decorated by household members assisted by the villagers. Then, in the early morning of the first day of the funeral ceremony, the coffin is placed in the temporary mourning hall, accompanied by the sound of three huge cannons. After the funeral

preparations are complete, the family of the deceased invite a number of Lamas and one Daba to chant. These religious chants last throughout the funeral; in fact, the Lamas' chants continue from the moment the individual dies until the forty-ninth day after cremation.¹⁴

The high status of Lamaism is reflected in the number of Lamas taking part in the rituals and, correspondingly, the cost of the service. The number of Lamas invited depends on the wealth of the household and its social network. At the service witnessed in 2016, the deceased's household invited fourteen Lamas and one Daba to chant in the rituals – Dabaism has never been replaced, and still plays a central role in the funeral process. It is the Daba who performs the role of the funeral guide, conducting the “Road Leading Ceremony” which aims to send the soul of the dead back to the ancestral land in Sibuanawa¹⁵, and thus to restore household harmony in this world. In the ceremony seen in 2016, the Daba first briefly recounted the history of the Mosuo and that of the lineage, then reviewed the personal history of the deceased and persuaded the soul to join the ancestors. He pointed the soul to take the road from the deceased's home garden to the ancestral place of origin, detailing the names of the places on the route – every road, every river and every village.¹⁶ At the same time the Lama prayed for the sins of the dead, chanting to pacify the soul. Whereas Lamaism appears to treat the deceased as individuals, the Daba treats the deceased as members of a social group that includes members both from this world and from the ancestral world.

During the two-day funeral, banquets are held in the courtyard for participants to eat and drink, and a traditional bonfire dance is held after dinner before the cremation ceremony. The dance rite is performed by men who wear armor and hold bells; they shout, sword in hand, for the deceased's open exorcism, in order to remove obstacles – the route back to their ancestral land is thought to be full of danger, evil spirits and demons. Household members, villagers, and guests form a line and dance around the bonfire, in a dance known as the Guozhuang dance, and sing the “Funeral Song,” as follows:

How can we have the heart to be apart forever / It's human nature to be dead. /
How good is life/ As good as after death / The tall trees will be blown away by
the wind. / He that is old will die. People will die when they are old.¹⁷

The “Funeral Song” fully represents the attitude of the Mosuo people – one of the openness of life to death. The leader of the dancing line plays a short bamboo flute; in the flickering light, tears are turned into laughter. The bonfire dance continues intermittently until after midnight, with relatives handing out sweets to every mourner during this time. At midnight, the body in its white wrapping is removed from the pit in the grandmother’s back room and put into the coffin, again accompanied by three cannons.

In the early morning of the second day, the coffin is transported out of the village to the cremation site. The pyre is constructed from squares of fresh pine logs with four logs forming a small square house, which represents the Mother’s House. The reason for this is that the Mosuo believe that the cremated body needs to live in the Mother’s House before returning to the ancestral land with the Mosuo ancestors. When the fire is lit at the base of the pyre, the coffin is torn into pieces and the personal belongings, including the deceased’s clothes, are thrown into the flames to be burnt with the body. One of the Lamas adds melted yak butter on top of the pyre. After a while, when the pyre is devoured by smoke and flames, most of the relatives begin to go home, with the exception of the Lamas and a few close family. After the cremation site has cooled down and the fire goes out, the cremated remains of the deceased are collected. The mourners pick up the remains, starting at the feet and finishing at the head. The ashes are then carried by two Lamas to the family gravesite. When at the grave, the ashes are placed under a tree in order to ensure that the deceased can have an early rebirth. From this point, the deceased is formally considered an ancestor and worshipped accordingly by the remaining household members.

A collective practice of rituals

The rites of passage we call “funerary” meet the defining criteria set out by Arnold van Gennep for both celebration and festival. The funeral is an occasion with “crowds of people” and “for a particular community.”¹⁸ As Thursby has suggested, “a funeral is a cultural performance.”¹⁹ Differing from other forms of festival, funerals are solemn, ritualistic and ceremonial. Though not always public or formal, they can be both. Despite their solemnity, funerals are a commemoration, and consequently their atmosphere is often one of pleasurable activity. At the wake, or “viewing,” there is

often vivacity, a sense of ongoing life, expressed by “a crowd of people with shared purposes and common values.”²⁰ Understood as a festival, the funeral rites, mourning and feasting can be interpreted as cultural performances. Though it may not be a regular “periodic religious celebration,” it occurs in all cultures.²¹ For Mosuo funerary practice, both Latin terms, *festum* and *feria* are appropriate. As Thursby mentions, funeral rituals follow ancient patterns and folk customs; they are a time for the celebration of a life “organized by and for a particular community.”²² The objects and audience of these rituals include not only the deceased and the surviving immediate relatives but also the whole matrilineage, and indeed the whole local community.

Angus Gillespie states that a festival provides the planners, the participants and the audience with “renewed confidence, enthusiasm, and pride which they take back to their home communities.”²³ The Mosuo funeral is a planned event that becomes a reunion of family and friends, and the experience is carried home in the memory of all of the participants. It is a homegrown, grassroots festival organised by and for a particular community. As part of the Qingming or “Circle-the-Mountain” festival, Mosuo families assemble yearly at the burial tree where they hang colored prayer-flags in honor of the deceased, then follow with a picnic. The religious idea of the “Circle-the-Mountain” festival is to worship ancestors as well as the natural gods. Through it, individual funerals, which are one-off events, and individual people now deceased, are given a role within the regular festivities of the community as a whole. The relationship between the Mosuo funeral and the annual “Circle-the-Mountain” festival makes clear that these funerary practices constitute aspects of a wider festival practice.



Figure 2 “Circle-the-Mountain” festival. Photo: Huichao Feng, 2016.

Spatial transformation

According to Falassi, “At festival times, people do something they normally do not; they abstain from something they normally do; they carry to the extreme behavior that is usually regulated by measure; they invert patterns of daily social life.”²⁴ Wayne Davies explains that festivals provide unusual activities and evoke emotions that take people outside their normal behavior in time and space.²⁵ Waldemar Cudny also argues that festivals are spatial phenomena which temporarily transform the space they occupy.²⁶ The transformation and continuity in Mosuo funerals, as Falassi suggests²⁴, announces, or affirms, a continuation of the cultural life of the deceased in memory, and perhaps iteratively in a continued form.

The subversive character of the funeral is change in use of the Grandmother’s House by renouncing its usual role. The spatial transformation is one in which the everyday activities of the Grandmother’s House are replaced by celebratory or ritual events during the funeral. Most of the time, the Grandmother’s House is the central place where the daily life of the household takes place. It is where family members gather, cook, eat, drink, discuss family matters, receive guests and worship their ancestors. It is also where they experience major life events and hold significant ceremonies, such

as the Coming of Age ceremony. During the funeral, the main room of the Grandmother's House transforms into a temporary mourning hall for the rituals of death. The back room (a small space behind the main room) that ordinarily functions as a storeroom for grains, preserved pork, potatoes and other kinds of food, becomes a mortuary. What remains the same in both funerals and everyday life is the symbolic meaning of the Grandmother's House, as a center to conduct rituals of the life cycle.

In contrast to its normal daily appearance, the main room of the Grandmother's House is decorated for the funeral with new clothes that are hung upon a rope and fastened horizontally over the coffin. The purpose of the decoration of the temporary "mourning hall" is to show the deceased's experience of life. In front of the house-like coffin, a ceremonial table is set up with ritual objects – ceremonial food, wine, flowers, yak butter, lamps, and a saddle, as well as white paper with a "Fenghuang" totem to lead the soul of the dead person. The colorful but empty coffin is placed in the upper hearth, opposite the entrance to the main room. The coffin is about a meter high with a herringbone pattern enclosing ink-painted decorations of red-green-blue bottles and lotus leaves, Tibetan elegiac couplets, claw flowers, conch shells, sun, moon, stars, and birds patterns, etc. Every course of the banquet is placed on the table for the deceased to enjoy with all their relatives and guests. Such rites of decorating are a way of displaying the most important symbolic elements of the ceremony in which the community comes together.

During the funeral, the inner courtyard is temporarily transformed from a multifunctional, relatively public space – used variously as a passageway, a working area for crop processing and feeding domestic animals, and a place for social gatherings and children's play – into a place to receive mourners, conduct ritual ceremonies, feast, and perform the traditional bonfire dance. Through the feasting and the ubiquitous presence and importance of food in relation to death and mourning, it is clear that this ritual funeral behavior is a folk expression for the living. As folklorist Susan Kalcik puts it, "eating at such a time is a celebration of life in the face of death."²⁷ Sumptuous banquets often occur over two days, set out on low tables and stools set up in the courtyard.

Sacralised spaces and celebrations

The Mosuo funeral can be regarded as a religious celebration designed to bring about a sacralization of space, involving a number of religious activities which combine indigenous Dabaism and foreign Lamaism. Durkheim was the one of the first to discuss the way in which festivals rely on a sacred/secular dichotomy, pointing out that religious festivals have evident secular implications, and secular ones almost invariably resort to metaphysics to gain solemnity and sanction for their events, or for their sponsors.²⁸ Eliade extended this idea, suggesting that religious events adopt a form of sacralization that modifies the usual daily function and meaning of time and space: “To serve as the theatre of the festive events an area is reclaimed, cleared, delimited, blessed, adorned, forbidden to normal activities.”²⁹

Both the Mosuo’s religious practices are represented in the space of the funeral process. Lama rituals are mainly held in the “sacred chamber,” a room which forms an integral part of every Mosuo household, a place for gods to live and for the Lama – equipped with Lamaist icons and various ritual objects – to stay and practice his religious routine. Meanwhile, the Daba rituals are mainly held in the Grandmother’s House and inner courtyard.

The final stage of the funeral ceremony, the cremation, takes place on an area of hillside that is again made sacred, transformed into a dramatic stage set by the, house-like pyre and other ritual items. It is reclaimed, delimited and adorned for the festive event. “Performers” chant, wearing religious costumes, while mourners stand quietly by like an “audience.” The act of cremation is believed to carry the “evil,” the negative, out of both the deceased person and the community that is left behind. In each stage of the funeral celebration – the temporary interment, the mourning through feasting, and the cremation – ordinary places are turned into festival places, renewing their own transformative powers.



Figure 3 Lamas performing a cremation, showing the positions of the performers and the audience next to the pyre. Photo: Huichao Feng, 2016.

Conclusion

The Mosuo funeral discussed in the paper reflects the ritual elements that define a festival. It shows that in the funeral festival, the Mosuo fulfil their cultural and religious obligations, not only to the deceased, but to their family and community as well. For the Mosuo, death is neither merely the end of mortal life, nor a simple disruption of domestic order in a single household. The death ritual is not only a concern of the household of which the deceased used to be a member, but also of the lineage and the whole immediate community. The Mosuo funeral has become a cultural phenomenon and a source of local community integration.

Instead of rituals of death, the Mosuo funeral has become a celebration of life, during which loved ones mend torn relationships through sumptuous banquets, heart-warming memories and gregarious laughter. Through the processes of Mosuo funerals, it can be seen that the Mosuo mourn and then celebrate with ongoing, forward-looking confidence in the continued joy of life. More importantly, from discussing the procedures of the funeral, from the preparation of the corpse, through the varied dramatic ritual performances and on to the climax of the cremation, every aspect is aimed at reinforcing matrilineal solidarity and revalidating matrilineal harmony and

related cultural values. Rather than a period of time with emphasis on separation and death, the rituals surrounding the funeral have become a place for renewal and reaffirmed connectedness between family and friends of the deceased.

Although an individual funeral will not be repeated, funerals as a community event in a society could be argued to have a recurrence, albeit an irregular and unpredictable one. The annual “Circle-of-Mountain” festival of the Mosuo works as an intermediate layer between funerals and the everyday, to continue the celebration of life.

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¹ Alessandro Falassi, "Festival: Definition and Morphology," in *Time out of Time: Essays on the Festival* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. 1987), 1-10.

² For the definition of *festival* in Latin see The Oxford Latin Dictionary, ed. P. G. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp.686, 694-95.

³ Falassi, "Festival: Definition and Morphology," 2.

⁴ Jacqueline S. Thursby, *Funeral Festivals in America: Rituals for the Living* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 127.

⁵ Falassi, "Festival: Definition and Morphology," 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷ Walking marriage or visiting marriage (Zouhun in Chinese) is all on-going sexual relationships in Mosuo culture and these bonds are based on mutual affection. Men do not live with their female partners and usually meet at night the woman's house and at dawn goes home to his own maternal family. They do not set up a new family and do not share property. Any children resulting from the union of the couple are the women's children and the man helps to raise the children of his sisters. See Blumenfeld Tami, *The Na of Southwest China: Debunking the Myths*. Available online at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110720025007/http://web.pdx.edu/~tblu2/Na/myths.pdf>, 2009, 3.

⁸ See Chuan-Kang Shih, "Mortuary Rituals and Symbols among the Moso," in *Naxi and Moso Ethnography*, eds. Michael Oppitz and Elisabeth Hsu (Zurich: Volkerkundemuseum Zurich, 1998), 103-125.

⁹ See Chuan-Kang Shih, *Quest for Harmony: The Moso Traditions of Sexual Union and Family Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 219-222.

¹⁰ The primitive religion of the Mosuo people is called Daba, which is a combination of ancestral worship, spirit worship and nature worship. Dabaism has no written scriptures, systematic creeds, classic books, religious organisations or monasteries. All its doctrine is retained in the memory of its practitioners, the Daba, and learned by rote orally from generation to generation. The Mosuo also practice Lamaism, a Tibetan variation of Buddhism, in which a Lama is a spiritual leader. Since the mid-sixteenth century, Tibetan Buddhism has gradually become the dominant religion among the Mosuo. Before the 1956 Democratic Reform in the Mosuo area, Tibetan Buddhism was prevalent to the extent that almost every household had at least one member serving as a professional Lama. See LLMCDA, 2006. The Lugu Lake Mosuo Cultural Development Association (LLMCDA) was an association, directed by John Lombard, focused on Mosuo cultural preservation and development.

¹¹ Since the mid-sixteenth century, Tibetan Buddhism diffused from Tibet has gradually become the dominant religion in the Mosuo area, see Chuan-Kang Shih, "Mortuary Rituals and Symbols among the Moso," *Naxi and Moso Ethnography*, 105.

¹² Christine Mathieu, *A History and Anthropological Study of the Ancient Kingdoms of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland – Naxi and Mosuo* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003). 35.

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- ¹³ Chuan-Kang Shih, "Mortuary Rituals and Symbols among the Moso," *Naxi and Moso Ethnography*, 123.
- ¹⁴ The Mosuo believed that it took forty-nine days for the soul to travel back to the ancestral land. According to Tibetan Buddhism, the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth takes forty-nine days.
- ¹⁵ Sibuanawa is a mythical place that Mosuo believe in an ideal kingdom, a heaven called it where the souls of their ancestor's rest and live. As from the old people told the legend: "in the olden days, the Na emigrated from Sibuanawa, their original village, to the south." see Cai Hua and Asti Hustvedt, *A society without fathers or husbands: The Na of china*. (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 102, 169.
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- ¹⁷ Prayer song, recorded in Shaoquan He, *Zhongguo Mosuo ren* (The Mosuo people in China), Yunnan: Yunnan Renmin Publishing, 2017, 541.
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- ²⁰ *ibid.*, 17.
- ²¹ *ibid.*, 16.
- ²² Thursby, *Funeral Festivals in America*, 17.
- ²³ Angus Gillespie, in Jan Harold Brunvand, ed. *American Folklore: An Encyclopaedia* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), 230.
- ²⁴ Falassi said: "the primary and most general function of the festival is to renounce and then to announce culture.", "Festival: Definition and Morphology," 3.
- ²⁵ Wayne K. Davies, "Festive Cities: Multi-dimensional Perspectives," in *Theme Cities: Solutions for Urban Problems*, ed. Wayne K. Davies (Springer, Dordrecht, 2015), 535.
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²⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, a Study in Religious Sociology* (London: Allen and Unwin / New York: Macmillan, 1915).

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