

# The Representation of Mosuo People and Mosuo Culture in Chinese Tourism Websites

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**Abstract.** Past research has shown that because tourism itself is a product of a gendered society, its processes are gendered in terms of construction, presentation, and consumption. This study examines how these websites shape the image of the Mosuo people and the Mosuo culture by analyzing texts in Chinese tourism websites. Ten representative Chinese tourism websites were selected for this study, and all relevant texts that could be retrieved were analyzed manually. All samples selected were officially published and represent only the attitudes of the tourism websites. The results of the study show that there are a large number of feminized or sexualized descriptions in the texts about the Mosuo people and the Mosuo culture provided by Chinese tourism websites. The language used on tourism websites is shaped by discourses of patriarchy and sexuality and is intended for heterosexual male tourists.

**Keywords:** Mosuo; China; Lugu Lake; Travel website; tourism advertising.

## 1. Introduction

Travel is not only a means of modernization, but for many Chinese, travel can also reaffirm Chinese identity. After China's reform and opening up, Chinese tourists prefer to travel outside of cities and begin to seek out natural beauty as well as "Others" that distinguish them from their own identity. Han Chinese, as the main ethnic group in China, form a majority identity by comparing themselves to Others, and this comparison includes ethnic minorities (Walsh and Swain, 2004).

The Mosuo, one of China's ethnic minorities, live on the shores of Lugu Lake in southwestern China and practice a matrilineal lifestyle that is tied to matrilineal blood relations. Mosuo people rely on "walking marriage" relationship to reproduce their offspring, and their children always live in the mother's extended family. The Mosuo culture has been of great interest to the outside world because of the "walking marriage" custom. Since the 1990s, the Mosuo communities around Lugu Lake have become a hot tourist attraction due to their unique "walking marriage culture" and the stunning natural scenery of Lugu Lake.

In the process, government have created an image of the Mosuo community that appeals to the domestic tourist market. In modern China, private sexuality remains a repressed topic (Millett, 2007), and as such, sexuality and gender figure have always been central to the official representation of Mosuo culture and tourism literature (Walsh, 2015). Chinese media and travel agencies often market Mosuo culture as "the last matriarchal culture" and

"the land of women", portraying the Mosuo culture of walking marriage as a one-night stand relationship that provides mainland Chinese tourists (especially male heterosexual tourists) with sexual fantasy. For many tourists, they come to the Lugu Lake area to experience the Mosuo culture in hopes of sexual stimulation or satisfaction.

Women and sexual imagery are used to portray the "exotic" nature of a destination, (Antrobus, 2004). The land of the Mosuo became the land of sex in sexual fantasy. Sex is one of the oldest motivations for tourism (Pritchard and Morgan, 2000), and the Mosuo "exotic" nature is often based on the consumption of young Mosuo women: the women wear bulky but colorful and pleasurable clothing, and their sensuality attracts the attention of tourists. The Mosuo are considered both backward and poor, but educated in their pure and loving relationships (Walsh, 2003). In this context, women are often the objects of sexual encounters rather than the initiators. Their culture and identity are embodied, altered, and reshaped through the tourist gaze and mechanisms of cultural production (Yang, 2011).

## 2. Literature review

Because tourism itself is a product of a gendered society, its processes are gendered in their construction, presentation, and consumption (Rao 1995). This gendered form is presented in different ways that are specific in time and space (Kinnaird and Hall 1994). In tourism

reports, women are often presented as exoticized commodities that need to be experienced. In the context of the Western world, the more exotic or less Western women are, the more marketers encourage Western male tourists to "escape the confines of civilization" (Enloe 1989). This assertion is equally valid in the context of tourism campaigns targeting Chinese tourists.

Yang's (2015) study found that tourists were satisfied that Lugu Lake was an exotic, rural destination that offered natural beauty, an idyllic lifestyle, and unique customs. The most positive experiences for visitors focused on exoticism and uniqueness. This uniqueness, in turn, is based on the consumption of young Mosuo women. Heshuang (2005) argues that mass media coverage of Chinese minority women often portrays them as colorful ethnic costumes, singing and dancing, and enthusiastic women to satisfy tourists' curiosity and sexual fantasies. Again, as Walsh (2005) found, in Lugu Lake, people imagine and consume Mosuo women as expendable through tourism. Overall, the contemporary meanings of the Mosuo are altered to fit the ideology of the dominant Han Chinese male. As Wang and Morals summarize, the dominant discourse presents the Mosuo and their culture as exotic, ancient, and feminized (2012).

Tourism promotion prioritizes the male, heterosexual gaze, and therefore the landscape is gendered to attract this gaze (Pritchard and Morgan, 2000). In tourism promotion targeting Mosuo communities, not only are locals sexualized, but destinations and landscapes as well, as tourism often relies on exotic sensory myths (Sharp, 1996).

O'Conner's study found that tourism websites tend to view Lugu Lake as a place of dreams, of mystery, of unreal beauty (2012). And, gendered language is used to describe Lugu Lake, viewing it as female to describe it: "mysterious," "beautiful," "simple," "serene" "purity". The website adopts a submissive quality to describe Lugu Lake, viewing it as a beautiful and mysterious woman, which in turn is engulfed by the gaze of tourists. The feminine description is provided for a Han Chinese male audience. This act provides a patriarchal discourse for the presentation of the Mosuo environment. Lugu Lake becomes an image commodity, lacking agency and powerless against cultural producers. In this case, it naturally becomes an exotic object (O'Conner, 2012) to be consumed by tourists.

The publicity in the tour brochure can lead to specific expectations and influence perceptions, thus providing tourists with a preconceived view of the landscape to "discover". (Weightman, 1987). Therefore, it is essential to study the image shaping of these cultural promoters for tourist destinations. Tourism websites are the bridge that connects tourists to the world of the Mosuo people. The descriptions in tourism websites not only shape tourists' fantasies about Mosuo culture, but also cause cultural commodification of the Mosuo community.

Unlike previous studies, this study selected a broad sample of 10 tourism websites for manual identification rather than using the traditional method of random sampling. Only texts officially provided by tourism websites were selected for this study, and not texts published by website users in any form, to ensure that the

findings were representative of the official attitudes of tourism websites. Thus, the authors could ensure that the sample was as representative as possible. Based on previous references, this study aims to answer the following questions.

(1) Are there feminized or sexualized depictions of the Mosuo people, and Mosuo culture, in the texts provided by Chinese tourism websites?

(2) If so, what do these feminized or sexualized images look like?

### 3. Methodology

This study addresses the above questions by analyzing the texts of Chinese tourism websites describing the Mosuo people's settlements, and uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods to identify valid samples. In order to ensure the representativeness and comprehensiveness of the data, this study selected the top ten brands of Chinese travel websites for text analysis, namely Ctrip, Tongcheng Travel, Flying Pig, Mafengwo, Donkey Mama, Tuniu, Qunar, Yilong, Poor Travel, and To Go.

The "Top 10 Chinese Travel Websites" can effectively show the way mainstream travel websites describe the attractions. It is a brand ranking of travel websites jointly launched by the technical research department of CN10 Ranking and the brand data research department of CNPP. This list is based on big data statistics and artificial analysis and research based on changes in market and parameter conditions, and is the result of big data, cloud computing and data statistics presented in a real and objective way. The list is based on the strength of the enterprise brand honor, network voting, the ranking of the enterprise in the industry, the honor and awards received by the enterprise, etc. The analysis is integrated with the ranking data from several institutions media and websites. Finally, a specific computer model was used to collect and analyze a wide range of data resources for research, and the data was finally formed and displayed on the website only after the researchers took into account the changes in market and parameter conditions. Therefore, it is possible to ensure the breadth and representativeness of the sample for this study.

The sample used in this study was entirely provided by the official tourism website, because this study only focuses on the official attitudes of the tourism website toward the Mosuo people. The criteria for selecting the sample for this study were that articles were selected as samples when the descriptions of attractions in the tourism websites directly mentioned the Mosuo people or mentioned the Mosuo people's place of residence (Lugu Lake); the introduction, title, and specific content provided by the tourism websites were in the selection range, while the accompanying pictures were not; the texts selected as samples had to be written and provided by the official tourism websites, and the travelogues written by users or reviews were not included in the selection. After retrieving all the samples, this study will proceed with the subsequent data analysis through three steps: identification, classification and analysis.

## 4. Results and Discussion

In tourism promotion, the landscape is shaped by discourses of patriarchy and (heterosexual) sexuality, while the language of tourism promotion is written for a heterosexual male audience (Pritchard and Morgan, 2000), so that the natural landscape is also gendered. In texts depicting Lugu Lake and other surrounding environments, official tourism websites attempt to portray the Mosuo living environment as "mysterious," "feminine," "primitive," "beautiful" (Table 1).

Table 1 Description of the living environment of the Mosuo people

keyword	word frequency
kingdoms of females	17
beautiful	16
goddess	12
mysterious	12
scenery	9
primitive	9
bright pearl	8
fascinating	7
Wonderland on earth	6
tranquil	6
Exceedingly charming	6
graceful	5
ancient	5
unique	4

In the sample, Lugu Lake is referred to as the "kingdoms of females" seventeen times, and its image is closely linked to the matrilineal lifestyle of the Mosuo people, making it feminine from the beginning. Both gendered tourism marketing and gendered tourism objects reveal power differences between men and women, giving a male perspective that has a significant impact on tourism image and promotion (Wearing and Wearing 1996). This feminization has also contributed to the marginalization of the image of Lugu Lake, making it a commodity to be appreciated by male tourists.

TongCheng Travel describes Lugu Lake as: "Lugu Lake is known as the Pearl of the Plateau. It is as far from the hustle and bustle of the city as an unspoiled virgin." Ming Zhu is often used in Chinese contexts as a metaphor for women, especially for young women who are valued, a typically feminine description. The direct reference to Lugu Lake as a "virgin" to show the "purity" and "cleanliness" of its scenery is certainly from a heterosexual male perspective. In the text, Lugu Lake is a pure young virgin, which arouses the curiosity and sexual desire of heterosexual male travelers, thus achieving a promotional effect.

Tuniu uses this description when introducing the scenery of Lugu Lake: "Lugu Lake... is like a white and flawless pearl. Her picturesque and charming scenery... is so eye-catching that the eyes of many tourists turn to this mysterious land." "She is full of charm... Graceful is the characteristic of this place, walking into it is like walking into the territory of the goddess of pure beauty." "The islands in the lake are very elegant... Very quaint and

peaceful." In their descriptions, travel websites directly use the word "She" to refer to Lugu Lake, tacitly acknowledging that this natural landscape is portrayed as feminine; Graceful (Xiu Mei) and Elegant (Ting Ting Yu Li) are both words typically used to describe femininity in Chinese, so Lugu Lake's enchanting Lugu Lake is based on the fact that it is feminized. But such beauty is fragile; it appears as a young girl in the grip of male power.

Qunar Travel, on the other hand, describes it as "an experience to go to the bridge that spans the sea of grass and imagine Mosuo men and women walking in marriage." Tourism websites highly integrate the attractions with the Mosuo "marriage walk" and even encourage visitors to "imagine" the sex scene or suggest that they can participate in the sex act. Based on the Mosuo culture of "walking marriage," the attractions of Lugu Lake have been sexualized and have become a major promotional tool.

In the descriptions on tourism websites, Lugu Lake is described as feminine, mysterious, primitive, and at the same time backward, as if awaiting male and modern conquest. These depictions are based on the sexual fantasies of tourists and are promoted by arousing the sexual desire of heterosexual male tourists.

In the texts depicting the Mosuo people or Mosuo culture, the official tourism website revolves around "walking marriage relationships" (Table 2). The word "walking marriage" is mentioned 19 times in all texts, and it can be said that most of the descriptions of Mosuo culture focus on bride relationships. Tourism websites devote much of their space to describing bride walking as a "non-responsible," "low-cost" one-night stand to attract heterosexual tourists.

Table 2 Depiction of the Mosuo culture

keyword	word frequency
Walking Marriages	34
folkways	19
clan	11
unaffected	11
A Xia	11
household	11
men and women	10
song and dance	10
Neither men nor women marry	9
girl	9
lover	9
grandmother	8
charming	8
marriage	7
ancient	7
mysterious	7
amorous	5
love song	5
youth	5
leave over	5
lively	4
tradition	4
unique	4
peculiar	4
love	4
romantic	3

Ctrip Travel describes Mosuo recreational activities in this way: "Young Mosuo men and women dance and sing love songs of Lugu Lake... The hospitable Mosuo girls sing and dance, offer ghee tea to visitors, swing the boat for them, and sing the love songs." It seems that all Mosuo activities are related to "love" in order to meet the needs of tourists looking for love relationships.

In describing the Mosuo bonfire, Tuniu says, "The bonfire is an occasion for Mosuo boys and girls to express their love for each other, and a good time for Mosuo women to choose their lovers. If a guy likes a girl, the guy will gently pick the palm of the girl's hand with his fingers during the dance. If the girl is in love with the guy, she will use her fingers to gently pick the palm of the guy's hand back. When the dance is over, late at night, they will meet in the dense forest on the hillside of the lake, and spit out their hearts together." "Dancing is a great opportunity for Mosuo young men and women to get to know each other and make a "walking marriage " relationship. Through dancing, they get to know each other, fall in love, know each other, until the walking marriage." Bonfire parties are a common tourist attraction in Mosuo communities, and in the representations on travel websites, this activity is closely associated with one-night stands. After the basic information about the bonfire, the text describes that "the enchanting dances and colorful and coordinated dresses make the girls more beautiful and charming, while the Mosuo guys take the opportunity to make friends and send messages of love by holding hands loosely. " This description is based on a heterosexual male perspective and relies on femininity to inspire attraction. In the description, the site encourages heterosexual male visitors to put themselves in the shoes of a "Mosuo guy," with the beautiful Mosuo girl as the expected commodity.

Immediately after, the text begins to suggest that the event is open to visitors: "The bonfire is now open to visitors to participate in. The interactive part of the party is also available for visitors to participate... Join the bonfire with beautiful and generous Mosuo girls... Find the person of your choice in the night and invite them to dance together." "Follow the Mosuo girls together to understand the mysterious Mosuo walking marriage custom... Also experience to be a Mosuo people, the original life can also be so primitive and simple." In the last paragraph of the introduction, the travel website even directly asks readers, "Did you come to dance with love?". This text shows how the site uses the sex appeal of young women to attract heterosexual male tourists and entice them to visit Lugu Lake for the reason of "finding love".

In Lugu Lake, race is imagined and consumed through tourism, and Mosuo women are consumer goods (Walsh, 2005). More than Mosuo men, tourism websites tend to use a lot of text to portray Mosuo women in order to create an image of beautiful, frivolous Mosuo women.

In describing the young Mosuo women, the travel website writes, "They weave their maiden dreams in their own personally owned bower, realizing her true and sincere love. They do not have loneliness, worries, sorrow; they will not be slaves of money, material and power; they follow their own rustic nature, follow the guidance of their own hearts in this magical land carefree labor, life, love;

in the mother lake of the mountains and water to show their pure nature." The tourism website constructs the image of Mosuo women as "passionate" "simple" "beautiful", they seem to be different from the vulgarity and money-worship of urban women, they don't care about money and They do not care about money and power and do not expect men to pay the "cost". This description is offered solely for the expectations of heterosexual men, satisfying their curiosity and sexual fantasies about the "perfect woman. Many tourists seek authenticity in order to satisfy their curiosity about exoticism. Even if the descriptions on tourist websites are not authentic, however, as long as tourists enjoy what they experience, they will gladly accept what the indigenous communities have arranged for them and are therefore less likely to be highly critical of authenticity (Xie, 2003; Ryan, 2002). In this process, the real Mosuo women are highly sexualized.

## 5. Conclusion

This study retrieved 67 introductory articles related to Mosuo people or Mosuo culture from 10 tourism websites, which were officially provided by the tourism websites. After manually classifying and analyzing the articles, the authors retrieved the words with the highest word frequency in these articles. These words contain any lexical form in the Chinese context, and may also be phrases or short sentences, and are translated into proper English.

The authors divided all texts from the ten tourism websites into two categories: landscape descriptions addressing the living environment of Mosuo people (Lugu Lake) and descriptions addressing Mosuo people or Mosuo culture. The results showed that the texts about Mosuo people as well as Mosuo culture provided by the Chinese tourism websites had a large number of feminized or sexualized descriptions. When tourism websites depict Lugu Lake, they often use the term "kingdoms of females" to refer to Lugu Lake and use a lot of feminine words to portray it as a beautiful, mysterious, and primitive image of young women. In the promotional process of the tourism website, Lugu Lake is gendered and shaped by the discourse of patriarchy and sexuality. The language around which it is promoted is for heterosexual male tourists.

The portrayal of the Mosuo people or Mosuo culture on tourism websites is inseparable from the "walking marriage relationship". The travel website devotes a great deal of space to describing the walkaway marriage as a one-night stand to appeal to the imagination of heterosexual tourists. In the text, more space is devoted to the Mosuo women than to the Mosuo men, because the website is written from the perspective of heterosexual men. Analysis of the text suggests that Mosuo women are portrayed as beautiful and frivolous, and that they are distinguished from urban women by being offered exclusively for the expectations of heterosexual men, satisfying their curiosity and sexual fantasies of the "perfect woman". As a result, the images of natural

landscapes and Mosuo women overlap, and they both become commodities to be appreciated by male tourists.

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