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Shih Chuan-kang, *Quest for Harmony. The Moso Traditions of Sexual Union and Family Life*

Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010, 329 pp.

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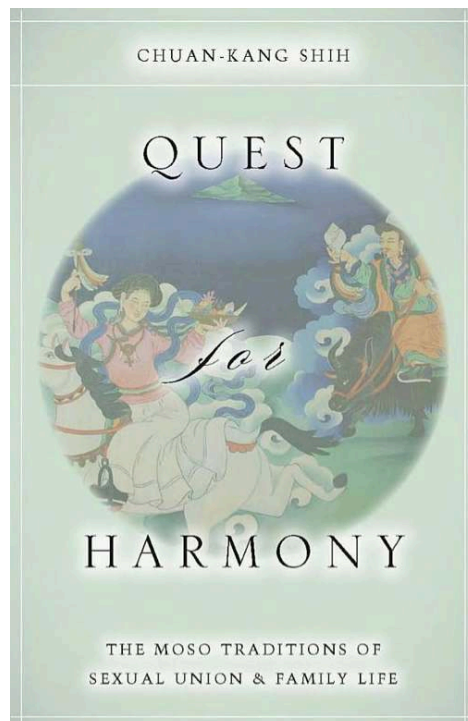
Shih Chuan-kang, *Quest for Harmony. The Moso Traditions of Sexual Union and Family Life*

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- 1 This long-awaited work by Shih Chuan-kang offers a precise ethnography and solidly researched discussion on kinship among the Mosos (Mosuo in Pinyin), sedentary farmers in Yunnan also known by the generic name Na. The Mosos are officially associated with the Naxi “nationality,” despite major socio-cultural differences. In fact, Moso society is matrilineal and matrilocal, and is noted for treating marriage as a marginal practice alongside a free sexual union system called *tisese* (literally “walking back and forth”), also called visiting system. Children from these free unions automatically become members of their mother’s household, whereas the biological father has no part in the family, having no customary legal authority over his offspring. Although denounced in the Communist era, this custom has survived and over the past decade has even become a tourist attraction. Moso society has rapidly



acquired fame for its exceptionality, challenging conceptions of the universality of the conjugal family and of marriage.

- 2 In the introduction, Shih retraces the history of studies on the Mosos and the detailed investigations conducted by Chinese anthropologists in the 1960s and their disastrous repercussions. From 1958, the Mosos were subjected to many waves of reform aimed at imposing monogamy. Anthropologists' work buttressed the reform policy that regarded this society as a "living fossil" of social evolution with its supposedly archaic matriarchy and "primitive" form of marriage. They thus ended up portraying a primitive society, giving rise to value judgments on its supposed "sexual promiscuity," much to the resentment of the Mosos. All anthropologists thereupon became suspect. Since then, Cai Hua's *A Society without Fathers or Husbands*, published in French (1997) and English (2001 – but never translated into Chinese) propelled the Mosos into a wider international spotlight.¹ Cai Hua sought to show that Na society – in his terminology – was a unique case in the world of the absence of both marriage and paternity. He was criticised for having copied case studies from previous works and also for having been selective in his study of ethnographic data to suit his own arguments. Around the same time, however, similar surveys were reported by other researchers, including Shih, who studied anthropology at the University of Stanford and completed a thesis in 1993.
- 3 After repeated visits (between 1987 and 2006) and an exhaustive study, Shih, who is now associate professor at the University of Florida, won his interlocutors' confidence on the delicate subject of the mode of sexual union, whose functioning and characteristics he analyses in a new light in the book under review. He recounts the terms of the debate in his introduction and narrates how he overcame initial hostility from his hosts to develop a working approach centred not on sexual practices and their psychological aspects – this would have been too direct and deemed offensive – but on the sociological characteristics of free union (*tisese*) as a reproductive institution.
- 4 In the first chapter, he provides an all too necessary presentation of the ethnonymy. He defends his choice of the exogenous name Moso (Mosuo) rather than Na, saying that is how they wish to be known, especially in order to stand out from the official Naxi category. He thus envisages the emergence of a Moso identity for part of the groups calling themselves Na, Nari, or Na-hing, but also with links to those culturally similar, known as Pumi today. This stems from the fact that during the Empire, the "Moso chief" in the Yongning basin region where most Mosos were grouped was of Pumi (*Xifan*) origin. This explains why the chiefs' lineage follows a pattern of patrilineal transmission and why they married in a matrilineal cultural milieu where free sexual union (*tisese*) prevailed. This is an important point in the author's demonstration, as it discredits the thesis of a shift to patrilineality under Chinese influence and helps him explain (later on in Chapter 4) the coexistence of two forms of union. The study of the social and historic context is pursued in Chapter 2, which describes the social stratification and the chief's authority structure implemented under the Empire from the thirteenth century onwards.
- 5 The next five chapters form the book's core and the essence of the author's contribution. He devotes Chapter 3 to a detailed and complete description of the dominant practice of *tisese*, which he analyses as being in principle non-contractual, non-obligatory, nonexclusive, and status-blind in respect of partners. Practised marginally between both Mosos and Pumis, this original form of sexual union is not the only one known to the Mosos. Chapter 4 sets out to show that while *tisese* is the

generally dominant union, marriage has existed in the Yongning region since the thirteenth century, linked to the introduction of chiefs of Pumi origin. Since then, marriage has spread among the Mosos, with differences emerging, however, between the Yongning basin and the surrounding mountainous areas. Contrary to evolutionist and diffusionist theses, Shih tries to show that the greatest proportion of marriages among the most isolated mountainous communities are essentially linked to environmental factors, including isolation and obstacles to mobility, which put paid to a free union system prevalent elsewhere.

- 6 Having thus explained the coexistence of the two forms of union, Shih devotes Chapter 5 to a discussion of the Moso kinship system. He analyses the kinship terminology, which does not correspond to any classic anthropological typology but is characterised notably by the absence of terms for relatives on the father's side or for affinal relatives. Yet unlike Cai Hua, he has found terms for genitor, husband, and wife.
- 7 Shih regards matrilineal ideology as the core of Moso institutions. Thus in Chapter 6, he describes the social organisation and the key role of the household (*yidu*) as a domestic unit, the descent group (*sizi*) being the only kinship unit strictly speaking, as much as its members honour the same ancestors. Social relations within and outside the domestic unit are discussed in Chapter 7, in which Shih notes a distinction among household, descent, and line of consanguinity, which according to him are the three main dimensions on the basis of which other Moso social affiliations are built.
- 8 The last three chapters add to and help sum up the analysis of ethnographic material presented in previous chapters. Chapter 8 advances the notion of harmony as a cultural value around which relationships are articulated. In Shih's view, this "quest for harmony," from which the book's title is taken, is the ultimate reference to which one might link the existence of this matrifocal system of free unions, as an alternative to the system that is much more prevalent in the world and is based on family and marriage. Chapter 9 goes on to detail diverse facets of feminine superiority by describing conceptions of gender, gender-wise division of tasks, or mythological references. The final chapter, in the form of an epilogue, concerns the religious landscape and the role of Tibetan Buddhism in a society that has its own religious system, and describes the major rituals that regulate the life cycle.
- 9 The book's main argument, set out in the conclusion, is that matrilineal ideology and household harmony are the two pillars of the institution of *tisese*. Shih's argument is persuasive, despite perhaps over-emphasising rational choice in defending the seemingly almighty value of household harmony. Finally, the *tisese* institution as an alternative to marriage leads Shih to question the ethnocentric tendency in anthropology, which regards marriage as a universal phenomenon.
- 10 While not undermining the book's main thrust, some arguments are not fully developed, such as the discussion, for example, of the origins of the name Moso (Moxie, etc.) or the use of the environmental determinant as the obstacle to the practice of *tisese*. More concretely, the stress on the non-constraining nature of the practice of free union leads Shih to neglect the exchange of offerings and gifts between partners: he notes their importance but without elaborating on their possible ritual nature and symbolic value. A systematic treatment of different services regulating free unions might well shed light on the manner in which such relations are conducted.
- 11 Moreover, Shih is so preoccupied with establishing the exceptionality of the Moso that he has rather too hastily dismissed the comparative potential of similar practices found

in some regions bordering Tibet. As a matter of fact, one of the merits of the book is that it presents a clear ethnography on the basis of which regional comparisons could be drawn, while fuelling the debate within anthropology of kinship in general.

- 12 The book is set to become the ethnography of reference on Moso kinship. Shih is precise in his descriptions and prudent in his analysis. He avoids sensationalising, seeing the free union system in its larger historical and ethnographic context and drawing on specific cases, all of which testify to his assiduous work. He also prompts us to think about the anthropologist's responsibility as regards the impact research might have on the local community.

NOTES

1. Cai Hua, *A Society without Fathers or Husbands: The Na of China*, New York, Zone Books, 2001.

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