

Analysis on Economic Model and Social Customs of the Matrilineal Families of the Mosuo Ethnic Group

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Abstract. The Mosuo people, an ethnic group living in the border areas of Yunnan and Sichuan in China, are often regarded as a living fossil of matrilineal society. Unlike patriarchal family structures, the Mosuo maintain a unique matrilineal system in which women occupy a central position within the household. Their distinctive economic model and social customs reflect this cultural feature. This study examines the economic organization of Mosuo matrilineal families from three perspectives: economic activities, family structure, and social customs. In terms of economic practices, the research focuses on three primary livelihoods—boating on the lake, land leasing, and operating family guesthouses. Regarding family structure, attention is given to the role of the mother as the core figure responsible for household affairs and financial management, as well as the role of maternal uncles in the education and upbringing of children. The findings show that Mosuo matrilineal families have developed unique economic patterns, familial arrangements, and traditional customs. In the realm of social customs, the Mosuo people's festivals and rituals, clothing culture, views on life and death, and the distinctive "walking marriage" (tise) system are all closely intertwined with their matrilineal family structure. This study concludes that the Mosuo matrilineal family demonstrates both the continuity of traditional culture and a remarkable adaptability to the conditions of modern society, providing a valuable example for exploring diverse forms of family organization and cultural inheritance.

Keywords: Matrilineal kinship, economic organization, maternal authority, walking marriage (tise), cultural continuity

1. Introduction

The Mosuo ethnic group mainly resides around Lugu Lake in Ninglang County, Yunnan Province, and in Yanyuan County, Sichuan Province. It is one of the few ethnic groups in China that still retains the characteristics of a matrilineal society. Different from other family systems centered on patrilineality, Mosuo families are bonded by matrilineal ties, with family members living together in the "grandmother's house" (the core residence of a Mosuo family). In the growing process of a child, the uncle (mother's brother) plays a far more significant role than the father. Mosuo families are known as a "living fossil" for the study of human family forms and social structures [1]. Economically, Mosuo families earn money through tourism, land leasing, and homestay operations.

Their economic activities not just embody the traditional spirit of collective cooperation but maintain connections with the modern market economy. The distribution of income takes both individual freedom and collective responsibility into account, demonstrating a unique balance inherent in matrilineal societies [2]. Socially and culturally, the Mosuo's festival customs, costume etiquette, concepts of life and death, and marriage system are all closely linked to the matrilineal family structure. For instance, the "walking marriage" system represents a form of marriage distinct from that of mainstream society, while funeral rituals and festival ceremonies reflect their unique perspectives on nature and life as well. Studying the economic model and social customs of Mosuo matrilineal families is useful to gain a better understanding of how matrilineal societies operate and provide inspirations to reflect on the interaction between traditional culture and modern society. In this paper, a comprehensive analysis from three aspects will be conducted, so as to explore the unique value and contemporary significance of the Mosuo matrilineal society.

2. Analysis of the economic model of mosuo families

2.1. Sources of income

The main economic sources of Mosuo families are closely related to their geographical environment and social structure. At first, Lugu Lake is one of the most important local natural resources, and the boating service on the lake has become a source of income for a large amount of families. During the peak tourist season, the daily income from boating can reach 300 to 400 RMB; however, in the off-season, the total income for a week is only around 300 to 400 RMB. This seasonal difference shows that the Mosuo economy is highly dependent on tourism. Land leasing is equally important. With the development of tourism and the increase in the floating population, lots of Mosuo families lease their land to non-local businessmen for operation, earning a monthly rent of 3,000 to 4,000 RMB [3]. This allows them to obtain a stable income without direct participation in business operations, which also reflects the function of land as collective property in the matrilineal society. Additionally, the development of tourism has made homestay operations a crucial part of the Mosuo family economy [4]. Mosuo families convert their idle houses into accommodations for tourists, which not merely brings economic benefits but also opens a window for the dissemination of Mosuo culture. Therefore, the income methods of Mosuo families embody both traditional and modern characteristics. They rely on collective projects rooted in the natural environment while proactively participating in the modern market economy.

2.2. Income distribution method

The income distribution method of the Mosuo people bears the feature of the matrilineal family system. Personal income, such as earnings from working outside the hometown or profits from small-scale operations, is usually managed by individuals themselves to cover daily expenses or personal consumption [2]. However, collective income, including earnings from boating, land rent, and homestay operations, is handed over to the "Dabu" (the head of the family) for management. When distributing collective income, most of it is allocated to educational expenditures, expenses for house construction, or costs related to handling major family affairs, such as paying children's tuition fees, purchasing school supplies, or renovating family houses. Family members with higher incomes might also contribute part of their personal income to supplement the family if they are capable. This approach not simply ensures the overall interests of the family but maintains economic mutual assistance among members. Mosuo families emphasize consultation and fairness in income

distribution [4]. Although the Dabu holds considerable authority, their decisions are not made unilaterally. Instead, they are reached through discussions among family members, to prevent conflicts and ensures the fairness of resource allocation, which reflects the values of cooperation and sharing in matrilineal societies.

3. Matrilineal family system and management method

3.1. Matrilineal family structure

The Mosuo ethnic group still retains the matrilineal family system, under which families are centered on the mother and all family members live together in the "grandmother's house" (the core residence of a Mosuo family). The father is not the center of family life. This family structure breaks the "paternal authority" of traditional patrilineal societies. Otherwise, it takes women as the core of blood ties, forming a matrilineal family dominated by matrilineal inheritance and kinship. In this family model, most properties, land, and houses are passed down through females from generation to generation. Children's surnames and identities are also inherited along the maternal line. Whether the family is stable or not depending on the matrilineal blood ties instead of the marital relationship. Even with the unique "walking marriage" system (a Mosuo marital practice based on emotional bonds, not fixed cohabitation), children born belong to the mother's family rather than the father's, which ensures the continuity and stability of the family and reduces the impact of marital breakdown on the family [5]. In general, the matrilineal family structure of the Mosuo demonstrates the uniqueness of blood and kinship relationships meanwhile provides a matrilineal-centered living order for the entire society. This structure lays the foundation for income distribution, family management, and the inheritance of cultural customs.

3.2. The role of "dabu"

In Mosuo matrilineal families, the daily operation of the family and the handling of major affairs are mostly managed by the "Dabu", who is usually an elderly and respected female in the family [6]. She acts as the manager of the family's economy as well as the organizer and coordinator of family affairs, including taking charge of collecting and managing the family's collective income, arranging educational expenses for children, overseeing house construction, and organizing festival celebrations. It can be said that the Dabu plays the key role in ensuring the stable operation of the family. However, the Dabu's power is not absolute as Mosuo families value collective discussion and democratic consultation. Important family decisions are made after discussions among all family members. When disputes arise over income distribution or major construction projects, family members might seek advice from external professionals to prevent internal conflicts. Apart from strengthening the bonds between family members, it also reflects the characteristic of matrilineal societies that respect collective opinions. In daily life, the Dabu also takes care of family members, caring for the elderly, children, and those working outside the hometown. She is both the family's "economic manager" and "spiritual pillar". Therefore, the role of Dabu represents the dual authority of women in economic and social life during the matrilineal society, with emphasis on the necessity of mothers in maintaining family unity and stability.

3.3. The status of uncles

Uncles (mother's brothers) hold a special status in Mosuo families, even more important than that of fathers [6]. Since the Mosuo's marital system is mainly based on "walking marriage", father is not a

stable presence in their children's growth. As a result, the responsibility of educating and raising children falls to uncles. Uncles serve as both role models and life mentors for children, teaching them productive skills, social norms, and cultural knowledge. The authority of uncles is determined by matrilineal blood ties, which is stable and irreplaceable. Regardless of the circumstances, children belong to their mother's family, so uncles naturally hold the responsibility of educating and managing, which ensures stability in the children's growth. Additionally, the relationship between uncles and their nieces/nephews reflects the solidity and stability of blood ties in matrilineal societies. Uncles often participate in making major family decisions and also play key roles in educational, cultural, and religious activities. It can be said that the significance of uncles in Mosuo society is an important guarantee for the long-term maintenance of the matrilineal family system.

4. Social customs and cultural beliefs

4.1. Festivals and rituals

The festivals and rituals of the Mosuo people are derived from their matrilineal social culture, encompassing both religious beliefs and family values. One of the most representative festivals is the "Mountain and Lake Circling Festival". During this festival, mothers carry their young children to circle mountains, which symbolizes the children's healthy growth. It is said that two-year-old children who are unable to speak will gain the ability to speak after circling the mountains, which reflects the Mosuo people's trust in the power of nature and religious rituals. The Mosuo people hold rituals on important occasions. A celebration is held when a child is one month old, and all villagers are invited to attend. Simultaneously, the marital relationship of the child's parents is publicly announced. This practice embodies their low-key yet solemn marital culture. In addition, teenagers aged 13 to 14 participate in the coming-of-age ceremony, signifying that they have entered adulthood and obtained the qualification to participate in social life. These festivals and rituals serve not just forms of cultural expression but ways to strengthen the bonds between families and the community. Through joint celebrations and rituals, the Mosuo people constantly confirm their kinship ties and sense of group identity.

4.2. Costume culture

The Mosuo costume culture has distinct ethnic characteristics and symbolic meanings. Traditional costumes must be worn on special occasions, especially during the coming-of-age ceremony and important festival celebrations. Everyone wears Mosuo traditional costumes to show respect for their ancestors and culture [7]. Traditional costumes for women are often brightly colored and adorned with exquisite accessories, indicating the ethnic group's aesthetic tastes and the important status of women in the matrilineal society. Traditional costumes for men are relatively simple with unique ethnic symbols [7]. During rituals such as weddings and festivals, costumes serve not only as decorations but as symbols of identity and culture. Currently, more and more Mosuo people choose to wear Han-style or modern clothes in daily life. Nevertheless, they still wear traditional costumes on important occasions. This "selective preservation" practice reflects the Mosuo people's recognition and adherence to their own culture, meanwhile demonstrating their cultural adaptation and balance in the process of modernization.

4.3. Views on life and death and funeral customs

The Mosuo people have distinct views on life and death. They consider natural death a "good thing", as it means the elderly can smoothly enter reincarnation and continue the cycle of life. Suicide, on the contrary, is regarded as extremely inauspicious, which might affect the fortune of future generations and cause the soul of the deceased to be unable to find their ancestors, trapping them in loneliness and pain. This reflects the Mosuo people's respect for life and emphasis on moral order. In terms of funeral customs, the Mosuo people generally practice cremation. The timing and rituals of the funeral are determined by lamas, who select auspicious days for cremation and the funeral procession based on Buddhist scriptures. During the funeral, relatives of the family are assigned different tasks and take turns preparing three meals a day for the lamas to show respect and piety. This process is not merely a religious ritual but an important way for families to face death together and maintain emotional bonds. The Mosuo people's views on life and death and their funeral customs embody their belief in the cycle of life, as well as the emphasis on collectivity and kinship in their social culture. These customs are closely linked to the matrilineal family system, thereby ensuring the inheritance of their culture and beliefs.

4.4. Courtship and marriage customs

The Mosuo people have a unique marital practice known as "walking marriage", which is closely tied to their matrilineal family system. In "walking marriage", there is no formal marriage registration or fixed cohabitation relationship between men and women. When a man and a woman develop an emotional connection, the man will visit the woman's home at night (usually by climbing through the window to avoid disturbing the woman's family) and return to his own mother's home in the morning. This relationship is based on mutual affection, and either party can terminate it voluntarily without complex divorce procedures. Children born from a "walking marriage" belong entirely to the woman's family, who take the woman's surname and are raised by the woman's family. The biological father does not bear the responsibility of raising the child. Instead, this responsibility falls to the child's maternal uncles. This marriage model ensures the continuity of the matrilineal family and reduces the impact of marital changes on the family structure. Still, "walking marriage" exists in some rural areas around Lugu Lake, becoming a unique cultural symbol of the Mosuo people and a key manifestation of the stability of their matrilineal family system.

5. Conclusion

The Mosuo people represent a unique matrilineal society in China, with their family system, economic methods, and social customs all bearing strong ethnic characteristics. Economically, Mosuo families rely on the natural environment of Lugu Lake and the development of tourism, forming a collective-centered income system by boating services, land leasing, and homestay operations. The income distribution takes both individual freedom and the overall interests of the family into account, with the "Dabu" (family head) responsible for unified management and coordination, reflecting the tradition of cooperation and sharing. In terms of the family system, the Mosuo people maintain a matrilineal family structure centered on mothers and uncles. The important role of uncles in children's education and cultural inheritance further strengthens the stability of matrilineal families. This system ensures the continuity of families and largely reduces the impact of marital instability on family structures. For social customs and cultural beliefs, the Mosuo people convey their cultural identity through festivals, rituals, and costumes to express their understanding

of the cycle of life through funeral customs and religious beliefs and the "walking marriage" system demonstrates the uniqueness of their marital form and the key status of matrilineal families. These customs reflect their respect for nature and life meanwhile show the matrilineal society's dependence on kinship ties. In a word, the economic forms and social customs of Mosuo matrilineal families support each other, shaping a complete living system. This system goes beyond representing the adherence to traditional culture to reflecting adaptation to changes in modern society. Under the continuous development of globalization and modernization, the Mosuo matrilineal society provides a valuable example for people to understand the diversity of family systems and the possibilities of cultural inheritance.

In summary, the Mosuo matrilineal society demonstrates a distinctive integration of family structure, economic organization, and cultural practice, offering valuable insights into the diversity of kinship systems and cultural resilience under modernization. However, current studies remain limited by reliance on secondary accounts, potential outsider biases, and insufficient attention to the challenges of tourism commercialization, migration, and generational change. Future research should prioritize firsthand perspectives through ethnographic fieldwork, comparative studies with other matrilineal groups, and longitudinal analyses of how globalization and state policies reshape Mosuo traditions.

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